

## **ABSTRACT**

BELLOTA, ANGELLA ANDREA. Perpetuating Color-Blind Ideology: Middle School Children and Their Understanding of Race. (Under the direction of Dr. Maxine Thompson and Dr. Barbara Risman).

Current sociological research argues that children are social actors in their own right, and are capable of using race when explaining their social worlds. It is also argued that in order to examine how racial ideologies are produced and reproduced, we must look at day-to-day events as the arena where ideologies are learned and lived. In order to examine if children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reproduce and perpetuate racist ideologies, I analyze 44 interviews with white and non-white middle school children from a small southeastern city. My results indicate that middle school children share racial stereotypes that reinforce racism. More importantly, in applying Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's conceptual framework of color-blind ideology, my findings suggest that although many of the respondents in this sample expressed equality rhetoric, their statements end up justifying racial inequality. The implications of color-blind ideology are discussed.

Perpetuating Color-Blind Ideology: Middle School Children and  
Their Understanding of Race

by  
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

Sociology

Raleigh, North Carolina

2008

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## DEDICATION

To my family

You showed me what it means to love unconditionally

You showed me how to stay strong in the face of adversity

You showed me to always aim for growth...

Si no fuera por ustedes yo nunca estaría aquí luchando por mis sueños

Los amo

*Required Translation: If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here  
fighting for my dreams. I love you*

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Angella Andrea Bellota was born on January 7, 1981 in Lima, Peru to Francisco and Victoria Bellota. At the age of five, Angella and her family moved to southern California, where she grew up in the infamous Rancho Cucamonga. After graduating from Etiwanda High School, Angella attended California State University, San Bernardino, Ca, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and a minor in Ethnic Studies. While at CSUSB, she participated in the McNair Scholar's Program and was mentored under the direction of Dr. Marcia Marx. This experience influenced her decision to attend graduate school. While pursuing a Master of Science degree in Sociology at North Carolina State University, Angella was a research assistant and teaching assistant and participated in activities that encouraged her growth as a scholar as well as an activist. She also enjoyed teaching introductory sociology to undergraduates at NC State. Angella hopes to pursue her research interests on Latinos in North Carolina and in particular Latino youth and race relations. She aims to continue using her work for the improvement of her community, both here in North Carolina and California.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was completed with the support of many people. I am grateful to my committee, Maxine Thompson, Barbara Risman, and Michael Schwalbe for providing thoughtful feedback and guidance during the writing process. I was lucky to have worked with scholars that valued and encouraged my research interest in qualitative work. Maxine, your presence during this project was priceless and I am thankful for your kindness and encouragement. Thank you to my fellow graduate students, especially my 1911 and Harrelson officemates for allowing me to bounce ideas around about the project. A special thank you to Joy Piontak and Tricia McTague, who provided feedback at the critical final stages of this project and over a cup of coffee at GV, reminded me to trust in my abilities and the power of sharing my voice. To Kristine Macomber who unknowingly provided optimistic energy when I needed it the most. To Alecia Anderson, who when I first met, I thought to myself, “she’s going to bring a breath of fresh air to our sociology bubble,” and she did. To my friends in SGSOC who created a space for me to sit quietly and feel a sense of solidarity through our research work, forum planning and gatherings. Here’s hoping people come to see the value in such a wonderful group. And finally, I am thankful for all of the friendships I have developed here in Raleigh and for the loved ones in California who cheered me on from so far away. And it is with warm thoughts, that I share the following quote from bell hooks. In an interview about one of her mentors, she states the following:

“Our meeting had that quality of sweetness that lingers, that lasts for a lifetime, even if you never speak to the person again, see their face, you can always return in your heart to that moment when you were together to be renewed – that is a profound solidarity.” ~ bell hooks

I am blessed to have met so many inspiring, passionate people, who have shown me that there is a shimmer of hope in this very chaotic world. Many moons may go by, and the world may drift us apart, but I will always have you in my heart and remember fondly all of those happy memories we created together.

Peace.

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## Introduction

Most research on racism has focused on adults rather than children. The earliest research projects with children were mainly experimental, in which a child, or group of children are examined within a controlled setting to test the effects of certain stimuli (reviewed by: Loovas, Baer, and Bijou, 1965). Most research with children has used experimental research, with dolls and photographs, and word association tests (Baer, 1962; Lindsley, 1962; Sears, 1951; reviewed by: Troyna, 1991). Other literature depends on attitude surveys as a way to understand children's perceptions of race related issues (Bigler and Liben, 1993). Current sociological research however, has begun to focus on studying children in their natural social settings, including the process in which children understand race and racism (Adler and Adler, 1998; Lewis, 2003; Troyna, 1991; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 1996, 2001). Lewis (2003) argues that in order to understand the production and reproduction of racial ideology and structures, we must look at day-to-day events as the arenas where ideologies and structures are learned and lived. Stoughton and Sivertson (2005) also argue that it is important to examine the influence of one's social context, especially middle school children because it is in their settings and interactions with peers that middle school children develop a sense of themselves (Lei, 2003; Murrell, 1999; Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). Many authors suggest that through in-depth interviewing, focus groups, and participant observation, researchers can best learn the perceptions of children (Connolly, 1998; Lewis, 2003; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001; Stoughton and Sivertson, 2005; Tatum, 1997).

We need to examine how white and non-white children experience race within the same setting to understand their assumptions about race and color-blind ideologies. Such data is necessary to understand how racism is perpetuated, experienced, and internalized. This research based on interviews with middle school children focuses on “tween-aged” perspectives on race and race relations. Middle school children are interesting because at this age they are very concerned with presenting themselves properly to be accepted by peers. My findings suggest that these children use an equality rhetoric based on color-blind ideology but they use it in ways that end up justifying racial inequality. Their interviews help shed light on how middle school children even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may reproduce/perpetuate racist ideologies.

I begin with a discussion of the literature on the conceptualizations of racism as a means to maintain group status and privilege. I focus on the perpetuation of racism at the interaction/individual level. How is the dominant racial ideology perpetuated at the micro level and how is it reproduced? What role do stereotypes play in the reproduction of this racial ideology among middle school children? I analyzed data of 44 interviews from children in middle school in a small southeastern city. I address the questions of how children understand issues of race and race relations. More importantly, I hope to get a better understanding of how white and non-white children understand their experience with race in their social worlds.

## Literature Review

Blumer (1958) argues that the dominant group isn't so much concerned with the subordinate group itself but with the position they hold. Invested in their privilege, whites get a sense of where groups belong. By avoiding the subordinate position of non-whites, whites can be comfortable in their own position, firmly placed at the top of the social hierarchy. To help solidify their own position, they characterize and define other racial groups, and in doing so define themselves. When these definitions are not challenged they create a collective image of the subordinate group. In claiming their social position, whites get a sense of their own superiority, a sense of the "intrinsic" difference of the subordinate group from their own, and a feeling of deserving certain privileges.

Following Blumer's argument, Wellman (1993) contends that racism is a way to protect white's sense of entitlement. Racism is far more complicated than the prejudice of a bigot, or overt racist acts against people of color. Racism is subtle and pervasive throughout American society and its various economical, political, and social institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Troyna, 1991). Wellman defines racism as, "culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities (1993)." White Americans use racism as a way to defend racial advantages and maintain the racial status quo. It is not a matter of ill-willed prejudice or individual bigotry but is instead a subtle way to defend racial privilege. Although some sociologists, argue that there is a decline in the significance of race and instead focus on class and the economic structure (Wilson, 1980), I proceed from the perspective that race is still an important explanation for the division between whites and

non-whites. When non-whites are at a disadvantage (in health care, job markets, educational systems, and criminal justice systems), whites benefit from their subordinate status. When non-whites begin to gain more opportunities in these various contexts, whites lose certainty in their social privilege, and may become defensive in order to protect it. It is in this need to defend their privilege that whites perpetuate racism (Wellman, 1993).

This defense of privilege can be hidden inside a color-blind ideology. Color-blind ideology is the racial ideology used by whites as a way to preserve the racial order and to explain and justify racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000). Bonilla-Silva and Forman argue that racism isn't about "prejudiced" people, because it is possible to have non-prejudiced attitudes and still use the dominant color-blind racial ideology. Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues we must look beyond the stereotypical Archie Bunker (working class, uneducated white, who doesn't know any better but to be a bigot) and examine how Whites perpetuate racism without overt individual prejudice. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) argue that racial ideology is used as a way of protecting whites' group interests. This new theory of color blind ideology suggests that when whites deny racial inequality as something structured and institutionalized, they can presume that any difference between groups is something that non-whites bring upon themselves. Color-blind ideology can be used as a way to support and reproduce the racial structure, and to rationalize social inequality. Although this more modern racial ideology may not contain overt racist speech, it is still used to protect racial privilege for whites and to maintain the status quo. Bonilla-Silva (2001), states that in the U.S. most whites claim to be color-blind and wish to live in a world where race is not important. Unfortunately, whites experience a contradiction in their value for equality and

their daily interactions. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) show us that whites are very much color conscious. Although they may want to claim that they believe in equality, their negative actions when it comes to racial policies suggest otherwise (Jackman and Crane, 1986; Krysan, 2000; Schuman, et al., 1997).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva provides for us four color-blind frameworks used by whites in order to explain and justify racial inequality. Abstract liberalism, is a form in which whites use political and economic individualism to rationalize inequality; they believe in advancement based on individual ability, preference, and little government involvement. Thus, the emphasis is on decentralized and de-contextualized individuals. A second framework to justify inequality is the inferior culture of non-whites. This framework blames subordinate groups for their own status by stating they lack determination and will, or that they are just lazy; it places an “innate” cultural deficiency on non-whites. Bonilla-Silva (2001) suggests it “allows whites to express resentment and hostility safely since, in their view, blacks are where they are as a group because they do not want to get ahead (148).” A third framework used by whites to justify inequality is that of naturalizing racial matters. Segregation is believed to be something that just happens; it is a natural tendency for people to gravitate to their own kind; everyone has the freedom to live or go where ever they want, but they *choose* to stick to their own race. The fourth framework whites use to justify inequality is the minimization of racism. This framework denies the structural/institutionalized character of discrimination and therefore suggests race is not as important as it used to be. If there are racial problems, they blame it on the very few “ignorant racists” or on non-whites own doing.

Bonilla-Silva uses the concept of color-blind ideology to develop the concept of “race talk,” a way of speaking in order to avoid being labeled a racist, and appearing to be color-blind. Doing this can allow a white person to express their view on racial issues but by using a qualifying statement, they avoid the stigma of being a racist. In the study of white college students, Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) found that although white students expressed prejudicial views, they “filtered them through various ‘semantic moves’ or rhetorical constructions to avoid appearing racist (65).” What is interesting is that although they tried to use certain discourse to ‘save face,’ these white students were actually showing the interviewers that they were very much color conscious. There are several styles in which whites attempt to avoid appearing racist: they avoid racist terminology, they present both sides of the argument in regards to an issue in order to present their real disapproval, they attempt to neutralize or shield the racist opinion they share by claiming to not be racist or claiming to have non-white friends, and finally they use rhetorical incoherence (hesitation and stuttering in speech, um’s, and uh’s) as a way to soften the blow of their racist comment in regards to sensitive racial issues. As we can see, the use of race talk is subtle, full of double-talk, and full of contradictions (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). From this discussion, one realizes that the use of color-blind frameworks and forms of race talk are ways in which whites cover up what is underneath the surface, their desire to protect white status and privilege.

I will use the theoretical framework of color-blind ideology to study how children may understand race. Although earlier literature has assumed that children are too naive to understand abstract ideas like race and racism, more current research is proving this

assumption wrong (Adler and Adler, 1998; Lewis 2003; Troyna, 1991; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). Research by Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001), suggests that children as young as three *do* have knowledge of race and ethnicity and *do* use racial concepts in their interactions. By observing 58 children ages three to six, in a pre-school setting, Van Ausdale and Feagin gathered data on how these children use racial awareness and knowledge in their social relationships. They conducted unstructured observations of the interactions between children and children and adults, to see how children construct and experience racial and ethnic distinctions. They investigated how kids learn and express racial concepts and attitudes and how they use them in their interactions.

Van Ausdale and Feagin conclude that the terms describing visible markers are passed down to children through socialization, from generation to generation, and through various external outlets, such as the media. Pre-school children are aware of the complex notions of skin color, hair differences, and facial characteristics. These differences are used by children, especially white children, to define non-white children as “others,” and to create a ‘we-they’ dichotomy. If non-whites try to reject their assigned label, other children police them and remind them that they can not deviate from what has been assigned. For example, a white girl did not allow a black girl to use the color pink for her hand print because she was black and therefore had to use brown paint (785-86). Another example is when three girls are playing, two of them are white and one is Asian. When the Asian girl wants to pull the wagon they were all playing with, one of the white girls tells her, “No, no. You can’t pull this wagon. Only *White Americans* can pull this wagon.” The white girl reminds the Asian girl that she is neither “white” nor “American” and therefore she can not be in charge of the

wagon. From reading these examples one can understand that the children involved are, “aware of the power and authority granted to whites (788).”

Another example involves Carla, a three year old white girl. She states that she does not want to sleep next to Nicole, a four year old biracial girl, because, “I can’t sleep next to a nigger...Niggers are stinky (782).” In this example, Carla, “showed awareness not only of how to use racial epithets but also of the negative stigma attached to black skin (782).” In social interactions both white and non-white children are aware of the racial hierarchy and accept the superior position that is given to whites. This research shows how white children maintain their social status through the controlling of interactions with other children.

Lewis (2003) shows how racial categories are used to build boundaries between children. In her one year study of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children, Lewis examines how racial meaning and racial identity are reproduced in schools. By examining classrooms, lunchrooms, schoolyards, and other school events at three different schools in a metropolitan area in southern California, she focuses on how race is learned and lived, constructed and negotiated in children’s everyday life. She shows how racial inequality is reproduced. In addition to participant observation, Lewis also conducted formal and informal interviews with students, staff, and parents and collected documents from each of the three schools (i.e. reports, newsletters sent to parents, programs). Lewis (2003) finds that when external features are ambiguous (like that of biracial children), other characteristics, like language, hairstyle, or name, are used to define others. Either way, non-white children are not only made to feel different but also less than their white peers. Lewis states that it is not so much the label that is harmful but the meaning that goes along with it. It is in these “racialized”



labels that power is transferred and subordination is implied. For example, the label “black” isn’t so much the problem as is the meaning of blackness, especially male blackness because it is, “associated with criminality and danger,” and a particular social location; working class.

Van Ausdale and Feagin (1996) point out that children are aware of how treating other children based on race is wrong and will therefore act on these beliefs when adults are not around. In fact, the authors showed that white children know not to share with a teacher the racial incidents they enacted. This means that white children are aware of the sanctions that accompany racist acts. These children are learning what is “wrong” to share in the public sphere, and are careful not to do racist actions in front of adults for fear of sanctions.

These studies not only demonstrate the ability of children to understand race but also the way this knowledge is applied to interaction and how the meanings that are attached to “racial features” can be used negatively (i.e. exclusion practices). These studies support the need to further examine the perceptions middle school children hold. From these studies we can see that negative stereotypes are likely to lead to negative or racist behavior.

Stoughton and Sivertson (2005) conduct focus group research with middle school children. The researchers acknowledge the importance of direct narratives from middle school children, and therefore held focus groups in a large, urban middle school, to understand children’s social experiences and perceptions. In four focus groups (made up of ten to twelve 8<sup>th</sup> graders), middle school children discuss their lives. The findings include their reporting to patterns on cafeteria seating preferences based on race, academic tracking practices and the labeling of students based on stereotypes.

Stoughton and Sivertson (2005) found that most of the middle school children expressed the sitting patterns in the cafeteria as a form of racial segregation, that they believed was something “natural” and a matter of personal choice; people wanting to “stick with their own kind (284).” Along with these racial divisions came beliefs of different cultural behavioral patterns: “there are certain tables that have problems. There are good tables and bad tables (stated by white student).” White students expressed separation because of the unacceptable behavior of other students (black students), “the way they act,” and the idea that the tables where black kids sat were the “bad” tables (285); expressing an underlying belief of stereotypical images of blacks. All of these ideas were expressed with an understanding that everyone got along *but* people are just happier with those like themselves (285).

Stoughton and Sivertson (2005) also found that in the discussions among the students there was a general, “naturalized” assumption of academic achievement based on race. Not only did most of these children accept the idea that white students are the ones that take the higher level academic classes and that black students are in the lower track classes but they then used this as a way to justify and see as “normal” the social divisions between whites and blacks (few friends of the other race because they don’t have classes together) (286-288). Another important finding within this study is the ease at which these kids could describe the social stratification in their school. Not only could they acknowledge the presence of social hierarchies but they clearly showed the, “widespread use of stereotypical thinking and essentializing of racial and ethnic characteristics (288).” Black students were described as bullies, ghetto people, people to fear, and uncivilized. White students on several occasions

expressed, “They can call us anything they want, but if we say something back its World War II; They’re always fighting and cussing (288).” Many white children’s arguments came down to blaming the victim/poor personal choices. What was once again interesting was that students expressed dominant stereotypes of black students. At the same time because some black students wanted to distance themselves from such negative images, they too were found to agree with the stereotypes. Like other researchers, these scholars contend that to begin to change misunderstandings, stereotyped beliefs, and racial divisions, we must, “provide safe spaces where honest, authentic communication can take place...(294).”

Past literature has found that children as young as pre-school age understand and use racial concepts. They are capable of using what they learn from their social settings and have been found to create a ‘we-they’ dichotomy, and to exclude children from social interactions. From these studies we see that in their day to day activities, these children are capable of reproducing inequality. Although children may lack the sophistication of directly stating their awareness of a racial hierarchy, through their daily interactions they do seem to accept its presence and for non-white children this acknowledgment of such a hierarchy means that they are made to feel less than their white peers.

## Methods

Why focus on what these children have to say? Kristen Myers (2005) argues that language is powerful. Language has the power to constrain and shape opportunities for different groups in society. The language we use in interactions is more than just that moment of communication, the language we use everyday can affect how we think and act toward others. In her book, *Racetalk: Racism Hiding in Plain Sight*, Kristen Myers defines racetalk as “any talk that demeans on the basis of race or ethnicity...the ritualistic, persistent degradation of some groups below others, that reinforces racism.” It is this kind of everyday talk that accumulates and therefore reinforces and legitimates the larger inequalities people experience at the structural level (i.e. segregation, discrimination, exclusion, and racial profiling). Language is a major element in the production and reproduction of racism. I intend to examine the narrations of middle school children so we can obtain a firmer grasp on the way the next generation to come of age understands race and racism.

Children are capable of understanding issues of race and racism. Children can and do learn from their interactions with others (Adler and Adler, 1998; Connolly, 1998; Lewis, 2003; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). Children have an active understanding of their social worlds (Connolly, 1998). I follow Van Ausdale and Feagin’s (2001) argument that we should not underestimate the ability of children to negotiate social constructs. Children are more than just imitators, they are social actors and when they participate in different cultural and societal activities they learn “social tools” which they will use in their future interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Young white children use the racial “social tools” they learn from their social worlds in order to reproduce a racialized society, and to create their individual and

social realities, as do non-white children. When white children internalize racial and ethnic concepts through their use in interactions they begin to develop a strong sense of power over others. When non-white children internalize such concepts they not only use them to develop their own identities but learn that the negative meanings attached to such concepts are attributed to them as individuals, leading them to possibly internalize such concepts so deeply that their own behavior and psychological well-being is affected.

*Description of the Study*

I will be using data from interviews with 44 children in middle school from fall of 2003 through the summer of 2004. Data were collected from several sites: a racially integrated magnet middle school, a local YWCA after-school program and summer camp, and at an urban, mostly black local Girl’s Club. This non-random sample included 17 white females, 10 non-white females (6 Black, 3 Bi-racial, 1 Indian), 13 white males, and 4 non-white males (2 Black, 1 Latino, 1 Asian Indian). The children interviewed ranged from eleven to fourteen years old and were between the sixth and eighth grade. The interviewers were faculty and graduate students at North Carolina State University.

**Table 1: Sex and Race Sample Size**

	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>White</b>	<b>N=13</b>	<b>N=17</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Non-White</b>	<b>N=4</b>	<b>N=10</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>44</b>

My focus in this study is the perspectives of white and non-white children on race. I will also compare white and non-white boys and girls for possible differences based on gender. My focus is to examine the ideas middle school children share about race and race relations in their social world, how they experience race, and the types of assumptions they hold about race and inequality.

### *The Interview Schedule*

A flexible interview schedule was created to investigate several topics: family life, peer interactions, friendships, issues of gender and racial identity, dating, and future goals. Several questions led to the children discussing issues of race (questions on friendship, the cliques at school, and lunchroom activities). For my thesis, I will focus on the hypothetical race change question posed to the children, to examine their perceptions of race. I used responses from the following question to do my analysis:

Alien race question-“If an alien were to come into your room late one night, while you were asleep, and change your race, make you white (or black), how would you be different? Friends? Other kids treat you? Teachers? Future?”

### *Issues with interviewing children*

I have identified several issues that need to be addressed in regards to interviewing children. A problem with adults interviewing children using structured questions is that children will try to give the “right” answer because they see the researcher as a sanctioning adult (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). When it comes to topics of race, children will be likely to give the “we are all the same inside” response. Previous literature has found that when dealing with the limitations of interviewing children (adult vs. child interaction,

attention span, gaining rapport, etc) there are several techniques one can use to overcome such problems (Docherty and Sandelowski, 1999; Irwin and Johnson, 2005; Kortessluoma, Hentinen, and Nikkonen, 2003).

When interviewing children one must make sure to clearly inform the participant of what the research is about, speak to them at their comprehension level (in a language that they can understand and use), and assure them that there are no right or wrong answers (Faux, et al., 1988; Kortessluoma, et al., 2003). Giving them a small reward can encourage them to pay careful attention to the questions. Before the interview begins it is good to get to know the child as much as possible in order to reduce their level of anxiety. Having the child draw as well as talk can also help to alleviate anxiety, and give them another way of expressing what they are trying to tell you (Irwin and Johnson, 2005). Faux et al (1988) state that when children answer “I don’t know” they may know but are unable to express their feelings or thoughts verbally. This is when probing, rewording and offering other forms of expression (drawing, free writing) is helpful in getting the participant to express themselves through different mediums. Kortessluoma et al (2003) state that providing hypothetical questions and vignettes can help the participant deal with things that are familiar to her or him and can aid them in not having the desire to give the “right” answer, because the question isn’t structured in a way that demands one type of answer. Aside from using direct questions, the use of props can also help the participant recall information and report their experience (Docherty and Sandelowski, 1999). For our research, we understood the dilemmas presented and attempted to use various strategies recommended by the literature in order to overcome these limitations.

Most of our interviews were conducted in a location the participant was comfortable: their school, their after-school program, or in their home. Most of the time the interviewer had some time before the interview to chat with the participant about their day, in hopes of creating a level of comfort before the interview started. After explaining to them that the project was about learning their view on life, the interviewer obtained their permission to participate, and showed them the tape recorder we planned to use to aid us in gathering data. In order to have them feel like a participant in the process, we gave them control over the tape recorder and told them that they could turn it off whenever they wanted to. Once the interview started, they tended to last one hour on average. The interview schedule we used was a combination of loosely structured questions and interactive exercises. Following the research literature suggestion, we aimed to use interactive exercises (using photographs, cards, and a section where the respondent could draw or write their response) to give the respondents alternative forms of expression. Vignettes were also used as a way to make it easier for the respondents to understand and relate to the question. Through this flexible and conversational interview schedule, the research team was able to get a better understanding of the children's perspectives on gender and racial interactions and the meanings that they assign to their personal relationships.

### *Coding Analysis*

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, I listened to each interview recording. I then read through each respondent's interview transcript several times. From this I picked up on issues of race and race relations through the statements the respondent's shared. Using Nudist 6 software, I then began to code the statements that included comments



on race in hopes of developing patterns based on their interviews. The categories are as followed: acknowledgment of race, natural segregation, description of blacks, race relations in school, description of whites, friendship diversity claims, self-described race, acting white, general friendship patterns, interracial dating, description of Latinos, acknowledgment of cliques, and racialization of bullies. After coding I began to develop categories based on how these respondent's perceived race and issues of race relations. With a more narrow focus on the research question, I went to the literature and gathered tools from readings to aid in my analysis. I then once again narrowed down my research questions to: 1) How do these children talk about race? 2) How do they say they experience race?, 3) What role do stereotypes play into their understanding of race?

Although I allowed the data to suggest the major patterns, I used analytic categories from Bonilla-Silva's theory of color-blind ideology. I used Bonilla-Silva's four categories of explaining/justifying racial inequality, when re-examining each interview. The four categories are: (1) advancement is based on individual ability or personal choice, (2) non-whites lack determination or have an inferior culture, (3) naturalizing segregation, meaning people choose to stick to their own race, and (4) minimize racism, meaning racism isn't a problem now, it is not institutionalized and if there is inequality it is to be blamed on the few ignorant bigots or on non-whites themselves. I will examine what these children say and try to see if their perceptions are representative of any of these categories.

#### *Implications of method*

This study did not include direct observations. It was based on first and second hand reports that the children gave during interviews, I believe, however, as do other scholars, that

obtaining children's perspective is fruitful for grasping their thoughts, ideas, and assumptions of race (Stoughton and Siverston, 2005). Another limitation of the study is that the sample is not large enough or diverse enough to make generalizations and/or links to larger social forces or the experience of the larger population. While I do compare within genders across race, the strength of this analysis is limited because there are only four non-white boys in the sample.

Finally, although this research team used various strategies to avoid interviewing issues, we still experienced some limitations when conducting interviews with the respondents. Although there are mixed results on the effect of race/class/sex of interviewer, most research purports that the match up of interviewer and respondent based on race, class and gender is important when collecting data (Davis, 1997; Krysan and Couper, 2003). The research team for this study made serious attempts at matching interviewer demographics with that of the respondent (black male interviewer with black male respondent, female interviewer with female respondent, etc) but the research team was mostly limited to white female graduate students. Since some research has found the mismatch of interviewer and respondent demographics to have an effect on the responses shared (Anderson, Silver, and Abramson, 1988; Krysan and Couper, 2003) it is important for the reader to keep this in mind when reading the analysis.

## Analysis

My analysis for this project is based on the responses given by middle school children when the interviewer read a scenario where their race was changed from non-white to white or white to black depending on the respondent's race. The question presented to the participant was as follows: "If an alien were to come into your room late one night, while you were asleep, and change your race, make you white (or black), how would you be different? Friends? Other kids treat you? Teachers? Future?" We asked specifically, "Would your life be different?", "Do you think your friends would treat you differently?", "Do you think other kids would treat you differently?", "Do you think your future would be different?" – we probed where appropriate.

The following sections will discuss the responses both white children and non-white children gave to the scenario posed to them. I focus on how they respond to the overall question of "would life be different if your race changed?" and "would you experience different treatment if your race changed?"

### White Middle School Children

When asked the question about an alien changing their race, white respondents were divided in their answers. Almost half of the white respondents (14 out of 30 or 46%) stated that their life *would not* be different if they were to become black over night. While another fourteen respondents (46%) stated that their life *would* be different if they were to become black. Two of the white respondents did not answer this question.

They were then asked if they would *experience* different treatment if their race changed to black, a little over half of the white respondents (16 out of 30 or 53%) stated they

would not experience different treatment as black children, while 12 of the 30 (or 40%) white respondents stated they *would* experience different treatment, and two of the white respondents did not answer this question. Overall, while almost half of the white respondents stated that their life would be different if they were to change their race to black, slightly over half of these respondents did not believe they would *experience* different treatment. In the following sections, I elaborate the various ways white middle school children explain what it means to live life as a black person and whether or not they would experience different treatment.

***“Life as a black kid is different...”***

Many of the white middle school children described what they believed to be the behavior of black people when explaining what life would be like if they were to become black. And for many of them their descriptions of black life were based on negative stereotypes. Several of them also showed signs of Bonilla Silva’s color-blind ideology frameworks when describing black children as self segregating. The following excerpts elaborate on these patterns.

Eric (White boy, 6<sup>th</sup> grade) believes that white children and black children are different and so are their friendships. Blacks tend to hang out in groups and not one-on-one, alluding to his idea that black boys are in gangs as he later specifically states. He believes that if he is treated different when Black, it is because of his behavior and “attitude.” He at first downplays how different things would be as a black boy, “not that much different, just maybe people do different things...” but in the rest of his answer, there is quite some difference he is describing.

*In response to being asked how his life would be different:*

*Eric: Um, not that much different, just maybe, people would do different things than what other people do.*

*Interviewer: Like what kinds of things you might do that would be different.*

*Eric: Usually you don't see much black people skateboarding. They usually like hang out and play games, not games, but I don't know what they do, some of the stuff they do but, they hang out more with more people and they don't just play with single friends usually. Some of them do, but like mostly, its not in a bad way but, black people get in gangs stuff.*

He goes on to state that he may be treated differently by teachers if he was a black boy because of his “attitude,” which he believes black boys in his school have.

*Interviewer: How about teachers?*

*Eric: Maybe a little*

*Interviewer: Why do you say that? How do you think they might treat you different?*

*Eric: Maybe my attitude or something like that.*

*Interviewer: They might think you had more of an attitude?*

*Eric: Yeah, because usually there's some pretty bad black kids in the class and they have really bad attitudes, if someone like messes with them they'll start yelling at them, maybe sometimes, one of them picked up a chair*

Jack (White boy, 7<sup>th</sup> grade) differentiates between acting white and black when trying to explain what it means to have a life as a black person. After stating that if he became black he would be called an “oreo” because he would still act like himself (white), he was asked to describe how a black person would act. Jack states the following:

*Jack: Well, usually, and I'm not really saying this about every black guy, but a lot of them are aggressive and just like, talk differently than I do.*

He then says he would have different friends but that he would not have a different life. He also believes that his future would be different because he would not play golf as much. Although Jack states that his life wouldn't be different as a black person he does describe difference between blacks and whites behavior: blacks and whites "act" differently (blacks are more aggressive and talk differently) and if he were black he would have different friends. When asked if his future would be different he seems to acknowledge minimal difference, "Um, like I wouldn't play golf that much." So he attempts to state that things wouldn't really change, but the idea of behaving and acting differently and having to have different friends says otherwise.

Jason (White boy, 7<sup>th</sup> grade) immediately does not like the question of what would happen if he became a black boy. He says he likes being white and if he were to become black he would hang out with gangsters (associating blacks with gangs). He also states that the way he talks would change.

*In response to being asked what would happen if he became black:*

*Jason: I would go and find that alien and kill him!*

*Interviewer: Why?*

*Jason: because I don't want to be black, I like being white. I'm not racist or anything but I like my race.*

*Interviewer: How is life different?*

*Jason: I guess I'd just go and hang out with the gangsters.*

*Interviewer: Would anything be different?*

*Jason: Yeah, the way that I talked, I'd be like, "Yo, what up, homey G?" and what not.*

Jason is so uncomfortable with the idea of changing races that he would kill the alien who would do that to him. Like Jack and Eric, he too believes that being black means talking and acting differently but he describes an extreme image of having gangster friends and using slang. In his response we see signals of him presenting himself along the ideals of color-blind ideology when saying that he doesn't want to be black because he likes being white. In order to make this response "okay and non-racist" he feels the need to state right after, "I'm not racist or anything but I like my race."

Erica (white girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) stated that black children have negative behavior, specifically that they are bullies. When asked how her life would be different as a black person, she responds:

*Erica: Hm, I wouldn't get bullied by the black people because they only bully white people.*

*Interviewer: Do you think other kids would treat you differently?*

*Erica: Um hm [very eager here]. They might treat me more popular because that's really what all black people, like, they get really, they are really known among other people in the school because they're considered bullies so everybody knows their names... Something else that might happen is that some other black people might take offense and they might try to have a fight or something because they do that in the cafeteria sometimes and outside. They have small fights.*

Once again we see white respondents equating life being different to behavioral changes based on race.

The following are examples of respondents that believed that black children segregate themselves. These excerpts are important because we see Bonilla Silva's naturalizing racial matters framework at play. When asked if her life would be different Audrey (white girl, 6<sup>th</sup>

grade) states that life would be different as a black person because she would mainly have black friends and would dress differently. Her response is as follows:

*Audrey: Um, I'd probably have some different friends because it seems like in a lot of classes I've seen, the black people kind of stay, they normally have black friends and a couple of white friends.*

After stating she would dress differently if she was a black girl, she goes on to state:

*Audrey: It seems that a lot of the time black people, especially girls, not a lot of them they seem to wear a little bit tighter clothes and they have these different hairstyles.*

Not only does she see black children as self segregating but she seems to generalize black girls by stating that they wear tight clothes. In stating this she begins by generalizing, "It seems that a lot of the time black people..." but then narrows it down to "not a lot of them..." Still the overall sense one gets from her response is that blacks are *different* from whites and not in a positive way.

Samantha (white girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) and Krista (white girl 8<sup>th</sup> grade) also go on to describe this idea that black people sit together (as a form of natural segregation). Although at first Samantha says that she would still hang out with the same friends (even after becoming a black girl) she goes on to state:

*Samantha: I'd hang out with more black people like at school, at lunch you see everybody scattered but still sometimes talk to their race...they'll talk to each other but they'll kind of talk to other people, but mostly to each other.*

Krista believes that if she was a black girl, other black children would talk to her more and would hang out with her more. She, like Samantha, states that black children



segregate themselves. When she is asked how her life would be different as a black girl, she responds:

*Krista: I think that black people at school group more with other black people and not necessarily with white people most of the time. My circle of friends, it doesn't really matter, but I don't know. I think I would probably be drawn more to hang out with people that I am similar to, and that I have shared personality with.*

In these excerpts we learn that white middle school children see having a different life to mean different behaviors based on race. And their ideas of black behavior are negative ones. Also, their ideas of negative black behavior are the opposite of white behavior. In these examples we have also seen forms of “equality talk” that follow the ideas of color-blind ideology (we may be different but we are equal). I say this because of the way some of the respondents attempted to make less racially charged comments by including statements like, “I’m not racist but...”

Respondents who did not believe their life would be different if they were black explained it using the ideas of color-blind ideology, stating that race was no different than general physical attributes like freckles and different hair. The importance of race in one’s life experience was downplayed which is another display of Bonilla Silva’s minimization of racism framework. For these children, life as a black person or a white person, were one in the same. The following excerpts illustrate this.

Kerri (white girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) shares a statement where she equates being a different race to being different like having buck teeth, face covered in freckles, or frizzy hair, people don’t care about others being different because, “they really see what’s on the inside.” Jeffrey

(white boy 7<sup>th</sup> grade) and Reese (white boy 7<sup>th</sup> grade) also shared the sentiment that all children are equal. Marney (white girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) states:

*Marney: I mean, because I think all people, all races are equal and I don't think anybody should be treated differently just because of their background or anything, so I don't think it really matters what race you are.*

***“As a black kid, people wouldn't treat me different...”***

The following excerpts highlight the way in which many of the white middle school children used “equality talk” to explain how race didn't change the kind of treatment one receives. Once again, illustrations of color-blind ideology (we may be different but we're equal), in one form or another, were presented by respondents. For them race no longer mattered, all races were equal.

Katie (white girl 7<sup>th</sup> grade), Candace (white girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade), and Mona (white girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) share this sentiment; race doesn't matter now. When asked if she would be treated differently, Mona states:

*Mona: Um, no, because everybody at my school...they're a family, and then like everyone else is a big family, so you know, the black people get treated like part of my family.*

Dante (White boy, 6<sup>th</sup> grade) states that if he were to become a black boy he would not be different and he would not experience different treatment from other children or teachers. He does state that his future might be different because there could be racist people that would prevent him from getting a job, but this is something he believes is not fair.

*In response to being asked if his future would be the same:*

*Dante: Uh, it might be. Sometimes there are like people out there who don't really like...who are racist and they wouldn't let me get some jobs but that's not really very fair but that's [how]they think of it.*

*Interviewer: Okay, so you might experience some of that.*

*Dante: Yeah.*

Although Dante is aware that he may experience negative consequences in the future for being black, he also says this is not fair. Overall, we get a sense that Dante is using color-blind ideology in his discourse. He doesn't believe his life would be different as a black person and he supports this statement by stating, "none of my friends are really opposed to races," yet he can still acknowledge the possibility of inequality in the future but with an emphasis on the individual racist who isn't being fair.

The following excerpts highlight the responses where white children found that they *would* experience different treatment as black people in the future. They specifically pointed out experiencing obstacles when it came to occupation solely based on their race.

White children were asked if they would experience different treatment, especially in their future, some acknowledged possible disadvantage because they were black. Most of these children had stated that their lives would be different if they were black children and also expressed that they would experience different treatment if they were black. These kids had some understanding of discrimination that still happens, especially when it came to future employment. Both Kamry (white girl 8<sup>th</sup> grade) and Reese (white boy 7<sup>th</sup> grade) state that they have heard that there is still prejudice and discrimination. When asked if her career would be different if she was black, Jamie (white girl 8<sup>th</sup> grade) states:

*Jamie: I think I would have to work a little harder. I think that's how it is now a days. Like black people have to work harder just to get in the door.*

Finally, Krista (white girl 8th grade) goes one step further to acknowledge the advantages of being white. When asked if she thinks her future would be the same [if white or black] she directly states no, and goes on to say why:

*Krista: I think because I'm a white person that maybe I have a better chance...If people just look at your color...I know its not legal, but maybe I have a better chance to get into things than if I'm black. And that I've never had a situation like that, but that's what my mom says. My teachers say that...that sometimes...Like I was talking to them because I had to do high school stuff...that it's not always fair, but sometimes that's the way it is.*

This is an interesting remark. She has come to learn that she has advantage for being white (from the adults in her life) and although it isn't fair, that's just the way it is. Once again we see the minimization of racism framework.

The use of color-blind ideology elements are frequently used by white middle school children. While some use the naturalizing racial matters framework to naturalize self segregation, other white respondents used color-blind ideology ideals to acknowledge the possibility of discrimination but find it as an act of unfair individuals. Even when they acknowledge their own privilege as a white person they state that's how it is and therefore neutralize the racial hierarchy.

#### *Non-White Middle School Children*

After being asked what their life would be like if an alien came and changed their race to white, more than half of the non-white respondents (Eleven of fourteen or 78%) state that if they were to turn white over night their life *would* be different. While less than a quarter of the non-white respondents (three of fourteen or 21%) stated that their life *would not* be different.

They were then asked if they would *experience* different treatment if their race changed to white. Although a majority of the non-white sample had previously stated that their life would be different if they were to turn white, a majority of them (nine of fourteen or 64%) stated that they would not experience different treatment as a white person, leaving only four of the non-white respondents stating that they would experience different treatment. Interestingly, six non-white respondents who at first stated they would not experience different treatment later go on to *indirectly* describe forms of “different treatment” if they were to become white. When we combine both groups of respondents (directly and indirectly stating that they would experience different treatment), most non-white respondents (10 of 14 or 71%) believe they would be treated differently if they were white.

In the following sections I elaborate the various ways these non-white middle school children explain what it means to have a different life as a white person and what it means to experience different treatment as a white person.

***“Life as a white kid is different...”***

Almost all of the non-white respondents described how whites and blacks are different when explaining what life would be like if they were white. Tyrone (Black boy 6<sup>th</sup> grade) states that if he was white, things would be different and more specifically boring, because he likes being black. He goes on to say that if he were to turn white he would just try to “act black.” From here he attempts to describe how he would do this; dressing and acting differently (“baggy jeans, clean shoes, clean shirts...”). Although he states that it is different

to be black and white, he also states that there would not be different treatment by others and that his future would not be different.

*Interviewer: You said that you would want to act black? What does that mean?*

*Tyrone: Um...I don't know.*

*Interviewer: Let's try it a different way. How do white kids act?*

*Tyrone: Prissy, sweet and shy.*

*Interviewer: Okay. How do black kids act the same or different?*

*Tyrone: Different.*

*Interviewer: In what way?*

*Tyrone: They're prissy sometimes and shy sometimes and loud.*

Although Tyrone states that being black and being white is different in how one acts and how one dresses, he struggles or lacks the ability to explain how this is so. Cassie (Black girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) also states that being white is different. But she states that there would not be differential treatment by friends or teachers and that her future would not be different.

Although she states that she likes being African-American she believes that if she were white she would have to celebrate different holidays and that her physical appearance would be different. She presents the physical changes in being white, as something positive, although she then contradicts this with the assertion of racial pride.

*Interviewer: If you woke up tomorrow morning white, how would your life be different?*

*Cassie: I wouldn't be...I wouldn't be black. I wouldn't be able to [inaudible]. I guess that would be okay. I would be able to have long hair. All the way down to my back. And I wouldn't have braids in my hair. I like being an African-American [inaudible]. I would have to celebrate*

*Hanukkah [inaudible]. And I wouldn't be able to celebrate Black History Month. I wouldn't be able to celebrate Martin Luther King.*

Deb (Asian Indian girl, 6<sup>th</sup> grade) states that she would be blonde and that she would talk different. Kay (Black girl, 7<sup>th</sup> grade) states that if she were to become a white girl she would have less sense. Lana (Biracial girl, 6<sup>th</sup> grade) seems to have a slightly deeper understanding of how it would be different to be black and white. She states that as a black person you have to be more concerned with receiving different treatment and that there is a different future for you as a black person.

*In response to the question, how would you be different inside?:*

*Lana: I would have different thoughts about yourself and how Black people are treated and so you would think about different stuff.*

*Interviewer: So do you think Black people are treated differently?*

*Lana: Yeah*

*Interviewer: and so then Black kids have to think about that stuff more often than white kids do?*

*Lana: Yeah.*

In comparing non-white middle school children responses to that of whites discussed earlier, we see that both white and non-white children equate “life being different” to a certain way of being and behaving. But, compared to the responses given by white children about what it would be like to be black, it appears that non-white children are less likely to use negative stereotypical ideas of what it means to be white. Non-white children also appear to be more concerned about what they would “lose” if they had to become white.

***“As a white kid people would treat me different...”***

As previously stated, some non-white respondents seemed to experience a contradiction when answering the alien race change question. While a majority of them stated their life would be different if they became white, only a few of them went on to state that they would also experience different treatment. The following statements illustrate the contradiction of how non-white respondents first stated they would not experience different treatment but then go on to share *real* examples of how their experience would be different if they were to become white.

Lorenzo (Latino boy 6<sup>th</sup> grade) at first states that life would be different as a white person. When asked if he would experience different treatment he denies it and says his friends would probably not change and that he would not be treated differently by teachers. But, Lorenzo also shares that by not being white he would be excluded because he doesn't share the same “history” as whites.

*In response to the question about how his life would be different:*

*Lorenzo: Um, sometimes, like, um, if you're left out cuz I'm not white and I don't have the same history as them.*

*He goes on to say:*

*Lorenzo: Like, um, they like music. I don't know why white people like music so much. I hate music. And like (inaudible) cuz they start liking me to do something and probably have the same history so I'd be like saying more than I already do.*

In making the statement above, Lorenzo is expressing that he would experience different treatment if he was a white person. As a Latino kid he feels excluded but if he were white he would be accepted by other white children because he would have the same history



as them. And in being able to relate he would have the opportunity to participate more with the other children.

Deirdre, Isabel, Jackie, and Cynthia also show this contradiction. They start by telling us that they would not experience different treatment as white girls, but then they contradict this, by going on and describing that they would experience differences in their friendships if they were to change their race.

Deirdre (Black girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) states that there is a difference in being white and black but that she would not experience different treatment by teachers or that her future would be different. But, she does state that she would lose all of her black friends if she were to become a white girl.

*Deirdre: I'd probably lose all of my...my friends...I'd probably lose about half of my friends.*

*Interviewer: You'd lose about half of your friends. And why is that?*

*Deirdre: Because [coughs] because most of them...*

*Interviewer: Would you lose most of your white friends or your black friends?*

*Deirdre: My black friends...*

Jackie (Black girl 8<sup>th</sup> grade) states that there is a difference in being black and white but that she would not experience different treatment by teachers and that her future would not be different. But, she does state that she would not have the same friends and that the racial makeup of her friends would have to change if she were to become a white girl.

*After stating she would not have the same friends, she was asked how her friends would change.*

*Jackie: They would probably change race, because that's how it is at my school. Like, people usually, I guess, are friends with their race. And um...*

*Interviewer: And do you think the kids in your school would treat you any differently?*

*Jackie: If I were white? I don't think so, because no one really treats people different because of their race. They might not be as close with you or something, as they were before, but they wouldn't be mean to you or something like that.*

Jackie claims that she would not receive different treatment if she was white because no one is treated differently based on their race but we see that there really is different treatment because “they might not be as close with you...”

The non-white sample who did not respond with contradictions, directly stated that their life *would* be different and that they *would* experience different treatment. Joleesa (Black girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) believed that she would be different from what she used to be and that kids would treat her differently because, “they’re so used to me being black.” She goes on to say that people might stop hanging around her and this would make her think of herself as different. Deb (Asian Indian girl 6<sup>th</sup> grade) believes that turning white would mean having to hang out with mostly white people and having other kids treat her differently. Aside from having “blonde hair” she would also talk differently.

When responding to the question of different treatment if their race changed, both Joleesa (Black girl, 6<sup>th</sup> grade) and Kay (Black girl, 7<sup>th</sup> grade) believe that their future would be different if they were to become white girls. Both girls state that they would no longer be singers. Kay even states that she would then want to be a nurse or a psychologist if she was

white. Lana (Biracial girl, 6<sup>th</sup> grade) states occupational limitations due to being black. The following excerpt illustrates Lana's response about how her future would be different:

*Interviewer: Do you think your future would be any different if you were black?*

*Lana: Um, kind of because even though Blacks are equal as whites now some Black people can't get into the same jobs as higher white people because there's never been a Black president and people have tried to run so like there's still, you have a better chance if you're Black being working at McDonalds then working at a really high, expensive place.*

*Interviewer: So what do you think it is that makes it harder for Black people to get into like higher paying jobs?*

*Lana: Because they're really outgoing like something that they say they don't care about but they say, they just, um, who they make fun of, they just make fun of people because they wanna be cool.*

It is interesting to see that in her statement Lana acknowledges the differences in job attainment between whites and blacks. When she attempts to explain why, she makes statements like, "they're [blacks] really outgoing...they don't care [what] they say..." This appears to be a form of "cultural" explanation for the reason that blacks do not attain the same jobs as whites, which Bonilla-Silva finds as a form of black culture blame that whites use when trying to justify inequality.

After analyzing the responses of non-white children we see that unlike white respondents who shared "equality talk" as evidence of perpetuating color-blind ideology, the contradictions in non-white respondents may be explained by the more subtle influence color-blind ideology has on their understanding of race. Color-blind ideology has us believe that although we are different we are all treated equal. When it comes to non-white children, this ideology is contradicted by the children's own experience as children of color and therefore their awareness of a different life and treatment if they were to become white. Non-

white respondents are aware of the mainstream racial ideology that dictates to us that “we are different but equal” but these children may live an experience that most likely contradicts this ideology on a day-to day basis (through their own experience or the experiences they hear or see from other family members) This is why they state they wouldn’t experience different treatment if they were white but then they describe experiences that *are* forms of different treatment and a different experience based on race (i.e. claiming no different treatment *but* I would lose my friends, some friends might not be close to me, etc).

It is also worthy to note how some children placed a form of value on their own culture, which we can see when these children state that they either wouldn’t want to be white or when sharing what they would no longer be able to do if they were no longer children of color. Some of the non-white respondents also expressed “positive” ideas of becoming white. Lorenzo would no longer feel a sense of exclusion because he would now have a shared history with other whites. Cassie expressed the benefits of being able to have long hair down to her back (her statement most likely being influenced by the biased American ideas of beauty that are expressed through media and toys for girls). Both Kay and Joleesa believe their future careers would change, but Kay goes on to state that she would no longer be a singer but instead a nurse or a psychologist if she was white. She acknowledges that as a white person there are different occupation opportunities. Along the lines of future occupation, Lana shares that blacks experience occupation limitations and whites don’t have to worry about things like this, another benefit to being white.

These findings although intriguing, are not surprising. Bonilla-Silva’s (2001) research has shown that color-blind ideology is not just maintained by whites but also by the

compliance of people of color. And in being our current mainstream racial ideology, it is disseminated to everyone and therefore internalized by all (at varying degrees). Non-white middle school children, at least in this sample, are more aware of the different treatment one experiences based on race and are also more aware of the “perks” of being white. Even more fascinating are examples of children of color using color-blind ideology frameworks to explain the inequality they see. Although Lana points out the inequality blacks face in the job market, she uses a form of black culture blame to explain it, which Bonilla-Silva has found whites use when explaining/justifying racial inequality.

In this sample, non-white middle school children respond to interviewers with a level of understanding the ideas of color-blind ideology, and that is why in their responses they acknowledge that life would be different as white children but they don’t state that they would now experience different treatment just because they were white. Although these children can express this color-blind ideology in their discourse, most can not ignore their actual experience as a racialized being. This is why although they at first state “no different treatment” they (indirectly at times) describe actual different treatment due to the race change. These children, like white children, are making color-blind ideology comments but their experience as people of color has shown to contradict color-blind ideals.

It will be interesting to see how these respondents will handle the continuing contradiction between ideology and experience in their futures. How will they be able to explain to themselves their own experience? If they are to follow white’s use of Bonilla-Silva’s color-blind ideology frameworks, they too will justify the (possible) negative experiences that come along with being a person of color. Instead of becoming aware of the

structural forms of racism, they will use individual blame and not challenge the status quo or their unjust position in the racial hierarchy.

### **Discussion**

In this study, I have been interested in the way the dominant U.S. color-blind ideology is perpetuated at a micro level and what role stereotypes play in the reproduction of color-blind ideology. Using data from interviews with 44 middle school children, I have examined the perspectives of middle school children on race and race relations in order to better understand their views and assumptions on race and how this may be linked to color-blind ideology. In analyzing their responses I aimed to better understand how white and non-white children understand their experience with race in their social worlds.

Both Lewis (2003) and Stoughton and Sivertson (2005) state that in order for us to get a better understanding of how racial ideology is produced and reproduced we must examine the experience of youth at the interaction level because it is in their social settings that they learn and live racial ideologies – through their discourse, their interactions with others and in what they observe. That is why for this project we attempted to examine how middle school children understood and talked about race and racism in their own settings- school, after school programs and local YMCA's. In doing so, we got a better understanding of how both white and non-white children spoke of their experiences (or lack thereof) with issues of race and racism and what kind of assumptions they were making that integrated them within color-blind ideology.

In gathering data based on the interviews with middle school respondents, I believe this study has placed us in the right direction and is a step closer in allowing us to understand

how racism is perpetuated, experienced and internalized. More specifically, in reference to Bonilla-Silva's concept of color-blind ideology, we see how children are already in the process of learning and applying the frameworks of this ideology. With a lack of adult intervention on how to understand their own interactions and encounters with issues of race, these novice social actors are left to use the limited knowledge they have and possibly imitate what is around them, instead of learning to critically examine their surroundings.

Before discussing the patterns found in this analysis, it is critical to acknowledge the influence of interviewer demographics on the respondent. While I have discussed the research teams' attempts at overcoming general limitations that occur when interviewing a special population, like children, I can not ignore the effect of race of interviewer on respondents and therefore its overall effect on the quality of the data. Previous literature has found the demographic characteristics of interviewer to effect survey and interview data. Issues of racial deference and social desirability can alter the information shared by respondents; with respondents modifying their responses based on the gender and/or race of interviewer (Anderson, Silver, and Abramson, 1988; Davis, 1997; Schaeffer, 1980; Krysan and Couper, 2003). Research has also shown that respondents are more open and willing to share their thoughts and opinions with a researcher or interviewer of the same race (Krysan and Couper, 2003; Royster, 2003). Going beyond the issue of methodology, even research that examines the relationship between psychologist and client find that black clients are less likely to open up to their white psychologist and offer "rich" information compared to same race psychologist and client interactions (Thompson Sanders, Bazile, and Akbar, 2004). It is

found that non-whites are less likely to verbalize their experience in detail when talking to a psychologist of a different race (Qureshi, 2007).

For this study, both white and non-white respondents encountered a novel question, yet when examining the data white children provided more “rich” data than non-white children. While someone may argue that this means that non-white children are less aware of the differences between whites and blacks, I would argue that the lack of “rich” data was influenced by the mismatch of race of interviewer and respondents. Non-white respondents were most likely uncomfortable when talking to white interviewers than were white respondents. White respondents were interviewed by white interviewers and probably perceived the interaction to be more of a comfortable space to share their ideas to the alien race change question.

In the following paragraphs I will describe how both white and non-white children discussed race, the types of stereotypical assumptions they made about being another race, and how their responses are linked to the perpetuation of color-blind ideology. After analyzing the interview responses to the question: “If an alien were to come into your room late one night, while you were asleep, and change your race, make you white (or black), how would you be different? Friends? Other kids treat you? Teachers? Future?” I found the middle school children in this sample to use equality rhetoric based on color-blind ideology but in ways that end up justifying racial inequality. The interviews conducted shed light on how middle school children even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may reproduce/perpetuate racist ideologies.



What is important here is that the equality rhetoric these children used, is linked to the color-blind framework Bonilla-Silva describes in his research as reinforcing and perpetuating racial inequality. While many of the respondents shared ideas of race no longer mattering or they naturalized racial inequality (i.e. it's unfair, but that's just the way it is) the larger implications of such thinking cannot be ignored and will therefore be discussed in this section.

*Equality Talk: Race doesn't matter*

My analysis shows that many white middle school children interviewed used “equality talk” when describing what their life would be like if they were to become black and if they would experience different treatment as black people. When stating that life would not be different, these respondents tended to state that it was because race no longer mattered and that all races were equal. One girl (Kerri) even goes on to equate race with general physical features like having buck teeth, freckles or frizzy hair, and that people don't care about all of these things because it's the inside that counts.

Although most non-white respondents directly state that life would be different if they were to become white children, many of them at first do not think this would lead to experiencing different treatment based on race. But, when describing their own experience most non-white respondents did in fact believe they would experience different treatment once they became white children. Although they may begin by claiming the idea of, “we're all equal,” overall they acknowledge the pro's and con's of being white and the different treatment they would receive.

What is important to see in these findings is that both white and non-white respondents express the idea that different treatment based on race doesn't occur. I know most scholars won't find it surprising that these middle school children are expressing equality ideals, especially since more than ever before U.S. society pushes the belief that as U.S. citizens we value diversity and that differences do not equal difference in treatment. But it is critical to understand the consequences of such thinking. Issues of race and race relations affect both white and non-white people. What will happen as these middle school children get older and start to see first hand the implications of race?

For whites, having grown up with color-blind ideology and the ideas that race no longer matters because we're all equal, they may struggle to explain the drastic social issues present in the U.S. How will they come to explain the rising rates of poverty, incarceration, school drop-out rates, and unemployment being experienced by a disproportionate number of black and Latinos? It is likely that in growing up with color-blind ideology they will lack an understanding of the structural inequalities that people of color experience in the U.S and may fall back (as we have partly seen in my analysis as already happening) on some of the color-blind ideology frameworks conceptualized by Bonilla-Silva. Many of these white respondents, assuming that race no longer matters and believing that we all experience the same treatment (and therefore opportunities, access to resources, etc) will be tempted to use individual blame and/or use forms of cultural blame to explain the social inequities experienced by people in the U.S. If we link color-blind ideology to our highly valued idea of individualism, many of these respondents will wrongfully believe that those in poverty,

unemployment, lack of education, etc are just not working hard enough, aren't really trying to get ahead because if they were *really* trying, they would be achieving the American dream.

For the children of color in this analysis, they too will struggle to explain what they see in their social world. As we can already see from the data in this study, these children have also learned the ideas of color-blind ideology and express that being a different race would not lead to different treatment. But from the responses already shared, we know that these children will and most likely are already experiencing different treatment because of their race. Therefore, contradicting U.S. color-blind ideology ideals. In believing that race no longer matters, these children will find themselves struggling to explain their future experiences. One way of explaining their experience is by also doing individual blame. As color-blind ideals and other values like individualism continue to influence our way of thinking, many of these respondents will lack the critical social tools to deconstruct the various processes of racial inequality and in being unable to understand and deconstruct such processes, they will only continue to play a role in the reproduction of inequality.

*Equality Talk: Naturalizing racial matters*

Not all respondents believed race didn't matter. In fact, some of the respondents did believe that life would be different and that could possibly lead to different treatment. During the interviews, some children acknowledged the discrimination one would face as a black adult. In describing what life would be like in the future as black people, some white children made statements about having to work a little harder just to get in the door because they were black, or encountering racist individuals that wouldn't let them get jobs, or at least hearing that prejudice and discrimination still exist. One girl, Krista (8<sup>th</sup> grade) even goes on to

acknowledge her own privilege as a white person by stating, “I think because I’m a white person that maybe I have a better chance...I know its not legal, but maybe I have a better chance to get into things than if I’m black...it’s not always fair, but sometimes that’s the way it is.” Her last statement is crucial, because it represents the overall tone in which these children used equality talk. Although they were capable of stating the setbacks one might experience as a black person, they said it with a sense of “it’s not always fair, but sometimes that’s the way it is.” In their eyes, racism is out of their own control, it is something larger and outside of them, it is individualized to the one unfair and racist person, and it isn’t fair but it just is. In doing so they are naturalizing the racial order and not challenging the status quo.

### *Stereotypes*

Both white and non-white children described how life would be different as another race and they related “life being different” to a person having different behavior. But it is intriguing to see how differently white and non-white children talked about what it would be like to be a different race.

Non-white children who believed their life would be different if they were white focused on general differences like hair color change or the change of having to lose things for no longer being a person of color - such as not being able to celebrate certain holidays. A couple of these respondents described “positive” stereotypes- such as wanting to be a nurse or psychologist instead of singers, which eludes to the awareness they may have of opportunity differences based on race. A few non-white respondents also shared what would be considered to be “negative” stereotypes- such as, white children being prissy or having

less sense. Statements like these are problematic. But it is important to keep in mind that statements like these have very different consequences than that of stereotypes about people of color (examples of which we will see below). In a society where dominant culture is white culture, white stereotypes have less power/force and overall influence on the treatment and experience of white people than the influence black stereotypes could have on people of color and their experience.

Overall the main concern for non-white respondents was what they would lose if they had to be white or what they could gain if they were white. Although they made some negative assumptions about whites (i.e. white girls having no sense; white children being prissy) for the most part, non-white children did not describe whites negatively but more so in regards to just being different. Of course, it is important to remember that the responses these children gave may have been limited due to the race of the interviewer. I would argue that if we would have had racial matching, there would have been more detailed and open responses from non-white respondents.

Unlike non-white respondents, several white children who stated that their life would be different if they were black described being different along the lines of negative behavior. They believed that if they were black they would be aggressive, bullies, interested in gangs, and people with bad attitudes. I believe that in being interviewed by white adults, these white children felt more comfortable opening up about their negative ideas of blacks. Although it is possible that their statements are based on personal observation, their need to generalize these ideas to all or most blacks is problematic. While non-white respondents may have also shared generalized statements about white people, I once again point to the difference in

consequences when it comes to the use of stereotypes. What these white respondents express in these statements are also mainstream stereotypes used against people of color that have real life consequences in interactions, employment and access to resources, while white stereotypes do not.

One incident that should be explained is that of Lana, a biracial girl, and her comment on why blacks have trouble obtaining higher paying jobs like whites do. Lana shared that she knew blacks would experience a tougher time getting a job than whites, specifically higher paying jobs. Her explanation for this was a form of “culture blame” because she states that black people, “are outgoing, they don’t care what they say, they just make fun of people because they want to be cool.” In her mind, it is a black cultural problem that will prevent blacks from achieving higher paying jobs not an issue of institutional racism, for example. Such a statement is problematic. One possible explanation for her statement is the influence of her social class. Like most black respondents in this study, Lana is middle class and it is possible that in being interviewed by a white, middle class, female interviewer, Lana felt the need to use what is known as “distancing” (Snow and Anderson, 1987) or “defensive othering” (Schwalbe, et al., 2000) in her remarks. While the work of Bonilla-Silva (2001) also finds some black respondents to express culture blame for the social location of blacks, Lana in this study could be trying to obtain the acceptance of the interviewer by distancing herself from a negative black stereotype. Although this is evidence of the influence of social class, this is not enough to make a significant conclusion about most of the non-white respondents. Instead, I hope to take on this issue in future studies.

Like stated before, white children also explained the black experience as a need for self-segregation, stating that they have seen black children only hanging out with their own race and preferring it to be that way. A few non-white children also expressed this sentiment of self-segregation but not in such a direct way. Non-white children stated that in becoming white they would have to lose black friends and therefore also expressing self-segregation, by insinuating that white children would hang out with other whites.

In discussing the stereotypes shared by both white and non-white children, I am not trying to put blame or racist labels on either set of respondents, but instead hope to share this data in order to have others see that issues of race and racism are important and influential on all – whites and people of color. And therefore we are all implicated in reproducing color-blind ideology.

To sum up, the children in this study have found themselves in an awkward situation. Aside from having to answer a novel question about aliens changing the respondent's race, these children have answered in ways that show race is an important influence in their social worlds. Although their knowledge of race and racism may not be as sophisticated and at times one can see their struggle to explain what they are trying to say, we can not ignore the stereotypes shared about different races or the equality statements that present them as color-blind but as I have shared, are forms of reinforcing racism. Keeping in mind the effect of interviewer, the data does imply that some of these middle school children are aware of making “proper” self-presentations with the interviewer and are being influenced by their schools, families, and other social agents to make claims of acceptance, equality and the

value of diversity. While this may be a sign of progressive thinking, one may be more likely to see these dialogues as developing color-blind ideologies among youth.

Other respondents were found to share negative stereotypes about their peers based on race, and this may be explained with the “open” interaction most of the white respondents experienced in being interviewed by white female graduate students. And it may also be plausible that these children are not as influenced by social agents promoting equality and diversity and instead are in social environments in which they are not taught to refrain from such thinking. Making direct explanations for these differences is not the role of this paper. Instead, it is to document the rhetoric used by middle school children as a starting point to further study the role of language in the reproduction of inequality.



## **Conclusion**

From previous research and the findings of this study, we see that children can use race when trying to explain their social worlds. Although their understanding is limited and may be found to be contradictory at times, we must not take away their active roles as social actors. Even though they are not yet adults, and are therefore not as politically savvy, it is clear from this study that middle school children are aware of differences among their peers. What we find though is that some children have been influenced by the norms of “proper” self-presentation and have been influenced by mainstream egalitarian ideals through various socialization agents and therefore express ideas of equality among races. While this can be a sign of progressive thinking in terms of equality for all, many of these children wanted to avoid looking racist in responses and that may explain their equality rhetoric. Yet, other children show no signs of holding back and sharing what they believe to be negative behavior traits of black people.

I do not find these different expressions on race to be set backs to this study. In fact, it is these differences in thinking that make it clear just how tricky U.S. racial ideologies can be and more specifically, color-blind ideology. This study can not get into the particulars of why some respondents did or did not express clear and detailed expressions of color-blind ideology but, as shown in the discussion section, this paper can attempt to give leads as to why some of the respondents expressed equality rhetoric while others shared negative stereotypes.

I believe this study adds to the work of other race scholars by not only interviewing a special population, children and more specifically middle school children, but by also

providing interview data to a unique question. These respondents have never had to answer a question where they had to envision what life would be like as another race and a different racial perspective. More importantly, research has shown that attitudes can influence a person's behavior (Feagin, 2000) and for these respondents it is possible that the statements they shared about people of another race may influence their behavior when interacting with people of a different race. In using the language shared in their interviews, these children are already reproducing the racial order and perpetuating racism (Myers, 2003). Future research on the language used by children should make sure to examine forms of race talk that Bonilla-Silva describes in his own research (2001). This study did not take into account detailed semantics during the transcribing process, but a future study should make note of rhetorical incoherences (hesitations, stuttering in speech, um's or uh's) as research has shown it can be used to soften the blows of racist comments.

As stated before, all of these children will find themselves trying to explain social inequalities in the U.S. and because of the influence of color-blind ideology they may find themselves using statements of "victim blame" when explaining the disproportionate number of people of color in poverty, unemployment and school drop out rates instead of problematizing the institutionalized inequalities that are directly affecting people of color and the working class.

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## **Appendix**

## Appendix: Detailed demographics for respondents

Name	Gender	Race	Grade	Age	SES	Interview Location
Marc	Male	African-American	6	12	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Tyrone	Male	African-American	6	11	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Samir	Male	Asian Indian	6	11	Middle class	Middle School
Lorenzo	Male	Latino (Mexican)	6	11	Working class	Middle School
Michael	Male	White	6	11	Middle class	YWCA
Eric	Male	White	6	12	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Brady	Male	White	6	12	Middle class	Middle School
Micah	Male	White	6	11	Middle class	Middle School
Max	Male	White	6	12	Unknown	Middle School
Dante	Male	White	6	11	Middle class	Middle School
Jason	Male	White	7	13	Working class	YWCA
Wayne	Male	White	7	13	Upper middle class	YWCA
Jack	Male	White	7	13	Working class	YWCA
Shawn	Male	White	7	13	Upper middle class	Middle School
Jeffrey	Male	White	7	12	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Reese	Male	White	7	12	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Marshall	Male	White	8	13	Upper middle class	YWCA
(n= 17)						
Cassie	Female	African-American	6	12	Working class	YWCA
Deirdre	Female	African-American	6	11	Lower middle class	YWCA
Joleesa	Female	African-American	6	11	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Isabel	Female	African-American	7	13	(Upper) Middle class	Girls' Club
Kay	Female	African-American	7	12	Middle class	Girls' Club
Jackie	Female	African-American	8	13	Upper middle class	Girls' Club
Lola	Female	Bi-racial (B/W)	6	12	Upper middle class	YWCA
Cynthia	Female	Bi-racial (B/W)	6	11	Middle class	Middle School
Lana	Female	Bi-racial	6		unknown	Middle School
Deb	Female	Asian Indian	6	11	Middle class	Girls' Club
Audrey	Female	White	6	12	Middle class	YWCA
Mona	Female	White	6	12	(Upper) Middle class	YWCA
Candace	Female	White	6	12	Middle class	YWCA
Marney	Female	White	6	12	Middle class	YWCA
Molly	Female	White	6	12	Middle class	Middle School
Samantha	Female	White	6	11	Middle class	R's Home
Kerri	Female	White	6	12	Upper middle class	Middle School
Eve	Female	White	6	11	Upper middle class	Middle School
Erica	Female	White	6	11	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Mallory	Female	White	7	13	Middle class	YWCA
Katie	Female	White	7	12	Middle class	Middle School
Alison	Female	White	7	12	Middle class	Middle School

Karlin	Female	White	8	13	Middle class	YWCA
Krista	Female	White	8	13	Middle class	YWCA
Kirsten	Female	White	8	13	(Upper) Middle class	Middle School
Kamry	Female	White	8	14	Upper middle class	R's Home
Jamie	Female	White	8	13	Working class	R's Home
(n= 27)						

**N=44**