

# Racial/Ethnic Socialization and Faith: Essential Ingredients for Achieving Liberation and Empowerment Among African American Youth

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*Although racial-ethnic socialization (RES) within the African American communities includes faith/spirituality, Christian social workers have not explored this relationship in ways that explicitly integrate the two. As a result, we have limited understanding of how Christian social workers can foster a holistic sense of self that integrates Christian and racial/ethnic identities to foster empowerment and liberation possibilities among black/African American youth. Drawing on literature related to RES and faith/spirituality, we argue that Christians social workers can integrate the process of faith development, with an explicit focus on Black liberation theology, with RES to promote psychological and spiritual liberation to foster self-worth and dignity of black youth to promote their positive development. This paper provides a review of the literature on racial/ethnic socialization. A discussion of how the Black church and liberation theology along with black history positively shapes racial identity and preparation to resist racism. We conclude with some practice and research recommendations.*

**Keywords:** African American youth; racial/ethnic socialization; racial/ethnic identity, faith; critical consciousness; racial history & heritage

**T**HE UNITED STATES HAS A LONG AND PERSISTENT HISTORY of racism, which first manifested through the European project of colonization and enslavement of persons of color. People of African

descent have faced centuries of racist practices and policies that have evolved through slavery, domestic terrorism advanced by lynching, Jim Crow practices, police profiling, and mass incarceration. These various forms of cultural, economic, social, and medical oppressions have continued to diminish human potential and health, often leading to avoidable deaths (Bailey et al., 2017; Washington, 2006; Williams et al., 2019). Racism—the beliefs, attitudes, practices, institutional arrangements, and acts that work to confer power on, while simultaneously stripping power from, individuals or groups based on phenotypic characteristics or racial and ethnic group affiliation (Clark et al., 1999; Virdee, 2019)—is a significant risk to development and overall well-being to African Americans and their communities. Although racism's justifying claim—the false premise that black people and other persons of color are inherently inferior in moral and intellectual endowments and therefore subhuman to whites—has been disputed, it continues unabated (Kendi, 2016). Thus, racism is a structural problem with deep roots in social institutions' foundation, including housing, education, politics, health care, and criminal justice (Bailey et al., 2017; Diamond & Lewis, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Through these affiliated institutions and culturally reinforcing beliefs and practices, race-based policies and practices confer significant hardships on, and devalue African Americans (Bailey et al., 2017; Kyere et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2019). The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on black communities (Fletcher, 2020a, 2020b) and the ongoing killing of black people by police are examples of the current racial contexts with which black people must contend.

Within this social context of racially subordinating and adversarial forces, black children are expected to achieve and demonstrate positive developmental competencies. Social work is called to engage in anti-racist practices that support families and communities to thrive (National Association of Social Workers [NASW, 2020]). Social workers can uniquely assist black children and their families in addressing racial hostilities from an empowerment and strengths perspective. "Social work at its best is an empowerment profession" (Lee & Hudson, 2017, p.143). Lee and Hudson (2011) suggest that three interlocking concepts inform empowerment-based social work practice: *(1) the development of a positive and potent sense of self, (2) the development of critical and comprehensive assessment of the social forces that shape one's existential experience, and (3) the development of functional competencies that necessitate liberation.* These conceptions suggest that an empowerment-based social work practice with black children should consider their racialized context, including liberatory and resilient resources within black communities. Through culturally and contextually relevant approaches (e.g., racial socialization and black religion/spirituality), social workers can connect black youth to the heroes within the black

communities and the Black church; the Biblical accounts of God as the just, conqueror, and liberator; and Jesus' social position as a minority and the social and cultural experiences that characterized his childhood (Gates Jr., 2021; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Stevenson, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2002; Thurman, 1975; 1976).

### **Racial/Ethnic Socialization**

Racial/ethnic socialization (RES) refers to a process whereby African American parents/caregivers or their communities instill specific messages about racial status in children to influence personal and group identity, intergroup relationship, and adjustments in society (Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019; Kyere & Huguley, 2020; Stevenson, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2002). Research on best practices for optimal family functioning in African American communities has shown that RES is a set of culturally unique adaptation strategies that parents creatively integrate into their parenting practices to promote developmental competencies in black children. In general, these practices consist of 1) cultural/racial pride promotion—messages and activities that connect children to their racial heritage, culture, and history; 2) preparation for bias—practices and strategies designed to help children effectively respond to actual or potential racialized experiences; 3) egalitarianism—practices that instill the need to respect and recognize one's humanity equally; and 4) promotion of mistrust—messages that warn children to be wary of trusting individuals from other racial groups because of stereotypical narratives that racism promotes to sustain anti-black racism (Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2009; Stevenson, 1994). Central to RES is the critical exploration of black history where both the racial oppression and the community's cultural wealth (e.g., aspirational capital, social capital, resistant capital, linguistic capital, and spiritual capital) for navigating them are addressed (Degruy-Leary, 2005; Stevenson, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2002; Yosso, 2005). A critical feature of the community's cultural wealth embedded in black history is black religion and an intimate relationship with God, which provides the basis for self-worth and dignity (Thurman, 1975; 1976). In this paper, we draw upon Campbell and Bauer's (2021) conception of spirituality as faith practices such as prayer, scriptural contemplation, religious ritual, or intentional religious action established to maintain a divine relationship by individuals or groups with their Creator. We use the terms "faith" and "spirituality" interchangeably.

### **Racial/Ethnic Socialization and Positive Development**

Research has associated racial/ethnic socialization (RES) with positive

developmental outcomes in several African American youth domains. These include educational outcomes (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Smalls, 2010; Wang & Huguley, 2012), mental health (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Fisher et al., 2000; Lesane-Brown, 2006), physical health (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010) and healthy racial-ethnic identity (Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019). Evans and colleagues (2012) contend that positive youth's psychosocial outcomes—caring, connection, character, confidence, and competence—are linked to the racial/ethnic socialization messages and practices transmitted to African American children. For example, Murry et al. (2014) observed that RES practices fostered futuristic orientation among African American youth, which influenced positive peer affiliation. The decision to affiliate with positive peers was also associated with healthy emotional responses to stressful life events. Such positive affiliations promoted prosocial norms that discouraged youth from engaging in a range of risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and unsafe sexual behaviors.

As indicated above, a central goal of racial/ethnic socialization is the construction of a healthy racial/ethnic identity (Hughes et al., 2016; Huguley et al., 2019). Racial/ethnic identity refers to the significance and subjective meaning attributed to membership in a racial/ethnic group in one's conceptualization of self (Sellers et al., 1998; Sellers et al., 1997; Huguley et al., 2019). The construction of a healthy racial/ethnic identity is an essential developmental need, especially for African American youth. Although racism is a structural social phenomenon, it activates interpersonal relationships at micro, mezzo, and macro levels by constructing negative cultural narratives about people of color, particularly African Americans (Carter, 2018; Diamond & Lewis, 2019). Understanding the negative racialized narratives constructed about African Americans makes RES practices and strategies particularly influential in constructing healthy racial/ethnic identity among African American youth. The RES practices and strategies transmitted to African American youth, when internalized, serve to expunge and replace the negative societal stereotypes about them with positive ones through their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Worrell et al., 2006).

Thus, the healthy racial/ethnic identity goal of RES suggests that effective RES practices foster critical consciousness (Mathews et al., 2019; Watts et al., 2011) to achieve a healthy racial/ethnic identity. Thus, the content of RES messages and practices provides a comprehensive knowledge of African Americans' psychohistory, a history often constituted by a loss of historical truth, concealment of historical accomplishments, and intergenerational trauma (Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Abass, 2016; Degruy-Leary, 2005; Ferguson, 2014). Such exposure can provide the context for bolstering self-efficacy through critical consciousness to resist racism and achieve developmental goals among black youth (Chapman-

Hilliard & Adams-Abass, 2016; Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2015; Mathews et al., 2019). According to Karenga (1982 cited in Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Abass, 2016, p. 486), critical consciousness of African Americans' history facilitates RES and provides a framework for both retrospective and introspective conceptualization of their humanity in others' views and their view. It helps children to unpack assumptions about their self-worth and potential.

Chapman-Hilliard and Adam-Abass (2016) argue that exposure to African Americans' historical heritage serves three functions. First, it facilitates a better self-discovery of the black racial-ethnic group members through a complete examination of their history globally. Second, it reveals the collective determination of the group in the past and future possibilities. Third, history provides a counter-narrative against the deficit-oriented myth about black people. Racial/ethnic heritage is rich in a liberation-based narrative that embodies healthy psychological development and ensures the community's continuity. Chapman-Hilliard and Adam-Abass (2016) propose that black history and heritage reflect an awareness of:

*(1) the role African enslavement played in the structure of race and racism in the U.S.; (2) the achievement and contribution of African people before African enslavement and also the development of the United States; (3) one's positioning as it relates to capital (e.g., social, political, and economic); (4) cultural strength that fosters continuity of community and empowered action (p.486).*

Thus, RES practices within African American communities may facilitate greater historical awareness about the generative cultural, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, and navigational resources inherent in their historical narratives (Stevenson, 1994; 2002; Yosso, 2005). This understanding may catalyze healthy psychosocial functioning, which can facilitate empowerment and positive developmental outcomes and African American youth's overall well-being (Jones & Neblett, 2016; Travis Jr, & Leech, 2014). Faith/spirituality has been an integral part of RES practices within Black communities (Stevenson, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2002; Thurman, 1976). However, explicit emphasis on faith/spirituality has been less attended to as the research scholarship on RES continues to evolve, especially in the relationship between RES and the racial-ethnic identity of black youth. In the section that follows, we discuss the critical role of faith/spirituality in the healthy identity development of black youth and conclude with ways to explicitly attend to faith/spirituality and its integration with RES toward the liberation and empowerment of black youth in the context of racialized contexts.

### **The Power of Faith and RES**

Faith/spirituality has been central to African Americans throughout slavery and after emancipation (Gates Jr., 2021; Giles, 2010). The Black church, with the history of serving the holistic (e.g., physical, emotional, social, economic, and spiritual) needs of the black families and communities (Boddie, 2004; Cnaan et al., 2006; Brice & Hardy, 2015; Gates Jr., 2021; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990) has been a central institution for the nurturance and transmission of faith/spirituality within the black communities and families. However, there is a growing decline in the post-Civil Rights era Black church, especially among the younger generation of blacks (Jordan, 2019; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mohamed et al., 2021). Many Black churches in contemporary urban times have become more sophisticated and staid. They have adopted more of the White Christian aesthetic and focus more on adult-oriented activities with less focus on the youth's needs and interests (Gates Jr., 2021; Jordan, 2019; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). As a result, although black youth and young adults may be interested in developing their faith/spirituality that connects to who they are and their social realities, an increasing number choose to do so outside of the Black church (Dill, 2017; Jordan, 2019). By integrating RES with faith/spirituality to foster liberation and empowerment, Christian social workers can help cultivate a healthy racial-ethnic identity of black youth in a race-conscious society.

According to Thurman (1975; 1976), faith/spirituality rooted in the teachings of Jesus and his significance to the oppressed and the socially disinherited resonates with the African Americans experience. This kind of religion can provide black youth with an alternative claim to assert their self-worth and dignity. In this regard, faith in God provides a potent life force to resolve the ambiguity of black youth's racial identity (Giles, 2010; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Parker, 2003; Thurman, 1976, 1975). For example, Howard Thurman's identity was constructed through the socialization provided to him by his grandmother on the navigational capital of southern Black culture. A critical component of that culture was a deep understanding of himself as a child of God. This was strengthened by a counter-narrative message his grandmother received from an "itinerant Black slave preacher" from a neighboring plantation who visited twice a year. At the end of his sermons, he reminded them that they were not niggers nor slaves, but God's children" (Giles, 2010, p.356). In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman (1976) established striking comparisons between the social conditions of Jesus such as his marginalized status, his community's oppression under Roman authority, discrimination, poverty, and the racialized contexts of African Americans. He argued that the religion of Jesus offers a path to liberation and empowerment for African

Americans. Jesus possessed a strong conviction of his identity as a child of God. He did not need to prove himself to those who did not accept him. Jesus did not define himself by the conditions that shaped his social reality. As he stated, “*the father who sent me has already testified of me...I do not accept glory from human beings* (New International Version, 1973/2011, John 5:37-41). His self-worth and respect settled his identity question and offered him the psychological equilibrium to explore creative ways of manifesting his gifts, talents, and abilities (Thurman, 1976).

Thurman (1975; 1976) contends that because of the similarity that African Americans share with Jesus’ and his community’s social context, faith developed in, and modeled after Jesus’ kind of religion can provide a liberatory and an empowering path for African Americans to resist racism. Similarly, accounts of the Old Testament scriptures that reveal God as the deliverer, avenger, and conqueror who stands against slavery and delights in the freedom of his children strongly resonate with the African American experience of enslavement and racism (Gates Jr., 2021; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). However, white supremacy masking a Western conception of Christianity has misinterpreted the true form of Godly religion and turned it into the weapon of the socially powerful against the socially powerless (Douglass, 1845; Fanon, 1963; Gates Jr., 2021; Thurman, 1976). However, the accounts of the children of Israel in Egypt provide strategies by which African Americans and their communities help provide culturally relevant approaches to faith and spirituality that support the identity development of black youth to achieve developmental competencies. For example, although Moses was raised in Pharaoh’s palace with Egyptian education to become a prince of Egypt, his Hebrew upbringing provided to him by his mother (indication of RES) helped him to negotiate his Egyptian socialization successfully and by faith lived accordingly (Exodus, 2:8-11; Hebrews 11:24-27, NIV). Moses’ experience and several other accounts of Biblical heroes suggest that true faith in God is not so much about material success, but rather spiritual success, living out God’s purpose (Giles, 2010; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Thurman, 1976). To achieve this success required a type of critical consciousness that drives the word of God deep into the soul (Psalm 119:11, NIV). This deep internalization of God’s word can displace the possibility of being driven by emotions, fear, and negative bias that can undermine self-worth and respect and instead, function to build resiliency (Evans, 2019; Thurman, 1976).

Ethnographic works with predominantly African American youth in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods reveal the critical role of faith/spirituality in these youth’s lives as they navigate their social context (Dill, 2017). Dill’s participants revealed that faith/spirituality provides them the inner fortitude to navigate their social context. For example, when asked how, one participant describes it as: “By praying every time I step

out the door, wearing my spiritual jacket” (p. 699). Reviewed works by Dill (2017) linked the spirituality/faith of African American youth to an increased focus on prosocial values (e.g., empathy, justice, and cooperation) and fewer reports of criminal behaviors. Additionally, among incarcerated youth of color, faith-based talks provided an alternative lens to reframe themselves and to imagine a positive outlook within a culturally familiar and institutionally approved context (Dill, 2017). Faith in God was the “spiritual-sustaining God force used by Blacks to protect their self-worth and collective identity” (p.356). As noted, “resistant soul force is the power to create, transform, and transcend those barriers and constraints that enforce complete domestication to those values, processes, behaviors, and beliefs that reinforce human devaluation and oppression” (Stewart, 1999 cited in Giles, 2010, p. 356).

Other research corroborating the role of faith/spirituality rooted in God suggests that it fosters resiliency among adolescents, including African Americans (Campbell & Bauer, 2021; Edwards & Wilkerson, 2018; Parker, 2003). For example, reviewed work by Edwards and Wilkerson (2018) suggests that spirituality confers favorable influences on adolescents in four ways: “by helping build attachment relationships, by opening access to sources of social support, by guiding conduct and moral values, and by offering opportunities for personal growth and development” (p.49). These authors also suggest that spirituality has provided an important mechanism to foster resiliency for coping with the pain of racism.

A Biblical analysis reveals that Christians’ awareness of the early apostles’ and prophets’ faith is vital for developing and maintaining faith, a belief system verified by actions (Evans, 2019). True Christians are called *fellow citizens with God’s people and members of his [God’s] household built on the foundation of both the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone* (Ephesians 2:19-20, NIV). A Christian and the church are established and sustained by the spiritual heritage given by the Christian church’s early apostles and prophets, not on modern ideas driven by Eurocentric values. According to the holy scriptures, “it was credited to him” [Abraham] were written not for him alone, but for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the death (Romans 4:23-24, NIV).

The above text suggests that Abraham’s exploits through faith are written for Christians to know that if they follow such examples and strategies, they will acquire the grace and strength Abraham gained to achieve success despite struggles and adversities. It suggests that critical awareness of historical experiences of those in the Christian faith is essential for cultivating functional faith that contemporary Christians need to thrive. Christians are encouraged and edified by the god-centered identity and godly life of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Ruth, Esther,

Mary, especially Jesus, and many others who demonstrated extraordinary courage and persistence in the face of adversity. As the eleventh chapter of Hebrews states, by learning about the resiliency of these witnesses of faith, Christians can also cultivate an inner strength through the word of God to acquire the wisdom, courage, and faith to resist injustice and oppression while persevering.

The meditation process by which faith is cultivated can be akin to the level of consciousness that researchers have associated with a critical exploration and identification with blacks' history in the United States (Chapman-Hilliard & Adam-Abass, 2016; Giles, 2010). Such consciousness reveals blacks' resilience and the subsequent accomplishment and social contributions the black race has made to society. Doing so fosters pride in their racial heritage that can make them psychologically and spiritually empowered to achieve individually and collectively (Giles, 2010; Hughes et al., 2015). Such empowerment has been shown to confer favorable effects on mental health and overall well-being on black people and their children (Hughes et al., 2015; Travis Jr, & Leech, 2014). The human experiences of social suffering and oppression as exemplified by the apostles and prophets, including Jesus himself, while painful and should not be tolerated, provide a context to carefully reframe and engage in transcendent life to effectively respond to the evils of injustice and oppression (Giles, 2010; Thurman, 1976). According to theologian James Cone, Christians from the Black church tradition like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ida B. Wells viewed the cross and the resurrection as inspiration for hope (Cone, 2011). Both risked their lives to fight for justice and life-affirming practices and policies for African Americans. For Cone, this critical consciousness path involves empowerment through lament and forgiveness (Cone, 2011). Such understanding can foster the need to recognize the stony road walked by other black historical figures and appreciate the cross they carried. Using Cone's critical perspective, Christian social workers (African Americans in particular) who work with black youth and their families can draw parallels between the experiences of the Bible characters mentioned in Hebrews eleven (e.g., Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab) and the accomplishments of black historical figures with enduring faith such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Howard Thurman, Mariah Stewart, W.E. B. Dubois, Ida B. Wells, George Washington Carver, Francis Grimke, Lewis Howard Latimer, Garret Morgan, and many others. Such connection can be relied on to promote deep reflection to help black children establish a connection with these heroes, like Christians connect with the faith of the early apostles and prophets to develop and nurture faith for thriving.

In the same way that faith ignites hope and help to perceive possibilities in the context of a hopeless situation, research on possible selves suggests

that in the context of difficulties, strategies that establish a connection between youth and accomplished social identity group members help them to reframe the meaning of difficulty and engage in strategies that advance success. Oyserman and colleagues (2006) observed that black youth who are consistently exposed to historical or contemporary accomplished members of their racial-ethnic group and their resilience could reframe their difficulties and employ effective strategies to achieve developmental outcomes (e.g., improved grades and test scores, and displayed academic initiative, improved mental health, improved school attendance and positive behavior in school). Similarly, Christians seeking to follow the pattern of those living an authentic life of faith can confront the dehumanizing and oppressive forces in their lives.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The following practice recommendations can provide new opportunities for Christian social workers to support black youth and their families, especially concerning black children's identity development. Given the declining relevance of the Black church to black youth (Jordan, 2019; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mohamed et al., 2021), social workers who work with black youth should understand the racialized context's critical role of faith/spirituality within a culturally relevant framework. Family researchers have recently called for incorporating race and racism across time and space into family systems theory for practice (James et al., 2018). Social workers can help black children and talk about family history and legacy as well as their faith legacy using various innovative approaches. For example, social workers can engage black children to identify photos, drawings, and symbols to discuss their family's history and heritage. Next, help children process their feelings, think about themes emerging from the exercise, and identify actions that such feelings can motivate them to take. Second, find examples from the Bible, and help children establish a connection with their Christian faith and racial-ethnic identity. Third, identify and discuss autobiographies and biographies of accomplished, historical, or contemporary figures who are members of their racial-ethnic group with a shared Christian identity, and help children explore how these historical figures influence their lives today (See example *The Ward: Race and Class in Du Bois' Seventh Ward, Oral History: Congregations*, 2012). Fourth, challenge black children to consider "their possible self" as historical figures rather than the black stereotype. Connecting this vision with scripture, black children imagine how they desire to be remembered by others (e.g., family members, friends, and society). Following this, ask black children to write down at least two actions to ensure their future historical self is accomplished. Consider how black children internalize

these proactive processes and their Christian and African American history heritage to develop a powerful sense of themselves by engaging them in questioning through dialogue. Effective social workers must guard against colonialism and a distinctly white-centered perspective that can disempower youth through the white savior mentality.

### **Recommendation for Research**

A model that helps black youth develop faith within the cultural frame by connecting them with Black church traditions birthed during the slave era can foster resilience to achieve developmental competencies and improved overall well-being. Further investigation through interviews is needed to flesh out the model with a more profound and explicit emphasis on faith/spiritual integration with RES for a more consolidated identity for black youth. Although RES within the African American communities entails spirituality, Christian social workers have not explored this relationship in ways that establish parallels with the principles and process underlying both Christian identity and racial/ethnic identity development. As a result, we have limited understanding of how Christian social workers can foster a holistic sense of self that integrates Christian and racial/ethnic identity and combine the empowerment and liberatory possibilities to support African American families and the positive developmental outcomes for African American youth. Empirical research using in-depth qualitative interviews should focus on potential mediators and moderators in understanding the mechanism by which RES and faith principles or strategies can be internalized, leading to the strengthening of identity, affecting developmental outcomes among African Americans.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, in response to the persistent and turbulent history of racism in the United States and the developmental risks racism presents for African American youth, African American families and communities use RES to prepare their children to be psychologically, physically, socially, and spiritually healthy. In this article, we argue that a closer examination of the RES principles, strategies, and goals reveals parallels with the principles and strategies by which Christians develop and maintain their Christian identity for flourishing. We argue that Christians' awareness of the early apostles' and prophets' faith is vital to the development of a mature Christian identity. This process to mature Christian development is comparable to the critical consciousness process of African Americans' historical heritage and serves a liberatory function. This parallel suggests that Christian social workers may be well-positioned to effectively draw upon African American history and

heritage, given this group's tremendous national and global contributions, to support the healthy development of black youth. Also, because of the Christian faith's life-affirming messages, Christian social workers can draw from their clients' faith and consider the potential links to their own racial/ethnic identity. This integration of faith principles, rooted in the Jesus kind of religion, with the rich historical heritage of African Americans can facilitate anti-racist practice and promote healthy developmental outcomes of African American children and other children of color. ❖

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