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Citation Information

Matthews, Jahmali '22, "Color Consciousness or Blindness in the Face of Race: White parent's approach to race during the BLM protests of 2020" (2021). Hamilton Digital Commons.

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Color Consciousness or Blindness in the Face of Race:
White parent's approach to race during the BLM protests of 2020
By Jahmali Matthews

It is the last week of May in 2020. A White family is spending time together in the living room, unable to enjoy the sunny weather because of the active stay-at-home order. The TV is turned on and the news plays: massive crowds of Black protestors and their allies appear on the screen. Their signs read, BLACK LIVES MATTER, WE CAN'T BREATHE, NO JUSTICE NO PEACE. Will White parents encourage their children to ask questions and offer explanations of racial inequality, or carefully turn off the television?

The summer of 2020 proved to be a season like no other. Complete with extended stay-at-home orders, and steadily increasing coronavirus positivity rates, no one was prepared for the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement to claim the world's attention during the global pandemic. In the weeks following the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin, half a million Americans participated in nationwide protests to demand an end to the use of excessive force against Black Americans by police. The continuous airing of coronavirus updates were suddenly replaced by media coverage of growing social unrest: footage of Black and police brutality against peaceful protestors, reporters being detained, and counter protests occupied every screen in America. The media coverage of social unrest combined with families quarantining at home created a unique moment for parenting. Parents and their homebound children were presented with an opportunity for racial socialization. Racial socialization refers to the way in which parents teach their child to understand and navigate their own race in reference to the rest of society, a process that differs significantly depending on the racial identity of the family. With the media existing as a crucial window into the rest of the world during the pandemic, parents had to make a decision--do they share the view with their children, or close the blinds?

This question concerning parents and this opportunity for racial socialization is especially interesting when considering middle class White parents. With access to almost unlimited resources, these parents are able to construct the racial reality of their choice for their children, inspired by their own "racial logic and parenting priorities" (Hagerman 2014). Previous research has identified two possible approaches to racial socialization within White families, the colorblind approach, in which White parents encourage children to ignore people's differences and treat everybody equally, and the color conscious approach, in which parents encourage children to think critically about social justice and acknowledge their white privilege. In this piece, I will explore how White parents who understand race using a colorblind approach, and a color conscious approach, processed the social unrest of last year, and evaluate the influence of the racial current events on the racial socialization of their children during that time.

The Research

This research is based on interviews conducted with parents of children in third through fifth grade. Participating households live in adjacent small towns within our target northeastern region. Our team utilized snowball sampling for recruitment, securing participants through our survey's advertisements, then asking them to share our study's information with their networks. We measured social class using parents' education and occupational status. Our sample is composed of eleven lower class parents and eleven middle class parents. During interviews, we

focused on any changes regarding childcare, housework and social networks due to the pandemic. Interviewees were asked questions about their perception of how their race influenced their interactions with other families and institutions, the demographic of their child's networks, and how their parenting was affected by the broadcasting of social unrest related to the Black Lives Matter movement last year. The questions geared toward race and social unrest tended to generate responses that evaluated respondent's awareness of personal biases and racism, their child's exposure to media regarding protests, and whether or not racial conversations were initiated in households. It is important to note that due to the open-ended nature of the interview questions, parents were free to respond to the race and diversity questions with their own perception of diversity. Because of this freedom of response, some parents spoke about diversity in terms of class, family circumstances, and experience. Due to their manner of answering our race questions, eight parents did not express any indication of color blindness or color consciousness in their responses.

Effects of color blindness and consciousness: shaping children's understanding of racism

Previous research, such as Margaret Hagerman's "White families and race: colour-blind and color conscious approaches to white racial socialization," has observed that children raised with a color conscious approach to understanding race initiate racial conversations with their parents and peers. Such conversations may be motivated by the normalization of talking about race from their parent's frequent conversations about social inequality, or the observations that children make about the diversity in their surroundings. In contrast, children that live in wealthy, all white neighborhoods whose parents use the colorblind approach to form their child's racial understanding are not exposed to diversity in their everyday lives. This lack of exposure, along with their parents avoiding or glossing over conversations about racial injustice encourages the belief that racism does not exist, or is not a relevant problem in their lives or community (Hagerman 2014). Because the majority of our sample resides in areas with low diversity, parents who are conscious and colorblind are on a "level playing field" in terms of encouraging their children to think about race since the children of parents in our sample are not significantly varied in their exposure to diversity. Instead, the relevancy of race in the household relies, primarily, on the parent's discretion.

The Media's Influence on Colorblind Contexts

Throughout our sample, four out of twenty-one White respondents expressed a color blindness approach to race in their household. One colorblind respondent insisted that her children do not see color, pointing to their lack of questions about their mixed-race cousin for proof of this claim. Another "colorblind" respondent admitted to harboring implicit biases against Black Americans, revealing that before the media coverage of the protests she doubted the seriousness of racial inequality that the group faces. She mentioned that she would often adopt the mindset of thinking to herself, "'Oh, I'm so sorry. You're poor and you're black. Big deal. This is America, figure it out.'" Despite this previous way of thinking, she maintained that despite the thoughts of the "lesser parts of herself," she taught her children to understand that people's differences "mean nothing." This respondent's awareness of her active implicit biases while she motivated her children to be colorblind demonstrates one reason why colorblindness is not the ideal approach to racially socializing White children. Implicit biases and a colorblind approach to understanding race do not contradict, and can exist together in one's navigation of race. While it is important that this parent has acknowledged her implicit biases as problematic,

this parent's understanding that she can hold such biases and hide them from her children is false when considering previous research. Castelli et al. (2008) observed that young children are able to detect their parent's subtle demonstrations of implicit biases and unspoken racial attitudes through their interactions with people from different races.

Out of all of our colorblind respondents, Stephanie's responses thoroughly displayed the possible influence of media exposure on parent's colorblind approach to race. Stephanie mentioned that her children have never been raised "to see anybody's differences as differences. They just are people to them... And that's how [she and her husband] were raised, as we're all human. And I think that all of the people we surround ourselves with have the same mentality." As stated before, instilling these ideas in children does not help them recognize racism and inequality. Also, these racial messages do not encourage children to act against, or acknowledge, their own implicit biases. When considering how the protests influenced her parenting, Stephanie claimed that despite their colorblind upbringing, her children "know that [racism] is a problem in the world, [but] they can't grasp why this historical event is happening with the Black Lives Matter stuff." Stephanie goes on to provide a snippet of her conversations with her children, offering them the explanation that "not everybody's raised like you, and not everybody thinks like you do." While Stephanie's messages seem comparable to a color conscious parent, the messages she gives her children do not highlight the oppressive systems that perpetuate the inequalities that Black and Brown people face. Instead, she suggests that people's lack of color blindness is to blame. Stephanie continuously enforces the message that people's differences are irrelevant to her children, despite these differences leading to discrimination. These messages do not prepare children to recognize and break cycles of implicit and explicit biases. With this understanding of race, her children are unable to critically think about race, which is why they respond to the media confused about why the "historical event is happening." Believing that differences are unimportant, and motivated to be aware of people that were not raised with their racial mindset, Stephanie's children will be looking in the wrong direction when tasked with identifying racism and inequality. They likely will not be able to identify such instances. Stephanie later speculated that the type of racial inequality and social unrest demonstrated in the coverage of protests "didn't exist when [she] was young, so [she doesn't] know how to handle it for them." Stephanie mentioned that she and her partner were raised with the same racial understanding that she preaches to her children. Her lack of awareness of racial injustice throughout the 1990s indicates that the same colorblind racial context that she is building for her children numbs White children to the reality of racism.

The Color conscious' incorporation of Media

Our sample contains nine color conscious parents out of 21 White parents. When answering questions about race, color conscious parents tended to acknowledge both the prevalence of racism in America as well as their White privilege. Five out of the nine color conscious parents acknowledged the existence of racism and personal biases, compared to only one out of the four colorblind parents explicitly acknowledging both their privilege and the existence of racism. Some color conscious recognized the difficulty of talking to their children about the intricacies of social inequalities and privilege. One respondent mentioned that their household applies the sensitivity training that her partner has completed for work at home due to the difficulty of such conversations: "my husband's been through a lot of diversity training through his job, and I feel like there's a lot of white privilege talk out there, and that's really hard to try to navigate to explain to your children, "Just because you're born a certain color or you live

in a certain area, you didn't ask to live where you live. You were born here. You were born in this town, or your parents chose to live here. We chose to send you to this school." So, to say your kids automatically are born with white privilege... I mean, that's a difficult thing in itself. Despite vocalizing that such conversations about privilege can be a struggle to break down to her children, this respondent's household recognizes such conversations as necessary and uses their resources to initiate them. This approach to racially socializing White children equips them with a personal awareness that encourages them not to—unlike Stephanie's children—consider their actions as perfect and unbiased simply because they are aware of racism.

Jessica's responses display the possible influence of the protests' coverage on the color-conscious approach to race during the pandemic. Unlike colorblind respondent's approach to talking about race with their children, Jessica's color-conscious approach to race was not complicated by the media coverage, rather, she was able to incorporate the news directly into her conversations about the nuances of racial injustice and discrimination. Jessica reminisced about the first "real" conversation about race that she had with her son when he was in kindergarten: when my son was in kindergarten and asking about Martin Luther King, and asking about a friend of his and he was so upset thinking, well, people would be mean to my friend, Ryan, because his skin is brown, and trying to understand that. And it's funny because I was trying to explain to him then, we've come a long way, and then to realize we haven't, in light of what's happened over the last 10 months." Jessica's response highlights her color-conscious with her willingness to respond to her child's specific questions about race as well as her acknowledgment that racism has been a problem in the past and the social unrest illustrates that the problem is getting worse. When Jessica spoke of her more recent conversations with her children she claimed that the racial topics "make dinner conversations interesting, because they're only seven and nine, but there's no reason not to talk about it and understand that there are differences in the way that people see people, and it's so silly you know?" Jessica does not regard the racial socialization of her children as a chore, and instead welcomes the conversations, deeming them "interesting." This attitude, along with the mention of past conversations with her children, indicates that racial conversations are normalized in her household, in line with previous research's observations of color-conscious parents. Jessica offers a sample of her recent conversations with her children: "We talk about [the racial current events]. Last week we had a lot of talks about, what is a protest? We had protests. And what is a riot?" Jessica's conversation with her children about the difference between a riot and a protest is a perfect example of color-conscious parents welcoming the intricacies of discrimination as conversation topics with their children. During a time when opposers of the BLM movement would generalize all acts of activism against police brutality, including peaceful protests, as riots, Jessica's active encouragement of her children to critically think for themselves and differentiate between false information and truth is imperative. Here, Jessica represents the careful messages that parents with a color-conscious approach to race pass on to their children. These messages and knowledge equip children not only to acknowledge discriminations, but also to defend minority rights with logic.

Takeaway

This research on White parent's racial socialization styles, and how protests during the pandemic influenced them, highlights how detrimental the colorblind approach to contextualizing race can be. It is important to note that two out of twenty one respondents acknowledged that their previous colorblind view of race was shifted due to the media coverage

of protests. They now express an awareness of their White privilege and initiate racial conversations with their children. Education is the key to deconstructing the unsuspectingly dangerous perception of color blindness. This research shows us that changing racial socialization styles are possible, and necessary.