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Training for colour-blindness: white racial socialisation

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ABSTRACT

Racial socialisation describes the mechanisms by which youth acquire concepts of race and racism. The field addressing racial dynamics in the United States has primarily focused on the racial socialisation of youth of colour, generally regarding White racial socialisation as superfluous for White people, and therefore mostly absent in White families. The current study used qualitative methods to investigate the racial socialisation practices of White parents of White children; we conducted 36 in-depth interviews with 13 White families (parent/s and a teen child). Parents and teens were asked about their beliefs about race and how racial issues were addressed in the family. The results show that White youth received clear messages around colour-blindness attitudes and behaviours, and that their parents were intentional in conveying such messages. The authors discuss the implications of the fact that racial socialisation practices within White families are both pervasive and systematic.

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Conventional wisdom in the racial socialisation literature suggests that currently in the United States (US), White parents do not actively socialise their White children around race. Measures of racial socialisation have shown that families of colour – to varying degrees – teach their children pride in their cultural heritage, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and/or egalitarianism (Hughes, Rodriguez et al. 2006). White parents of White children, when given the same measures as parents of colour, have demonstrated a tendency to teach their children only egalitarianism, if anything at all. The assumption in the racial socialisation field has been that the process of racial socialisation was particularly important for people of colour, in light of the US historical, institutional, and contemporary forms of racism that impact their lives (e.g. Bentley, Adams, and Stevenson 2009; Lesane-Brown et al. 2010). It has seemed equally self-evident that the reality of White privilege and membership in a historically dominant racial group placed White individuals in a distinct position in which they might not have to think about race and what it means to be a part of their group (Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 2008). Thus, the racial socialisation literature has assumed that White racial socialisation does not occur. Consequently, the study of such processes within White families has not been a priority within the field. In fact, although more recently such research has broadened to a wider range of racial-ethnic groups (Rivas-Drake 2011; Tran and Lee 2010), there has been a continued almost exclusive focus on racial-ethnic minority populations.

While White families do indeed have a unique set of imperatives that shape how they talk about race, it is questionable whether in a racialised society like the United States discussions about race can be avoided altogether. Therefore, scholars of racial socialisation recommend more qualitative studies of White families to better understand what exactly these families are teaching their children about race (Huynh and Fuligni 2008; Lesane-Brown et al. 2010). In this paper, we take up that call and demonstrate that racial socialisation is indeed happening within White families, albeit through different forms and means than in families of colour.

For the purpose of this study, we will focus on racial socialisation defined as ‘[p]arents’ attitudes and behaviors [that] transmit worldviews about race and ethnicity to children by way of subtle, overt, deliberate and unintended mechanisms’ (Hughes 2003, 15). Over the years, researchers have produced a reduction broth of core ideas about racial socialisation which complement this definition and provide a helpful frame of reference for the data presented in this paper. Within racial socialisation literature, for example, it is taken for granted that racial socialisation messages are largely invisible to parents, while they are conveyed to children in a ‘consistent, persistent and enduring fashion’ (Boykin and Toms 1985, in Hughes and Chen 1999, 471). It is this persistence over time that leads to socialisation, rather than pithy messages or even multicultural experiences, books or movies. Additionally, it has been long stated that socialisation is ‘caught, not taught’ (Allport 1954), that children absorb adults’ non-verbal messages more readily than verbal messages. But it is also true, as Kofkin, Katz, and Downey (1995) showed, that when parents don’t talk overtly about race with kids, children are left to their own devices to learn about the world that surrounds them. They often absorb messages from society (Hughes and Chen 1999) and make meaningful deductions from the selective silence itself.

Given these bedrock concepts of racial socialisation, it is clear that even when explicit messages about race are not openly conveyed, White parents still impart implicit messages through their behaviours and what they do *not* say (Rockquemore, Laszloffy, and Noveske 2006). Such subtle and inadvertent forms of racial socialisation are just as important as overt messages in shaping the racial lenses through which White children see the world. In this paper, we suggest that previous studies have found lower levels of socialisation among White families not because it happens with less frequency, but rather because researchers have not asked questions that adequately capture the specific socialisation processes occurring within White families.

Studies so far have not been able to assess from an empirical standpoint the nature and impact of such implicit messages on White youth, due to the lack of qualitative work involving *both* parents and youth within White families. According to Hamm (2001), ‘recent socialisation frameworks (Phelen et al. 1991) point to a need to consider the meanings that youth themselves integrate from parents’ socialization’ (94). The only existing qualitative study involving a White sample that includes both parents and youth addresses racial socialisation of transracial adoptees (DeBerry et al. 1996, as cited in Hughes, Rodriguez et al. 2006). There are only a few additional studies that include both parents and youth within White families (White and Gleitzman 2006 on an Australian sample; Brown et al. 2007; and Lesane-Brown et al. 2010, based on data collected from a US national longitudinal study on childhood; Hughes, Bachman et al. 2006), and they all rely on quantitative measures derived from research with people of colour. Because there has been no research on White racial socialisation that qualitatively examines both parental messages and youth understandings simultaneously, our research design was premised upon data collection with both parents and youth from the same family.

Our research seeks to expand the existing knowledge base about White racial socialisation using in-depth open-ended interviews with White family units (both parents and teens from the same families) to determine (1) why White parents racially socialise their children; (2) both the intended and potentially unintended messages parents convey about race to their children; (3) the means used to convey such messages (e.g. modelling, discussions, actions, omission); and (4) the messages received by the teens from the parents and other socialising agents in their lives. As our research demonstrates, racial socialisation is taking place within White families; in fact, it takes concerted effort to raise children who avoid seeing or talking about race in a heavily racialised society like the United States.

In this paper, we will describe our research process as well as some of the forms that racial socialisation took within the families we interviewed. While interesting, these socialisation forms emerged within a relatively homogeneous sample, and are therefore not generalisable to all White families. What is critical, however, is the implied finding of the clearly intentional and structured ways in which White racial socialisation is occurring within White families. The fact that White families intentionally and thoughtfully socialise their children about race is the finding we emphasise.

Method

Participants

Thirteen White families participated in the study: 13 adolescents and 23 adults, for a total of 39 separate interviews. Families were recruited in the working-, middle-, and upper-middle class suburban outskirts of two major East Coast cities of the US. Given the cognitively complex nature of the questions asked in the study, we restricted participation to adolescents ages 12–18. Families had to identify as White and have a teenage child in order to participate in the study. In the event that more than one teen in the family qualified for the study, parents' preference determined which child was interviewed. Two of the families interviewed were single mother headed households and all of the other families were headed by one mother and one father. The sample had no same sex couples. See Table 1 for further description of the sample, including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, age and school environment.

Sampling procedures

Families were recruited with the aim of maximising the diversity of socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, educational and political backgrounds as well as diversity of family structure. Participants were recruited via e-mail sent to middle schools, high schools, places of worship, and White acquaintances of the researchers, who might be connected to White families with children in the required age range. Participants were recruited over a nine-month period, and compensation for participating in the study consisted of a movie ticket per family member who participated in the interview.

Of the 35 families who met the inclusion criteria and initiated contact with the researchers, 13 agreed to participate. Given the number of connections that the research team had with White communities meeting inclusion criteria, the team was surprised at the difficulty of recruiting families for the study. Some of these difficulty seemed to come from the substantial time commitment required by the interview process (about four hours), while some seemed to have been related to a discomfort engaging with the topic. In fact, successful scheduling of interviews frequently depended on acquaintances vouching for the research team. This might mean that the families who ultimately agreed to participate may have had a relatively high level of openness and comfort discussing issues of race.

Research design and materials

The study was primarily qualitative in nature, with the inquiry grounded primarily in a postpositivist paradigm utilising consensual qualitative research or CQR (Hill et al. 2005; Ponterotto 2013). CQR was used to analyse participants' answers to the interview questions. Because of the complexity of the qualitative data collected (i.e. multiple interviews with multiple participants both within a same interview and within a same family), we also constructed case studies for each family (Creswell 2007). These case studies were in turn coded to analyse parents' socialisation intent, means, and outcomes across interviews.

Data collection

All but one interview took place at the families' homes on a weekend and were conducted by White academic researchers; one interview was conducted in a faculty member's office at a university. The parent(s) were interviewed separately from the teen, after which the parent(s) and teen were

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics and Diversity of Environment Summary.

Background Information (<i>n</i> = 13 Families)												
Parents (<i>n</i> = 23)												
Ethnicity				Religion				Birth place of parents				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed European 7 (30%) • Irish 6 (26%) • Italian 2 (9%) • Polish 2 (9%) • American 2 (9%) • Anglo/British 1 (4%) • French 1 (4%) • Austrian 1 (4%) 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roman Catholic 13 (57%) • Quaker 3 (13%) • Jewish 3 (13%) • Atheist 1 (4%) • Protestant 1 (4%) • Multiple religions 1 (4%) • No response 1 (4%) 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USA 19 (83%) • France 1 (4%) • Nigeria 1 (4%) • Spain 1 (4%) 				
Parents (<i>n</i> = 23)												
Parent type		Years of age (<i>M</i> / <i>SD</i>)		Marital status		Self-identified SES			Household income range			
10 fathers, 13 mothers		50.74/4.27		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Married 19 (83%) • Divorced 3 (13%) • Remarried 1 (4%) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working class 3 (13%) • Middle class 10 (44%) • Upper middle class 1 (4%) 			\$60,000–\$180,000			
Adolescents (<i>n</i> = 13)												
Gender		Years of age (<i>M</i> / <i>SD</i>)				School grade				School type		
8 boys, 5 girls		15.2/2.00				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7th Grade 2 (15%) • 8th Grade 3 (23%) • 9th Grade 2 (15%) • 10th Grade 2 (15%) • 11th Grade 1 (8%) • 12th Grade 3 (23%) 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public 6 (43%) • Private 5 (38%) • Parochial 1 (8%) • Cyber public 1 (8%) 		
Adolescent interactions with Whites (Wh) and African-Americans (AA) ^a												
	Neighbourhood		School		Close friends		Places of worship		Characters on TV/movies		Favourite musicians	
	Wh (%)	AA (%)	Wh (%)	AA (%)	Wh (%)	AA (%)	Wh (%)	AA (%)	Wh (%)	AA (%)	Wh (%)	AA (%)
Upper–Lower	0–100	0–25	3–93	3–13	5–98	0–30	4–100	0–6	4–82	1–35	5–100	0–70
Median	50	1	50	1	55	4	82	1	25	15	45	25

^aAdolescents were asked what percentage of the people in each context were specific races. Represents the upper and lower range and the Median; the interactions with Hispanic and Asians averaged less than 5% each in every context, and were not included.

interviewed together as a family. Each interview lasted about one hour, for a total of three hours of interview material for each family. Eleven out of the thirteen families interviewed agreed to the audio and video recording of both the teen/parent(s) and family interviews.

During the parent interview, researchers asked participants about their racial and ethnic backgrounds, the racial socialisation means intentionally used with the teen, the frequency, nature, and timing of race related discussion in the home, their own racial socialisation, and their views on race. The teen interview covered similar topics, but from the teen's perspective and in the context of the teen's experiences (including academic, athletic, extracurricular, peer influences, readings, music and the media). A short break between the parent/teen and the family interviews allowed the interviewers to design follow up questions based on themes that arose in the parent/teen interviews. During the family interview, the parent(s) and teen were also given a chance to ask each other any questions they might have been curious about after their respective interviews. The family interviews were designed to give the researchers an opportunity to observe the ways that the parent(s) and teen interacted with regard to racial content. At the end of each interview, all of the participants were asked to reflect on the interview experience itself.

Results: racial messages in White families

White is neither right nor wrong, it's not anything

Whiteness tended to be a new concept for all but three of the parents interviewed in this study. Most of the parents reported that they rarely, if ever, thought about being White and that they had never discussed the concept explicitly. As one dad shared, 'I'm a male, I'm Italian American, Roman Catholic, I'm an engineer. That's how I would describe myself and White would not be something, you know, at the top of the list.' When asked how they identified racially, all of the parents but one said that they were White; but that the concept of Whiteness held no meaning for them. Several parents said that they did not identify primarily racially, but rather ethnically (e.g. Jewish, Polish) or religiously (e.g. Catholic); a few parents identified foremost as 'American'. None of the parents relayed explicit messages about being White to their children. One parent reported, 'I do feel sometimes like you know I'm guilty because I'm White and you're not allowed to have any honest discussions about race because you're automatically racist then, you know.' Another parent said, 'I'm just stressed out about the questions about being White or being taught about being White ... I didn't realize that maybe there were people that were taught [that].'

All of the teens identified as 'White' and/or 'Caucasian,' and almost uniformly qualified that descriptive term as being meaningless, 'I guess I am Caucasian, but I don't really think about it. It doesn't really play a part in my life at all.' They stated that race 'doesn't define' their lives, that it holds no special meaning for them, and that it is too general of a term to sufficiently account for cultural/ethnic variation among Whites. 'I don't know what it means for me to be White' another teen stated. Even though parents' and teens' beliefs surrounding Whiteness were similar in nature, the teens seemed to think that Whiteness as a category *is* in fact meaningless, while the parents seem to think that it *should* be meaningless. In other words, the parents collectively seemed to be more aware than the teens of the possibility that others might deem Whiteness a meaningful category.

Everyone is the same: colour-blindness and colourmuteness

The parents from all but two of the families who participated in this study were invested in guiding their children away from any conscious acknowledgement or recognition of race. The teens interviewed reflected this socialisation from their parents; they devalued race as a meaningful category and reported relating to others without considering race, 'It's important what kind of person you are, it doesn't matter if you're White or Asian or Black or whatever.' Another youth said,

It's not really something that we talk about at all. I mean, they tell me, they used to tell me when I was little that everybody's the same and it didn't matter the color of their skin and things like that, but nothing specific.

All but one of the parenting units enthusiastically approved of – and recounted times when – the teen did not seem to notice others' racial background at all, deeming this an indicator that their children were free of racial judgements. 'It doesn't matter. And I did always say this to her "it doesn't matter what anybody's color is and never judge anybody on their color."' Parents from all but one of the families said they believed that naming race is not only irrelevant, but also potentially disrespectful or racist. This was one of the primary reasons given for avoiding conversations about race with their children. All but one of the parents reported that they tried to lead by example rather than by having overt discussions about race (even the two parents who reported long-term multiracial friendships). The one family that did speak explicitly about race with their teen reported struggling to coach the son not to stereotype and over-generalise. One teen demonstrated this race-omission in a statement about how she doesn't talk about race with her parents: 'We don't like really talk about it because, because like we have a lot of friends who are like, and they like come over our house and their parents know my parents and so we know them really well.'

Racism exists and impacts the lives of people of colour

Parents in two different families had ongoing, authentic relationships with people of colour, through which they witnessed the effects of both personal and institutional racism. Most of the divergence in our data-set is derived from these two families (and sometimes only one of them) who stood out as outliers to the larger group. These parents shared stories that demonstrated skills they used in interracial contexts, particularly in dealing with institutional racism. Having strong counterpoints to popular racial stereotypes through these friendships and work contexts, these parents also explicitly contradicted such stereotypes when discussing race with their teens. Parents in these families often brought up race first with their children, in contrast to most of the other families in our study who tended to wait for the teens to bring it up. One of the teens in this category was one of the few youth participants with a burgeoning awareness of institutional racism and a willingness to stand up to racism if it affected his friends. However, he also had a tendency to generalise and stereotype people of colour, which his parents struggle to counteract. The other teen who demonstrated these skills had cross-racial friendships in which race was explicitly acknowledged, but reported that racism did not affect him or his friends. Finally, one teen from a different family reported cross-racial friendships in which she talked about racism at her school diversity club. While she expressed knowledge and outrage about systemic racism, she considered her parents explicitly racist and did not talk about her views in front of them. Given the experiences of the teens in these three families, it is clear that ongoing authentic relationships with people of colour has a strong impact on how White families think and talk about race and racism. And yet even within those families, there remained uncertainty and sometimes silence about how to discuss racism.

Focus on values and White cultural norms

Parents in our study insisted that values are more important than race. Respecting others regardless of context and helping people in need were the primary values instilled by White parents in our study. Working hard and meritocracy (i.e. the belief that everyone has a chance of success if they choose to work towards it) were also explicitly mentioned as important values to many of the parents in the study. One parent said, 'Again I look at it like instead of being White, as a person, you have to be a good person, you have to have your morals, values, be true to yourself.' All of these values directly impacted their conversations about race with their children, 'It does not matter if you're Black, White, Oriental, umm, you know, male, female. I just think we all have the same opportunities. You just have to be willing to get out there and work for it.' Parents emphasised values over race, seemingly suggesting that it was a *difference in values* that prevented them from connecting across race, as though people of colour necessarily have different values from them. Perhaps recognising the implications of that statement, they also emphasised that there are many White people with whom they don't share values. Parents expressed no awareness that some values, such as a belief in meritocracy, were racialised.

Don't be racist

All but one of the parents tended to define racism in the US as singularly overt and individual, rather than systemic, pervasive, or historical. All parents expressed disapproval of any form of overt racism. Some parents expressed disapproval of naming racial differences, suggesting that any departure from strict colour-blindness is a form of racism. A few parents were proud of their children when they stood up for a peer experiencing racism, and a few others actively addressed stereotypical or judgemental statements made by the teens, thereby trying to teach them not to generalise characteristics or behaviours to an entire population, such as 'When people use words or ideas in a way that sort of reflect negatively on people that we sort of challenge it, talk about it, examine it.' In one interview, the mother dramatically interrogated her daughter, 'I have to know: are you a racist?' She was visibly relieved when her daughter denied it in disgust, 'No, mom, no!' This interaction made it clear to us

that the mother's concern was whether her daughter self-identified as a 'card-carrying racist'. As long as that was not the case, she had fulfilled her socialising intent, which did not include teaching her children anything more about race (e.g. how to be anti-racist) beyond making sure they were not 'racist,' in the old-fashioned, overt sense of the word.

The teens primarily described racism as overt acts of prejudice and discrimination. All of the teens believed racism is wrong, and many characterised racist behaviour as 'crazy' or 'ridiculous.' The majority of teens spoke of racial slurs (both towards Whites and people of colour, such as 'cracker' and 'the n-word') as examples of contemporary racist behaviour. On occasion, such incidents became the focus of school assemblies, teaching that racism is unacceptable, but also reinforcing the idea that racism is only overt and individual (not also covert and systemic). Two of the teens understood racism as more systemic and covert, discussing racial profiling and unequal wages as additional indicators of discrimination in American society. One clearly got this message from his parents, while the other seemed to get it from her work in a school diversity club. The latter explicitly contradicted her parents' thinking in her individual interview, but remained silent on the topic in the joint interview.

Racism is in the past: it gets better over time

Many of the teens believed that racism has decreased in American society over time. They cited American slavery as the source of modern racism and explained that race relations have improved since their grandparents' generation and since the 1960s, as if this change were inevitable and natural, rather than the result of intentional effort and strategy. Several teens believed Obama's election impacted race relations, but could not describe how.

I mean when we do talk about like race and like the March on Washington and things like that it's always positive and how it's gone from being slavery up to where we are now with an African American president and it's just suddenly more positive.

Geographic socialisation

Some parents were openly concerned about their children going to neighbourhoods where they were the racial minority, or being exposed to 'inner city mentality' by attending city schools. They cited safety and 'staying out of trouble' as values that guided these concerns. 'I don't think I'm racist, but I am concerned for their safety when they go into certain areas, which happen to be Black.' Parents did not view these as race-related values, but rather values about character, which they felt they applied equally to people of all races. In only one family the parents tried to demystify the stereotype that city neighbourhoods are intrinsically dangerous. All the teens seemed to believe that racial diversity is correlated with increased potential for poverty and violence. As one youth said,

Like in African American communities they just, like sometimes they're poorer in like the ghettos and stuff and it's like hard for them I guess, but like we just live in a richer community and stuff so. Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Like I don't know.

For most parents (with a couple of notable exceptions), safe neighbourhoods and good schools were the primary motivators for deciding where to live, rather than exposure to a diverse environment. The adolescents grew up primarily in same-race environments with few opportunities to contemplate issues of race in their day-to-day interactions.

Youth led socialisation

Most of the teens interviewed reported feeling free to ask their parents questions about race, reflecting the parents' intent to welcome such conversations. Parents reported not introducing the topic often (even though they reported introducing it more often than teens seemed to remember). Parents engaged in race-related conversations either by following the child's natural interest (e.g. as they began

noticing differences in skin tone among friends during the pre-school and elementary years) or in reaction to current events.

During the teens' childhoods, some parents tried to expose the teens to race-related issues via books portraying diverse characters, books describing various cultures, and race-neutral (e.g. Teletubbies) or racially diverse (e.g. Sesame Street) programming. When teens were older, some parents tended to expose their children to race-related issues or interactions with people of colour via service projects (in lower socio-economic status communities), travel abroad, and movies or books (mostly involving historical events related to race struggles). They exposed them to people who were racially different, but still did not talk about it explicitly. Once their children were older, both parents and teens reported that race-related discussions were most often initiated by the teens, and that teens only brought it up when there was conflict in the news or at school.

They don't really talk about it that much. Sometimes if something happens and I'm not really sure why, I'll ask them. And they'll explain to me what about racism a little bit. But they never really came to me, 'This is what racism is.' I might have asked them that, but we don't really talk about it.

Just do it (integration) and don't talk about it (race)

Most parents believed that the teen's exposure to racial diversity in their school environments – to whatever degree that it might have been present – taught them to live in a racially diverse society, since it made integration 'just normal'. 'We're glad that they're exposed, that we live in a community that is somewhat diverse and they're exposed to different kids their age that are raised differently and have different cultural experiences.'

Modelling collusion

When teens did witness racism, they reported struggling with how to react to it. They reported fearing or being uncomfortable confronting racist behaviour in strangers or family members directly, while also not wanting to be perceived as racist themselves. In some cases, they reported a lack of modelling from adults around them on how to react to racism. When teens told their parents about racist incidents witnessed or heard about at school, some parents validated the teens' perceptions that such incidents were indeed race related, while others tried to convince the teen that the incident was unrelated to race. On a couple of occasions, the parents noticed racial injustices at the teen's school, but avoided speaking about them to the teen for fear that their ideas might be misrepresented by the teen.

Some parents also reported avoiding conversations about the racism expressed by extended family members because they could be construed as disrespectful and therefore would contradict the value of respect they were trying to instill in their children. Parents reported struggling with their value of wanting their children to have positive and close relationships with some of the extended family members (often grandparents) who held racist ideologies while also not wanting their teens to learn their racist messages. Avoiding the conversation as well as joking about or minimising the relatives' statements were the most frequent strategies to reach both goals, especially since parents seemed to think that individuals who hold racist ideologies cannot be swayed in their opinions. One parent told a story about her own father:

He used the term 'n*****' and I was just, we were in the car. But just like I was mortified sitting in the car with [my child] and my mother and father because I couldn't imagine my dad and yet I couldn't speak to it either.

Discussion

The parents in our study *knew* that race matters, but they *wanted* it *not* to matter. Therefore, in the socialisation of their White children, they *acted* as if race did not matter; the youth then received the message that race in fact *does not* matter. The teens also received the message that they should not

notice or talk about race, lest they may appear racist, and that racism is steadily becoming a thing of the past. When, in our interviews, we asked the teens to explain some of the racial disparities they saw in their lives (e.g. racial segregation between neighbourhoods, on their sports teams, or in Advanced Placement classrooms), they relied, after some hesitation and confusion, on well-worn *unexplored* racial stereotypes (e.g. Black people are stronger than White people; Black people have too much to worry about or don't care about academics). Therefore, the teens were systematically socialised at once (a) to deny the meaning of race, while (b) viewing race in highly stylised and stereotypical ways, which were used to explain inequities. The result of these socialisation practices is youth who is unable to detect, understand or intervene with racism.

These results are not unique in the fields of Whiteness studies and Critical Race Theory; several theorists have demonstrated that colour-blindness and the belief that racism is over are widespread among White people (Baldwin 1965; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Neville et al. 2013). Bonilla-Silva (2006) asserts that colour-blindness is actually a strategy for maintaining racism without holding anyone responsible as 'racist.' Philosopher Charles Mills (1997) has termed the silence about among White people 'the racial contract,' and describes how White people sanction one another from talking about race in order to maintain the racial status quo – a racial hierarchy in which Whiteness is dominant. Similarly, the stereotypical ideas that youth propose as explanations for racial disparity rely on racist tropes about individuals because they have no skills for seeing the bigger picture of how structural and historical racism has shaped the localised demography of their classrooms, sports teams, and peer groups. A colour-blind, de-racialised, non-racist analysis (the very kind they have been trained to espouse) doesn't explain the dynamics found in the heavily racialised historical present of the US.

That said, the idea that White people espouse a colour-blind ideology is not new. What gives this research value is that it documents – in the context of interviews conducted by White interviewers, and premised on the very question of how they raise White children to think and talk about race – that there exist White parents who consciously and intentionally socialise their children to be colour-blind. In other words, colour-blindness is not an accident, nor is it simply achieved by silence and omission; colour-blindness is a socialisation *strategy*. This strategy, ostensibly contrived to contribute to a world where race matters less, ends up making race matter more. It makes race matter more as it leaves common racial stereotypes to persist uninterrogated, and makes it impossible for youth to talk about their race-related experiences in nuanced or accurate ways.

Our research helps demonstrate that not seeing race, in a heavily racialised society, is a skill that has to be carefully taught and cultivated in order to be developed. It's not natural to just 'not see race.' Our eyes detect pigment, and our society gives value and meaning to such pigment. When we don't see it, we are engaging in a strategic denial of something apparent. Just as a person whose parents never argue in front of them learns through omission that conflict is wrong or scary, White people who never see anyone talking consciously or critically about race learn through omission that talking about race is wrong. Children see and recognise gender by the time they are toddlers. They can accurately use gender pronouns (within the gender binary) from the time they can talk. Seeing race is as natural as seeing gender; it takes active work to deny it. Nobody would ever claim, 'My child doesn't see gender.' It is noteworthy that we so easily claim that statement with regard to race.

The two families who did talk about race with their children had active ongoing discussions of race and racism, but they were still fraught. They didn't have all the answers, and still struggled with what and how to communicate with their children around this topic. One family had a clearly 'non-racist' stance, but not an 'anti-racist' stance. The other, in spite of all the parent's experiences with co-workers of colour, still expressed an appreciation of colour-blindness. The parent's favourite story was of the teen learning in kindergarten about the Civil Rights Movement, which at the time the teen thought involved the 'Blocks' and the 'Wives' (rather than 'Blacks' and 'Whites'). The parent shared this story to demonstrate how irrelevant race is to children, indicating that if adults could learn from children, maybe all the issue of race would go away.

This preliminary research provides us with three major findings about White racial socialisation. First, it happens. In other words, White racial socialisation is both pervasive and systematic. White

parents put effort into teaching their White children not to see or talk about race. Although we describe examples of *what* and *how* parents teach their children about race, our sample size is too small and homogeneous for the results to be generalisable to all White families. What *is* significant about our data is the fact that each of these families has given much thought to how they should talk to their kids about race; and in so doing, that they have intentionally chosen a colour-blind approach to socialise their children. While the specific content of what was taught and what was learned is to some degree bound to our sample, it is clear that White youth are indeed learning particular notions about race that specifically socialise them to distort their understanding of the world. They are taught what to notice and what to disregard, what to say and what not to say, what to get involved in and what to avoid.

Second, all of the White parents in our study made a very concerted effort to be *good* parents so that their White children would be *good* people. In other words, they had very purposeful conversations, or very purposeful avoidance of conversations, about race so that they could raise children firmly grounded in their vision of justice. The parents in our study did not think that they were teaching racism. To the contrary, they were highly interested in creating a just world, which to them meant a world where race doesn't matter, where everyone gets equal chances, where all people should be treated equally (colour-blindness), where racism is over and therefore does not need to be discussed, and where meritocracy truly rewards hard work in a system that can reward anyone who tries hard enough. Their intent was to *not* be racist parents, but nor was it to be *anti-racist*. They were actively and intentionally socialising their children into a colour-blind selective denial of reality because they believed it was the road to justice for all.

Third, colour-blindness seemed to be the only option for raising *good* White children because the parents had no conception of the possibility of being *anti-racist* White people (Tatum 2003). Even the two parents with long term relationships with friends of colour sought only to be non-racist. The racial socialisation literature reports that when youth of colour are socialised to become aware of race, value their cultural backgrounds, and recognise and respond to racism, it supports positive racial identity development. Learning an accurate racial history of the United States helps people of colour see themselves, their families, and their accomplishments more clearly within a context that has limited their access to resources and opportunities. The opposite is true for White people. Racial socialisation for White people, unlike for people of colour, forces them/us to contend with a racial history that challenges their self-perception as good and deserving of their accomplishments. Teaching White children about the history of racism, and White people's past and current roles within that history, can feel like a challenge to one's inherent human goodness. In this context, colour-blind and colourmute (Pollock 2004) ideologies provide an avenue for raising White children with both strong self-esteem and a conscious distaste for overt racism, even though it leaves them without any tools to confront the racial realities in their lives.

Implications for education

The White parents we interviewed deeply wished to know what the 'right' answers were. There is little research and very few resources addressing how to talk to White youth about race. The field of Whiteness has not been focused on how to train White youth to become anti-racist adults. While parents in our study were hungry for resources, the reality is that they have very few places – outside of schools and the media – to turn to for support. In such a context, colour-blind socialisation strategies provide an appealing framework. After most of our interviews, parents asked the researchers what the right answer were: What *were* they supposed to be teaching their children about Whiteness and race? Not wanting to skew the interview process (given we had planned a number of shorter follow up conversations), we simply reflected the complexity of the issue and promised them we would share the outcome of our work. In hindsight, we wish we had spent time with parents debriefing their questions after the interviews. In leaving their questions unanswered, we missed a ripe teachable moment.

We suspect that the White parents in our sample were not unique in wanting to do the right thing, thinking they were doing the right thing, and wishing for more answers. This has profound

implications for parent education. White parents who know that race matters, but who don't want it to matter, provide fertile ground for training on how to raise colour-conscious anti-racist children, rather than colour-blind 'non-racist' children. White anti-racist socialisation practices would pervasively and systematically teach that the legacy of racism doesn't allow for a neutral 'non-racist' position, or for race to be just skin deep, and that it's not enough to live next door to people of colour to create a beloved community. It would teach concrete skills to develop authentic relationships with people of colour, and to detect, disrupt, and confront racist incidents and structures. It would emphasise a positive racial identity for White children. A positive White racial identity is not about feeling good or badly about being White; it is about having an accurate understanding of what it means to be White in the context of a racist society. White anti-racist racial socialisation practices might be rare in our current world, but they are far from mystical or unwanted. We must begin the conversation with a clear understanding of the fact that White racial socialisation *is* indeed happening, everywhere, all the time; we can then leave it unquestioned or steer it towards justice. Our social structures afford us no neutrality; White racial socialisation can only be racist or anti-racist. The choice is ours at every turn, with everything we say and do, and everything we don't say and don't do.

Limitations and future research

The study's results are limited by the small sample size, the homogeneity of the sample (e.g. only one of our families identified as working class), and the fact that all of the families interviewed lived in a relatively restricted geographical area. Further, as some of our data indicated, youth are not only socialised by their primary caregivers, but by an array of social forces that send a number of potentially conflicting messages. Youth are not also simply passive recipients of socialisation, and research should continue to identify the variables that shape the active participation of youth in this process.

Future studies should continue to gather data within family units, rather than assessing parents and teens separately. Future studies may also test the assumed impact of parents' socialisation practices and teens' understandings of race. Causal inferences are difficult to make without longitudinal studies or experimental designs. Finally, the data reported in this article point to the need for a specific quantitative measure of White racial and ethnic socialisation, investigating the racial socialisation dynamics unique to White families. The development of such a measure, administered to a larger national sample, would give us the opportunity to further assess socialisation practices within White families as well as the generalisability of these results.

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