

# **RETROSPECTIVE MEMORIES OF RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES**

A Senior Scholars Thesis

by

HANNAH MARGARET PRICE

Submitted to the Office of Undergraduate Research  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

April 2010

Major: Sociology

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Approved by:

Research Advisor:  
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Research:

Joe Feagin  
Robert C. Webb

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## **ABSTRACT**

Retrospective Memories of Racialized Experiences. (April 2010)

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This thesis explores the relationship between individuals' memories of experiences with children from different racial backgrounds and their present racial identity. After generating data by collecting responses to an open ended survey about racial identity and memories of racialized experiences, the results are examined using theoretical concepts including the white racial frame, critical race theory, and "colorblind" racism. The results indicate that racial identity and categorization is formed prior to interaction with children from different racial backgrounds. Additionally, the trope of "colorblindness" in respondent answers is analyzed, not as evidence of racial progress, but as an extension of white racism.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my students of color in the past, present and future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must acknowledge and express my immense gratitude to my advisor and mentor Dr. Joe Feagin. Without his willingness to work with undergraduate students and patiently teach the true history of and present state of racism in this country, I would still be on my way to becoming a “colorblind” teacher hoping to assimilate all my students into white middle class values. You have taught me to think critically and have inspired me with your decades of dedication to this important work. As they say in the African philosophy Ubuntu, “I am who I am because of you.” Thank you.

I also must acknowledge help from Brittany Slatton, whose research project, design, and methodology inspired my own and who spent several hours helping me prepare my research proposal. Without your guidance in my time of need, this project would not have been possible. For that I thank you. I also must thank Ruth Thompson-Miller, who helped me (though not for the first time) with the tedious IRB forms and has been an important role model and friend these past three years. Your friendship, guidance, and encouragement has been invaluable to me during my time at Texas A&M. I cannot thank you enough!

I also must thank my colleague Celia Emmelhainz for reviewing my survey and passing it along. I attribute much of my growth over the past two years to the hours we have spent in deep conversation. I am also indebted to my friend and academic scholar

Jonathan Luu, whose Immense thanks goes out to Kelley Reeder and Amanda Stolnacke who reviewed and edited my thesis for me on very short notice. Thanks for your friendship and English skills! I also must thank Alicia Israel, who loaned me her computer after mine crashed; this paper literally could not have been written without your support.

I also must acknowledge Dr. Tommy Curry; the readings and theories in his Critical Race Theory this class have really impacted my thinking on racism and influenced my research analysis and interpretations. Without him and his dedication to rigorous scholarship and to exposing scholarship that is “piss poor,” I would still be caught in the vicious mindset that is white liberalism.

Finally, I must acknowledge and thank my parents, Jennifer and David, and my siblings, Emily and Andrew. Thank you for putting up with me and for allowing me to speak my mind. You have supported me financially, emotionally, intellectually, physically, and in every way imaginable through these four years in college, and the other eighteen before that. Thank you for raising me in an environment that did not foster hate towards others, and in a home where I never once heard a racist joke or slur (believe me, after three years of studying racism, this type of child rearing happens much less often than you’d think!) You always taught me to care about and empathize with others; without you, I wouldn’t be who I am or where I am today. To my family, I offer these words of greatest gratitude.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

On a day when the weather was particularly nice when I was a teacher, I decided to take my pre-school students to the playground to burn off some energy by running race. I awarded the top three students with the traditional titles of gold, silver, and bronze indicating first, second and third place. When one of my black students found out she came in second place, she excitedly began to chant, "I'm silver! I'm silver!" However, after two triumphant choruses, a white student put her hands on her hips, cocked her hip to one side, leaned forward, and with a furrowed brow quickly informed my black student, "No you're not, you're *black*." I italicize this word to indicate the emphasis my young white student put on it; this was not a neutral fact she was sharing. The tone of her voice and her body language seemed to say, "you may run fast, but don't forget that you are black and I am better than you." This took place between two children who regularly played together and had been in the same class for two years.

#### **Research questions**

While some might try to explain this interaction as the result of mild jealousy or that the remark had no larger racial meaning and was just "kid stuff", it struck me as significant

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This thesis follows the style of the *American Journal of Sociology*.

that the white student acted with such speed use the word “black” as an insult.

Thinking about the larger racial hierarchy the pre-school aged white student indicates with her statement, this anecdotal experience served as the starting point to develop my research questions for this project. The white child’s comment especially interests me because of the recent growing reference to “post-racial America” in the mainstream media (Wingfield and Feagin 2009, p. 218), the myth of a non-racist “color-blind” society in the United States (Carr 1997), the presumed innocence of children in terms of racial and ethnic relations (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001 p. 2), and the growing emphasis on multi-cultural education in schools encouraging “tolerance” and “respect” (Prashad 2001, p. xi). Despite these sentiments, the white child demonstrated clear understanding of the racial hierarchy that suggests black inferiority and white superiority. I wanted to know how this interaction would affect these two students, if they would even remember this experience in the future, and if it impacted either child’s racial identity or the way they perceive the other child’s racial group. After looking at research on racialized encounters among young students and the potential long-term effect on racial identity, my broader exploratory research questions became:

- (1) Do young adults remember experiences with children from different racial backgrounds?
- (2) What age do young adults remember experiences with children from other racial backgrounds occurring and does this vary across racial groups?

(3) What types of experiences with racially diverse peers and authority in school do young adults remember, and does this impact racial identity and categorization?

### **Literature review**

When Lewis (2003) conducted ethnographic research in three California elementary schools, her results suggest that children learn racial categorization in schools; they learn where others place them on the color line as well as where they place themselves (2003, p. 6). Her research suggests that children's racial identity is an unstable category that is negotiated through interaction with people who are classified racially the same, and by people who are classified as racially different. Schools are where racial categorizations and identities are "made and remade everyday" (Lewis 2003, p. 11). Lewis's ethnographic study explores what social formation processes look like while contextualizing this daily negotiation in a history of racial oppression that results in unequal resources. She also explores how the context of institutionalized racism reinforces and recreates existing and new racial hierarchies; the historical and institutional contexts of racism suggest that racial identity is also about power and resources and not just racial ideas (2003, p. 189). While this study explored the negotiation process in elementary schools for an entire school year, the research is unable to show empirically how these experiences will affect future negotiations of racial identity. Additionally, her research was conducted in the 1997-1998 school year,

which makes it nearly twelve years old now indicating the need for more contemporary research on racial identity negotiation and its implications.

Another ethnographic study explores a racially diverse pre-school; the study of Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) contextualizes children's racialized experiences within the reality of systemic racism rather than with concepts that attribute racial experiences to individual ideas about racial groups, individual prejudices or individual discrimination. Systemic racism "encompasses many dimensions of white-determined racism: the white attitudes, emotions, practices, and institutions that are central to white domination of African Americans and other Americans of color" (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001, p. 29). Through abandoning the traditional research methods that distance adult researchers from child subjects, Van Ausdale and Feagin demonstrate that "children's understandings [of racial and ethnic hierarchies] are often much more sophisticated and developed than most adults know or are willing to acknowledge" (2001, p. 213). Limitations of this research are similar to that of Lewis (2003). The ethnographic research took place nearly a decade ago, and updated research of a similar kind has not yet been administered. Additionally, more research needs to be done to better understand the future implications of these racial negotiations in the children's lives.

McKown and Strambler (2009) found through testing and interviewing a sample of 124 children, ages 5-11, that students who have knowledge about widely-held stereotypes of their own racial group or others will be more likely to "attribute discriminatory intent to

individuals engaged in interracial interactions (2009, p. 1659). Additionally, their research suggests that African Americans and Latinos who expressed awareness of others' stereotypes performed lower on a standardized working memory test. The study also found that as age increased, so did knowledge of widely held stereotypes. McKown and Strambler (2009) provide evidence that even at a young age, negative perceptions of racial identity can affect performance in school.

### **Methods overview**

I use a qualitative sociological method known as the extended case method to conduct my research and answer my research questions. This method reconstructs theories discovered through prior research in order to uncover how larger societal structures shape everyday micro or interpersonal situations (Burawoy et al. 1991, p. 282). Building on the theories developed out of Lewis (2003) and Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001), I conducted an open ended survey using a protocol instrument that asks detailed retrospective questions about people's childhood memories of racial experiences. My target demographic was respondents of all racial and class backgrounds ages 21-30. In order to reach a wider population and to ensure racial and other diversity amongst respondents, I advertised under the "volunteer" section on craigslist.org in a variety of cities across the United States of various sizes and geographic locations. In cities where my survey received little traffic, I asked colleagues in that area or with networks there to direct others towards the survey. This potentially skews my data towards a more educated population because of the educational attainment of my colleagues.

Additionally, I used the Google.com advertising service. My methodology limits my results to people who use these web sites rather than a random sample from my intended population of 21-30 year olds.

On the survey, I asked respondents to recount memories of interactions with racially diverse friends during early and elementary school, and reflect on the ways these experience affected or did not affect present day attitudes towards other racial groups and the respondent's own racial identity. I also asked demographic questions about geography, including state, relative size and type of location (for example: urban, rural, suburban, etc.) in order to control for potential regional differences in experiences and/or views. I also asked open-ended questions about teachers from different racial backgrounds. The use of online research methods is growing and is now recognized as a way to secure data not otherwise accessible (see expansion and evidence in Chapter II "Methods" section.)

My present findings are skewed by the overrepresentation of white responses. However, within the responses of white volunteers as well as some respondents of color, there is extensive evidence of "color-blind" ideology articulated in Carr (1997), Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001), Lewis (2003), as well as in Joe Feagin's book *The White Racial Frame* (2009) and in writings of critical race theorists. Some responses even express hostility to me, the survey creator, for asking questions about friends or classmates from specific racial groups. Many white respondents also answered that they did not have

views of racial groups nor do they make judgments on an individual level. I will review my results and analysis in more detail in Chapters III, IV and V.

Before discussing results I will discuss in detail my precise methodology in Chapter II followed by a presentation of the resulting data in Chapter III. In Chapter IV, I will summarize my results, analyzing them using the extended case method by discussing and extending concepts including “color blind” racism, critical race theory, and the white racial frame. The white racial frame, which I define in greater detail in Chapter IV, is the dominant racial frame that attaches “a positive orientation to whites and whiteness and a negative orientation to those racial ‘others’ who are exploited and oppressed” (Feagin 2009, p. 11). Finally, after the summary, I will draw conclusions from my research and theories developed through prior research, as well as discuss implications for future studies in the area of racial identity negotiation of children in schools.



## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

I collected my data over a period beginning in November 2009 lasting through February 2010. Respondents primarily lived in the cities of Phoenix, Arizona and Columbus, Ohio, however the respondents within these cities grew up in various places around the country and some even spent their early childhoods abroad. My population was people of various racial backgrounds currently living in the United States ages 21-30.

Additionally, the subjects must have had to have Internet access and be able to read and write in English in order to complete my open-ended survey. I chose this population because their age was suitable for my research questions; their early childhood experiences were not too distant as would be the case with an older adult, but additionally the memories are not too recent. This distance allows me to explore my research questions concerning the effect of childhood memories on racial identity and conception. Also, people ages 21-30 in the United States will have attended school after de-segregation, which means that there is a higher probability that they attended school with students from racial backgrounds other than their own when compared with someone whose early childhood took place during segregation in the South. Overall, I have 35 cases. Within these cases, 28 of the respondents identified as white, 3 identified as black, 2 identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 1 respondent identified as Latino, and 2 did not respond. 23 of my respondents were females, 10 males, and 1 did not respond.

**Sampling method**

My sampling method was internet-based using an advertisement on various websites targeting in specific cities in order to get respondents. After reading a brief description of my project on craigslist.com under the “Volunteers” section, if the person wanted to participate, they clicked on a link that directed them to my survey. I also had an out of state colleague e-mail acquaintances of the target age group in order to reach a wider sample. Once the surveys were complete, I chose lengthier answers that cited specific events in childhood and went more in depth in articulating how these memories had impacted their racial identity and racial conceptions rather than generic and vague answers given by respondents. I chose to analyze the content of these answers in order to better answer my research questions. Interestingly, although the overwhelming number of my respondents were white, their answers compared with the responses from people of color tended to be more vague and showed less thought on the subject of race, racial identity, and racial experiences. Therefore, in my content analysis and extended case method, I have chosen all responses from people of color as cases to closely examine. However, what whites could not recall and did not respond to also provides insight to answer my research questions.

**Instrument**

I used a survey data collection protocol on the website surveymonkey.com. There were around 55 questions. Free-response questions were intermittently mixed with multiple-choice questions. I chose this design to shorten the amount of time it would take

respondents to complete the open ended survey. It took respondents 20 minutes at the most to respond to all the questions. The internet made it possible for respondents to take my survey at any time or place they wished at their convenience, and it also meant that research was being conducted basically for 24 hours a day 7 days a week, for as long as I kept my survey on the website.

### **Variables**

My key dependent variable was racial identity as a child. I predicted that this dependent variable would have a correlation with racial identity in the present, as well as the kinds of racial memories that respondents reported remembering and how much or often the respondent thought about the racialized memories. I operationalize racial identity simply by asking the respondent to indicate his or her racial or ethnic identity, and if it had changed since he/she was a child. The options included white, black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Latino/Latina, and Other with space to indicate. Respondents could also choose more than one option if they identified as bi-racial.

### **Use of emergent methods**

Although I chose to look at dependent and independent variables, which is typically characteristic of quantitative sociological methods, my study more closely falls into the category of exploratory qualitative research. More specifically, this kind of combination in using both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore research questions is known as *mixed methods* research (Hewson 2006; Hewson 2008.) Additionally, the use

of the Internet qualifies my research further as *internet-mediated research* or IMR, which is characterized by the gathering of original data using an online protocol instrument (Hewson, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003; Hewson 2008.) Importantly, IMR is now considered by researchers to be a valid and valuable data-gathering tool that can enhance research opportunities, and both IMR and mixed methods are considered emergent research methods (Hewson 2008.)

### **Extended case method**

The exploratory, qualitative, emergent methods of this research make the specific method and analysis description difficult. However, the basis of this research and its application comes from a method known as the extended case method. The basic principle of the extended case method is the expansion or reconstruction of grounded theory through new research (Burawoy et al. 1991.) Restated, this means that from the onset of the research, the point of the departure is dependent upon prior research and resulting theory. My research's point of departure relies upon the research and resulting theories of Lewis (2003) and Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001).

I chose to use the extended case method implementing both mixed methods research and qualitative emerging Internet mediated research in order to approach my research questions of the effect of memories of racialized experiences on racial identity and racial conception. The reason I chose to do this rather than a participant observation, in depth interview, or ethnography was in order to get at longitudinal results of the initial research

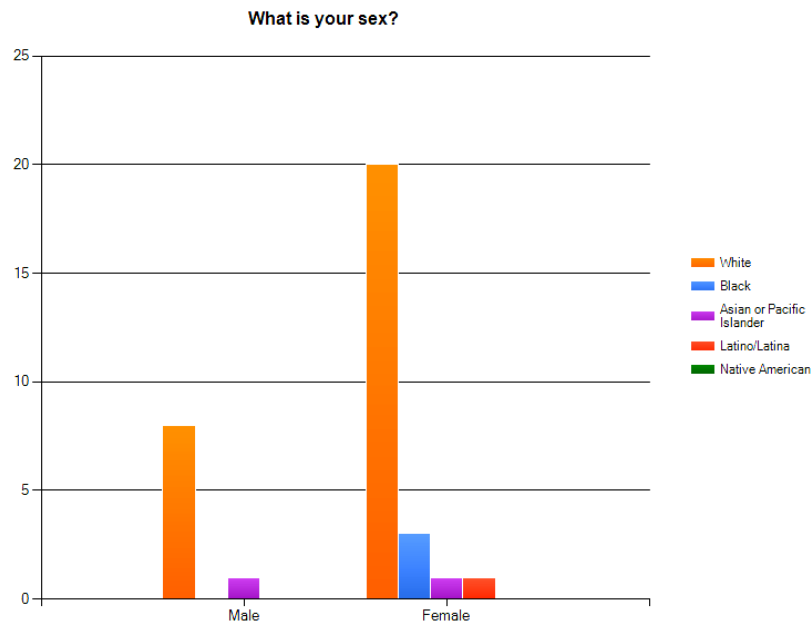
of Lewis (2003) and Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001). Participants of their ethnographic school studies would be nearing the ages of the participants of my research study. My research questions look at the long-term implications of racialized experiences, not the initial reaction or effect. Using IMR allowed me to ask a larger population sample and granted me access to respondents that geography and monetary restraints would have otherwise prevented.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### Demographics of respondents

My respondents were overwhelmingly females; within the females my sample was also mostly white. The breakdown is shown in Figure 1 below.

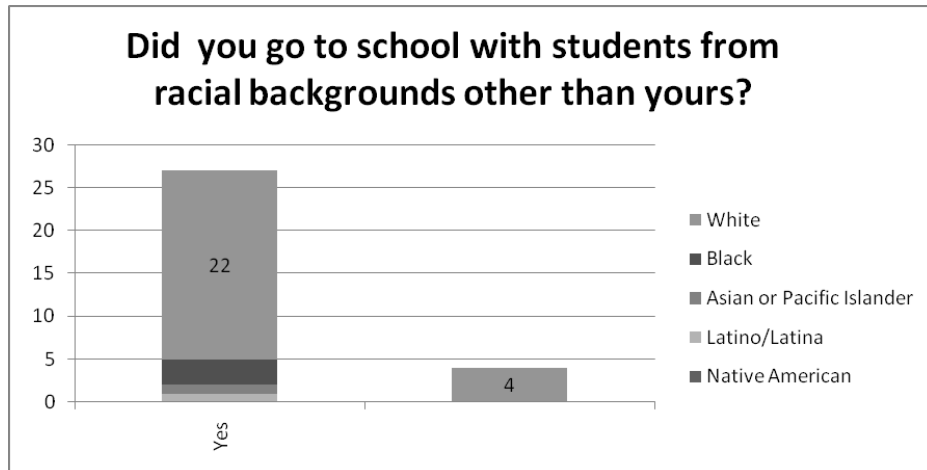


**FIG. 1-**Racial and Sex Demographics of Respondents

Of the 34 respondents, 23 marked women, 9 marked men and 2 did not respond. Figure 1 also shows the racial breakdown of the respondents, which gets at all three of my research questions.

### Cross tabulation

In order to answer my first research question, which asked if young adults remember experiences with children from different racial backgrounds, I needed to address whether respondents attended diverse schools. To do this, I have cross-tabulated the question “with what racial or ethnic group do you most closely identify” with “did you go to school with students from racial backgrounds other than yours?” The results are recorded below in Figure 2.



**FIG. 2-** Racial Diversity in Respondents' Schools

While most students indicated that they did attend schools with students from other racial backgrounds, four white respondents indicated that they did not attend schools with students from other racial backgrounds. Of the respondents who answered “yes”, I also looked at whether they were friends with classmates from other racial backgrounds. The answers are recorded below in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**DID RESPONDENTS HAVE FRIENDS FROM DIFFERENT RACIAL**  
**BACKGROUNDS**

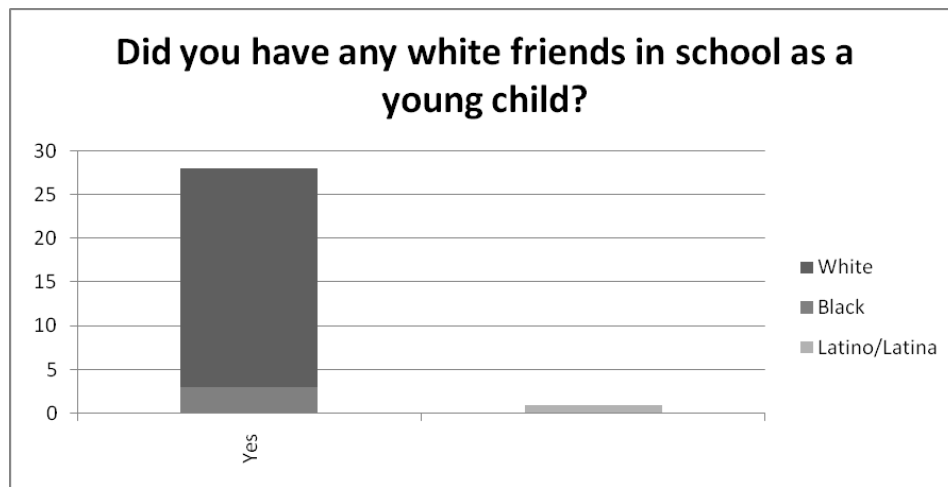
	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Latino/ Latina</b>	<b>Native American</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	19	3	1	0	0	73.3%	22
No	7	0	0	1	0	26.7%	8
<i>Answered question</i>							<b>30</b>

The responses to this question indicated that 7 out of 26 white students did not have friends from other racial backgrounds at their racially diverse schools. Additionally, one Latina respondent who grew up in Colombia did not have friends from other racial backgrounds. Asking this question potentially skewed my results by suggesting that I only want to know about experiences with friends, which tended to involve positive memories. While I was not necessarily looking for only experiences with friends, the responses tended to revolve around friends. Additionally, the answers tended to be a little vague in description. My survey needed to have more probing questions in order to really address the extent that childhood experiences affect racial identity.

### **Experiences with white children**

By this section of the survey, the only non-white respondents who remained were three black women and one Latina; both Asian respondents did not answer this question, therefore Asian identity is extremely underrepresented. When I asked if respondents had white friends in school as young children, all answered yes except for the Latina woman.





**FIG 3-Did Respondents Have White Friends**

The survey was designed to skip entire sections if a respondent answered that they did not have friends of that racial background, therefore the only responses relevant to this section are those of the three black women.

### **Individual cases**

#### *Black and White identified woman from Ohio and Pennsylvania*

This woman explained that school was the first time she had white friends, probably around the age of 4. She did not notice race at this point. She later explains that race became an issue as she got older. She says “it was not necessarily a problem, but it was apparent that I was black and my friends were not.” She also indicated that she has thought about her experiences with white children before, however she does not think that these experiences shaped the way she sees white people today. She describes her view of white people today saying, “in general, most white people are nice and try not to

make race an issue, but there are definitely some obvious cultural differences between me and them.”

### *Identity*

She also explained that as a child, she identified as white, however now she identifies as both white and black. She describes that the town in which she grew up discouraged her from embracing her culture and that race became more of an issue as she got older.

When she left her hometown and began to meet other black people who she had a lot in common with, it helped her to embrace her culture and her “background and accept that it’s okay to be different.”

### *Teachers*

All of her teachers growing up were white and one experience specifically stands out to her in 6<sup>th</sup> grade when she was the only African American in class and asked to speak on behalf of her entire racial group.

### *Black identified woman from suburban Ohio and urban Pennsylvania*

When asked about her experiences with white children as a young child, she responded, “I remember not knowing I was ‘different’ until the 2nd or 3rd grade. And even then it wasn’t really a big deal. Not until 7th grade actually.” Later in the survey, she describes her junior high school years as a “crash course” in race relations. She expressed that she had thought about her experiences with white children before and that they had

somewhat shaped her views of white people today. She says she was fortunate to have good experiences with white children as a young child, however she does remember having a crush on one white boy who did not like her because she was smarter than he was, and she suspects he was embarrassed by being outsmarted by a black girl. She finishes articulating her present view of white people saying “overall, I think white people are interesting, but definitely different.”

*Black identified woman from Maryland*

The final black identified woman provided much constructive feedback about my survey. She differentiated between experiences with different friends labeled as “white” such as Jewish friends, Russian friends, Turkish, or other European descended friends. Her final comment summarizes nicely her overall reaction to my survey. She says “in general, this survey seemed a wild oversimplification of a highly nuanced and complex topic.”

**White respondents’ experiences with black children**

The experiences white respondents shared with me concerning black children tended to be very vague and involved memories of playing together on the playground, or simply having black students in class with them. One respondent went to church with black children. This reflects a weakness in my survey as I failed to specify certain kinds of experiences; again I could have used some more in depth and probing questions. When I asked if respondents thought that experiences with black children had affected their

views of black people today, 50% of white respondents said no. Only one respondent said “yes” to this question, and the rest indicated “somewhat.”

### **Views of black people today**

When I asked respondents to articulate how the experiences with black children played into their views of blacks today, one white woman who described having black children in her ballet class explained, “I view someone who is black as just as smart and intelligent as I am. Someone's skin color doesn't affect how smart they are or how capable at a job they are.” Another respondent remembers being bullied by a black child and connects this to her fear of blacks for a period of time in her life. Another respondent says, “I feel that they tend [to] have a different culture that tends to be exclusive to blacks. It's hard to relate to them fully because they live in a world that is predominantly black and think about different things than I do. Their perception of the world is different.” Most other responses expressed that the white respondents have no overall view of black people and that they did not “see color” or adamantly downplaying the significance of racial difference by reductive statements or vagueness. For example, one white respondent makes this assertion saying, “we never thought of our friends as different. We respected their cultures.” This respondent actually speaks for others by using the plural pronoun “we.” There is no indication whether the “we” represents all friends, whites, or some other collectivity.

### **Experiences with Latino children**

Only three respondents had any experiences with Latino children growing up; all three of these were white respondents. These responses described little interaction between Latinos and children from other racial backgrounds. The white respondents associate Latino children with the Spanish language. Despite the lack of interaction with Latino children, 62% of white respondents said that although they had no experiences with Latinos, this did not affect their general view of Latino people. However, one white respondent became a bilingual educator because of her experiences with Latino children. Another respondent downplays racial difference despite interaction with Latinos saying, “quite a few hispanic kids. never thought much about their race. Not an issue for me.”

### **Views of Latinos today**

The six responses from whites describing Latinos today were very vague. One described the influence of popular culture and the media on her view of Latinos. Another respondent said that she did not see skin color, only people. Another described Latinos as stubborn and that it “drives her nuts.” Another white woman described herself as hesitant to initiate friendships with Latina women. One black respondent said that she was slowly getting to know more Latinos in college and in general they had a great culture; another black respondent said that Latinos were similar to black people.

**Experiences with Asian children**

Experiences with Asian children were also extremely vague, due in large part to my lack of specification and vague questions. Most of the responses tended to indicate that there were Asians in their classes at school at a young age, but that was the extent to which they interacted with them.

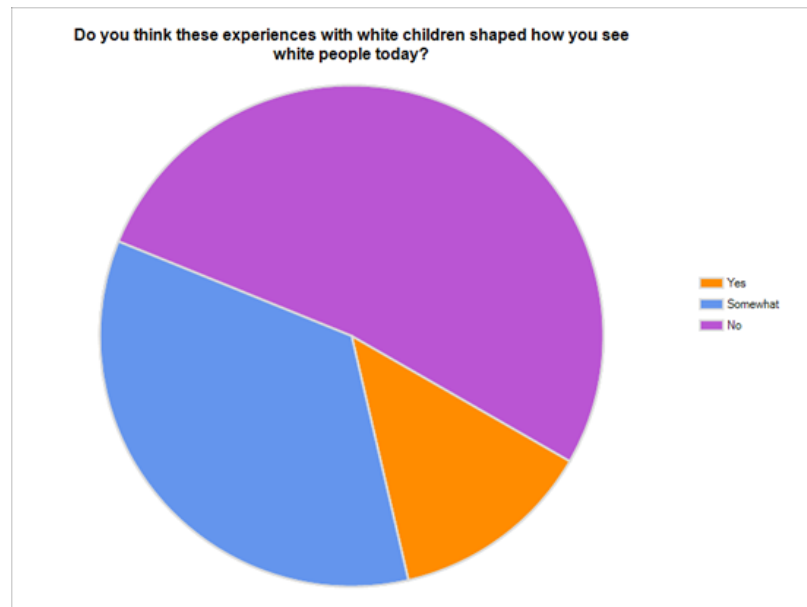
**Views of Asian people today**

Despite the vagueness of experiences, there were several lengthy descriptions of views of Asians today. One white woman said that she hesitated to befriend Asians. Overall, the responses indicated a very positive view of Asians. One white respondent expressed that Asians valued education. Another white respondent described, “Asians tend to be more quiet and keep their emotions to themselves. I know this is not always the case from personal experiences in my adulthood. I tend to believe many Asians are smart and hard workers. I have also believed they tend to be thinner and shorter in stature than many Americans.” Another described Asians as culturally reserved and docile. One black woman respondent expresses that she does not buy into stereotypes of Asians because as a minority, she knows they are not true.

**Do childhood experiences impact racial identity and categorization?**

Part of my research intends seeks to understand the connection between the racialized experiences people have during childhood, their memory of them, and their present racial identity. In my survey, I divided this question and asked specifically if experiences

with children from certain racial backgrounds affect the respondent's present racial identity. Whether it did or did not, I then asked respondents to explain and then describe their general views of certain racial groups. I first asked respondents about their views and experiences with white children. The responses are broken down below in Figure 4.



**FIG. 4-**Did Experiences with White Children Affect Views

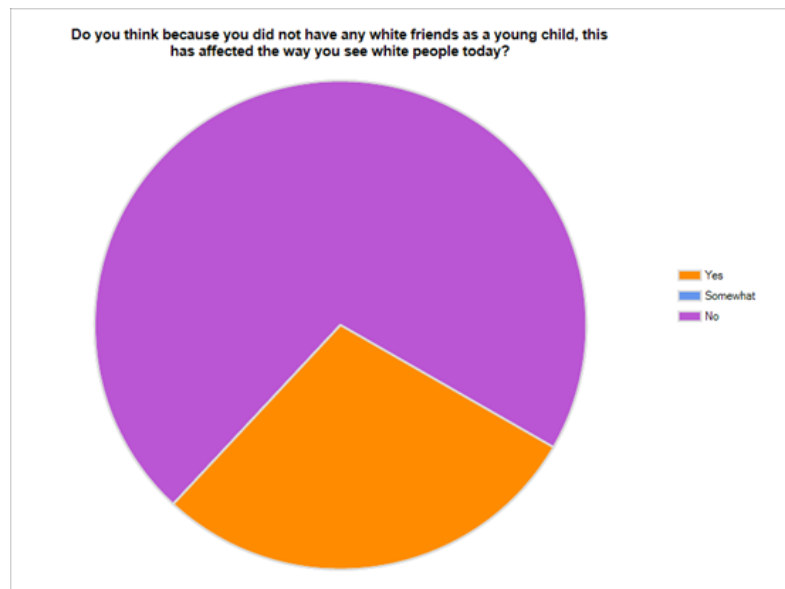
More than half of the respondents did not believe that their experiences with white children shaped the way they see white people in the present. One white respondent describes how these experiences made her feel more comfortable around other white people. She says,

Well because I am white too, I think it made me feel comfortable being friends with white people mostly and it made me feel that it was normal to be white and have white friends. I grew up in a world with mostly white people and we shared similar experiences, which I think validated a belief system for me. It's really hard to fully say because I think most of the shaping that occurred was and is unconscious. I feel the most safe and comfortable with white people.

Other white respondents also expressed that the lack of cultural diversity in their early childhood and elementary school years had an impact on their views today.

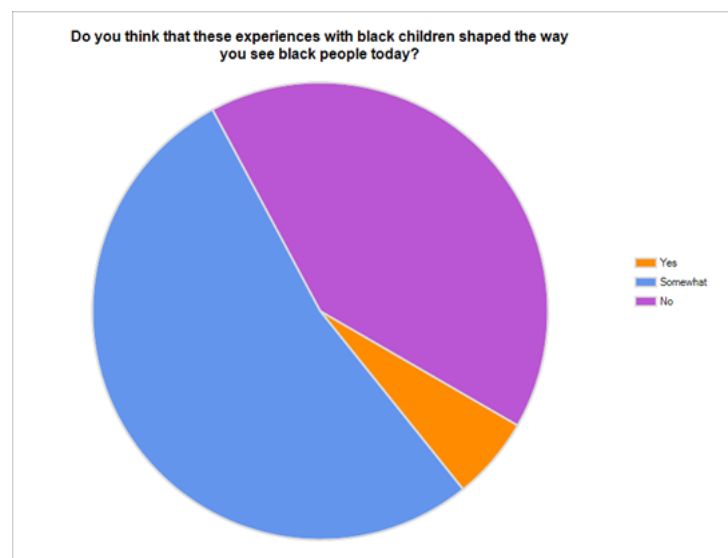
The respondents that did not feel early childhood experiences with children from different racial backgrounds affected their views generally appealed to universal humanism and “colorblindness”, namely that they had no general view of white people and made decisions based on individuals. For example, one respondent says, “I view people by who they are as a person, not what skin color they have,” and another responded “[I] don’t know that [I] have a general view of white people or black people.” Another respondent expresses that what distinguishes white people from other racialized groups is the structural material benefits they receive. He writes “While individuals vary, overall the only real distinction is that they are the beneficiaries of a society that grants implicit benefits such as the belief that they are the ‘norm’ and that all others are somehow different or less privileged.” Respondents who answered that they did not have white friends growing up overwhelmingly answered that this did not affect their views of white people. The results are shown below in Figure 5.





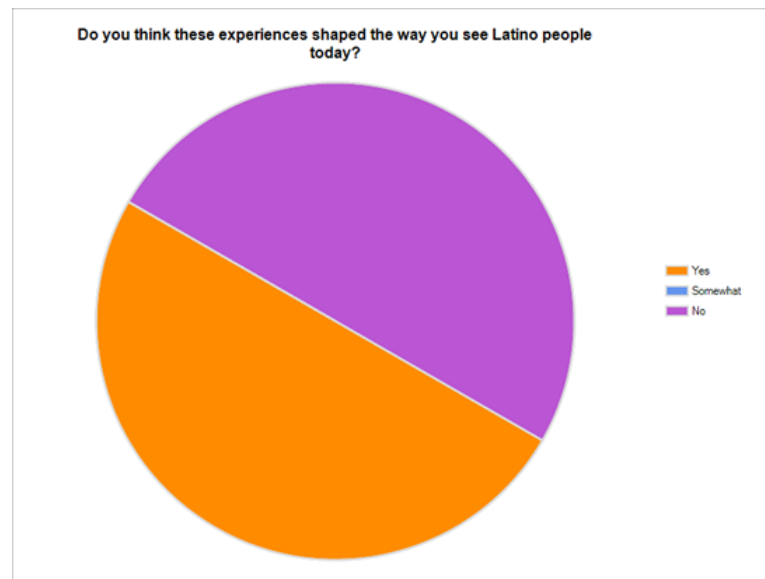
**FIG. 5-**Did Not Having White Friends Affect Views

With a response almost opposite to that of the question about interaction with white children, over half of the respondents said that their experiences with black children somewhat affected their views of black people in general today. The results are shown below in Figure 6.



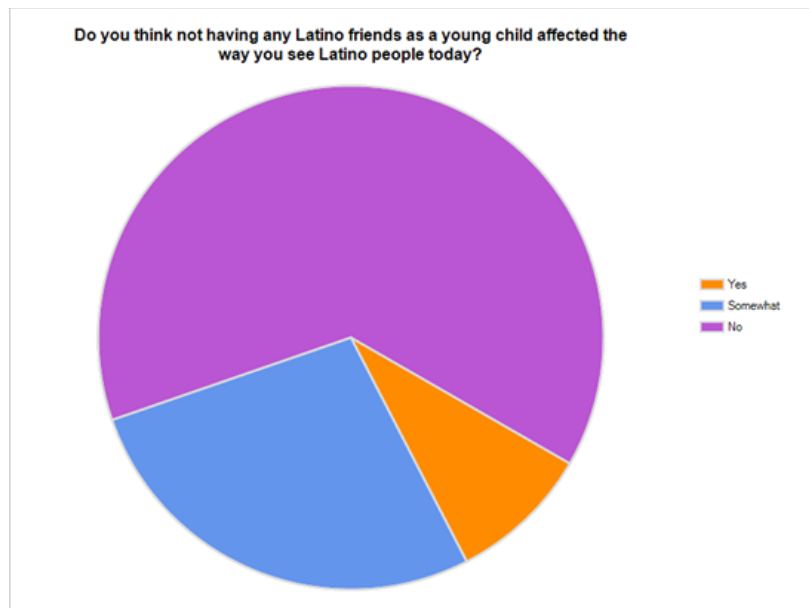
**FIG. 6-**Views of Black People

Once again, respondents are not convinced that their experiences with children of different racial backgrounds shapes their present views. The response to Latinos is split down the middle with half of the respondents seeing these experiences as impacting views, and the other half responding that these experiences have no impact. The results are shown below in Figure 7.



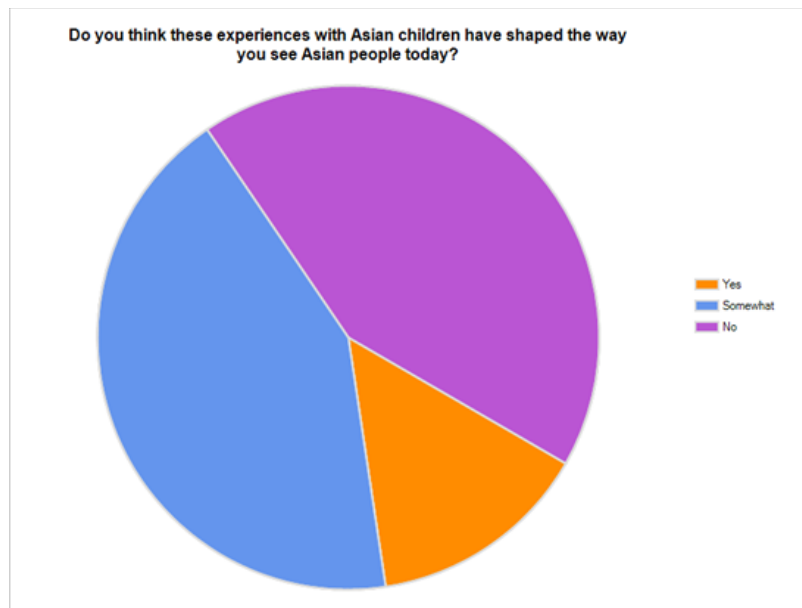
**FIG. 7-** Experiences with Latino Children

The response from those with little experiences with Latinos is different; most respondents assert that not interacting with Latinos as children has no impact on their present views of Latino people today. The results are broken down below in Figure 8.



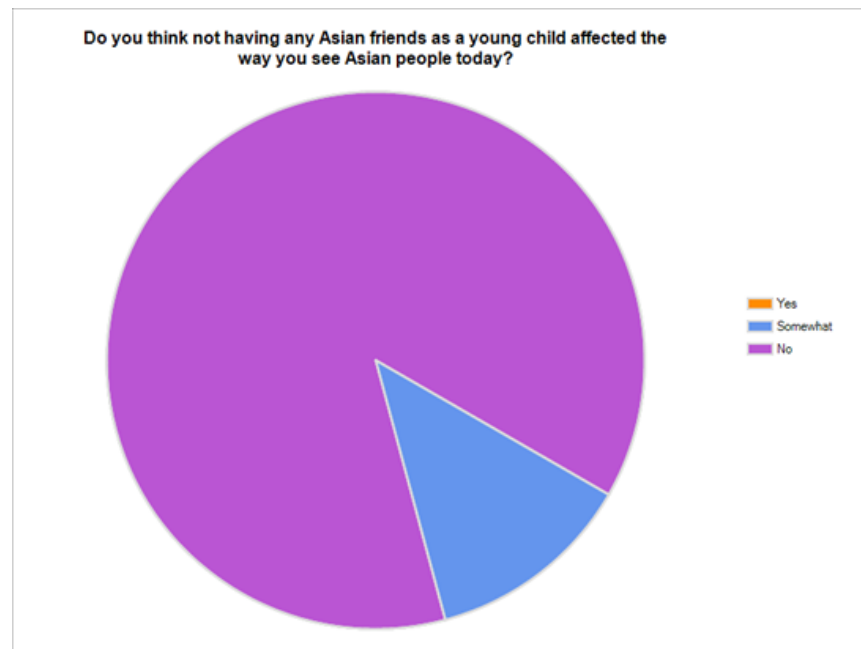
**FIG. 8-** Views of Latino People

Respondents with experiences with Asian children express more certainty that their memories do not impact racial views of Asians or at least hesitancy about the connection. A minority of respondents with memories of experiences with Asian children express that this impacted their present view. The results are shown below in Figure 9.



**FIG. 9-** Experiences with Asian Children

Lastly, respondents without experiences with Asian children adamantly oppose the notion that lack of experiences shapes their view of Asians. For this question, there is not anyone who answered “yes;” a majority of respondents answer “no” with a few responses indicating that no experience somewhat impacts their views.



**FIG. 10-**Views of Asian People

As many respondents indicate adamantly throughout their free responses articulating that they do not “see race” as well as in the above responses seen in the pie graphs, racialized experiences with individual children and their lasting memory are not understood as having any conscious impact on racial views. If this assertion is true, then there is another explanation that can account for the connection, if any, between racialized experiences and resulting racial ideology. I will discuss and analyze possible explanations in my conclusion.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS**

In this chapter, I will summarize the answers to my three research questions by analyzing the collected data, weaving in strong and critical race concepts developed by social scientists, lawyers, and critical race theorists to better explain what larger racial sociological themes are operating in respondent answers. In addition to answering my three research questions, I will also answer additional questions that arose as I was analyzing the data. I will use theories including the white racial frame, “colorblind” racism, and critical race theory to analyze and explain the data and the connection between racialized experiences as children or later in life and racial identity and categorization. Before continuing the discussion of my results, I must define an important theoretical concept known as the white racial frame that will be central in my summary and conclusion. After this definition I will begin answering my research questions.

#### **White racial frame**

To interpret my data and the responses of my volunteers, I will use a theoretical concept known as the white racial frame. According to Feagin (2009), the white racial frame is a “white created racial frame that provides an overarching and generally destructive worldview” (Feagin 2009, p. 10). Additionally, it combines important features including racial stereotypes, racial narratives, racial images, racial emotions, and inclinations to

discriminatory action (Feagin 2009, pp. 10-11). The white racial frame operates on a daily basis influencing interpretations of racialized events. While the white racial frame is a broad and overarching framework for interpreting the world, it has many sub-frames that work both together and separately towards the goal of creating, enforcing, maintaining, and rationalizing white supremacy. I will also examine the various sub-frames of the white racial frame operating in the answers of the respondents including blatant racial framing, but focusing mostly on the “colorblind” or liberal white racial frame.

### **Analysis of research questions**

Now I will begin to answer my research questions using the extended case method through developing my answers based on prior theory and research as well as my own research.

*Question 1: Do young adults remember experiences with children from different racial backgrounds?*

The young adults in my sample, ages 21-30, remembered having experiences with children from different racial backgrounds. When I specified and asked for memories with children from certain racial backgrounds to make it easier for respondents to remember and understand what I meant, most respondents could provide memories with children from the specified racialized backgrounds. Only one respondent, a black female volunteer, expressed a need for clarification on the racial categories I had listed. She

needed more clarification on who I meant by “white” because she was unsure who it included; specifically if it included more recent immigrants including people of Russian or Turkish backgrounds or if “white” also included Jewish people. She expressed to me in her comments after finishing the survey, that she needed specification because of the way the specificity of white ethnic groups impacts her racial identity.

Her articulation of the social construction of the category “white” indicates a deeper understanding of race as not biological. Another respondent indicates that race is socially constructed by putting “black” in quotation marks when I asked her to describe a memory involving black children. However, critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw describes this kind of emphasis on the fact that race is not a real biological category, merely a socially created category as “vulgar constructionist smugness.” She writes, “[t]o say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world” (Crenshaw 1995, p. 375). While race is not a biological category and is socially constructed, it still has real psychological, physical, social, political, and economic consequences.

*How did respondents recognize racial difference, and still manage to transcend it?*

Before continuing the explanation for my first research question, it is necessary that I address a frequent discrepancy I found in the answers to the survey. While respondents did remember experiences with children from different racial backgrounds, they are



adamant that they have no prior opinions or ideas about different racial groups, and come to decisions about each person they meet individually based on something other than racial group. Despite claims that they don't see skin color and are "colorblind," or the expression that respondents can "transcend race," they still have memories of racialized experiences. Additionally, even though whites claim they "'do not see race' in fact usually [they] *do* see it, and they frequently act negatively on what they see" (Feagin 2009, p. 98). Expressing that one is "colorblind" reveals an ahistorical racial understanding. Critical race theorist Cheryl Harris writes, "the construction of white identity and the ideology of racial hierarchy were intimately tied to the evolution and expansion of the system of chattel slavery" (1995, p. 278). The history and development of the concept "racial identity" is inextricably linked with the history of slavery in this country and by extension the history of the United States itself. Whether an individual believes that he or she can "transcend race," this idea, even the term itself, invokes the continued existence of race and as a result does not achieve its purpose of forgetting about or ignoring racial difference. Language invoking "transcending race" took place frequently in the responses. Answers involving this type of language tended to be vague.

Another explanation for the vague responses by whites on my survey is that,

surveys are seriously limited by the fact that many whites give the pollster, a stranger, socially desirable answers that accent white virtue or colorblindness and thus disguise their actual racial framing of society. Psychological research has found that many white respondents alter their comments on racial issues so they appear unprejudiced (Feagin, 2009: 91).

Feagin (2009) writes that whites understand to whom and where they may express their true feelings about race. Potentially, because I am a stranger asking them to fill out a survey for a research project, this influenced whites to put answers that make them appear less racist.

*How did respondents operationalize racial difference?*

The rest of the respondents admitted recognizing who is white, who is black, who is Asian and who is Latino; I understand that all the other volunteers recognize and as a result legitimize these racialized categorizations because they had answers for my questions. Specifically, when I asked for the earliest memory respondents had with a black child, they responded with a distinct memory indicating that they have an understanding of how to determine someone's racial group. However, I did not include probes asking what mechanisms the respondents use to distinguish between racial groups (be they racialized phenotypes, language, skin color, culture or another indicator) and at what age they remember attaching meaning to difference in racial groups.

Despite the lack of clarification on how exactly one determines racial group, some respondents indicated their mechanisms of distinguishing between racial groups. Before or after recalling a memory involving a student from a specified racial background, some respondents would include a clarifying moral statement that racial group does not matter. For example, one respondent writes in somewhat broken English because of the internet setting on which the survey took place, "WE all played together regardless of

background one blk kid and he was adopted.” While he emphasizes the fact that the “WE” recognized differences based on background, he claims this did not affect their playing together. He also recognizes the racial group of a black playmate; this result is not “colorblind,” but expresses rather a “tolerance” or an “in spite of difference” tone. This particular respondent does not give a clear indication of how he can tell the differences between racial groups.

Other respondents reveal their mechanisms for identifying racial groups by specifically indicating that race is equal to skin color. For example, “I view people by who they are as a person, not what skin color they have.” This respondent reveals that she possesses the ability to “transcend race.” Many whites view “colorblindness” as the opposite of racism, but author Leslie Carr argues that “colorblindness” is merely a new manifestation of racism. He writes, “to say that you do not discriminate and are not prejudiced is one thing, to say that you do not do this because you are ‘color-blind’ is something else” (Carr, 1997: 150). Seeing the differences in people’s skin tones and treating them with dignity and respect is different than adamantly arguing that all people look the same. “Colorblindness” as a solution to racism implies that it is skin color which creates oppression, rather than the negative attachment that whites have associated with it for centuries. This argument locates equality in sameness. Melanin itself is not oppressive, it is the reaction and meaning attached to difference in skin color that results in oppression. By claiming she “views people by who they are” instead of by “skin color”, which is the way she operationalizes racial difference, the respondent is

already indicating that racial difference is negative by expressing the need to ignore it. Not judging based on skin color has been taken and twisted in many ways since its widespread use after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech. Were skin color and racial categorization neutral and difference was truly celebrated in a multicultural society instead of merely in "colorblind" rhetoric, then the emphasis on would not be as clearly pronounced as it is in many of the responses to my survey.

*Additional flaws in "colorblind" rhetoric*

Before I move on to my second research question, I want to emphasize the point that the rhetoric of "colorblindness" or "post-raciality" is not an indication of racial progress. Emphasizing that the evil of racism is the continuing existence of racial categories removes the focus from an institutional and systemic racism to simply a matter of discourse. Crenshaw describes this saying "the dimension of racial domination that has been most vexing to African-Americans has not been the social categorization as such but, rather, the myriad ways in which those of us so defined have been systematically subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1995: 376). While the creation of racial categories happened to subordinate blacks and create a racial class whose exploitation would provide social, political, and economic benefits for the white racial class, the major flaw of "colorblind" racism is its "implicit denial of any possible positive values to race. In particular, the negative model devalues black culture—culture-race in this article— and unjustifiably assumes the social superiority of mainstream white culture" (Gotanda, 1995: 269). "Colorblindness" is not really about erasing difference so that everyone comes to some

neutral identity, it is about assimilating everyone to the standard of whiteness and removing all possibilities of resistance.

*The black counter-frame and “colorblindness”*

Feagin (2009) describes this positively framed view of blackness and black culture that fights against the dominating and oppressive white culture as the *black counter-frame* (19). One black respondent expresses her counter-frame on the survey when I asked about her view of black people in general. She wrote, “of course because I’m black, I’m going to say I think black people are awesome.” As expressed in Feagin’s work and in the response of this black woman, black identity can be the site of resistance to white racism (Crenshaw, 1995: 375). “Colorblindness” cites racial consciousness as the same issue as racism instead of recognizing its contribution to fighting racism (Hutchinson, 2001: 1479). Crenshaw articulates the difference between “colorblindness” and resistance stemming from positive black identity. She states that there is a clear difference between making the statement, “I am black’ and the claim ‘I am a person who happens to be black.’ ‘I am black’ takes the socially imposed identity and empowers it as an anchor of subjectivity” (Crenshaw, 1995: 375). “Colorblindness” only strengthens white racism and renders recognition of a positive black subjectivity as similar to racism, rather than representing the “end of racism” as it purports to do. While the “post-racial” language may give the appearance of progress, it still perpetuates the white racial frame privileging whiteness over blackness. As critical race theorist Neil Gotanda writes,

the successful abolition of “black” as a meaningful concept would require abolishing the distinctiveness that we attribute to the black community, culture, and consciousness. The abolition of a people’s culture is, by definition, cultural genocide. In short, assimilation as a societal goal has grave potential consequences for blacks and other nonwhites. However utopian it appears, the color-blind assimilationist program implies the hegemony of white culture (1995: 271).

Now that I have examined the flaws of “colorblindness,” its role in perpetuating white racism and its relevance to my research I will continue to my second research question.

*Question 2: What age do young adults remember experiences with children from other racial backgrounds occurring and does this vary across racial groups?*

Young adults do remember experiences with children from different racial backgrounds, but their memories tend to be emphasized during the elementary school years and not during early childhood. This does not mean that racialized experiences do not occur during early childhood, rather that these memories are not recognized racially or perhaps are occurring at such an early stage in people’s lives that they do not remember them.

Since I did not ask other kinds of questions requiring respondents to recall other memories from this time period early in their lives, I cannot explain what caused the lack of racialized memory from early childhood, especially considering the Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) ethnographic research that suggests highly developed racial understanding and experiences.

One explanation for the vague answers to questions on my survey is the predominantly white sample. As Leslie Carr (1997) in his book *"Colorblind" Racism* writes quoting another research study, "Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 14) characterized colorblindness as 'color evasiveness and power evasiveness.' She observed that White people do not see themselves as belonging to a White race. Rather they see themselves as 'American' or 'normal.'" (Carr, 1997: 150-151). Because whites see themselves as the normative racial group, this gives them the privilege of not thinking critically about race, especially the ways that race affects and privileges them socially, economically, politically, and psychologically. Additionally, "a great many white Americans, inside and outside the media, sometimes exhibit significant discomfort in talking critically about issues concerning white racism, especially that which is more covert and backstage in the society" (Feagin, 2009: 99). This discomfort could also account for the lack of memory and lack of discussion in my results. As seen from the early writings of numerous black Americans including Frederick Douglass, David Walker, and W. E. B. DuBois, people of color have been thinking critically and writing critically about race in this country for a very long time; if my sample were more diverse, this might have potentially provided more insightful responses.

*Question 3: What types of experiences with racially diverse peers and authority in school do young adults remember, and does this impact racial identity and categorization?*

Respondents expressed many types of experiences with racially diverse peers; they include playing together on the playground, playing with toys with one another, playing video games, having discussions about cultural differences, being bullied, being in class with each other, riding bikes together, playing sports together, taking dance classes together, and attending church together. The memories were characterized more by the activity that was occurring with less focus, description, or thought to the actual interpersonal interaction, dialogue, or emotions occurring. This lacks focus on the dynamics of the racialized experiences. Instead, the focus on social activities is most likely due to the vagueness of my survey question, as well as the downplaying of racial difference that gives the appearance of being less prejudiced. Additionally, the understanding of appropriate behavior in racially mixed settings might have influenced “colorblind” responses (Feagin, 2009: 124).

Now I will move on to my conclusion and finish answering the third research question. Based on my research and prior research, I do not believe that racialized experiences as children impact racial identities and categorization later in life.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

The racialized experiences children have in early childhood do not create the racialized ideas and views individuals will have in the future. As understood through the concept of the white racial frame, the ways that whites and people of color who have been socialized into a white framed worldview without strong counter-frames understand the world is hierarchical. Whiteness is considered superior while blackness and other non-white categorizations of racialized identity are considered inferior. Not only is this understanding filtering and affecting the way individuals see the world and people, there is also a connected systemic, historical, foundational, and legal racism that creates a world that is stratified racially in a way that reflects the white racial frame's hierarchical understanding of whiteness as good and successful, blackness as the opposite including lazy, bad and criminal, and other racialized groups in between but still inferior to whiteness.

This individualistic and racialized understanding and stratification of society, namely the white racial frame and systemic racism, shape white understandings of people of color long before they interact with any person of color through “deep emotions, visual images, languages and the everyday sounds of spoken language such as accents” (Feagin, 2009: 14). Therefore, it is the white racial frame that determines first how children will interact and interpret encounters with children from different racial

backgrounds; additionally the frame will determine how and if these experiences are remembered. In fact, “for most whites the dominant frame has become so fundamental that few are able to see it or think about it critically. When important but inconvenient facts are presented that do not fit this frame, whites tend to ignore or reject those facts” (Feagin, 2009: 15). For instance, even when the respondents in my survey express having memories of playing with and having fun with peers of color, or remembering intelligent peers of color from their schooling, these individuals of color will be interpreted through the white racial frame as “exceptions” to their racial group, and will not impact the racist hierarchical understanding of white virtue.

The retrospective memories of racialized experiences are formed and filtered through the ever-present white racial frame; these experiences are widely diverse, ranging from memories operating through a liberal white racial frame expressing notions of “colorblindness” and recognizing the “person, not the skin color,” to explicitly anti-Latino, anti-black, anti-Asian, or blatant white racist framing. The implications and consequences of the white racial frame include the maintenance of a systematically racist society that results in the oppression of people of color while privileging whites on a large scale. On a smaller scale, the white racial frame has the potential and is empirically proven to negatively affect people of color including children as young as four years old, like the student in my introductory anecdote. There are numerous research studies that show that,

African American respondents who are questioned about the impact of discrimination on them list many effects- from hypertension and stress diabetes

to stress-related headaches and heart and stomach conditions. Moreover the impact of racism is more than physical, for it has severe psychological effects ranging from anxiety to depression to anger and rage (Feagin, 2009: 136).

Research that reveals the effects of racism still seen in the lives of people of color may cause some to hesitate before declaring the United States “post racial.” Additionally, more research needs to be done in order to fully discover and develop the affect of “colorblind” and “post-racial” language on children of color, and its impact on racial identity. I hope to continue my studies on racism and children in the future.

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