White Families and Racial Socialization

Sadie Strain

*Western Washington University, sadie.strain@wwu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu](https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu)

Part of the *Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons*

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu/vol8/iss1/7](https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu/vol8/iss1/7)
WHITE FAMILIES AND RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

By Sadie Strain

Since the early 1980s, studies have attempted to answer questions regarding the ethnic and racial socialization strategies of parents. The majority of this work has centered on the socialization practices utilized by parents of African American children, with few studies researching the socialization practices of Latinx parents and parents of transracially-adopted children (Hughes et al. 2006). Recently, research regarding the racial socialization practices of white parents has increased. (For an overview of the research I present in this paper, see table on page 48). However, the amount of literature regarding white racial socialization is still less comprehensive than research examining socialization practices within other ethnic groups. Prior research shows that four common themes-cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, egalitarianism, and silence about race, emerge in socialization strategies (Hughes et al. 2006). Silence about race aligns with colorblindness, which is a common strategy white parents use 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). Similarly, Robin DiAngelo acknowledges “white silence” as the tendency of white people to remain silent when given the opportunity to discuss race. DiAngelo suggests that the racial status quo in the United States is racist and that by not speaking up or participating in conversations about race, the status quo is reinforced (2012). In addition, the authors that I discuss posit salient questions about the manner in which parents transmit messages regarding race to their children. I also address parents who hold color-conscious ideologies, examining the possibly unforeseen damage to communities of color that occur when these parents attempt to raise racially-conscious children in a non-mutually beneficial way.

COLOR-BLIND FRAMEWORKS

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva provides comprehensive definitions of color-blind frameworks in his book, Racism Without Racists (2003). Describing frames as “set paths for interpreting information” (26), Bonilla-Silva incorporates interviews and surveys with white adults to determine four color-blind frames of thinking. Bonilla-Silva points out that these frames, which “misrepresent the world,” have been normalized and accepted in society because the dominant group within the United States,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDY</th>
<th>AGE OF CHILDREN</th>
<th>RACE/ETHNICITY</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>SAMPLE SIZE</th>
<th>METHOD OF STUDY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CASTELLI ET AL. 2008</td>
<td>3-6 years old</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>3-6 year old children</td>
<td>78 children</td>
<td>Videos &amp; follow up interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAGERMAN, MARGARET ANN 2017</td>
<td>10-13 years old</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Affluent white fathers &amp; their white children</td>
<td>8 fathers</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAGERMAN, MARGARET ANN 2016</td>
<td>10-13 years old</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White children</td>
<td>35 children</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview, spending time in social settings with participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAGERMAN, MARGARET ANN 2014</td>
<td>10-13 years old</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Affluent white parents &amp; their white children</td>
<td>40 parents, 35 children</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAMM, JILL V. 2001</td>
<td>Required: at least one child in 5th grade or high school. Some parents had other children in middle school.</td>
<td>African American, White</td>
<td>African American parents (low &amp; middle SES), White parents (middle SES)</td>
<td>18 African American parents, 10 White parents</td>
<td>Semi-structured focus group style interviews, semi-structured individual interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KELLEY, JENNA A. 2016</td>
<td>8-12 years old</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White parents</td>
<td>161 parents</td>
<td>Online survey, vignettes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSEY, LINN 2012</td>
<td>Elementary-aged children</td>
<td>White (majority), African American, Mixed race, Latino/a</td>
<td>Majority middle &amp; upper class parents</td>
<td>71 parents</td>
<td>Observation in parent meetings, semi-structured interviews, a prospective parent survey, artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKINNER ET AL. 2011</td>
<td>Preschool-aged children</td>
<td>White (majority), African American, mixed race, another race</td>
<td>Preschool-aged children</td>
<td>148 parents</td>
<td>Video &amp; questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIMPSON, VITTRUP, BRIGGITE 2007</td>
<td>5-7 years old</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White parents &amp; their white children</td>
<td>93 children, 186 parents</td>
<td>Video &amp; questionnaire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
white folks, subscribe to them. These frames can be adequately used as an aid to understand ways that white parents may interpret racial problems. The four frames presented are not mutually exclusive, but are instead used in conjunction with each other (29).

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 often 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, white people are ignoring the historical redlining gentrification practices that have led to modern day segregation.

The second frame, *naturalization*, is another way to rationalize societal segregation and inequality. Many whites argue that it is natural for people who are alike to want to group together. This frame also suggests 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 it enables whites to defend their preferences for other whites as a non-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 of cultural difference have historically been expressed in blatantly racist terms, today white people often convey such beliefs by framing black poverty as a result of not working hard enough or having children at a young age (i.e. racialized generalizations such as “lazy” or “don’t value education”). 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.

The fourth and final frame, *minimization of racism*, greatly downplays the effect that discrimination plays in the lives of people of color. In this frame, discrimination is considered antiquated. When people of color bring up ways they have been discriminated against, whites using this frame can attribute those experiences as exaggerations. In addition, it has been a common misconception that only overtly racist people would practice acts of individual discrimination, and that racism is not experienced on a larger systematic scale.

Parents who believe that racism is a non-issue in 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 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.

---

1 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.
PARENTAL BIASES

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 however, asks 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, whom he was having a conversation with. These behaviors included avoiding eye contact with the black actor, and sitting far away from him. Interestingly, there was not a strong significance associated with negative verbal behaviors nor the children's personal attitudes towards the black actor. Even if the white adult model used positive verbal messages, the children still noticed 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, Skinner et al. (2017) adds to Castelli et al.'s research by examining the potential formation of group bias, 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).

RACIAL CONTEXTS & RACIAL ATTITUDES

In another facet of familial socialization, researchers study the effects of the racial contexts in which children grow up. Ideally, parents choose the environment in which their children live, providing them with schools 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 significant role that race plays in the lives of the U.S. population (Hagerman 2014).

Central to Hagerman's research (2014) is the way in which middle-school aged white children are racially socialized by their families. In this research, Hagerman 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. An ethnographic approach was used to study two different groups of families in two predominantly white neighborhoods, Sheridan and Evergreen. The major difference between the two neighborhoods is the diversity of the local schools. The Sheridan middle and high schools were 93% and 96% white, respectively. The Evergreen neighborhood has 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

---

2 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). After surveying 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).
within these two neighborhoods have different ideologies when it comes to understanding race. Color-blind 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. Throughout the interview, Schultz’s comments do not blatantly mention race, but still illuminate her negative beliefs about people of color. Schultz 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. Schultz’s sentiments align with the frame of cultural racism. Admittedly, Schultz 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. Thus, they are not exposed to racism, and are led to believe that race is not a problem. In a separate article (2016), Hagerman breaks down the way 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). 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, they rework these frames around their peer groups, 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 gives a final example 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 are capable of disagreeing. This seems to be rare, but understanding how this particular child, and other children, have come to reject colorblindness are important areas for future research.

The racial contexts provided by the Evergreen parents were much different from the Sheridan parents. Evergreen parents intentionally chose to send their children to diverse schools, and believe that talking about race and privilege are important topics for their children. One Evergreen parent stated that it was important for her child to understand how to interact with people different from 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. 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.

WHITE PRIVILEGE & COLOR-CONSCIOUS IDEOLOGIES

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. 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). 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 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 children that they were born with greater privileges than other people. Although Hagerman commends the fathers for rejecting color-blind ideologies, she points out “at times, [they] paradoxically reproduced the very social hierarchies they wanted to dismantle for their children” (72). Importantly, Hagerman 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.

Similar parallels can be found in Jill Hamm’s research (2001). Hamm observed 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 considering how they could personally model positive cross-ethnic relationships. One white parent expresses frustration that her children do not seem eager to cross the “wall” that separates her children from the black children at school, saying that she doesn’t understand why this is. Perhaps this has to do with the nonverbal biases the parent exhibits 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.

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. Similar to the fathers in Hagerman’s study (2017), these parents wanted their children to attend diverse schools, stating that they wanted their children to have a racially mixed group of friends, and for their kids to understand their privilege by interacting with less privileged classmates. 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, 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 without creating an inequitable environment. While enrolling white children in ethnically diverse schools seemingly benefited the children in Hagerman’s study (2014), 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” on privilege.
BRAINSTORMING EQUITABLE AND NON-WHITE DOMINANT WAYS TO RAISE ANTI-RACIST CHILDREN

Smith et al.’s research (2011) examines the racial socialization practices of white parents with adopted black children. The authors argue that the race lessons taught by these parents 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). To combat this, the authors recommend reframing lessons about race by examining race through the historical experiences and traditions of African Americans. In this way, race can be discussed without reinforcing white superiority. In addition, Dr. Ali Michael provides suggestions for eight guiding principles that can be used when discussing race:

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 is has no meaning (2017, 35:22).

Michael also provides a list of skills that white children 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). In alignment with Michael’s suggestions regarding media analysis, Birgitte Vittrup Simpson writes of the importance of “elaborative mediation” (2007). This involves parents’ explaining to their children the “reality behind the programs and characters” (53). Because young children may believe what they see on TV is an accurate depiction of real life, it is crucial that parents give their children the tools to analyze 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 have 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, non-verbal behaviors, and the racial contexts of childhood are all mechanisms by which families either avoid or engage in racial discussions. These findings demonstrate that racial socialization is an ongoing process, and cannot be 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.


