

Does Parenting Style Matter? A Review of the Mediation of Child Success Concerning Race and  
Social Position

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## **Introduction**

In the United States, there are systems of institutional discrimination that sustains the subordination of African Americans, in favor of white Americans. One critical piece of social science work supporting this historical development was the Moynihan report of the 1960s. Within the report, Moynihan focused on the state of the African American family, which he asserted was heading towards a state of decay due to pathological problems, embedded in a “tangle of pathology.” The decline of the standard family structure, determined by understanding of the nuclear family as including both parents and their children, was understood as the result of perpetual states of poverty (Massey and Sampson, 2009). Missing from the Moynihan report was a critical analysis of the larger structural issues that disproportionately affect black families, such as mass incarceration and systemic racism, which now removes black men from the home at a higher rate than other social groups, shifting the familial responsibilities entirely on mothers (Martensen, 2012). Another important development to consider is the resilience strategies that women have to employ to aid themselves and their children to navigate complex social situations, which would demonstrate the potentially positive aspects of African American families.

Turning a critical eye to the Moynihan Report, it would be important to understand whether concerns about the African American family are grounded in a harmful pedagogy of using the white, middle-class American family as a frame of reference, or whether the social issues at play stem from race-based discrimination. The literature cites Reagan’s “War on Poverty,” modern racism, and the societal shift towards “pro-racist” ideologies as cause to regard black families from a deficit perspective, while application of resilience theory demonstrates the ability of black families to respond despite adversity (Hill, 2003; Hollingsworth, 2013; Jarrett et

al., 2018). As such, one potential route of connecting the ideas of the “tangle of pathology” as impairing social gains of the parents and the children would be analyzing the relationship between parenting style and children’s relationship with education. Black families are noted for their usage of kinship bonds, religious orientation, and, particularly mother’s, positive outlooks on education as means to overcome challenges in life situations (Hill 2003; Hollingsworth 2013; Jarrett 2018). This analysis seeks to explore what the marginal effects of different parenting styles are on future child success when controlling for similar social positions across racial groups.

To access child success, the most commonly used measures would be high school GPA and pursuit of postsecondary education, as well as considering job outcomes. In the context of this analysis, it was not possible to gain access to measures of wealth, so consideration of financial circumstances would substitute in measures of income instead.

Given the multifaceted nature of the guiding question, it is necessary to break down the inquiry into more palatable sub-questions: does parenting style vary between black and white Americans, are there intragroup differences in parenting style concerning social class, and what are the effects of parenting style on educational success in black and white children, defined by markers like GPA and pursuit of higher education? These questions were intended to help posit the effects of both race and social class, by accessing intragroup variations as well as the effect when the relative social position is held constant.

## **Core Concepts**

### *Parenting Style*

Within work on the socialization process, there is a lot of attention paid to the impact of different parenting styles on child development. The field draws on the work of Baumrind to

define parenting styles as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and indulgent. Importantly, the major consideration is the dichotomy between parental control and parental warmth, though neither definition is standardized due to variations in cultural backgrounds throughout the literature.

The relationship between control and warmth, as well as the effects, appears to vary across the literature. A paper by Robinson and Harris (2013) details that while black respondents report that their parents were more disciplinarian and withdrew privileges in response to inadequate achievement in a survey, the white respondents were more likely to use reason as a response. Steinberg et al. (2006) state that authoritative parenting is less common in families from ethnic minorities and poor families, but understood within the field to have beneficial effects on adolescent adjustment across ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Steinberg et al., 2006). However, Hill (1997) reports that restrictive control was positively related to achievement in low-income and high-risk communities, while low control correlates more with success in low-risk communities. Additionally, Matejevic et al. (2014) indicate that parental authority might not be a good predictor of child success in African American families after finding that there was no correlation between authoritative parenting and academic performance.

#### *Parental Practice of Concerted Cultivation*

A trend that appears in the literature is the association between middle-class parenting and concerted cultivation. According to Carolan and Wasserman (2015), concerted cultivation is described as the skills, habits, and attitudes that teachers prefer and reward, though another description of the process is the trend of enrolling children in many extracurriculars to develop cultural competencies. This can range from piano lessons to choir practice to travel soccer and represents a social development of regulating the leisure time of children and the parents around

a schedule of activities. The implication here is that the skills that are developed in the process are rewarded, which has the dual effect of othering students that do not come from the same kind of background.

Lareau (2002) says middle-class parents, both black and white, engage in the practice due to access to resources that enable discretionary spending on social enrichment. The research demonstrates that the same relationship does not hold up for low-income families, reflecting a difference in childrearing practices from a socioeconomic perspective, while suggesting that the race of the family in question is not a significant consideration.

### *Parental Practice of Discipline*

Furthermore, there was an emphasis on the parental use of consequence in terms of responding to stress. Broadly, society associates physical forms of discipline with black families, yet the literature explores different classifications of discipline and responses to child behavior. Cooper et al. (2018) note that research suggests that parental stress influences the processing of children's behavior. This relationship is important to understand parental responsivity as the paper also reports that African American and Caucasian parents overreacted or displayed hostility due to blaming or intentional understandings of child behavior, while Caucasian parents also displayed hostility due to stable attributions of behavior.

The terms used within the paper were operationally-defined to fit into the context of the analysis for self-reported survey data. The purpose was to provide a rationale for when and how parents employ punishment, yet a significant conclusion from Robinson and Harris (2013) is that the use of punishment divided parents into two groups, where one was punitive and the other non-punitive, and parents in the non-punitive group abstained from punitive measures completely, while the punitive group used a mix of the two. In this manner, the relationship

between parenting and punishment represents a complex relationship between cultural factors and social understandings of the relationship between the parent and the child.

### *Cultural Mobility Theory*

There exists a complex relationship between culture, as a product of social factors, and the practices of American families due to pressures to advance socioeconomically. Research in the field characterizes these pressures under the cultural mobility theory, which connects social advantage with the intergenerational transfer of different forms of capital, to explain varying abilities to gain exposure to different forms of social capital. Social science research engages with African American families from a deficit perspective, entailing that there is an expectation of low cultural capital in families due to a lack of engagement for different reasons (Carter-Black, 2001). This phenomenon is consistent with the Moynihan's appropriation of Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty frame to apply it to black families.

The consequence of this is that there are structural barriers to African American engagement, such as lack of opportunities in areas frequented by minorities, lack of family time due to work schedules, and discrimination in hiring practices that leads to lower amounts of discretionary income that can go to various forms of cultural engagement. These barriers do not disappear when African American families advance socially, as Hill (1997) notes that achievements are more complex because they are earned in friction with crossing class and cultural lines.

Additionally, Hill (1997) proposes that the issues with socialization faced by white Americans generalize to African American women, entailing this double burden to cultivating cultural competency through engagement. As this endeavor is procedural, Carolan and

Wasseman (2015) indicate that, while recognizing the significance of social background, it is critically important to understand the processes that lead to the accumulation of cultural capital.

## **Results**

### *Does parenting style vary between black and white Americans?*

A host of research studies point to mixed results about differences in the parenting style of black and white Americans (Lareau, 2002; Robinson and Harris, 2013; Steinberg et al., 2006). Lareau (2002) performed an ethnographic study of the black and white middle class and working-class families that involved observation of the daily life of the children and the dynamics of the household. One of the major findings was there was not a significant difference between the ways that working-class and poor families socialized their children, presenting the result of similar social pressures, regardless of race. For children in those families, free time was spent around siblings and other family members, rather than immersion in organized activities.

Although, it is important to note that there was still racial pressure mentioned in an interview with the black middle-class parents, who felt that they had to remain cognizant of the ways that race would affect their son growing up. The parents assert that being black should not be an excuse to not work hard, admitting to the barriers to success for African American youths in the United States, relaying back to complications in cultural mobility theory about issues of access to the same experiences and spaces as white counterparts.

Alternatively, Steinberg et al. (2006) attempted to evaluate the impact of parenting style on adolescent patterns of social adjustment between surveys of a sample of mostly juvenile offenders from black, Hispanic, and Asian families and available data from samples of white, affluent suburban youth. The initial analysis using MANOVA did not reveal significant results, leading the researchers to take race and class out of the question and then focus on the trends

between parenting styles, defined as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and indulgent, and adolescent resistance to peer pressure and adjustment. They found that there was no significant difference between adolescents from authoritative and authoritarian families combined with a lack of significant difference between permissive and neglectful groups.

Therefore, their conclusion was parental control is a more critical measure of adolescent ability to function than experiences of parental warmth. This conflicts with the narrative that Robinson and Harris (2013) presents about the negative impact of control on the reading achievement of black children, while not affecting math scores.

The focus on the parental use of punishment as a means of responding to inadequate academic performance was more heavily associated with black parents, who are more likely to be viewed as authoritarian within the paradigm, defined as having high control and high warmth or responsiveness, as opposed to white parents considered to be authoritative, with lower control.

In the context of the study, Robinson and Harris (2013) found that authoritative parents were more likely to belong to the non-punitive group based on survey results of parenting techniques, meaning that they were more likely to apply strategies of verbal encouragement to promote improved performance in the future. Therefore, there are signs of racial differences in the parenting practices that are used by black and white parents, even though the causes of a marked difference in the use of punishment or parenting style are not elaborated in the research itself.

*Are there intragroup differences in parenting style concerning social position?*

The literature points to more direct consequences of the interaction between social position and race in terms of impacting working-class parenting practices. A study by Hill (1997) on the socialization experiences of African American women indicated that there were no

reported differences in the race-related socialization or social experiences according to the social class of upbringing. While there was no difference in the parental value assigned to education, the activities that parents engage in as part of parenting are mediated by socioeconomic differences of access to cultural activities.

Lareau (2002) analyzed the differences in the middle class and working-class parenting, and children in working-class homes spent more of their time engaging with others their age, rather than spent in organized practices like middle-class kids. Irrespective of race, concerted cultivation was a group of behaviors connected with middle-class families that generated a sense of othering for working-class parents that wanted to provide their children a haven, not solely to set them up for success as adults, but were restricted by financial barriers and time constraints. As such, the role of social position functions as a social buffer between parenting practices and child socialization, which would reasonably explain the differences between working-class and middle-class parents.

*What is the effect of parenting style on educational success in black and white children?*

When considering the relationship between parenting style and educational success in children according to race, studies focused on the effects of involvement and motivation strategies of parents, primarily the mothers. Certain studies assert that, regardless of race, mothers performed the primary guiding role in the developmental relationship, and took on a more authoritative parenting style, in contrast with fathers more likely assuming an authoritarian role (Matejevic et al., 2014; Spera, 2005). The association between parental figure and parenting style harks to cultural expectations for the mother and the father to occupy different familial duties, where the mother performs more of the domestic duties of raising the children. Consequently, the father is not as present, but an important finding is that parental expectations

were positively and significantly associated with academic achievement, measured by reading scores (Hill, 1997; Carolan and Wasseman, 2015). Matejevic et al. (2014) also found that there was a positive relationship between parental involvement in school activities and academic performance, though this was more likely for white families, as minority parents were more unaware of opportunities to become involved in school activities. The study also revealed that over the course of children's education, parental engagement for both black and white families decreases.

On the other hand, Carolan and Wasseman (2015) find that parental involvement was not significantly associated with children's high school GPA. Also, concerted cultivation was not found to be associated with student success in school. This finding implies that the skills influence the socialization of children, but not academic performance, which has benefits that were not explored in the study regarding navigating relationships with authority and undergoing interviews for jobs. In relationship with parenting style, Spera (2005) mentions that authoritative parenting was associated with GPA for white families, though not for black, Asian, or Hispanic families, where authoritarian parenting was found to be negatively associated with GPA in Asian and white families but not black and Hispanic families. This finding supports the idea that the effects of parenting style are stratified by race and cultural backgrounds, even though parental socialization goals do not appear to vary by ethnicity. Robinson and Harris (2013) find that the parental use of punitive measures to manage inadequate academic performance does negatively impact future performance along a black and white family divide.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the literature draws rather inconclusive results on the matter of whether or not parenting style is important to the consideration of child academic performance. While it is

hard to draw a clear distinction between which results are especially linked to class differences and which are mediated by racial background, there was a prevailing notion of the impact of race and discrimination on black families, irrespective of social position. The results indicated that the authoritative parenting style is more common in white families and correlates with better scores on standardized tests, while authoritarian parenting provides the same results for black families. The use of punitive parenting practices to respond to inadequate academic performance was found to negatively impact the performance of white children, though the same relationship was not found for black children. Regarding concerted cultivation, a practice of middle-class families, there was not a correlation with higher student performance, so much as the development of skills that are rewarded in schools and the workforce. Based on access to material resources, social position impacts the parental ability of both white and black families to engage in concerted cultivation. Parental involvement in education does correlate with higher success in primary education and increased motivation to pursue higher education, with black mothers attributed to a significantly higher promotion of educational attainment among parents.

As most of the studies are ethnographic and utilize relatively small samples or convenience samples, the lack of access to longitudinal data or wealth measures makes it hard to analyze the effect of parenting throughout children's lives. Some data analysis relied on measures of self-report from surveys, which is open to interpretation and relative to the experiences of the respondents. Currently, it is hard to place the role of the social context within this analysis, as child success and parenting style are likely influenced by discrimination and systemic racism. There is a current need in the research to further address the deficit model derived from the "tangle of pathology" relating to black Americans and other ethnic minorities because of the use of white, middle-class America as the reference group. Given that changing

parenting style does not appear to impact academic success, a potential solution to the problem of the black-white achievement gap would be to increase access to resources through a process of detracking in schools. This would be an alternative to increasing financial income available to working-class families, with notice to ways in which social pressures might not be alleviated for black families.

Therefore, a goal for future studies would be to perform longitudinal studies to observe the long-term effects of contextual factors on racial differences in parenting style and the pressures that influence child performance and success. One way to accomplish this would be to select an area to study, such as a state, and then randomly select cities and school districts to create focus groups. From there, a mixed-methods study would track the K-12 journey of white and black students from working- and middle-class backgrounds through an ethnographic study of the family unit and standardized testing scores. With access to both qualitative and quantitative models, results would more readily provide access to the influence of cultural backgrounds on academic success, taking particular note of how school demographics in terms of race and class affect the allocation of resources.

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