Kids Talking About Race: Tween-agers in a Post-Civil Rights Era[1]

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Our research examines how American children understand and talk about how race matters in their everyday lives. We draw on interviews with 44 middle school children who attend schools in an integrated county-wide system and find that while some use color-blind rhetoric, most children in our study know that race matters, while they offer alternative accounts for why and how. Some explain race as social inequality, while others offer cultural accounts of racial differences. Our analysis suggests that for white children, gender matters; more girls describe racial inequality than boys. For children of color, class seems to be key, with middle-class children giving cultural explanations, including negative evaluations of others in their own racial group. We use an intersectionality framework to analyze the alternative and complex narratives children give for their own experiences of race and race relations between peers.

KEY WORDS: children; color-blind; gender; inequality; narrative; race.

INTRODUCTION

While African-American children can now dream that someone who looks like them might be president, they are still far more likely to grow up in poverty, drop out of high school, be unemployed or underemployed, and spend time in jail and are far less likely to go to college, graduate school, and buy a home in the suburbs (Damaske 2011; Feagin and Sikes 1995; Fullerton and Anderson 2013; Massey and Denton 1993; Patillo 2000; Royster 2004). How do children raised in the twenty-first century experience this paradox of great changes in opportunity and yet the persistence of radically different life experiences by race?

The goal of this study is to analyze the stories that children tell about their lives to identify how they experience a racialized world in a post-Civil Rights era. How children experience the present may matter for the future, but it is also important as the lived reality and for quality of life in the moment. We seek to understand children not merely because they are preparing for life, but as they

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are living it (Corsaro, 2005). We are interested in how children both inherit and reinterpret racial ideas based on their own personal interactions.

Research on racial attitudes among children has developed over more than half a century. There were early studies in which children were participants in laboratory experiments. Children were asked to respond to cultural artifacts that had racial meanings (Baer 1962; Lindsley 1962; Sears 1951). The next stage of research on children focused on attitudes about race-related issues (Bigler and Liben 1993; Branch and Newcombe 1986; Hollander and Scarpa 1971; Milner 1983). During the end of the twentieth century, there was a shift toward studying children in natural social settings such as schools or families (Adler and Adler 1998). There have been many studies exploring how children understand race and racism (Lewis 2003a, 2003b; Moore 2002, 2003; Stoughton and Sivertson 2005; Troyna 1991; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996). Recent studies focus on the importance of race in youth discourse, finding complex and often contradictory attitudes toward the meaning of race (Lewis, 2010, Winkler, 2010).

Our study builds on this tradition of interviewing children to hear their own stories and to analyze the experiences as they relate them to us. We do not ask directly what race means to them. Earlier research has shown that that merely leads to surface, socially acceptable answers to avoid any appearance of racism. Instead, we use a variety of techniques to explore how children understand what race means in their daily lives, whether they use color-blind ideology, and, when they talk about race, what kind of explanations they give to make sense of what they see in their everyday worlds. Our article is based on semistructured interviews with a diverse group of 44 middle school children. Our methods included a variety of techniques to move beyond socially desirable answers, from asking students to write poems, to tell stories about what life would be like in another racial category, and to answer a series of questions that probed any responses that might indicate racialized experiences. We examined the meanings that children give to their experiences across racial groups within an integrated school system. Our research adds to the literature by focusing attention on possible differences between boys and girls and by social class. Indeed, we find suggestive patterns by race, class, and gender: among white children, girls are more sensitive to inequality; among children of color, middle-class children ignore racial inequality and focus on cultural differences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Color-blind Ideology and Children

According to Bonilla-Silva (2001), people who espouse color blindness believe that to "see" race is racist and thus pretend not to see it. Color blindness allows people to believe the world is post-racial without acknowledging any white racial privilege or contemporary institutional racial discrimination. Color blindness is an ideology that ignores structural inequalities and thus leads to the

presumption that if group differences exist they are attributable to personal failing and essential cultural dysfunction. Bonilla- Silva and Forman (2000) offered the concept of *semantic moves* or language used to claim color blindness while simultaneously indicating covert racism. In a study of white college students, Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) found that although white students expressed prejudicial views, they "filtered them through various 'semantic moves' or rhetorical constructions to avoid appearing racist" (p. 65). What is interesting is that although they tried to use certain discourse to emphasize color blindness, these white students actually exhibited a deep-rooted color consciousness. This research suggests that it is important to study the stories people tell about race.

The research on children's attitudes toward race shows some evidence of what Bonilla-Silva (2001) called color-blind ideology (Lewis 2003b; Stoughton and Sivertson 2005). Yet, other research has shown that children and adolescents are aware of the abstract ideas of race and racism (Adler and Adler 1998; Corsaro 2005, Lewis 2003b; Troyna 1991; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996). For example, Van Ausdale and Feagin found that children differentiate racial categories and use racial hierarchy at very young ages. Contradictory evidence suggests complex and perhaps contextually specific patterns.

In one important ethnographic study of fourth- and fifth-grade children in Southern California, Lewis (2003b) examined how racial meanings and racial identities are reproduced in schools. Lewis (2003a) found that when external features are ambiguous (as with biracial children), white children use other characteristics, like language, hairstyle, or name, to categorize them as "other" or not. It is in these "racialized" labels that power is transferred and subordination is implied. Lewis showed that despite the existence of general rhetoric about racial equality, white children used visible racial signifiers to enforce exclusionary practices.

Stoughton and Sivertson (2005) also reported that rhetoric about racial equality is superficial. They conducted four focus groups of 10 to 12 sixth to eighth graders, in a large, racially integrated, urban middle school and found that the middle school children reported that racially segregated cafeteria seating patterns were a matter of personal choice—people choose to "stick with their own kind" (p. 284). White students cited unacceptable behavior by students of color, who were described as rowdy. Stoughton and Sivertson also report "naturalized" assumption of academic merit, so that any racial tracking was presumed achievement-based entirely. The children used the racialized tracking system to justify segregation as "normal" social divisions between whites and children of color. These findings support Tatum's (1997) earlier writings about self-segregation from the point of view of minority students who self-segregate to protect themselves from the effects of daily racism. Stoughton and Sivertson also found that some students of color internalized and used racial stereotypes to distance themselves from negative images. For instance, a biracial student said, "I'm bi-racial and I feel more comfortable hanging around with white people. I hang out with black people too, but some black people aren't civilized" (p. 289).

In two different ethnographic studies of children in recreational summer camps, Moore (2002) explored the emergence and use of race in children's collaborative peer cultures between the ages of 10 and 12. She studied a "generalist" camp (nonspecialized recreational day camp) and a "cultural awareness" camp where "appreciation for cultural diversity" was a goal (p. 60). She found that in both camps children used cultural aspects such as language or ethnic names to categorize race. She also found that children at both camps used race to determine who to include or exclude from peer group membership. Moore's research shows that children at both camps used race as an exclusionary and hierarchical tool. In a "diversity" camp setting, children of color used racial strategies to be on top. In another study, Moore (2003) found that in the predominantly white camps, whiteness was mostly invisible, and color-blind rhetoric was widely prevalent. The campers did not use racialized language and were even loathe to assign racial categories. If questioned about race, many white and black children denied that race even existed. In contrast, in predominantly black camps, whiteness was made more visible.

Perry's (2002) study in two California high schools, one predominantly white and the other predominantly children of color, suggests that school contexts affects racial ideologies. Her research shows that white students at the predominantly white school defined whiteness through images and discourses in popular culture and talked about race in terms of "color blindness" and "white as normal." However, at the predominantly minority schools where white students have direct daily associations with students of color, particularly black students, Perry found the meanings of whiteness to be more complex. Young white people articulated much clearer expressions of what whiteness means (including white privilege) and even challenged the idea of "white as normal." At the same time, these white children in children of color majority settings used more racist language than in the predominantly white school. Tracking and multiculturalism as practiced by the school reinforced racist attitudes among some children because whites were advantaged without acknowledgment of such privilege.

Recent research has focused on youth discourse about race itself. Lewis (2010) interviewed and observed 31 families with fourth-grade children who went to racially mixed schools, 21 white and 10 African American. All the children in this study, black and white, denied that race mattered when asked directly, but then went on to describe the different racial dynamics and its consequences in their schools. White children believed black youth perpetuated racial significance by their antagonistic attitudes toward whites. Black youth believed whites mostly did not antagonize others because of race, and if one occasionally did so, they had little support and limited impact. Lewis found, then, ambiguous and contradictory messages, color-blind rhetoric right alongside stories about how race matters in everyday life. Winkler (2010) interviewed 28 middle-class African-American children in Detroit, 18 of whom were girls. Here, too, the author reported that adolescents have ambivalent and conflicting racial attitudes. They grow up straddling their belief in the color-blind rhetoric of equality

with their personal experiences of "learning to be Black" (p. 437) from parents and others in their communities. Some of the adolescents in this study expressed racial pride while others thought it "racist" to acknowledge racial differences (Winkler, 2010).

Our research builds on previous work by furthering investigation about children's lived experiences in today's complicated world, racialized in many ways, but with a popular discourse built on the ideology of color blindness. We go beyond previous research by using an intersectional analysis, with particular attention on identifying patterns that exist by race, social class, and gender.

METHODS

We contribute to the research on how children make meaning about race by interrogating the question in one particular, and important, social context—an integrated school system. Orfield and Lee (2005) present strong evidence that American schools have begun to resegregate after the 1991 Dowell decision that relaxed desegregation standards in many districts, authorizing a return to neighborhood schools, even if that resulted in resegregation. The school system we study, in an urban setting in the Southeastern United States, was one of the last systems that mandated integration, although using poverty indexes to distribute children from poor neighborhoods to schools across the county after busing based on racial categories became illegal. While the city will remain anonymous here, it was widely seen—in two front page *New York Times* stories—as successful at integration (by race as well as class, given their correlation) and at beginning to reduce racial gaps in test scores. Recently, however, even here, the concept of neighborhood school is being revived and, with it, segregation. Thus, our data explore the meanings children who study in integrated settings bring to race. Does everyday life in an integrated school context lead young people toward a color-blind rhetoric or away from it?

In this article, we explore how tween-agers who interact daily at school with children from diverse racial and class backgrounds talk about what race means to them and how they explain racial patterns they notice (or not) in the world around them. We focus specifically on whether and how they use color-blind rhetoric and how they talk about race in response to questions and vignettes about their own lives and relationships with peers. We analyze whether white children and children of color tell different stories. We are attentive to issues of intersectionality, probing for any suggestive evidence that class or gender matters in the ways these children understand race. We explore whether or not the children in our sample use color-blind ideology. Our study builds on past research, as we try to further understand how color-blind ideology intersects with race and class in shaping children's narrative about race and experiences as racialized beings. The research epistemology we used assumes that children are more than just imitators; they are social actors (Corsaro, 2005; Renold 2005; Thorne 1993). As they participate in different cultural and societal activities they

learn "social tools" that they use to navigate their current lives as well as to react in future interactions (Vygotsky 1978). We are interested in their experiences, as children in the present, rather than focusing on their childhood as a precursor to a future, more adult phase of life.

The data collection was part of a graduate training project in qualitative methods. The interviewers were graduate students at North Carolina State University and the senior author. Our project began with observation of youth in Grades 6–8 who attended a middle school in a midsized southeastern city in the United States. Almost 600 children attended this school, and we chose it for its diverse student body and partnership with a university. All members of the research team spent a few hours in the school for two semesters. During the second semester of observations, the research team read widely about the process of interviewing children and met weekly to create and then pretest innovative interview techniques including active participation by the children. We used knowledge gained from the observations to create an in-depth interview schedule. We designed our interview format to measure the breadth and complexity of raced and gendered beliefs and experiences in the lives of youth. We tried to make the experience fun by enabling their active participation, asking them to map their lunchrooms, to tell stories about popular cultural icons, and to answer vignettes about bullying and gender nonconformity, to draw pictures, and to write poems. We tried to make the children feel comfortable, offering them snacks and also giving them full control of the tape recorder, so that they could turn it off if they so desired, for certain responses. In this article, we analyze the textual data from the transcriptions of the interviews about race and racialized experiences.

We began recruiting children to participate by sending letters home to parents at a magnet middle school in partnership with a university. The university Institutional Research Board required that we contact parents and receive their signed consent before approaching children. After a dismal response from our recruitment letter, we attended PTA meetings at the same school. While our recruitment of parents willing to allow their children to participate was far more successful at PTA meetings, we quickly noticed a selection bias in favor of children whose parents had the time and inclination to attend those sort of evening school events and found ourselves with an overrepresentation of middle-class white families. We then changed our recruitment strategy and recruited parents of children who were enrolled in two local after-school programs that served middle- and working-class and poor families and summer camps at the same sites. We met these parents as they came to pick their children up at the end of the workday and requested their participation in our research. Once we received signed consent from the parents, we arranged to meet the children, usually after school, on school property, or during the after-school program or during the day at summer camp, on site. We then asked the children for their "assent," including their signature, before the interview began.

Our data are based on interview transcripts from 44 children in middle school during the fall of 2003 through the summer of 2004. Table I provides the demographic description of all the children in the sample. The children we talked

Table I. Demographic Information for Middle Schoolers in the Study

Pseudonyms	Sex	Race	Grade	Class
Alison	Female	White	7	Middle class
Audrey	Female	White	6	Middle class
Brady	Male	White	6	Middle class
Candace	Female	White	6	Middle class
Cassie	Female	Black	6	Working class
Cynthia	Female	Biracial (black/white)	6	Middle class
Dante	Male	White	6	Middle class
Deb	Female	Asian-Indian	6	Middle class
Deidre	Female	Black	6	Lower middle class
Eric	Male	White	6	Upper middle class
Erica	Female	White	6	Upper middle class
Eve	Female	White	6	Upper middle class
Isabel	Female	Black	7	Upper middle class
Jack	Male	White	7	Upper middle class
Jackie	Female	Black	8	Working class
Jamie	Female	White	7	Working class
Jason	Male	White	7	Working class
Jeffery	Male	White	6	Upper middle class
Joleesa	Female	Black	8	Upper middle class
Kamry	Female	White	8	Upper middle class
Karlin	Female	White	7	Middle class
Kay	Female	Black	7	Middle class
Katie	Female	White	6	Middle class
Kerri	Female	White	8	Upper middle class
Kirsten	Female	White	8	Upper middle class
Krista	Female	White	6	Middle class
Lana	Female	Biracial (black/white)	6	Unknown
Lola	Female	Biracial (black/white)	6	Upper middle class
Lorenzo	Male	Latino	6	Working class
Mallory	Female	White	7	Middle class
Marc	Male	Black	6	Upper middle class
Marney	Female	White	6	Middle class
Marshall	Male	White	8	Upper middle class
Max	Male	White	6	Lower middle class
Micah	Male	White	6	Middle class
Molly	Female	White	6	Middle class
Mona	Female	White	6	Middle class
Nathan	Male	White	6	Middle class
Reese	Male	White	7	Upper middle class
Samantha	Female	White	6	Middle class
Samir	Male	Asian-Indian	6	Middle class
Shawn	Male	White	7	Upper middle class
Tyrone	Male	Black	6	Upper middle class
Wayne	Male	White	7	Upper middle class

to did not all attend the same school, but they were all students in the same school district, which mandated schools be integrated by social class, with children who lived in poor neighborhoods distributed throughout the system. We do not know the racial demographic characteristics of the teachers in the schools these children attended. Race and class were correlated strongly enough among

the students, however, that integration by class also, in practice, meant racial integration. We scheduled visits with the children in advance. As shown in Table II, this nonrandom sample included 17 white girls, 10 female children of color (six black, three biracial, including African-American ancestry, and one Asian-Indian), 13 white boys, and four male children of color (two black, one Latino, one Asian-Indian). While we sympathize with those who criticize the phrase "children of color" to describe the children who are biracial, African-American, Asian-Indian, or Latino in one group, we use it for lack of an alternative that covers them all (e.g., Tatum, 1997). We group them together because they share the experience of being from groups that are in the numerical minority in a white dominated society. We realize that a problem with the language is that it could be read as if the white children do not have color, when, of course, they do. We decided that "children of color" was a better alternative then "non-white," which centers whiteness as normative.

The children interviewed ranged from 11 to 14 years of age and were between sixth and eighth grade. Most of the interviewers were white women, and so we could not match the race of interviewer with the child's racial identity. Class location of the children was determined by their perception of their parents' occupation and education level. We categorized children whose parents (one or both) work in high-level professional jobs as upper middle class, with 17 of our children falling in this group, six of those from families of children of color. Children who had one parent working in professional jobs and the other either not working or working part-time or in blue collar jobs were categorized as middle class, with 15 children falling in this category, six of them from children of color families. Working class families were identified as such when one or both parents worked in jobs that did not require postsecondary school education, with seven children in these families, three white and four children of color. There were several children who did not provide enough information about their parents' work to be easily categorized. Table III shows how class locations of the children were ascertained.

A semistandardized interview schedule was created to investigate a variety of topics: family life, peer interactions, friendships, issues of gender and racial identity, dating, and future goals. Several questions led to the children discussing issues of race (questions on friendship, the cliques at school, and lunchroom activities). We asked about how they would describe their own race and about the racial composition of their friendship groups. We asked students to list the first names of the children who attended their last birthday party, and then to

Table II. Sex and Race Sample Size

Race	Boys	Girls	Total
White	13	17	30
Children of color	4	10	14
Total	17	27	44

Table III. Class Categorization

Class	Parents' Occupation[a]	n[a]
Upper middle class	When parents or one parent held high-level professional jobs, such as managers, academics, and lawyers, and had a graduate degree.	11 white childen and 6 children of color
Middle class	When both parents held semiprofessional jobs or one parent held a professional job and the other held a part-time or a blue-collar job.	11 white children and 4 children of color
Lower middle class/working class	Parent in jobs that did not require postsecondary education. Single-parent households with parents holding lower-level service jobs (secretarial, clerical jobs) or blue-collared jobs (working in factories, construction work, salon work, electrician).	3 white children and 4 children of color

[a]Data on class is available for 43 children.

assign a racial group to each one. We asked about how they would describe their own race and about the racial composition of their friendship groups.

Vignettes such as the following were used to get children to think about race and racial inequality.

> If an alien were to come into your room late one night, while you were asleep, and change your race, make you white (or black), how would your life be different? How would your friends, teachers, other children treat you? Would your future be different?

We used interviewing techniques suggested by Faux et al. (1988), Irwin and Johnson (2005), and Kortesluoma et al. (2003). For example, before starting the interview, each interviewer took some time to chat with the participant about his or her day, to make the interviewee feel comfortable. We usually met at school or on site at an after-school setting or day camp, but occasionally interviews were conducted in children's homes. In order to have children feel like partners in research, they were given control over the tape recorder and were informed that they could turn it off whenever they wanted to. Once the interview started, they tended to last approximately one hour. The interview schedule we used was a combination of loosely structured questions and interactive exercises. We used questions and vignettes to help the children focus on things that are familiar to them, to avoid the search for the "right" or "socially desirable" answers. Through this flexible and conversational interview schedule, the research team was able to get a better understanding of the children's perspectives on gender and racial interactions and the meanings that preadolescents assign to their personal relationships.

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, the authors coded them. The topical coding for this article focused on answers about race. We identified all statements throughout the interview about race, including descriptions of the race of friends, race-specific friendship networks, self-description of race, interracial dating, description of Latinos/whites and blacks, acknowledgment of cliques, and racialization of bullies and a description of life as a white/

black person. While survey researchers (Davis 1997; Krysan and Couper 2003) have found that the race of the interviewer can influence the response of the interviewee and the majority of the interviewers were white (with one Latina woman), the possibility that children of color may have felt inhibited from talking about race with interviewers remains. We, however, do not believe that this seriously biased our findings because both white and children of color in our study shared other opinions that were not socially desirable, especially their homophobia (Risman and Seale 2010). We are also reassured that interviewer's race is not the primary reason for our results because some children freely associated race with ethno-cultural markers, using negative stereotypes. Still, the possibility of interviewer race effects is a limitation in our research design.

ANALYSIS

We found that when children told us that "race matters," they provided two very different narratives for how and why: "race as culture" and "race as inequality." Among those children who framed race with cultural descriptions, we found some used ethno-cultural descriptive terms while others used overtly negative stereotypes, particularly about African Americans.

We coded every mention of race or racialized topics that occurred in the interview transcripts, with attention to variation by class, location, and gender. We found that three patterns of discourse emerged as we analyzed our transcripts. Eleven children from the entire sample insisted race did not matter at all, using entirely color-blind rhetoric. The rest of the children, the majority, admitted to noticing racial differences between children. While white children were divided on whether or not race mattered, all but one among the children of color acknowledged race mattered. But we found that among the majority who told us that race did matter, we found two very different narratives about culture and about inequality.

One question that helped to distinguish children between those who believed racial categories did not matter in their everyday lives from those that did, was the "alien" question. We asked white children what would happen if an alien entered their room at night and turned them into black children. We asked children of color the same question, but asked them what would happen if the alien turned them into a white child. Table IV shows these results.

Table IV. Alien Question[a] Distribution

Children by Race	Number Who Think Life Would *Not* Be Different	Number Who Think Life Would Be Different
White (*n* = 29)	10 (35%)	19 (65%)
Children of color (*n* = 14)	1 (7%)	13 (93%)

[a]Alien question: If an alien changes your race while you were asleep would anything change or be different about your life?

In the following analysis, we begin by analyzing the responses from the minority of children, nearly all white, who used color-blind rhetoric.

Color-blind Rhetoric

A third of the white children used a color-blind rhetoric or said that "race does not matter" to talk about race and told us that nothing would change in their lives if they woke up as a black child one morning. When asked if she would be treated differently at school if she were to become black, Candace, a middle-class white student said:

> Today, I don't think I would get treated like that. I think now nobody cares at my school if you're black or if you're Chinese or Mexican or white or Indian or whatever. If you're a new kid, they'll help you, some children will help you.

Another upper-middle-class white girl, Mona, when asked about whether teachers and students in her school would treat her differently if she were black, said:

> Um, no, because everybody at my school except for that one bad prep group, they're like a family, and then like everyone else is a big family, so you know, the black people get treated like part of the family.

Samantha, a middle-class white student, along the same lines, said, "None of my teachers really notice or care what race you are; it's just their job to teach (laughs)." She distinctly articulates the color-blind rhetoric to say that her world is not racialized.

Jeffery, an upper-middle-class seventh grader, when asked if anything would be different if he woke up as black, said:

> I'm sure people would see me different but they won't treat me different. They won't think I have a different attitude or anything, because I haven't seen any racist stuff happen at this school. But, I mean . . .
>
> Interviewer: Would you have the same friends?
>
> Jeffery: I think so.
>
> Interviewer: How would other children treat you?
>
> Jeffery: I don't know if . . . I don't think my friends are racist. . . . I'm not sure though. I'm almost positive but I'm not going to make any assumptions. I bet they'd treat me fine. I guess so, yeah, I think it would be fine.

Here, Jeffery clearly used rhetoric of racial equality when he said, "I don't think my friends are racist." He refused to acknowledge race has consequences in his social world. And yet, past research suggests that children are not, on the whole, more egalitarian than adults (Stoughton and Siverston 2005; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996). Most of the children who say that their lives would not change if their race were different insisted that racism was a thing of the past. All the

children put strong emphasis on the fact that they are not racists; neither do they know people who are racists. They portray schools as a racially neutral institution and often express surprise when asked if the teachers and students would treat them differently if they were to become black. Many students also express discomfort when talking about race. This is apparent from conversations about race that came up during the interview. Brady, a white, middle-class, seventh-grade student, said, "I don't think that's. ... Uh, J.J.'s one of my best friends and he's black. I really don't like saying that because it's judging people on their skin color, not their true inside." Katie, another middle-class sixth grader, emphasized this sentiment further and said, "We really don't care about races." Jeffery, when talking about cliques in his school, said, "I think it's mixed. You just see people around. ... I don't really notice that kind of stuff."

These children, like many other white children—and adults for that matter—found talking about race uncomfortable. These children were making an attempt to prove that they are not racists by denying race matters at all in their daily lives. Many of the children who used a color-blind rhetoric were visibly uncomfortable when asked to explain racial differences and used avoidance tactics to bypass the questions. They claimed to have friends of all races and then, when asked to name the children at their last birthday party, named only those within their own race category. They seem to believe that they were not supposed to see race in a postracial society, so when they do, they are uncomfortable with it. It seems as if the rhetoric of equality, which translates to color blindness, leads children to fear the label "racist" if they even acknowledge the existence of differences between racial groups.

Still, this group of children who insisted on color-blind rhetoric was the minority in this sample. Nearly twice as many white children believed their life would be different as a child of color than did those who denied it. Most of the white children acknowledge that race matters and chose to describe racial difference either in cultural terms or as inequalities. All but one of the children of color acknowledged that race mattered in their daily lives. Among children who talked about how race matters, the analysis becomes complex. In the sections below, we analyze the narratives *only* of those children who told us about how race mattered in their daily lives.

How Race Matters

One of the striking and counterintuitive findings that emerged from our analysis is that most of the white children who see race (19 of 29) describe it as a form of inequality and do so with a sense of injustice. In contrast to the white children, most children of color we talked to described race through a cultural lens. Only four out of 14 children of color in our sample talked about race as a system of inequality, and they were all from working-class families. We found no differences by class in the answers of our white children, but we have very few white children from working-class families.

Less surprising is the use of negative stereotypes by those who describe race as culture. Most of the white children who talked about race as culture used negative racial stereotypes, although some girls did not. Most children of color who described race as culture used ethno-cultural markers, although perhaps using whiteness as a cultural norm. A few girls of color also used negative cultural stereotypes when talking about others in their own racial category.

Figure 1 provides a schematic demonstration of the patterns that emerged in our analysis, including the numbers of children in each group. In the following sections, we present the analysis, which illustrates the two distinctive patterns by which children described how race matters: first as culture and then as inequality.

Race as Culture

While both white and the children of color described behaviors in racialized cultural terms, more children of color framed race this way. White children, particularly boys, were most likely to use negative cultural stereotypes, particularly about African-American boys. For example, Jack, a white boy from a middle-class family, when asked how black children are different than white children, said: "Well, usually, and I'm not really saying this about every black guy, but a lot of them are aggressive and just like, talk differently than I do." This rhetorical maneuver is very close to semantic moves of "I'm not a racist but" language reported by Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000). When Eric, a white boy from an upper-middle-class family, was asked what kind of different things he might do if he were black, he said:
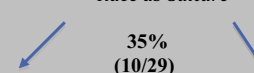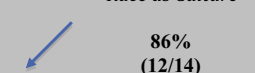
White Children		Children of Color	
Race as Culture		*Race as Culture*	
35% (10/29)		86% (12/14)	
Negative Cultural Stereotype	Descriptive Ethno-Cultural Explanation	Negative Cultural Stereotype	Descriptive Ethno-Cultural Explanation
7/9 (5 boys and 2 girls)	3/9 (2 girl and 1 boy)	3/14 (All 3 were girls)	8/14 (4 girls and 4 boys)
Race as Inequalities		*Race as Inequalities*	
48% (14/29) (6** boys and 9**girls)		29 % (4/14)** (All 4 girls)	

Fig. 1. Children's views about race by numbers and rates.
Note: Asterisks signify that a child can indicate more than one answer.

They usually like hang out and play games, not games, but I don't know what they do, some of the stuff they do but, they hang out more with more people and they don't just play with single friends usually. Some of them do, but like mostly, it's not in a bad way but black people get in gangs stuff.

Another white boy, Jason, from a working-class background, when asked about the racial composition of his friendship groups, said:

[pause] I'm not racist or anything, but most of them, most of them are white . . . . The dominantly black . . . boys are probably the gangsters. I stay away from them 'cause they tend to get into fights with everybody and I don't want to get jumped by twenty people.

He also said, when asked how he would be different if he became black, "The way that I talked, I'd be like, Yo, what up, homey G, and what not."

Max, another white lower-middle-class boy, also associated black children, especially boys, with gangs and said if he were to become black he would engage in gang activities such as "like robberies and stuff like that." These accounts reinforce negative stereotype about black masculinity with black boys being described as bullies, aggressive, having bad attitudes, and involved in gang activities. More white boys used negative cultural stereotypes than white girls did. However, fewer white children used cultural rhetoric to explain race than did children of color. The lack of self-consciousness in the reporting of these racist stereotypes supports Noguera's (2001) argument that peer groups police race boundaries and create barriers to African-American males' sense of self-worth and inclusion in school settings.

Our analysis shows that most of the white girls in the sample who talked about race in cultural terms used descriptive ethno-cultural signifiers to describe race. We call accounts of racial differences ethno-cultural if the children used ethnic and cultural signifiers such as clothing, language, food, and such cultural tropes to describe race and racial differences. For example, Audrey, a white middle-class sixth grader, said, "It seems that a lot of the time black people, especially girls dress differently . . . and have these different hairstyles." Here, Audrey seemed to associate racial difference with particular way of dressing that is also gendered. While she is not using negative stereotypes, there is a clear implicit bias in her language to normalize "whiteness." Mona, a white upper-middle-class girl, when asked if being black is different than being white, said:

It's just—it's just like they may be American, but they're also African American because their culture is from Africa, and, like, usually, I don't know, I just don't like saying black and white. It seems like, like seeing a black and white movie, just race.

This shows Mona's discomfort with talking about race. She is actively avoiding categorizing people because it may imply that she is prejudicial. Recall from above that Mona began with a color-blind rhetoric, but, during the interview, she went beyond it to use a cultural narrative. When pushed to talk about race by our questions, she veered from her postracial denial to a cultural narrative.

Another white girl, Mallory, a middle-class seventh grader, when asked how her life would change if she were to become black, said:

> Um, I'd probably know more about the other black children at school and like what they're life is like, because, well, the people I always sit with at lunch are always black 'cause well, they're just nicer than the other ones 'cause most of the white ones are like preps or people. So, I'd probably, if I had a choice between white friends or black friends, I'd probably choose the black. Depends on how they treat me, but . . .

In this quote, Mallory assigns a positive cultural stereotype to black people, saying, "they're nicer." At the same time, she views the segregated seating arrangement among white and children of color as a natural cultural phenomenon and does not question the arrangement. This was a common explanation used by both white and children of color, as we will see later, to describe their friendship groups or how it would change if their race were to change, showing an underlying assumption that people of the same race stick together. This is what Bonilla-Silva (2001) called naturalizing of racism to justify and reinforce racial segregation as "self-segregation" or "that people who look like each other want to stick together." On the other hand, Tatum (1997) has suggested that sometimes self-segregation is a mechanism by which minority group members survive settings in which they feel ill at ease.

Two white girls did use negative cultural stereotypes to explain racial difference. Kerri, a white, middle-class seventh grader, used negative stereotypes to talk about how one of the black girls "wears the tightest skirts," "never combs her hair," and puts makeup on the wrong way. She went on to say that she and her friends tried to give her a makeover so that she could start looking more like one of them. Kerri's negative comment about how black girls dress and look normalizes hegemonic white, gendered beauty standards and derides a black classmate's presentation of self.

Among the children of color, all but two talked about race from a cultural lens. Most of the children of color used descriptive ethno-cultural signifiers to describe racial difference. Cassie, a black middle-class sixth-grade student, when asked how her life would be different if she were white, said:

> I guess that would be okay. I would be able to have long hair. All the way down my back. And I wouldn't have braids in my hair. I like being an African-American. I would have to celebrate Hanukkah. And I wouldn't be able to celebrate Black History Month. I wouldn't be able to celebrate Martin Luther King.

Her answer indicates the racialized meanings of ethno-cultural signifiers such as religious celebration and secular holidays related to black history. Cassie, however, draws attention to a poignant racialized phenomenon—that, in her experience, whites do not celebrate historical events associated with black history, which is also part of the American history. Her account of what it means to be black also shows some evidence of internalization of white beauty standards in her desire to have long hair. This suggests the complexity of racial meanings to middle-class black children. Similarly Marc, an upper-middle-class black boy, answered the same question with:

> It's like, I'm a new exchange student from, maybe, I'm an exchange student from Europe. I came from France. So I'd start my whole life over. People would be like, "teach me some French," and I'd be like, "I was only there for a year and that's when I was first born."

In this account, Marc used ethnicity interchangeably with race. Isabel, a middle-class African-American girl, answered a vignette question asking if other girls would join a football team if a hypothetical girl headed it:

> If she is black, yes, . . . well, because, um, some of the black people or something like that, because most of the black people are athletic so they would be like, "oh that's hot" so they would want to join in and everything.

Here Isabel used an essentialist cultural explanation of racial difference. She said race would trump gender if the hypothetical girl football player were black, as other children would find it normal for a black to be playing football. Other children, such as Jackie, an upper-middle-class black girl; Deb, a middle-class East Indian girl; and Samir, another middle-class East Indian boy, emphasized the notion that people of any particular race like to be with people of their own race. Deb and Samir also talk about language as a signifier of race. Samir said that if he were to wake up as a white boy one morning he would "forget his language." When race is conflated with ethnic signifiers such as language or food it shrouds the race-based power inequalities.

Only three of the children of color used evaluative (negative) cultural stereotype to describe racial differences. All the three were girls. For instance, Kay, a middle-class African-American sixth grader, described black people, saying:

> We, African-Americans, do a crazy amount of stuff. Kind of wild, doesn't care what you think, maybe obnoxious, think you're all that, want to be somebody . . . no, going to be somebody . . . not want to, can be, get what you want all the time.

When asked about why she thinks it is harder for black people to get into higher paying jobs, Joleesa, an upper-middle-class black student, answered, "Because they're really outgoing like something that they say they don't care about but they say, they just, um, who they make fun of, they just make fun of people because they wanna be cool." In a different context, Lola, a biracial middle-class girl, described her hypothetical dating and attractions saying, "Yeah. I've been attracted to maybe two black boys in my lifetime. No one wants to date black boys." This is an example of what Myers (2012) described as imagining race as a binary with little variation within categories and vast differences between, as if black boys are never desirable and white boys always are.

The above accounts show that a few of the middle-class and upper-middle-class biracial and African-American girls used negative stereotypes to describe "other black people," thereby distancing themselves from the people of color whom they perceive as socially problematic. None of the working-class children of color described race in cultural terms. Nor did any of the boys of color.

Race as Inequality

Almost a third of all the children in the sample talked about race in terms of inequalities and stratification. They talked about how racism affects life

chances. Most of the white children who acknowledged that race matters explained racial differences in terms of racial inequalities. More white children talked about race as inequalities than children of color. More white girls than white boys talked about race as inequalities. Audrey, a middle-class white girl, when asked if she would be treated differently as a black child, said:

> Maybe. It seems that sometimes some white people they get mad, they get mad; sometimes they call black people names. Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes they make fun of them for the ones that were from Mexico or any other South American country. Sometimes they tell them that they have a weird accent in the class. And sometimes white people, I mean black people do that to white people also.

This quote shows that Audrey is aware that racial discrimination exists at the interactional level in different settings such as the family and the school. She also noted that discrimination can happen in an equal opportunity sort of way, with whites treating not only blacks badly, but also those from Latin or South America, and black people being equally disparaging toward whites as well. Other girls like Kristen and Kamry also had similar responses. When asked if she would be treated differently if she were to become black, Kristen, an upper-middle-class sixth grader, said, "Because people judge each other before they know them and sometimes by race." In response to the same question, Kamry, also a sixth-grade, upper-middle-class white girl, said,

> Yeah, I don't think anything would change but there are some prejudice stuff but I would try to ignore them because that's just showing that they don't like people that are different from them and that's not good.

Such accounts point that these children recognize racial discrimination in the form of racism but they interpret it to be individual actions of racial prejudice. They talk about how all races can be prejudicial and racist toward each other. While these children do not articulate a sophisticated understanding of institutional racism, which many adults do not either, they do acknowledge racism.

Fewer of the white boys talked about race in terms of inequalities than did the girls. Marshall, a middle-class white boy, told us he would be treated differently if he were not white:

> Well, I guess I'd be treated differently, um, by other people. Uh, some of the people are mean. . . . I don't know what, I, uh . . . Some . . . Why some people treat . . . like like, a lot of our grandparents and stuff are like racist . . . yeah.

White children often talked about racial inequality as a phenomenon of the past. Candace, a white middle-class sixth grader, talked about racism in the past:

> So when I came to America, everybody, you know, you know how when it was like "colored only" and "white only," that's how I was treated. Like, I was a really good cook, that's what I pretended. And then I wanted to go to the best cooking school, because I had enough money, but they wouldn't let me because I was black.

This finding is in keeping with Myers's (2005) findings that suggest that whites view racism to be a thing of the past. While the historical frame here clearly minimizes the current issues of race, Candace did recognize race as a historical

source of stratification. Alison, a middle-class, white, sixth-grade girl, put racial inequalities more in her current context and talked about institutional discrimination. She suggested that if she were to become black she would not be able to access certain resources or hold positions of power affecting her life chances.

Dante, a middle-class, white seventh-grade male student, also placed racial inequalities in the present times. When asked how his future would be affected if he were to become black, he said,

> Uh, it might be. Sometimes there are like people out there who don't really like... who are racist and they wouldn't let me get some jobs, but that's not really very fair, but that's they think of it.

Eric, an upper-middle-class student, when answering the same question, said, "I will probably not get a proper job." These quotes indicate that some white children had a sense of racial inequalities that affects people's futures and their life chances. However, the way these children understand inequalities varies. Dante, for instance, realized that race creates inequality at the institutional level and hence disadvantages blacks in the job markets. Eric's understanding of inequalities is more complex and embedded in negative stereotypes about blacks. While saying that being black would prevent him from acquiring a "proper job," he also asserted that black boys were likely to be gangsters.

In contrast to 14 white children, only four children of color talked about race as inequalities. All four who talked about race in terms of inequality or stratification belonged to lower-middle-class and working-class families. Children of color from lower-middle-class families talked about how race affects life chances. Lana, a biracial (black/white) girl from a lower-middle-class family, when asked if she would be treated differently if she were to become white, said:

> I would have different thoughts about yourself and how black people are treated and so you would think about different stuff. Um, kind of because even though blacks are equal as whites now; some black people can't get into the same jobs as higher white people. . . . You have a better chance if your black being working at McDonalds then working at a really high, expensive place.

Lana talked about race in the context of structural inequalities. She talked about how blacks were still not able to get high-paying jobs. Cynthia, another lower-middle-class, biracial (black/white), sixth-grade student, when asked if she would be treated differently if she were white, said, "I don't know. Sometimes the girls at my school, they have racism, I don't know why, white girls pick on black girls." We see here a pattern of denying racism exists and then finding examples of it in daily life. The children live with the inconsistency between ideological preference for a postracial world and material realities that include racialized experiences.

Cynthia clearly noticed racism among students in the school, a fact denied by most other white and black children. Diedre, a lower-middle-class black girl, when asked about how her friends would react if she became white, said, "I'd lose about half of my friends if I became white." When the interviewer probed if

she would lose most of her white or black friends, Diedre responded, "My black friends, they'd probably be all like, man, what happened to you?" This resonates with the way many of the other children naturalized racial segregation in the school.

Our analysis provides a suggestive indication about class differentiation in how children of color talk about race. Children of color who explained race in terms of inequalities were either from working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds. The middle- and upper-middle-class children of color used a cultural explanation of race and sometimes even negative stereotypes.

DISCUSSION

Most children in the sample said that race matters. Even when children began with a color-blind rhetoric, the various interview strategies such as use of vignettes helped them think about and articulate how they understood race to matter. We suggest that using innovative interview techniques, such as vignettes and stories about aliens, helps to move beyond the social desirability of equality rhetoric in today's world. We found, as did Lewis (2010) and Winkler (2010), that children maintain complex understandings of the importance of race even if they deny it has consequences in today's world.

In this research, we have found evidence of color-blind ideology and semantic moves used by the minority of children who insist that race does not matter in today's world. No child, perhaps no adult either, insists they cannot "see" color, but rather that they do not believe that color has any consequences in our society. But in our study, such children were in the minority, and nearly all were white. The contribution of our article is to suggest that we need new categories that add to the frame of color-blind ideology. We found that schema does not fit well with the themes emerging from conversations with children in the twenty-first century, at least children who go to integrated schools. Some of the children we interviewed were easily coded as holding color-blind rhetoric, which ignores the reality of race and racism in the social world. But most did not. We suggest that when children's discourse involves an understanding that race matters, there are distinct narratives that they use to explain racial experiences in their lives, and not all such narratives naturalize or minimize racism. Some children talked about race as a system of privileges and discrimination, using the language of inequality even if they did not fully articulate how racial prejudice might translate to structural inequality. Other children framed their understanding of race as culture but not exclusively in ways that justify inequality or devalue traditions of racial minorities. We suggest adding analytic categories to explain the narratives children use to talk about race beyond the iconic color-blind ideology. We offer the following additional analytic concepts to the literature: (1) color consciousness with an understanding of inequality and (2) color consciousness with a cultural frame, which can be racist (e.g., cultural racism) or it can be ethno-culturally descriptive. We suggest that our work builds on recent research

(Lewis, 2010; Winkler, 2010) that shows the complexity of racial understandings among today's young people.

We suggest that the children in our study, and in Lewis's (2010) work, were more aware of racial differences than has been found in previous literature because of the racially and class integrated schools they attended. Bonilla-Silva and Embrick's (2009) research on college students has suggested that white students who grew up in segregated settings have worldviews they call "white habitus," including positive views of whites and negative views of blacks. Other studies (Singleton & Asher 1979; Wells & Crain 1994) similarly suggest that integrated schools help children to develop positive attitudes across race categories and that predominantly white school settings foster color-blind rhetoric because white is seen as normal (Lewis 2003b; Perry 2002). It is possible that closer contact with children of color may lead white children to see race more often and for some of them to understand it as a system of stratification. The children in our sample have contact, at least at school, with people who are different from themselves. But most of the white children and children of color in our sample still sit in racially segregated tables in the lunchroom, and most of their friends are of the same race and gender, just as Tatum (1997) described more than a decade ago. In the integrated school setting, the children are told that "everyone is equal" and that they should talk in ways that do not reflect racial differences, thus indirectly fostering a color-blind ideology. However, the children perceive racial separation and segregation in their everyday lives. Some of them are astute enough to even see racial separation as inequality in and beyond the lunchroom.

We have a small sample, and we claim neither generalizability nor the ability to test for group differences. Yet the themes that emerged during our analysis suggest that the positionality of the children with respect not only to their racial identity but also to their gender and class experiences helps shape their understandings of whether and how race matters in their everyday lives. We find some suggestive evidence of a gender difference in the ways white children talked about race. More girls than boys talked about race as inequality. Only six out of 16 boys described race in terms of inequalities. More white boys than girls attached negative cultural stereotypes to children of color, particularly to blacks. (Risman and Seale 2010) found, in these same data, that boys are quite vicious in how they police other boys into gender normativity. Similarly, these data suggest that the peer policing written about by Noguera (2001) may also be a male homosocial social problem. White boys most often call up racist stereotypes to describe racial differences between their minority peers.

Only girls of color, not boys, used negative racial stereotypes about others in their own racial group. Given the small numbers in the sample, it is difficult to know if this pattern reflects any substantive difference. The very suggestive evidence, however, it is worth noting that these three middle-class girls, one biracial (appearing to be mixed race, African American and white) and two African American girls attempted to distance themselves from other presumably not middle-class black people.

Our data also suggest that future research should focus more on whether class has an effect on how children of color talk about race. Almost all the children of color from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds in our small sample offered cultural explanations of race, sometimes even providing negative stereotypes of other children of color. This supports the research by Winkler (2010) that finds that African-American middle-class children are taught the rhetoric of color blindness but then also "learn to be black" and so perhaps come to think of racial socialization as coming into a culture. Other researchers have found that middle-class children of color sometimes make a conscious effort to distance themselves from the lower class, employing negative stereotypes (Dyson 2005; Frazier 1957; Hyra 2006; Patillo-Mccoy, 2000). For example, Dyson found that the members of the black middle class distance themselves from the black lower class by designating them as having "ghetto culture." The middle-class and upper-middle-class children of color in our sample also seem to use this strategy.

The children of color who talked about race as embedded in a system of inequality in our study were from lower-middle-class and working-class backgrounds. It appears that children disadvantaged by both race and class face so many hurdles that they come to understand the disadvantage in at least somewhat structural terms: the "system" is not in their favor.

Our study also suggests that there may be gender differences in the way children talk about and understand race. White boys used negative cultural stereotypes to explain the racial differences more than white girls did. White girls were more likely to talk about racial inequality. This is consistent with findings from past research on gender among middle school children where researchers found that girls are less homophobic than boys and that boys police each other around gender normativity more than do girls (Risman 1998). Perhaps white boys police racial boundaries more than do white girls.

CONCLUSION

We suggest a need for a comparative study on the effect of racially integrative and racially segregated setting on color-blind rhetoric. Our study also indicates that we need more research on how understandings of racial meanings are influenced by class and gender. We suggest that using intersectionality as an analytic tool when exploring how children talk about race may yield deeper insights about how children perceive race in the contemporary society.

While color-blind rhetoric that hides inequality may be common among white children today, it is perhaps less likely for those who grow up attending integrated schools. We therefore suggest that if we desire a society where children are more aware of and sensitive to racial inequality, we should create more integrated public spaces. In addition, parents and teachers should pay attention to the possibility of middle-class children of color internalizing negative stereotypes about underclass children of their own race.

Given that two respondents, one white and the other black, in the study said, "Though blacks are equal as whites now; some black people can't get into the same jobs as higher white people because there's never been a black president and people have tried to run" and "If I wanted to run for president. Most likely that's not going to happen. You don't see any black people being the president," it would be useful to study if children's ideas are changing as quickly as the demographic characteristics of our leaders under the Obama administration.

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