

RUNNING HEAD: Racial Ideology

Socialization of Racial Ideology by White Parents

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## Abstract

**Objectives.** The ways that White American parents socialize their children to think about and interact with racial outgroups are not well understood. The goals of this study were to (a) explore the degree to which White parents endorse contradictory racial ideologies, and (b) the reasons behind the presence versus absence of parent-child discussions of racial current events (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, or the Charleston church shooting).

**Method.** We recruited a sample of White parents of children ages 8-12 (N= 165, 66.1% female, *M*-age = 36.67) and applied a qualitative thematic analysis to their answers to open-ended probes regarding racial discussions with their children.

**Results.** Results revealed both colorblind and color conscious racial ideology communicated by White parents. Thirty-seven percent of White parents endorsed a mixture of colorblind and color conscious ideology. The majority of parents did not discuss racial current events with their children; many believed these discussions were either too negative or unnecessary.

**Conclusions.** The results indicate that White parents have the potential to be agents of change that socialize color conscious beliefs in their children, but many are reinforcing the current system of colorblind indifference to racial inequality.

**Public significance statement:** This study examined the messages White parents communicate to their children about race and racism. Results revealed that about a third of White parents in the sample communicated contradictory messages to their children, and the majority of White parents avoided talking about racial current events such as the Charleston shooting.

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### **Socialization of Racial Ideology by White Parents**

The majority of White adults in the United States endorse colorblind ideology – espousing the idea that they do not see race, and that race is not important – a harmful belief that diverts attention away from racial disparities, leads to less awareness of racism, and fosters negative interracial interactions (Plaut, Kecia, Hurd, & Romano, 2018). Colorblindness implies that racial inequality is a myth; yet, incidents of racial harassment and hate crimes have increased in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2016), including incidents perpetrated by youth in schools (Klein, 2018). These troubling trends suggest an urgent need to foster color conscious ideology (i.e., acknowledging race, and discussing the history and prevalence of racial bias) in youth. This is especially true for White youth, who are not only potential perpetrators of racial harassment, but are also bystanders who are in a position to encourage, tolerate, or challenge racial inequality (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Nelson, Dunn, & Paradies, 2011).

Most cultures view parents as key sources of information about how to interact with others; thus, the task of teaching White children color conscious beliefs falls, at least in part, on their White parents. Yet, we know that White adults often demonstrate contradictory beliefs, opinions, and actions related to race. Compared to several decades ago, White individuals are far less likely to endorse overt racial prejudice, and the majority of White individuals explicitly endorse egalitarian beliefs. Yet, egalitarian-minded White people still engage in subtle forms of discrimination, such as preferring White over Black applicants when the qualifications are ambiguous (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Furthermore, White individuals anticipate that they will experience emotional distress and want to distance themselves from another White person who engages in overtly racist behavior, but when they actually witness this behavior, they fail to show these responses (Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009; Karmali, Kawakami, & Page-

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Gould, 2017). Thus, White adults' expectations about their feelings and actions related to racism are often in complete opposition to how they actually feel and behave. The current study explores whether White American parents communicate such contradictory beliefs to their children.

### **Parents as a Source of Racial Socialization**

In families of color, parents play a critical role in the socialization of children's understanding of racial identity and prejudice. Parent ethnic-racial socialization, in turn, contributes to stronger ethnic-racial identity in youth of color (Huguley, Wang, Vasquez, & Guo, 2019). Parents of color consider racial socialization to be an essential aspect of their role as parents. This is undoubtedly shaped by the realities of racial inequality; for example, parents' own experiences of discrimination inform their racial socialization practices (McNeil Smith, Reynolds, Fincham, & Beach, 2019). For White families – who are shielded by racial privilege – the context, motivations, and prevalence of racial discussions is very different from that of families of color.

Since White parents know their White children will not be targets of racism and have not experienced racism themselves, they may lack the motivation to discuss race with their children. Indeed, White people tend to avoid talking about race. Many White individuals consider racial topics to be taboo (Plaut et al., 2018), feel anxious about racial interactions (Plant & Devine, 2003), and are reluctant to use racial labels even when doing so provides an advantage in a given task (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006). The desire to avoid the appearance of racial bias appears to be a strong deterrent against mentioning race (Apfelbaum, Summers, & Norton, 2008). However, some White individuals are willing to openly discuss race, and those

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who do have more positive interactions and friendships with racial outgroups (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004).

Consistent with White adults' avoidance of race in general, explicit racial socialization is rare in majority culture families (Lesane-Brown, Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Bruce, 2010). In two parent-child interaction studies with young children (ages 4-7), most White parents did not mention race at all. Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo (2012) found that 91.6% of mother-child dyads made no mention of race, ethnicity, or interracial interactions during a reading task, although 57.3% of mothers made broad, positive comments about the diversity. Vittrup and Holden (2011) gave parents detailed instructions on how to talk about race with their children, but only 10% of the sample reported discussing race in depth.

Parent-report studies have yielded similar results. Although the majority (81%) of White mothers of 4-7 year-olds in Vittrup's (2018) sample indicated that racial discussions are important, only 30% reported actually doing so. Similarly, Zucker & Patterson (2018) found that only 33% of White parents of 8-12-year-olds actively encouraged discussions of race.

Qualitative studies in which White parents are interviewed in depth about racial socialization have also revealed few direct conversations regarding race (Hagerman, 2017; Hamm, 2001; Underhill, 2018). Although based on a small number of studies with small samples, White parents' reticence to discuss race with children is a consistent trend.

### **Colorblind versus Color Conscious Ideology**

When White parents engage in racial discussions, they often communicate colorblind messages that undermine progress toward racial equality. This includes downplaying/denying the importance of race, discouraging discussions of race, or wanting children to not "see" race (Hamm, 2001; Pahlke et al., 2012; Underhill, 2018; Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018).

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Although much less common, some White parents communicate color conscious racial ideology by encouraging children to acknowledge racial prejudice, emphasize equal treatment of different races, or teach children about racism in American culture. However, parents often communicate color conscious messages in vague or superficial terms (Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). Hagerman (2017) found that affluent progressive fathers ( $n = 8$ ) socialized antiracist values in their children by encouraging intergroup contact rather than directly discussing these values with their children. Together, limited extant research suggests that although some parents endorse color conscious ideology, they may do so in a way that has little impact on children's developing beliefs.

### **Mixed Messages?**

Building upon prior work, we sought to explore whether parents are sending mixed messages about race – namely, voicing a combination of both colorblind and color conscious ideology, which are in direct contradiction with one another. Extant research has documented both types, but these studies have either simply reported the frequency of each type or they have categorized parents and reported percentages of those who predominantly communicate one versus the other. Thus, no prior studies of White parents have systematically examined within-parent overlap between colorblind and color conscious ideology.

There is limited evidence that mixed messages are likely to occur when White parents discuss race. Vittrup (2018) categorized parents as either colorblind (70%) or color conscious (30%) based on their responses, but within the colorblind category, some parents voiced beliefs that also contained aspects of egalitarianism (e.g., saying people in general should be treated the same); Zucker & Patterson (2018) report similar examples. Underhill's (2018) qualitative analysis of White parents discussing the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, revealed contradictory

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messages as well; for example, some parents reported teaching their children about the value of diversity while also minimizing or even denying the reality of racial tension in America. Yet, none of these studies systematically explored mixed messages in their analyses.

Capturing mixed messages about race is a logical next step and will provide a more accurate picture of White parents' racial socialization. Failing to take contradictory ideologies into account could obscure our understanding of the information children are receiving and their ensuing impact on children's developing beliefs. This should better inform educators, family therapists, and activists who seek to reduce colorblindness and racial bias at the family level.

### **Parent-Child Discussions of Racial Current Events**

An additional goal of this study was to examine White parents' discussion of racial current events with their children. The prevalence of high-profile news stories related to race has increased in recent years, and social media platforms now allow for the wide dissemination of information regarding racial current events (Pew Research, 2016). Frequent news coverage of racial current events could instigate racial discussions in White families, who have reported that race did not come up naturally in conversation with their children (Vittrup, 2018; Underhill, 2018). Black parents have reported making specific suggestions to their children about how to navigate interactions with the police and/or White adults in response to the shootings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown (Thomas & Blackmon, 2015; Threfall, 2018). Among White parents, there is limited evidence that reticence to discuss race extends to racial current events. When asked hypothetical questions about news stories related to race, the vast majority of White parents of 8-12-year-olds reported colorblind responses such as avoiding, deemphasizing, or disparaging the role of race in the event (Zucker & Patterson, 2018). Underhill (2018) found that only a third of White parents discussed the protests in Ferguson, Missouri with their children,

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and the majority used a colorblind framework in their discussions. In a prior report, we found that just over a third of parents discussed racial current events such as the deaths of Black youth and the Charleston shooting (redacted). We believe that the reasons *why* White parents chose to engage in versus avoid talking about such events with their children may provide a unique window into parents' racial beliefs.

## The Current Study

The goals of this study were to apply a qualitative approach to gain detailed information regarding (a) the extent to which parents communicate mixed messages about race, and (b) the reasons behind the presence or absence of discussions of racial current events with their children (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, or the Charleston shooting). We focus on the developmental period of middle childhood (ages 8-12). By this age, children have developed an abstract understanding of race (Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007) and have a basic level of knowledge of racial categories and stereotypes (Aboud, 2008), providing a foundation for children of this age to discuss race with their parents.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). We conducted an anonymous online survey hosted on Qualtrics.com to reduce demand characteristics and increase participants' comfort in sharing their socialization practices regarding race. Data were collected 14-28 days after the 2015 Charleston, SC church shooting. Participants received \$1. We recruited



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200 participants expecting 75-80% would be White. The final sample included 165<sup>3</sup> White parents of children ages 8-12 (66.1% female, ages 24 - 63, *M*-age = 36.67, 97% biological parents).

First, parents listed the ages of each of their children. Parents with more than one child aged 8-12 were instructed to focus on a child that was randomly selected by Qualtrics software. Parents completed other quantitative measures not included in this report (see *redacted*).

The qualitative analysis focused on parents' typed responses to three open-ended questions: (1) "What would you say if your child asked you about race?", (2) "What would you say to your child if you witnessed together an incident in which someone experienced prejudice due to their race?", and (3) "Describe how you have discussed recent current events related to race, such as events related to Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, or the Charleston shooting, with your child. If you have not discussed them, describe why you chose not to do so." We framed the first two questions as hypotheticals to elicit responses about racial socialization ideology even for parents who do not frequently interact with people of color. We developed the third question to examine whether the high-profile current events involving race at the time of the study (e.g., the deadly church shooting in Charleston; police shootings of Black youth) would elicit racial discussions in White families.

## Data Analysis

We applied thematic analysis to examine patterns within the messages White parents communicated to their children about race and racism. We adopted a theoretically driven or "top-

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<sup>3</sup> Of 168 White parents who completed the survey, three reported having a child within the age range required for eligibility, but later mentioned in their responses to the open-ended questions analyzed in this report that their child was younger than 8. These parents were excluded from this analysis, yielding a final sample size of 165. This sample thus differs slightly from that of (redacted), a quantitative analysis of the same dataset using other data not examined in this report.

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down” approach guided by extant theoretical perspectives on racial ideology (e.g., Plaut et al., 2018) and by prior work on racial discussions in White families. We primarily explored latent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), or the underlying ideologies behind parent reports of their socialization messages. Informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendations, the authors first independently reviewed all responses and identified an initial list of impressions and ideas for codes. Second, we collaboratively developed a coding system to capture the range of racial ideologies present in the data. Third, two undergraduate coders applied this coding system to the data, supervised by a graduate student. After a rigorous training process, coders independently coded a subset of responses to establish reliability. Discrepancies and questions were resolved via discussions between the coders, their supervisor, and the authors, and the coding scheme was subsequently revised as needed. Once coders achieved reliability, all responses were re-coded. Interrater reliabilities were overall excellent, with Cronbach’s alpha values<sup>4</sup> ranging from .72 to 1.00 for all but three codes. For three codes, alpha values were near or equal to zero despite high percentage interrater agreement due to very low variability (i.e., very few participants received a code for these variables). Coding was inclusive – many comments contained aspects of multiple codes and were coded as such. Finally, the authors sorted the codes into themes.

## Results

We first identified two broadband themes informed by previous work: colorblind socialization and color conscious socialization. Second, we explored the degree to which parents communicated a mixture of these two contradictory types of messages. Finally, we explored themes specific to discussions of racial current events.

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<sup>4</sup> The coding scheme included magnitude codes that were not relevant to the current qualitative analysis. Because the codes were not purely categorical, Cronbach’s alpha was used to calculate interrater reliability.

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### **Colorblind Socialization**

More than half of parents (56.4% percent) voiced at least one form of broadband colorblind socialization, downplaying the importance or even the presence of race in our society.

**Specific colorblind ideology.** The most prevalent type of colorblindness (present in 49.7% of the sample) was a specific colorblind ideology in which parents made statements that either implicitly or explicitly undermined the value or the reality of race. In most cases, this involved framing race as surface-level or unimportant (e.g., “I explain to her that racial or ethnic differences are superficial and what matters is the kind of person someone is inside.”) or referencing biology to encourage their children not to take race seriously (e.g., “I would explain to them that race is nothing but a difference in biological DNA which causes people to have different color skin much like hair or eyes but that we're all human and the same.”) A few parents offered a more extreme version of colorblindness, implying that race does not exist or that it should be purposefully ignored, with comments such as “I try to teach her not to see color,” or “race should not matter.” One potential consequence of such thinking is the belief racism is a myth – a theme we also observed.

**Denial of racism.** Comments that undermined the reality of racism in our society – in some cases denying that racism exists at all - were present in 17.6% of the sample. Several parents argued that racism has been exaggerated in media coverage. One parent wrote, “We discussed how people are far too sensitive about things such as race and how events can be taken out of context and blown out of proportion.” Another parent viewed the Charleston shooting as an outlier of sorts:

I told my child that, save for the Charleston shooting, these cases have flimsy evidence that it was due to race. I made sure to tell them that many people like to use these sorts of cases to push or advance their agendas. I did tell them the Charleston shooting was racially motivated and that cases like that are very rare.

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Others believed that racism itself is a myth. One parent wrote, “I told him that I believe that some people like to cry racism for everything and ignore the facts. Only the facts matter.”

### **Color Conscious Socialization Messages**

Color conscious socialization messages teach children to prioritize equal rights across racial groups, acknowledge racial disparities and privilege, and celebrate unique cultures. A majority of parents (69.1%) communicated at least one form of color conscious ideology.

**Egalitarianism.** Egalitarian ideology, defined as the belief that different groups of people have the same rights and should receive equal treatment in society, was endorsed by 49.7% of parents in the sample. In order to receive a code for egalitarianism, comments needed to explicitly refer to how people are treated or judged.

Many parents endorsed egalitarian ideologies in response to the second prompt about witnessing racial prejudice. One parent wrote: “I would tell her that what she witnessed was wrong and only hurtful people act like that and we should accept everyone as equals.” A few parents seemed to be attempting to teach children a broader lesson that was not restricted to one singular instance, such as the parent who wrote: “I would tell her that everybody is different and the color of your skin is no reason to treat anyone any differently.”

Other parents voiced egalitarian beliefs more broadly, such as, “the way a person looks or sounds is not an acceptable way to judge someone. Even though some people do judge others like that, it’s wrong.” or, “That is not the right thing to do and I am so sorry you had to witness that. Treat everyone with kindness and respect.” These vague answers advocate for equal treatment between groups, but they fail to mention race.

**Acknowledgement of racism.** Less than a third of the sample (29.7%) acknowledged the reality of racism in our society. Many of these comments were brief, such as, “I would tell them

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that some people do not like people that do not look like them.” or, “there are people who judge others by their skin color.” However, some parents went into greater detail, providing context for how racism works or where it comes from. One parent wrote:

People a lot of times think that black people are criminals or drug users or just bad people just because they look different, and that causes hate, and good people and even kids can be hurt or killed because white people are hateful and afraid and dumb.

This parent reported teaching their child to recognize their own white privilege:

He does [ask about race] and we talk about it. He's very confused about the existence of racism. We discuss examples of things that are happening in the world and also the casual racism that is ignored by society. We have recently been discussing how we have better opportunities in life because we are white even though we are not well-off ourselves. I want him to understand white privilege and think about how he can reduce that when he's older.

These parents recognize that racism is present in our society, they are teaching their children to recognize it, and some are encouraging children to dismantle it.

**Multiculturalism.** About a fifth of the sample (19.4%) reported communicating multicultural ideology, which recognizes the importance of racial differences and cultural diversity for our society. Multicultural comments were often brief and simply acknowledged that different groups exist, such as “People are all different - different shapes, sizes and colors - but are all still people.” A few parents went into more detail and encouraged their children to view racial differences in a positive light:

I would explain to her that everyone is different and some come from different places....People may look different and sound different, but they are all unique and special, and to them, we might look just as unique and different.

These comments broaden the conversation beyond the oppression faced by racial minorities and encourage children to value learning about differences between people.

## Mixed messages

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We found that 35.2% of parents in the sample communicated a mixture of colorblind and color conscious ideology. In contrast, 33.9% of parents voiced only color conscious beliefs, whereas 21.2% voiced only colorblind beliefs. Finally, 9.7% of parents voiced neither color conscious nor colorblind beliefs.

When comparing specific types of racial ideologies across responses to all three prompts, the most common combination was specific colorblindness and egalitarianism (25.4% of total parents). The second most common pattern of mixed messages was combining specific colorblindness and acknowledgement of racism (15% of total parents). Very few parents combined specific colorblindness with multiculturalism (4.2%), denial of racism with egalitarianism (4.2%), denial of racism with multiculturalism (2.4%), or denial of racism with acknowledgement of racism (< 1%). In sum, nearly all cases of mixed messages involved combining colorblindness with some form of color conscious message.

A few contradictory messages about race took the form of specific colorblindness seeping into color conscious sentiments within a single response to a single prompt. One parent very clearly voiced both colorblindness and racial egalitarianism together: "I would tell her race doesn't matter, and judging someone by how they look, including the color of their skin, is simply wrong." Another parent began with colorblindness but ended with acknowledgement of racism: "All people are equal and race doesn't matter. Unfortunately some people don't see it that way and sometimes treat other races unfairly." Both of these comments seem to frame colorblindness as the correct approach.

The majority of mixed messages emerged due to different prompts eliciting distinct types of answers (color conscious versus colorblind). All three prompts elicited a variety of types of responses; however, parents tended to emphasize colorblindness in response to the prompt about

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race in general and egalitarianism in response to the prompt about witnessing racial prejudice. For example, one parent said “Race is not important at all...it matters what is in the inside, not what the color of the person is” in response to the prompt about race in general and “It is wrong to judge someone by it's [sic] color and discriminate them by color. We are all equal.” in response to the witnessing prejudice prompt. Mixed messages that combined colorblindness with acknowledgment of racism also emerged across these two prompts. Another parent said “having a different color of skin means just that - the person is different in that way and it doesn't mean anything more than that” followed by “I would explain (somewhat needlessly, as she's pretty aware of such things) that some people (wrongly) think that the color of someone's skin means that they're inferior or less worthy of respect.” A few parents voiced colorblindness in response to the general prompt (e.g., “race doesn't matter”) with acknowledgment of racism in response to the current events prompt (e.g., “I've also let him know about systemic racism and how he should stand up against it if he ever sees it.”) Together, these findings highlight the utility of framing questions about racial socialization in a variety of ways to better capture the nuance in parents' racial beliefs and racial socialization messages.

### **Discussions of racial current events**

Just over a third of the sample (37%) reported discussing racial current events such as Trayvon Martin's death and the Charleston church shooting with their children. Many parents gave brief descriptions of these discussions, often labeling events as negative. One parent wrote: “Yes, we talked about the shooting, and what an evil event it was.” A subset of parents talked about the reasons behind the event, but the reasons themselves varied. Some voiced acknowledgement of racism in their answer, whereas others expressed denial of racism or even

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explicit racism, such as “Yes, we discussed that blacks are acting irrational and that's how they are.” Thus, parents’ interpretations of the causes of the events varied widely.

A few parents reported earnest attempts to help their children understand the social and cultural factors that contributed to these events. One parent wrote:

Yes, my daughter asked me why the police only shoot young black people. I didn't know she had noticed the news so well. I explained that so many cops are wonderful people who will do anything to help but just like with regular people some cops are prejudiced and ignorant just the like people who hate and that they are afraid of people who are different and it makes them misjudge a situation to the point where it becomes harmful or even deadly.

**Reasons for not discussing current events.** Far more parents (63%) reported that they did not discuss racial current events with their children. We were particularly interested in the reasons parents gave for avoiding these discussions. Most (74% of this group) provided at least a brief explanation for why they did not discuss racial current events.

**Shielding.** By far the most common theme (43.2%) in parents’ reasons for avoiding these discussions was the desire to shield children from negativity, primarily due to age. One parent said “No, she is too young to worry about it.” Another labeled racial current events as not for children: “No. These are adult matters. We need to focus on school, family, and friends.” A few parents mentioned the violent nature of racial current events as a reason for avoiding discussions: for example, “No, a child should not be told about death and murder. Those are adult topics.” Many viewed their children as too young to comprehend racial current events, using sentiments such as, “my child is too young to fully understand the situation.” In sum, many parents viewed racial current events as something from which they needed to shelter their children.

**Passive approach.** About a fifth of parents who did not discuss events (21.2%) adopted a passive parenting approach, in which they expected external forces to instigate the discussion. When such forces were absent, discussions were absent as well. Some relied on situational



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circumstances: “No, it hasn’t come up.” or, “No, we do not really watch the news.” Others referenced their child: “My child is not aware of these.” A few parents seemed to be waiting for their child to ask: “They don't ask about it, and it doesn't occur to me to bring it up.” These parents did not voice any regret or disappointment that circumstances had not elicited such discussions, suggesting a lack of motivation to discuss racial current events.

**Unnecessary.** Finally, 9.6% of parents who did not discuss events believed that such discussions were unnecessary. Some mentioned their child, “No, I did not think it was something she needed to know at the time.”, whereas others referenced themselves, “No, because they are not important to me.” One parent seemed surprised we asked the question: “I have not. Why would I bring that up?” These White parents do not seem to view racial current events as relevant to their families.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to apply qualitative methodology to gain an in-depth look at contradictory racial ideologies communicated by White parents of children in middle childhood, as well as the reasons why White parents do or do not discuss racial current events with their children. We present evidence that some White parents communicate solely colorblind or color conscious racial ideology in their children, but others communicate a mixture of the two. The majority of parents did not discuss racial current events with their children; some viewed these discussions as too negative or unnecessary, and some seemed to be waiting for external forces to instigate discussions. These results indicate that White parents have the potential to be agents of change that socialize color conscious beliefs in their children, but a subset are communicating mixed messages that may dampen the positive effects of such beliefs. Furthermore, many White parents appear to be reinforcing the current system of colorblind indifference to racial inequality.

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### **Socialization of Contradictory Racial Ideologies among White Parents**

Documenting mixed messages about race communicated by White parents is a novel contribution of this study. At first glance, it appears that color conscious ideology was more common than colorblind ideology. Yet, exploring overlap between the two reveals a more complicated picture. Approximately a third of White parents voiced mixed messages that combine colorblind and color conscious ideologies. This represents about half of the parents who voiced any color conscious beliefs.

Combining specific colorblind messages (e.g., race does not matter) with some form of color conscious message (particularly egalitarianism or acknowledgement of racism) was by far the most common expression of mixed messages. Colorblindness is pervasive in White American culture, and some view colorblindness as a pathway to interracial harmony (Plaut et al., 2018). Thus, these parents could be combining colorblindness with color conscious ideology because they believe that colorblindness will actually lead to racial equality (despite clear evidence to the contrary). Alternatively, White parents who value color consciousness could have employed “strategic colorblindness” (Apfelbaum et al., 2008, p. 918) in their responses to avoid the appearance of racial bias, resulting in mixed messages. Assessing parents’ understanding of the actual effects of colorblindness and their beliefs about its utility for race relations would help us understand the reasons behind these mixed messages.

About a third of the sample communicated solely color conscious messages to their children. Some parents made nuanced arguments in favor of color conscious thinking that communicated multicultural values and addressed the history and complexity of racial interactions in the United States. A few parents taught their children about White privilege. Acknowledgement of racism was more common in our sample than denial that racism exists,

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which is encouraging – yet, it was voiced by less than a third of parents. Teaching children about the realities of racism could be particularly useful from a social justice perspective, as it simultaneously communicates that racial equality is valued, but also that work remains to make it a reality. School-based interventions that teach children about the history and systemic nature of racism are an effective way to reduce racial bias in middle childhood (Hughes et al., 2007).

Exploring whether White parents communicate color conscious ideology in a way that reduces racial bias in their children is a logical next step.

## Racial Current Events

Just over a third of our sample reported discussing racial current events with their children; declining to discuss racial current events was by far the modal response. This rate is similar to Underhill's (2018) study on discussions of the Ferguson protests, yet somewhat higher than prior studies of racial discussions in general or in response to a specific lab task (e.g., Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup & Holden, 2001; Vittrup, 2018). Our sample included parents of older children compared to these studies; yet, many still viewed their children as too young for discussions of racial current events. In fact, sheltering children due to their age or the violent nature of events was the most common reason for not discussing them. This tendency among White parents is problematic because it denies White children accurate information about what minority children their own age are experiencing. In one study, approximately 95% of Black parents reported that they had already talked about and prepared their child for an experience with discrimination by early adolescence (Frabutt, Walker, & Mackinnon-Lewis, 2002). Other work has shown that 88% of racial minority early adolescent children report that they have experienced at least one incident of discrimination (e.g., name calling, physical bullying), and the majority of these incidents were perpetrated by a White child (Pachter, Bernstein, Szalacha, &

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Coll, 2010). It is possible, and perhaps likely, that White parents and children are unaware of these incidents; however, White parents declining to discuss the events of which they are aware only exacerbates their children's lack of knowledge about racial discrimination.

The second most common reason for not discussing racial current events was waiting for external factors – such as the topic “coming up” or children asking about them – to elicit discussions. High profile news stories about racial issues have increased in recent years. Increased news coverage, and the ensuing reactions among adults and peers, could be a catalyst that increases external pressures on White parents to hold these discussions, or cause them to come up in conversation more often. Exploring these questions among older youth, who are more likely to consume news stories independently of parents and, in theory, less likely to be sheltered from violence, is a logical next step for this area of research.

In stark contrast to parents of color, most White parents do not view discussions of race and racism as part of their job as parents. Some parents simply stated that discussing racial current events was unnecessary. The overall reticence toward race in our data is consistent with research with other White American samples (e.g., Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). This may stem from White parents' position as a dominant cultural group; rather than seeking to help their children understand and identify with other racial groups, they may instead expect people of other races to assimilate to the dominant (White) culture (Hamm, 2001). Our study suggests that White parents are encouraging their children – either actively through colorblind socialization or passively through avoidance and silence – to uphold the status quo.

## Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be noted. Although anonymous online surveys are useful for exploring White parents' discussions of uncomfortable topics, in-person interviews or

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observations of discussions in real time would provide richer information. Self-reports may be prone to recall or social desirability bias. This study relied on a single informant in a moderately sized sample. Comparing racial socialization of multiple caregivers or obtaining children's perceptions of racial socialization in larger samples would be valuable. Finally, we were unable to assess how White parents' socialization of racial ideology contributes to children's developing views about race, a critical next step.

## Implications

This study presents evidence that although a majority of White parents attempt to socialize color conscious ideology in their children, a subset undermines this goal with mixed messages that also include colorblind ideology. White parents who send mixed messages about race may be a group of interest for interventions. They clearly need further training about colorblindness and its harmful effects, but they endorse at least some forms of color conscious thinking, providing a useful foundation upon which interventionists may build. Intervening at the family level has the potential to be high impact, as teaching parents about the benefits of teaching their children color conscious ideology – as well as the adverse effects of colorblindness – could also be a pathway to reducing bias in parents themselves. Finally, current events related to race could provide a useful starting point to get discussions going, but also to help families understand the reality of racism in American society.

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