University of Cincinnati

Date: 7/6/2016

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It is entitled:
Becoming White: The racial socialization practices of middle-class White parents

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Becoming White: The racial socialization practices of middle-class White parents

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Graduate School at the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

in the Department of Sociology
of the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences

by

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July 2016
ABSTRACT

What, and how, do middle-class White parents teach their children about race, and being White in America? Though Whites are the majority racial group in the United States, very little is known about how they racially socialize their children. Drawing upon observational research and interviews with 40 parents, I examine the explicit and implicit racial socialization practices of middle-class White parents in two Cincinnati, Ohio neighborhoods. I argue participants adopt “happy” racial socialization practices that promote positive racial narratives and interactions whilst simultaneously minimizing conversations and interactions that challenge or threaten their family’s race and class-based privileges. In terms of explicit racial socialization, this means parents do speak with their children about race but they ignore or downplay racial discussions that concern issues of racial inequality, racial tension, and racial protest. A similar pattern of behavior is evidenced in parents’ implicit racial socialization practices, or what I term their “exposure to diversity” efforts. Participants all claim to value racial diversity and actively pursue opportunities for their children to be in the presence of people of color. They envision their “exposure to diversity” efforts as a means to foster small-scale social change and to achieve racial and class distinction for their child. However, a study of participants’ parenting practices reveals that parents are not enthusiastic about all racial diversity. They embrace middle-class, people of color but are decidedly ambivalent about contact with the poor; they fear that too much contact will diminish their children’s middle-class presentation of self. Taken together, study results provide insight as to the role middle-class White parents play in the cultivation of a White identity.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To redesign social systems, we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects.

- Peggy McIntosh

White Americans no longer resort to the lash of a whip, the strength of a hangman’s noose, or the barrel of a gun to maintain their power. Still, White control of American society continues. A quick study of the images of US Congressional members, Fortune 500 executives, and the casts of American films and television programs confirms the suspicion that White domination is near total. The reality of White social control is further substantiated by a review of national-level data concerning income (Maume 2004), wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 2006), education (Kozol 2012), and health (Kuzawa and Sweet 2009) outcomes in the United States. Barring Asian-Americans, this research indicates Whites have more favorable outcomes on all of the previously mentioned measures. They even live longer than members of other racial groups (Chang et al. 2015; Olshansky et al. 2012).

What these results call attention to is the reality of White domination in contemporary American society – a reality most White’s claim to know nothing about. Indeed, research indicates the majority of White Americans deny the salience of race and reject the idea that race structures social life (Bonilla-Silva 1996). Yet, like members of all dominant groups, White Americans reap material and psychological rewards from their position of power (DuBois 1903;
Jackman 1994; Roediger 2007). This, however, is not all they gain. They also develop an easy familiarity with power such that their position of dominance fades from view. It becomes an invisible, taken-for-granted feature of daily life (Jackman 1994; Lewis 2004; McIntosh 1990).

White’s denial of race is especially acute in America’s post-Civil Right’s era. The passage of Civil Rights legislation and the provision of legal protections to people of color inspired many White Americans to declare that “racism is over” and that race “no longer matters” (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004). This raises an interesting question. What accounts for White’s racial blindness? Their sense that society is meritocratic and post-racial despite a large body of evidence that points to the contrary? Sociologist Mary Jackman (1994) argues the answer lies in the institutionalization of dominance. She describes this process accordingly:

Dominant groups set up institutions to carry out the ongoing task of expropriating resources from subordinates. Those institutions become a communal property, transmitting expropriative patterns from one generation to the next…This means that benefits are delivered to individual members of the dominant group routinely, without any need for individual acts of assertion. The institutions operate as an experiential buffer, blurring the direct, expropriative basis of the inequalities between groups…[it also] releases the individual members of the dominant group from any sense of personal complicity. As they seek to interpret the happy situation in which they find themselves, they have no reason to feel personally defensive – after all they have personally taken no steps to extract from others the benefits that regularly come their way (pp. 64-5).

As Jackman (1994) and others argue, White control of society remains uncontested because White tastes, ideas, practices have been institutionally enshrined - and in the process made normative (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Doane 2003). The institutionalization
of White dominance also means members of the dominant group accrue privileges without having to consider how the rewards they accumulate simultaneously impoverish others.

This study uses Jackman’s (1994) insights as a jumping off point to investigate the cultivation of Whiteness as an identity, a structural location, and worldview within the White home. In line with Jackman (1994), I argue we must examine institutions to understand the workings and also the vulnerabilities of dominant groups. To date, many scholars have written about the institutionalization of White dominance by the state (Feagin 2013; Mills 1997; Omi and Winant 1994), schools (Lewis 2003), workplace (Embrick 2006, 2011), and media (Bonilla-Silva 2011; Collins 2000) but the role the White family plays in this process has been almost entirely overlooked.

This dissertation works to correct this oversight by investigating how and what middle-class, White parents in both a multiracial (n=22) and a White-segregated (n=18) neighborhood teach their children about race and racism. Pre-existing racial socialization research indicates that members of all racial groups teach their children about race and racism (Burton et al. 2010; Carter, Picca, and Murray 2012; Hughes 2003; Hughes et al. 2006; Rockquemore et al. 2006; Tatum 1987, 2004; Tuan 1998) yet, we know almost nothing about how White children are racially socialized by their parents (Burton et al. 2010; Hughes et al. 2006). Most of the racial socialization literature examines the socialization practices of non-White parents (Burton et al. 2010; Hughes 2003; Hughes and Chen 1997; Hughes et al. 2006; Tuan 1998; Young 2004). Consequently, scholars have some understanding of the process by which the racial identity of Black, Asian, and multi-racial Americans develops over the life course, but possess little knowledge as to how racialization unfolds among Whites (Hughes et al.
This gap in the literature perpetuates the idea that only “only non-Whites “have” race” (Burton et al. 2010: 453).

As will be explored in the following subsections, the few White racial socialization studies that exist provide us with an incomplete understanding of White racial socialization. For example, we know nothing about what middle-class White parents say to their children about racial tension and racial protests and know only slightly more about White parents’ non-verbal racial messages – i.e. their implicit racial socialization. Matters of intersectionality and neighborhood social context have also been overlooked.

**Explicit v. Implicit White Racial Socialization**

Parents teach their children about race and racism through explicit instruction and implicit actions (Castelli et al. 2009; Vittrup and Holden 2010). To date, most research has focused on White parents’ explicit racial socialization efforts – i.e. what parents say to their children about race and racism (Hagerman 2014, 2016; Hamm 2011; Michael and Bartoli 2014). Findings from this body of research are mixed. Some research indicates middle-class White parents say nothing at all to their children about race; they engage in silent racial socialization (Bartoli et al. ND; Vittrup and Holden 2010). Other research finds that middle-class, White parents speak with their children about race in a very limited way (Bartoli et al. ND; Hagerman 2014; 2016). These parents espouse a colorblind rhetoric, noting that racial differences are “skin deep” and people inherently the same (Bartoli et al. ND; Hagerman 2016; Michael and Bartoli 2014; Rockquemore et al. 2006). Only one study documents “color-conscious” White parents

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1 Borrowing from Bonilla-Silva (1996), I understand race to be a product of a *racialized social system* wherein a society’s “economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories …such that processes of racialization…acquire autonomy and have pertinent effects” (p. 469).
who speak with their children about race as a structural location and a system of inequality (Hagerman 2014).

Many race-related topics of conversation are under-explored or absent from the White-racial socialization literature, especially those related to racism, racial tension and protest. Research indicates that middle-class White parents teach their children that “racism is bad” but we do not know if parents ever elaborate on that discussion. Hagerman’s (2014) research suggests that some “color-conscious” parents do; they speak with their children about systemic racial inequality and White privilege. Unfortunately, Hagerman does not provide an in-depth discussion as to the content of parents’ racism talk. We also know nothing about what middle-class White parents say to their children about racial tension and protest. This is an important subject in light of a growing public awareness of police violence towards people of color, racial protests in Ferguson (2014) and Baltimore (2015), and the emergent social and political presence of Black Lives Matter. I take up many of these questions in Chapter IV, where I examine parents’ discussions of racial tension and protest.

Though our understanding of middle-class White parents’ race-talk is partial, we know even less about White parents’ implicit racial socialization – or the non-verbal messages they communicate to their children about race and racism (Castelli et al. 2009). It seems reasonable to assume that White parents’ racial silence may enhance the weight of parents’ implicit racial socialization efforts, a hypothesis that has received some empirical support. For example, Castelli et al. (2009) conclude that White parents’ implicit racial socialization efforts have a more significant influence on the development of White children’ attitudes and beliefs than parent’s explicit instruction. Consequently, it is incumbent upon racial socialization researchers
to study Whites “acts of inclusion and exclusion” and not simply their “thought processes” (Lewis 2004).

To date, most implicit racial socialization research has focused on White avoidance of people of color (Hagerman 2014; Johnson and Shapiro 2003). As a result, we do not know much about parenting practices oriented towards racial contact. This is unfortunate in light of a growing body of diversity-related research that suggests Whites now “celebrate” racial diversity and welcome the opportunity to live in neighborhoods and attend schools with people of color (Ball et al. 2004; Burke 2012; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Reay et al. 2007). In light of these gaps, I investigate how and why, White, middle-class parents facilitate or obstruct interracial contact for their children. Findings are presented in Chapters II and III.

**Complicating White Racial Socialization Research: The Need for Intersectional and Contextual Studies**

Within this small but growing body of White racial socialization literature, issues of intersectionality have also been overlooked. Prior research has focused exclusively on the racial socialization efforts of middle-class, White parents (Bartoli et al. ND; Hagerman 2014, 2016; Hamm 2001) and yet none have critically examined how parents’ class status influences parents’ racial socialization efforts. In all of these studies, class has been treated as a taken-for-granted constant rather than something that animates specific race-related dialogue or action. Indeed, past research makes clear that people do not occupy a class status unreflexively; they also “do” class (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003). They make active, though not always conscious decisions about the best way to protect or enhance their - and their children’s - social-structural location (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003). White racial socialization research has ignored how other social structures - including class - shape parents’ racial socialization efforts. To remedy this absence, I
examine the relationship between social-class and White racial socialization in each of my three empirical chapters.

Neighborhood-level influences also remain under-examined. Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) argue that coming of age in a segregated-White neighborhood helps produce a “White habitus” that conditions White racial tastes, beliefs, and behaviors; however, few studies examine the influence of neighborhood racial composition on White parents’ racial socialization practices. Recent research in two majority-White neighborhoods (99% White) - one located near a neighborhood that was 17% Black, suggests that the racial composition of a neighborhood may influence what parents say to their children about race (Hagerman 2014). Parents with closer residential proximity to people of color were more “color-conscious”; they eschewed a color-blind outlook and openly engaged their children in conversations about race and racial inequality (Hagerman 2014). While a useful insight, there is still much to be learned about the relationship between neighborhoods and White racial socialization. As noted, all of the pre-existing research examined White racial socialization in majority-White, middle-income communities. To date, no research has examined White racial socialization in a White, mixed-income neighborhood. It stands to reason that race may also be learned in relation to members of one’s own racial group, albeit those who differ in some other way. An inattention to intra-racial boundary making in majority-White neighborhoods perpetuates the idea that majority-White neighborhoods are places of absence where few racial messages are communicated or learned.

We also know nothing about White racial socialization in multiracial neighborhoods; specifically, how residence in a neighborhood with a sizable minority population influences White parents’ explicit and implicit racial socialization efforts. An analysis of the racial composition of a White family’s neighborhood is important because it tells us something about
the ease or difficulty White parents have exposing or insulating their children from people of color. The idea of interracial “exposure” is significant in light of a number of findings. First, some research suggests interracial contact provides individuals an opportunity for “stereotypes to be challenged or for commonalities of experience and outlook to be realized” (McDermott 2006: 8). Other scholars posit that racial awareness is a product of racial contact - and it is through regular interaction with members of outside racial groups that individuals become aware of race as an identity and a structural location (Frankenberg 1993; Tuan 1998; Young 2004). I investigate many of these neighborhood-related questions in Chapter III.

**Dissertation Overview**

In the following chapter, I examine “exposure to diversity,” an implicit racial socialization practice adopted by middle-class White parents to teach their children about “race” – i.e. people of color. Exposure to diversity involves parents’ active efforts to expose their children to people of color by attending multiracial parks, establishing residence in a multiracial neighborhood, or enrolling their child in a multiracial school or extracurricular. I argue parents’ exposure efforts are motivated by two beliefs - a “diversity ideology” wherein racial diversity is constructed as a source of value that enriches White life (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014) – and the middle-class parenting practice of “concerted cultivation” (Lareau 2003).

In Chapter III, I investigate how residence in neighborhoods with class and racial diversity influence participants’ parenting practices, specifically as it relates to the protection or enhancement of their children’s privileged social status. I find that parents adopt different practices in each neighborhood depending on the race and residential proximity of their low-income neighbors. Parenting practices in Greenfield, where parents’ live cheek-to-jowl with their poor White neighbors, are characterized by avoidance. Meanwhile, parenting practices in River
Park evidence a strategic openness due to parents more favorable assessment and residential
distance from their poor Black neighbors.

In Chapter IV, I examine what parents communicate to their children about racial tension
and racial protest directly before and after the 2014 Ferguson protests in Missouri. I find that the
majority of parents (70%) say nothing to their children about either subject. Further, of those
parents who do speak with their children about the Ferguson protests, most adopt a neutral or
defensive color-blind frame wherein race and racism are minimized. I argue that class-based
understandings of childhood as a protected, felicitous period of life, partially drive parents racial
silence.

Finally, in Chapter V, I re-examine study findings and discuss the overall implications of
my research, including study limitations.
CHAPTER II
“DIVERSITY IS IMPORTANT TO ME”: WHITE FAMILIES AND RACIAL CULTIVATION

I think parents like me and my husband, have an obligation to do everything we can as intentionally as we can to raise kids who are fully aware of what’s happening in the wider world. We have to consider how we talk about it. Who do we associate with? Where do we go? What kinds of things do we do to make sure that we are being as inclusive as neighbors, and friends, and community members as we can? We try to achieve inclusivity by being very intentional parents. I think we’ve made some deliberate steps in sending him to specific educational environments. Every summer we also send him to a summer camp that is very diverse. We’ve made this a very intentional part of our parenting.

- Isabelle, River Park resident

INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that few White Americans possess an awareness of their own racial identity or the privileges that such an identity affords (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Doane 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Hagerman 2014; Perry 2001; Phinney 1996; Rockquemore, Laszloffy and Noveske 2006; Twine and Steinbugler 2006). The basis of this hidden identity, and Whites’ blindness to the way race structures life in the United States, stems from White control of normative culture, which reflects the tastes, norms, and practices of White Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2011; Doane 2003; Feagin 2013). The institutionalization of White dominance through the state (Lipsitz 1998; Omi and Winant 1994), educational system (Lewis 2003; Perry 2001), and media (Bonilla-Silva 2011; Collins 2000) has received a great deal of empirical attention, while the role White parents play in this process has been largely overlooked. By examining how White parents teach their children about race, I attempt to shed light on the unexamined center of
America’s racial elite. Through interviews with 40 White middle-class parents in both a White-segregated and a multiracial neighborhood in Cincinnati, I investigate the implicit racial socialization strategies adopted by White parents.

Most studies within this small but growing body of research on White racial socialization focus on explicit racial socialization – the things White parents say to their child about race (Bartoli et al. N.d.; Hagerman 2014, 2016; Vittrup and Holden 2010). While important, such an approach may not be the best way to assess what White parents teach their children. Research suggests that most Whites racially socialize through silence, in part because parents fear upsetting their child or saying the wrong thing and being misconstrued as a racist (Bartoli et al. N.d.; Michael and Bartoli 2014). What is missing from this research is an investigation of how individual beliefs and attitudes translate into practice. This point is made well by Lewis (2003) who writes that “racial identifications…are not merely about thought processes but about action; acts of inclusion and exclusion are part of the racialization process” (p. 137). By focusing on parents’ accounts of their behavior, I uncover some of the ways middle-class Whites help to sustain and/or challenge the current racial structure.

For many of the middle-class, White parents in my sample, most with children under 10 years of age, exposure to diversity serves as their primary racial socialization strategy. Parents who adopted this strategy actively worked to expose their child to people of color (POC), a feat that often required deliberate effort on the part of parents; from visiting multiracial parks, enrolling their children in schools with significant minority populations, to establishing residence in a multiracial community. As I will argue, while there are many reasons parents adopt this racial socialization strategy, what ultimately informs their efforts is the belief that diversity is valuable (Ahmed 2012; Reay et al. 2007).
The idea that middle-class, White parents teach their children about race via an exposure strategy is not altogether new; other researchers have also documented this practice (Bartoli et al. N.d.; Hagerman 2014, 2016; Hamm 2001). This project builds off of previous work and provides further insight as to how and why White, middle-class parents attempt to expose their children to POC. I argue parents’ exposure efforts are motivated by two underlying beliefs and practices - a “diversity ideology” wherein racial diversity is (primarily) constructed as a source of value that enriches White life (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014) – and a middle-class desire to craft a distinctive, high-status White child via a “concerted cultivation” parenting practice (Lareau 2003). Taken together, I argue White, middle-class parents pursue an exposure to diversity strategy because they believe – consciously or not – that diversity provides they and their children with the means to do and achieve racial and class distinction.

**Implicit Racial Socialization among Whites**

Racial socialization, or the process by which individuals learn about race and racism, occurs among all families irrespective of their racial background (Brown et al. 2007; Rockquemore et al. 2006). Parents play an especially instrumental role in the racial socialization process (Brown et al. 2007; Carter, Picca, and Murray 2012; Castelli, Zogmaister, and Tomelleri 2009; Hughes 2003; Hughes et al. 2006; Phinney 1996; Rockquemore et al. 2006). They teach their children about race through explicit instruction and implicit actions (Castelli et al. 2009; Hagerman 2014; Rockquemore et al. 2006). To understand these issues, a brief overview of the implicit racial socialization literature among White Americans is useful.

Implicit racial socialization consists of the non-verbal racial messages individuals consciously or unconsciously communicate to others. These non-verbal racial messages may be conveyed through an individual’s body language when around or discussing POC (Castelli et al.
or via the consumption of specific types of food, music, books, or film associated with a particular racial group (Hagerman 2014, 2016; Vittrup and Holden 2010). On a larger scale, implicit racial socialization also occurs as a consequence of the racial environment in which parents raise their child (Hagerman 2014; Rockquemore et al. 2006). Parents’ decisions about the most appropriate neighborhood to raise a family or attend school, fundamentally shapes the context in which a child develops an understanding of race – both with respect to members of his or her own racial group and members of outside racial groups (Hagerman 2014; Rockquemore et al. 2006) and may have a more significant influence on the development of their child’s attitudes and beliefs than a parent’s explicit instruction (Castelli et al. 2009). For example, Hagerman (2014) found that children who grew up in a White-segregated neighborhood and who attended a segregated school had a more difficult time understanding how race structured their life experience than children who attended an integrated school.

Like the results presented in this study, Hagerman (2014) also found that White parents who lived in a White-segregated neighborhood tried to racially socialize their children by taking them to venues or areas of the city where their children might encounter POC. Other parents enrolled their children in a public school with a sizeable number of minority students so they would have the opportunity “to engage with human diversity for purposes of social activism” (Hagerman 2014: 2606), a practice other scholars have also documented (Reay et al. 2007). My study builds off of Hagerman’s (2014) exposure findings by providing further insight into how and why White, middle-class parents expose their children to diversity. I also briefly examine instances when parents avoid this practice. Findings from this study advance the White racial socialization literature by demonstrating how this implicit practice is informed by both a diversity ideology (Embrick 2006, 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014) and class based beliefs and
practices tied to a desire to create a distinctive child via a concerted cultivation parenting practice (Lareau 2003).

**Diversity Ideology and Concerted Cultivation**

In today’s color-blind world, diversity is one of the few color-conscious aspects of social life people enthusiastically embrace. Within the popular imagination, diversity is lauded as a positive aspect of contemporary society (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2015; Embrick 2006, 2011) that has value and “adds value” to the normative White center of American, as well as Western culture (Ahmed 2012: 58; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Doane 2014; Reay et. al 2007). As bell hooks (1992) argues, diversity adds color, or spice, to the pallid palate of White life, helping it appear more dynamic and interesting. Diversity enriches White life in other ways as well. It establishes the moral worth (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2015; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Reay et. al 2007), liberal credentials (Burke 2012; Mayorga-Gallo 2014), and high status taste (Ahmed 2012; Reay et al. 2007) of the White diversity proponent. In short, diversity transforms the unexceptional White individual into someone more noteworthy and distinctive.

By claiming to support diversity, White individuals are able to re-imagine their racial identity as one worthy of respectful consideration rather than scornful condemnation (Burke 2012; Ahmed 2012; Doane 2014). As Doane (2014) argues “in the decades since the Civil Rights Movement it is increasingly socially desirable for individuals to embrace diversity in order to substantiate their non-racist or post-racial standpoint.” (p. 19). Because White understandings of diversity “deal with difference but not equality,” White diversity proponents are able to focus on the “happy talk” of diversity (Bell and Hartmann 2007:911), without having to consider past or
present forms of racial inequality (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Embrick 2006, 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014).

Many of the parents in this study have more than simply good intentions. All actively work to expose their children to POC. I argue their racial socialization efforts are related to, and informed by, their family’s middle-class status. In Annette Lareau’s landmark book Unequal Childhoods (2003), she examined how a family’s class status influenced parents’ childrearing practices. She found that middle and lower-income parents, regardless of race, adhered to different parenting philosophies, which in turn contributed to the “transmission of differential advantages to children” (2003: 5). Middle-class parents practiced “concerted cultivation” wherein they made strategic investments of time and money in the education of their child in the hope that such investments would safeguard, or improve their child’s future social standing. What remains unexamined in Lareau’s book, is how middle-class parents draw upon a concerted cultivation parenting philosophy to approach other forms of socialization; specifically, racial socialization. As I will argue in this paper, White, middle-class parents’ desire to expose their child to diversity, functions as a racialized extension of their adherence to concerted cultivation. Parents hope that by teaching their child about race (via exposure), they will cultivate a good, non-racist, White person who is well-prepared to live, learn, and work, in an increasingly diverse world.

METHODS

Interviews for this research were conducted in Cincinnati, a mid-sized, southern-Ohio river city (pop. 300,000) that borders the state of Kentucky. Historically, the city is lauded as having been a safe-haven for run-away slaves; once individual’s crossed the Ohio River and made landfall on the banks of Cincinnati’s shore – they were free. Today, minorities constitute
51% of the city’s population - 45% of whom are Black (2010 US Census Bureau). But the narrative of racial hope that made Cincinnati appear progressive, has been marred by recent events in the city’s history. Because of both of these things - Cincinnati’s sizable minority population and its recent history of racial tension – it makes for an interesting site to conduct race-related research.

Data for this study comes from interviews with 40 middle-class, White parents in two Cincinnati neighborhoods. Both of these neighborhoods are middle-income communities with median household incomes around $48,000 a year; $14,000 more per annum than the city average (2010 US Census Bureau). Though both neighborhoods share similar annual household incomes, they differ in terms of their racial composition. River Park is one of Cincinnati’s most multiracial residential neighborhoods - 58% of neighborhood residents are White and 42% non-White. In contrast, Greenfield most closely resembles a White-segregated neighborhood; 88% of area residents are White, and only 12% non-White.

The 40 parents who participated in this study were all middle-class homeowners. Most were female (77%), possessed an undergraduate or a graduate degree (80%), and had an annual household income that equaled or exceeded $100,000 (70%). Though family size varied, the average parent had two children between the ages of 3-10 (63%). The demographics of research participants differed somewhat by neighborhood. In general, River Park parents had fewer children and were more likely to be dual income than parents in Greenfield. River Park parents were also better educated and had slightly higher annual household incomes.

Two-thirds of the parents who participated in this study were recruited using a snowball sampling method. I met the earliest study participants at community council meetings. After I interviewed these parents, many sent out emails to neighborhood friends or posted a short
description about my study on their Facebook page. Once these network referrals were exhausted, I recruited the remaining participants by reaching out to area schools and churches, daycare centers, and Facebook neighborhood groups for assistance. Administrators at these institutions distributed my fliers, placed announcements in online forums or organizational newsletters, and invited me to community events where I might meet neighborhood parents.

Parents who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed at a location of their choosing. Interviews usually occurred at a neighborhood coffee shop or restaurant, though some were conducted at the participant’s home. On average, interviews lasted between one to two hours. All of the interviews were audio-recorded. Interview questions focused on parent and child’s social network, school and neighborhood choice, extracurricular activities, consumption habits, and parent/child discussions about race and class. It is important to note that my interview guide did not include a question about diversity; participants initiated all of the diversity discussions, though I did ask follow-up questions after the topic was introduced.

Interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2001; Glaser and Strauss 2012). Per the recommendation of Glaser and Strauss (2012), interviews were transcribed and read shortly after they occurred. Inductive reasoning guided the analysis and coding of interviews and conceptual categories like “exposure to diversity” were identified early in the project. Once this conceptual category was identified, I began a focused coding of interviews using the qualitative software program NVivo.

FINDINGS

Types of Exposure: How Parents Expose their Child to Diversity

Middle-class White parents in this sample discussed using “exposure to diversity” as their primary strategy to teach their children about “race” (i.e. people of color). The intensity and
regularity with which parents pursued this strategy varied but that did not invalidate diversity ideology’s influence. As Jackman argues, “it is misleading to take as the measure of an ideology’s reach its success in implanting identical mores into the minutiae of everyday life of all participants;” a dominant ideology must be “loose-jointed” and “flexible;” if it is to endure (1994: 70).

Those least committed to the exposure racial socialization strategy lived in Greenfield, a White segregated neighborhood, where they rarely saw or interacted with POC. Despite this, all participants stated they were “not-racist” and spoke earnestly about the importance of exposing their child to racial diversity. However, because there was little racial diversity in their neighborhood, friendship network, or, for some, at their child’s school, parents organized periodic racial fieldtrips to multiracial areas of the city. Parents realized if they wanted their child to see POC, they would have to leave their neighborhood and venture into the city. Parks in multiracial neighborhoods were favored, especially if the park featured a novel play area, and appealed to a wide cross-section of people, including both POC and other middle-class Whites. Participants did not explicitly state their preference for parks with a sizable contingent of middle-class Whites, but this was evident from their park choices. The parks they favored were located in middle-class, multiracial or majority-Black neighborhoods that were undergoing rapid and aggressive gentrification.

The goal of these visits was for their child to see, and perhaps even play with POC. Parents understood that cross-racial friendships were unlikely to emerge from their sporadic park visits but they were incentivized to make these trips anyway as a precautionary measure; none wanted to raise a child who feared or disliked POC. It is important to note that these periodic racial fieldtrips did not feel trivial to the parents who pursued this strategy. Parents described
feeling as if this was a progressive and, for some, subversive act that radically differed from the
decisions made by their own parents – most of whom avoided, and encouraged their child to
avoid, non-White areas. By placing their child in a racially diverse space, parents felt they were
signaling their good intentions as non-racists.

Parents who were most committed to the exposure strategy chose to raise their child in a
multiracial neighborhood and/or enroll their children in a majority-minority school/after-school
program. In general, these White parents were more socially and politically left-leaning than
parents in Greenfield, a trend that is consistent with research on White residents in multiracial
neighborhoods (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Mayoga-Gallo 2014).

Parents who established residence in the multiracial neighborhood of River Park said the
neighborhood appealed to them precisely because it contained a sizable number of non-white
residents. As Anna, a mother of three explains, “I think it is very important for my children to
see people of color. As a kid, I had a lack of exposure to anybody who wasn't a White person.”
Kerri, a mother one had a similar upbringing as Anna but was able to more clearly identify why
she thought it advantageous to raise her child in a multiracial neighborhood:

I read a lot and Cincinnati has always been very segregated [laughs] maybe. But I
want him to see… The best that I can I want him to see all races existing together
in harmony [laughs] maybe. That’s kind of what I want to say. I’ve never really
had to enunciate it before. But I think that kind of in a nut shell, that’s kind of
what I want him to see. That we all live together happily and we don’t have to be
put in separate groups.

Drawing upon the “happy talk” of diversity, River Park parents like Kerri want their children to
see that people of all races can peacefully co-exist (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Many participants
also believe their residence in a multiracial neighborhood helps them convey an important non-verbal message to their children about racial tolerance – a message many feel ill-prepared to conversationally negotiate.

Despite parents’ good intentions, the decision to move to a multiracial neighborhood did not necessarily mean that POC lived next-door or even on the same street as White, River Park families. What it did guarantee was that POC were a visible part of their children’s life. For many River Park parents that felt like a good start. After all, their residence radically differed from their own segregated upbringing and the residential decisions of most of their White family and friends. Hannah, a non-profit director and mother of one, offers the following insight as to why she desired living in a multiracial neighborhood:

It was a place where you felt like you were at least living in some proximity with African-Americans, and that was something I had a value about, and I had for quite a while been trying to figure out “what do you do to cross from this living side-by-side to actually becoming friends with” because working at a non-profit you just really have almost no contact with people of any other socioeconomic groups and anything else. At least when we walk we-- even if we don't have a long conversation with an African-American person or whatever, we happened to be on the same street, we nod and say “hello.”

As Hannah explained later in the interview, the interactions she had with her non-White neighbors were not as robust as she would have liked – but at least she was in a space where interracial contact was possible. For the White parents in this study like Kerri and Hannah, “valuing” diversity required them to be in the same space with POC; it did not require them to establish relationships with POC (Burke 2012; Mayorga-Gallo 2014). This perspective highlights
one of diversity ideology’s central tenants; namely that emphasis is placed on parents’ good intentions rather than the outcome of their actions.

A quarter of the parents, all of whom were residents of River Park, also enrolled their child in the neighborhood elementary school where the majority of students were minority (67%) and low-income (64%). As other researchers have documented, this is an uncommon schooling decision for White, middle-class parents who possess the financial means and know-how to enroll their child in a variety of public or private schools (Johnson and Shapiro 2003; Reay et al. 2007). This decision, like their decision to reside in a multiracial neighborhood, was also motivated by a desire to expose their child to POC. Kelly, an environmental activist, and mother of three explains:

I think that's part of what I like about the school, it's not like everybody is White skinned. So when they see somebody who is not White skinned it's not like a realization of “how can this be?” “What does this mean?” So I think, you know, there is obviously more learning and identifying that needs to happen, but not everybody who is at school, who is White skinned, behaves a certain way, or comes from a certain sized house, and the same goes for any other color too.

At the most basic level, Kelly hopes her children’s experience at a majority-Black school will help her children see POC as normal, unexceptional members of society and not as individuals to fear or revile. Her exposure efforts are thus framed as a strategy to counteract the negative racial stereotypes her children will encounter throughout their life.

Five of the 22 River Park parents, all of whom self-identified as anti-racists, also enrolled their child in a majority-Black afterschool program or extra-curricular sporting activity so as to further supplement their child’s exposure to POC. This small subgroup of parents feared their
child was not getting enough exposure to POC at school, on their street, or via their family’s social networks and sought other venues where their child might. Marianne explains why she enrolls her children in the multiracial neighborhood swim league:

That’s why I insist on going to the Rec Center to swim, to do the swim team. I take my kids there because they aren’t getting exposed to enough diversity at their school. [At the Rec Center] I see and get to know people, and my children see me having friends and hugging, you know, African American people, and having that relationship and hugging the kids and getting to know them. That’s important to me.

One of the things that distinguishes Marianne from other research participants is that she is trying to establish a different interactional norm for children. She wants her children to observe her interacting with POC in a friendly and warm manner – something she herself never witnessed as a child - and to learn from her behavior. In so doing, she aspires to non-verbally communicate to her children that Whites and POC need not live separate lives – they can be friends.

All of the individuals described above were well-intentioned parents who opted for a seemingly color-conscious, implicit racial socialization strategy. Unfortunately, their efforts were rarely coupled with more general discussions about race or racial inequality. Parents’ racial silence, and their preference to teach their child about race through a process of exposure (“actions speak louder than words”), undercut the color-conscious message they non-verbally conveyed to their child.
Parents’ exposure to diversity strategy was motivated by several considerations. First, few parents in this study possessed a clear racial identity as a White American. They believed that POC were raced, but failed to recognize that they were too. This meant that in most cases, their explicit and/or implicit racial socialization efforts were oriented towards teaching their child about non-Whites, a finding that is consistent with research on White Americans (Chesler, Peet, and Sevig 2003; Rockquemore et al. 2006). As I will describe in detail below, parents’ exposure efforts were motivated by their class-based adherence to a concerted cultivation parenting logic; parents made conscious efforts to position their children near POC because they believed diversity was valuable and as such, would enrich their child’s cultural capital.

When asked why “exposure to diversity” was important, parents cited a few reasons. The most common response was that parents hoped exposure to diversity would help their child feel comfortable around POC; a feeling that eluded many of the White parents in this sample during their early adult years. Indeed, the majority of the parents in this study grew up in White-segregated neighborhoods where they had little interaction with POC, a finding that is indicative of Whites’ hyper-segregation (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Charles 2003; Chesler et al. 2003). This proved difficult as young adults, when, after leaving home, they began studying, working, and living in more racially diverse environments. With a sense of profound shame, several White parents confided feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, and, at times, even fearful interacting with POC during their early adult years. They advocated for a racial exposure strategy so as to protect their child from this perceived racial handicap. Penelope, a property administrator, who grew up in a small, all-White town in rural Ohio, described her decision to move to River Park, a multiracial neighborhood:
I moved to River Park because of the racial diversity. I grew up out in the country, only White people, so when I grew up and got into the world a little more, it was a little difficult for me just because I’d never been around anyone who was even just a little different. When I was in college, I know it was awkward when I met people because I had a horrible scare in college. [Laughter] You know I’d just never been around people with any other skin color and I was very curious, like, “wow,” you know this is interesting, and I was scared of people, and it was, I know it was, awkward for everyone…I did not want my children to grow up and not know other cultures.

Penelope is not alone in her racial discomfort. Research conducted at the University of Michigan in the late 1990’s found that few White undergraduates had ever interacted with POC before starting college, and as a result were “fearful and awkward in intergroup interactions” (Chesler et al. 2003: 230). By moving to a multiracial neighborhood and enrolling her children in the local school, Penelope was trying to correct for this perceived racial handicap. She wanted to cultivate a different racial awareness for her children and hoped her decisions would help her children feel comfortable and confident in racially mixed settings.

Secondly, many parents believed exposure to POC would help them craft a moral, non-racist White child who was understanding of, and empathetic towards, individuals from different racial backgrounds. This re-imagined White identity stood in opposition to the outwardly bigoted Whiteness of their grandparents.

Parents’ desire to cultivate a non-racist White child through interracial contact was not an unreasonable proposition given most parents’ psychological understandings of racism. The majority of the middle-class parents in this study believed racism inhered in the minds of bigoted
individuals, who had little knowledge of world history or contact with POC. Racial contact was thus seen as a strategy to combat the development of a closed mind. By exposing their child to POC, and making racial contact seem like a regular and unremarkable feature of everyday life, parents hoped to add weight to the explicit, color-blind message they relayed to their child (i.e. “everyone is the same”). Evelyn, a Greenfield resident and mother of five explains:

I was not raised racist by any stretch of the imagination, but everyone I was exposed to seemed to be. So to me that was really sad and that was one of my big things, I really wanted mostly ethnic diversity to be pretty normal to them, that was one of my main goals, and I feel like we've somewhat achieved that.

Like the U.S. population at large, very few study participants understood racism as a structural phenomenon (Bonilla-Silva 1996; 2006; Doane 2003). Hence, most felt as if they were making a progressive choice pursuing an individualistic, child oriented, racial cultivation strategy. This belief has received mixed empirical support. Some research indicates that interactions with POC help Whites challenge pre-conceived racial stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva 2006; McDermott 2006) and develop a better understanding of racial inequality (Dalmage 2000; Frankenberg 1993, Yancey 2007). However, other research indicates that racial contact alters the world view of a much smaller contingent of Whites, specifically those with a non-White partner or spouse (Frankenberg 1993; Yancey 2007). But even this is not a given. For example, Twine and Steinbugler’s (2006) found that only 25% of White partners developed “racial literacy” as a consequence of their interracial relationship.

Parents also believed this cultivation of racial comfort added to the depth of their child’s cultural capital and helped mark their child as a worldly, high-status cultural omnivore (Peterson and Kern 1996; Reay et al. 2007; Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal 2007) rather than a provincial,
low-status, racist. Indeed, Peterson and Kern (1996) argue that a cultural shift has occurred as it relates to the taste of high-status Americans. The new harbingers of elite taste are cultural omnivores, who, in contrast to high status snobs of the past, evidence a discerning “openness to appreciating everything” (p. 904). Seen from this perspective, parent’s exposure efforts were motivated in part by their desire to increase the value of their child’s cultural capital.

Exposure to diversity also served as a classifying practice that some middle-class, White parents used to mark intra-racial distinctions between themselves (progressive, good Whites) and their ideological White others. For example, White middle-class parents who opted for a life of residential racial proximity, pointed to their residence in a multiracial neighborhood as something that distinguished them from their conformity-oriented, close-minded, suburban counterparts. In many ways White parents’ residence in a multiracial neighborhood was unique; research indicates that as of 2000, only 29% of White Americans live in racially integrated neighborhoods. (Charles 2003). Parents’ adherence to an exposure strategy provided they and their children with a certain measure of social prestige or what Hughey (2012) terms “color capital.” Hughey (2012) argues that Whites routinely view themselves as bland and cultureless. To fill the void of their cultural emptiness, and to signal their progressive ideals, many Whites position themselves close to non-White people, ideas, and/or products so as to mitigate their “White debt” (Hughey 2012).

A smaller contingent of middle-class White parents also thought their child might derive financial or occupational benefits as a result of their racial comfort, which they framed as a kind of soft skill. As parents repeatedly stressed during the interviews - contemporary society is characterized by increasing diversity, as the world becomes more inter-connected, schools, workplaces, and residences, are also becoming more diverse. Individuals who can comfortably
negotiate racial and ethnic diversity will have a leg up on those who cannot. For these parents, exposure efforts are clearly guided by a concerted cultivation parenting logic. Parents’ believe in the fungibility of cultural capital and view their exposure efforts as a way of ensuring their child will be able to parlay his or her omnivorous cultural capital into future economic opportunities. Parents’ like Bradley, a senior graphic designer at a global corporation, believe that exposure to diversity serves as a financial and occupational asset in other ways as well, namely by helping his White child appear more interesting:

I work at a global corporation so I think from a career and/or business standpoint you can, it adds a lot of perspective… Um really just from a social standpoint… I think it helps you interact with people better overall, right, and … I think it makes you more interesting as a person because you know, you have stories that not everyone has.

For Bradley, the cultivation of racial comfort helps White individuals flourish in an increasingly competitive and diverse workplace, by helping them to appear more colorful and dynamic than White peers who have led more sheltered lives. Bradley’s statement perfectly captures White understandings of diversity as a kind of “addon” that helps brighten and culturally enrich the banal normativity of the White self (Bell and Hartmann 2007: 907; hooks 1992; Hughey 2012).

Parents who were the most committed to the exposure racial socialization strategy, and who also identified as anti-racists, wanted their child’s exposure to POC to do more than cultivate a tolerant mind – they hoped it would challenge their child’s White privilege. To achieve this goal, parents sought out residential, educational, or recreational experiences where their child would experience being a numerical minority in a majority-minority space. Abigail, a
social worker, and mother of one, describes why she thought her daughter’s experience as an occasional numeric minority was important:

I love, first and foremost that she is a minority, because I feel like being a White kid you don’t like – how many times are you the minority in your neighborhood, not just your school, or like at the grocery store, or like where you live? I think – there’s – a false sense of importance, when you grow up being the majority. It’s like “I’m the majority because I’ve earned it” when in fact, of course you didn’t earn it, but it feels more powerful, it feels like “well there’s a lot of us here” um, and so without doing anything right, or wrong, but especially without doing anything right, you earn this sense of power, and this sense of importance and entitlement. So I think living here is a good lesson.

For all of the White, middle-class parents in this sample, the exposure to diversity racial socialization strategy acts as a racialized extension of their class based efforts at concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003). As Lareau (2003) describes it, concerted cultivation is a middle-class parenting practice, or cultural logic, designed to foster their child’s social, cultural, and intellectual skills so as to enhance their future educational and occupational competitiveness. To achieve this end, middle-class parents made calculated investments of time and money in the education of their child. To varying degrees, the middle-class White parents in this study also made strategic investments in the cultivation of their child’s racial acumen. They hoped that such investments would pay off in crafting a non-racist White child, who possessed the emotional and social skills necessary to successfully interact with people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, as will be described in the following section, there were limits to the type of exposure parents deemed valuable.
The Limits of Diversity

Many parents hoped their exposure efforts would pay off by producing an interracial friendship for their child. In part, interracial friendships were valued because they evidenced the parent’s success raising a non-racist White child. Parents like Justin, a vice president at a logistics firm, and a father of three, describes the pleasure and relief he derived from his son’s friendship with an African American boy:

“Our four-year-old started his first year of pre-school last year. By the time we went to the carnival in the fall, he had become very close friends with an African-American boy in his class, to the point where they were almost inseparable, you know. So that felt really good to me, just knowing that he was capable of that and that he, you know, there weren’t any, you know, barriers in his mind.

As Justin notes, part of what made him feel happy about his son’s friendship was that his son was capable of forming a friendship with a child outside of his race. To Justin, this friendship served as a testament to the fact that he was raising a morally upstanding White child. His son’s friendship also filled him with a sense of hope that race relations in the U.S. could be repaired, and that his son, and by extension also he and his wife, were playing a role in that repair.

It is important to note however that some interracial friendships were valued more highly than others. Though middle-class White parents loved the idea of their child having a diverse friend network, they were most comfortable limiting this diversity to middle-class POC who shared similar class-based practices. This kind of “homogenized diversity (Rich 2011) was easy for parents to celebrate because it presented few challenges to their class-based behaviors or worldviews. Participants believed that middle-class parents of color espoused the same beliefs as
middle-class White parents, and adhered to similar practices and understandings of good parenting.

Parents were not as enthusiastic about their child establishing a friendship with a low-income POC. In fact, most held deeply ambivalent feelings about the prospect. Parents continued to believe that diversity was valuable, but were also quick to assert the limits of that value. In general, low-income individuals of all races were described as possessing coarse and uncivilized manners. Their bodies and homes were read as being dirty and/or potentially unsafe. Consequently, parents worried that sustained contact with low-income children or adults would negatively affect their child’s middle-class presentation of self.

For example, Hannah, a self-avowed anti-racist White mother, sent her daughter to a majority Black, low-income neighborhood school because she was vehemently opposed to de-facto racial segregation and believed if she wanted things to change, she would have to make decisions that reflected her political and social beliefs. Though she was deeply committed to living a racially integrated life, she also expressed concern at some of the ways in which her daughter’s racial contact impacted her performance of class – specifically with respect to her daughter’s newly learned “lower-class” speech patterns:

She became quickly able to imitate the sound and the words -- and it came out more in a - I say more subtle way - but we would hear her speak and say “That's slang. You might say a lot of slang at school, but we don't talk slang at home” and so it-- there was about a year when I seriously considered that by the summer she was going to need to go to some kind of little finishing school, or some kind of etiquette thing to kind of reestablish a little bit of culture but she managed to find
a balance where she understood that you could talk one way one place and another at another.

Though Hannah was disquieted by her daughter’s use of “slang,” and the impact her daughter’s contact had on her middle-class presentation of self, she was not bothered enough to pull her out of the majority-Black school she attended. Hannah overcame her sense of apprehension by focusing on what she hoped her daughter’s exposure to POC might achieve; a non-racist White child with a racially diverse friend network. This decision also helped publically identify Hannah, and the other middle-class parents like her, as a good non-racist White – even though she, and most of the other parents in this study, struggled with feelings of classism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Middle-class White parents’ adherence to an exposure racial socialization strategy was seen as a departure from, and improvement upon, the racial socialization practices of their parents. All of the parents in this study felt their child’s life was more racially integrated than their own and they prided themselves on their efforts to cultivate a child who surpassed them in terms of their level of racial comfort and awareness. This was especially true of the parents who lived in the multiracial neighborhood and/or who enrolled their child in a majority non-White school. By being in favor of diversity, White parents felt as if they were crafting Whiteness anew and producing a tolerant and worldly racial identity, rather than one steeped in Jim Crow bigotry (Ahmed 2012).

Exposure efforts were motivated by parents’ belief that diversity was valuable, and as a source of value, should be cultivated. Parents’ class-based adherence to a concerted cultivation parenting logic meant that middle-class, White parents actively worked to alter the racial
landscape of their child’s life, in the hope that exposure to POC would help them cultivate a high status, non-racist White child. Others believed that exposure to diversity provided their child with a much needed, racial-soft-skill that enhanced their child’s cultural capital, increased their educational and occupational competitiveness, and established them as a worldly cultural omnivore, rather than a provincial suburbanite. Thus from the parents’ perspective, exposure to diversity yielded clear future pay-offs, many of which could be converted into future economic rewards.

Exposure to diversity also provided middle-class White parents with the sense that they were pursuing a feel-good, progressive racial politics. Parents were able to assuage their collective sense of White guilt by framing diversity, and specifically their efforts to expose their child to diversity, as a kind of “racial repair” that placed they and their children “beyond racism” (Ahmed 2012: 164). Through their efforts, parents were able to craft a positive White racial identity for themselves and their children.

While parents’ desire to expose their children to POC was an improvement from their parents’ decision to raise their children in a White segregated, participants’ exposure efforts were frequently symbolic and partial. This was especially true of the Greenfield parents whose primary form of racial socialization was family fieldtrips to multiracial parks. These trips may have enhanced their child’s racial comfort, but they did not necessarily lead to the cultivation of greater racial awareness. If anything they may have helped re-inscribe White invisibility by positioning POC as the ones who “have race;” not Whites. Within this context, POC were presented as symbolic racial tokens or “spice” (hooks 1992).

Parents who lived in River Park, and who sent their child to a majority non-White school, conveyed a different message to their child. They wanted their child to see multiracial spaces as
normal spaces where Whites and POC could both congregate and play. However, few were concerned with the quality of the interaction that transpired in these spaces. Whether conscious or not, parents also taught their child that some relationships with POC were more desirable to pursue than others; not all diversity was valuable. Parents juggled both of these concerns – a desire to expose their child to POC because they believed such contact was valuable – vs. a fear that contact with lower-income people would undermine their child’s middle-class presentation of self. Though parents claimed to desire a diverse friend network for their child, what they most desired was a friend network where people were celebrated for looking different, provided they acted the same. Parents’ feelings of classism, and their concern that lower-class tastes and behaviors would corrupt their child’s middle-class pedigree, hurt and undermined parents’ progressive agenda.

For many of the parents in this study, this seemingly color-conscious plan functioned as little more than a *color-blind* racial socialization strategy. Parents taught children that differences were to be celebrated but not questioned. Unfortunately, tolerating or even celebrating difference does not bring us closer to the anti-racist goal of demanding equal treatment and opportunities for people of all colors.

Parents’ class-based racial socialization efforts were fueled by their espousal of a diversity ideology (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014). Diversity ideology holds that any differences, whether they are related to race, gender, sexual orientation, or lifestyle choices, should be accepted, and perhaps even celebrated (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014). Absent from this ideology is a recognition of power differentials, hierarchy, or inequality (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014). Questions as to why some people, spaces, and practices are valued more highly than others are also ignored. The problem
with this viewpoint is that racialization does not occur in a value-neutral vacuum. Rather, as Burton et al. remind us, “racialization… produces hierarchies of power and privilege among races. These racial hierarchies constitute the basis for racism, discrimination, and the perpetuation of inequality in a society and within families” (2010: 445). Parents’ adherence to a diversity ideology misled them about the best way to combat racism. Fighting racial inequality must not be an individual level pursuit, pursued by well-meaning people in isolation. At the most basic level, anti-racism requires people to recognize the structural foundation of social inequality.

White children did learn something about POC as a consequence of exposure. However, this strategy did not necessarily contribute to the cultivation of a more racially aware White identity. When the exposure to diversity strategy is decoupled from critical conversations about race, it reinforces the idea that Whites are “normal,” while non-White individuals are raced. Parents’ inattention to discussions about their child’s race, or the associated privileges of Whiteness, reinforced a color-blind understanding of the world.

Findings from this research provide us insight into an implicit racial socialization strategy embraced by middle-class White parents in a Midwestern city. Future research should investigate whether middle-class White parents in other regions of the United States also adopt an exposure to diversity racial socialization strategy. Additionally, researchers should examine implicit racial socialization strategies adopted by lower-income White parents. Research indicates that low-income Whites adhere to a different parenting philosophy than middle-class Whites (Lareau 2003) and that many lead more racially integrated lives (Hartigan 1999; McDermott 2006). It therefore stands to reason that implicit racial socialization may assume a different form among lower-income White parents.
CHAPTER III
PROTECTING PRIVILEGE: WHITE PARENTING PRACTICES IN DIVERSE NEIGHBORHOODS

‘Whiteness’ is a space defined only by reference to those named cultures it has flung at its perimeter. Whiteness is in this sense a relational category... [that] needs to be delimited and ‘localized.

- Ruth Frankenberg

INTRODUCTION

Parents are the primary agents of socialization during the early years of their children’s lives. However, not all parents have equal control over the socialization process. Family resources – financial, social, and cultural -- enable and constrain parents’ socialization efforts (Lareau 2003). Privileged parents have the greatest range of options available to them when determining the neighborhood where their children will be raised, the school their children will attend, and where and with whom their children will play (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003; Mose 2016; Pugh 2009). In this way and others, they decisively narrow the field of potential people with whom their child might interact - setting the stage for the development of their children’s identity.

Many researchers who investigate White identity development explore how residence in a middle-class, majority-White neighborhood affects middle-class Whites’ understanding of self

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and other (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Frankenberg 1993; Hagerman 2014). They conclude that middle-class Whites raised in these racially isolated environments possess a stunted racial awareness. Immersed in communities where everyone around them is socially similar, few are confronted with situations that force them to consider how they are marked and shaped by race. This is troubling since Whites disproportionately benefit from their position in the racial hierarchy yet are typically not aware of their social structural location or the rewards they reap as members of the dominant group.

To date, we know little about whether, or how, the social context of childhood differs for middle-class Whites raised in communities with racial and class diversity. If, as Pulido argues, the “reproduction of White privilege is predicated on distancing oneself from the poor and people of color” (Pulido 2006: 38) - how do middle-class White parents who live in neighborhoods with the poor and people of color attempt to hold on to their family’s racial and class privilege? What parenting practices do they institute to protect and perhaps even enhance their children’s privilege in the face of possible diminishment from lower-income, White and Black neighbors?

This project examines White, middle-class parenting practices in two mixed-income neighborhoods – one majority-White and the other multiracial. Within both neighborhoods, parents identify White and Black low-income residents as “others,” yet how they discuss and negotiate contact with their poor neighbors depends upon the neighborhood context and the race of the group in question. Perhaps counterintuitively, I find that parents erect stronger symbolic boundaries around their low-income White, rather than their low-income Black neighbors. Among study participants, low-income Whites uniformly conjure feelings of disgust and are
actively avoided, while low-income Black residents provoke feelings of ambivalence -- contact with them is judged to be both valuable and threatening.

Throughout this chapter, I investigate how White, middle-class parents adopt specific parenting practices to protect their children’s privileged structural location. As such, I examine how parents’ differential assessments of otherness influence their parenting practices and evaluate when and in what contexts parents pursue or avoid contact with their poor Black and White neighbors.

A study of racialized White parenting practices is important because few Whites speak with their children about race (Hagerman 2016; Vittrup and Holden 2010). Consequently, White children first learn about social differences through their parents’ actions (Castelli, Zogmaister and Tomelleri 2009). Parents’ boundary work sets the stage for the development of later relationships and provides White, middle-class children with the conceptual framework to rationalize future acts of exclusion. It also contributes to the development of a White identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whiteness is both a privileged structural location and a racial identity (Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004). The origins of both date back to European colonial expansion when White Europeans first created “race” to justify their reorganization of social relations within their colonized territories; they positioned themselves as rulers and benefactors of a system of White domination (Bonilla-Silva 1996; Frankenberg 1993). Though the days when the sun never set on the British empire have since passed, White domination remains. Nowhere is this more evident than in the United States, a nation state created by Whites, for Whites (Mills 1997; Omi and Winant 1994; Roediger 1994). For most of U.S. history, Whites have maintained their power
through processes of exclusion. They assumed complete control over the political, economic, and ideological domains of U.S. life such that their beliefs and practices became hegemonic (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Hughey 2012; Lewis 2004; Omi and Winant 1994). They also denied people of color rights and privileges readily extended to White Americans. The list of exclusions is long but included such things as the right to full political participation, a White-equivalent public education, and bank financing to purchase or maintain a home. In the words of W.E.B. DuBois (1903), people of color were systematically denied a seat at the (White) table until the mid-1950’s, when in response to Civil Rights activism, the U.S. government instituted progressive legal reforms banning racial discrimination in education (1954), employment (1964), voting (1965), and housing (1968). The result of hundreds of years of racial exclusion has been the steady accumulation of advantages for Whites and the “sedimentation of racial inequality” for minorities (Oliver and Shapiro 2006). Consequently, when we speak of Whiteness as structural location we are speaking of a history of domination that has allowed Whites to assume and maintain a position of power in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 1996; Lewis 2004).

In addition to being a structural location, Whiteness is also a privileged racial identity; for most it remains a “lived but not seen aspect of White experience” (Frankenberg 1993: 135; Lewis 2004). Research indicates that few Whites think or talk about race, much less their own White identity (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Frankenberg 1993; Hagerman 2015; Hughey 2012; Lewis 2004). When pushed for descriptors of Whiteness, researchers find that White participants describe it as neutral, bland, empty, and homogeneous (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Frankenberg 1993; Hughey 2012; Lewis 2004). Whites denial of their racial identity and of the salience of race more generally, allows them to ignore their role in the perpetuation of racial inequality; they cannot address what they
do not see (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Lewis 2004). Most researchers believe that White’s denial of race stems from their residential segregation from people of color. Inspired by Allport’s “contact hypothesis” (1979), these researchers posit that racial awareness is a product of racial contact (Frankenberg 1993; Tuan 1998; Young 2004); Whites do not think about race because they rarely interact with people outside of their race.

Implicit in this research are two assumptions about middle-class Whites who live or attend schools in segregated neighborhoods. The first is that middle-class Whites desire to avoid people of color, especially Blacks (Exceptions include Hagerman 2014). There is however a growing body of literature that suggests that middle-class White parents may now “celebrate diversity” and welcome interracial contact (Ball et al. 2004; Reay et. al. 2007; Underhill N.D.). In fact, some studies indicate that a contingent of liberal, middle-class White parents go out of their way to expose their children to people of color due to an emerging, class-based belief that racial diversity enriches the social context of White childhood (Hagerman 2014; Underhill N.D.). Thus, what remains unclear is how this celebratory embrace of racial diversity informs the day-to-day decisions of White, middle-class parents who reside in a multiracial neighborhood. Do they, fueled by the belief that diversity is valuable, negotiate contact with their non-White neighbors similarly or differently than White parents in segregated neighborhoods?

The second assumption guiding prior research is that White, middle-class parents recognize people of color as the exclusive threat to their children’s racial and class-based privilege. A review of the Whiteness literature, however, reveals that middle-class Whites have long treated poor Whites (i.e. “White trash,” “hillbillies,” and “rednecks”) as racial others who exist outside the bounds of normative (middle-class) Whiteness (Hartigan 2005; McDermott 2006; Roediger 2007). Indeed, historical research indicates that at various times and places, poor
Whites have been understood as “near Black” (Hartigan 2005; Roediger 2007). If, as some researchers suggest, the meaning of Whiteness varies locally (Frankenberg 1993; Hagerman 2014; Hartigan 1999), how then do White, middle-class parents attempt to protect their children’s privilege if the neighborhood other is also White? Do parents in White-segregated neighborhoods adopt similar or different practices than parents who live in a multiracial neighborhood with a differently-raced other?

METHODOLOGY

Data for this research comes from 40 interviews conducted with middle-class, White parents in Cincinnati, Ohio (pop. 300,000). Respondents were recruited from two middle-income neighborhoods, River Park and Greenfield. Both neighborhoods possess roughly equivalent median household incomes ($48,000) but different racial compositions (2010 US Census Bureau). River Park is one of Cincinnati’s most multiracial residential neighborhoods - 58% of neighborhood residents are White, and 42% non-White. In contrast, Greenfield most closely resembles a White-segregated neighborhood; 88% of area residents are White, and only 12% non-White. These neighborhoods were selected so as to better observe whether the racial composition of a neighborhood influences what or how White parents teach their children about race.

The 40 parents who participated in this study were all White middle-class homeowners. Most were female (77%), well-educated (80% had at least an undergraduate degree), and had an annual household income that equaled or exceeded $100,000 (70%). Most study participants had

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3 Both River Park and Greenfield are pseudonyms in order to better protect the anonymity of study participants.
two children (n=63%) between the ages of 4-10 though there were also 15 participants with older children (11-18).

The participants were recruited with the help of a snowball sampling method. I met the earliest study participants at community council meetings. After I interviewed these parents, many sent out emails to neighborhood friend. Once these network referrals were exhausted, I distributed fliers to area churches, daycare centers, and neighborhood recreational centers. A few neighborhood schools also allowed me to hand out recruitment flyers at school events or to place a research announcement in their school newsletter. One third of study participants were recruited via this strategy.

Participating parents were interviewed at a location of their choosing, mostly at their home or a nearby coffee shop. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and all were audio-recorded. During the interview, parents were asked questions about their parenting practices, especially as they related to parents’ negotiation of cross-racial and cross-class contact for their children. For example, parents were asked to describe the factors that influenced their neighborhood and school choice, as well as more day-to-day decisions about where and with whom their children were permitted or prohibited from playing.

In addition to interviewing White parents, I also conducted observational research in both of the chosen neighborhoods. I spent time attending neighborhood parks, pools, recreation centers, libraries, and community events to assess whether White parents visited community spaces with their children, and once there, how interracial and interclass interaction unfolded. While in the field, I took observational notes on my cell phone which I later transformed into fuller field notes upon returning home. This type of observational research is important because it allows researchers to observe practices that participants’ themselves may not be fully aware of
and to also examine how parents stated beliefs translate into everyday practice (McDermott 2006).

I used a grounded theory approach for the analysis of interviews and field notes (Charmez 2001; Glaser and Strauss 2012). Interviews were transcribed shortly after they were conducted and were read once before they were coded in NVIVO, a qualitative software program. All of the interviews were coded twice. In the first round of coding I identified master-codes that addressed the most prominent research themes. I then I went back through each of the master-codes and identified narrower sub-themes.

I was particularly interested in understanding the basis of parents’ “boundary work” - how they “construct(ed) similarities and differences between themselves and other groups” – both in terms of the criteria they used to determine an individual’s otherness and how a designation of otherness influenced their parenting practices (Lamont 2000: 3). After reading through the master-codes, it became clear the primary marker of otherness was social class rather than race. Further coding allowed me to identify three sets of criteria parents used to determine if someone was a class based insider or outsider. They assessed their physical appearance, parenting practices, and use of neighborhood space.

Once I understood these criteria, I looked to see if parents evaluated neighborhood others differently on the basis of race. I analyzed how parents spoke about their poor White and Black neighbors and looked to see if there was any distinction in terms of how they were discussed and parents’ receptivity or hostility to contact with members of either group.

Finally, I completed a tally of parenting practices in each neighborhood. I counted the number of parents who allowed their children to play in their front yard or bike or walk unsupervised to the home of a friend. I also documented parents’ use of neighborhood space;
how many parents attended the neighborhood park, school, or pool. This allowed me to draw 
inferences regarding the likelihood of participants’ children encountering their low-income 
neighbors. The frequency of these parenting practices is documented in Table 1.

FINDINGS

Lower-Class Others

Among the White, middle-class parents who participated in this study, social class, rather 
than race determined who parents identified as the other. As Sayer (2005) describes, others are 
individuals or groups whom people “define themselves in opposition to…by attributing negative 
properties to them, in contrast to which their own identity is defined as normal and good” (p. 58). 
In both neighborhoods, the other was always the low-income neighbor -- White or Black. They 
were invoked when parents were asked if there was anything that “keeps your neighborhood 
from being a good place to raise a child;” or “concerns you about the neighborhood school;” or 
“prevents you from attending neighborhood parks.”

Middle-class parents pointed to the “out-of-control” qualities of their low-income 
neighbors as evidence of their otherness and as justification for acts of avoidance and social 
distance. Though there was overlap in terms of how participants understood the lower-income 
families in their neighborhood, parental responses also varied by the race of the low-income 
group. As will be discussed in the next two sections, residential proximity to lower-income 
Whites, rather than Blacks, provoked the greatest anxiety among participants.

Greenfield: White (on White) Disgust

Greenfield is a White-segregated neighborhood (88% White) known for its distinctive 
mid-century housing stock; one-story ranches and bungalows abound, but statelier, more 
expensive Tudor and Victorian homes can also be found. Though Greenfield is located within
the city limits, it has a suburban feel. Modestly landscaped single-family homes are situated on sidewalk lined streets. Many feature a fenced-in backyard and a swing set where children run and play in the warmer months. First time homebuyers and new families are drawn to Greenfield because of the affordable housing stock.

Rents in Greenfield are also affordable and hence attract individuals with fixed and low incomes. Rental properties are distributed throughout the neighborhood and are not relegated to the periphery of the community. In fact, several Greenfield streets contain an equal number of apartment buildings and single-family homes. Participants who lived near, or in between low-cost apartment buildings described overhearing their low-income neighbors’ conversations when they sat in their backyard, and mentioned feeling visually accosted by their presence when they stepped outside to walk their dog or ride bikes with their child. Only two of the White, middle-class parents in this study grew up in a mixed income community. Consequently, most were unaccustomed to living around -- much less interacting with -- their low-income neighbors.

Middle-class parents celebrate the affordability of the neighborhoods single-family homes but worry about the number of inexpensive apartments peppered throughout neighborhood streets. Camelia, a long-term resident and working mother of three explains that what concerns homeowners is not the buildings themselves but the poor White residents; “Yeah, I mean our part of the neighborhood is nice, but there are areas that are shit-ville [whispered] -- And um [pause] it is not so much the buildings -- it is the people [whispered].” Though Camelia’s response may sound harsh, all Greenfield parents spoke disparagingly about the disgusting, out-of-control “White trash” who lived in their neighborhood. As Lawler argues, disgust is an important emotion to examine because it is “involved in the work of drawing of distinctions” (Lawler 2002: 438). Parents’ feelings represent a visceral, embodied rebuke of their neighbors’ class-
based otherness. Parents did not view their low-income, White neighbors as being like them. If anything, a shared racial identity only amplified parents’ feelings of revulsion.

Poor White residents were not only disgusting, they, like poor Whites in other studies, were also polluting (Hartigan 1999, 2005; McDermott 2006). The visibility of their bodies damaged the desirability of all neighborhood spaces: public and private. So much so, that participants purposely avoided most neighborhood spaces, including the neighborhood park - an expansive, wooded space that featured a paved walking path, hiking trails, and a children’s playground. In fact, only four parents visited the park on a regular basis. The rest drove 10-15 minutes to attend a park in a wealthier neighborhood. Parents spoke candidly about avoiding the park because of the rough words and unkempt appearance of the White, low-income park goers:

You go to the park and your kids can obviously choose to play with whoever they want, and there have been a couple times where, you know, he’s been playing with other kids, and these kids look like they had, a pretty rough upbringing but, you know, they were a bit disheveled, they didn’t look terribly clean, and I'm not just talking about dirt, it looked like it had maybe been days since they had been bathed, I mean many days kind of thing. Then you start worrying “are they sick?” and it's like, “okay, how many times have your kids been sick? I mean, fricken’ countless times right?” Obviously sickness knows no boundaries. But it’s like, the point was, you know, actually worrying a little bit about physical interaction between these kids and my kids.

In the above quote, Justin, a father of three, catches himself worrying whether his children will become sick as a result of their interaction with the “dirty” White kids at Greenfield Park. He recognizes both the irrationality of the thought and also what the thought suggests; namely his bias against low-income Whites. What is interesting about Justin’s admission, is that
he, like other Greenfield parents, explains that his feelings of trepidation do not extend to low-income African Americans: “it’s tricky because I feel it more with White lower-class kids then I do with African American kids. I don’t have the same feeling [with them]…it doesn’t look like they haven’t been bathed in days. They actually look like they’ve been pretty well taken care of.” What disgusts Justin is White poverty, not Black poverty. He notes that the low-income Black children he encounters at the multiracial park his family visits, look better cared for than the poor Whites he sees at Greenfield park. Even though most of the country’s poor are White (DeNavas-Walt and 2015), middle-class Whites like Justin are unaccustomed to seeing White poverty.

Parents’ self-image and their sense of middle-class respectability, were marred by their residential proximity to low-income Whites. In fact, most parents felt stigmatized by their day-to-day exposure to their low-income neighbors. To minimize their stigma, parents worked to brighten the class-based boundaries that distinguished them from their White others. The extent to which they were able to achieve this goal depended upon their financial resources. Middle-class families with smaller annual incomes had more social contact with their low-income neighbors because they could afford less social distance. They were more likely to live on streets with apartment buildings and to enroll their children in the high-poverty neighborhood school (n=3), where 74% of students received free or reduced lunch.

Patricia’s story illustrates this point well. Patricia and her husband identify as middle-class, but their hold on middle-class status is insecure. Patricia cuts coupons, shops for sales at the grocery store, and adheres to a monthly budget. Though Patricia is a homeowner who can afford weekly dinners out, and occasional family vacations, she is aware that such luxuries

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4 For example, to preserve the good opinion of new acquaintances, several parents purposefully misled people about where they lived. They told new acquaintances they lived in a more affluent neighborhood that bordered Greenfield.
require her family to cut costs elsewhere. Consequently, her daughters attend the high-poverty neighborhood school and not a private school, as Patricia and her husband would have liked:

My very first day at Greenfield Elementary, my daughter and I went to meet the teachers and [pause] it was a shock. It was very shocking to go into a room, knowing how I grew up, and my husband, and my daughter - who’s very well-groomed - um to see moms with tattoos on their necks, and you know, big piercings. My sister-in-law who comes from money she’s like, “you’re taking your kids where?” And we’re like, “we can’t afford [the local private school] so we’re gonna put them in the public school in Greenfield.” And she’s like, “ewwwww! I just don’t like what I see when I drive past there. I don’t like the people I see going into the school.” And I have to admit, I understand where she’s coming from.

Patricia describes feeling stigmatized by but resigned to her decision to enroll her daughters in Greenfield Elementary. To mitigate her feelings of stigma, Patricia purchased name-brand clothes for her daughters and enrolled them in costly skiing and tennis lessons few families at Greenfield Elementary could afford. In this way she visually marked her daughters as higher status than their lower-income, White peers. In the face of their proximity to poverty, Patricia’s family made choices that helped her children hold onto both their racial and class privilege. This type of boundary work was important for Patricia because she wanted to ensure that her children were not mistaken for low-status Whites.

Many parents also actively discouraged their children from forming friendships with their poor White neighbors. Participants said they were distrustful of low-income parents and
disquieted by the idea of their children adopting lower-class habits. Quinn, a father of one, describes why he objected to his son’s playing with the low-income children next door:

Right and it’s not that we didn’t want him to not socialize with the kids [next door], but judging on how the parents were as adults, we didn’t want him to be exposed to that - people fighting in their front yards. We had one lady we called her the baby factory…she’s having babies like every nine to ten months and there’s a different guy at the house and she’s being told by the court and system that she’s not capable of being a reasonable guardian of the children. So, it was like, oh my gosh, this is our neighborhood? And so if the question was do I want him to go out and play in the front yard - not a chance. Because if these kids, and they may be the greatest kids on earth, but I don’t want to socialize with their parents and I don’t want my son picking up what they’re feeding to their kids.

Quinn understands that it is unfair to judge the children next door on the basis of their parents’ behavior. Despite this, he is adamant about limiting his son’s exposure because he does not want him “picking up what they’re feeding to their kids.” Quinn’s statement hints at the idea of pollution described earlier. Quinn believes his son must be protected from the contaminated others who live next door. As such, Quinn discourages all contact between his family and his White, low-income neighbors, and even prohibits his son from playing in the front yard. Whether conscious of his actions or not, Quinn teaches his son that low-income Whites are intrinsically different from, and inferior to the middle-class Whites with whom he and his son regularly associate.

Quinn’s response to his low-income neighbors was not uncommon. Most Greenfield parents who lived on mixed-income streets tightened the “bubble of safety” around their child,
and in the process minimized undesirable social interaction. Like Quinn, parents confined their children’s play to private family spaces where their play could be easily supervised. Less than half of parents (44%) allowed their children to play in their front yard unattended and only two parents (11%) let their children walk or bike down their street unsupervised. Caitlyn, a massage therapist and mother of one, describes the supervised play environment she creates for her daughter, age seven:

Some parents [in my neighborhood] let their children play freely. That’s not my personal preference. I mean we have a backyard that’s fenced in. And she has a playset that I built her our first year there. So she is always out there playing and if she wants to go out front – well, I prefer to be with her. If she wants to go on a scooter ride then I go with her. I have a niece who is a twelve. So this last summer I did actually let them go on a bike ride and scooter ride by themselves [around the neighborhood]. But Leona had her cell phone. There was some anxiety there.

Like Caitlyn, no Greenfield parent allowed their children to bike or walk around their neighborhood unsupervised. In fact, most felt extremely uneasy about the prospect. They worried their “White-trash” neighbors may hurt or unnecessarily expose their children to inappropriate words or behaviors.

For Greenfield parents, supervision served a dual function. It safeguarded their children from dangerous outside influences and also served as a classifying practice for the parents themselves (Hays 1996). By embracing parenting norms that emphasized controlled supervision, Greenfield parents publically signaled their symbolic distance from their low-income White neighbors – whose children played outside unsupervised. Through these actions, parents
communicated that they were distinct from their lower-class neighbors; they were a different kind of White.

In order to further distance themselves from their White neighborhood others, parents also abandoned community spaces. They exclusively attended stores, parks, and sometimes even schools, in higher-income neighborhoods. These spaces were dominated by middle-class people, who “shared the same values” as my participants. It was in these class, and often also racially-segregated environments that parents felt the most comfortable and safe. Gwen, a professional mother of two explains:

In order for me not to helicopter my kids, they need to be in a safe enough environment regularly enough that I know that they can go and I don’t need to be there. For me that involves having my children play with other kids whose parents are like us – who have present, involved parents.\(^5\)

Being in mixed-income settings distressed and unnerved Gwen. Her feelings of discomfort stemmed from her distrust of low-income, White parents whom she characterized as uninvolved, irresponsible parents who possessed little knowledge of their children’s whereabouts.

How can we make sense of Greenfield parents’ acts of avoidance towards their low-income, White neighbors? As discussed earlier, parents view their poor White neighbors as a source of pollution. Poor Whites challenge the security of participants’ middle-class status and the normativity and neutrality of their White identity. As Hartigan (2005) argues, part of what is disconcerting about low-income Whites is their “dimension of sameness” (p. 60); they share the

\(^5\) LeMoyne and Buchanan (2011) define helicopter parenting as “an over-involvement of parents in their children’s lives” (p. 399).
same racial identity, but derive different material and social rewards from their class status. To maintain their family’s class and race-based privileges, parents tried to create physical and social distance between themselves and their low-income neighbors. One of the ways they achieve this goal is through a process of social closure whereby low-income people and spaces were resolutely avoided (Weber 2008). Parents whose limited resources afforded them less social distance, brightened the blurry race-based boundary in other ways; they purchased name-brand clothes and expensive lessons for their children. Both of these strategies helped middle-income White parents maintain and transmit their class and race-based privileges to their children.

As will be explored in the next section, White, middle-class parents in River Park were much more ambivalent about the low-income others in their neighborhood. Parents judged their presence to be both beneficial and threatening.

**River Park: White Ambivalence**

In some ways River Park and Greenfield have a lot in common. Both neighborhoods possess roughly equivalent median household incomes ($48,000 per year) and offer similarly priced homes in walkable neighborhoods close to downtown. Despite these similarities, River Park is distinct from Greenfield in several key ways. There is a vibrancy to the neighborhood not found in Greenfield. Some of it is due to the cheerful paint that adorns many of the neighborhoods wooden-frame homes and the whimsical gardens that decorate people’s summer lawns. Sturdy wooden container gardens brim with summer tomatoes and golden sunflowers.

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6 Social closure is an exclusionary tactic pursued by group members to enhance the value of the group’s assets (Weber 2008, see also Bourdieu 1984; Cassell 1993). Status groups achieve closure by restricting group membership and access to resources (Weber: 2008).
peek over picket fences. People are also outside, moving about the neighborhood. On a warm
day, exercising parents push jogging strollers past uniformed men and women waiting for the
bus and Black and White children run excitedly around the neighborhood park.

That both Black and White children are visible at the neighborhood park attests to the
racial diversity of River Park’s residents, 61% of whom are White and 34% Black (2010 US
Census). In fact, River Park is one of the most racially diverse neighborhoods in an otherwise
segregated city -- a feature that residents proudly emblazon on neighborhood-related websites
and discuss at length in person. Of the River Park parents who participated in this study, all said
they knowingly moved into a neighborhood with poor and non-White residents. Many even said
they moved to River Park because of the racial diversity. They were proud they had opted out of
a suburban neighborhood filled with “conservative” Whites and opted in to a neighborhood
where in the words of Fiona, a divorced mother of one, there was “more a spirit of inclusion and
acceptance of differences…and also more of a liberal political ideology.”

While River Park parents were more open to exposing their children to people from
different racial and class backgrounds they were not as open as they seemed. Like middle-class
Whites in other studies, River Park parents celebrate middle-class people of color but are
decidedly more ambivalent about their lower-income counterparts (Burke 2012; Pugh 2009;
Reay et al. 2007; Rich 2011; Underhill N.D.). Elizabeth, a River Park mother of three, neatly
summarized this tension: “I think diversity is good but sometimes it is maybe not necessarily the

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7 This abstract White identity— the suburbanite – was the first group of individuals whom parents
established as their other. They functioned as both their reference group and their foil. This kind of intra-
racial, intra-class boundary making has also been documented by researchers who study middle-class
White residence in multiracial neighborhoods (Burke 2012; Hartigan 1999; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Rich
2011).
people I want my kids hanging around.” Statement’s like Elizabeth’s were issued by most River Park parents.

Parent’s ambivalence towards their Black low-income neighbors was not immediately self-evident. If anything, River Park parents appeared more comfortable living in a neighborhood with low-income neighbors, as evidenced by their cavalier approach with respect to their children’s comings and goings. Many parents (55%) let their children play outside or walk or bike to the home of a neighborhood friend unsupervised – a practice that was all but unheard of among Greenfield parents (See Table 1 for cross-neighborhood comparison).

Obscured by the celebratory diversity rhetoric and free-range parenting practices was the social context of participants’ streets. For example, when I asked participants who lived on their street, it became clear that the vast majority of their neighbors were other middle-class Whites like themselves. Thus, while a socially progressive worldview contributed to participants’ free-range approach to parenting, it did not entirely account for parents’ actions. Equally, if not more important, was the fact that their families were relatively isolated from people of color and neighborhood poverty. Marianne, a mother of three and a River Park resident of six years explains:

I thought [River Park] would be more diverse. We do have a few African American families that live on our street. Well I take that back, there’s one family, and one White couple that has three African American children they adopted. Now that I’ve moved here, I feel like there are pocket streets where certain people live and other streets where they don’t.

As Marianne’s statement suggests, River Park was diverse in the aggregate but it was less so on a block-by-block basis. River Park’s low-income housing was also distant from the
neighborhood center and participants’ homes. According to Farrah, a long term resident, this meant that low-income residents, most of whom were Black, were “sequestered…they’re really not… in the community as much.” Consequently, parents had little day-to-day contact with their low-income Black neighbors unless they visited the local park or pool or enrolled their children in the high-poverty, majority-Black neighborhood school.

Interestingly, River Park parents who lived closer to low-income Blacks adopted similar practices as Greenfield parents. They did not let their children play in the front yard, or walk or bike to the home of a friend unsupervised. Like Greenfield parents, they too were uncomfortable with the idea of their children being near neighborhood apartment buildings, because as Anna, a mother of three admits “apartments make me uncomfortable… There are just too many people; I don’t know what’s going on.” As a result of parents’ sense of dual discomfort -- for their children and themselves -- an interesting pattern of neighborhood interaction emerged.

In terms of neighborhood play, 90% of River Park parents said they visited the local park on a regular basis because, parents explained, they hoped to encounter “Black kids” with whom their children might interact. Though it was true that both White and Black families used the space, during my eighty hours of observational research, I never witnessed one time when the number of non-White individuals equaled or exceeded the number of White individuals. Thus, despite the park’s location in a multiracial neighborhood, it maintained a feeling of being a “White space” (Anderson 2015) and more specifically a White, middle-class space, as evidenced by the parents’ appearance – their name-brand athletic apparel and expensive jogging strollers -- and also by their practice.

While there were certainly Black children at the park, interracial interaction was not always commonplace. Much of this had to do with parents’ park behavior. As numerous
participants discussed, middle-class parents have a tendency to “monitor” their children in public spaces, especially parents with children age five and below. However, parents did more than simply monitor their children’s behavior, they hovered over them, remaining footsteps behind their child at all times. The only time parents allowed their child to run unattended, was when they encountered an acquaintance; in most cases another middle-class, White parent. Few middle-class, White parents spoke or interacted with people they did not know and almost none helped their child broker or sustain interracial play. An unintended consequence of parents’ class-based behavior was that young White children were able to see people of color on the playground but they rarely had an opportunity to interact with them.

As discussed earlier, River Park parents were less open to frequenting spaces where an equal or greater number of low-income Blacks were in attendance. Spaces like the neighborhood pool were avoided by 59% of participants in favor of private pools 10 to 20-minutes from their home. When I asked parents why they did not use the pool down the street from their home, most provided a non-racial response. They remarked upon the “unappealing” aesthetics of the pool or the “out-of-control,” “loud” behavior of the pool attendees. The nine River Park parents who did frequent the space offered a slightly different assessment. They believed it was the sizable presence of low-income Blacks that served as the ultimate deterrent. Rosalind, a mother of two and neighborhood pool attendee explains:

I don’t think people from this street go there, which is an interesting thing. I think it’s, it’s a SES thing. It draws um a lower class, but it is a great pool. [Pause] But it could also be because they don’t like all the brown people at our pool. I think that’s ridiculous but it could be that too.
In the minds of River Park participants, the pool, more so than the park, gave off the impression of being a lower-income, “Black space.” Though few of the parents cited race or class as the reason they avoided the neighborhood pool, it appeared as if they, like Greenfield parents, preferred frequenting spaces with people they judged as being “like them” -- a finding that is consistent with other research on middle-class White parents (Mose 2016; Pugh 2009).

River Park parents were more open to exposing their children to their lower-income neighbors than Greenfield parents, as evidenced by the greater number of families (n=12) who enrolled their children in the high-poverty, majority Black neighborhood school.8 Parents noted how they “chose” River Park Elementary because they believed in the mission of community schools and thought their children would benefit from attending school with people of color. Parents’ schooling choice reflects the larger process of White identity construction in which these parents are engaged. They are trying to craft a particular kind of White child -- a distinctive omnivore who possesses a “discerning openness for everything” (Peterson and Kern 1996). Luella, a mother of three explains:

And I know my son would come home during 4th grade. It was pretty rough he said. “There’s bullies and there’s cursing and there’s kids talking back to the teachers and I’m not … used to that and I’m not familiar with that.” And I’m like “are the teachers dealing with it?” “Yes.” “Do you feel unsafe?” “No.” “Are you learning” “Yes” “Do you wanna go to a different school?” “No.” “All right then.” Because in your life you’re going to run into kids, people, who are … cursing and maybe a little bit intimidating or scary or putting on a tough front and talking

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8 River Park Elementary was 63% Black and 65% of the students were on free and reduced lunch.
back to authority figures and if …you learn how to … deal with that you’ll wind up a better global citizen.

In many ways, Luella’s statement exemplifies privileged parenting. Luella asked her son if he would prefer to attend another school and when he said no, Luella encourages him to stick it out because she thought his experience would prove beneficial; it would help him become “a better global citizen.” Though parents appear to be “choosing against the grain,” they like middle-class Whites in Reay et. al’s (2007:1042) study do in fact benefit from their schooling decision. To start, parents appreciate that their children feel fortunate when comparing themselves to their classmates. Their families are better positioned financially and socially than their peers. They understand the “correct” way to behave in public spaces -- in part because dominant norms of social decorum originate from middle and upper-class White culture. Parents’ school choice also reproduces privilege in other ways. Parents use their proximity to people of color as a means to cultivate privilege for their children, albeit a privilege that reflects the values and norms of a multicultural world in which ease and comfort are the new markers of high status. (Khan 2011; Peterson and Kern 1996).

River Park participants did not look favorably on all forms of diversity. The families who attended River Park Elementary (n=12) also engaged in boundary work to mark their children as distinct from their lower-class Black peers. However, because race served as a bright marker of difference, participants did not worry about dressing their child in higher status clothes or enrolling him/her in costly lessons. What they did police was their children’s speech. Several parents expressed feeling “concerned” when their children would return home “talking Black.” From the parents’ perspective, “talking Black” meant their children used “Black slang,” “dropped an s at the end of words” or began “adding an s” where it didn’t belong - “saying mines
rather than mine.” Hannah provides an unguarded assessment of the “downside” of attending a high-poverty, majority Black neighborhood school:

The minority part was not the problem at all, the problem was that [sighs] - these children do not speak English. It's not that they’re Hispanic. It's not that they’re bilingual and they speak Ebonics and then speak, you know, regular English. These children do not know how to speak regular English. They do not know that there are “s”s at the ends of words. So you are sending your child to a place where the children literally are so poorly educated that they cannot speak English. They don’t look at you in the eye. It is as far from what you would call a place for your child to be educated, I mean it's not violent, it's just so low on the scale of what you expect. But at some point you have to either walk the walk of social justice or quit talking.

Parents like Hannah may enroll their children in River Park Elementary, but they worried that too much contact with low-income Blacks would damage their children’s White, middle-class presentation of self. By telling their children not to “talk Black” these parents sent their children the message that their socialization was superior that that of their peers. They spoke “regular English” and knew to “look [people] in the eye” when conversing. These messages naturalized their socialization and made it appear as if the practices their White, middle-class parents adopted were objective and universal when in fact they too were informed by race and class.

In many ways parents’ diversity rhetoric echoed the “assimilationist assumptions…that privilege White cultural norms and values” issued by White participants in Bell and Hartmann’s study (2007: 907). Like Bell and Hartmann’s (2007) participants, River Park parents’
understanding of diversity was informed by the logic of White normativity such that people of color were understood as an “add-on” to the White experience. According to this logic, White participants embraced diversity that added value to their children and rejected diversity that challenged their individual and collective racial and class privilege(s).

Most River Park participants celebrated diversity in the abstract (n=17). They espoused a “happy talk” of diversity but their understanding of “good” diversity was quite narrow. It encompassed people and places that were different in appearance only. Diversity that made them uncomfortable, (i.e. racialized class diversity) received little support. Charlotte, a mother of three, tearfully described how she detested racism and appreciated diversity but admitted that she did not have the time, energy, or patience to pursue relationships -- including interracial friendships -- with people who differed too much from her and her family:

When my daughter was a kindergartener, a low-income African American family invited us over, and I was like yeah let’s go. I had the girls who were very young at the time. The mom was completely overwhelmed with her two children. The dad wasn’t home. I just remember going to their home and she wanted me to stay for the playdate. I’m glad I did because like the second child took the toilet brush and swiped my other daughter across the face with it… And that was it for me.

We never went back.

Charlotte argues that class differences make relationships with low-income Blacks untenable. In fact, she points to these class-based differences in behavior and parenting practices as justification for why she stopped supporting her daughter’s friendship with her low-income, Black classmate. She recalled feeling uncomfortable on the playdate because the children were “out-of-control” and “wild” and the mom was an ineffective disciplinarian; “she didn’t know
how to control her kids.” In the end, her caution and discomfort trumped her self-avowed desire for an open, racially exposed life for herself and her children. Her children’s exposure to people of color was thus limited to middle-class people of color or as Rich (2011) describes, “homogenized diversity.”

In contrast, participants who identified as anti-racists (n=5) viewed their efforts to expose their children to people of color as a way they could individually improve U.S. race relations. These parents were committed to providing their children with an exposed childhood despite their personal discomfort. Farrah, a mother of one, explains:

I have to say, it was a very hard thing for me coming from a middle-income or upper, middle-income area to let my kid go to Avondale which is a you know, kind of a dangerous neighborhood to spend time with her friends. [I did it] because I felt Laura needed to see it. I knew the parents were nice. I knew they were going to take care of her, and they did. And you know, she has no regrets but she would come home and be like, “Mom they just sleep on the couch and you know the carpeting is really yucky.” And I’m like, “Well, you know, they don’t have the money that you do.” I don’t think it ever really deterred her from being friends with them. And despite my initial concerns, it didn’t deter me either.

Anti-racist parents like Farrah were more open to helping their children establish and support relationships with low-income Blacks. They were still ambivalent about racialized class diversity but they believed the value of diversity outweighed class-based differences in demeanor and parenting practices.

In the end, River Park parents did not erect as strong of symbolic boundaries around their low-income neighbors as Greenfield parents. But they also may not have needed to; parents in
River Park differed from Greenfield parents in three important ways. First, race provides the onlooker with a visible and immutable marker of difference; it is a bright boundary. River Park parents did not have to visually distinguish their children from their low-income neighbors the way Greenfield parents did.

Second, symbolic boundaries in River Park may also have been weaker because of parents’ “progressive” worldview and their desire to raise a non-racist child. Parents’ primary goal was to teach their children to see people of color as “normal,” not as deficient or frightening. Therefore, River Park parents worked to de-emphasize the racial boundary that distinguished Whites and Blacks. Because racism is so deeply stigmatized in the United States (Thomas 2014), parents reaped symbolic rewards for pursuing a more open, racially exposed life.

Finally, the block-level geography of River Park may have influenced why River Park parents erected weaker symbolic boundaries around their neighborhood others than Greenfield parents. Because parents lived on majority-White, middle-class streets, they had limited day-to-day interaction with people of color, especially low-income Blacks who lived distant from participant’s homes. Consequently, River Park parents saw their low-income neighbors less than Greenfield parents. Further, when River Park parents did see their low-income, Black neighbors it was typically on their terms -- when they visited the neighborhood park or community pool. Parents interaction with their low-income Black neighbors was voluntary on two counts; parents knowingly and purposefully moved to a racially diverse neighborhood, and once in the neighborhood, controlled when and where interracial interaction occurred. Consequently, progressive parents were provided with the symbolic benefits of living in a diverse neighborhood but had less day-to-day interaction with their low-income neighbors than Greenfield parents.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The middle-class White parents who participated in this study were invested in maintaining their privilege and passing it on to their children. As such, they made daily decisions about the best way to protect or enhance their children’s racial and class privileges, including decisions about where and with whom their children can play. Parents’ boundary work was contingent upon the class and race of the neighborhood other as well as the block level geography of participants’ neighborhoods.

In Greenfield parents spoke with “unconscious naturalness” about their disdain for their “trashy,” low-income, White neighbors (Hartigan 2005: 109). Participants viewed their lower-class White neighbors as a source of pollution that needed to be contained and isolated to guard against the diminishment of their children’s racial and class privileges. This was especially important for Greenfield parents in light of their shared racial identity and their close residential proximity to the neighborhood other. As such, Greenfield parents pursued a defensive strategy of social closure. They abandoned neighborhood spaces and limited their children’s play to the private confines of the home. Play in the front-yard was supervised, as was all of their children’s neighborhood travel. Parents with the most day-today contact with the neighborhood others did other things to visually brighten the boundary that distinguished their middle-class, White family from their poor, White neighbors. They purchased expensive name brand clothes and enrolled their children in costly lessons. Friendships with low-income neighbors and classmates were also discouraged.

In River Park, parents’ boundary work was more complicated and nuanced. To start, middle-class, White residents were spatially and symbolically more distant from their lower-class Black neighbors than Greenfield parents. Race provided a bright marker of difference
between White and Black residents, and the racially and class-segregated nature of participants’ streets minimized unwanted interaction. Consequently, parents did not need to work as hard to physically or symbolically distinguish themselves from their low-income Black neighbors. River Park parents also viewed racial diversity as something that enriched the social context of White childhood, especially White-assimilated, middle-class diversity. Participants favored middle-class, “homogenized diversity” because it presented few challenges to their family’s racial and class privileges -- and may have enhanced both (Rich 2011). River Park parents could thus favor diversity because in some ways it was how their family’s power was maintained.

That being said, River Park parents were ambivalent about their lower-class Black neighbors. Parents were uncomfortable in their presence, and also somewhat concerned that too much contact would tarnish their children’s middle-class presentation of self. In light of these competing evaluations, parents’ actions reflected a strategic openness towards their neighborhood rather than an outright rejection. For example, participants did make regular visits to the neighborhood park and many sent their children at high-poverty, majority Black school but they were less likely to visit majority-Black neighborhood spaces like the pool, or to help their children nurture or sustain friendships with lower-class Black children.

Through their actions, both sets of parents sent their children messages about what it means to be White and how to do Whiteness correctly. As sociologists have long known, “to develop a sense of self, we need others” (Sayer 2005: 56). The other is who we establish our identity against; the other functions as a kind of camera obscura, reflecting back to us an inverted image of ourselves. Within both study neighborhoods, parents’ designations of otherness were based on lower-class status rather than race. This is not entirely surprising considering how few Whites actively reflect on their racial identity (Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004). In Greenfield,
the “disgusting.” White other helped constitute middle-class, White residents as normal and privileged -- provided cross-class contact was minimized or avoided. Through their words and actions, Greenfield parents taught their children about the boundaries of normative Whiteness; children learned that poor Whites were not quite White because they were unable to correctly emulate middle and upper-class White forms of “etiquette” (Hartigan 2005). River Park parents’ experience with their low-income neighbors differed. Their racial and class privileges were in many ways bolstered by having Black neighbors. In terms of class, it attested to River Park residents’ omnivorous cultural capital; racially, it signaled their status as a progressive, “good” White (Peterson and Kern 1996). Interracial contact with the lower-class Blacks remained valuable, provided it was voluntary and strategic, and did not diminish their children’s middle-class presentation of self. Like their counterparts in Greenfield, River Park parents also taught their children that normative Whiteness was middle-class but they also signaled something a bit more. These parents sent their children the message that it was wrong to discriminate on the basis of race but defensible to avoid individuals who evidenced a different class-based logic.

Until now, most research has focused on White’s distancing themselves from people of color. Consequently, we have ample evidence of White parents circumventing Black neighborhoods and schools because they believe both environments will jeopardize their children’s future. This project examines how middle-class White parents attempt to protect, and in some instances enhance, their children’s White privilege when they share a neighborhood with people they have historically tried to avoid – the poor and people of color. Findings indicate that middle-class White parents in mixed-income, majority-White neighborhoods, do not embrace their poor White neighbors as their racial equals. Instead, they adopt isolationist, protective practices to minimize contact between their families and their poor White neighbors. This allows
them to maintain their White privilege – a privilege that is intrinsically middle-class - despite
their proximity to their polluted White neighbors. Within the multiracial neighborhood of River
Park, parenting practices oriented towards the reproduction of White privilege are more
complicated, due to emergent understanding of racial diversity as valuable. In this space, parents
pursue contact with people whose company offers the greatest rewards and fewest drawbacks;
middle-class Blacks who have assimilated to White norms. Exclusionary parenting practices are
reserved for lower-income Blacks. Parents either avoid spaces peopled primarily with low-
nearhood who have assimilated to White norms. Exclusionary parenting practices are
reserved for lower-income Blacks. Parents either avoid spaces peopled primarily with low-income Blacks - or they allow their children to share space with their lower-income Black neighbors - but little else. They unwittingly block interaction on the playground, and subtly
police their children’s speech and behavior, thereby communicating to their children they are
different and in some ways superior to their lower-income Black neighbors. Thus in both places,
middle-class White parents adopt parenting practices designed to help their children safeguard,
and when possible, also enhance their racial and class based privilege.

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CHAPTER IV
PARENTING DURING FERGUSON: MAKING SENSE OF WHITE SILENCE

Too many young men of color feel targeted by law enforcement — guilty of walking while black or driving while black, judged by stereotypes that fuel fear and resentment and hopelessness.

- President Obama 9

INTRODUCTION

On August 9th, 2014, an unarmed Black teenager named Michael Brown was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown’s death and the multi-week protests that followed, riveted the attention of the nation and also the world. His alleged last words, “hands up, don’t shoot” became a rallying cry for activists incensed by the enduring specter of racial inequality in the United States.10 Activists protests brought the subject of racial inequality back to the public’s attention but they also accomplished something more.11 Brown’s

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9 (Boyer 2014)

10 I use the term “racial protests” to describe the actions of majority Black activists in Ferguson and Cincinnati, following the deaths of Michael Brown (2014) and Timothy Thomas (2001). These actions include, but are not limited to marching and chanting in the streets. I do not use the word “riot” to describe these events because of the racially charged, negative connotation the word conjures.

11 Activists’ demands for greater police transparency and accountability also stimulated institutional change. Since Brown’s death the police are now subject to greater public scrutiny, so much so that many states have adopted legislation that mandates police use of body cameras (Kaste 2016).
death and protesters calls for racial justice, uncovered a deep divide between the racial perspectives of Black and White Americans.

Nowhere is this divide better evidenced than in series of surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014. Indeed, results from a survey conducted days after Brown’s death revealed that 80% of Black participants believed Brown’s death “raised important questions about race” as compared to only 37% of White respondents (Pew Research Center). This sharp attitudinal divide was evidenced yet again in a Pew study conducted after Officer Wilson’s 2014 acquittal wherein 80% of Black and 23% of White respondents said “the grand jury’s decision not to charge Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown was the wrong decision.”

The deeply racialized nature of these patterns warrants further thought, especially as it relates to Whites’ certainty that race had little to do with either Officer Wilson’s use of force or the grand jury’s acquittal decision. That the majority of White survey respondents doubt the racial significance of Brown’s death is not entirely surprising. As other researchers have documented, one consequence of being a member of the dominant racial group is that members give less thought and attention to how their dominant status shapes their daily experiences and life outcomes (Doane 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004; Tatum 1997). In fact, most research suggests that Whites are blind to matters of race altogether (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004). They view themselves as racially unmarked individuals whose achievements are due to hard work alone; few consider the long history of racially exclusionary state and community initiatives that fostered their privileged structural location (Feagin 2013; Lewis 2004).
While there is pre-existing research that examines the racial attitudes and beliefs of White adults (See Bobo, Oliver, Johnson, and Valenzuela 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Croll 2007), we know little about how these racialized worldviews are learned by White children. Racial socialization research offers us some insight into this process; it illuminates how and what parents teach their children about race. For example, racial socialization research on Black families indicates that parents proactively educate their children about racism in an effort to prepare them for racial discrimination (Hamm 2001; Hughes et al. 2006). Far less is known what White parents teach their children about race or racism. Most of the existing research indicates that middle-class White parents refrain from speaking with their children about race and racism because they subscribe to a colorblind ideology and believe that talking about race is impolite, or worse—potentially racist (Bartoli et al. ND; Hagerman 2016). To date we know nothing concrete about what White parents say, or do not say, to their children about the basis of racial tension in the United States—especially as it relates to racial protests like Ferguson.

The goal of this chapter is to examine what White, middle-class parents say to their children about racial tension and racial protest when race-related events like Michael Brown’s death and the Ferguson protests become the top news story. Do White, middle-class parents speak with their children about Brown’s death and the Ferguson protests - or, do they maintain a position of racial silence? Understanding what White, middle-class parents communicate to their children about highly publicized racial protests helps illuminate the strength or flexibility of the patterns of White racial socialization.

To answer these questions, I interviewed 40 White, middle-class parents in Cincinnati, Ohio – a city that is both racially diverse and residentially segregated. And more to the point,
possesses a distinct history of racial tension and protest.\textsuperscript{12} Study results indicate that few middle-class White parents spoke with their children about racial tension or racial protests – even when such discussions were highly visible in the news and on social media. Parents’ silence stemmed from a few factors, the most notable being a class-based desire to create an idyllic, worry-free childhood. Many parents were also unable to understand how such subjects related to their family’s White life; neither they or their children had experienced racial tension or protest so why discuss it? Not all parents, however, were silent. Twelve participants talked with their children about racial tension, Brown’s death, and the Ferguson protests but almost all of these discussions were communicated from a neutral or a defensive color-blind frame.\textsuperscript{13} Only two out of forty parents drew attention to issues of power and privilege.

\textbf{LITERATURE REVIEW}

Research indicates that few White Americans actively think about their racial identity or their privileged structural location (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004; McIntosh 1990). In the eyes of many White Americans, “race” refers exclusively to people of color; Whites are simply “normal” individuals (Bonilla-Silva 2006). As Woody Doane (2003) and others argue (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin 2013; Hughey 2012; Lewis 2004) one of the reasons Whites are unaware of their dominant structural location is because they have appropriated the “social and cultural mainstream” thereby allowing their worldviews and practices to become normative (Doane 2003: 12). Consequently, Whites’ lack of racial awareness - their sense that they and White-dominated institutions are “normal” (i.e. race-

\textsuperscript{12} In the last 100 years of Cincinnati’s history, racial protests occurred in 1935, 1967, 1968, and in 2001.

\textsuperscript{13} These 12 participants constituted 30% of the total sample, and 41% of the sample (n=29) interviewed after Michael Brown’s August death.
less) - is one of the defining features of a White worldview or “White normativity” (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Frankenberg 1993).\textsuperscript{14} We know something about how this White blindness is institutionally reproduced by the state (Omi and Winant 1994), educational system (Lewis 2003) and media (Bonilla-Silva 2011; Collins 2000) but know relatively little about the White family’s role in this process.

Indeed, most racial socialization research examines the practices of minority parents (Burton et al. 2010; Hughes et al. 2006); little research investigates how White parents teach their children about race (For exceptions see Bartoli et. al. ND; Hagerman 2014, 2015; Hamm 2001). The research that does exist, indicates that White parents teach their children different things about race than minority parents (Bartoli et al. 2014; Hamm 2001; Rockquemore at al. 2006). For example, research reveals that minority parents adopt a proactive stance towards the racial socialization of their child (Hamm 2001; Hughes 2003). They attempt to prepare their child for discrimination, and emphasize, among other things, the importance of their racial group’s cultural traditions and historical contributions (Hughes 2003; Hughes et al. 2006). In contrast, Whites adopt a reactive stance towards the racial socialization of their child; conversations about race seldom occur unless they are in response to a direct query, or a negative interracial encounter (Bartoli et al. ND; Michael and Bartoli 2014).

White parents also speak with their children about race less often than minority parents (Brown et al. 2007; Hamm 2001; Lesane-Brown et. al 2010). In fact, many studies indicate that

\textsuperscript{14} According to Bell and Hartmann, White normativity “starts with the dominance of white worldviews, and sees cultures, experiences, and indeed lives, of people of color only as they relate to, or interact with the white world. White normativity is not simply an attitude held by whites in which white people are the center of the universe. Rather, white normativity is a reality of the racial structure of the United States in which whites occupy an unquestioned and unexamined place of esteem, power, and privilege” (2007: 907).
White parents racially socialize through *silence* (Bartoli et al. ND; Hagerman 2015; Lesane-Brown et al. 2010; Michael and Bartoli 2014; Vittrup and Holden 2010). For example, a subset of parents’ in Hagerman’s study claimed discussions of race “never really come up” (2014: 2604) or that such discussions were unnecessary because “racism is over” (Hagerman 2015: 62). Parents in other studies reported feeling as if there was never a “good time” to initiate the conversation or they feared “saying the wrong thing” (Bartoli et al ND; Michael and Bartoli 2014: 2). They worried about unintentionally conveying a racist message to their child or making their child feel “guilty” about their White racial identity in light of Whites’ historic oppression of people of color (Bartoli et al ND; Michael and Bartoli 2014). Many also thought discussions of race were best introduced by trained professionals and believed it was the responsibility of schools, rather than parents to teach their children about race (Bartoli et al. ND; Hamm 2001; Michael and Bartoli 2014).

When White parents do speak with their child about race, they emphasize different things than minority parents (Bartoli et al. ND; Hamm 2001; Rockquemore et al. 2006). In contrast to minority parents, Whites do not relay messages to their children about cultural pride (Bartoli et al. ND; Hamm 2001), preparation for bias (Bartoli et al. ND; Hamm 2001), or promotion of mistrust (Bartoli et al. ND; Hamm 2001). Their conversations typically concern people of color (Rockquemore et al. 2006; Underhill ND); few White parents discuss their own racial identity or their privileged structural location (Bartoli et al. ND; Hagerman 2016). Instead, they emphasize the universality of the human experience (Hamm 2001; Michael and Bartoli, 2014: 2; Rockquemore et al. 2006) and stress that racism is bad (Hagerman 2014, 2015; Michael and Bartoli 2014: 3). They discourage their children from pointing out racial differences and note that racial differences are only skin-deep; people are ultimately the same (Bartoli et al. ND;
Michael and Bartoli 2014; Rockquemore et al. 2006). As other scholars argue, this line of instruction contributes to the perpetuation and normalization of a color-blind upbringing where race and racial inequality are seldom discussed (Bartoli et al. ND; Hagerman 2015; Rockquemore et al. 2006).15

Given what previous studies have found about White identity as invisible and White racial socialization as reactionary, yet silent, equalizing, and ultimately color-blind – what do White parents tell their children about racial tension and racial protest? My research sheds light on this process and in so doing helps fill an important gap in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study comes from 40 interviews conducted with middle-class, White parents in Cincinnati, Ohio (pop. 300,000) from July 2014-July 2015. Cincinnati is an interesting place to conduct race-related research because of the racial demographics of the city – 45% of city residents are Black and 49% White – and the city’s history of racial tension and protest. Indeed, before the Ferguson protests in 2014, there were racial protests in Cincinnati in 2001. In both instances, White police officers fatally shot unarmed Black teenagers. In the case of Cincinnati, the shooting victim was 19-year-old Timothy Thomas - the 15th Black resident to die at the hands of police in five years (Fisher 2014). When news of Thomas’ death broke, racial protests erupted in Over-the-Rhine, the high-poverty, majority-Black neighborhood where Thomas lived

15 Hagerman’s 2014 study is the one exception. She found that some White parents - namely those who live close to a neighborhood with a sizable Black population (17%) and whose children attend a multiracial school – racially socialize their children to be “color-conscious.” These parents make it a point to speak with their children about race, racial inequality and White privilege (Hagerman 2014).
and died. The Cincinnati protests lasted for four days and were motivated by a similar set of concerns as the Ferguson protests.

Interview questions explored a variety of racial socialization related topics, including questions about racial tension and protest. When the study originally began, my goal was to assess whether parents conversed with their children about racial tension and the 2001 Cincinnati protest. I believed both questions would resonate with participants due to years of informal conversations with White Cincinnati residents about both the 2001 protests and strained race relations in the city more generally. Then, a month into the project, Michael Brown was fatally shot by a White police officer and the Ferguson protests ensued. At which point, I altered my interview guide slightly. I continued to ask parents if they had spoken with their children about racial tension and the Cincinnati protests but also included a separate question regarding parent-child discussions of the Ferguson protests. All 40 participants answered the racial tension and Cincinnati riot question, but only 29 participants were asked about the Ferguson protests; 11 individuals were interviewed before Brown’s August 2014 death.

Most of the White parents who participated in the study were female (77%) and had two children between the ages of 3-10 (63%). On average, participants were well-educated; eighty percent possessed an undergraduate or a graduate degree. Though participants all self-identified as middle-class, participants average median household income was $100,000, which was high relative to average median household incomes in the state ($48,849) and city ($34,002) (2010 US Census).

Participating parents were recruited at community council meetings, neighborhood recreational facilities, and school and church festivals. Many participants then referred me to their neighbors, co-workers, or friends for additional interviews. After all of these network
referrals were exhausted, I reached out to area schools, churches, and day-care centers for recruitment assistance. Several of these institutions placed recruitments announcements for me in their monthly newsletters or allowed me to leave my fliers in well-traveled areas of their facility.

Once recruited, participants were interviewed at a location of their choosing. The interviews were audio-recorded and usually lasted for one to two hours. Interviews were then transcribed, read, and uploaded into NVIVO, a qualitative software program, where they were inductively coded. All interview transcripts went through two rounds of coding. During the first round of coding, I identified large conceptual categories or master-codes; narrower subthemes were then identified during the second round of coding.

**FINDINGS**

*White Silence*

Seventy percent of parents in this study (n=28) had not conversed with their children about racial tension or related protests in either Cincinnati, Ohio (2001) or Ferguson, Missouri (2014). When I asked parents why they remained silent about these subjects, a little less than half (n=12) said it was because they believed their children were too young. The other half (n=16) placed responsibility at their children’s feet; they claimed their children never asked or expressed interest in either topic. Further questioning revealed that parents’ silence was also associated with a third factor – they did not know what to say to their children about the subject due in part to the pervasiveness of their White worldview.

*“I’d like to keep her in a little bubble if possible”*

Parents like Hannah, quoted above, said they refrained from speaking with their children about racial tension in the U.S., including protests in Ferguson and Cincinnati because the
subject matter was too mature. Most of the parents who cited this concern had children between the ages of 3-8 (n=9) but a few parents with older children (9-15), expressed similar reservations (n=3). Charlotte, for example, said she shied away from discussions about Ferguson because she did not want her children (ages 9, 11, 13) “worrying about things they don’t have to worry about.” Other parents’ concerns ran deeper. For example, Lauren a mother of two, explained she had no intention of talking to either her sons, age four and seven, about Ferguson because she did not want to “scare them”:

My sons get very, very scared of things. I’m still trying to shelter them both. I don’t want them to have bad dreams. I want to keep them kids as long as I can keep them kids. The only thing they should worry about is going outside and playing.

Most participants (n=37) had spoken with their children about race before. Like White parents in other studies, their racial discussions drew upon the “we’re all the same but different” trope (Michael and Bartoli 2014; Rockquemore et al. 2006). Parents’ race talk was also informed by the “happy” diversity rhetoric described by Bell and Hartmann (2007). For example, parents like Justin reported telling his children, age five and three, that racial differences are “what makes the world beautiful and interesting. We should celebrate them.” Consequently, among this subset of parents, happy discussions of race were common; unhappy racial conversations were not. This happy race-talk sustained the worry-free “bubble” of childhood participants believed was the cornerstone of a normal, middle-class upbringing (Shanahan 2007).

Discussions of racial tension on the other hand, ran counter to parents’ positive message of racial diversity. They threatened the idyllic “bubble” of childhood parents and
were thus minimized or positively reframed. In a few instances, this positive reframing of negative racial subjects extended all the way to parent’s discussions of slavery. For example, when Patricia’s eight-year old daughter returned from school with a question about “how people could have been so mean as to own slaves” Patricia immediately tried to alter the emotional tenor of the conversation. She shifted the frame of the conversation away from race and towards gender, recasting slavery as a Black feminist victory rather than example of White oppression. This allowed her daughter to bypass any feelings of “White guilt” that might arise from a more thorough discussion of slavery and feel instead a sense of deep appreciation for the indomitable strength of women – Black women.

Other parent’s adopted a more direct approach; avoidance. Julia, a mother of four acknowledged she did not speak with her children about racial protests in Ferguson because she does not like to “foster the negative.” In fact, she and seven of the other parents have a “no-news” policy in their household and car. Julia explains:

We don’t watch a lot of news because there is really nothing good on it. So no, we haven’t [spoken about Ferguson]. Um, [pause] instead of pointing out that there is this Black-White thing, we just tell our children that we all love each other.

Not only does Julia not teach her children about Ferguson, but she sends her children the message that that there is no tension between Whites and people of color. She chooses to ignore the “Black-White thing” in favor of a positive racial message that emphasizes how people of all races “love each other.”
In an effort to cultivate a childhood that was “virtuous in its naiveté,” parents like Julia adopted a protectionist parenting strategy (Shanahan 2007: 413). They tried to isolate their children from information or people that would corrupt or undermine the innocent “bubble” of their children’s youth. These were parents who were deeply uncomfortable thinking or talking about racial tension. One of the ways they dealt with this discomfort was to shut out upsetting news or conversations thereby creating a structure of racial silence around their children.

One of the consequences of this protectionist parenting practice was that parents hindered their children from learning about current events. This became important in light of the second reason parents cited when explaining why they refrained from speaking with their children about racial tension and the recent Ferguson protests; parents (n=16) claimed their children “never asked.” In line with research that positions Whites as reactionary racial socializers, this subset of parents said they would have spoken to their children about Ferguson if their children broached the subject, but “they never did” (Bartoli et al. ND; Michael and Bartoli 2014). Given the predominance of this no-news policy among study participants, it is possible their children never heard about Michael Brown or the Ferguson protests. However, children’s ignorance was by no means accidental. Parents’ no-news policy created a structure of silence around their children; challenging conversations, including discussion about racial tension or protest, were excluded from participants’ homes.

Parents felt a sense of pride about the positive, colorblind “bubble” they created around their children. None considered the racialized consequences of their sheltered silence. By not speaking with their children about racial tension or recent or past racial protests, parents
implicitly signaled that such topics were either conversationally inappropriate or immaterial to their life. Parent’s silence reinforced White invisibility and also White dominance; it served as a “shelter for power” – White power – by making it seem as if Whites were not implicated in racial matters (Foucault 1978: 101).

**White Normativity: “I don’t know what to say about racial tension; it’s never been a big part of my life”**

None of this subset of parents (n=28) reported feeling a strong sense of urgency to speak with their children about racial tension or the underlying factors that contributed to racial protests in Ferguson or Cincinnati. All parents imagined it would be a difficult discussion and most felt extremely uncertain about what they would or should say to their children. Several parents described feeling “at a loss for words.” Ten parents said they planned to speak with their children about racial tension and protests “one day, when my kids are older” but when pushed for details about the hypothetical, future conversation admitted they “really don’t know.”

Few parents appeared knowledgeable about racial tension or racial inequality in the United States -- past or present. When trying to make sense of it, most cited slavery as the source of present day racial discord. A few participants also mentioned Jim Crow segregation. Only three offered a contemporary example of racial inequality. In all three cases parents discussed police brutality against African Americans. They were the only participants in this subsample who provided a post-Civil Rights example of racial inequality and who connected the racial protests in Cincinnati and Ferguson to police violence against communities of color. Despite this, none felt prepared to speak with their children about the subject. Two of the three parents attributed this to their privileged status as a White American. Penelope, a mother of three White sons, explains:
I think growing up White, being White, I think there’s, there’s a lot of anger there that I couldn’t even begin to understand. Intellectually I think I get it. But when I think about the conversations Black parents have to have with their sons, with their kids, you know – “this is how you need to behave with the police.” I know I will never have to do that. So I don’t know how I would address Ferguson.

Penelope recognized it was critical for Black parents to have the police-talk with their children, but that she, a middle-class, White American “would never have to do that.” She was one of the only parents in this subsample who alluded to - but never directly discussed - the idea of White privilege. She understood that her White skin helped her create a protected bubble around her children – a protection Black parents could not necessarily guarantee. Only she and one other parent in this sub-sample expressed an understanding of their families’ racially privileged status.

Parents’ lack of racial awareness was not entirely surprising given their dominant status (Tatum 1997; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007). So prominent was this White worldview among some participants that they were unable to see how or why the subject of racial tension or racial protests related to their life. For example, eight parents claimed their silence about racial tension and the Cincinnati or Ferguson protests was not purposeful; they simply had not given either event much thought. As countless participants told me, “it isn’t really part of my life.” Though the 2001 Cincinnati Riots were historically distant from participants’ day-today life, the Ferguson protests were not. Twenty-nine parents were interviewed days, weeks, and months after Brown’s death.

Most of these participants had difficulty interpreting world events outside of a White normative frame. For a handful of participants, the only events that burned bright
in their memory were those that involved White people.16 When, for example, I asked Maggie, a Cincinnati native to tell me about the 2001 Cincinnati racial protests, she did not tell me about the death of 19-year-old Timothy Thomas, but described instead how she was personally inconvenienced by the city-mandated curfew:

I mainly remember the curfew. But I mean I didn’t really listen to it. I’m a White girl from [affluent suburb], I’m not getting into any trouble! So I went out anyways.

There are many problems associated with teaching children about past or present racial events through a lens of White normativity. When parents avoid, downplay, or positively reframe uncomfortable or unhappy matters of racial inequality, they contribute to an intergenerational “collective forgetting,” which helps sustain, rather than undermine, racial inequality (Feagin 2013: 17). As Feagin (2013) argues: “when such a momentous and bloody past is suppressed, downplayed, or mythologized...ordinary Americans, especially Whites understandably have difficulty seeing or assessing accurately the present day realities of unjust enrichment and impoverishment along racial lines” (Feagin 2013: 19).

**Breaking the Silence: White Parents’ Discussions of Racial Tension and Protest**

Thirty percent of parents (n=12) spoke with their children about racial tension and related racial protests in Ferguson (n=12). Parents had one of three ways they approached the topic. Most adopted a neutral (n=7) or a defensive (n=3) colorblind frame, wherein they deemphasized racism, avoided discussions of power, and adhered to an individual rather than a structural

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16 This White worldview was so pervasive among some participants that when I asked them what they said to their children about slavery – an institution where there is little doubt that Whites enacted a system of racial terror – three provided their children with examples of historical oppression, thousands of years in the past, where Whites were both the oppressors and victims. Ignored was the more recent example of Black slavery in the United States.
understanding of race and racial inequality. Additionally, two parents evidenced a race-conscious frame; they spoke with their children about Michael Brown and connected his death - at the hands of a White police officer – to systemic racial inequality rather than individual racial bias.

Neutral Colorblindness: “Not all people get along. Unfortunately, sometimes they’re different color people”

Ten of the 12 parents in this subsample adopted a colorblind frame when speaking with their children about racial tension and the Ferguson protests. None of the parents in the colorblind subsample discussed the 2001 Cincinnati protests with their children. By colorblind I mean parents discussed racial events using a non-racial frame or they attributed race related outcomes to non-racial phenomena (Bonilla-Silva 2006). The colorblind parents discussed in this subsection (n=7) were those who provided their children with neutral, power evasive explanations that rarely deviated from the “happy” race-talk detailed in the last section (Bell and Hartmann 2007).

Like the silent parents discussed earlier, these parents were also reluctant to speak with their children about “challenging” racial subjects. They did not want their children to worry about events beyond their comprehension or control. But they were also reluctant to raise their children in an anesthetized bubble. Hence they read, watched, and listened to the news in the presence of their children. Still, few thought discussions of racial tension or protest developmentally appropriate for children six years of age or younger. In fact, only one parent out of 40 spoke with their child, age five, about the Ferguson protests. She, like the other parents in this sub-sample, drew upon race and power-evasive language:
I did tell her there was a man but I didn’t identify color. So I don’t know if that’s
good bad or indifferent. I just said there was a man who was killed by a police
officer and some people think it was an okay thing and some people think it was a
really bad thing. And that’s what the protests are about.

Caitlyn, the mother quoted above, explained to her daughter that people were
protesting in Ferguson because a man was “killed by a police officer.” Absent from her
explanation was any mention of race. Caitlyn, like the other six parents in this subsample,
adopted an air of neutrality when communicating with daughter about Brown’s death,
noting that “some people think it was an okay thing and some people think it was a really
bad thing.” In so doing, Caitlyn depoliticized the Ferguson protests. She positioned them
as connected to the shooting death of an abstract, individual person and failed to discuss
how Brown’s death and the subsequent Ferguson protests were directly informed by
racial concerns. True to a colorblind frame, her explanation “chases race into the closet”
(Guinier and Torres 2012:103).

Parents with slightly older children, age 7 and up, were less reticent to speak to
their children about racial tension, but their conversations, like Caitlyn’s, tended to be
child-initiated, brief, and power-evasive. For example, Stephen a father of one, admits he
might not have spoken with his daughter, age 7, about the Ferguson protests had it not
been “all over the news”:

It’s in everything you hear. It’s in the newspaper that came up here on Sunday.
We have NPR on in our house, or in our car and it was just like all the time in
your face for a couple of weeks. And so we were processing it as adults and she, I
think she had question about it and we just had a little conversation about how,
how not all people get along. And unfortunately sometimes they are different
color people and for whatever reason that’s not always a positive thing. We were
trying to be honest about it but also trying to help her understand at her level,
which wasn’t going too far at seven.

In contrast to Caitlyn, Stephen makes no mention of the shooting death of Michael
Brown but does briefly allude to race when he states that the protests were related to “different
color people” not “getting along.” Though Stephen’s explanation of the Ferguson protests is
somewhat less colorblind than Caitlyn’s, it maintains a neutral, power-evasive frame. As
evidenced in Stephen’s comment, colorblind parents do not think of race as a hierarchical
structural location associated with varying degrees of power. Nor do they see themselves as
being better positioned than people of color. From their perspective Whites and people of color
are “equal.” Consequently, the Ferguson protests are interpreted as an unfortunate dispute
between equal status groups.

This type of neutral, colorblind framing was also evident in the way Ilene, a
mother of three, spoke with her son, age 11, about the Ferguson protests:

Everybody just has such a strong opinion one way or another on whether they
thought the police officer was guilty or innocent kind of thing and whether he
should have been punished or not and whether he, you know [sighs] killed, I can’t
remember the kids name now, um whether he was shot because of race or because
he was charging the officer. And because everyone feels so strongly and none of
us were there I just thought it would be better for him not to talk about it to
anyone because it’s very sensitive for a lot of people. I don’t want him to say
something that’s going to like … cause trouble or make people feel upset.
Like Caitlyn, Ilene attributes the Ferguson protests to the death of a “kid” whose name she “can’t remember.” Ilene is reluctant to side with either Brown or Wilson supporters because she is unsure whether Brown’s death was triggered by the officer’s racial bias or his need for self-defense. Consequently, she expressly forbids her son from speaking with his classmates about Brown’s death because she does not want to “cause trouble of make people feel upset.” Caitlyn is able to maintain a position of silent neutrality because she understands Brown’s death as an isolated incident. She does not connect his death to larger patterns of police brutality against people of color or to ongoing racial inequality more generally. Ilene’s message to her son is clear; do not talk about race; it might offend someone. In this way Ilene teaches her son that conversations about race are best avoided.

Defensive Colorblindness: “They can’t let go of their bitterness over the past”

A smaller subset of colorblind parents (n=3) rejected the neutral framing described above. They too possessed a colorblind worldview but approached the subjects of racial tension in the United States and the Ferguson protests from a more defensive perspective. They did not believe White Americans were at fault for the perpetuation of racial tension in the United States. If racial tension persisted, they reasoned, it was because of the Black community’s inability to “let go of their anger.” Helen, a mother of three, described how she dealt with the subject of racial tension with her 11-year-old son:

We talked a little bit about how people of a different color were treated differently in the past and that a lot of people have a lot of bitterness over that and they can’t let go of it. It also may not have anything to do with how they are being treated today, they just can’t let go of that anger about the past.
Jaime, a mother of two, engaged in similar reasoning with her 10-year-old son:

I told him the tension in this country is going back hundreds of years. You know, back to the Civil War. But that’s hard because he doesn’t know the history and I can only look at today. I mean, I don’t own a slave. I’ve never owned a slave.

In the above quotes we see that both Helen and Jaime believe racism and racial inequality are a thing of the past. Neither denies people of color were “treated differently” “hundreds of years ago” but they reject the idea that racism continues to shape their day-to-day experiences and life outcomes. These parents minimize the reality of racism when speaking with their children; a trend that is consistent with previous research on White families (see Hagerman 2015). They do this through their adoption of what Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick (2004) have identified as the “past is the past” and the “I didn’t own a slave” storylines. Both storylines justify the current racial status quo by depicting contemporary society as progressive and race-neutral (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004)

This disavowal of contemporary racism also informed how this subset of parents evaluated Michael Brown’s death and the Ferguson protests. All three dismissed the idea that racial bias had anything to do with why Officer Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown. According to Charlotte, a mother of three, Officer Wilson fired at Brown because Brown was unable to “manage his emotions and act like an adult.” Brown was thus believed to have provoked and incited Officer Wilson.

Jaime conveyed a somewhat similar message to her son. She believed Brown was shot because he disobeyed Wilson’s instructions; “he ran from the police”:  

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I have a hard time being able to explain to my child, the right and wrong of the situation; who’s at fault and who’s not. I have difficulty because in my book, it doesn’t matter who you are. You know, you don’t run from the police. I’m trying to teach my kids that the police are there to help you. They don’t just come and arrest you. But if you do something wrong, they will come. They’re here to protect you. It doesn’t matter if you’re White or Black, Asian, you know, Indian. Don’t break the law. So we kind of explained to him the situation. We said, you know, these men robbed a store. They scared people and then when police were coming after them, they ran. And the one guy was shot, he didn’t have gun. He wasn’t armed so he couldn’t have hurt the police officer. But the police officer did shoot and kill him. And my son’s comment was, ‘he shouldn’t have run from the police.’ I’m like, yeah. That’s kind of true. He shouldn’t have run.

Elements of a White normative frame are evident in Jaime’s discussion of the police. She does not think the police are biased or discriminatory, as promulgated by Ferguson protesters. Instead, she counsels her children that “the police are here to help you. They don’t just come and arrest you.” It never occurs to Jaime how her race and class inform this positive assessment. Nor does she consider that people of color frequently have different experiences with police than Whites (Alexander 2015; Embrick 2015). Indeed, research indicates that people of color are more likely to be stopped and arrested by police than Whites (Alexander 2010; Rojek, Rosenfeld, and Decker 2012) and in 2015, unarmed Black men were 7 times more likely to be fatally shot by a police officer than an unarmed White (Lowery 2016). Though this discrepancy may elude White parents like Jaime, it does not escape the notice of Black parents. They understand they will have to have “The Talk” with their children - especially their sons - regarding appropriate
ways to interact with the police: “where to put hands and eyes, how to manage the tenor of one’s tone, what not to wear, and generally how to make sure that African American children do not frighten armed police officers into shooting and perhaps killing them” (Whitaker and Snell 2016: 304). As noted earlier in their paper, one of the privileges of Whiteness is that White parents do not feel compelled to have similar conversations with their children. Like Jaime, most envision the police as protectors rather than threats to their children’s safety.

**Race-Conscious Parents: “Sometimes the police will treat people differently because of the color of their skin”**

Like the defensive colorblind parents, *race-conscious* parents (n=2), also rejected neutral interpretations of racial tension and the Ferguson protests but they did not endorse a post-racial, meritocratic understanding of contemporary society. Rather, they like the race conscious women who participated in Frankenberg’s study believed “race makes a difference in people’s lives and…that racism is a significant factor in shaping contemporary U.S. society” (1993: 157). Both parents were well-informed about America’s racial history and spoke openly with their children ages 9 and 16, about racial inequality in the past and present. They wanted their children to understand that racism continued to structure social life in the United States by privileging Whites and disadvantaging people of color.

Both parents said it was they, rather than their children, who first initiated a conversation about the Ferguson protests. They saw Brown’s death as a tragic example of contemporary racial inequality and wanted their children to be mindful of how racial bias persists in individuals and institutions many assume are operating from a position of measured objectivity. Isabelle, a mother of one, described how she approached the topic with her 9-year-old son:
I remember having a conversation with him about how sometimes the police will treat people differently because of the color of their skin, that’s not fair. And you know, the situation was that a young, unarmed Black was shot and killed by a White police officer. People are upset because this happens to minorities a lot and that’s why people are protesting. I told him that we need to be aware that this happens in the world and we need to think about how we can be a part of the solution to that problem.

Isabelle engaged her son in an open discussion of the events that inspired the Ferguson protests. She wanted him to understand that though Brown’s death may have originally sparked the protest it was not the only reason demonstrators gathered in Ferguson. They were also protesting against a pattern of police brutality towards individuals and communities of color. She framed Brown’s death and the issue of police violence towards people of color as a universal concern that required the thought and attention of all – even White, middle-class nine-year-olds. She hoped her words would empower her son to begin thinking about how he and his family could “be part of a solution to the problem.”

Farrah, a social worker and a self-identified progressive who worked with low-income youth, also spoke with her daughter, age 16 about the Ferguson protests and police brutality towards people of color:

We’ve talked about why it happened. I told her these guys - Black guys - are getting shot and beat up by the police and she’s like, “I can’t understand why that’s happening.” And I said “well you’re White. These kind of things won’t happen to you but they might happen to your Black friends. Talk to them about it so you’ll have a better understanding.
Like Isabelle, Farrah connected Brown’s death to a larger problem of police violence towards communities of color. However, Farrah’s conversation differed from Isabelle’s in a few key ways. For example, when Farrah’s daughter exclaimed she could not understand why the police were responding aggressively to people of color, Farrah challenged her daughter to see beyond her White worldview and consider how her status as a member of the racial majority protected her from experiencing similar acts of police aggression. In this way, Farrah called attention to her daughter’s racial privilege vis-a-vis her friends of color. What Farrah did not do was suggest her conversation serve as a catalyst for thinking about large scale social change. Instead she concluded the conversation by suggesting her daughter speak with her Black friends about police racial bias so she could develop a more critical perspective of both contemporary racial inequality and her privileged structural location as a White American.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Writing over a hundred years ago, sociologist W.E.B. DuBois (1903) described a “conspiracy of silence” concerning the subject of race in the United States, especially with respect to racial inequality. The silence DuBois described was so deafening and absolute that even the “astonished visitor is inclined to ask if after all there is any problem here” (1903: 50). Results from this study provide some insight as to how this “conspiracy of silence” is reproduced among middle-class, White families even at a time when discussions of race and racial inequality are featured prominently in recent protests and national and international news coverage.

Michael Brown’s death and the protests that followed in Ferguson brought discussions of racial inequality back to the public attention – or at least that is how it appeared based on a perusal of newspaper headlines, television coverage, and social media postings. But study findings, like the Pew Research results mentioned in the introduction, revealed that these public
discussions of race and racial inequality did not necessarily filter down into the White, middle-class home. In fact, 70% of the parents in my sample, said nothing at all to their children about racial tension or racial protests in Cincinnati or Ferguson. When I pushed parents for a reason why, they noted their children were either “too young” for such discussions or their child “never asked.”

I argue parents’ silence was driven by a class-based belief that childhood - early childhood especially - should be a joyous, worry-free period of life. Consequently, parents worked to isolate their children from subjects they deemed challenging or potentially upsetting. When racial discussions did occur, they were first distilled through a “happy” diversity rhetoric; challenging aspects of a racial subject were then omitted or positively reframed leaving behind a narrower and more celebratory message (Bell and Hartmann 2007). For the majority of middle-class White participants, the result of this class-based practice was a childhood structured by racial silence.

Parents silence also stemmed from another factor; they had no idea what to say to their children about racial tension in the United States, or how it informed the Ferguson protests. Few possessed an awareness of contemporary racial inequality in the United States which meant that many of the protesters concerns were lost on parents. Several parents also explained they did not think about the subject of the racial tension or racial protests because they did not directly “impact my life.”

Thirty percent of parents (n=12) did speak with their children about racial tension and the Ferguson protests. Most (n=10) adopted a neutral (n=7) or a defensive (n=3) colorblind frame. Parents who opted for a neutral frame avoided engaging their children in a discussion of racial inequality. They did this by either omitting how the Ferguson protests were driven by racial
concerns; presenting the Ferguson protests as an isolated instance of Whites and Blacks not “getting along;” or by acknowledging the protests but insisting they should not be publically discussed for fear of upsetting someone. None of these parents connected Brown’s death to issues of police violence towards people of color or to a larger pattern of racial inequality.

A similar logic was evidenced by parents who used a defensive, colorblind frame when speaking with their children about Brown’s death and the Ferguson protests. They too provided their children with power-evasive, ahistorical explanations but they also did something more. In subtle and not-so subtle ways they communicated to their children that Brown’s death was Brown’s fault, thereby individualizing, undermining, and invalidating protesters larger message that Brown’s death was emblematic of a larger problem of persistent racial inequality in the United States. In so doing, they made protesters concerns unintelligible to their children and in the process reinforced a White normative outlook that denied or diminished the structural significance of race. By downplaying the racial significance of Brown’s death, parents deftly protected their family’s privileged structural location and made inaction a defensible recourse.

Though the overwhelming majority of parents did not speak with their children about racial tension or the significance of the Ferguson protests, two did parents. These parents acknowledged the presence of racism in the United States and engaged their children in a discussion of White power and privilege. Though their numbers were few, these parents’ actions provide modest evidence of heterogeneity in White parents’ racial socialization efforts. They suggest that some middle-class, White parents - perhaps only a minority - actively work to raise children who are attendant to White’s role in the perpetuation of racial inequality.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

*We cannot change the world of race if we do not know how deeply the practice of Whiteness has affected those we wish to transform*

- Eduardo Bonilla-Silva\(^{17}\)

In the introduction, I posed the following questions: how does the middle-class, White family contribute to White racial blindness? What explicit and implicit racial socialization practices do parents employ to teach their children about race and racism? Further, how are parents’ racial socialization efforts informed by their middle-class status? Findings from this study make several distinct contributions to the White racial socialization literature. First, I argue middle-class, White parents adopt “happy” racial socialization practices that promote positive racial narratives and interactions whilst simultaneously minimizing conversations and interactions that challenge or threaten their family’s race and class-based privileges.

These “happy” racial practices are fueled by a “diversity ideology” (Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gall 2014) that characterizes racial diversity as a valuable social good that enriches White life and the social context of White childhood. By acknowledging race, this “diversity ideology” appears progressive but because it ignores racial power differentials it reproduces color-blindness. In fact, it could be argued that “diversity ideology” is a revamped version of

\(^{17}\) (Bonilla-Silva 2015: 81)
colorblindness but one that evidences a message that is both more inclusive and persuasive (Doane 2014; Jackman 1994). As Mayorga-Gallo (2014) argues, part of what makes this ideology so compelling is that it places greater emphasis on an individual’s “good intentions” rather than the outcome of their actions. This in turn allows Whites to jettison the negative identity of “White oppressor” in favor of a positive White identity as a high-status multiculturalist.

Middle-class, White parents adopt this happy “diversity ideology” for three reasons: (1) they hope their positive discursive and interactional efforts will foster small-scale racial change; (2) they believe diversity helps with the cultivation of racial and class distinction; and (3) they desire to create an idyllic, protected childhood for their children.

In terms of parents’ explicit racial socialization, findings from this project partially corroborate past research that characterizes White parents as silent racial socializers (Bartoli et al. ND; Hamm 2001; Hagerman 2016; Rockquemore et al. 2006; Vittrup and Holden 2010). However, my research indicates that middle-class, White parents, most of whom have children 10 years of age or younger, do speak with their children about race but their conversations rarely extend beyond a color-blind “happy talk” (Bell and Hartmann 2007). For example, parents welcome the opportunity to speak with their children about the “beauty” of a racial groups’ food, music, or traditions but as discussed in Chapter IV, prefer to avoid racial conversation that “emphasize the negative.”

As I argue in Chapter IV, this “happy” racial socialization practice – meant challenging racial conversations were ignored or downplayed, no matter how well-publicized they were in the wider world. Thus, in some ways study results evidence a similar pattern as the survey results from the Pew Research Center described in Chapter IV. Like the respondents who participated in
the 2014 surveys concerning Michael Brown’s death and Officer Wilson’s acquittal, White parents in this study also minimize the significance of race and contemporary racial inequality. In fact, most participants said nothing at all to their children about racial tension or the basis of racial protests in Cincinnati or Ferguson.

I contend that discussions of racial inequality, tension, and protest were ignored in part because they illuminated the unearned, group-based privileges of White Americans. They also compelled parents to consider how they as a White Americans were implicated in the reproduction of racial inequality. The easiest way to protect their family’s racial privilege, was to adopt a position of passivity – of silence. Parents’ silence allowed them to continue on with their life without having to feel guilty about either their racial privileges or their racial inaction.

Parents’ celebratory racial socialization efforts were further fueled by their implicit exposure to diversity practice. This “actions speak louder than words” racial socialization strategy served as the primary means by which parents taught their children about “race” (i.e. people of color). Parents hoped that by exposing their children to people of color, their child would develop a sense of racial comfort and would learn there was nothing to fear or revile about people of color. While parents’ color-conscious efforts were progressive in some ways – especially when compared to their parents’ segregationist practices - the impact of this practice was decidedly less certain. Though all participants frequented mixed-race spaces, their family’s friend network continued to be dominated almost exclusively by other middle-class Whites, a finding that is consistent with research on Whites in multiracial settings (Lewis 2003; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Reay et al. 2007).

As I demonstrate in both Chapter II and III, parents were not as open to interracial contact as they first reported. Though all parents loved the idea of diversity in the abstract, they
were ambivalent and sometimes even hostile to class-based diversity, especially among Whites. Parents embraced diversity that added value to the middle-class, White childhood but avoided or minimized contact with poor individuals because they worried it might diminish their child’s middle-class presentation of self. Interestingly, it was poor Whites rather than poor Blacks whom parents were most intent on distancing their family - due to their White neighbors closer residential proximity and their shared racial identity.

What a closer look at parents’ explicit and implicit practices revealed, was that parents’ embrace of diversity was quite narrow. It was limited to conversations, actions, and relationships that posed little threat to their family’s privileged position. Ideas and individuals that threatened their child’s racial and class privileges were avoided or excluded. This exclusion could be overt, like Greenfield parents’ interactional avoidance of their poor White neighbors - or subtle, as with parents’ racial silence regarding matters of racial inequality, tension, and protest. Whether overt or subtle, both of these practices were oriented towards the protection of privilege.

While parents’ acts of exclusion (i.e. avoidance and silence) were not necessarily motivated by racial concerns, they often had racialized consequences. To start, parents’ adherence to a “happy” diversity rhetoric and practice obscured their family’s privileged racial and class position and made it seem as if racism and racial inequality were a product of a by-gone era. Parents silence about matters of racial inequality and protest signaled that these subjects either did not matter or were impolite to discuss. This may contribute to an intergenerational “collective forgetting” (Feagin 2012) or what Lewis (2004) describes as a “collective amnesia” (2004) that further disengages Whites from the lived experience of people of color and the privileged reality of their own positionality.
One of the main arguments I advance in this dissertation is that social class informs and sometimes drives parents’ racial socialization efforts. For example, I make the case that parents’ construction of an idyllic bubble of childhood stems from their class-based desire to provide their children with a worry-free childhood, ideal for personal enrichment. This class-based bubble served as a filter regulating who and what came into contact with their children. Parents’ inclusion and exclusion criteria was informed by race but not entirely determined by it. The most important consideration was whether an idea or individual added or detracted from their child’s privilege. For example, in Chapter I, I detail how parents employ an exposure to diversity racial socialization strategy because they believe it will help their children develop racial comfort and omnivorous cultural capital to better navigate an increasingly diverse world. In Chapter III, I also document parenting practices participants adopt to protect and in some instances improve their children’s racial and class-based privileges.

Participants’ ability to create a bubble around their children was directly related to both their privileged class status and race. While there is no research that examines racial socialization among lower or working-class Whites, we know from other studies that parenting experiences of lower-income Whites are characterized by more financial and residential uncertainty (Edin and Kafalas 2005; Hays 1996) and less control over their child’s coming and goings (Lareau 2003). Hence, parents’ ability to create an idyllic childhood was made possible in part by parents’ financial resources. However, the impermeability of participants protected bubble was also informed by their privileged racial status. As I note in Chapter IV, parents did not feel they needed to discuss Brown’s death or the Ferguson protests with their children because they did not see how either event pertained to their life. Parents also recognized they did not have to speak with their children about either event. In contrast to parents of color, White parents did not
feel they needed to worry whether the police would open fire on their unarmed, teenage son because he was mistakenly viewed by a police officer as a potential threat. Parents of color do not have this luxury. No matter how much they too would like to protect their children from worrisome conversations or experiences, they are often unable to do so. One way or another the racist world in which we live intrudes into the bubble Black parents’ work to create, forcing them to have more challenging conversations with their children than White parents (Dow 2016; Whitaker and Snell 2016). What this suggests is that a protected childhood may be something that only privileged, middle and upper-class White families can achieve.

**Putting White Parents’ Racial Socialization Efforts into Context: How a Sociologist of Race Makes Sense of their Practice**

How might a sociologist of race and ethnicity interpret parents’ racial socialization efforts? Do their actions signal racial progress? The answer is both yes and no. All participants claimed they were making better racial socialization decisions than their parents. They were speaking with their children about race and they were not vilifying POC during these conversations. They were also intent on leading a more racially integrated life, characterized by less physical and social distance between themselves and POC.

While these practices are certainly an improvement from the racial socialization efforts of participants’ parents, in other ways they are less progressive than parents might imagine. Part of the problem stems from participants’ understanding of race and racism. Participants understand “race” as consisting of the physical and cultural differences between different groups of people. Only five out of forty participants also recognize that race is structural – meaning that the “economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races” (Bonilla-Silva 1997: 469). Within this structural framework,
race is characterized as a system of power - created by Whites, for Whites (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Mills 1997). Consequently, if White parents are sincerely interested in redressing racial inequality, they must first adopt a structural understanding of race that acknowledges and interrogates the racial privileges their dominant status affords.

White parents must also expand their understanding of racism. Racism is not a thing of the past. Nor is it a psychological, individual-level phenomenon; it too is structural (Bonilla-Silva 1997). That means racism can only be eradicated via structural change – not through a “changing one’s thinking” approach. Thinking positive thoughts about POC while ignoring how race constrains their life chances may help Whites feel more comfortable with POC’s second-class status but it does not alter the White-created structure that psychologically and materially injures them. Racial change requires Americans to shift their focus away from a preoccupation with racist individuals towards an examination of racist structures. Failing schools and unjust criminal sentencing practices hurt people far more than does the utterance of a racist epithet.

Racial change also requires collective action. For those Whites who are committed to anti-racist ideals, it means Whites must ally themselves with racial justice movements and use their racial privilege to agitate for change. They must also communicate with other Whites who deny the salience of race and racial inequality - and direct their attention to America’s brutal racial history as well as contemporary research that evidences glaring disparities in the life outcomes of POC v. Whites.

I would also encourage parents to cast aside their colorblind racial socialization strategy in favor of one that is more race-conscious – not simply in terms of acknowledging the presence of color but also the presence of power. That means engaging children in discussions about “challenging” racial topics including racial inequality, racial protest, and also White privilege. It
is important to note that five participants did speak with their young children about the structural basis of race and racism as well as White privilege. Seeing how they approach the subject is instructive and may help other White parents think about how they can address these topics with their children. For example, Isabelle revealed that she first introduced the idea of structural inequality and White privilege to her son (age 9) via a discussion of math, her son’s favorite subject. Isabelle explains:

My son is going to need to understand that he gets treated certain ways that are not fair because of who he is and the family that he’s been raised in. That he has advantages that other kids won’t have and he needs to understand and respect that, he needs to acknowledge that and grapple it. One way I approach the subject is through math because my son is a math kid. I frame the discussion in terms of winning the genetic lottery. I say “think about how many billions of people there are in the entire world and think about statistically what the chances are that you would be the creation of two people who not only live in the United States but are White, are educated, and both come from families where that was a generational thing. So you know, they started out with advantages themselves. Think of the statistical probability that that’s who you ended up being on this entire planet. It is like winning a lottery. You have to know that you have won the lottery every single day.

Anna adopted a different strategy with her two, 11-year-old-daughters. She used images from national and local newspapers to visually call attention to the persistence of racial inequality in the United States:
If I am reading the paper, I like to slide the paper over to my kid and ask them “what’s wrong with a particular picture?” So for example, one time I did this with a picture that featured the CEO’s from Fortune 500 companies. My girls immediately noticed there were no girls among the CEO’s. Then I said “what else”? Because there were very, very, few people of color, if any. That led us to discuss why that might be the case. I do the same thing with the society section in the Cincinnati newspaper. I always look at the pictures in that section and ask them what they see. Are there any African American people there? What does it mean if there aren’t? I want to make sure they notice that.

Excellent resources for talking about structural racism can also be found on the website Teaching Tolerance (http://www.tolerance.org/) created by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Interested parents should explore the contents of this site for additional ideas.

In conclusion, I fully recognize these discussions may feel uncomfortable for parents in light of America’s colorblind climate, wherein many believe speaking about race is impolite, or worse – racist. I also understand that parents’ reticence is fueled by a class-based belief that childhood should be worry-free period. I urge White parents to work through their sense of personal discomfort and begin speaking with their children about these issues. Knowingly avoiding such topics allows racial inequality to flourish, albeit in a more amiable social environment.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any research project, this study is not without its own set of limitations. My original research goal was to interview both middle and lower-class Whites about their racial
socialization practices. Despite my best efforts, I found I was unable to recruit a large enough sample of lower-income White parents to make such a comparison possible. To date all of the White racial socialization research has examined the practices of middle-class Whites. Thus we have some knowledge about how this group of White Americans racially socialize their children but know nothing about whether upper or lower-class Whites adopt similar practices. It seems especially likely that lower-class Whites provide their children with different explicit and implicit messages about race than their middle-class counterparts. For example, research indicates that poor and working-class Whites lead lives that are more racially integrated than middle-class Whites (Hartigan 1999, 2005; McDermott 2006). Consequently, future research should examine what and how lower-class, White parents teach their children about race and racism. It is possible they convey different messages to their children than those presented in this dissertation.

Another research limitation is that I interviewed only one parent per family and in most cases that parent was the mother. I am thus relying on one parent’s account of both parents’ racial socialization efforts. The risk with this approach is that the other partner’s racial socialization practices may not have been fully accounted for by the participating parent. It is possible that had I interviewed both parents, I would have found less consistency and perhaps even more conflict in the racial messages parents conveyed to their children. Future research should interview both parents and examine instances when parents provide children with different racial messages. Findings would provide a fuller picture of racial socialization in the home, specifically as it relates to gendered process of racial socialization.

A further study limitation is my inability to assess how children make sense of the explicit and implicit racial messages relayed to them by their parents. I recognize that children
have agency and that they do not blindly accept everything they learn in the home. In fact, research among slightly older middle-class, White children (10-13) reveals that children often re-interpret parents’ racial messages (Hagerman 2016). Because I did not interview children and parents, I am unable to assess how parents’ racial socialization efforts influence the beliefs and practices of their children. It is possible White children reach different conclusions about race than those advanced by their parents - or that they have a different recall of parents’ racial socialization efforts than the one presented to me by participants.

Results from this study provide insight into parents’ active crafting of a middle-class, White identity for their children, most of whom were ten years of age or younger. Understanding how Whites think about race is important given the rampant racial inequality that riddles contemporary society – inequality most Whites claim not to see. This project is an attempt to pierce the silence that shelters and protects White power. My hope is that study results will create an opportunity for critical reflection, open dialogue, and perhaps even social change - especially among those well-intentioned White parents who had not considered the racialized consequences of their explicit and implicit parenting practices.


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