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What attachment scholars can learn from research on Black family resilience

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Abstract

Within a sociohistorical context of racism-related physical and emotional threats, Black families in the United States have developed sources of resilience to promote children's safety and positive development. Yet research on Black family resilience has rarely been integrated into one of the most influential theories of child development: attachment theory. In this article, we propose specific ways that attachment scholars can learn from research on Black family resilience to enrich models of parent–child relationships, focusing on three sources of resilience: culturally specific *parental protections* (e.g., “The Talk,” preparation for bias), *extended caregiving networks* (e.g., natural mentors, fictive kin, spiritual community), and *racial-ethnic identity development* (e.g., racial pride messages to protect against social denigration). We argue that including insights from research on the resilience of Black children and families in the face of racism-related threats across generations can substantially advance current understanding of caregiving, attachment, and positive child development in context.

KEYWORDS
attachment, Black families, Black youth development, parenting, racism, resilience

The United States is a racialized society plagued by an overarching system of oppression and inequality, particularly toward Black individuals (Lloyd et al., 2021). Anti-Black racism exists in the form of prejudice (e.g., negative attitudes) and discriminatory behavior (e.g., social denigration and exclusion), and within societal systems in the form of laws, policies, and economic structures that reinforce racial inequities (Kendi, 2019). Racism profoundly affects the health and well-being of Black children and families across the life course (Pachter & García Coll, 2009; Trent et al., 2019).

A growing body of research reveals how Black families draw on culturally relevant practices to foster resilience in the face of racism (American Psychological Association, 2008; Hill, 2003). Beginning in early childhood, firm control combined with warmth, as well as moderate emotional suppression with high levels of emotional support, offer protection against the emotional and physical risks associated with racism (Dunbar et al., 2022). Moreover, across development, preparing children for racial bias, having access to extended caregiving networks (e.g., communal supports, natural mentors; Billingsley et al., 2021), and cultivating a positive racial self-concept (e.g., via cultural pride messages) promote and sustain well-being despite adversity (Lesane-Brown, 2006).

Several *developmental equity models* (e.g., García Coll et al., 1996; Spencer, 2006) provide insights about how racism influences development through its impact on caregiving behaviors, parent–child relationships, and identity development (Coard & Sellers, 2005; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). Yet such understanding

Abbreviations: IWM, internal working model; RES, racial-ethnic socialization.

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has rarely been integrated into one of the most widely used models of child development—*attachment theory* (Bowlby, 1969/1982). According to attachment theory, caregiving, children's attachment, and subsequent development vary as a function of specific ecological threats and adaptations to protect individuals and their offspring (Bowlby, 1969/1982). However, most attachment research has been limited to a restricted range of ecological threats (e.g., psychological threats of caregiver rejection or abandonment), with almost no attention to the role of *sociohistorical systems of oppression*. As a result, attachment research has rarely considered (1) culturally specific efforts to protect children from anti-Black racism, (2) the role of attachment figures beyond the nuclear family, and (3) how internal working models (IWMs) may be shaped by racialized experiences.

In this article, we have two aims: First, we seek to critically examine what research on African American family resilience can teach the field of attachment so our models of caregiving, attachment, and positive development are more predictive, inclusive, and fully reflective of the strengths of Black families. Beyond informing attachment research with Black families, these lessons may be applicable to other populations facing similar threats of systemic oppression (e.g., Latinx, immigrant, Indigenous, and refugee families). Second, we argue that integrating the unique caregiving processes and strengths within Black families will substantially advance attachment theory more broadly—including how diverse forms of caregiving contribute to secure attachment in context (see Causadias et al., 2022; Coard, 2022; Dunbar et al., 2022; Stern et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023, for emerging scholarship on this topic).

Many family resilience factors shape positive Black child and adolescent development (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Murry et al., 2018). As a starting point, we focus on three factors that address key shortcomings of previous research on attachment (1) *parental protection* in the context of racism as a psychological and physical threat; (2) the role of nonparental figures, including fictive kin, natural mentors, and spiritual community members in providing a secure base; and (3) the development of *positive racial identity*. For each, we review empirical findings to highlight the context in which that resilience factor develops, describe the ways it manifests within the family, review links to positive developmental outcomes, and outline growing points (Coard, 2022) for attachment research (see Table 1). We take a developmental approach, given that society's views of Black children, the threats children face, the ways parents provide a secure base, and children's skills and competencies vary with age. Although children of all ages have the same fundamental attachment-related needs for safety, support, love, and self-worth, the behavioral manifestations of these needs, and caregivers' ways of meeting them, can adaptively change over development, which we discuss in each section.

PARENTAL PROTECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF RACISM: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE SECURE BASE CONSTRUCT

Black families must raise children in the context of multiple racialized physical and psychological threats. In response to these threats, research taking a *strengths-based approach* to Black families and cultures documents that Black parents engage in diverse protective behaviors to keep their children safe, including forms of *racial-ethnic socialization* (RES). RES gives children and adolescents skills to respond to the social environment with flexibility and fluidity, read social situations quickly, and look past any denigration or rejection they encounter as they navigate anti-Black spaces; these competencies are core components of the portrait of resilience (American Psychological Association, 2008) of Black children and adolescents.

One dimension of RES highlighted in previous research on parental protection (Dotterer & James, 2018; Dunbar et al., 2022) is *preparation for bias*, which involves teaching children about racial inequalities and pointing out imbalances in society (Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Lesane-Brown, 2006). By early adolescence, preparation for bias often includes direct instruction about how to protect yourself in racialized situations (e.g., "The Talk"—conversations intended to prepare Black children and adolescents to respond to racial discrimination and physical dangers they are likely to face in the world; Anderson et al., 2023). Protective parenting extends beyond supportive parenting: A study of fourth through 12th graders found that protective parenting is different for Black families because it evolved as a means of protection in uniquely harsh environments (i.e., racism; Zapolski et al., 2016). For example, parents may moderately suppress their children's emotional expression (Dunbar et al., 2017, 2022), or engage in strict, no-nonsense parenting of their adolescents with limits on autonomy and a high degree of monitoring and behavioral control (Brody & Flor, 1998; Murry & Brody, 1999).

These findings are relevant to a core notion in attachment theory—that caregivers serve as a *secure base* whose central function is to provide protection to ensure the survival of offspring (Bowlby, 1969/1982). The nature of such protection varies as a function of threat in the unique contexts in which each child grows up. Children's confidence in the availability of a secure base in times of threat is robustly linked to positive social–emotional outcomes in children and adolescents, particularly emotion regulation (Brumariu, 2015); it also serves as a protective factor, moderating detrimental effects of life stressors on developmental outcomes (for evidence in Black preschoolers, see Kidwell & Barnett, 2007; Whittenburg et al., 2023).

However, prevailing conceptions of secure base provision, caregiver protection from threat, and predictors

TABLE 1 Resilience factors in Black families with implications for attachment theory and research.

Ecological threats	Family resilience factors	Positive child outcomes	Relevance to attachment theory	New directions for attachment research
Racism-related physical & psychological threats	*Parental protection* • Preparation for bias (e.g., "The Talk") • Moderate emotion suppression • Monitoring; limits on autonomy	• Physical safety • Emotion regulation • Emotional "code-switching" (behavioral flexibility) • Active engagement	• Secure base: central function = protection from threat • Availability of a secure base in times of threat supports positive child outcomes • Nature of protection varies as a function of threat, in context	• Consider more inclusive definition of secure base provision • Counter deficit narratives and assess parenting strengths of Black caregivers that contribute to security • Measure ecological threats to contextualize individual differences in parenting behaviors and child attachment
Historical & present-day family separation and loss	*Extended social networks* • Fictive kin • Natural mentors • Spiritual community	• Multiple sources of security • Social supports to buffer stress and loss • Social competence (e.g., prosociality)	• Multiple attachment figures possible • Loss of a caregiver may be buffered by another secure base	• Include multiple caregivers in attachment research, including fictive kin and multigenerational households • Assess unique, additive, and interactive effects of diverse sources of security on child outcomes
Discrimination & prejudice	*Positive racial-ethnic socialization* • Counter-narratives/ inoculation to negative stereotypes • Racial pride messages • "Black joy"	• Positive racial identity/ self-concept • Critical consciousness/ sociopolitical development • Positive emotion	• Content of IWMs based on lived experience • IWMs include cognitive & affective components • Positive self-concept as key mechanism of positive development	• Examine the role of racial identity in IWMs of self & others • Integrate measures of discrimination and RES to contextualize differences in IWMs • Examine attachment as a predictor of justice-oriented outcomes, (e.g., critical consciousness, activism)

Note: In the context of specific sociohistorical threats (racism, family separation and loss, discrimination and prejudice), Black families have developed sources of resilience to keep their children safe and foster positive development. Table 1 outlines resilience factors in three domains—parental protections, extended social networks, and positive racial-ethnic socialization. For each, we highlight their contextual antecedents and associated child outcomes, drawing specific implications for attachment theory and research. The specific forms of ecological threat, family resilience factors, and child outcomes, as well as their links to attachment, change depending on children's developmental stage.

Abbreviations: IWMs, internal working models; RES, racial-ethnic socialization.

of secure attachment (e.g., maternal sensitivity) may not fully reflect the significant threats Black families face. The extent to which traditional measures of caregivers' sensitivity predict secure attachment during the first years of life varies as a function of context (e.g., family income; De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). Accordingly, it is crucial to consider how secure attachment in Black children develops within the context of parental protections calibrated to keep children safe from the unique threats of anti-Black racism. Preparation for bias and the combination of moderate emotion suppression and high levels of emotional support are arguably useful ways to conceptualize secure base provision in Black families (Dunbar et al., 2022), although their links with attachment have yet to be determined.

Integrating research on the strengths of Black parents would benefit attachment research in at least three ways. First, attachment research could actively counter deficit narratives by assessing the strengths of Black caregivers that contribute to security. For example, sensitivity may take different forms in Black families (e.g., high levels of parental monitoring in adolescence; Brody et al., 2004; less importance of promptness in infancy; Woodhouse et al., 2019), and it may interact with other parenting behaviors (e.g., moderate suppression of emotion in early childhood; Dunbar et al., 2022) to predict security and later developmental outcomes.

Second, attachment research could advance a more inclusive definition of secure base provision that recognizes the value of culturally specific parental protections observed in Black families. For example, Black caregivers must be attuned to their children's developmental readiness for protective RES messages and calibrate their approach to their children's cues, needs, developmental stage, and cognitive capacities, and in response to distress following experiences of discrimination (Coard et al., 2004; Doucet et al., 2018); thus, emotionally attuned RES may be an important culturally salient form of caregivers' sensitive responsiveness in Black families.

Third, methods used in attachment research could incorporate measures of specific ecological threats to contextualize individual differences in parenting behaviors and children's attachment. Such measures could include direct assessments of caregivers' daily experiences of racist events, racism-related stress, or perceptions of discrimination in specific contexts (e.g., neighborhood, school), as well as indirect measures (e.g., physiological indicators of stress; Atkins, 2014); beginning in early childhood, these experiences could be examined across contexts (e.g., the experiences of children in neighborhoods and schools).

FICTIVE KIN, NATURAL MENTORS, AND CONNECTIONS TO SPIRITUALITY: EXPANDING THE CIRCLE OF SECURITY

Within the historical and present-day context of family separation (from removing children from parents during the slave trade to present-day racial inequities in foster care placements) and caregiver loss (from Jim Crow-era White mob violence to present-day racial inequities in maternal mortality, health care, and mass incarceration), Black families have drawn strength from extended social networks both within and beyond the biological family (e.g., fictive kin, natural mentors, informal congregational support networks).

Ethnographic data show that *fictive kin* are an important aspect of identity, social structure, and caregiving of children and adolescents of color. Fictive kinship "involves the extension of kinship obligations and relationships to individuals specifically not otherwise included in the kinship universe" (Spruill et al., 2014, p. 4). Furthermore,

> African Americans continue to exist within the context of extended family structure rather than as discrete units despite the influence of the larger society. The members are interdependent and may share the responsibilities of childrearing and household funding across or among nuclear family units. What appears to be a "single parent family," from a Western European perspective, may in actuality be part of a larger extended family system. (Stewart, 2007, p. 165)

From a developmental perspective, beginning in infancy and early childhood, fictive kin may provide child care, contribute to children's sense of safety and stability, and be involved in children's daily activities. As children enter adolescence, their network of fictive kin may expand to include coaches, teachers, and other individuals who serve as part of an extended network of secure bases and safe havens in the teenagers' lives. Indeed, many Black adolescents report the presence of *natural mentors*—nonparental adults within youth's social networks who provide support and guidance—as important adult figures in their lives (Rhodes et al., 1992). In addition, many Black adolescents and families describe their *spiritual community and spirituality* as central sources of support (Butler-Barnes & Martin, 2023).

Substantial evidence links such extended social bonds to positive development (Rhodes et al., 1992) across childhood and adolescence. For example, Black middle schoolers who have more connected relationships to natural mentors demonstrate better social skills, greater psychological well-being, and higher self- and teacher-reported academic engagement than peers without such relationships (Hurd & Sellers, 2013). Furthermore, Black youth's spiritual community may provide a safe space for emotional expression, help seeking, trust, and shared positive affect (Taylor et al., 2013). In a study of Black 5- to 18-year-olds, spirituality contributed to children's and youth's ability to cope with racism (Christian & Barbarin, 2001), and in a study of Black college students, spirituality served as a buffer against stress, promoting health outcomes (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002). Similarly, a study of Black adolescent boys found that beyond the promotive effects of parental support, community support—a combination of religious connection and mentor presence—served as a protective factor against discrimination (Cooper et al., 2013).

This evidence is relevant to attachment theoretical concepts that most children have multiple attachment figures (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Howes & Spieker, 2016), that loss of a caregiver may be buffered by another secure base (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1980), and that mentors can serve as attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1989). Extended caregiving networks may promote positive development by providing multiple sources of security, supports to buffer stress and loss, and opportunities and community obligations to develop social competence. In particular, fictive kin may be involved in providing a *safe haven* (e.g., having caregivers beyond the nuclear family to rely on when in need of comfort, uplifting, and reassurance). Access to a network of attachment figures may be especially important in the context of racism-related threats of family separation and caregiver loss. Furthermore, secure attachment to one caregiver may compensate for insecure attachment to another caregiver in predicting mental health outcomes in middle childhood and adolescence (Iwanski et al., 2021), highlighting the interactive effects of multi-caregiver systems.

Studies of attachment in adults in multiple countries (and therefore with a range of sociodemographic characteristics) suggest that God may serve as a secure base for religious individuals or compensate for experiences of loss or insecurity with other attachment figures (Cherniak et al., 2021). In one study of older adults (ages 70–97), secure attachment to God was associated with decreases in death-related anxiety over time, and benefits were stronger for Black individuals than for White individuals (Jung, 2018). Similarly, attachment to God in later life tended to be higher among Black individuals, as well as among those who had lost other attachment figures (Cicirelli, 2004). In one of the few studies to examine adolescents in this context, college students who self-reported anxious and avoidant attachment to God were more likely to engage in health-risk behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use (Horton et al., 2012); although the participants were primarily White, researchers could test whether effects replicate—and perhaps are stronger—among Black adolescents.

The predominant focus of attachment research on the quality of children's attachment to one person (usually the mother) has been overly narrow and based on observations of Euro-American nuclear families (Keller, 2018). Thus, integrating perspectives on Black family resilience could advance attachment research by including multiple caregivers (e.g., fictive kin and fathers; Tyrell & Masten, 2022; see also Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2021), and assessing unique, additive, and interactive effects of diverse sources of security on positive Black children's development. Integrating these perspectives could also broaden the scope of who serves as a secure base for children to consider fictive kin, natural mentors, and spiritual community members (e.g., by using measures that delineate diverse secure base/safe haven roles). Expanding the circle of security in these ways can help advance the field of attachment more broadly—not only for research with Black families but also when working with Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant families (e.g., Ebaugh & Curry, 2000).

COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND RACIAL-ETHNIC IDENTITY: TOWARD POSITIVE IWMs OF THE SELF AS BLACK

Discrimination and prejudice are common and stressful experiences for Black children and adolescents (English et al., 2020; Zapolski et al., 2016). To inoculate children against dominant racist narratives (e.g., negative stereotypes), Black families give affirming *counter-racist narratives* that youth are valuable and worthy of protection (Barr & Neville, 2008). Embedded in a rich, improvisational oral tradition, family narratives may communicate Black history, Afro-centric values, connections to ancestors, and cultural strengths. Similarly, *racial pride messages* celebrate the beauty, power, and resilience of Black people (Hughes et al., 2006; e.g., "Black is beautiful," "Melanin Poppin," "Black girl magic"; Rogers et al., 2021). Internalizing racial pride messages and spending time with one's community in ways that strengthen social bonds and elicit positive affect ("Black joy") may be conceptualized as forms of resistance against oppression by affirming individuals' capacity for joy, pride, and well-being. Such counter-narratives and experiences of positive emotion may contribute to the development of *positive racial-ethnic identity*. Racial identity is protective in that it reinforces a connection with other Black people with whom solidarity offers safety (Jones & Neblett, 2017). Developmentally, parents often communicate racial pride messages in early childhood, but may wait until their children are older to incorporate messages about bias; however, bias socialization may occur earlier in response to children's unique experiences with discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006). Thus, efforts to nurture a positive racial identity often begin in early childhood but continue throughout adolescence and into emerging adulthood.

Extensive research has linked racial-ethnic identity to positive outcomes, particularly for Black adolescents (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Across multiple stages of development, racial-ethnic identity has been linked with self-esteem, social adaptation, and emotional adjustment, as well as with reduced antisocial outcomes like aggression, depression, and substance use (for evidence in adolescence, see Yasui et al., 2004). In addition, positive racial identity has been associated with prosocial behavior among Black college students (White-Johnson, 2012) and with academic motivation among Black adolescent girls, serving as a protective factor against the effects of negative school racial climate (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018).

Research on racial-ethnic identity in Black families connects to a central idea in attachment theory: that experiences in close relationships shape mental representations (IWMs) of the self, others, and the world, beginning in infancy and early childhood and extending through adolescence (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Often assessed through children's and adolescents' narratives, such representations are based on individuals' experiences (both positive and negative) and include cognitive and affective components. Within this framework, securely attached individuals' positive self-concept is seen as a key mechanism that contributes to social competence (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Rasmussen et al., 2019). Although research on IWMs has typically focused on secure relationships with caregivers as the primary source of positive self-representations (e.g., "I am worthy of love and care"), models of Black child and adolescent development point to the importance of broader cultural messages in shaping the *content* of such representations. For example, exposure to racial discrimination and White supremacist messages of Black inferiority may threaten positive self-concept even for securely attached Black children and adolescents, whereas counter-narratives proclaiming that "Black Lives Matter" could bolster positive self-concept even for those who are insecurely attached. Thus, attachment experiences with caregivers may interact with racialized experiences in individuals' broader social context to shape the content of self-representations.

We suggest that attachment research on IWMs could be enriched by considering how racist messages from the broader society and race-affirming (e.g., racial pride) narratives from caregivers and peers inform Black youth's positive identity development and critical consciousness.

For example, attachment researchers can examine the contribution of racial identity and family narratives to IWMs of the self, others, and the world. For Black children and adolescents, beliefs that the world is safe versus unsafe may vary by context (e.g., "I am safe with my caregivers or social group, but not within predominantly White spaces"), and beliefs about others' trustworthiness may be more selective (Smith, 2010). In addition, attachment researchers can integrate measures of racism and RES to contextualize individual differences in children's IWMs. For example, preliminary evidence suggests that Black adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood racism are associated with higher levels of self-reported attachment avoidance (Stern, Jones, et al., 2022a). Finally, researchers could examine attachment as a predictor of justice-oriented outcomes in adolescence (e.g., critical consciousness, sociopolitical development, community involvement).

LOOKING AHEAD

Integrating perspectives from research on Black family resilience can enrich and modernize the field of attachment by extending the theory itself, as well as informing research questions and assessments of Black families and other families of color. Drawing on the research we have reviewed, we offer the following recommendations for how attachment researchers can learn from this work. Attachment scholars can:

1. Incorporate more extensively theory and measurement of *context*—including cultural strengths and racism—to explicate patterns of resilience in caregiving behavior and children's attachment behavior;
2. Include *multiple caregivers and fictive kin* in assessments of children's attachment relationships; and
3. Consider the parameters within which *RES* in childhood and adolescence can enhance security and positive self-representations.

Such collaborative research can address novel questions in the science of attachment and positive development in Black families. Researchers can explore *developmental considerations* by asking: What caregiving behaviors foster security in infancy versus in adolescence for Black children? For example, racial pride messages may contribute to secure IWMs as early as preschool, but more complex counter-narratives and "The Talk" may become more salient to self-representations in adolescence, depending on adolescents' exposure to discrimination. Relatedly, researchers should examine within-group diversity to understand how families' experiences shape the codevelopment of RES and IWMs over time. Furthermore, as children enter school, nonparental attachment figures (e.g., coaches, mentors, and teachers) may increasingly transmit RES messages to children and adolescents (Hurd et al., 2012; Saleem & Byrd, 2021). More work is needed to examine associations between nonparental RES and children's attachment representations. In addition, by integrating understanding of identity and systemic oppression, attachment research can critically examine issues of *intersectionality* by asking: For children and adolescents with multiple marginalized identities (due to intersecting systems of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ethnocentrism, and colorism), what aspects of parents' secure base provision are unique in the context of the unique threats these youth face?

To address these complex questions, the field's methods may be strengthened by integrating more qualitative (e.g., in-depth interviews, ethnographic/participant observation) and cross-cultural approaches. For example, in many cultures, children live in multigenerational households in which grandparents participate in childrearing; thus, observations of multigenerational households may shed light on how caregivers across generations participate in providing a secure base and RES for Black children. Such ethnographic and cross-cultural approaches call to mind Ainsworth's (1967) foundational work and continue to illuminate attachment processes in Black families outside the United States (see Mesman, 2021).

Researchers in this field can also ask additional questions, including: What are the implications for *clinical practice and public policy* of understanding how experiences of racism affect functioning, socialization goals, and attachment relationships (Gaztambide, 2022)? When working with Black families, attachment-focused practitioners should draw on insights from successful parenting interventions (e.g., Brody et al., 2004; Coard et al., 2007, 2021), clinical practice (Tadros et al., 2021), and public policies (e.g., Barbarin et al., 2016; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018) designed to support Black children, adolescents, and families. Beyond the cultural strengths highlighted here, attachment researchers can consider the role of other resilience factors in Black families, such as optimism, community socialization, verve, future orientation, and diverse forms of kinship support (forms of *ordinary magic*; Murry et al., 2018). Finally, attachment researchers should consider the question of *when resilience is not enough* (Jones et al., 2023) and recognize resistance to, and *transformation of*, systemic racism as "not only what is needed, but is what is due Black babies, children, and adolescents" (Jones et al., 2023, p. 6).

In summary, we envision a more inclusive scholarship that examines close relationships and children's development; improved understanding of attachment processes, research, and practice that better serves Black children, adolescents, and families; and evidence-based policies that reduce systemic racism and contribute to positive, resilient relationships. Science and practice to support family resilience can be strengthened by more conversation and greater collaboration between scholars of attachment and scholars of Black family resilience.

By actively including research on the resilience of Black families, the field can substantially deepen current understanding of caregiving, attachment, and positive development in context.

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