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Effects of Color-blind Pedagogy on White Adolescent Racial Socialization

Schools are a central fixture in many American children’s lives. From middle childhood to adolescence, the influence of parents and other caretakers decreases as they interact more with peers, teachers, and other adults in their communities (Aldana & Byrd 2015; Bradshaw 2014). By high school, individuals begin constructing beliefs through the lenses of social identities like race (Williamson et al. 2020). Historically, analysts have investigated the relationship between Black students' educational experiences, such as their academic placement, relationships with teachers, and discipline, with their racial identities, attitudes, educational performance, and life outcomes (Bañales et. al 2020; Francis & Darity 2021; Pena-Shaff et. al 2019; Brown 2007; Hughes 2009). Other studies extend these issues to Latino, Asian American, and multi-racial individuals (see, e.g., Brega & Coleman, 1999; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Stone 2017).

Interactions between teachers and white American students remain largely absent from these inquiries due to the seemingly invisible and white-centering logic of colorblind ideology, which posits that race does not matter, modern-day racism is the consequence of a few prejudiced people, and racism is a relic of the past (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Lewis 2004). Because of their dominant position in the United States' contemporary racial order, white individuals have an ego-protective incentive to practice colorblindness (Plaut et al. 2018). It allows individuals to enjoy both the material advantages and "psychological wage" of whiteness while attributing racial inequalities to personal shortcomings (Du Bois 1920). Few scholars have examined how white youth reproduce, rework, or contest such beliefs as they interact with their teacher’s pedagogical approaches. This paper specifically focuses on white adolescents’ perceptions of history by drawing upon ethnographic observations, surveys, and interviews in high school classrooms.

Past studies on race and school contexts often recruit parents and teachers to report students' racial practices (e.g. interracial friendships, standing up to racism, etc.) and racial beliefs revealed through conversations (Onyekwuluje 2000; Hagerman 2017). Shifting the focus of this scholarship from parents to their children's perceptions can illuminate aspects of behaviors and beliefs that are often obstructed from their parents' view. During adolescence in particular, individuals increase their autonomy and elevate the importance of relationships with those outside of their families (Loyd & Gaither 2018; Smetana et al. 2015). Therefore, it is possible that messages transmitted by teachers would grow in relevance during high school. By equipping child-centered methods to understand teacher-student relationships, analysts can more easily develop existing theories about the reproduction of dominant racial ideologies and better inform anti-racist teaching strategies and school policies (Rogers 2021).

To be sure, schools provide a limited view into the lives of adolescents. Past analyses have revealed that socializing roles of parents, the media, and peer networks, to name a few, are not easily separable from each other (Vitrup 2011). Likewise, studying adolescence alone ignores earlier life experiences that shape individuals' views and sense of self. As such, policies and practices intended to disrupt colorblindness must also target earlier stages of development (Hagerman 2020). Pedagogical approaches are also not easily separable from the effects of mandated curricula and teacher’s education. Finally, since white individuals are socialized differently, conclusions from studies recruiting adolescents and their perceptions of schools cannot be generalized to white teenagers overall; factors like geographic region, class, sexual orientation, and gender also shape perceptions and beliefs about race and racism (Grossman 2009; Ghavami & Mistry 2019; Hatchell 2004). Despite these limitations, the material conditions produced by whiteness cannot be discounted; its allocation of privileges and resources in schools ultimately shapes narratives about race that many white adolescents share.

This paper begins with a review of racial and ethnic socialization, particularly among white adolescents, and directs it towards a discussion of how pedagogy exists as race-making and socializing practice. Synthesis of psychological, sociological, and educational scholarship reveals that teachers have a limited effect on white adolescents’ interpretations of history. Many white instructors and white students share similar framings of racial groups’ roles in American development and interpretations of national identity. Since color-evasive ideology pervades discussions both inside and outside of classrooms, students tend to maintain their pre-instructional beliefs. Furthermore, the effect of teachers on white youth’s beliefs is not easily separable from those of other socializing agents like peers, parents, and the media. Anti-racist and culturally relevant pedagogies can disrupt the crystallization of colorblindness but are more successful earlier in youth’s development. Future studies can navigate the complexities of ideological formation by gathering more information about these influences on adolescent participants.

Background

In the United States, "race" is a dynamic social construction contingent on the country's unique history of white domination and the marginalization of African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples (Ifekwunigwe 2020). Population geneticists contend that human variation does not satisfy discrete biological “races,” yet race remains socially real (Graves 2003; Keita et al. 2004) Today, racialized practices and social relations continue to shape Americans' life outcomes across areas of housing, wealth accumulation, health, and education (see, e.g., Akbar et al. 2019; Trent et al. 2019; Wight 2020). While significant associations exist between race and educational outcomes, for instance, like graduation rates, grades, discipline, and educational attainment, they do not reflect racial groups' inherent characteristics. Consequently, the "main effect" of race, as well as other racial measures, are sensitive to the social structure of American schools and society broadly.

Children learn about race before their school years through racial and ethnic socialization (RES), “a social, cognitive, and developmental process through which individuals transmit, negotiate and acquire beliefs, values, social norms and behaviors to engage appropriately with society” (Loyd & Gaither 2018, 55). Early RES literature illuminated the central role Black parents and caregivers play in their children’s self-esteem, racial pride, and preparation for bias (Peters & Massey, 1983; Richardson, 1981; Spencer, 1983; Tatum, 1987). Recently, scholarship has discussed how white children also experience RES. Throughout their lives, but especially during their children’s preschool and elementary school years, White parents tend avoid conversations about race and racism or communicate to their children that such issues should not be discussed (Bartoli et al. 2016; Pahlke et al., 2012; Brown et al. 2010; Vittrup 2016). Despite their parents’ avoidance of “race talk,” white children form racial attitudes and beliefs about racial inequality and racism based on perceptions and implicit messages.

The *white habitus* explains how the totality of these messages constitute "racialized process of socialization" that develops white individuals’ beliefs, perceptions, tastes, and behaviors (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 73). The strength of the white habitus persists despite historical efforts to racially integrate neighborhoods, social networks, and schools (Burke 2012). As early as 6 months in age, individuals can distinguish between different faces by race (Paulker et al. 2019; Spencer 2008). By middle childhood, the socializing and racializing work of the white habitus leads white individuals to prefer peers or toys based on race (Clark & Clark 1939; Aboud 1988; van Ausdale & Feagin 2001; Stokes-Guinan 2011). In the contemporary United States, primary white school-aged children learn to shift from explicit attitudes on race to subtler ones once they learn that they are less socially acceptable (Sinclair el al. 2005; Zucker & Patterson 2018). Finally, white adolescents crystallize these racial identities and display greater coherency while discussing matters of racism, diversity, and racial privilege (Hagerman 2020). During this time, individuals gain the ability to discuss and think about race in an abstract and more complicated way (Williams et al. 2020). Adolescence is a critical period for the study of racial ideologies since they are constructed in relation to the position of racial identities one holds.

Colorblind or color-evasive ideology is one ideology acquired by many white individuals throughout socialization and frames the United States as a post-racial society. Bonilla-Silva (2018) theorizes four "frames" of colorblindness: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. Abstract liberalism describes messages justifying racial inequality with the vague language of equal opportunity, individual freedom, and meritocracy. For example, some individuals use abstract liberalism to argue against school integration policies (e.g. bussing, redistricting) by framing them as violations of parent choice. The second frame, naturalization, explains racial inequality as “just the way things are.” One instance of naturalization appears in messages explaining peer network segregation, like students’ preferred tables in a school cafeteria, as natural occurrences. Often, these arguments ignore the underlying socialization processes that make white students exclude students of color. The third fame, cultural racism, levies stereotypes about communities of color to justify persistent inequality. One such case of this frame arises in Hagerman's (2020, 184) interview with an adolescent girl who claimed that “even a poor black kid could… move up,” but their success would be hampered by their parents’ supposedly inferior financial habits.

As previous examples regarding school choice and peer networks suggest, colorblind messages circulate schools on an everyday basis. Compared to informal interactions between peers, teachers, and school staff, racial ideologies can arise most clearly in teacher’s pedagogical approaches. Pedagogy, or the process by which educational material is taught, often invokes ideological frames along dimensions of race, class, and gender (Murphy 2008; Apple 2004). In this article, I focus specifically on racial messages transmitted by teachers through their pedagogical approaches to history.

Discussion (Need a better header)

At the time of this article’s writing, American political discourse has intensified around the teaching of race and racism in public schools. Some have mobilized in response to the perception that American children are indoctrinated by certain racial frameworks, like critical race theory. This backlash occurs after a period of racial reckoning following the deaths of George Floyd, Breona Taylor, and other Black individuals at the hands of police, which has since exposed racialized practices across society. Recently, several state legislatures have passed laws banning teachers from discussing “divisive concepts” such as identities of race, gender, and sexual orientation (“Alabama House approves bill banning ‘divisive concepts’”., often explicitly regarding the teaching of American history. These developments, however, are nothing new. Debates over school curricula have long invoked relations of power, ultimately deciding which ideological knowledge will become school knowledge (Wills 2019; Thomas 2015).

How matters of race are discussed in classrooms depends largely on the racial identities of their teachers. Today, more than three-quarters of high school teachers are white, yet students of color constitute more than half of total enrollment in American public schools (Pew Research 2018). As demographic changes in both classrooms and the country increases the salience of race, racial inequality, and racism in schools, teachers’ interpretive frames of these issues still dictate how these matters are examined. Most teachers report discussing racial inequality and racism with students but rarely do so in practice (Epstein 2009; Vitrup 2016). For example, recent studies reveal that around 70 percent of teachers ascribe to colorblindness, a figure comparable to the overall adult population (Vitrup 2016; Hazelbaker & Mistry 2021). Moreover, little variation exists in the use of colorblind messages between white, Black, and Latinx teachers. Therefore, given the prevalence of color-evasive messages in classrooms, it is worth considering how white adolescents perceive them (Festritzer 2011). Teachers can equip colorblind frames during formal instruction, for example, while teaching units about history. Their ideology can also appear in differential treatment and appraisals of students. In both formal and informal interactions with teachers, white adolescents are exposed to racial ideological positions that they can reproduce, rework, or contest.

The prevalence of color-evasive ideology means that discussions about racial identity, racism, and racial often exist subtly in teachers’ pedagogical approaches (Thomas 2015). Literature about the effect of pedagogy on white adolescents’ interpretations of history can be grouped into two categories: their views on the role of different racial groups in American development and formulation of a national collective identity through concepts like citizenship.

As mentioned previously, many teachers report discussing race in their classrooms yet seldom do so in practice. This principle appears prominently in teachers’ portrayal of European-Americans as the leaders, inventors, and nation builders. For example, excluding Sacagawea in the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804, many teachers omit individual Indigenous people from American post-colonial history (**Martel 2018**). As a result, white adolescents tend to discuss American Indians using past-tense phrases like “lived in teepees,” “some lived in longhouses,” or “they fished and grew plants or had different religions” (Epstein 2009, 61). This assumption draws upon Cook-Lynn’s (2001) theory of “anti-Indianism,” which describes that which treats American Indians and their tribes as if they no longer exist. Hatchell’s (2004) analysis of historical pedagogy in Australia also points to the effect of anti-Indianism on white adolescents. Despite white adolescents’ sympathy towards these groups after learning about European violence and colonialization, victimization alone prevents individuals from viewing Indigenous people as important historical actors, which in turn leads to confusion once introduced to contemporary claims by Indigenous groups to sovereignty, land, and resources.

Like the teaching of Native American history, white adolescents are also exposed to pedagogical approaches that strip other racialized communities of their agency and contemporary relevance. For example, teachers often exclude details about lynchings and other racial violence throughout history, especially in Asian American and Latinx communities (Brown & Brown 2010; Salinas et al . 2016).Their lessons about civil rights leaders also introduced abstract liberalist interpretations that dilute messages of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Cesar Chávez (Carlson 2003; Epstein 2009). Specifically, textbook sections about Martin Luther King Jr. ignore the leader’s most radical critiques of systemic racism and capitalism as well as the violence he faced in both life and death (Alridge 2006). These ideas transpired in letters the eleventh graders were asked to write to Martin Luther King Jr.’s children as an activity in their Civil Rights unit. One letter follows:

I wanted to know how you felt after your father’s birthday passed. I know it was hard when your father passed away. Just know we will always keep your father’s dream in our hearts. I’m glad your father’s dream came true. (Epstein 2009, p. 75)

Similar messages that simplified MLK Jr.’s message (e.g. “he was important for everyone being equal”) reveal the consequences of pedagogy obscuring the Civil Rights Movement’s structural goals and abstracting the “dream” to matters of morality or personal prejudice. The two eleventh grade history teachers in the school argued that Civil Rights leaders “stood up for people’s rights and everyone was listening” (p. 72) despite the opposition by many white Americans in the country at the time (“Public Opinion on Civil Rights: Reflections on the Civil Rights Act of 1964”). Individuals in the Civil Rights era who supported segregation, in the eyes of white adolescents, “treated blacks mean” (p. 75). At first glance, depictions by teachers and white depictions of racism as an issue of the past contradicts the belief of many that racial discrimination still exists. However, these two ideas, that Black community developed the country but are contemporarily irrelevant, are central to the reproduction of colorblind ideology.

While several frames of colorblind racism can be evoked in these contexts, minimization and naturalization of racism appear most prominently. During Black History month, for example, one teacher in Epstein’s study opposed several Black students’ suggestion that the class learn about Jesse Jackson. He argued that Jackson’s association with Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam was too controversial, and that Black history month should focus on more “positive” leaders (p. 56). This comment is in keeping with national data revealing that Black students experience less respectful and “open-classroom” environments than their white peers (Knowles 2018). After silencing further critiques and comments made by Black students about their Black history month lessons, several of the white students became upset with their Black classmates. One responded:

When black history comes around, it’s nothing but problems. Black kids are mean to the white kids, like it was us who were the slave owners… But when civil rights come around, blacks get angry… That was in the past. Blacks think it affects them but it doesn’t (pp.79-80).

Versions of refrains like “The past is the past” and “I was not a slave owner” also appear prominently in interviews with white adults and college students when asked about racial inequality today (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Ultimately, these phrases serve colorblindness by concealing and naturalizing persistent racial inequality. White adolescents, like their teachers, can reduce racism to the consequence of a few prejudiced people, thus ignoring its structural and historical significance. Consequently, this logic normalizes manifestations of racism like residential segregation: “there has always been segregation because you are always going to have racist people…” (Epstein 2009, p. 79). Collectively, the use of simplified heroes and victimization while discussing Indigenous and Black history can undermine more comprehensive understandings of their roles in historical as well as contemporary contexts. In the case of Latinx, Asian American, and Native American activism, the minimization of racism frame more easily erases these movements altogether.

While colorblind pedagogy appears to affect white students’ characterizations of racial groups’ roles in history, does it also affect their beliefs about race relations? Colorblind teachers and textbooks often send “mixed messages” about the relationships between racial groups throughout American history (e.g. cooperation and conflict) that disguise power imbalances (Espstein 2009). This perspective seeks to balance “positive” examples of racial cooperation with “negative” facts about enslavement, dissent, segregation, and persistent racial inequality (Levstik 2000)**.** However, as mentioned previously, white adolescents already diminish the salience of people of color in their interpretations of history. As a result, white students rarely characterize dynamics between racial groups unless asked directly (Hewitt 1986; Landsman 2009). In Epstein’s study, for example, white teenagers often focused on the “positives,” like Indigenous peoples’ assistance to European colonists (e.g. “showed settlers how to hunt” p.63) and multi-racial coalitions during the Civil Rights Movement. In other words, white students seemed to ignore the teacher’s “negative” statements about colonization and racial violence. Wills’s (2019) analysis of essays written in a unit about white-Black segregation during the Civil Rights era similarly reveals the limitations of pedagogical frames on white students’ interpretations. In one During one lesson, a teacher argued that racism arose from ‘segregation within [one’s] own color’ and that ‘race is really a difference of culture and society’ (2019, pp. 20-21). The belief that race is a cultural production, reflecting a set of values and beliefs, successfully challenged the teacher’s students’ biological construction of race but did not interrogate race’s relationship to social and cultural power (Levstik 2000). “Only a few” of the 65 essays written on the topic of “social change” mentioned race or racism explicitly (p. 30). Those that did include content about race either discussed racial discrimination (e.g. segregation in Birmingham, Alabama) or Civil Rights Movement was simply about ‘blacks [wanting] to prove that they were equal to the white man.” Unfortunately, Wills’s analysis did not differentiate between the essays written by white and non-white students. However, the “handful” of color-conscious essays still represent a small fraction of the total white students (n = 29) in the study. The fact that the majority of the students minimized the role of race in the Civil Rights unit still points to the fact that race relations were low salience compared to individual accomplishments. However, it is hard to deduce the contribution of the teachers’ approaches to their white students’ interpretations due to the lack of data collection before instruction.

Given the silencing role of colorblind pedagogy on historical narratives about people of color, it is possible that it also influences white adolescents’ construction of national identity. As discussed earlier, teachers and white students tend to view American development through the contributions of European Americans like the founding fathers and presidents. Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Asian American communities are often excluded from the American collective despite their contributions and presence in society as well as the “American creed” of inclusion and equality (Myrdal 1944). These erasures infiltrate mostly clearly through white adolescents’ constructions of the historical narratives and the national polity. For instance, in Levstik’s study of forty-eight adolescents and twelve teachers, they found both groups using the first person plural to explain historical events. Many of the teachers, for instance, described the colonial period and American Revolution as the time when “we began” (p. 288). When asked about their ideas about Thanksgiving, one white student reported: “We was making a bond with Native Americans; that’s good because that’s a tradition that goes on forever” (p. 289). Epstein’s sample of white adolescents also constructed discursive boundaries when asked to report a national narrative, particularly during the colonial period: “if it weren’t for them [the colonists], we wouldn’t be here.”