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Sadie F. Strain

Western Washington University

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White Families and Racial Socialization: A Review

Sadie Strain
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Since the early 1980s, several studies have attempted to answer questions regarding the ethnic and racial socialization strategies of parents. The majority of this work has been centered around the socialization practices utilized by parents of African American children, with a few studies looking into the socialization practices of Latinx parents and parents of transracially adopted children (Hughes et al. 2006). Recently, there has been an increase in research regarding the racial socialization practices of white parents. (For an overview of the research I present in this paper, see Table 1 on page 2 and 3). However, the amount of literature regarding white racial socialization is still less comprehensive than the research that has examined socialization practices within other ethnic groups. In “Parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices,” the authors analyze the most common themes that emerge in parental socialization research. These themes are cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, egalitarianism, and silence about race (Hughes et al. 2006). Studies have found that colorblindness, which aligns with silence about race, is a common strategy used by white parents to teach their children about race (Hamm 2001, Hagerman 2014, & Kelley 2016). Hughes et al. reminds us that while not talking about race has been often overlooked as a form of socialization, a “failure to mention racial issues also communicates race-related values and perspectives to children” (757). Adding on to that, Robin DiAngelo speaks of “white silence,” the tendency of white people to remain silent when given the chance to discuss race. DiAngelo states that the racial status quo in the United States is racist, so by not speaking up or participating in conversations about race, the status quo is inherently reinforced (2012). With this in mind, I provide an overview of common color-blind frames of thinking that are often used by white people to avoid the historical racial problems that plague our country. In addition, the authors I discuss have started asking salient questions about the manner in which parents transmit messages about race to their children. I also consider the racial contexts provided by parents that may affect the socialization of children as they

develop. Lastly, I address parents who hold color-conscious ideologies, examining the possibly unforeseen damage to communities of color that can occur when these parents attempt to raise racially-conscious children in a non-mutually beneficial way.

Table 1. An overview of the studies I review in this paper. The layout of the table is modeled after Hughes et al. 2006 study.

Study	Age of Children	Race/ Ethnicity	Participants	Sample Size	Method of Study
Castelli et al. 2008.	3-6 years old	Not stated	3-6 year old children	78 children	Videos + follow-up interview
Hagerman, Margaret Ann. 2017.	10-13 years old	White	Affluent white fathers and their white children	8 fathers	Semi-Structured Interviews
Hagerman, Margaret Ann. 2016.	10-13 years old	White	White Children	35 children	Semi-Structured Interviews Spending time in social settings with the participants
Hagerman, Margaret Ann. 2014.	10-13 years old	White	Affluent White parents & their white children	40 parents 35 children	Semi-Structured Interviews
Hamm, Jill V. 2001.	Required: at least one child in 5th grade OR in high school Some parents had other children in middle school	African American White	African American Parents (low and middle SES) White parents (middle SES)	18 African American parents 10 white parents	Semi-Structured focus group style interviews Semi-structured individual interviews
Study	Age of Children	Race/ Ethnicity	Participants	Sample Size	Method of Study

Kelley, Jenna A. 2016.	Children between the ages of 8-12	White	White parents	161 parents	Online Survey Vignettes
Posey, Linn. 2012.	Elementary-aged children	White (majority) African American Mixed Race Latino/a	Majority Middle and Upper-Middle Class parents	71 adults	Observation in parent meetings Semi-structured interviews A prospective parent survey Artifacts
Skinner et al. 2017.	Preschool-aged children (M=59.25 months)	White (majority) Asian Multiracial Another race	Preschool-aged children	148 children	Video + questionnaire
Smith et al. 2011.	No children	White African American	White parents Black adoptees (adults)	13 parents 13 adoptees	Semi-structured interviews
Simpson Vittrup, Birgitte. 2007.	5-7 years old	White	White parents and their white children	93 children 186 parents	Videos + questionnaires

Color-Blind Frameworks

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva provides comprehensive definitions of color-blind frameworks in his book, *Racism Without Racists* (2003). He uses interviews and surveys with white adults to determine four color-blind frames, describing frames as “set paths for interpreting information” (26). Bonilla-Silva points out

that these frames, which “misrepresent the world,” have been normalized and accepted in society because white people, the dominant group in the United States, subscribe to them. I briefly summarize these frames as they can be used as an aid to understand ways that white parents may be making sense of racial problems. These frames are not mutually exclusive, but are instead used in conjunction with each other (29). I also want to point out that the statements made below are generalizations about white people and people of color, and obviously do not reflect the entirety of these two groups.

The first frame, *abstract liberalism*, involves the abstract use of ideas such as individualism and equal opportunity to justify racial inequalities. For example, many white people find it reasonable to verbalize their opposition to affirmative-action policies, stating that they provide an unfair advantage to minority groups. Bonilla-Silva points out that white people can justify this stance by stating the importance of equal opportunity for all, while ignoring the underrepresentation of people of color in all major societal institutions. He also finds that white people often use the idea of individualism and free choice to explain segregated neighborhoods and schools. By stating that people choose to live in specific neighborhoods and send their kids to specific schools, white people are ignoring the historical redlining, gentrification practices, and governmental decisions that have led to modern day segregation.

The second frame, *naturalization*, is another way to justify societal segregation and inequality. Many whites argue that it is natural for people who are alike to want to group together. This frame also states that it is natural for white people to have mostly white friends and white interactions. Bonilla-Silva sees this frame as one of colorblindness because whites explain that their preferences for other whites is not a racial issue, “because *they* (racial minorities) do it too” (28).

The third frame, *cultural racism*, has historically been used by whites to explain the “cultural differences” between themselves and people of color. While these beliefs have been expressed in blatantly racist ways in the past, nowadays white people express their beliefs that people of color are “lazy,” or “don’t value education” by framing black poverty as a result of not working hard enough or having children at too young an age. This frame is mentioned and utilized by white parents in Hagerman’s research, which I will discuss later. Cultural racism allows whites to claim they are not racist

while simultaneously blaming black “culture” for the poverty and other disadvantages many black people face, rather than examining the institutionalized racism of the United States that appoints systematic advantages to those who are white.

The fourth frame, *minimization of racism*, greatly downplays the effect that discrimination plays in the lives of people of color. In this frame, discrimination is seen as a thing of the past. When people of color bring up ways they have been discriminated against, whites using this frame can chalk those experiences up as an exaggeration. Also common is pretending that only outwardly racist people would practice acts of individual discrimination, and that racism is not experienced on a larger scale.

Parents who believe that racism is a non-issue in our society often do not discuss race with their children, due to one or more of these frames. This leaves children to interpret for themselves the implicit biases that come along with these frameworks, as well as navigate our racialized society with parents who do not acknowledge that there is a problem in the first place. Providing alternative explanations to these frames is crucial for educating white parents so they can make the choice to raise anti-racist children.

Parental Biases

The frames listed above are further supported by parental nonverbal behaviors, which is an area that researchers have been studying. While some studies have found that the explicit racial attitudes of parents are not correlated to their preschool aged children’s racial attitudes (Aboud and Doyle, 1996), Castelli et al.’s (2008) research asked the more probing question of “whether nonverbal behaviors that signal potential friendliness or uneasiness are somehow recognized by very young children (3-6 years of age) and shape the formation of their social attitudes” (1505). To test this question, the authors showed four different videos to the children, one in which a white actor displayed clear negative nonverbal signals toward a black actor he was having a conversation with. These behaviors included avoiding eye contact with the black actor, and sitting far away from him. After watching the video, the children were asked five specific questions about the black actor, called Abdul. These questions included “How much do you like Abdul?” and, “How much do you think that Abdul is a nice person?” (1506).

From analyses of the responses, the authors found that the personal attitudes of the children were significantly affected after watching the video with negative nonverbal behaviors. In fact, “even when verbal behavior was positive, children were nonetheless influenced by nonverbal behaviors, consistent with the view that the expression of positive verbal statements cannot override the effects of nonverbal cues that signal interpersonal discomfort” (1511). Interestingly, there was not a strong significance associated with negative *verbal* behaviors and children’s negative personal attitudes towards the black actor. Even if the white adult model used positive verbal messages, the children still picked up on the underlying negative nonverbal signals. This study serves as a reminder that body language speaks much louder to young children than well intentioned words.

In a similar study, but one that did not attempt to include race as a measure of bias, Skinner et al. (2017) reproduced the findings above, adding to Castelli et al.’s research by not only questioning whether or not children will be affected by nonverbal bias, but also if they will form group bias (towards an outgroup) by observing the negative nonverbal interactions of adults. The authors found this to be supported, stating that,

Preschool children who watched a brief demonstration of nonverbal bias on video subsequently showed more positive attitudes toward the target of positive nonverbal signals than toward the target of negative nonverbal signals and also showed more positive attitudes toward, and imitation of, the best friend of the target of positive nonverbal signals than toward the best friend of the target of negative nonverbal signals (221).

These findings are necessary to keep in mind when thinking about the many factors that are a part of socialization. While I believe that what is explicitly stated or not stated about race leaves an impression upon children, it also seems that very young children are capable of nonverbally understanding “ingroups” and “outgroups,” which can be the basis for forming prejudices (222). This information is somewhat daunting, especially when white parents who do not subscribe to colorblind ideologies are attempting to raise racially conscious children. How do parents raise anti-racist children if their nonverbal signals may be conveying racial bias? This question is not easily answerable, but it is an important piece of the socialization puzzle.

Racial Contexts & Racial Attitudes

In another layer of familial socialization, researchers have been studying the effects of the racial contexts in which children grow up. Parents choose the environment in which their children live, providing them with the schools, activities, peer groups, and neighborhoods “...in which specific norms...rules...and associated meaning structures reside” (Hughes et al. 2016, 18). These “racial spaces” (18) may lead children to ask questions about race, or may lead them to remain oblivious to the effects race plays in the lives of the U.S. population (Hagerman 2014).

Hagerman’s research (2014) revolves around the way middle-school aged white children are racially socialized by their families. She finds that the process of familial socialization is largely impacted by the “distinctive racial contexts in which white children live” (2599). These unique contexts inform the way children think about race. Hagerman used an ethnographic approach to study two different groups of families in two different white neighborhoods, Sheridan and Evergreen. The major difference between the two neighborhoods was the diversity of the local schools. The Sheridan middle and high schools were 93% and 96% white, respectively. The Evergreen neighborhood had public middle and high schools that were 57% and 47% white, respectively (2602). Although Hagerman’s research does not focus on the racial socialization that occurs in schools, she draws attention to this stark difference because parents who live in these two different neighborhoods have different ideologies when it comes to understanding race. Colorblind ideologies are largely held by Sheridan parents, while Evergreen parents are color-conscious.

Hagerman interviews a Sheridan mother, Mrs. Schultz, who intentionally moved to the neighborhood to provide the best education for her children. Hagerman points to the fact that throughout the interview, Mrs. Schultz’s comments do not blatantly mention race, but still point to her negative beliefs about people of color. She says that she would welcome more people of color in her neighborhood, though she would want the parents to value education in the same way that she does. Mrs. Schultz’s sentiments align with the frame of *cultural racism*. She does not talk about race with her

children, and most of the other Sheridan parents interviewed do not talk about race with their children either.

Hagerman's interviews with the children of the Sheridan neighborhood demonstrate that the children are also living with a color-blind mindset. The Sheridan children and some of their parents believe that working hard means you can overcome anything. This belief is a mixture of two color-blind frames, *abstract liberalism* and *minimization of racism*. Hagerman finds that these parents are constructing environments for their children in which they are surrounded by white people, so therefore they are not exposed to racism, leading them to believe that race is not a problem. Sheridan children are shielded from witnessing racial discrimination, from becoming friends with people of color, and if they do wish to discuss race at some point in their lives, they will most likely lack the skills and confidence needed to engage in these difficult conversations. In a separate article (2016), Hagerman breaks down the way the Sheridan children use their agency and their understanding of the world to rework the color-blind frames their parents use. Hagerman stresses that failing to acknowledge the agency children have when making sense of ideologies "...fails to account for clever shifts in ideology that may or may not serve to reproduce the [racial] status quo" (69). She uses Bonilla-Silva's frames to analyze the behavior and comments of the white children she interviews. Many of the color-blind parents in the study believe that their children do not care about race and do not see race. Hagerman finds that although these children often follow the general color-blind frames their parents have provided them with, they rework these frames around their peers in their own ways, often expressing views about black people that they do not express in front of their parents. For example, an interviewee, Natalie, uses the frame of *cultural racism* to explain the gossip she engages in at sleepovers. Natalie says that the girls expressed "how [the black girls] are not as smart and everything, and how like sometimes they would even say how their clothes are so ugly and all" (66). This gossip is elicited from girls growing up in households where race is not discussed, and goes unchallenged as these children "refine if, when and where this frame's use is acceptable, illustrating the dynamic nature of idealized whiteness" (66). In another example, a group of girls had trouble deciding if Rihanna was black, or if she was white with very dark makeup on. Another

child argued with his friend about the athletic abilities of black athletes, stating that biological differences between white and black people were the reason why so many professional basketball players were black. Hagerman states that over the course of her two year study, many of the children's questions about race went unanswered, leaving them to interpret race for themselves. All of these comments point out that these children do in fact notice race, and have explanations for perceived differences between white and black people. Hagerman states that:

racial socialization is not an 'uninterrupted socialization process'; children interrupt white racial socialization all the time through their questions, their confusion, and most of all, their own unique interpretations and refinement of cultural ideas presented to them within their context of childhood (69).

She gives a final example in her piece of a Sheridan girl who described an act of racism that she witnessed, despite her mother's protests that nothing racist was going on. Hagerman uses this example to remind us that even when children are growing up with color-blind parents, they still have the capability to strongly disagree. This seems to be rare, but understanding how this particular child, and other children, have come to reject colorblindness may be important areas for future research.

Moving from a color-blind neighborhood to a color-conscious neighborhood, the racial contexts provided by the Evergreen parents were much different than the Sheridan parents. These parents intentionally chose to send their children to more diverse schools, and believed that talking about race and privilege were important topics for their children. One Evergreen parent stated that it was important for her child to understand how to interact with people different than himself. Another parent stated that she wanted her son to understand his privilege as a white male. The children of these parents were much more likely to understand that being white is an advantage in everyday life (2611). They also recognized the racism that occurs in everyday situations, which Sheridan children are not exposed to because they attend almost exclusively white schools. The differences between Sheridan and Evergreen children's responses about race are used to show that racial context is extremely important in the way children understand race and racism.

Scholars using other methods have found similar patterns in socialization strategies. Jenna Kelley (2016) investigated the relationship and interconnectedness between the “racial attitudes, racial identity development and racial socialization strategies” (iii) of white parents. Unlike Hagerman’s research, she did not target parents based on socioeconomic status or neighborhood choice. Instead, her sample consisted of parents with a range of education levels, although most had obtained a college degree. Kelley’s study also did not involve children as participants, but it was a requirement for the parents to have children between 8 and 12 years old.

Kelley issued a survey for the parents with questions intending to “explicitly measure an individual’s positive and negative attitudes towards Black, White, and Hispanic people” (20). She also assessed symbolic racism, which can be described as “the predominantly White belief that racial struggles in America are no longer an issue and racial differences now exist as a factor of meritocracy as opposed to social and institutional constructs” (Henry and Sears 2002 qtd. in Kelley, 20). This assessment is in line with Hagerman’s interview-style study, in which several parents expressed this belief out loud. This idea of symbolic racism also ties in with the frames of *abstract liberalism and cultural racism*.

Kelley measured the parents’ conceptions of belonging to the white group, examining how this conception affected the parents’ beliefs about members of other groups. Lastly, Kelley used qualitative vignettes to ask parents about their racial socialization strategies. Examples include questions that asked parents to explain how they would talk to their children about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, how they would respond to their children inquiring about racial slurs, and if they believed their children held similar racial attitudes to their own. In her analysis, Kelley’s findings were in line with prior research, in which the parents most commonly expressed the egalitarian socialization strategy (Hughes et al. 2006). With this strategy, parents teach their children that all people are equal and should be treated the same no matter their skin color. Kelley notes that this strategy is not necessarily negative, but that it can become detrimental when used to justify a lack of conversation around race (44). Interestingly, respondents who said they would tell their children that BLM is a “bad movement” also had higher symbolic racism scores compared to those who did not talk about BLM in this way. Kelley theorizes that

because symbolic racism ties in with the idea that we live in a post-racial society, parents may see BLM in a negative light because of its advocacy around a specific race. Kelley also found that when parents were presented with the opportunity to discuss race, they often did not, even though many had previously stated that they would discuss race with their children if it came up. Kelley suggests that further research look into *why* parents won't explicitly discuss race, even when they are asked to do so. Her findings tie in with Hagerman's interviews with color-blind parents in the Sheridan neighborhood. However, Kelley's research attempted to find correlations between parental attitudes and parental socialization practices, and did not involve comparing parental practices to their children's racial attitudes and beliefs. Interestingly, Kelley found that parents were *not* more likely to utilize egalitarian strategies if their children were enrolled in less diverse schools. This is in direct opposition to the Sheridan parents in Hagerman's study (2014), who sent their children to majority white schools and often used egalitarian rhetoric with their children.

White Privilege & Color-Conscious Ideologies

Returning to Hagerman's research (2017), I would like to specifically address some of the pitfalls of common strategies used by color-conscious parents to teach their children about race. Hagerman writes about self-defined "progressive" fathers from the Evergreen neighborhood to examine the unique role that fathers play in raising "anti-racist" children. She discusses "how their attempts to raise anti-racist children both challenge and reinforce hegemonic whiteness" (60). The fathers that she interviewed used their structural privilege to teach their children about race in three common ways. They did this by actively seeking out interracial friendships for their children, using strangers, especially foreigners, to point out the privileges their children have, and by encouraging their children to speak up against racism. For example, one father believed it was important to coach a racially diverse soccer team. He stated that it was important for his sons to grow up with friends of other races, and he was proud of the fact that his was one of the only soccer teams in the community that was not all-white. Although he was actively trying to challenge hegemonic whiteness, he reinforced negative stereotypes about black fathers when he told

Hagerman that there was an absence of black fathers at games and practices. In this way, white superiority and white dominance were reinforced (68). Hagerman points out that all of the fathers interviewed had the power to create science clubs, soccer teams, and other spaces where their white children could benefit from having interracial friends. While this is important, these fathers (and other affluent white parents) also have the power and privilege to remove their children from uncomfortable situations at any point in time. For example, one of the fathers used his privilege to take his daughter out of a racially diverse school because he believed she "...had been victimized in an attempt to resist racism" (71). Hagerman argues that this was a contradictory message to send to his daughter. She was taught to stand up against racism, but then was allowed to switch schools when her efforts became difficult. Lastly, the fathers interviewed found it important to expose their children to people they deemed impoverished or less privileged than their own children, often by taking them on international trips or by driving their children through "poor" neighborhoods. Hagerman points out that these excursions often involved objectifying non-consenting strangers. Although the children may have been learning a valuable lesson, it was taught at the expense of others. All three of these themes are collectively aimed at teaching children how to be "better" white people by building relationships with people of color, and by attempting to teach the children that they were born with greater privileges than other people. She commends the fathers for rejecting color-blind ideologies, and for giving their children opportunities to understand human differences. However, she points out that "at times, [they] paradoxically reproduced the very social hierarchies they wanted to dismantle for their children" (72). She also finds that the ways in which the fathers are attempting to raise anti-racist children relied more on intergroup contact than on explicitly talking to their children about what it means to be white.

I found a similar parallel in Jill Hamm's research (2001). She found that many of the white parents in the study relied on the racially diverse schools their children were enrolled in to socialize their children, instead of looking inward for ways they could personally model positive cross-ethnic relationships. Hamm states that many of these parents have few social networks that are not exclusively white, but believe that the school or their children need to be responsible for building better cross-ethnic

relationships. A white parent expresses frustration that her children do not seem eager to cross the “wall” that seems to separate her children from the black kids at school, saying that she doesn’t understand why this is. Perhaps this has to do with the nonverbal biases the parent is exhibiting towards other racial groups, or perhaps this parent does not model positive cross-ethnic relationships and therefore her children do not know how to create them. Either way, Hamm’s research makes it clear that simply enrolling a white child in a racially diverse school will not necessarily result in positive cross-ethnic friendships or positive socialization. White parents should avoid using this as a sole active socialization strategy.

Linn Posey’s work (2012) also involves interviews with parents (not exclusively white) who want their children to have positive interracial relationships, but due to their approach these parents jeopardize the diversity of the local school. Posey studies a middle and upper-class parenting group’s attempts to build up the image of the local urban school, called Morningside. At the time when the parenting group was formed, the school was primarily students of color, which was considered a benefit by the parenting group. Similarly to the fathers in Hagerman’s study (2017), these parents wanted their children to attend diverse schools, stating they wanted their children to have a racially mixed group of friends, and they wanted their kids to understand their privilege by being around kids with less privilege. However, Posey writes that by inserting themselves in the local urban school, the influx of white children “ultimately threatened the diversity” and “contributed to patterns of inequality in district enrollment linked to race, class, and residence” (33). Although this study is not explicitly about socialization, I do think that the parents quoted are more aligned with color-conscious ideologies, and in their efforts to socialize their children and improve the local school, there is harm being done. An African American parent in Posey’s study expressed her concern with Morningside becoming an “elite place,” stating that she liked the school because “it is not just for the people that can bang on the door the loudest” (31). Posey raises important points of discussion about how middle and upper class parents can become involved in city public schools without disrupting the school’s sense of community and being inequitable. While enrolling white children in ethnically diverse schools seemingly benefited the children in Hagerman’s study (2014) in their

questioning of racial discrimination and in their awareness of racial issues, there needs to be more conversation about how white parents can go about raising anti-racist children without using marginalized groups of people to teach their children “life lessons” about how privileged they are.

Brainstorming Equitable and Non-White Dominant Ways to Raise Anti-Racist Children

Smith et al.’s research (2011) examines white parents’ racial socialization practices with their adopted black children. The authors argue that the race lessons taught by the white parents who want to do right by their black children often “reproduce the racial structure by...leaving unchallenged the apparent naturalness of the historical privileging of interests, beliefs, values, and experiences associated with Whites” (1223). In order to combat this, the authors recommend reframing lessons about race by examining race through the historical experiences of African Americans. They suggest thinking about race and understanding race through considering black traditions. I find these ideas to be salient not only for parents who have adopted children of races other than their own, but also for white parents with white children who wish to discuss race in a way that does not reinforce white superiority.

In addition, Professor Ali Michael, who is the director of K-12 consulting at the University of Pennsylvania, provides suggestions for what white racial socialization should entail. She provides eight guiding principles:

Talking about race is not racist, race should not only come up at times of conflict, race and racial differences do matter and they are not all bad, racism negatively impacts everyone, and therefore anti-racist action is relevant to all of us, being white may have no meaning for [you], but that doesn’t mean that it has no meaning (2017, 35:22).

These principles can be used in parent to child discussions, and can be utilized by parents who aren’t sure where to start when it comes to bringing up race. She also provides a list of skills that white children (and further, all white people), need to learn in order to be anti-racist. Skills include learning to recognize racism, role-playing responses [to racism], media analysis, and learning how to be a friend instead of a bystander (38:40).

Discussing the role the media plays in affecting racial attitudes and beliefs is beyond the scope of this paper, but I want to briefly address media analysis as a form of positive socialization. Michael explains that learning to critique the media as a child is a way to start breaking down systemic racism. She

gives the example of her daughter, who decided to start drawing her Disney princesses with brown skin, actively rejecting the media's warped ideas of beauty and whiteness as the norm. Michael says it is important to teach children (when referring to the media), "Actually, somebody made a choice to put that image in my brain and I'm gonna make a choice not to adopt it" (39:23).

Birgitte Vittrup Simpson's work (2007) aligns with Michael's statements about critiquing the media, in which she states the importance of "elaborative mediation," which involves parents' explaining to their children the "reality behind the programs and characters" (53). Young children may believe what they see on TV is an accurate depiction of real life. Consequently, children whose parents do not intervene are likely to buy into the stereotypes and negative portrayals of people of color that are present in the media and have become normalized in society (Bonilla-Silva 2012). Vittrup Simpson suggests that some parents may benefit from watching TV with their children that features "positive interracial interactions" as a way to bring up race, since many parents do not know when or how to bring up these conversations (64).

Conclusion

The research I have referenced provides insight about the manner in which white parents are racially socializing their children. Color-blind frames of thinking, nonverbal behaviors, and the racial contexts of childhood are all mechanisms by which families either avoid or engage in racial discussions. These findings can help parents understand that racial socialization is an ongoing process, and not a one-time conversation. Future research may want to investigate the socialization practices of families with lower socioeconomic statuses as the racial contexts they can provide for their children might potentially be different. Researching queer families and single-parent families might be of interest as well.

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