

That Sounds About White: Parental Racial Socialization and Implications for White Youth

Identity Development

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Dedication

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Abstract

Though parental racial socialization in the United States has been investigated since the 1970s, the literature almost exclusively focuses on its execution within minority families. The study at hand addresses this gap and ascertains how parental racial socialization works in White families. It unravels this question qualitatively, via semi-structured interviews with twenty students at a private university in the Southeast. The intention behind approaching college students was to gain a better sense of the kinds of racial behaviors and attitudes that White children internalize. In addition, it was hoped that interviewing college students about their parental racial socialization would provide insight into the impact that their parents have on their offsprings' racial identities into adulthood. The findings of this paper were noteworthy, as they shed light onto how members of the dominant racial group in the twenty-first century learn to conceive of themselves and, by extension, racial others. Consistent with prior work on this topic, the main finding was that the parents of those surveyed neglected to converse with their kids about race and, for the most part, attempted to raise them "color-blind." However, as I show, parents still passed on ideas about race, but through implicit means. A novel insight that this study provides is that White children in the twenty-first century may socialize their own parents about race once they mature and develop their own political opinions.

Keywords: Parental racial socialization; Whiteness; color-blind racism; parenting; racial attitudes

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I. Introduction

I was ten when I found out I was Black. It happened by mere coincidence. I had been asking my White adoptive mother for weeks for more information about my adoption and biological parents, and one afternoon she relented. She summoned me into her bedroom closet and pulled out from the safe a thick packet with my name handwritten on it. A whirlwind of emotions overtook my body as she handed me this hefty collection of files and family secrets. On one hand, I was eager to finally know the answers to the questions that I had been asking since she told me I was adopted five years prior. But on the other, I was terrified at the prospect of something being in those records that I could not handle.

I carefully unsealed the packet and removed from it the first file—my birth certificate. My eyes danced around the page before settling on the race and ethnicity section, of all things. As expected, the “White” box was checked. But what was equally unexpected was the box right above it, “Black,” being checked as well. Utter chaos erupted in my brain. Everything I thought I had known about myself—my whole identity that I had molded for the past decade—crumbled in a tenth of a second. But all I could say in the moment to my mom, who was quietly observing me behind her blond bangs, was “You mean to tell me that I’m *Black*?!”

. . .

I often relay this anecdote to my friends as an *oh my gosh, you will never guess what crazy thing happened in my childhood* kind of story, but I believe that it can serve a purpose in a scholastic context. The reason why it took me having to be told that I was half Black was that my parents never discussed race with me. To them, the color of my skin was inconsequential so far

as I grew up to be a good person. Thus, when my bubble of racial ignorance burst and I had to mentally transition from White to Black overnight, I had to figure out how to racially re-socialize myself so that I could conform to the behavioral expectations others had of me based on my appearance. And this involved putting race at the forefront of my mind for the first time.

While the circumstances around my story are unique, the fact that my parents neglected to talk with me about race is not. Most White parents fail to discuss race with their children (Freeman, Martinez, and Raval 2022; Zucker and Patterson 2018) and, like mine, lead them to think that ignoring race is optimal for living in a post-Civil Rights America (Freeman et al. 2022; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Hagerman 2014). It is the absence of race talk in White families that has driven me to explore the following questions in the present study: how do White American parents in the twenty-first century racially socialize their children? And how influential are the racial ideologies that White parents pass on to how their offspring interact with the world and others into adulthood? The answers are crucial, as they provide insight into not only how the dominant group in the United States develops its sense of collective identity, but how that may be shifting in the digital era. As a preliminary attempt at unearthing them, I interviewed White-identified college students about conversations they had with their parents about race as children. In this way, I will elucidate how White parents go on to mold their progeny's relationships with in-group and out-group members.

II. Literature Review

Understanding Whiteness

The United States Census Bureau defines a White person as anyone

“having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report responses such as German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, and Egyptian. The category also includes

groups such as Polish, French, Iranian, Slavic, Cajun, Chaldean, etc.” (United States Census Bureau 2020).

While the government categorizes the above groups as White, the subgroup of Whites that I focused on was Americans with European ancestry. Middle Easterners and North Africans are legally classified as White, but I hesitated to conflate them with American descendants of Europeans, given their exclusion from definitions of Whiteness in academic circles (Rothenberg 2016; McDermott and Samson 2005) and the Islamophobia to which they have been subjected following 9/11 (Qutami 2020). Thus, moving forward, my usage of “White” in this text will exclusively refer to Euro-Americans.

A group under the umbrella of Whiteness that I did not exclude from consideration but made extra qualifications around was Whites with a light-skinned or White Hispanic parent. Hispanics also belong to a stigmatized collectivity (Canizales and Vallejo 2021; Brown, Jones, and Becker 2018; Mize 2013) and therefore the children they produce with a non-Hispanic White partner can have an alternative experience of Whiteness to children with two non-Hispanic White parents. This was evident with Regina, one of my interviewees. She vividly recalled her high school friends making derogatory claims about Mexicans in front of her—forgetting she was half Mexican until it was too late. However, Hispanic is an ethnicity and there is a history in the United States of European ethnic groups who were originally precluded from Whiteness (Rothenberg 2016; Sacks 1994) ultimately obtaining that status. In other words, the fact that White Hispanics do not yet have the full privileges of Whiteness does not mean that they are not White, but rather that they—like the Irish, Italians, and Greeks—are in the process of becoming.

Whiteness in the United States has intrigued scholars especially in the last three decades, leading to the emergence of Whiteness Studies: an interdisciplinary, mainly qualitative field that critically examines Whiteness as a social position and identity (McDermott and Ferguson 2022).

Through investigating Whiteness, scholars have identified core themes that are central to how it functions in the twenty-first century; the first is “White” as the default race (McDermott and Ferguson 2022; Moffitt and Rogers 2022; Rothenberg 2016; DiAngelo 2016; McDermott and Samson 2005). Researchers have consistently found that Whites do not tend to think of themselves in terms of race (Freeman et al 2022; McDermott and Ferguson 2022; McDermott and Samson 2005) and insist that race has no impact on their lives (Bonilla-Silva 2018). They, rather, regard race as something that people of color have and racism, thus, as a force that disadvantages people of color rather than advantages them on the flip side (DiAngelo 2011; Lewis 2004; McIntosh 1988). Scholar George Lipsitz has maintained that Whiteness is not about the possession of fair skin, but is instead a possessive investment. A White person belongs to a genealogy of people that amassed wealth via slavery, genocide, and colonialism and have gatekept it through redlining, social security, voting restrictions, and citizenship clauses (Lipsitz 1995). However, he held that Whiteness’s elusiveness as the “unmarked category against which difference is constructed” makes it so that it “never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (Lipsitz 1995: 369).

Along with Whiteness being the default, scholars have documented that some Whites have grown a distaste for Whiteness because it makes them “devoid of culture” (McDermott and Ferguson 2022). In fact, some studies have noted an increase in Whites attempting to claim non-White ancestry to seem exotic (Roth and Ivemark 2018). Part of this concept of White *un-exceptionalism* is rooted in the existence of the White habitus, or what sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes in *Racism Without Racists* (2018) as the “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (121). This habitus is the result of Whites’

segregation in upper class, suburban communities (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Rothenberg 2016), which conditions them to view their perspectives and ways of life as universal (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006).

Another tenet of Whiteness that scholars have identified is color-blindness.

Color-blindness can be thought of as Whites' insistence upon ignoring race and racial differences (McDermott and Ferguson 2022; Bonilla-Silva 2018) and assertions that American society and institutions should do the same (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Despite sounding akin to the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018) argues that color-blindness is central to the maintenance of White supremacy, as it facilitates Whites' ability to defend the racial status quo while simultaneously promoting equality and meritocracy. Other academics concur with this claim, noting that color-blindness enables Whites to eschew their membership to a privileged collective (McDermott and Ferguson 2022; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Jayakumar and Adamian 2017; McDermott and Samson 2005; Lewis 2004; McIntosh 1988), frame the hardships people of color face as consequences of their own failures (Moffitt and Rogers 2022; Bonilla-Silva 2018), and deny racism's continued prevalence in American life (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Color-blindness allows Whites to remain racially ignorant and to build an intolerance to situations of racial duress, a state that multicultural educator Robin DiAngelo calls "White fragility" (DiAngelo 2011).

In keeping with the theme of Whites being made to feel racially uncomfortable, a third tenet of Whiteness that scholars have identified is vulnerability. A growing number of Whites have expressed being hyper vigilant about what they say to avoid being canceled (Bouvier and Machin 2023; McDermott and Ferguson 2022). This feeling of demonization, coupled with economic shifts that have left Americans in financial insecurity (Reyna et al. 2022), and

affirmative action policies (Bonilla-Silva 2018) have fostered what Reyna et al. (2022) calls “racial nostalgia.” This collective nostalgia has inspired incensed Whites to initiate nationalist movements (McDermott and Ferguson 2022; Reyna et al. 2022; McDermott and Samson 2005) to fight for a return to the “good old days,” when the American Dream sported a “Whites only” sign and was not conditional upon political correctness. This nostalgia is what Donald Trump capitalized on in his “Make America Great Again” campaign for the 2016 presidential election.

Parental Racial Socialization

Socialization refers to “a particular part of learning” where actors glean “the requisite orientations for satisfactory functioning in a role” (Parsons 1951: 211). It is the process that individuals in a society undergo to learn how to become functional members. Sociologists have distinguished five major agents: parents, peers, schools, religion, and the media. All five play a role in shaping each person’s racial dispositions, but parents are the focal point in this study.

Minority Parental Racial Socialization

Umaña-Taylor and Hill (2020) defined parental racial socialization as “a multifaceted construct that captures how families socialize youth regarding the values, traditions, and practices associated with their ethnic-racial group; it also includes families' efforts to teach youth about potential ethnicity-and race-based threats and how to cope with these experiences” (245). The vast majority of the literature since the 1980s in the United States has aimed to understand how parental racial socialization functions in minority households—mainly Black ones (Nieri, Montoya, and Carlos 2023; Galán et al. 2022; Juang et al. 2018; Zucker and Patterson 2018; Hughes et al 2006). The literature review compiled by Hughes et al. (2006) contributed a four-part framework for African American parental racial socialization that has influenced how scholars have studied it ever since (Kim et al. 2023; Scott and Varner 2023; Anderson et al.

2022; Atkin and Yoo 2021; Williams and Banerjee 2021; Umaña-Taylor 2020; Kurtz-Costes et al. 2019; Ayón 2018; Juang et al. 2018; Peck et al. 2014; Thomas and Blackmon 2014).

This leading framework consists of racial pride socialization,¹ preparation for bias,² promotion of mistrust,³ and egalitarianism⁴ (Hughes et al. 2006). Most of the studies that have applied it in their analyses of Black families have focused on the impacts of its first two tenets on Black youth identity development. There is a consensus that, in addition to being the most employed strategy (Kurtz-Costes et al. 2019; Hughes et al. 2006), racial pride socialization has the most positive outcomes for Black youth. High cognitive competence (Umaña-Taylor 2020; Kurtz-Costes et al. 2019), psychosocial adjustment (Umaña-Taylor 2020; Kurtz-Costes et al. 2019), and academic performance (Umaña-Taylor 2020) are just a few of its cited benefits. Findings for preparation for bias have been mixed: researchers have seen negative (Kurtz-Costes et al. 2019), positive (Kurtz-Costes et al. 2019), and negative and positive (Umaña-Taylor 2020) effects. What they have consistently observed, though, is that African American parents send more messages to their children overall in comparison to parents of other races (Kurtz-Costes et al. 2019; Thomas and Blackmon 2014; Hughes et al. 2006).

¹ Practices that teach children about significant artifacts in their culture and promote pride in their heritage.

² Efforts—both proactive and retroactive—to make children aware of the potential prejudice they might face because of their racial and/or ethnic identity.

³ Emphasis upon being wary of other racial groups—particularly Whites.

⁴ Espousal of color-blind values and virtues regarding all races being equal.

Much of the scholarship on other minority groups (mainly Latinos and Asians) has found that parents are more likely to socialize their kids *ethnically*⁵ rather than racially (Hughes et al. 2006). It has been tracked across the board that Latino and Asian first-generation parents prioritize *cultural* pride socialization with their children (Juang et al. 2018) to teach them about their nationality's traditions (Ayón 2018), food (Ayón 2018; Juang et al. 2018), and language (Kim et al. 2023; Ayón 2018). This practice, like for African Americans, has been found to positively aid identity development among second-generation Latinos and Asian Americans, with perks such as increased ethnic identity exploration and pride (Kim et al. 2023; Atkin and Yoo 2021; Ayón 2018; Umaña-Taylor and Guimond 2010), better academic outcomes (Kim et al. 2023), and a lower propensity to engage in risky behavior (Ayón 2018).

Researchers who have applied Hughes et al (2006)'s model to Latino and Asian families have noted that first-generation parents are more likely to promote egalitarianism to facilitate their children's assimilation (Ahn et al. 2022; Williams and Banerjee 2021), whereas second-generation parents are more likely to send their children preparation for bias messages due to the racism they confronted in their youth (Juang et al. 2018).

White Parental Racial Socialization

Unlike their counterparts of color, White families have been overlooked in the racial socialization literature. This oversight has prompted academics to call for attention to this area so more can be discovered about how they transmit racial attitudes (Nieri et al. 2023; Galán et al. 2022; Abaied and Perry 2021; Bigler et al. 2021; Zucker and Patterson 2018). What is known, which has principally been extracted from interviews of parents with children who are middle

⁵ Race, as illuminated by Howard Winant, is a social construct based on one's skin tone and corporeal dimensions (Winant 2015). The U.S. census currently recognizes five racial categories: White, Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (United States Census Bureau 2022). Ethnicity is one's cultural heritage. In the United States context, this cultural heritage refers to a place of origin outside of the country. Because race and ethnicity refer to different things, it is possible for there to be a group of people who share the same ethnicity but not the same race. Hispanics are a great example.

school-age or younger, is that White parents do not directly communicate about race (Freeman et al. 2022; Galán et al. 2022; Bigler et al. 2021).

There are many reasons why White parents fail to introduce their children to racial topics. They range from the opinion that race is irrelevant (Abaied and Perry 2021; Zucker and Patterson 2018; Hagerman 2014), to the fear that making their children aware of systemic racism will disrupt their innocence (Nieri et al. 2023; Abaied and Perry 2021), to the belief that their kids are too young to comprehend racism's complexities (Nieri et al. 2023; Abaied and Perry 2021), to the hope that schools will shoulder the responsibility of those uncomfortable dialogues (Freeman et al. 2022). A number of studies have tracked that some White parents send their kids to diverse schools under the premise that the increased interracial contact will relieve them of having to confer about racism at home (Freeman et al. 2022; Hagerman 2014).

Researchers have maintained that the lack of discussion of race does not translate to a lack of racial socialization (Abaied and Perry 2021). Newer material is beginning to parse out how White parents transmit racial attitudes in ways that are not explicit— i.e., through implicit socialization (Nieri et al. 2023; Yasui 2015). They maintain that Whites' decisions to insulate their families within a White habitus (Bonilla-Silva 2018) or suburban “Whitetopia” (Rothenberg 2016) are a major avenue for implicit socialization in that they subconsciously train children to see Whiteness as normative (Nieri et al. 2023; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Yasui 2015).

When most White parents do broach the subject of race with their kids, though, it has been recorded that they do so in a color-blind fashion (Freeman et al. 2022; Galán et al. 2022; Abaied and Perry 2021; Hagerman 2014), stressing that racial differences do not matter (Freeman et al. 2022; Hagerman 2014) and that drawing attention to them is, in fact, racist (Freeman et al. 2022; Zucker and Patterson 2018). White children are advised that being a good

person (Nieri et al. 2023; Hagerman 2014) and treating everyone the same (Nieri et al. 2023) are all that matters. Though this emphasis on not giving import to race sounds benign on the surface, researchers suggest that color-blind racial socialization has deleterious effects for White children (Abaied and Perry 2021; Bigler et al. 2021), stunting their ability to recognize racial discrimination (Freeman et al. 2022) and ingraining within them racial bias (Freeman et al. 2022).

Overall, the existing research on Whiteness and parental racial socialization has signified that, unlike people of color, Whites fail to discuss race and racism with their children and actively encourage them to develop a color-blind outlook. What I seek to contribute to this growing body of research is an understanding of the mechanisms involved in White parental racial socialization, as well as its effects on White youths' social behaviors into adulthood.

III. Data and Methods

Description of Participants

The population of interest for this study was White-identified American college students who were raised by White-identified American parents. Kids, rather than parents, were interviewed because research has hinted that parents' point of view of what they say about race may not correspond with what their kids internalize (Scott and Varner 2023). This may be exacerbated with Whites since much of their communication about race is implicit.

College students were selected over a different age group because college is a pivotal period in a young person's life. In addition to accelerating one's transition into adulthood, as it requires students to live on their own for the first time, higher education liberalizes political and social attitudes (Jung and Gil 2019; Golebiowska 1995) by allowing students to have daily contact with people from all walks of life (Bowman and Denson 2012). For many White pupils,

this means that college is their first foray outside of the White habitus (Bowman 2013). College students are the best positioned of any age range to critically reflect on how their parents talked to them about race when they were young because they have been given the opportunity to develop their own individual identities and values. Yet, as they are not fully supporting themselves financially, they are in the unique position of asserting their independence while still being under their parents' sphere of influence.

The saturation point for qualitative research is normally between 17 and 25 interviews (InterQResearch 2022; Saunders et al. 2017), so I sought a sample of twenty participants to reach this threshold. The students surveyed hailed from a private university in the Southeastern United States with such a stellar academic program that it attracts students from across the country and with a wide spectrum of scholastic interests. However, they lacked diversity on account of gender and class year, with sixteen identifying as female and eighteen being juniors or seniors. Participant demographic information can be found in Table 1 and Appendix F.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Region	Year
Alex	Woman	West	Freshman
Cady	Woman	Midwest	Senior
Chandler	Man	Southeast	Junior
Claire	Woman	Mid Atlantic	Senior
Elle	Woman	West	Freshman
Gretchen	Woman	Southeast	Junior
Haley	Woman	West	Junior
Hannah	Woman	Southeast	Junior
Joey	Man	Midwest	Senior
Karen	Woman	Midwest	Senior
Mitchie	Woman	Midwest	Senior
Monica	Woman	Northeast	Senior
Peter	Man	Mid Atlantic	Junior

Phoebe	Woman	West	Senior
Rachel	Woman	Midwest	Junior
Regina	Woman	Midwest	Senior
Ross	Man	Southeast	Senior
Serena	Woman	Mid Atlantic	Senior
Sharpay	Woman	Mid Atlantic	Senior
Tess	Woman	Midwest	Junior

Recruitment Strategies

Upon obtaining IRB approval (protocol #2024-0212), I recruited participants with a combination of methods. I first sent out a solicitation email (Appendix B) via listservs provided to me by the sociology department. I then advertised my study on Instagram and GroupMe, as everyone at this university utilizes both to stay updated about happenings on campus. Third, I posted flyers (Appendix C) in popular locations around the school, like the student center, the dining hall, the library, frequented walkways, and coffee shops. I also distributed flyers in academic and residential buildings to achieve a broad representation of class years and academic interests.

Procedures and Protocols

All prospective participants filled out a Qualtrics Survey (Appendix D) to indicate their desire to be interviewed. The first question asked whether they had read the informed consent sent form attached in the listserv emails, and supplied a link to it if they had not (Appendix A). The seventh question asked whether they would like to participate in the research, and I followed up with the respondents who answered “yes” with a link to sign up for a Zoom interview via Calendly. I emailed those who did not immediately sign up for an interview two reminders, after which their candidacy was forfeited. Out of the twenty-five students that completed the survey, five did not sign up for the interview, yielding a retention rate of 80%.

Upon logging onto the Zoom calls, I engaged each participant in a few minutes of small talk. I asked them how their days were going, if they had any weekend plans, and if they could tell me their preferred names, pronouns, hometowns, majors, and a fun fact. I thought that beginning this way would ease them into the interviews and aid in establishing trust. I gave them a few minutes to read through the informed consent form again and field questions before I obtained their verbal consent to be interviewed and recorded. A typical concern that was voiced was whether their real names would appear in the report, to which I assured them that I would employ a pseudonym if I quoted them directly. Each interview was an hour-long, and each participant was compensated with a twenty dollar Amazon e-gift card upon completion. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix E) were the optimal approach, as they permitted the participants to contribute experiences that I did not explicitly ask about.

Benefits of Zoom Interviews

Zoom was the virtual platform of choice for the interviews because all students at the university have Zoom accounts through the institution. Though the literature on Zoom's efficacy in qualitative research is still in its infancy, it has seen substantial growth because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Joffe 2022; Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2020), as lockdowns rendered in-person data collection impossible. Some researchers, such as Keen et al. (2022), argue that Zoom should still have a place in qualitative research now that COVID-era restrictions have dissipated.

Existing scholarship suggests that Zoom interviews offer several benefits for both researchers and participants that in person ones do not. For researchers, Zoom's advanced software permits the host of a meeting to record and transcribe the interviews with ease (Keen et al. 2022). This feature enhances the efficiency of the interview process and frees up more time to

code and analyze data. An additional security asset is that Zoom recordings are automatically encrypted to prevent hackers from accessing them (Lobe et al. 2020; Archibald et al. 2019).

For participants, one of Zoom's advantages is that it accommodates busy lifestyles (Keen et al. 2022; Archibald et al. 2019). This factor was important to me, as college students have a myriad of commitments, and I did not want having to account for travel time to be an obstacle to participation. A related advantage that Keen et al. (2022) underscored is that Zoom can help participants be more at ease during interviews because they can join from where they are most relaxed. They also have the option of turning their cameras off or even logging off if they feel awkward (Keen et al. 2022). Keeping my participants comfortable was a priority since the nature of the interviews was already overwhelming.

Quality Control

Studies have had mixed findings as to whether virtual interviews hinder rapport between researchers and participants (Keen et al. 2022; Archibald et al. 2019). Knowing this, I followed Keen's advice and adopted warm on-camera body language and thanked participants for their time. As I described earlier, I also took the first few minutes of the interviews to ask the participants about themselves so they could understand that I cared about them as people. This extra step was beneficial in helping them feel comfortable and safe with me.

Another variable that I foresaw as potentially influencing the data's quality was my background. I was aware that my positionality as a person of color could make the participants nervous to be open with me, for fear that I might judge them or their parents. To ensure that this would not be the case, I emphasized that I knew where they were coming from because I also had White parents.

The last factor that could have influenced data quality had to do with the technological issues attached to virtual platforms. Archibald et al. (2019) cautioned that “dropped calls and pauses, poor audio or video quality, and the inability to read nonverbal cues as a result of inconsistent and delayed connectivity” (2) could hinder researchers from obtaining high quality data. To mitigate these problems, I made participants confirm in the Qualtrics survey that they had access to a space with a strong Wi-Fi connection and an electronic device with a quality microphone and camera. There were no technological or connectivity complications as a result.

Analytic Approach

I transcribed all twenty interviews with Otter.ai, a software that uses artificial intelligence to produce speech-to-text transcriptions. Once they were completed, I compiled the transcripts into a Word document, color-coded each one according to the patterns I identified while conducting the interviews, and pasted salient quotes into a separate document. There were more than twelve themes overall, but I eliminated many after realizing that they could be absorbed into others. This consolidation process yielded six major themes, all of which I denote in the proceeding discussion section with a bolded italics font.

IV. Discussion

Overview

The first four sections of this discussion address the primary research question of how White American parents in the twenty-first century racially socialize their children and concentrate on socialization between infancy and middle school. The beginning section is an analysis of participants’ recollections of conversations they had with their parents about race. The second covers the explicit racial socialization approaches that the parents of the sample employed. The third analyzes how parents implicitly instructed their kids about race. The fourth details the

effects that the explicit and implicit racial socialization methods had on participants' concepts of race and interpersonal relationships. The last two sections tackle the secondary research question of how influential the racial ideologies that White parents pass on are to their offspring into adulthood. The fifth deals with shifts in racial beliefs in high school. The final section examines how participants, upon becoming politically aware, attempted to educate their parents about race.

Explicit Lessons about Race and Racism

All participants insisted that race and racism seldom came up in their households, replicating the findings of Freeman et al. (2022), Galán et al. (2022), and Bigler et al. (2021) that White parents rarely communicate with their children about race. Claire, a senior from the Midwest, and Chandler, a junior from the Mid Atlantic, explained it best.

Claire:

Um, so I don't know though that I have explicit memories of race being specifically talked about. Like, I don't know that my parents ever taught me the history of racial segregation in the United States or talked about why people of different races have different experiences of life, or have different experiences living in the United States.

Chandler:

I know it sticks out to me that we talked about gender and sexual identity. But I don't think race was really a conversation that we had . . . That wasn't something we really thought of too much. I guess we were in a very White community, so it just didn't come up as much.

Claire posited that her parents neither informed her about the United States's racial history nor its current battles with racism. Chandler parroted this but acknowledged that his parents informed him about other axes of social domination, explaining that gender and sexuality were relevant to his family and community, whereas race was not. His claim resonates with the revelations of Freeman et al (2022), McDermott and Ferguson (2022), and McDermott and Samson (2005) that White people consider others raced and themselves neutral and "unraced." Monica, a senior from the Northeast, reinforces this point:

I can't think of an incident where it was something of conversation. And again, I think that's inherently coming from a side of privilege because it wasn't something that was, y'know, central to our identity and ingrained in us. We didn't really think about it.

When taken in conjunction with Chandler's recollection of discussing gender and sexuality, Monica's provocation confirms Cathy Cohen's contention that singularly-marginalized individuals "consistently activate only one characteristic of their identity . . . to organize their politics" and "rejec[t] any recognition of the multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances" (Cohen 1997: 440). In the context of parent socialization, this means that White parents typically make their children aware of systems of oppression—like gender, sexuality, and class—that *adversely* affect White people. The selective attention to other social systems, thus, leaves their effects hyper visible and hurtful, as they are not confounded by racism. This phenomenon was reflected in the sample, as most participants were outspoken about identity categories for which they have been discriminated (such as for being Jewish, a woman, gay, and/or low income) but not the identity category in which they were privileged: race.

The few occasions where students' parents intentionally brought race up during their childhoods were driven by two principal motivations. The first was to correct racist behavior.

Peter, a junior from the Northeast, gave an example from when he was six:

My dad is an educator and so he was very big on me doing math problems and reading and whatnot and getting ahead on that. And I remember one day we were reading a book called *Who Am I?* You flip the pages and each one has a different identity, and it talked about it briefly in six year-old language. And then I remember my dad flipped the page and it said, "I am Muslim." And I looked at my dad and I said, "Those are the people who did 9/11. They're bad," because I was six years-old, and that was what I had learned. What I understood about it. And my dad was very good about it. He was like, "Whoa, that's not it. Islam is a whole religion." And we got into it, and he talked about it with me, which was good. That's the only time I can remember distinctly having a conversation with my parents about race though growing up.

Peter's dad swiftly scolded his son for making Islamophobic generalizations but neglected to educate him about the United States' surveillance of Muslims following 9/11 or to

interrogate him about where he learned such an idea in the first place. His incomplete reproach left the door open for Peter to continue to make insensitive remarks out of ignorance.

The other motivation was to deliver a moral or educational lesson. Tess, a junior from the Midwest, provided an account of her mom sharing about dating a Black guy in high school:

I remember her telling me that she dated a Black guy when she was in ninth grade and she thinks she kind of did it just out of like rebuttal, because she was just so fed up with everyone being so caught in their cookie cutter box of y'know, like White suburban rich . . . And she told me that her parents didn't really approve of him because he was Black. And . . . there was a Black guy in her grade who was adopted by a White family and went to [] his whole life . . . and she said that many of her friends' parents would not allow her friends to date him simply because he was Black, even though he was raised by a rich White family and everything. Like even that aside, they were still like, "He's not White. I don't want you to date him." I remember she wouldn't tell me which one of her friend's parents wouldn't let her because I know all of them.

Tess's mom's relationship—and the recounting of it—are intriguing. The first reason is that Tess initially denied that her parents had talked to her about race when she was younger, yet she produced this story—involving the contentious matter of interracial pairings Black men and White women—several minutes later. Another salient reason was Tess's mom's justification for dating a Black boy: to rebel against the expectations of White suburbia. She entertained the guy because he was a means to eschew the constraints imposed by her parents and the larger White habitus. The next reason was the racism within her residential community. Tess's mom disagreed with her friends' parents' racial attitudes but still protected their identities. Though she was trying to teach Tess about how racist people were back in her day, she actually showed her to be complicit in racist behavior.

Framing of Parental Socialization Approach

Most of the participants, following Freeman et al. (2022), Galán et al. (2022), Abaied and Perry (2021), and Hagerman (2014) characterized their parents' approaches to racial socialization as

color-blind. See the below responses from Rachel and Gretchen, two juniors from the Midwest and Southeast respectively.

Rachel:

Yeah, I would say they also probably adopted the color-blind—or what they thought was color-blind approach and only really talked about it when I brought it up, or like when I called them out for like, “Okay, well, why did you just explicitly call out that person's race when you're telling a story?” or something like that. Yeah, I think that and also anytime I would bring it up, like, “Hey, like what you said right there was just really racist,” they'd be like, “Oh, well, I have this Black person at work that I'm really close to, so I can't be racist.” They're like, “I don't see color. I wouldn't treat anyone differently. I treat everyone the same” kind of vibe.

Gretchen:

Yeah, my mom definitely adopted like a “Oh, I don't see race. I don't see them as different kind” of approach, but she would say, “I don't see them as different.” So that was automatically othering. Which was very confusing for me because I was like, “Well, if they're not different, then why are ‘they’ them? And us ‘us?’” But my dad—I think my dad—was always a lot more liberal than my mom. He grew up in a much more diverse household and had much different experiences than my mom. So I think he was a lot more open about talking about race, and I do wonder sometimes if he had been home more often or had a bigger hand in raising me when I was younger, if I would have had a different experience.

What is significant in these responses is that both students saw through the smokescreen.

Rachel, for instance, was tuned into how her parents were so adamant about being color-blind, yet continuously derided people of color. Whenever she would label their statements as racist, her parents disagreed because they had a Black friend at work. The irony in this strategic employment of the “I am color-blind because I have a Black friend” argument is that it required her parents to own up to seeing race, since there would be no way to tell that their “friend” was Black otherwise.

Gretchen pointed out a similar inconsistency in her mother's beliefs. She deemed her mother's stance of “I don't see them as different” hypocritical because delineating people of color as “them” inherently implies that she considered them separate. It is evident in Gretchen's

mom's assertions of color-blindness that she was blind to her own racism and how racism as an institution differentially structures people's life chances. Gretchen also wondered about how different her socialization would have been had her dad been home when she was younger. This pondering is not insignificant in that it highlights how the molding of a child's view of race is a profoundly gendered experience. Women are still the primary childrearsers in most American households (Milkie, Raley, and Bianchi 2009), which means that they, naturally, play a predominant role in what their children come to believe.

Implicit Lessons About Race

Though the participants affirmed their parents taught them little about race, it was later revealed that their upbringings were not as color-blind as they alleged. In fact, their parents passed on White supremacist ideologies, but so implicitly that the participants often were not aware of them until I prompted them to reflect in their interviews. Two of the biggest avenues of implicit racial socialization were parents' negative discussion of other racial groups and insulation of their kids in a White habitus.

Parental Discourse about People of Color

African Americans

The primary racial group that parents talked about were African Americans. Though parents insisted on being color-blind and on treating all races equally, the vast majority of their rhetoric about African Americans was deprecatory—relying on stereotypes of them as thugs, non-viable romantic partners, and welfare queens. With respect to the first, several parents employed the thug trope in instances where either they or their children had to interact with Black people.

Claire's anecdote about her dad's refusal to ride the New York City subways exemplified this:

My dad is definitely racist. Like not in a way where he just like randomly spouts like . . . White supremacist ideology or whatever but a lot of times he'll watch Fox News and will

believe this culture war shit about like, “Oh, like New York City subways are so dangerous.” Like my dad grew up 40 minutes away from the city and he's gone a handful of times in his life because he was scared.

Claire’s dad avoided New York subways because of sensationalized news stories about Black passengers. He is a case study for how important it is to represent people of color in the media accurately, as their unsavory portrayals can influence White people—who rarely interact with them on a daily basis—to discriminate against them in real life. Tess’s parents were not as extreme but still communicated similar messages:

There's a part of the county that I live in that's pretty dangerous and is predominantly an African American population. And I know that it's called [] Heights, and I know that when my mom would talk about the Heights she would talk about the people there being Black. I don't really know how to say this . . . but like my parents would see someone who is Black like maybe on a bus sitting next to us when we were little as more of a threat than maybe someone who's White. Or like, they would be more wary about them being around than someone who's White.

In this anecdote, Tess’s parents described the Black area of her town as dangerous and to be avoided at all costs. The neighborhood’s reputation was so present on her parents’ minds that it preceded any Black person they saw—communicating to their children to be afraid of Black people and to associate Blackness with poverty.

Rachel’s parents echoed Claire’s and Tess’s. She relayed a controversy in her town regarding the announcement of a homeless shelter being built near the main road:

I remember another incident where on our main road in like [] there was gonna be a homeless shelter they were gonna build, and my parents were livid—and most White parents really. Because, realistically, it meant a lot of poor minorities were moving in. And they built it right by my school and my parents were like, “Oh my God, they're gonna assault the kids” and like, “They're gonna bring violence” and blah, blah, blah.

Rachel’s parents’ reactions to the homeless shelter, like Claire’s and Tess’s, betrayed that they associated Blackness with poverty, pathology, and violence. However, they were explicit that they evaded Black people to *keep their children safe*. They viewed Black people as security

threats and their children's distance from them as ideal, rather than as a barrier to being able to interact with a diverse array of individuals.

Parents also proliferated the stereotype that African Americans were non-viable partners. Tess spoke to this when she shared a moment that occurred while she was watching a movie with her mom and brother:

I'll just tell you this funny story that my mom told us about. So right when my parents got divorced, I was probably in second grade. And we were watching a movie with my mom and The Rock was in the movie, and my mom was single and I said to my mom like, "Mom, you should date The Rock." And my mom responded back to us; she's like, "Oh, you guys wouldn't care that he's Black?" And we were like, "No, of course not. That wasn't even a thought in our minds."

One of the most striking elements is Tess's mom's assumption that her kids would react poorly to her dating interracial. Inherent in her assumption is another assumption that an aversion to interracial dating is inherited rather than developed through exchanges like this that represent interracial dating as abnormal.

Hannah, a junior from the Southeast, was advised by her mom to not pursue romantic relationships with Black men:

I was like, 10, and I went to this camp, and I had my little camp boyfriend. Y'know? Like when you're texting? And we slow danced at the dance on a Friday night and all that stuff. He had long hair, like he had braids. My brother was a counselor there, so of course he gave me a lot of shit, as older brothers do. And he told my parents about it, and I don't know why he mentioned that this kid was Black but he did. And my mom sat me down and was like sort of quoting Bible verses or something. She was like, "Y'know, you have to be careful with who you're with" and blah, blah, blah. And I went to my dad about it because they didn't live together. And I was like, "What is this?" And he was like, "Don't listen to her. Some people are gonna say those kinds of things, but that's not the way the world works anymore. It might have worked that way when I was a kid or when your mom was a kid, but things just don't work like that anymore."

This memory stood out for various reasons—from Hannah's brother tattling on her to her mom quoting Bible verses to show that miscegenation is sinful, with the latter moment speaking to how some White parents use religion to justify racism to their kids. Hannah's father's passive

response to this incident is equally noteworthy. Instead of condemning his ex-wife for attempting to convert their children into ardent racists, all he had to say was “That’s not the way the world works anymore.” His comment implied that it was not what the mom said that was wrong, but rather its inconsistency with the times.

The final trope about Black people that emerged in responses was the welfare queen.

Claire’s dad frequently propagated it via his retelling of calls he answered as an EMT:

He is like a big Reagan guy. He talked about welfare queens and stuff. He used to be a firefighter and EMT, so he would respond to calls all over our hometown . . . There's a public housing section in our town. And I mean, he would say I guess very negative things about people who live there. Like, “Oh, they don't want to get jobs . . .” He'll tell me stories about him like responding to calls about women having like their third or fourth child and then he'll claim that they said “Oh, yeah; now I get the bigger apartment” or something.

Though what Claire’s dad told her was supposedly based on real life events, that his framing of said events came out of the Ronald Reagan textbook is suspect. It is unlikely that he fully grasped the crises facing Black families in modern America as someone who shielded his family from Black people and consumed Fox News, rendering it likely that he interpreted events to confirm pre-existing biases.

Latinos and Asians

The participants’ parents made occasional comments about other races and ethnicities. Regina, a senior from the Midwest, offered the sole instance of a parent discussing Latinos. This contribution arose from a specific thing her dad did in the car when Latinas crossed the street:

I think my dad has a little bit of the White man in him. Like he will say stuff sometimes. Or like, he never says anything outwardly racist, but like, I feel like there might be some micro-oh my god, wait, no. Oh my god. There definitely were microaggressions. He used to do this thing where we'd be driving. And say there was like a pedestrian that was taking way too long to cross the street. He'd be like, “Alright, move it, Carmela.” Like if it was a Latina woman, it was always Carmela.

This report was perplexing, not in the least because Regina's dad is married to a Mexican American and the father of two half Mexican kids. He adores his family, but what does it mean for them when his actions negate their subjectivities? How can he draw a distinction between the Latinas to whom he refers as Carmela and the Latinas that live in his house? How are Regina and her mom supposed to reckon with the cognitive dissonance that occurs with loving someone that does not view them as fully human and does not make a point to hide it?

Another reason this narrative was curious was that, like Tess, Regina denied that her dad had ever said anything racist and then suddenly recalled an instance of just that. There is an indication here that White children may be trained to automatically forget racism, but this habit needs to be further unraveled.

Moving to Asians, parents frequently mentioned them in academic contexts. For instance, when I asked Ross whether his parents spoke about Asians in his presence, this was his reply:

But I guess for Asian people or Indian people, my parents would be kind of competitive with them. I think for my parents it was like, "You got to like beat this kid to go to Harvard" or whatever.

This is how Mitchie, a senior from the Midwest, tackled the same question:

One time my mom and I were watching TV and a spelling bee came on. And it was the last round and it was like an Indian kid or something. And, like, she definitely made a comment about that.

Ross's and Mitchie's parents both bought into the stereotypes that Asians are smart.

While it may sound positive on the surface, the subtext that Asians' "supergenius" will result in opportunities, such as Harvard acceptances and spelling bee victories, being taken away from "normal" White children is alarming, as that has been an impetus for anti-Asian violence. A fascinating sidenote is that Ross and Mitchie respectively went on to date an Asian woman and

Indian man in college, provoking questions about how White children surpass biases their parents instilled in them.

The White Habitus

The participants' parents filled their heads with hurtful comments about non-Whites that directly contradicted their attitudes of "race doesn't matter; treat everyone equally." The process of teaching their children about White people was often far more subtle. In this section, I return to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's concept of the White habitus to examine how parents explicated Whiteness through the neighborhoods where they resided, the schools to which they sent their children, the types of friends with which they encouraged their children to play, and the media they deemed appropriate.

Neighborhoods

Eighteen participants grew up in predominantly White towns, though many came from diverse cities like Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, D.C., and St. Louis. Karen, a senior, revealed that her Midwestern community was ninety-five percent White, as did Chandler.

Chandler:

I think my town when I was growing up had a strong 12,000 people. So pretty small. My neighborhood also was not very diverse. I think there was like a one half Asian family and two half Black families. But other than that, it was completely White.

Chandler added the layer of there being so few people of color in his neighborhood that he could count them. Not to mention the fact that his neighbors of color had White partners.

Chandler later expanded on one of the half Black families and how the dad was given a nickname:

The one thing I remember about our neighborhood was a mixed family. And it was the half Black family and I think that the nickname for the dad was Black Tony . . . But I don't know if he started it or if someone else started it, but he was fine with it. Like we'd say that around him . . . Like it was just a thing.

This anecdote contradicts Chandler's prior comment about race not being discussed in his community. In fact, it demonstrates that Chandler's neighbors were so aware of how White their community was since they drew attention to the only Black person. The nickname they gave him insinuated that Tony's race was the most distinguishable factor about him, yet also a joke—which all of the neighbors were in on except for him. And that leads to the next point: Chandler's claim that Tony was fine with being called Black Tony. It is likely that Tony, rather than being okay with being singled out for his race, acquiesced to the nickname as to not further alienate himself.

Schools

All participants, with the exception of Hannah (who went to a majority Black elementary school), recalled attending well-funded, predominantly White schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Any children of color were either Asian students, whose families moved to that district for its superior academic resources, or Black students who were bused in from other parts of town. The below excerpts from Cady, Gretchen, and Tess provide a comprehensive snapshot of the school demographics for the entire sample.

Cady:

My school was like I guess racially I'd say 70% White, 25% Asian—either East Asian or South Asian. Like a mix. And then 5% African American I would say and like very few Hispanic people . . . It was a public school, but financially most of the students were from wealthy backgrounds.

Tess:

It was weird when I was young growing up in a predominantly White and wealthy school, and then when the school choice kids came and they weren't White and their parents weren't as high income earning, that kind of created a sense of . . . racism or race, or whatever. But I know some kids definitely had that perception of African American students at my school because they didn't live in my town and they weren't wearing name brand clothes or whatever you want to say. They didn't fit the stereotype of the basic [] kid whose parents like grew up there and lived on the lake and had a boat and all that.

Gretchen:

There weren't a lot of children of color in my schools, which honestly struck me as very odd because my neighborhood was very diverse . . . But I remember not having many classmates that weren't White in my classes, which kind of struck me as odd because I was like, "Well, where are these kids going to school?" But yeah, I think because of that fact, I was probably closer to people that looked like me, quote, unquote when I was younger. Not necessarily because of individual, like, desires to ostracize myself from other people, but more of like that's just the way the community was set up.

Cady and Gretchen lived in diverse, low-income neighborhoods, but their parents sent them to wealthy White schools—which made Gretchen wonder where her neighbors were going. Her statement about being closer to people that looked like her when she was younger because of how her community was set up is also key, as she considered this fact “natural” rather than as the outcome of public policy decisions. What is even more ironic about her naturalizing her lack of friends of color was that her living situation was conducive to building a diverse friend circle, since she had many minority neighbors. However, that did not happen, and she did not seem to detect how *unnatural* it was to be surrounded by non-Whites yet end up in a White crowd.

Tess was attuned to how differentially the Black students at her school were treated and the tension that was created by combining White students from the suburbs with socio-economically disadvantaged Black students. The purpose of the school choice program was racial integration, but the White children at her school were unwilling to cross the color line because they felt superior to their new classmates.

Social Networks

Like Gretchen and Tess, most participants recalled having White social networks. One pattern that emerged when I inquired about their social circles was that many of the participants' friend groups were interconnected with those of their parents. Several of them described their parents either befriending the parents of their friends or becoming friends with their parents' friends' kids. Monica, Tess, and Gretchen detailed this further.

Monica:

The way that my parents mostly made friends was through . . . my sister and I when we were younger. So a lot of her close friends to this day are parents of little kids that we went to preschool with and that kind of stuff.

Tess:

They were all like best friends since I moved to []. And one of them, my mom actually grew up with his dad. [] is the name of my town. So there's a lot of familial ties. A lot of people who grew up in my town don't really leave.

Gretchen:

Well, I mean, we didn't know a lot of people that weren't Catholic and cisgender y'know—other than those that I was like playing with in the neighborhood. But when it came time to have parties and stuff, it was mainly the people from church that we would invite and people from my parents' work. And I think, yeah, I became closer to kids that I went to church with or kids that like their parents worked with my parents. And that became kind of my social circle.

Monica, Gretchen, and Tess's testimonies drew attention to their upbringing in towns that mirrored the segregated communities of their parents' and grandparents' eras. This fact reinforces how fundamental the United States's history of redlining and residential segregation (Aaronson et al. 2021) is to structuring modern social networks.

Media

The Whites-only nature of the participants' environments was mirrored in the types of media their parents exposed them to as young children. Nineteen participants recalled Disney Channel being their main source of entertainment at home. Hannah spoke to this trend:

Yeah, I'd say growing up watching Disney Channel and stuff . . . it was very White. And like normally if there were any characters of color, they were kind of side characters. I do have this really vivid memory of being like seven or eight and watching *That So Raven*, and my mom making a comment like, "Why are you watching this? . . . I don't know if it's appropriate." And even at that age, I was like, "That's weird. You don't ever care about what I'm watching."

Hannah's answer was provocative because her mom had an issue with her watching *That's So Raven*, a sitcom starring an African American family in San Francisco—even going to

the extent of labeling it “inappropriate.” Provided the show did not discuss lewd subjects, it can be assumed that what Hannah’s mom opined was inappropriate was that it featured Black people. Her anxiety around Hannah watching *That’s So Raven* also implies a belief that children’s media should be segregated—i.e., that White children should only watch content with White characters. On top of this, Hannah’s mom’s surprise to see a Black show on Disney Channel substantiates how White the network has been historically and why she chose it for her child to watch.

Interestingly enough, the White nature of Disney Channel in the early 2000s was why Regina’s parents kept her from it. The senior recalled:

My mom did not let me watch Disney because . . . Disney was racist. And that all the dark characters were the villains. She was especially against the Lion King, as in her words being like, “White people telling African stories.”

Regina’s mother prohibited her from watching Disney Channel so she would not be corrupted by racist programming. Her mom’s decision again indicates that there is an awareness that Disney may cause children to develop negative associations with people of color. It is intimated that parents who let their children watch Disney may be motivated by a desire for them to sustain an idea of the broader world as being like the White one curated at home.

Effects of Parent-Racial Socialization on Youth

The explicit and implicit lessons that the parents of the sample gave to their children on race prior to their entrance into high school tangibly impacted how the students in this sample conducted themselves socially. They were unequipped to engage with people of color. Take the stories provided by Sharpay (a senior from the Mid Atlantic), Joey (a senior from the Midwest), and Claire about interacting with Black people for the first time.

Sharpay:

There's like a family story that my oldest sister when she was very little had like never seen a Black person before. And in public, like pointed at someone and asked my mom

why she had a different skin color. For a little kid, it was kind of silly but also inappropriate in public. But I just think it's because we had like no like, people in our direct life that she had probably ever been exposed to. I wasn't alive at this point. So I don't know. I don't think I ever did anything like that. To my knowledge.

Joey:

So my grandpa: he's not my biological grandpa, but my grandpa for all intents and purposes. He's Black and he's from Cape Verde . . . But so like, when I was growing up, it was communicated to me that Johnny was Portuguese . . . And I think it's because Cape Verde, when he was born, was Portugal. And then in the fifties, it got its independence. So it's no longer Portugal. But so for me as a kid learning geography, I was like, "Oh, Portugal. That's where my grandpa's from . . ." And so in my mind, it wasn't until—and I know that sounds a little insane probably—I was fifteen or sixteen that I realized he's not White. I thought he was always just really tan. Y'know how like Mediterranean people are a bit tanner . . . It wasn't anything malicious on my part. It was just more because Johnny described himself as Portuguese. And everyone else in my family was White.

Claire:

I feel like going on Tumblr, I was able to read more firsthand accounts from BIPOC people, like people who I wasn't really socializing with much in my hometown and getting a more diverse array of people's experiences and thoughts and opinions. And just in general, I feel like it exposed me to a lot of different identities that I wasn't really familiar with before, like my friend who was Guyanese who I knew since I was little. It wasn't until I learned more about race in the Caribbean via the Internet that I thought to ask him one day, "Oh, so are you like Black?" And he was like, "Yeah." I was like, "Oh." Like, I didn't even realize that I've been friends with him for years and he identified as Black.

Each of these stories are significant for the common thread that no one recognized that the people in their surroundings were Black. In Sharpay's tale, her sister did not know that non-Whites existed and was incapable of handling herself upon seeing one. This idea connects to the provocations of McDermott and Ferguson (2022), Moffitt and Rogers (2022), Rothenberg (2016), DiAngelo (2016), and McDermott and Samson (2005) that Whites view themselves as the default for humanity, and everybody else who deviates from them is pathological.

In a related vein, Joey and Claire intimately interacted with a Black person for a significant amount of time, but assumed that they were White. I empathized with Joey: the similarities between him assuming that his grandpa was White with a tan because no one told

him otherwise, and me assuming that I was a White girl with a tan because no one told me otherwise were eerie. Our families' behavior made sense given how White people avoid race, but the purpose behind doing so to the extent of hurting the family remains elusive. One of the many problems of instructing children to be color-blind is that it is not that they just ignore race altogether but that they will just assume everyone is White.

Claire's scenario is also compelling because she only became educated about race after seeking out sources of information beyond her parents—insinuating that her parents, rather than helping her navigate the world, inhibited her ability to do so. Another riveting detail is that her Guyanese friend had known he was Black for a long time, whereas she was just finding out. Her account reinforces the proposition of Hughes et al. (2006) that children of color, and Black children in particular, are advanced in their racial understanding and vocabulary. It also makes the case that White parents not communicating about race is harmful to children of color because their White friends cannot comprehend their positionalities.

Similarly, and as Freeman et al. (2022) proposed, parents' socialization tactics rendered many participants unable to detect racism. For instance, Gretchen's and Peter's stories about events that happened in school.

Gretchen:

I had a friend who was adopted. Her parents were White. And she identified as African American. And when we would be playing on the playground, some of the kids from like the . . . country part of my hometown would say stuff to us. And I didn't really understand why. And I asked her about it. She was like, "Oh, yeah—it's because I'm Black." And I was like, "Well, that doesn't make sense. Why would that matter?" But it's kind of sad honestly, that another little girl had to explain to me what race was because my teachers and my parents didn't do that.

Peter:

Someone was having a discussion about being Black in a store. They were talking about the idea of like, when you go shopping somewhere, they're always looking at you

differently. They're always thinking you're shoplifting and stuff. And these were things that I was like, familiar with conceptually. I like understood that Black people were being treated differently and whatnot. But I remember I was pissed off at somebody and I picked a fight on the matter, because they mentioned that when they walked into our school store or whatever, they always made them take off their backpack and said they weren't allowed to bring it in. And I said something along the lines of like, "Well, I always have to take my backpack off too; like this is not specific to you. Like everyone has to take their backpack off here." Yeah. Which was like, yes, a true statement, but not the right fight to pick at the time. There were bigger statements being made. But I remember after that, I was very strictly ostracized in that group.

Gretchen and Peter did not recognize obvious instances of racism. Gretchen's obliviousness was so extreme that her friend had to explain to her that she was being disparaged because of her race—exacerbating the mental duress she was already experiencing and causing Gretchen to realize that the White adults in her life were failing her by facilitating her ignorance.

Peter was so focused on his own feelings that he made it a point to invalidate his peer's encounters with racism, failing to recognize his own racism in the process. He later went on to detail how being canceled by this group of students of color catalyzed his social justice journey. He realized that, by letting him be ignorant about race, his parents left him unprepared to be a citizen of a race-conscious world. He, like other students, was determined to chart a new path.

Parent Racial Socialization in High School

Though the participants blindly trumpeted their parents' racial sentiments early on, they all underwent a racial enlightenment in high school that prompted an ideological shift.

Social Media as an Agent of Socialization

Access to social media was essential in this process because it exposed the participants to historical and current events that were neither mentioned in school nor at home. Cady and Rachel elaborated below.

Cady:

I don't think I started really being influenced by the media aspect of it until I was probably in like late middle school or early high school, and I was doing a lot more independent exploration of media because I had my own iPod/iPhone . . . But even then I don't think that media was a big influence until probably like mid high school because . . . middle school was still a time where Instagram would be like a photo of you at the mall with your friends . . . Whereas now, y'know, I go on Instagram, and it's completely infographics and it's bombarded with . . . current events and lots of people sharing their opinions about global affairs, racial things, whatever.

Rachel:

I would say following creators that were people of color was a big thing. And I remember it started with those like infographic people who posted infographics on their story. I thought they were the highlight of activism. I really did. Every time I would look into it and like specifically around the 2016 election, seeing the rhetoric that Trump would use—especially against Mexican Americans or Muslim Americans—made me really angry. And so I looked into it more and I remember that led to further reading.

Rachel confirmed that social media was integral to her growing awareness about race, while Cady added the nuance that it was never intended to be that way. The participants created social media accounts not because they desired to learn more about racial affairs, but rather because it was the cool thing to do. It was only once political content circulated social media that they began to receive lessons about and research racial issues.

Child Racial Socialization During Black Lives Matter

The more knowledgeable participants became, the more they attempted to engage their parents in racial dialogues offline. In no other moment was this more accurate than with the resurgence of Black Lives Matter in 2020, when the oldest participants were high school seniors. For some, educating their parents about race—or what I will refer to moving forward as *child racial socialization* or *reverse racial socialization*—was successful. Tess happily recalled how responsive her mom was to her sharing updates about the Black Lives Matter movement. She even detailed checking out a protest with her mom one afternoon during the summer of 2020:

And there was a Black Lives Matter protest in my town and I remember my mom and I went to drive by just to see it . . . And it was really cool. Like I kind of stated before, we were mostly in agreement about what was going on and stuff like that. We support it, but

we weren't going to go protest ourselves necessarily, because we didn't feel like it was our place to join in that protest. Because it was primarily African Americans.

Tess confessed that, while both her and her mom sided with Black protesters, neither took substantive action. The most they were willing to do was watch the protest, effectively converting it into a “really cool” spectacle. It was additionally riveing that Tess framed the protest as an African American thing, as that belies a belief that the fight for racial equality has nothing to do with White people. Tess and her mom’s mindsets contrasted from Sharpay and her mom, who marched together in BLM protests in their city.

While there were instances of child racial socialization that were successful, most of the participants reported that it strained their relationships with their parents. There were students like Joey and Claire whose parents, despite supporting Black Lives Matter, were resistant to taking stances that could jeopardize their social and physical wellbeing.

Joey:

In June 2020, I bought a Black Lives Matter flag on Amazon and had it shipped to our house. And I started to put it up outside and my parents stopped me. Mainly not because of their own beliefs, but more out of the fear of how neighbors would respond to that. And so it's things like that do go on, I mean, where it's like they agree with certain more progressive causes with regards to race, but aren't willing to kind of showcase it.

Claire:

Like, the whole summer 2020 with the BLM protests and stuff he got really mad at me when I told him I was going . . . That was a period of my life when I was still trying to like—I guess I had hoped that I could—change his mind about stuff. And so I would tell him like, “I'm going to this BLM protest. Police brutality is a massive problem.” I would like throw stats at him and stuff and be like, “How can you not recognize this?” And he was just like “People are rioting and you could get hurt. You shouldn't go.”

Then there were other students like Rachel, whose relationship with her parents fizzled.

Yeah. So um, during that I was definitely at this point where I was fully politically aware. They would call me “woke liberal” but whatever. And I had so many conversations with them, especially because it was during COVID . . . And my mom was like really responsive. But she said it was too much. I would bring it up to her every day like, “Okay, well, this is what's happening now. Did you see this?” And stuff like that. And I

would just bring it up constantly. My mom's like, "This is too much. I feel like I'm always getting the trauma update. I can't always be thinking about these issues. And it's great that you care, but like, whatever." So I think she just got too overwhelmed. My dad honestly, yeah, it was mostly just arguments, and they were not productive arguments. It was like us screaming at each other. He just cannot see my perspective and refuses to admit that there are systemic issues. And not just that, he would just be like, "Oh, I don't understand why they can't just be educated and go to school and be good people."

Like Tess's, Joey's, and Claire's parents, Rachel's mom's support of Black Lives Matter was conditional upon her comfortability. As for Rachel's dad, he resisted what his daughter disseminated about the movement and countered her facts by attributing Black people's disparate treatment to their "lack of education." Their arguments that summer marked the beginning of a fracture in their relationship that is now a clean break, following the news of him assaulting a Middle Eastern taxi driver and calling him the N word.

Peter experienced similar tensions to Rachel with his dad during the Black Lives Matter movement, but his resolution was to cease discussing political matters with his family entirely:

And it's hard too, especially thinking about my Instagram explore page, which is still . . . where I'm learning a lot of information. A lot of what was being said was like the best thing that you can do as a White person sitting on your butt at home during the pandemic is have conversations with your White family members and talk about these topics and educate them. Like that's your number one job right now: educate people. And so I was like, "This is my responsibility. I'm going to do this." And I felt a lot of guilt over giving up because I was like, "If people are experiencing racism every day, how bad can it be for me to talk about it?" But I realized it really was just that bad.

In addition to his guilt over giving up on having racial discourses with his family, Peter's response points to a dilemma that White children may encounter when socializing their parents: having to face the reality that the people they were raised by are racist and close minded. How does one reconcile that and act accordingly when they are on an antiracist journey yet still financially dependent on their parents and living in their household? As it was in Peter's case, the common path of least resistance is to avoid the subject sowing dissension and agitate for social change outside of their parents' purview.

V. Conclusion

Summary

The findings of this work complicate those of other Whiteness Studies scholars with respect to how White American parents in the twenty-first century racially socialize their children. Most have posited that White parents avoid the subject of race with their children and attempt to rear them color-blind. This initially seemed to be the case with the sample of twenty college students from a private Southeastern university, especially given their steadfastness about race never being a topic of discussion in their households. However, upon further probing, the participants revealed that their parents imparted a lot about the racial status quo in the United States, vis-a-vis the incendiary comments they made about people of color and the segregated White environments in which they insulated their kids. Thus, the experiences of the sample suggest that White parents display a formal attachment to color-blindness in speech, but engage their kids in a White-centric socialization process that shields them from reckoning with their racial privilege and people of color's racial disadvantage. As much as minority parents enlighten their children about White supremacy to keep them safe, White parents keep their children in the dark because an intimate knowledge of the system threatens to burst the bubble of ignorant bliss constructed by the White habitus. This is evident from the turmoil that ensued once the participants joined in on the Black Lives Matter movement and tried to involve their families.

Limitations

The most pressing limitation is that this study relied on a convenience sample. The participant pool was narrowed to people in similar circles as me because the advertising strategy depended on Instagram, GroupMe, and the sociology department listserv. Therefore, it is likely that the sample was not representative of the entire student population at this university. Another

limitation is that this study suffers from response bias, as the participants self-selected to be in it. This means that they identified with the description of “White college student” as specified in the promotional materials and felt they had insights on parent racial socialization to share. Moreover, it is possible that the sample was more aware of race and racism than the general White populace at this university.

The next limitation is the sample’s gender skew, which may have resulted in answers that did not account for gendered nuances in how parents talk to their children about race. My partner told me that one day when she was coming to visit me in my dorm, she was on the elevator with a group of White males who were gawking and laughing at a flyer for the study that I placed next to the controls. She detailed how they thought that the poster was “so funny” and should be taken down. When I rode the same elevator later in the day, it was gone. This anecdote intimates that male students did not sign up for the study because they were threatened by it—to the extent that they felt the need to remove any reminder of it from their sight.

The last limitation is that the data was participants’ recollections of exchanges from their childhoods. The flaw in this is that participants only told me what they could remember—meaning that their stories could have been partial or exaggerated, and that there could have been other moments that affected their ideas of race that did not come to mind.

Directions for Future Research

Since most studies of parental racial socialization interview either parents or children, scholars moving forward need to interview both parties together to truly grasp what parents are teaching and what kids are internalizing. In addition, there need to be longitudinal studies to document the precise point when parental socialization becomes less influential on children’s concept of race and other agents assume priority. There also needs to be research on the effects of parental racial

socialization for Whites in college and beyond. Finally, work should be conducted about child racial socialization and social media as a vehicle of racial socialization.

The Future of Racism

Though systemic change takes many decades, these issues raise pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me, once we raise our daily consciousness about the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from the history of male privilege, it remains unanswered whether we will use such unearned advantages to undermine these hidden systems of advantage and exploit any of our arbitrarily-awarded power to reconstruct power systems on a broader base (McIntosh 1989).

Education alone cannot eradicate racism. It was apparent while the Black Lives Matter movement was in full force that most participants were aware of the precarity, violence, and suppression facing African Americans, but few took action outside of posting on social media, chatting with loved ones, attending a march, and reading books by Black authors. They did more than their parents, but their activism was similarly limited to what kept them comfortable. Like feminist Peggy McIntosh poses at the top of this section, as future generations of Whites become aware of their privilege, what are they going to do with their knowledge? What will it take for them to forfeit their social power?

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Study: That Sounds About White: White Parental Racial Socialization and Implications for Youth Identity Development

Key Information & Introduction:

My name is Mackenzie Culp, and I am an undergraduate researcher at Duke University, currently majoring in sociology. My honors thesis examines how parents inform their children's racial identity in White families. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a White-identified Duke undergraduate student, and you come from a family that has been in the United States for at least two generations.

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

Should you choose to participate in this research, you will take part in an hour-long Zoom interview regarding your recollection of how your parents talked to you about race throughout your childhood. You will be asked to use a device from which you can join the meeting that has a high-quality microphone and camera. Please feel free to keep your camera on for the duration of the interview, as to enhance the comfort and flow of the conversation. Please note, however, you are free to turn your camera off at any time, and either way, only the audio of the conversation will be recorded upon your consent.

Compensation:

All participants will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

Participants may skip questions, however those who exit the interview prematurely will not be

compensated[[HG1](#)] . You will be asked to provide your netID in the Qualtrics Survey linked below for receipt, per Duke policy. Please note your netID will never be linked to research data, and will only be used for accounting purposes.

What Are the Risks and Inconveniences and Benefits of This Study?

There are no benefits to participating in this research. Participation in research does involve a risk to your confidentiality. Please note, your privacy is very important to me, and I will do everything I can to protect your privacy.

Confidentiality:

The interviews, upon the provision of your consent, will be recorded and transcribed using Duke Zoom. However, if you need me to stop recording at any time, I will do so and will not restart without your approval. Your participation in this research is confidential: your name won't appear on the recording, transcript, or final report and will instead be replaced by a pseudonym. However, there is a possibility that I will describe you in my study using indirect identifiers, such as gender, class year, and your region of origin. I am the only person that will have access to the recordings and transcripts, and all will be destroyed after I submit my thesis in April 2024. In the meantime, all of the recordings, transcripts, and interview notes will be uploaded to Duke Box, which has been approved by the Duke Campus IRB and the Duke OIT as a secure location to store data.

Voluntary Nature of Participation:

In addition to being confidential, your participation in this interview is voluntary. You have the right to ask questions about this study and to have them answered, to skip questions that you would not like to answer, and to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

Who Do I Call if I Have Questions or Problems?

If you have any questions before or after the interview session, please either contact me at 336-528-2016 or email me at mackenzie.culp@duke.edu, or my advisor, Dr. Hedwig Lee at hedwig.lee@duke.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please email the Duke Campus IRB at campusIRB@duke.edu and reference my protocol #2024-0212.

APPENDIX B: LISTSERV EMAIL SCRIPT

Greetings!

My name is Mackenzie Culp, and I am a senior here at Duke. I am looking to recruit a sample of White Duke students to interview for my sociology honors thesis, which is about how parents inform the racial identities of their children in White families. The interviews will be about an hour long in length and will take place over Zoom from mid-January to mid-February. Participants will be compensated with a \$20 Amazon gift card.

If you match the criteria and are interested in being interviewed for the study, please read the attached informed consent form and fill out [this Qualtrics Survey](#). Upon answering “yes” or “maybe” to question #8, I will email you a link to sign up for an interview slot.

Thank you so much for considering this research opportunity! Please email me (mackenzie.culp@duke.edu) if you have any questions or concerns about the study!

Sincerely,

Mackenzie Culp

ARE YOU A WHITE COLLEGE STUDENT?

Have you been itching to talk about your childhood? For research?

If so, the opportunity you've been waiting for has arrived! Scan the QR code below to learn how to become involved in an ongoing study about parent racial socialization.

Compensation:

\$20
AMAZON GIFT CARD



Email mackenzie.culp@duke.edu for more info!

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT INTEREST QUALTRICS SURVEY

Full Name

1. Duke Email
2. Are you a Duke Undergraduate student?
3. Do you racially identify as white (i.e., being of European descent)?
4. Were your parents born in the United States?
5. Do you have access to a device (laptop, phone, tablet, etc.) with the following features?

Check all that apply:

- a. It allows you to join a Zoom meeting
 - b. It has a high-quality microphone
 - c. It has a high-quality camera
6. Are you interested in participating in the study? (Those who reply "yes" or "maybe" will be sent an electronic consent form and a link to sign up for an interview slot)

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. I would love it if we could start with you telling me about yourself?
 - a. How would you describe your identity or affinity groups you belong to?
2. You mentioned growing up in_. Tell me about what that was like.
3. Do you recall the demographics of the friends you hung out with the most while growing up?
 - a. Did your social circles reflect the demographics of the schools that you attended?
 - b. Or the demographics of the people that your parents socialized with?
4. Do you recall or have any idea of where you primarily got your information about race growing up (in terms of family, school, religious institutions, friends, media, social media, etc.)?
 - a. What did these sources teach you about race?
 - b. What sorts of media (music, tv, movies, magazines, toys, books, artwork, news, etc.) did your parents expose you to growing up? How would you describe the demographics of the people in the media or the people who made the media you consumed?
5. Did your parents explicitly talk to you about race growing up? If so, how did they talk about it?
 - a. To the best you can recall, how did your parents talk about members of other racial groups?
 - b. How did your parents talk about other white people? As in, if they talked about other white people, would they draw attention to their whiteness?

- c. How would you describe your parents' general approaches to talking about race when you were growing up?
6. Were there any racial incidents (tension, conflict, discrimination, that occurred growing up that involved either you or someone you know?
 - a. Did your parents talk to you about them? If so, how did they talk to you about them?
 - b. What about with racial situations that received lots of attention nationally (i.e., these could be negative instances like police brutality (corner store Caroline, barbecue Becky, or Amy Cooper? Or they could be positive instances, like the election of Barack Obama)?
7. Do you and your parents talk about race now (especially now that we're living in the aftermath of the resurgence of the BLM and Stop Asian Hate Movements)?
 - a. Who starts the conversations? What kinds of things are said?
8. Have you talked about race in any of your classes at Duke or taken any classes specifically about race?
 - a. Tell me about those conversations
 - b. What has been your biggest learning take away from these conversations?
 - c. How has being in college impacted the way that you think about race overall?
 - d. How would you describe your current social circle at Duke via a demographic standpoint?
 - f. Does race ever come up in conversation with your friends? If it does come up, what is the context, and how is it talked about?
9. How much do you think about your whiteness when interacting with others?

- a. Does this change depending on who you're interacting with (i.e., their race?)
 - b. When is the first time you remember becoming really aware of your whiteness?
Can you walk me through what the situation was?
10. What does the ideal life that you envision for yourself look like?
- a. What kind of career do you want to have and why?
 - b. Where do you imagine yourself living?
 - c. What do you imagine your spouse being like? Would you prefer them being of a similar background, or does their background not matter to you?
 - d. Have your parents expressed any opinions or preferences with regards to the background of your future spouse?
11. If you would like to have children in the future, do you intend on talking to them about race? Why or why not?
12. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you want to talk about before we wrap up, or anything you would like to add to what you've already told me?

APPENDIX F: FIGURES 1-4

Figure 1. Gender breakdown of participants

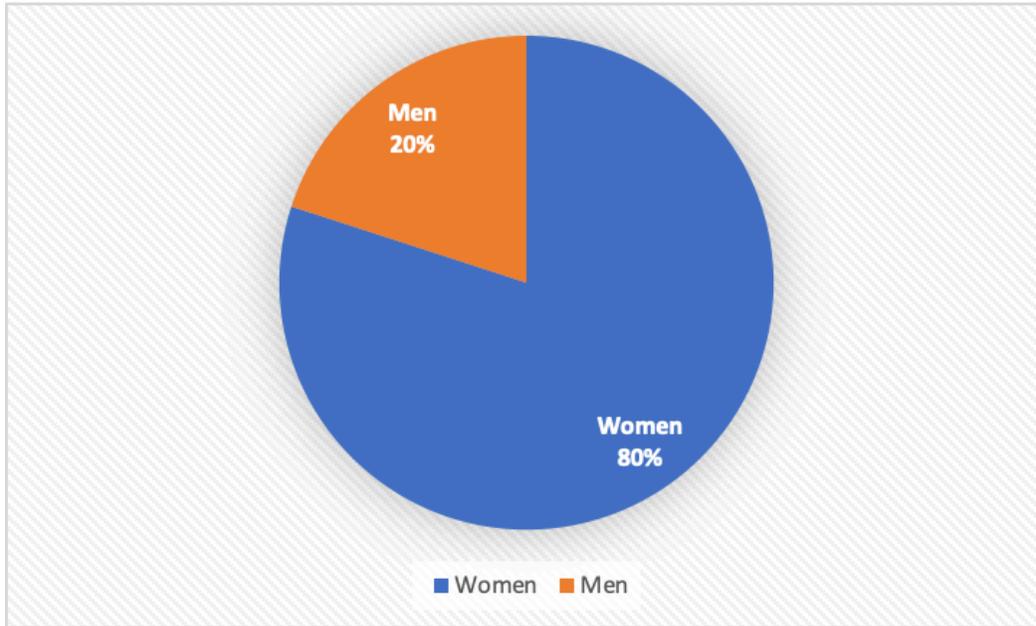


Figure 2. Class year breakdown of participants

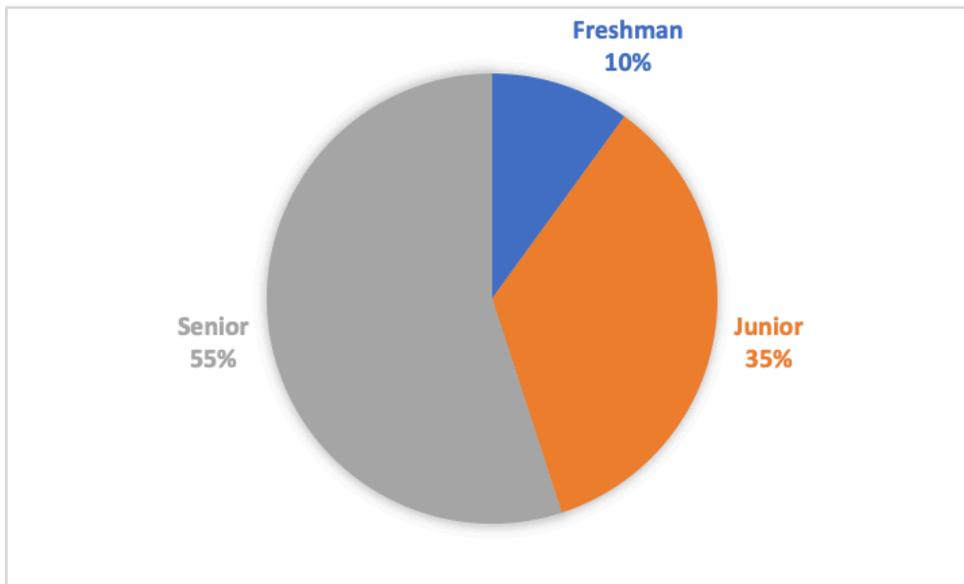


Figure 3. Major breakdown of participants

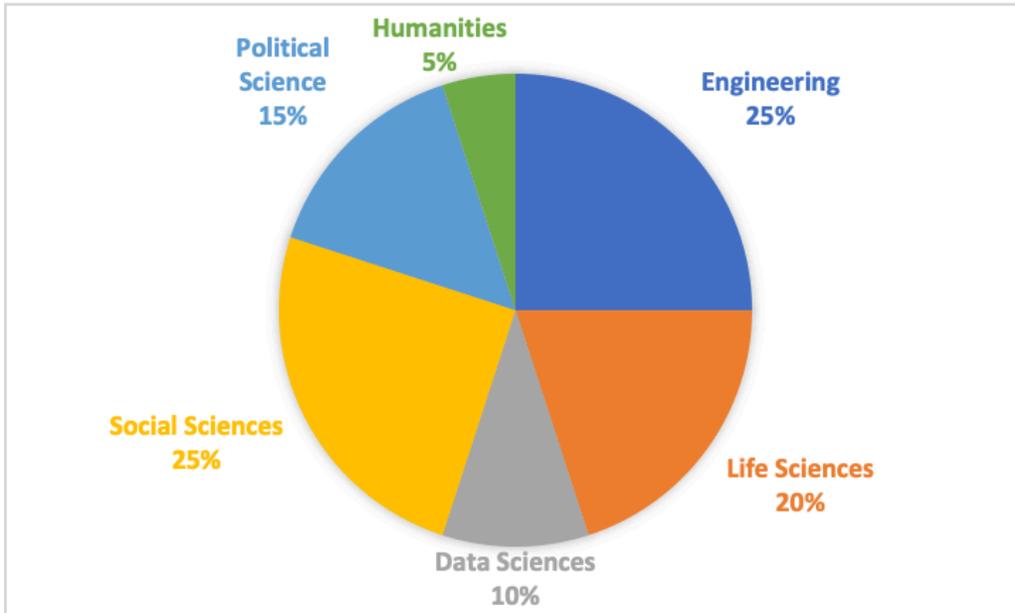


Figure 4. Geographic distribution of participants

