



“Martin Luther King Fixed It”: Children Making Sense of Racial Identity in a Colorblind Society

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Children in the United States grow up in a context wherein colorblindness and racism coexist. This article examined how colorblindness functions as a societal “master narrative” that shapes how children construct their own racial identities. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 217 Black, White, and Multiracial children ($M_{\text{age}} = 9.92$) in public schools in the Pacific Northwest during 2013–2014 academic year. Our analysis identified four race narratives, which varied systematically by child age and race. Associations were also found between narrative types and children’s ratings of racial identity importance. Although colorblindness infuses many of the racial narratives, there was evidence that children also question and disrupt this master narrative with stories of resistance that counter colorblind norms.

Children in the United States (U.S.) grow up in a society wherein racism and inequality are normative realities (e.g., Umaña-Taylor, 2016). The majority of racial minoritized youth will witness or experience at least one explicit event of racial/ethnic discrimination by the age of 12 (Brown, 2017). A recent study found that Black youth (13–17 years old) report an average of five discriminatory events per day (English et al., 2020). Even as children observe and encounter such racism, they also are socialized into a culture of colorblindness. Colorblindness is a pervasive narrative that claims race does not matter, that all people are equal, and that racism is solely historical (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2006). However, in reality, colorblindness means not seeing existing racial injustices, justifying the system on the basis of fictive meritocracy, and ignoring racial oppression on the false premise that we are a “post-racial” society. Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers (2012), in their review of research regarding the operation of colorblindness within families,

schools, and institutions, conclude that colorblindness increases people’s “explicit and implicit racial bias” and “makes children less likely to identify overt instances of bias” (p. 206). By guiding the ways in which individuals make sense of and engage with race, racism, and racial identity, colorblindness acts as a societal “master narrative” (McLean & Syed, 2015), upholding inequality, undermining equity, and shaping child development (e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2012).

In this article, we examine the ways in which Black, White, and Multiracial children¹ ($N = 217$, $M_{\text{age}} = 9.92$) construct their own racial identity narratives in relation to the colorblind master narrative. We focus on middle childhood (8–11 years old) in part because there is a robust body of literature on racial identity development during the adolescent years, but comparatively less is known about the precursors of and pathways to such identities (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020). During middle childhood, children have the cognitive capacity to recognize interpersonal discrimination and think about race as a socially meaningful construct based on more than just skin

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¹Throughout this manuscript we capitalize each of the racial groups - Black, White, and Multiracial - to articulate the social construction and political consequence of race. Our intent is not to equate the racial experiences of each racial group member but rather to underscore the structural relation between racial identities and the societal racial hierarchy.

color (Quintana, 1998; Rogers et al., 2012). Yet, little is known about how children make sense of racialized experiences that do not align with societal messaging about race, and very few studies have explored how White children, in particular, understand and negotiate the racial privilege tied to their identities (Brown, Spatzier, & Tobin, 2010; Rogers, Kiang, et al., 2021). Our analysis contributes to the literature by examining the nuanced ways in which children utilize and disrupt colorblindness as they make sense of their own racial identities.

Race, Identity and Meaning-Making in Middle Childhood

Race, and more specifically racism, is an indelible feature of the United States, and thus of child development (e.g., Spencer, 2008). Race is always in “formation” through everyday language, interactions, and policies (Omi & Winant, 1994), as well as personal and relational realities—how individuals view themselves and others (Kteily & Richeson, 2016; Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). Identity, or the self, is core to social development, as children learn who they are and how they fit into social groups, including racial groups (Ruble et al., 2004). The capacities for and precursors of racial identity emerge very early in life (Quintana, Benjamin, & Leverett, 2017; Williams et al., 2020). By middle childhood, 8–11 years, new cognitive and social advances allow children to assign meaning to race and to reason about its significance becoming more aware of the affective and interpersonal aspects of their racial and ethnic groups (Derlan, Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2017; Quintana, 1998). It is during these years that children move from applying race labels and describing physical differences to articulating a subjective sense of the importance and meaning of race.

Meaning-making, how one understands and attributes significance to their notion of the self, is a core feature of racial identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Spencer (2008) argued that it is “the meaning that individuals make from their social encounters” that matters most for identity outcomes (p. 696). Research shows that children do make meaning of their racial identities by attending to physical features (skin color), racialized behaviors (speech), modes of expression (affect), and stereotypes that characterize their racial groups (Quintana, 1998; Rogers et al., 2012). Children are aware of the physicality that distinguishes those with “White” or “Black” skin, and it is the meaning they attach to such racial markers that

contributes to the development of racial identity. Subjective meaning making, though personal, does not arise acontextually; it is developed within an environment of socially constructed narratives about race, which communicate the relative social position of racial groups.

Master Narratives and Meaning-Making Systems

Master narratives are “culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors,” and provide a script for how to be a “good” member of society (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 323). As such, master narratives act as scaffolds for constructing and understanding the self, and offer an approach to conceptualize, analyze, and interpret meaning-making in context. Colorblindness is a primary master narrative shaping how individuals engage with race, but children may also draw on additional narratives as they make sense of who they are and their place in the world. Here, we also discuss essentialism as a meaning-making system relevant to children’s understandings of race and racial identity (Hirschfeld, 1995; Quintana et al., 2017).

Essentialism, as a cognitive process, refers to the immutability and mutual exclusivity of groups, such that items within the same group share an underlying “essence,” whether a trait, an ability, or way of being (Gelman, 2003). Racial categories can be essentialized—those in the category “Black” are distinct and inherently different from those in the category “White”; they are different kinds (Hirschfeld, 1995). Research shows that children use social, psychological, and behavioral attributes to define racial group membership, and may essentialize these differences (Quintana et al., 2017). For example, a White girl (second grade) explained what being White means, “a lot of people are White or Black, and some jobs you have to be White and some you have to be Black; so, you get those choices” (Rogers et al., 2012, p. 106). Such logic reflects the early stages of Quintana’s racial perspective taking model (1998), when children observe race-based differences and rely on physical patterns to make sense of race. As illustrated in the quote above, conclusions drawn from racial essentialism are not neutral. Mahalingam (2007) refers to this as sociocultural essentialism, such that what and who children essentialize reflects the “strategic deployment of essentialism to justify social hierarchies” (p. 46). Thus, although older children may have the capacity to move beyond essentialist thinking, this type of logic undergirds pervasive

societal stereotypes (Roberts, Gelman, & Ho, 2017), making clear that cognitive development alone is not sufficient to explain its use. Applying the master narratives as an interpretive framework can shed light on the connections between children's essentialist thinking—and emphasis on racial group differences—and the sociocultural context of racial hierarchy.

Colorblindness also upholds racial hierarchy, but instead of essentializing race, colorblindness downplays its significance. In an experiment, Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, and Norton (2008) and Apfelbaum, Sommers, and Norton (2008) asked a sample of predominantly White children to play a game in which they were presented with pictures of faces and had to guess who was on the experimenter's card (hidden from view), with the aim of asking as few questions as possible. In the race-neutral condition, the pictures included variation across gender, weight, and card background color, but the race of the people pictured was held constant (solely White faces). In the race-salient condition, in addition to the other variations, the pictures featured Black and White faces. In the race-salient condition, asking about skin color was clearly advantageous, but older children avoided it. In fact, the younger children out-performed older children because they were more likely to ask about skin color.

Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al. (2008) and Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al. (2008) concluded that the older children had “learned not to talk about race,” pointing to the socializing influence of growing up in a colorblind culture. In a later study (Pauker, Apfelbaum, & Spitzer, 2015), the same patterns held for Children of Color and White children. Additionally, children who reported that their parents and teachers avoided talking about race were significantly more likely than their peers to avoid asking about race in the guessing game (Pauker et al., 2015). These findings highlight the complementary nature of colorblindness and essentialism—teaching children that race is a topic to avoid may also teach them that nuanced conceptualizations of race and racial categories are unnecessary. As a result, essentialism may act in tandem with colorblindness as dual master narratives that maintain the racist status quo.

As implied by the name, “master narratives” are steeped in power, constructed by and for the dominant group(s) in society (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2015). Applying the master narrative framework to the study of children's racial identity allows us to focus on the transaction between self and society

(Rogers, 2018). Specifically, we can assess racial identity as the ways in which children's identity stories align with master narratives that support racial hierarchy, or how they deviate from them (McLean et al., 2018; Rogers, 2020). Deviations from a master narrative, or alternative narratives, are stories that run counter to the social script and capture the diverse ways in which individuals may challenge the status quo by resisting the “norms” of inequality it supports (McLean et al., 2018; Rogers, 2020). Developing a healthy racial identity in a racist society requires such resistance (Nasir, 2011; Rogers & Way, 2018; Ward, 2018).

Most research with children has focused primarily on when and under what conditions they validate racist attitudes, stereotypes, and pro-White biases (Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010; Slaughter-Defoe, 2012). Thus, one piece of children's racial identities that is less understood is the development of “alternative” race narratives—when and how children question, reject or counter the racist “norms” of society. As youth develop and are socialized into a racist society, they also gain the socioemotional and cognitive capacities (empathy, perspective-taking) to critically question the norms that justify inequality (Heberle, Rapa, & Farago, 2020). It is important to document and understand resistance as part of the racial identity formation process (Rogers, 2020; Rogers & Way, 2018). Middle childhood, when youth are forming their racial identities, seems developmentally timely for capturing and—potentially fostering—alternative race narratives.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze how children narrate their own racial identities in relation to societal master narratives of race. This analysis is both exploratory, as noted in questions below, and confirmatory, in that we extend a previous analysis of master narratives in children's gender identities (Rogers, 2020) to children's racial identity narratives to see if and how their racial identities alternately reinforced or disrupted master narratives (like colorblindness) that uphold racial hierarchy in society. Three questions guided our analysis:

1. What characterizes children's race identity narratives, and can they be conceptualized as reinforcing (master narratives) or disrupting (alternative narratives) the racial status quo?

We hypothesized, based on previous work (Rogers, 2020), that children's racial identity

narratives could be analyzed in relation to master and alternative narratives. We expected colorblindness to be a prevalent race narrative (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008) but also anticipated that some children would question and deviate from this script by discussing racialized experiences when making meaning of their racial identities (Rogers et al., 2012).

2. Do the types of racial narratives children tell vary based on child age (grade-level) and racial group membership (Black, White, Multiracial)?

We expected the colorblind master narrative to be prevalent across the sample (Pauker et al., 2015). While older children may be more likely to rely on colorblindness, due to social norms of race talk (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008), we also expected older children to tell more alternative race narratives that disrupt racial silence because they may be more cognizant of racial inequity and thus more likely to try to make sense of it (e.g., Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). With respect to race, we expected White children to relay master narratives more frequently than Black and Multiracial children, and expected to hear more alternative narratives from Black and Multiracial children because of their racial positions in the societal hierarchy (McLean et al., 2018; McLean & Syed, 2015).

3. Are there associations between children's racial narratives and ratings of the subjective importance of race?

We expected children's ratings of the importance of race to be related to their explanations of its meaning (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Colorblindness, for example, includes downplaying the significance of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006); children telling master narratives with colorblind themes should also indicate that race is not important to them. On the other hand, children who recognize and experience racism may also be more likely to rate race as important (and relevant) to their lives (e.g., Zeiders et al., 2019). We explore these associations in the final analysis.

Method

Data for this analysis were drawn from a larger longitudinal, mixed-method project examining identity processes in middle childhood during the years 2013–2016 (see Rogers, 2020; Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Children were recruited from three racially diverse public schools (two elementary, one middle school) in a predominantly low-income, urban

community in the Pacific Northwest. Participating schools were purposively selected from the same district because of their diverse enrollment: no more than 40% of any one racial group, with a minimum of 70% eligible for free/reduced lunch (see Table S1).

Participants

Two-hundred and forty-two children enrolled in the first year of the study when these data were collected. Twenty children self-identified as Asian, Native American, Hispanic, or Samoan; due to small cell sizes, these cases were excluded from current analyses. An additional five children had missing data on the questions of interest. The final analytic sample included 217 children, ages 7–13 years ($M = 9.92$, $SD = 1.63$); 61% identified as girls ($n = 132$). Thirty-nine percent of the sample was in 2nd–4th grade ($n = 85$), 61% in 5th–6th grade ($n = 132$). The racial demographics were: 56 Black (26%), 77 Multiracial (35%), and 84 White (39%). The Multiracial sample included children who identified as: Black/White ($n = 35$), Hispanic/White ($n = 19$), Asian/White ($n = 7$), Hispanic/Black ($n = 6$), and Multiracial ($n = 10$).

Procedure

Students enrolled in Grades 2–6 at participating schools were invited to participate in a study about “what children think about themselves and their school.” Information letters and parental consent forms were distributed in each classroom by the first author. All students with signed parental consent forms were individually interviewed by the first author during the 2013–2014 academic year. Interviews took place in a private space on school property (e.g., classroom, office) and each student received a university-themed pencil and a \$5 gift card. Interviews were audiorecorded and ranged in length from 21 to 79 min ($M = 40.15$, $SD = 11.92$). All data were collected in accordance with ethical conditions approved by the university research board.

Semistructured Interview Protocol

Semistructured interviews were conducted using a phenomenological approach to explore meaning-making of the self and identity experiences (Rogers, Kiang, et al., 2021; Rogers, Moffitt, & Jones, in press). This analysis drew primarily from the race section of the interview. Children self-identified their race using the “Me, Not Me Identity Selection

Task” (see Supporting Information for more detail on this measure and procedure; see Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Children’s self-selected race label was used for the six primary interview questions about racial identity. One closed-ended question assessed subjective importance: “How important is being [race] to you?” Subsequent open-ended questions probed children’s thinking and experiences of race (see Table S2).

Coding and Analysis

Audio files were professionally transcribed, verified by research assistants, and uploaded into Nvivo Qualitative Software (Version 11 for Mac, <https://support.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/s/article/How-do-I-cite-QSR-software-in-my-work>) for coding and analysis. The race section of the interview was considered the unit of analysis, which included the direct questions about race (Table S2) as well as any explicit references to race throughout the transcript. For example, when asked about friends, family, or school, a few children (6%) made spontaneous references to race (e.g., “Mostly, the Black kids get in trouble here [at school].”) In such instances, the explicit race references were considered part of the analytical context of the child’s race narrative. For each transcript, the race section was read by a research assistant who wrote analytic memos focused on how the child accommodated to and pushed against the existing racial hierarchy, and documented questions for discussion (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Memos were used for analytic group discussions and the preliminary step in developing our codebook. These memos were especially useful for identifying negative cases—examples that challenged or did not fit in our developing codebook (Lincoln & Guba, 1986)—which strengthened the validity of the analysis.

The master narrative framework guided our analysis (McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers, 2020). There were two primary levels of coding. First, we used line-by-line coding to code for evidence of resistance and accommodation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Accommodation examples reinforced racial stereotypes and hierarchy (“Black boys are better at sports”); Resistance examples challenged or questioned racial hierarchy (“I think Black means to be proud . . . and you’re happy about it instead of being sorry”). Neutral comments (“I like families!”) were coded as such. Second, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to code the race narratives holistically. We developed a set of data-driven definitions that distinguished whether a child’s narrative was reinforcing or disrupting the

racial hierarchy (see Rogers, 2020). This codebook was developed over the course of 6 weekly, 2-hr coding discussions. A detailed description of coding procedures is reviewed in the Supporting Information (also: Rogers, 2020). The narrative codes for this analysis are described in Table 1 and further detailed in the Results.

The coding team included four research assistants, undergraduate students identified racially/ethnically as Asian American, African American, Multiracial, and White, who were trained and supervised by the first author who is also African American. Another research assistant (Multiracial) unfamiliar with the data was trained to code 25% of the sample with percent agreement ranging from 84% to 91% across the codes. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Building a diverse “interpretive community” (Marecek, Fine, & Kidder, 2001), comprised of multiple positionalities within the racial hierarchy, was an intentional strategy for analytical rigor and validity. All of the interviews were conducted by a Black woman, which invariably shaped what was and was not said in the interview context (Gilligan, 2015). Thus, race was focally relevant to the whole of this research; this was not minimized but rather integrated and routinely referenced in the analytic discussions of the data (Fine, 2006; Rogers, Kiang, et al., 2021; Rogers, Moffitt, & Jones, in press).

Results and Discussion

Narrative Types

We identified two narratives that illustrate ways of reinforcing the racial status quo: *Colorblind* (41%) and *Difference/Stereotypes* (11%), and two narratives that question or disrupt it: *Incongruent* (29%) and *Counternarratives* (17%). A small percentage of the sample (3%; $n = 6$) told narratives about cultural practices, behaviors, and rituals from a within-group perspective. For example, a Multiracial girl said she likes being Mexican and White because “I like families—and like sometimes like my cousins speak English but my aunts don’t, so I like speaking Spanish with them.” Such responses did not provide clear evidence of engagement with the racial hierarchy, and were coded as *Ethnicity*. Given its limited occurrence in the data, our analyses focus on the four prevalent codes. Within each of the narrative types we identified multiple threads, which highlight the diverse ways, within and across racial groups, that children make sense of their racial identities and the racial hierarchy.

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Table 1
Racial Identity Narrative Types, Definitions, and Examples

Narrative type	Definition	Example quote	% of sample (n)
Master narratives	Race narratives that reinforce racial hierarchy and inequality		
Colorblind	Color/race doesn't matter because we are all the same; race as historical; downplay the significance of race.	A: [Race] doesn't even matter. Q: Yeah? Why doesn't it matter? A: Because no one cares about it. Q: No one cares? A: Well they used to, but not now.	41% (n = 89)
Difference/stereotype	Essentializes differences between one's racial group; group comparisons; explicit stereotypes.	"Black boys are better at sports."	11% (n = 24)
Alternative narratives	Race narratives that acknowledge and/or disrupt racial hierarchy and inequality		
Incongruent	Characterized by a "dual voice"; children use master narratives and disrupt them by naming examples or personal experiences of racial discrimination/inequalities.	Q: What do you think it means to be White? A: I think being White means nothing . . . It's just a skin color. Q: Why is being White important? A: Because a lot of people at this school, they judge you on your skin color.	29% (n = 62)
Counternarrative	Name racial inequalities as problems and use their agency to act against them; aware of the consequences of race and resist.	"I remember when I was younger . . . I wanted to hang out with these girls and they were like no, you can't hang out with us because you're Black . . . people would bring me down because I'm Black."	17% (n = 36)
Ethnicity	Narratives centered around cultural practices, behaviors, and rituals from a within-group perspective	"Well [race] is important to me because all my family . . . is Spanish and I'm happy that—I'm happy about my language."	3% (n = 6)

Note. The six excluded *Ethnicity* narratives were all Multiracial; five were girls, four were in the younger age cohort (2nd–4th grade) of the sample.

Colorblind Narratives

In parallel with societal colorblindness, the most prevalent race narrative in our sample was the *colorblind* narrative, including 89 children (41%) in our sample. These narratives represented an array of cognitive complexity, from straightforward statements of "race doesn't matter" to layered explanations of why and in which ways it does not matter. Such variations suggest how greater social and cognitive perspective-taking abilities do not preclude children from taking up this narrative, though they may help children learn how to justify it. Three core threads characterized children's *colorblind* narratives.

The first thread was a direct message that race is meaningless. For example, a White boy (fifth grade) said that, "I don't really think it matters." After noting there's nothing he likes or dislikes about being White, he explains:

A: It's just your skin color.

Q: Yeah. Do you ever see kids getting treated differently because of their skin color?

A: Not really, uh-uh. Because it doesn't matter what your skin color is.

If race is "just" your skin color, then there cannot be anything important about it, nothing good or bad, and people cannot be treated differently because of it. A Black boy (second grade) responded in a similar manner, explaining that being Black is not important because, "they don't care if you're Black or White . . . You're still only a person, but you're just that skin color."

Children from all racial groups espoused this narrative: "It's [being Black] the same thing as being White. Um the skin color doesn't matter; but who you are or how you act; that's what matters" (Black girl, sixth grade). A White girl (fifth grade)

with similar reasoning said being White is “not important” “because it doesn’t matter what color you are; it depends on how you are inside.” Another Black girl (third grade) indicated her awareness of race while making clear that it does not have any personal or social consequence, “So, if I wasn’t Black then it would just be the same; I’d still have friends; I’d still get a good education and go to college just like everybody else is going, so it doesn’t really matter if we’re colored.” Under conditions of racial equity, race is “just” a color, but in a racist society, a colorblind interpretation of race functions to uphold rather than disrupt the racial hierarchy.

Some children also made clear that they have learned to disregard race as meaningful. A White boy (sixth grade), on explaining why being White is not important to him, said:

How do I know it doesn’t matter? Because we’re not learning about it in school; we don’t pay attention to it. We just go along usually with our day and just not notice it because it’s just one of those things like I wear shoes; I sleep on a bed; I write with a pencil; I drive a car or I’m White; it’s just something that doesn’t matter.

This statement suggests that colorblindness is socialized, in part, through the omission of race. Such omissions (or silence) were also expected, as one White boy (third grade) affirmed during his interview. In response to the interview questions about being White, he admonished the interviewer: “You know, you’re being really racist right now,” and explained: “You can’t just ask people about their colors.” The idea that talking about race is the same as being racist is quintessential to sustaining colorblindness (Pauker et al., 2015).

A second thread of the *colorblind* narrative was a multicultural emphasis, wherein children underscored presence of diversity as evidence of the insignificance of race. For example, a Multiracial girl (fifth grade) explained that being Black/Asian/White is not important to her because “everyone is cared for and there is a lot of different people that are different colors in families and in schools. I think there are all kinds of colors and doesn’t really matter anymore.” A Black boy (third grade) also explained: “It doesn’t matter if I’m Black. Because Black people can be friends with White people sometimes.” In a society without racism, this is how race would operate. But in a racialized context such statements can work in service of the master narrative that claims race does not matter and people are indeed treated equally.

The final thread within the *colorblind* narratives was the tendency for children to view race as historically relevant, explaining that race used to matter, but “it’s not back in the day anymore” (White girl, fourth grade) and “Martin Luther King fixed it” (Black boy, second grade). A Multiracial (Asian/White) girl in the second grade explained that race is not important to her, “Because here it doesn’t really matter too much, but I mean if I lived in the slave times where Martin Luther King Jr. lives, that would be a problem.” These responses suggest that children’s knowledge of race is based in lessons teaching that race is no longer relevant. For example, a White girl (fifth grade) explained that being White is hard “[b]ecause most history is based on slaves and stuff. . . . And because the White people did horrible things back in the day, but it’s not back in the day anymore{chuckles}.” One Black girl (fourth grade) summarized these ideas: “We’ve learned all about how we used to be treated back then” but today, “All we cared about was that we’re friends now and we don’t care how it happened in history.” While viewing racism as passé may be politically correct, colorblindness is both inaccurate and ineffective for dismantling racism, and does not support a critical awareness of self and society (Heberle et al., 2020).

We recognize that there is an aspect of *colorblind* narratives that can be interpreted as racial progress, or egalitarian views, such that children who do not notice race are indeed challenging racial hierarchies and categories. Although there is some nuance between egalitarian and colorblind, in practice, both of these messages tend to align with racial silence (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008) and rarely name or resist the real consequences of society’s racial hierarchy. Likewise, we heard a distinction in children’s narratives between the idea that race “shouldn’t” matter and that it “doesn’t” matter (colorblindness); the former acknowledges and questions the racial injustices, whereas the latter, as shown here, downplays or dismisses race.

Difference/Stereotypes Narrative

The second narrative was *difference/stereotypes*, which included 24 children (11%) in this sample. These responses, fairly infrequent overall, emphasized stereotypes of or differences between racial groups. Whereas *colorblind* narratives muted race, the *difference/stereotypes* narratives named race-based differences in ways that align with essentialism as a meaning-making system. Based on the racial perspective taking model (Quintana, 1998), we would

anticipate the *difference/stereotypes* narratives to lack complexity, yet this was not always what we found. Instead, as with *colorblind* narratives, children coded in this narrative type displayed a wide range in their statements.

That said, this code was particularly challenging to interpret because some responses appear benign or only about physicality—like the repeated assertion that darker skin was “better” because it is “harder to get sunburned.” One could interpret this as neutral, or even as positive for its valence. Our coding system, however, nested children within a racialized society in which difference is rarely neutral; this lens guided our coding decisions. Additionally, the narrative types are data-driven, and therefore relative to each other. The children who told *difference/stereotypes* narratives did not sound like those who told *colorblind* narratives, nor did they sound like those questioning and disrupting racial hierarchy; instead, they shared a common thread of understanding race as comparative, as better and worse, as difference.

Children’s *difference/stereotypes* narratives surfaced in three primary ways: observable (physical and behavioral) differences; relationships; and explicit stereotypes. In terms of observable differences, one Black girl (second grade) said: “[Being Black] means a lot to me because—because not being rude but Black people, sort of have longer hair than White people.” It is “good to be Black, another Black boy (third grade) explained, “because White people can’t get tan; they have to put sunscreen on, where we don’t.” This is a common yet false story about dark skin that carries threads of essentialized difference. Both examples frame race in a comparative lens of fixed difference that positions Blackness relative to (and as superior to) Whiteness. Similar comparisons were made about behavioral differences. For example, a Black girl (fifth grade), explained, “Well sometimes Black people just act like in a different way than White people . . . They might make spaghetti different than other people; they might use white noodles instead of wheat noodle.” Another child said, “Black people have a different kind of voice and they have a different type of personality than White people.” We do not interpret these responses as intentionally racist, but rather recognize that in a racist society the emphasis on difference can set the stage for stereotyping (Pauker et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2017).

For example, a White boy (sixth grade) described that race means “acting differently” and when probed, explained:

I think a lot of the Black kids get treated differently from other Black kids, you know, it’s like,

“Oh hey man. How’s it goin’?” You know they’re talking all slang—And I can’t understand them but {chuckles}. But, then the White kids, you know, they talk normally.

His observation of a behavioral difference (not differential treatment on the basis of race) reinforces the racial hierarchy by positioning Whiteness as “normal” and Blackness as incomprehensible (“I can’t understand them”). His observation of difference is not natural. A White girl (sixth grade) similarly said one thing that bothers her about being White is when “people are trying to act the other skin color.” When probed for an example, she said, “Well, mostly likely they see Black people rap and they’ll start like—the White people will start rapping. Then they try to act like them. . . .” To “act” like another race assumes that certain behaviors, styles, and personalities belong to particular racial groups. In alignment with essentialism (Gelman, 2003; Hirschfeld, 1995), these observables were thus indicative of an unobservable essence of “kind”; Black and White people are different and better/worse.

The second thread in the *difference/stereotypes* narrative was relational belonging with peers, friends, and family. For example, a White boy (fourth grade) said that one of the good things about being White is, “that I have friends that are” also White. When probed he explained “it would be weird” to have friends who were different than him because, “Like, if I was hanging out with some who as a different color and somebody saw me and started teasing.” A White girl (second grade) said what she likes about being White is that “there’s a lot of White people in our class, and there’s just a little bit of dark people.” In fact, the schools were racially diverse, but White children, in particular, seemed attuned to numerical distributions in articulating the meaning of race. Another White girl, (sixth grade) explained that being White “sometimes matters a little bit” to her, “because um a lot of the people here are kind of Black—not to be racist—but it is sometimes hard, um, ‘cause they do like swear and stuff and say bad things, so yeah.” When asked to imagine how things would change if she was not White, another White girl (sixth grade) reflected: “Um probably my grades would almost change I think, because I would probably get into a bad group of friends.” She equates not being White with associating with “bad” friends (and poor grades). The racialization of relationships and behaviors with attached value suggests how framing race as difference aligns with and upholds racial hierarchy.

The final thread in this narrative type was explicit stereotyping. For example, when asked what he finds hard about being White, a White boy (third grade) explained, "Black boys know how to fight and like White boys they won't. They know how to fight, but like when you're a White boy, the Black kids will just beat you up automatically." A Black boy (fifth grade), similarly explained being Black means "that I'm tough" and "if anybody tries to hurt me, they can't hurt me." Both boys, speaking from their gendered-racial experience, make sense of their racial identities through stereotypes that are essentialized in race categories. Reinforcing the shared script of racial stereotypes, a White girl (fifth grade) said that if she was Black, "it'd be easier actually, like get into sports. Because lots of those girls get like—not trying to be racist or anything, but they get like into sports more easier because they're like more athletic." A White boy (sixth grade), gave a similar reply about how things would be different if he was not White:

I might be able to run faster if I was African American. Because I asked my dad about that and he said their joints and hips are different than ours or something like that; that's why most of the Olympic sprinters are African American.

This longstanding racial stereotype about the innate athletic abilities of Black people is essentialism. And it remains a ubiquitous narrative: "Being Black is good because my mom says we are better at sports; we are." (Black boy, fifth grade).

Narratives rooted in difference sound distinct from colorblindness, but also align with the racial status quo. We acknowledge that the observation of difference itself does not have to be problematic, but the comparative and essentializing difference in a racist society is not neutral, as such differences are often a justification for the racial hierarchy and inequality (Mahalingam, 2007; Quintana et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that only 11% of the children in our sample told racial narratives that centered stereotypes and differences as focal to their understanding of race. This is not to suggest that children are not utilizing stereotyped knowledge to make sense of their identities, but rather to highlight that the majority drew upon narratives beyond differences to understand their racial identities. The small representation also may reflect the general decrease in explicit and overt forms of racism in a "post-racial" society (Umaña-Taylor, 2016) and shift to colorblindness as a more socially acceptable way to

discuss race (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008).

Incongruent Narratives

Of the two alternative narratives, the *incongruent* narrative was most prevalent, with 62 children (29%) in the sample. The defining feature of this narrative type is duality; children both reinforced and disrupted racial hierarchy in turn. The children who told these narratives often entered the conversation with the threads of colorblindness. Many mentioned that race was inconsequential or meaningless, that "it doesn't matter how you are or what color you are" (Multiracial girl, fifth grade). Some began their narrative by affirming race as purely physical, "just skin, just different colors" (Multiracial girl, sixth grade). What makes the *incongruent* narrative unique, then, is that children contradict themselves with lived experiences that illustrate the consequences of race, disrupting the racial silence. For example, a third-grader said race "doesn't matter at all" and "no one cares about it" but later in the interview described a game on the playground called "slavery" in which the White kids told the Black kids which equipment they could play on and which games they could play. The disruptions that marked the *incongruent* narratives were not necessarily intentional or deliberate in all cases, but the stories share a theme of going off the colorblind script and recognizing racialized realities.

Discrimination was one experience that disrupted the colorblind narrative. Some children shared personal encounters which forced them to "see" that race is not as meaningless as they said it was. For example, a Black boy (fifth grade) first stated that race does not matter because "nobody makes fun of my skin color, or nobody makes fun of anybody's skin color." But, moments later, he said that what is hard about being Black is that "Um some White people still say Black people should still have slavery and stuff." He further downplays racism, saying, "I don't care that much because it's not true about me" and for him, "Being Black means, um—it's awesome!" This narrative in whole contradicts the original colorblindness by providing evidence to show that racism is still a problem, then distances himself from it because he doesn't think that it pertains to him and he regards being Black as "awesome!" *Incongruent* narratives capture how these conflicting ideas can co-exist in children's construction of racial identity.

Children's colorblindness was also shaken by the recognition of the mistreatment of others and the

consideration of their own privilege. A White girl (fourth grade), initially stated that race was not important, asserting, "I wouldn't care if I was Black or if I was White or if I was Hispanic. Just because of the color of our skin, that doesn't mean that you should be treated any differently." Even though this "should" happen, she sees that this is not reflected in reality. When asked what are some of the good things about being White, she replied, "Um well you don't really get bullied a lot . . . Just in the lunchroom a couple of days ago somebody came up to this African-American girl and called her a Black cracker." In one voice, she says race is not meaningful, yet she is attuned to race and the direction in which racism operates. When asked to imagine herself if she was not White, she said that she would "probably be bullied more", which "I think that is really wrong; you shouldn't treat people differently because they are African-American or because they are White or Hispanic or Asian." Yet, she notices that it does happen. When asked if she ever felt like she was treated differently because of her skin color, she replied:

A: Well yes, that time when somebody just called somebody African American a bad name; I feel like—I wonder what it would be like to be African-American for a day or so, or to be Hispanic or Asian? And I feel really bad for the person that just was called a name because of the color of their skin and they probably feel really bad too. But you shouldn't feel bad because you have a different skin color; you should be really proud that you're White or African American or Hispanic; you should be really proud whatever skin color you were born with.

Listening to the fullness of her racial understanding, this 9-year-old grapples with the positionality and privilege afforded in the racial hierarchy, and she demonstrates empathy towards those who are discriminated against. She pushes back on the master narrative by noting that they should be treated equally while acknowledging that they are not.

The movement between repeating colorblind scripts and naming the racism and injustice that exists within it is disruptive to the master narrative. As such, the term incongruent is not meant to be evaluative of the child but a reflection of the conflict inherent in a racist yet colorblind society. Navigating these incongruencies seems integral to racial identity development (Way, Hernández, Rogers, & Hughes, 2013), but is scarcely examined during childhood. More broadly, these incongruent narratives well illustrate how the messages of colorblindness do not match what children may see, hear,

and remember. As children reflect on what their racial identities mean to them, it is possible to understand this incongruence as a catalyst for disrupting colorblindness. Indeed, this narrative type suggests an optimal space to intervene—both to acknowledge children's assertions of equality and provide strategies to make sense of the injustices they see around them. Rather than silence or solidify such racial observations, it may be the ideal moment to support alternative racial identity narratives that include a critical awareness of inequality and can contribute to disrupting the narratives that support racial hierarchy.

Counternarratives

The final narrative type was the *counternarrative*, which characterized 36 children (17%). *Counternarratives* were those that explicitly challenge the master narratives of racial silence and essentialized differences. Children who told *counternarratives* recognized that racism was not over; they were alert to and questioning the racial hierarchy in the present. Children coded in this narrative type can also be situated in the later stages of Quintana's (1998) racial perspective taking model. They engaged both personal and collective identities, situating their racial experiences within stories of racial stratification. A Black boy (third grade), for example, explained why being Black is important to him:

White people isn't treating Black people right but I don't want to be White. . . . Because a long time ago when Martin Luther King was trying to change stuff {sigh}. White people kept doing bad things to Black [people]. . . . It's still that way a little bit.

Whereas *incongruent* narratives typically entered the conversation with a colorblind script (race does not matter), *counternarrative* children often defined the meaning in their identities through awareness and experiences of both historical and present discrimination and their resistance to it. One Black girl (sixth grade), explaining why race is important, said, "It's pretty stupid because—I don't know—like people, they didn't have to do that [slavery]. It just doesn't make any sense." A Multiracial (Black/White) girl (sixth grade), noted that her racial identity "matters a lot because some kids at our school are racist and they make fun of my culture." She went on to explain how racial dynamics play out in interactions with her White friends at school:

A: . . . somebody had asked me to {clearing throat} tie their shoe for them and they were White, and I said "No" and they got all hurt. And they-they were mad at me. [. . .]

Q: And so what were you thinking or how'd you feel when-when that happened?

A: I was mad because they were White and we were Black and {pause} um {clearing throat} they did it cuz back then Black people had to do everything that White people told 'em and they thought I would do it because I'm Black and they're White.

The explicit naming of race and use of the word "racist" is notable in a culture of colorblindness, and has a distinct tenor from most children interviewed in this sample. Whether or not the peer's actions were intentionally racist, this student's awareness of how the history of race permeates and structures current interactions, as well as her refusal to contribute, is a mark of resistance.

Children coded in *counternarratives* also stated that race "shouldn't matter" at times, differing from those who claimed race "doesn't matter" with colorblind narratives. A Black girl (fifth grade), for example, initially stated: "Just because we look different on the outside, we're the same on the inside and got the same brains and stuff. So it shouldn't matter, that's what I think." She understands that race matters. She describes the homelessness and housing discrimination her family faced throughout her narrative, and the racial realities she encounters at school:

Q: Have you ever felt like you were treated differently because of your skin color?

A: Um, well today I was in second period and um this kid named Kevin, he's White, he was like: "My parents don't like Black people in their house." I'm like, "What?!" And he's just like, "Yeah cuz we have a Black landlord and they don't like him" or whatever. And I'm like {pause} okay that's rude. I was kind of upset about it.

Although she holds the assertion that race should not matter, she knows it does and shares a personal experience to underscore this reality. She uses racial identifiers to convey the story and is clear about the impact of such racist language ("that's rude"; "I was kind of upset").

Counternarratives also included calling out racism: "Because like the White girls that go here are like pretty much a little racist, but it's pretty annoying sometimes if you're Black" (Black girl, sixth grade). She added that she does not accept her White peer peers' racist comments, saying: "I may be Black but it's a different time here, so." She is aware of racial progress, "if it was back in the old days you

couldn't really be doing a lot of stuff being Black 'cause then you'd be in slavery. . ." but also that her Blackness continues to matter:

Q: What are some things that are hard about being Black?

A: How some teachers treat you. It's hard, but you can live through it; I always do.

Q: How do you live through it?

A: Like um you know just forget how they said it or just think of it in a different way than being racist.

Q: Okay. Does that seem to help? Yeah?

A: 'Cause then you don't want to hit them. You don't! Most girls want to hit the teachers that do that.

At the age of 11, she is aware of how racism influences her own subjective identity and her interactions with others. She has strategies to combat racism, trying to reframe racism, and notes the costs that youth of color pay in order to "make it" in racist schools. Although not all sixth graders spoke of their identities in this way, these *counternarrative* responses indicate the identity work children are doing as they negotiate a master narrative of silence.

Among the Black children who told *counternarratives*, specifically, pride and self-affirmation were central themes. For instance, a Black girl (sixth grade) explained, "I think Black means to be proud and to be like you're-you're from your own uh you're from your own country and you're happy about it instead of being sorry because you-you-you are who you are." This was coupled with an awareness of inequality; suggesting these children understand why it is necessary to cultivate and carry this sense of pride in their identities in a society that undermines their humanity. The same Black girl went on to explain something hard about being Black is that "some White people, like, don't like Black people. And I think it's really mean because I don't care which color you are, but as long as you're really nice. And then some people don't respect you." After giving an example of her mom having had racist co-workers, she explained: "I think it's rude and untrue because we're smarter than you think we are and um a lot of Black people graduate from college and a lot of people graduate from high school, and they just say rude things." With this statement, she has a set of counter truths ("it's rude and untrue") to combat the racialized and racist narrative about Blackness, which becomes part of how she understands and constructs her own sense of what it means to be Black:

Being Black means it is who I am and like what I do, like I try to learn so much stuff about the people that had to do with things with the slaves and slavery and all that kind of stuff, and how they felt probably and um like I wanted to see that movie *Twelve Years a Slave* and um movies like that. [. . .]

Q: Um so how do you think things would be different if you weren't Black, if you were a different race?

A: A lot of people would treat me with respect sometimes, because like there are some people, not trying to be racist, but some people that are White would treat you differently because you're Black.

After naming examples of racism, her use of "not trying to be racist" to offset her acknowledgment of differential treatment reflects the deep roots of colorblindness—she is aware that naming race even when calling out racism might be understood as racist itself.

Among White children, *counternarratives* suggested some awareness of their own racial privilege. For example, a White girl (sixth grade) explained what being White means, "I think it means um I think it means that I like have more rights or something. . ." For White children, in particular, the colorblind narrative served as a means for downplaying the privilege and choice afforded to Whiteness, but by naming these realities they call into question the presumed neutrality of skin color. Some were explicit about rejecting the privilege ascribed to them by the racial hierarchy. One White girl (sixth grade) explained what is hard about being White:

Mm, probably because like other people are like um, "Yeah you're White, so you're all like prissy and sassy and like all those things, like preppy, like you should go to [Other Middle School]." It's like that's something I don't like—some people are like, "Oh yeah you shouldn't go to [Current Middle School] 'cause this is like a full-on ghetto school." I'm like, "Well I wanted to go here." I could have gone to [Other Middle School] if I wanted to but I didn't want to. So that's one thing that bugs me. It's like people think "Oh yeah just cause of your color, you should go somewhere else." I don't like that.

Unlike the *difference/stereotypes* narratives, her discussion of racial diversity does not gloss over racial inequality but rather names the stereotypes embedded in this master narrative:

Q: Why do they call [Current Middle School] the "ghetto school"?

A: Because the majority of students come from a harsher neighborhood. And a bigger percentage of them, the bigger—the biggest percentage of our school is Black. And so people think okay, yeah all of them are bad when they're not. There's a lot of really nice, sweet people. Then there is the bad ones, but there are gonna be bad kids at every school. But people just think that since the majority of people are Black here, that it's gonna be worse when it's not. Cause like we got the highest test scores for our school. Um like the NBA and stuff like that and so it proves that people, just cause our school's very diverse than [Other Middle School] and everything, doesn't mean we're any different.

Her understanding of being White not only involves observing the oppression of others, but also resisting narratives that stereotype her and her Black peers—the "prissy" and "preppy" versus the "bad" and "ghetto." Constructing racial identities that disrupt the racist scripts involves moving beyond acknowledging the racial oppression of others to understanding one's own positionality within it. These *counternarratives* offer evidence that the work of resistance is happening in childhood, and more research could attend to and support its development.

The analytic framework of master narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015) offers an organization for how children make meaning of their racial identities, which include but also extend beyond colorblindness. In particular, the framework reveals the role of resistance and deviation from master narratives (McLean et al., 2018; Rogers & Way, 2018). It is also useful to situate the distribution of race narrative types in relation to an analysis of gender master narratives in middle childhood (Rogers, 2020). The overall patterns were similar to Rogers (2020), with one distinct difference: a reversal in the types of master narrative. Specifically, the difference narrative was the most prevalent gender narrative (61%) and only 3% of the sample endorsed a "gender-blind narrative" that downplayed gender-based differences (Rogers, 2020). In the current analysis of racial identity, we found that *colorblind* (41%) was the most common master narrative and far fewer children had narratives rooted in race-based differences (11%). This flip underscores the social embeddedness of children's sensemaking of identity—children's downplaying of difference aligns with the master narrative of the group they are reasoning about.

Variability is also a cross-cutting theme. As illustrated by the quotes, there was significant diversity of narratives within and across racial groups; Black

children in this sample told a range of narratives; as did White and Multiracial children. Thus, while our analyses focus on trends across groups, the narrative approach also underscores the important diversity *within* groups (Rogers & Way, 2018; Sellers et al., 1998). In the following sections, we discuss systematic variation in narrative types based on age and racial group, revealing the complexity of race narratives and value of studying these processes during childhood.

Variation in Narrative Type by Child's Race and Grade-Level

Our second research question was exploratory and examined whether the prevalence of narrative types varied systematically as a function of child race and grade level. We compared children in 2nd–4th grade ($M_{age} = 8.19, SD = 0.85$), the ‘middle years’ of middle childhood, to those in 5th–6th grades ($M_{age} = 11.07, SD = 0.83$), the late childhood years. These analyses only included children whose narratives were coded in the four primary narrative types, $N = 211$ ($M_{age} = 9.97, SD = 1.63$). We used chi-square tests, and post hoc tests evaluated which cells differed significantly from chance using residual analysis of contingency tables (Garcia-Perez & Nunez-Anton, 2003). A residual analysis post hoc approach involves calculating the p -value associated with the adjusted standardized z -score for each cellwise comparison. Significance levels are then corrected for number of tests. Findings are summarized in Table 2.

Race

As hypothesized, the prevalence of narrative types varied as a function of child race, $\chi^2(6, N = 211) = 13.85, p < .05$, Cramer's $V = .181$, an estimated medium effect (Cohen, 1992). Post-hoc tests, with an adjusted p -value of .004 ($p = .05/12$), indicated that counternarratives varied by race, $p = .001$, such that fewer White children than expected by chance told counternarratives. Indeed, 17% of the counternarratives were told by White children told compared to 36% of Black and 47% of Multiracial children. A marginal effect was detected for the *difference/stereotypes* narrative ($p = .015$), with White children telling more of these narratives than expected by chance. The patterned differences by race support our expectations and align with social essentialism (Mahalingam, 2007), in which it is not only sociocognitive skills that drive children's race narratives but also their social position and the racial experiences (e.g., socialization, discrimination) that such racial positionalities afford (Spencer, 2008).

Race differences for the *colorblind* or *incongruent* narrative types were non-significant in these analyses (see Table 2). The lack of race differences for *colorblind* narratives supports our expectations, given that this master narrative is pervasive (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008), whereas the non-significant race difference for *incongruent* narratives was unexpected.

Table 2
Variation in Prevalence of Racial Narratives by Child Racial Group and Grade

Narrative type	Patterns by race	p	Patterns by grade-level	p
Colorblind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% = Black children • 31% = Multiracial children • 44% = White children 	<i>ns</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30% = Older children • 62% = Younger children 	< .001
Difference/stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17% = Black children • 21% = Multiracial children • 62% = White children 	.015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9% = Older children • 12% = Younger children 	<i>ns</i>
Incongruent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27% = Black children • 34% = Multiracial children • 39% = White children 	<i>ns</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% = Younger children • 38% = Older children 	< .001
Counternarrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17% = White children • 36% = Black children • 47% = Multiracial children 	< .001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14% = Older children • 19% = Younger children 	<i>ns</i>

Note. Percentage values represent the proportion of children within each narrative type (e.g., of the total colorblind narratives, 44% were told by White children). Younger children = 2nd–4th graders, $M_{age} = 8.17$; Older children = 5th–6th graders, $M_{age} = 11.07$.

Grade-Level

Narrative type also varied as a function of grade, $\chi^2(3, N = 211) = 22.61, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .31$, an estimated large effect size (Cohen, 1992). The post hoc results (with corrected p -value set to .006) revealed significant differences for two cells. For master narratives, more of the younger children ($M_{age} = 8.17$) than expected by chance told colorblind narratives; 62%, compared to 30% of older children ($M_{age} = 11.07$), $p < .001$. For alternative narratives, more older children told incongruent narratives than expected by chance; 38% compared to 15% of younger children, $p < .001$. These findings align with previous work on colorblindness in middle childhood (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008), and the prevalence of incongruent narratives, particularly among the older children, adds nuance to this developmental trend. Older children in our sample were more likely than the younger ones to contradict or disrupt this colorblind narrative with lived experiences of racism. There were no significant grade-level differences for the difference/stereotypes or counternarrative codes. The consistency in these two narrative types may reflect their lower prevalence, but also supports the idea that the capacity to question (not just reinforce) racial scripts is present across middle childhood (Rogers, 2020).

Associations With Race Importance

The last question was exploratory and linked race narrative type to race importance ratings using multinomial logistic regression. The reference group for the narrative type was the colorblind master narrative. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of race importance ratings by narrative type. The full logistic regression model included child race, grade level, and race importance as predictors of narrative type. The model was significant: $\chi^2(12, N = 211) = 79.47, p < .001$ and explained between 31% (Cox and Snell R^2) and 34% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance. In particular, the importance of race identity was significant for distinguishing the likelihood of telling a colorblind narrative, $\chi^2(6, N = 211) = 56.09, p < .001$. Children who told colorblind narratives were significantly more likely to rate race as "not important." An examination of the follow-up chi-square tables revealed that 77% of children in the colorblind group rated race as "not important." In contrast, 58% ($p < .001$) of counternarrative children rated race as "very important" to their identity.

Yet, children rated race as important (or unimportant) for rather different reasons. For example, 58% of the children who told *counternarratives* rated race as "very important" because, as shown in their narratives, they were naming discriminatory experiences and negotiating racist encounters. At the same time, 30% of children who told *difference/*

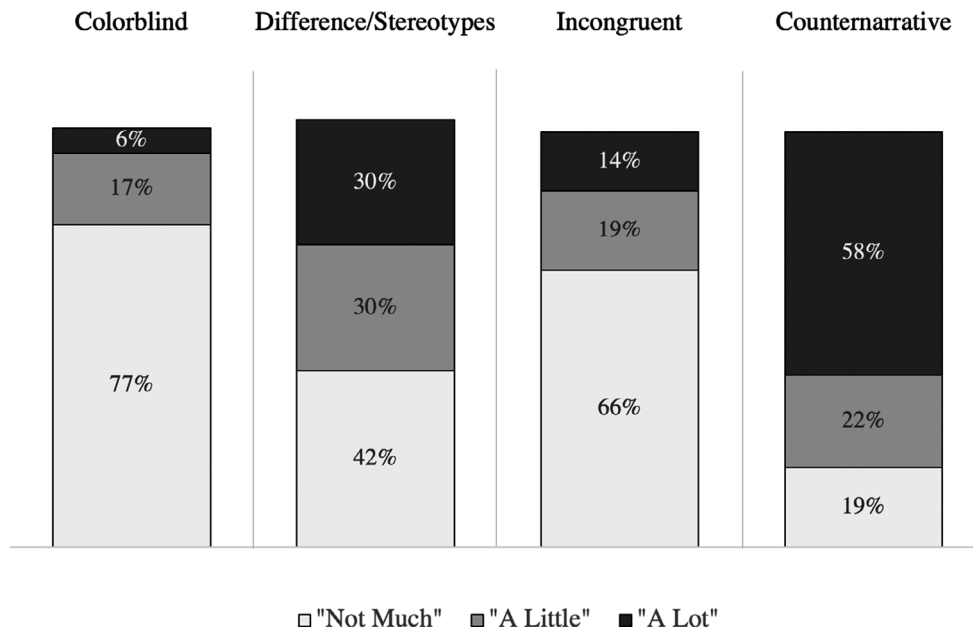


Figure 1. Distribution of racial identity narratives by importance ratings.

stereotypes narratives also viewed race as “very important” but due to racial stereotypes and essentialized differences. In contrast, incongruent narratives were primarily associated with low race importance (66% rated as “not important”), but the content of their narratives conveyed nuanced experiences that point to the relevance of race. In sum, the importance ratings were associated with distinct narratives, but only provided a slice of the story. It was the master narrative analysis that revealed patterns of reinforcing or disrupting the racial hierarchy in children’s identity meaning-making.

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions

Listening to how children tell a race narrative beyond their response to a single race question allows us to hear the breadth and complexity of their racial understanding and the centrality of colorblindness as a meaning-making system. Roughly 70% of the sample referenced that race does not matter in their narrative; but how they constructed and utilized this narrative varied. Some used colorblind language alongside an awareness of the racial inequalities they experienced. Incongruent narratives, in particular, highlight the conflict children face as they work to rectify colorblind messages with racist realities, as they see race shaping peer and family relationships, school interactions, and broader experiences. Colorblind ideology is standard practice in families, schools, and society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Hagerman, 2018; Pollock, 2004) so most children have few opportunities to talk about race. Many parents report that they “never” or “rarely” discuss race with their children (Kotler, Haider, & Levine, 2019), and thus socialize colorblindness through silence—hushing or simply not talking about race at all (e.g., Hagerman, 2018). Yet, children observe and experience race-relevant information and therefore need meaning-making systems to interpret such data in ways that disrupt rather than replicate existing structures. More recent research at the high school level has identified and examined the range of racial ideologies that schools may communicate, from colorblind, to cultural, to critical consciousness socialization (Byrd, 2017). Our findings suggest that such work is also relevant at elementary and middle school levels. Middle childhood may be a prime time when children are grappling with these conflicting truths and are amenable to, if not seeking, alternative reasoning systems.

Our research contributes to the identity literature in three primary ways. First, the sample focuses on middle childhood, which is a pivotal time for children’s social identity development (Bennett & Sani, 2004), and is a period that is underexamined in racial identity theory and research (Williams et al., 2020). By middle childhood, youth may have the cognitive capacity to think abstractly about race and recognize racism (Quintana, 1998), yet our findings indicate that only some children are doing so. Conversely, these findings push against the expectation that older children will necessarily espouse the colorblind narratives they are socialized into, offering a promising foundation for further research into the development of critical consciousness and anti-racist identities in middle childhood.

Our sample also included White and Multiracial children, who are understudied in the racial identity literature, especially in developmental research (Rogers, Kiang, et al., 2021). Including both racially privileged and oppressed identity groups is important because master narratives are socialized to *all* members of society, though one’s position within the racial hierarchy shapes experience and outcomes. Given that the racial hierarchy in the United States is built on whiteness, it is necessary to document how White children make sense of race in their own identities in order to disrupt it. Attending only to the ways that racial minority children conceptualize race is a one-sided view of racial inequality (Rogers, Kiang, et al., 2021; Rogers, Moffitt, & Jones, in press). Multiracial children also represent a growing demographic of diversity in the United States, with racial experiences both unique and similar to other minoritized youth. An intentional exploration of Multiracial children’s identity experiences and meaning-making in relation to society’s dominant racial narratives is warranted.

Second, this analysis contributes to the identity literature by extending the master narrative framework as a method of assessing racial identity as a transactional process that threads the micro- and macro-levels of the developmental context (Galliher, McLean, & Syed, 2017). Prior research on master narratives has focused on emerging adults and on the topics of gender, sexuality, and national identity (e.g., McLean et al., 2019; Moffitt, Juang, & Syed, 2018), and the current analysis adds racial identity to this body of work. This analytical approach aligns with the call to center the context and the transactional nature of identity and understands the ways that individuals respond to and engage with structures and ideologies of society (McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers, 2018; Way et al., 2013).

Relatedly, this research showcases the diversity of identity narratives. While the current analysis focused on outlining types of race narratives, we observed considerable within-group variation, which is an important part of identity research (Rogers & Way, 2018; Rowley et al., 2008; Sellers et al., 1998). Master narratives as an analytic framework can guide future study in this area, for example, examining the prevalence and distribution of race narrative types *among* Black youth or *within* a sample of White youth. Thus, this approach offers a way to identify variability in racial identity processes, within and across groups, in a context of racial inequality.

Third, this analysis contributes to our understanding of the role of resistance development (Rogers & Way, 2018; Way, 2011), and underscores the agency children have to respond to existing ideologies (Rogers, 2020). While most research on race in childhood focuses on when children learn and accommodate to racial attitudes or stereotypes, our analysis listened for the ways that children question or challenge racism as they construct their racial identity narratives. The narrative types identified may represent transitions in children's racial identity meaning-making. For example, *colorblind narratives* were more common with younger children while more of the older children told *incongruent* narratives. At the same time, there were no age-related patterns for the *difference/stereotypes* or *counternarratives*, suggesting that resistance to the master narrative is not contingent on age. It is therefore important to study alternative narratives as a normative and necessary part of healthy human development. Indeed, the fact that we observe *counternarratives* across racial groups suggests that resistance to master narratives may be engaged more often by those in marginalized positions (McLean et al., 2018; Rogers, 2020), but it is also accessible to youth across the social hierarchy. In an oppressive society, such resistance is one way to shift the master narrative and the structural inequality it supports (Rogers & Way, 2018; Ward, 2018). Our findings show how children's own racial identity development is part of this process.

Limitations and Future Directions

Alongside the contributions, our analysis leaves room for future research. First, because of the small number of children who self-identified as Latinx and Asian American in the larger sample, we were

unable to include these experiences in our analyses. Their absence is notable, as these heritage groups are the fastest growing racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States (Brown, 2014), yet we know little about how children from these groups engage with colorblindness. Relatedly, only six children in our sample told *Ethnicity* narratives, which were excluded from our analyses for insufficient cell size, but all of these narratives were told by children who identified as Multiracial. Although we captured many of the Multiracial children within the four narrative types we analyzed, it is possible that we overlooked an important and unique dimension of their identity experiences that warrants further attention.

Conclusion

Children today are growing up amid increasing ethnic and racial diversity, including multiracial individuals and families. Nonetheless, in a racially stratified society like the United States, the master narrative that structures racial categories was written with the pen of white supremacy. Thus, as young people develop who they are in this context, the extent to which their own identity narratives align with this master narrative is part of how racial identities reinforce or disrupt the existing racial hierarchy. From a developmental perspective, understanding the ways in which children disrupt racial inequality in their own making of identity can spotlight levers for when and how to foster resistance and build the kinds of identities that cultivate more equitable and inclusive communities.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Table S1. District-Reported Demographics of Participating Schools

Table S2. Racial Identity Interview Questions

Appendix S1. Identity Selection Task from Interview Protocol

Appendix S2. Coding Procedures