

Using Narrative to Combat Racism

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Introduction:

Children are living in a racialized society where people are categorized according to race and perceived as racial beings. These categorizations are divisive and inequitable and take privilege away from minority races. As a result, children grow up in a society with deeply rooted systemic racism, internalized and unspoken biases, stereotypes, and discrimination. These aspects are reflected in inequalities and barriers in the education system, the criminal justice system, healthcare, employment and wealth, immigration, homeownership, and many other systems of society. The prevalence of racialization causes children to form an understanding of themselves and others related to race. Minority race groups are at the highest risk of experiencing the harmful impacts of racism. Children may not be educated and aware of the devastating consequences of racism and are at risk of maintaining or continuing to foster these inequalities. Furthermore, parents may not be aware of their own racial biases and may unknowingly teach and instill racist notions in their children.

Furthermore, in a world favoring and privileging majority races and the culture of these dominant groups, children may need more exposure or awareness of other diverse and complex cultures. Children must understand the importance of inclusivity, acceptance, and appreciation for cultural diversity. Learning to value cultural diversity is a powerful step in combating racial bias as it broadens perspectives and expectations about minority groups. Racial prejudice is often formed from the influence of environmental factors. As children explore the world, they are influenced by social experiences, create and add to schemas, form essentialist beliefs, and change through multiple influences and interactions of their predispositions, developmental periods, and other environmental influences. These components instill thinking patterns and, specifically, an understanding of culture and racial beliefs within children.

Moreover, narrative plays a vital role in the proliferation or mitigation of racial bias. Racist notions are maintained and spread from the communication of a “single story,” which conveys a narrow and often stereotyped understanding of a minority group (Kleinknecht, 2024). The communication of a “single story” is the expression of a narrative from a single perspective. These narratives spread powerful socializing messages. However, broadening one’s perspective about diverse cultures’ beautiful and complex components can foster the diminishing of inaccurate bias and an appreciation for diversity. Parents also play a role in creating racial bias with narrative. Storytelling between a parent and child communicates messages that socialize children and may build racist beliefs.

It is essential to understand how children develop their cognitions and beliefs and the role that culture and the environment play. Grasping how children’s thoughts develop and the influence parents have on this development can lead to more effective strategies for building healthy and just thinking within children. It is also critical to recognize the influential role of narrative, its potential dangers, and ways parents can use narrative to shape children into respectful, accepting, and fair members of society. Storybooks can enact critical changes in perspectives and convey important messages. Similarly, my story aims to introduce children to a broader perspective of diverse cultures and the importance of embracing diversity to reduce racist prejudices and stereotyping.

The Development of Beliefs:

As children explore the world, physically develop, and engage in novel experiences, they develop complex cognitions and beliefs. They become socialized and learn their society’s culture. Subsequently, children form biased beliefs because they live in a biased society. We must understand the process of belief and bias development in order to prevent it.

Children develop through passive and active forces. Passive forces are environmental influences that shape a child by directing a child's behavior and providing a child with experiences. Lev Vygotsky suggested that social experiences shape cognition (Kleinknecht, 2024). Language and culture shape thought, and children advance their thinking with the help of mature members of society. Mature members of society, such as parents and educators, nurture children's growth with social exchange primarily through language. Children develop their thinking and beliefs through social dialogue, communication of expectations, and interactions with the people around them. These cognitions align with their environment's culture and the people they learn from. Children develop their perceptions of race, racism, and diverse cultures from these influences. If a child's environment is filled with racist ideas and their parents also hold racist perspectives, children will learn and adopt similar perspectives.

Furthermore, active forces that shape cognition refer to children's active exploration and engagement with the environment. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development encapsulates active influences on cognition. Piaget's theory is based on the idea that we always try to make sense of our experiences by creating schemas to adapt to our environment (Levine & Munsch, 2022). Schemas are mental representations that are built upon or changed and help children make sense of the world around them. Through exploring the world around them, children form and organize schemas, actively promoting their own development (Kleinknecht, 2024). Opportunities to explore the environment enable children to build knowledge. Therefore, children will actively and curiously explore their environment and learn about what they encounter. As they age, children pick up knowledge and form schemes or understandings about the culture and biases of the world around them. Therefore, when children see differences in race and negative attributes

and stereotypes associated with race, they will form their own understanding of race and racial biases accordingly.

Children's beliefs are also formed through psychological essentialism. Essentialism is the idea that specific categories have an underlying reality that cannot be directly observed (Gelman, 2004). For example, an essence would be whatever quality remains unchanging as an organism grows. The stripes of a tiger are an unchanging and innate essence. Children have an intuitive understanding of biology and understand that biological concepts share essences (Farrar & Boyer-Pennington, 2011). For example, if children are taught that a bird has a beak, they will infer that all birds should also have a beak. As they learn more about biology, children make more complex inferences about categories and appearances.

Essentialism helps children reason quickly, give objects identity, and categorize objects. It emerges as children try to make sense of the world by using biases as heuristics (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). These processes are influenced by the environment and vary with culture. For example, children have essentialist views on race, which are informed by the culture they are exposed to. Depending on the views and homogeneity of the community they are raised in, children will form views and stereotypes about race, reflecting the community's perspective. Rhodes and Mandalaywala (2017) explained that the language children hear about social categories, such as race in their environment, builds essentialist beliefs. Children learn to view race and racial features as categorizing heuristics. When children form expectations about race, they also form racial stereotypes and may even engage in prejudiced behaviors.

Finally, the Dynamic Systems Model can also explain the formation of children's beliefs. This model explains that children develop over different timescales, and development results from many individual elements in a complex environment (Smith & Thelen, 2003). Everyday

activities of children, where children are impacted by their predispositions, timescales of growth, and environmental influences, create developmental change. Children's predisposed emotions, temperament, and personality, as well as their motor skill capability, brain development, and timing of development, interact with each other to determine children's cognitive development (Kleinknecht, 2024). Furthermore, other environmental contexts, including culture and language, how well a parent's parenting style matches a child's temperament, and other social interactions play a role in forming children's thoughts. In other words, children form their beliefs, including their racial beliefs, from the influence of multiple interacting components, which prompt children to organize themselves in ways that can help them change or achieve goals.

Power of Narrative:

Narrative plays a vital role in conveying knowledge and shaping cognitive processes. Narratives serve as socializing agents that convey culture to developing children. Similarly, narratives convey society's ideas about race and racial stereotypes. Storybooks reflect the values, norms, and expectations of the society they come from, which impressionable children communicate and internalize. Narratives reproduce meaning, build identities, teach storytellers how to manage emotions, allow for learning of values and expectations, aid in self-reflection, transform experiences, and allow people to envision their lives (Miller et al., 2007).

Narratives are influential in molding impressionable children's identities. They allow people to enact and represent themselves in particular ways. For example, Miller and colleagues (2007) explained that stories of personal experience can provide young children from diverse communities and cultures with culture-filled resources to make sense of their own experiences. As personal storytelling holds cultural values, moral and social rules are also invoked in stories, teaching children how to act appropriately, regulate, and improve themselves. They are also

critical in forming the scripts to navigate the world around them (Kleinknecht, 2024). For example, if children read about kids playing in a playground, they will develop scripts to engage in play in playground settings appropriately. In other words, children use stories to guide their thinking and actions.

When parents read stories with their children, other social-emotional and cognition developments occur (Kleinknecht, 2024). Children build healthy attachments with their parents through warm and inviting interaction in story-telling. They can become more secure in their relationship with their parents. They are also introduced to a template for organizing their thoughts, learning about patterns of action, exposure to new vocabulary words and language, and an opportunity to enhance their executive function. Children with high executive functioning skills can self-regulate, plan, remember things, and focus their attention more easily. As a result, narratives have appealing benefits for children.

Moreover, dangerously, narratives are also responsible for perpetuating harmful stereotypes and biases (Kleinknecht, 2024). Narratives are guilty of communicating a biased, unrealistic, stereotyped, closed-minded, and prejudiced “single-story.” The communication of single-story refers to the idea that only one perspective is being conveyed. Often, children are only exposed to a single and stereotyped perspective of races and cultures. As a result, they form inaccurate and narrow perspectives of diverse groups, perpetuating racist notions and systems. Narratives that are inaccurate, disrespectful, or not representative of a child can be harmful and prevent children from forming realistic ideas. However, single stories can be fleshed out, and stereotypes and prejudices can be changed.

Narratives are such a powerful tool for socializing because of their ability to reach each level of socialization and subsequently convey, maintain, and perpetuate culture in each

environment. For example, in the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, books read to children travel through each level of socialization (Kleinknecht, 2024). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model explains that one's development is shaped by socialization. The social environment that children develop and grow within influences and interacts with them and shapes who they are (Levine & Munsch, 2022). In the levels of Bronfenbrenner's model, narrative can be spread from face-to-face book reading moments with a parent and child, books traveling from home to school and school to home, the amount of time a child reads depends on their family, socioeconomic status, and school resources, and cultural norms, values, and morals depicted in books and internalized by child readers. Changes in culture determine what kind of content is read. The far-reaching influence of narrative shapes children's understanding of race and racial categorization.

What Parents Can Do:

Narratives hold immense power, and the messages of narratives are specifically conveyed through parents reading books to their children. Stories promote, distort, and stifle world views (Kleinknecht, 2024). Storybook reading between parents and children holds more significance in shaping children's cognitions than one may imagine. Aligning with Vygotsky's idea that cognitive growth results from interactions between a more mature member of society and a child, parents guide their children's cognition when they engage in storytelling with their children (Kleinknecht, 2024). Parents read with their children, and they point out the meanings of the language of the book. Through repeated storytelling, the messages of the narrative are instilled in children. From an essentialist perspective, children tend to assume that other, more knowledgeable people, such as parents, know how to categorize and label things correctly. This means that children's categorization of objects and people will be influenced by parents (Rhodes

& Mandalaywala, 2017). Therefore, parents are key facilitators of developing their children's beliefs.

Caregivers must be cautious about discussing and presenting narratives to their children (Kleinknecht, 2024). Caregivers must be aware of the realities beyond the "single-story" communicated by narratives and have conversations with their children about what they encounter while reading. When only one perspective represents diverse and complex groups, children will build a narrow and inaccurate understanding of those groups. They should emphasize to their children that there is always more to groups, people, and cultures than they know.

Parents should also be wary of the stereotypes and biases within books and reflect on their own beliefs. There are influential implicit messages parents can send to their children through narrative (Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018). The implicit ethnic prejudice of children results from their parents' level of implicit ethnic prejudice (Pirchio et al., 2018). Implicit practices can be direct or indirect (Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018). Direct messages include responding to children's behavior, while indirect messages include responding to others. For example, parents can send direct messages about racist ideations by not allowing their children to read books or consume media featuring people of color. Additionally, they can send indirect messages by negatively commenting or stereotyping people of color while reading books with children. These implicit practices are mostly unconscious and, therefore, easy for parents to participate in. Therefore, parents must be cautious of what they say and do to their children to ensure they are not accidentally sending harmful messages. Parents should also model good behavior and ensure that the messages they want to convey to children align with their actions. Their words and actions convey strong messages to their children and shape their beliefs. The

more educated, open, and unbiased parents are, the more they can help their children develop into their most just and authentic selves.

Moreover, parents should also be selective in the types of stories they read to their children. Parents should expose children to various narratives to avoid having children form narrow perspectives. According to The Association for Psychological Science (APS), parents can influence children's development of beliefs through their choice of books (2022). If parents allow their children to learn about and interact with as many different perspectives as possible, children can avoid forming narrow, inaccurate beliefs. For example, parents can expose their children to books filled with diverse cultures, people of color, and lived experiences of minority groups. In that case, children can better understand groups or ways of living different from themselves and learn to be curious, appreciative, and embracing of diverse races and cultures. Interpersonally, parents can make significant changes in how children understand the world.

How this story will help:

My story will follow a young Japanese American Girl in her experiences of living in both a culturally inclusive and diverse community and a community that is more constrained in its inclusivity. The child's experiences in the two environments will be compared and contrasted to highlight the influence of systemic racism. By including the frustrations of experiencing limitations and barriers to cultural and ethnic expression in less inclusive, homogenous communities, the story will communicate deeply rooted issues that arise from racial inequalities. As a result, readers will expand their awareness of systemic racism, racial biases, and racial stereotypes that people of color and minority race groups experience.

Furthermore, the story will detail the experience of a child of color living in a community that represents and appreciates their culture. The depiction of this community will show children

how harmonious, just, and lovely the world can look if it focuses on achieving inclusivity, understanding, openness, and gratitude for cultural diversity. Subsequently, readers will understand the importance of embracing cultural diversity. To expose children to cultures they may be unfamiliar with, multiple different cultures and hallmarks of these cultures, including traditions, foods, and values, will be featured in the text or illustrations of the story. These representations of culture will be shown respect and appreciation in the story, modeling appropriate behavior to readers. They will also aid readers in gaining a richer perspective of culture and learning to avoid forming biases and assumptions about “one story” or a single narrative about diverse people and cultures. Ultimately, my story's goal is to expand children's perspectives and foster an appreciation and understanding of cultural diversity and minority groups to help mitigate the formation and maintenance of racial biases.

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