

# Beyond Ethnicity: Applying Helms's White Racial Identity Development Model among White Youth

IJSSP  
44, 15/16

**78**

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Received 21 June 2024  
Accepted 29 April 2024  
Published 2 July 2024

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## Abstract

Research on racial identity among Youth of Color has expanded considerably in recent years, but a parallel examination of racial identity among white youth has not occurred, reiterating whiteness as normative. We applied Janet Helms's White Racial Identity Development (WRID) model among white U.S. youth (8-14 years old) to address this research gap. WRID centers racism and white supremacy, offering a framework to analyze white racial identity in the context of systemic inequity. Using longitudinal, qualitative analysis, we found age-related change over time, with some evidence of increasing resistance to racism. There was high participant variability, however, indicating that socio-cognitive abilities alone cannot predict anti-racist white identity development. We discuss implications for racial identity research and social justice-orientated developmental science.

**Keywords:** White racial identity, racial identity development, whiteness, white youth, qualitative research, early adolescence

## INTRODUCTION

Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and numerous other unarmed Black people at the



International Journal of  
Sociology and Social Policy  
Vol. 44 No. 15/16, 2024  
pp. 78-113  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
0144-333X

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hands of U.S. police, the ensuing public outcry has included demands for justice, and for the naming and dismantling of white supremacy. White supremacy refers to long-standing beliefs and practices that situate white people as normative, while Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) are minoritized and marginalized (Sue, 2006). Breaking down white supremacist inequities requires myriad changes, including an interrogation of whiteness and white racial identity (e.g., Frankenberg, 1988; Winant, 2004). Although research on racial and ethnic identity development among Youth of Youth of Color has seen a substantial and overdue expansion in past decades (Umana-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020; Yip, Douglass, & Sellers, 2014), a parallel examination of racial identity among white youth has not occurred, reiterating whiteness as normative and invisible (Helms, 2007; Rogers, 2019).

Silence with regard to whiteness in developmental science is not neutral. U.S. society has been shaped by centuries of policies and norms enshrining whiteness with advantage (e.g., Feagin & Ducey, 2019), and the field of psychology has a long history of privileging white scholars, participants, and perspectives (Dupree & Kraus, 2021; Guthrie, 1998; Roberts, Bareket-Shavit, Dollins, Goldie, & Mortenson, 2020). Examining how racial privilege and power shape the development of white youth acknowledges that race shapes the trajectories of *all* humans, not just those who experience racial oppression and marginalization (e.g., Rogers, Moffitt, & Foo, 2021; Spencer, 2017). Such an approach disrupts the normativity of whiteness in the research context. Furthermore, examining racial identity among white youth makes space to understand whether, how, and when they may also resist white supremacy.

The current study takes one step in this direction. Drawing on longitudinal interview data with white children and adolescents (age 8–14 years), we conduct a data-driven, hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis with the aim of adapting Janet Helms's (1984, 1990, 2020) White Racial Identity Development (WRID) model. We engage this model for two reasons: First, it focuses on racial identity specifically, meaning it centers whiteness in the U.S. context and not ethnic heritage. In doing so, it locates an anti-racist identity, rather than an "achieved" identity, as most adaptive; and second, its structure allows for an investigation of individual change over time. Although neither the WRID model nor the current research assumes that white racial identity develops as a by-product of maturation, the framework recognizes that personal and societal experiences can compel an individual toward shifts in racial identity—either progression or regression. By analyzing change in the racial identity of white youth, we can see the role age-related socio-cognitive development may play as children gain greater knowledge of racial inequity while being socialized into a society dominated by color-blind norms (e.g., Pauker, Apfelbaum, & Spitzer, 2015). To situate our analysis, we review literature on ethnic and racial identity

development and discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the WRID model and related research.

### **Ethnicity, Race, and Identity Development**

In the United States, ethnicity is typically defined by shared ancestry, customs, and traditions, whereas race is defined primarily by phenotypical traits, including skin color, hair texture, and facial features (Cokley, 2007). Yet, ethnicity is also *racialized*, with individuals categorized as white, regardless of ethnic heritage, experiencing systemic privileging in terms of power, status, and wealth (e.g., Winant, 2004). Conversely, African and Caribbean immigrants in the United States, for example, are racialized and experience discrimination "as if" they are Black, regardless of heritage (Waters, 1999). Recognizing the interrelated nature of ethnicity and race, developmental psychologists put forth the meta-construct of ethnic racial identity (ERI) to include racial *and* ethnic markers and experiences (Umana-Taylor et al., 2014). ERI refers to attitudes and beliefs about one's membership in an ethnic or racial group, as well as the process of exploring one's heritage and achieving a committed sense of self in relation to ethnicity and race (Williams et al., 2020). Among Youth of Color, the development of ERI is a normative milestone (Yip et al., 2014). Strong ERI can buffer the deleterious effects of racism and has been linked to adaptive psychosocial outcomes across minoritized ethnic and racial groups (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

Although the racialization of ethnicity occurs across groups, its meaning is distinct, as whiteness confers a privileged status. Nonetheless, ERI is often measured using the same tools for white youth and Youth of Color. The "universal" scales, such as the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999) and Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umana-Taylor, Yazed-jian, & Bamaca-Gomez, 2004), do not mention race, power, or oppression (Helms & Talleyrand, 1997). Instead, they draw on the seminal work of Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) to assess exploration and commitment—"feeling good, happy, and proud" (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014, p. 77)—in relation to one's ethnic group. Perhaps not surprisingly, white youth consistently score lower than Youth of Color on these universal ERI measures (Phinney, 1992; Rogers, Kiang, et al., 2021). This could indicate that ERI is of minimal (or relatively less) importance to white youth. It may also be that universal ERI measures do not adequately capture the ways in which white youth identify with and make meaning about race and their own whiteness. What does it mean to feel "committed" to being white in the context of a white

supremacist society? Mixed-methods research has found that scoring high on universal ERI measures can indicate explicitly racist beliefs, explicitly anti-racist beliefs, or a strong identification with ethnic heritage (Grossman & Charmaraman, 2009; Hughey, 2010). Unfortunately, universal ERI measures alone cannot differentiate between these divergent interpretations, making it very difficult to draw conclusions (or comparisons) about ethnic and racial identity among white youth.

Perhaps more critically, the universal approach to ERI makes it difficult to assess an anti-racist-oriented white identity (e.g., Helms, 2007). Understanding how white youth may come to see the inequitable ways in which power is afforded to their racial group and the harm white privilege can cause necessitates a race-specific approach. This argument is not new. Prior to the advent of the MEIM, racial identity theorists including Cross (1991), Helms (1984, 1990), and Sellers and colleagues (1998) developed group-specific racial identity models based on this premise. These foundational frameworks pushed back on scientific racism in psychology, which often situated race as a biological construct used as an explanatory variable to denigrate Black individuals (Yee, Fairchild, Weizmann, & Wyatt, 1993). In tandem with a model of Black racial identity, Helms (1984, 1990) put forth a theoretical model of white racial identity, naming racism as the system structuring the racial identity development process—for Black people and white people.

#### **HELMS' MODEL OF WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

The WRID model, despite early psychometric critique of its measurement tool (Behrens & Rowe, 1997; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994), remains highly relevant to research on white identity and provides an alternative to relying on universal models that conflate ethnicity and race. Centuries of racist policies, research, and societal expectations have situated white people as more human than BIPOC individuals (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017), making whiteness the baseline marker for humanity (Feagin & Ducey, 2019). For this reason, Helms contends that viewing white supremacy as "normal" while denying the importance of race is *itself* a racial identity. In fact, such color-blind ideology predominates among many white adults (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), who benefit from racism and do little to question or resist the structures making racial privilege possible. It is therefore not a question of *if* a given individual has a racial identity, but rather what that racial identity looks like and how it fits within our racially stratified society.

Initially a stage model, Helms (2007, 2017, 2020) shifted from stage-based language in later publications, largely in response to critique regarding the notion of linear development, as well as questions about whether individuals are really in a single stage at a time (e.g., Fasching-Varner, 2014; Spanierman & Soble, 2010). Helms (2020) now uses the language of "schemas," lenses through which a person views race and their racialized experiences, which

are neither mutually exclusive nor rigidly linear. The WRID model is made up of two phases, each of which contains three schemas (Figure 1) characterized by strategies, perspectives, and behaviors that either accommodate to norms of racial inequity (Phase 1) or resist the socialization into and participation in the racist status quo (Phase 2). Though the schemas are not mutually exclusive, the assumption remains that at a given time, a person is primarily within one phase, if not one schema, as the identity work required to engage the anti-racist Phase 2 schemas necessitates some degree of relinquishing the beliefs and behaviors characteristic of Phase 1.

In the three Phase 1 schemas, white individuals shift from willing or unintentional obliviousness about the role of race and the meaning of whiteness (Contact) to a confused state of grappling with the recognition of whiteness (Disintegration) to a conscious embracing of the inequitable status quo (Reintegration). In Phase 2, the individual may first adopt assimilationist views, recognizing the existence of racism and aiming to "help save" BIPOC individuals (Pseudo-independent), then begin engaging in a more active exploration of racism as systemic (Immersion/Emersion), and finally confront racism as a part of a multilayered system of intersectional oppression, while also feeling comfortable within their white identity (Autonomy).

Importantly, Helms (1990, 2020) contends that because of the structure of the racial hierarchy and normativity of whiteness, a white person may remain in a given schema indefinitely, unless prompted by societal events and/or interpersonal interactions to either progress forward or regress to earlier schemas. Thus, progression from Phase 1 to Phase 2 is not anticipated simply as a function of age. By examining among whom and under what circumstances movement across schemas *does* occur, we can gain knowledge of individual and contextual factors that prompt racial identity development among white youth.

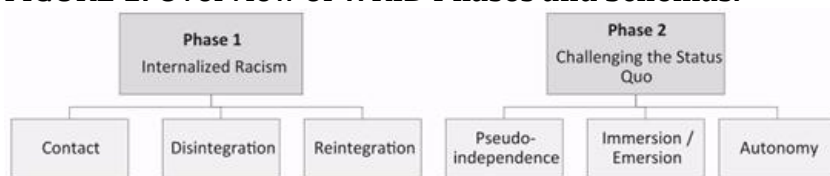
### **Racial Identity Development among White Youth**

Existing research using the WRID model has focused on emerging adult and adult samples. For example, one longitudinal study with white counseling graduate students found that, overall, students moved from Phase 1 to Phase 2 schemas after taking part in a semester-long course on power, privilege, and oppression (Dass-Brailsford, 2007). Early cross-sectional work found that students older than 20 years of age were more likely to endorse Phase 2 schemas than younger college students (Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994), suggesting that WRID may occur without specific intervention. Other studies have found great variation across

white college-aged participants, with higher endorsement of Phase 2 schemas linked to outcomes including less fear in response to racially charged situations (Siegel & Carter, 2014) and lower support for self-segregation from People of Color (Clauss-Ehlers & Carter, 2005).

To our knowledge, no scholars have applied this theoretical model of racial identity development prior to emerging adulthood. A primary concern when adapting such a model lies in its developmental appropriateness: Do young people, during middle childhood and early adolescence, have the socio-cognitive skills needed to comprehend the complex implications of racism and their own racial identities? By middle childhood (8-11 years), children generally identify with a racial group, while also showing racial constancy, or an awareness of race as a fixed characteristic (Byrd, 2012). During this period, children tend to think in concrete terms about race, gaining knowledge from peers, parents, teachers, and media about which groups are valued and devalued in society and where they fit in this structure (Williams et al., 2020).

FIGURE 1: Overview of WRID Phases and Schemas.



*Note.* This flowchart is adapted from the theoretical WRID model as described by Helms (2020). WRID, White racial identity development

Though research on racial meaning making in middle childhood is limited, there is evidence that by early adolescence, increased life experience and cognitive development allow for racial perspective taking (Quintana, 1998, 2008), and a critical engagement with racial stereotypes and expectations (Way, Hernandez, Rogers, & Hughes, 2013). During this period, some youth move beyond thinking about race in neutral terms, recognizing that individual experiences are situated in a societal context of racial inequity (Quintana, 2008). However, Quintana (2008) argued that white youth show lower levels of racial perspective taking than same age Youth of Color, in part because they are not prompted by experience to engage with race-relevant issues in the same way. That is, white privilege cocoons white children from the kinds of race encounters, discrimination, and racism that can prompt racial identity development, even prior to adolescence.

Research on white racial socialization echoes this, as most parents of white children either say nothing about race or express color-blind ideology (Chae, Rogers, & Yip, 2020; Hagerman, 2018; Perry, Skinner, & Abaied, 2019; Underhill, 2018). As white youth move from childhood to adolescence, they also become less willing to talk about race (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), and among youth who reported that their parents

and teachers avoided conversations about race, their own willingness to discuss race was lower than peers who received race-conscious socialization (Pauker et al., 2015). Color-blind messages are not neutral (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Colorblindness has been linked to increased racial biases and decreased recognition of overt racism (Apfel-baum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012). In other words, color-blind racial ideology upholds white supremacy, and the intergenerational socialization of this norm perpetuates stagnant white racial identity development (Helms, 2020).

Despite the pervasiveness of color-blindness, we know that white youth are not ignorant about race and racism. Qualitative work has shown that some white children and adolescents endorse color-blind ideology in one breath while pointing out inequitable treatment in the next (Hagerman, 2015; Rogers, Moffitt, & Foo, 2021; Way et al., 2013). Interest-ingly, a recent study with white adolescents in a "multicultural antibias course" (Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018, p. 749) found that a deepening knowledge of structural racism was coupled with greater introspection, empathy, and reflections on whiteness, similar to research with college students (Dass-Brailsford, 2007). Yet, other research with middle- to upper-class white high school seniors found an overall decrease in support for educational equity following a semester-long course on social justice, with many youth viewing privilege as zero sum (Seiders, 2008). These mixed findings underscore the need for greater research on racial identity development among white youth.

### **The Current Study**

The current analysis takes one step toward filling this gap in the racial identity literature and responds to a call for more qualitative research using Helms's theoretical model (Spanierman & Soble, 2010). Specifically, we are interested in the extent to which the WRID model (Helms, 1990, 2020) is meaningful for understanding the progression of white identity during middle childhood and early adolescence. To investigate this, we draw on longitudinal interview data with white youth, situating our analyses around the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent does the meaning making about race and white racial identity these youth engage in fit within the WRID schemas and phases?
- 2) What is the distribution of these youths' coded statements across WRID schemas and phases at Time 1 and Time 2? Are there age-related patterns in this distribution?

Although we do not have specific hypotheses, based on previous qualitative, race-focused research with white youth (Rogers, Moffitt, & Foo 2021), and taking into account the socio-cognitive abilities of youth in middle childhood to early adolescence (Quintana, 2008), we anticipate our participants' interviews will show evidence of greater endorsement of the Phase 1 schemas than Phase 2. We also anticipate, however, that this model will offer a meaningful organizational structure for making sense of any variation we do find, including across time points and age groups. Thus, we do not intend to offer a prescriptive model mapping out stages of white racial identity development. Instead, we investigate the ways in which our participants are engaging with their racial identities, drawing on the interviews themselves to explore trends in the data.

## **METHOD**

The data used in the current study were drawn from a larger research project examining self-perceptions and social identities across childhood and adolescence (see Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017 2021). Participants were recruited from two public elementary schools and one public middle school in an urban, predominantly low-income area in the western United States. These schools were selected due to their diverse student bodies, with a maximum of 40% of any one racial group. We could not gather individual information on participants' socioeconomic status, though at least 70% of students at each school received free or reduced-price lunch.

### **Participants and Procedure**

Students from grades 2 through 6 were invited to participate via information letters and parental consent forms. Students with parental consent were interviewed at Time 1 (T1) in the fall of 2013 to spring of 2014 and at Time 2 (T2) in the spring of 2016. A total of 242 youth took part in these interviews. There was notable attrition by T2, largely due to school transfers and study approval guidelines preventing the tracking of students to different schools. A total of 109 youth participated at both time points. Of those, 41 self-identified as white. We excluded four participants: two who identified as white at T1 and multiracial at T2 and were therefore asked a different set of questions, precluding longitudinal analyses; one who identified solely as Albanian and spoke about family and ethnicity without directly answering the interview questions; and a final child for whom the recording device malfunctioned, leading to unusable data. The final analytic sample included 37 white youth: 11 in middle childhood at T1 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 9.00$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) and 26 in early adolescence at T1 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 11-62$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ). There were 16 girls and 21 boys included in our final sample; each gender was represented evenly in each age group. Participants received a university-themed pencil and \$5 gift card at both T1 and T2.



## Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The interviews were conducted in a private room on school property and varied in length from 14 to 81 min ( $M = 39.43$ ,  $SD = 14.30$ ). All interviews were semi-structured and explored participants' meaning making on identity and subjective experiences (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017; Rogers, Moffitt, & Jones 2021). Each participant completed a card-sorting task, selecting cards that they felt applied to them with, "words we use to describe ourselves or other people" (including Asian/Black/Hispanic/white, boy/girl, son/daughter, student, athlete). All participants in our sample selected the "white" card at both T1 and T2 without being prompted by the interviewer, reflecting racial awareness and identification (Byrd, 2012; Williams et al., 2020).

Participants were asked to rank the perceived importance of each identity category for them personally and then discuss the importance of these identities and related experiences. In the current study, we focus on the race-related section of the interview. This semi-structured interview protocol was expanded at T2 to include a question about intersectional identities: "How important is being a white boy to you?" followed by two hypothetical questions: "How might things be different if you were a Black girl?" and "How might things be different if you were a Black boy?"

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We address our first research question by reviewing our data-driven codes and how they were situated within Helms's (1990, 2020) theoretical model. We then draw primarily on a quantification of our data to address the second research question, offering an overview of how participants' coded statements are distributed and an examination of change over time and age-related differences. Additionally, we use illustrative case studies to interpret our findings.

### WRID among White Children and Adolescents

Our first research question centered on the extent to which our participants' meaning making about race and their white racial identity fits within the WRID schemas and phases. To answer this, we turned to Helms's (1990, 2020) theoretical model. Rather than consolidating the 23 data-driven codes into broader, data-driven themes, as we would have in a fully inductive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014), we engaged in an iterative process of situating these codes within the WRID model (see Table 1) and framework for analysis. Nesting our codes within the schemas and phases of

Helms's (1990, 2020) theoretical model allowed us to code our data at the statement level, while situating our findings within an existing organizational and interpretive framework. Notably, the distribution of the 23 data-driven codes was not equal across schemas and phases. Instead, the first four schemas each contained between four and six codes, whereas the latter two contained three and one, respectively, giving an initial indication of our participants' predominant engagement with Phase 1 schemas.

*Evidence of Phase 1 schemas. Contact.* Across participants and time points, 49% ( $n = 417$ ) of the total 843 coded statements were grouped into one of the five data-driven codes nested within Contact, making it by far the most prevalent schema. One code in this schema was *Reference to ethnicity*. After identifying as "white" in the card-sorting task, an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade girl stated, "I'm actually a little bit Italian... My dad's like pretty Italian." Rather than interpreting this response as evidence of the overlap between race and ethnicity, by situating our data-driven codes within the WRID model, we can recognize the implications of engaging ethnicity *rather* than race. Helms (2020) describes this type of response as a conscious or unconscious strategy to avoid identifying as white. The participant's reference to *ethnic* identity in response to a question about her *racial* identity captures the avoidance central to the Contact schema, even if she did not deliberately intend to do so. In this way, the WRID model provides an interpretive lens, situating the socio-cultural relevance of participants' (non)engagement with race.

A key aspect of the Contact schema is a lack of conscious reflection on one's whiteness (Helms, 1990, 2020). Although this showed up in different ways, it was most directly captured by *Whiteness as unimportant*, the sole action-based, binary code in our codebook, comprised of instances in which participants chose "white" as the least important identity of those they were asked to consider. Overall, 82% of participants did so, indicating a consistent minimization of whiteness as a relevant part of their identity. By examining the breadth of statements surrounding this choice, we could see that the meaning making participants engaged in varied widely.

For instance, when asked to reflect on what being white means, many participants downplayed the importance of race and did not recognize racialization. One 4<sup>th</sup>-grade boy noted, "I think being white means that it's just the way you were made." He then added, "If you weren't made like this nothing would change at all; you'd still have your same personality, right, it's just the color of your skin." The first sentence in this excerpt was coded as *Whiteness as normal*, while the second was coded as *Color-blindness*. This boy explains that whiteness is "just" about skin color and that being white has little to do with personality

or life experiences. Although his phrasing may differ from the semantics employed by white adults, the message is similar: Race does not matter, we should focus on the individual. This type of statement reflects both the logic of late childhood and socialization into a society in which whiteness is normative and color-blind ideology prevails. If race does not matter, then inequity cannot be understood as a product of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). This child is not voicing these connections, and we are not arguing that he is even aware of them. By nesting this coded statement into the Contact schema, however, we can recognize that, without a push to move beyond this kind of reasoning, this child may develop into an adult engaging the same type of system-accommodating racial logic.

Some participants' color-blind statements were also coupled with *No recognition of different treatment*, for instance, in this exchange with a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade boy:

*I: Right, so what are some of the good things about being white?*

*P: Um I don't know, everybody is pretty much treated the same these days, so I don't think that there is anyone who benefits pretty much so. I think it really - there aren't any good things about being any color, like it's just the same.*

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Many participants answered this interview question in a similar way, using color-blind logic to claim all races are treated equally. This boy's phrasing, like a number of his peers, indicates that his interpretation of something "good" would mean something that creates "benefits" for his racial group. Although he is claiming there are *no* privileges to "being any color," his equation of "good" with racially stratified "benefits" is troubling. Helms's (1990, 2020) theoretical model can help us understand and situate the potential impact of this type of Contact reasoning, which reflects not only racial naivete but also an internal-ization of a racist status quo.

*Disintegration.* Five data-driven codes were situated within the Disintegration schema, though it accounted for only 15% ( $n = 124$ ) of coded statements overall (compared with 49% in Contact). When nesting our data-driven codes, we returned to Helms's (1990, 2020) theory many times to adequately parse what fell into *Disintegration*, which is marked primarily by the nebulous emotions of guilt, shame, confusion, and ambiguity about one's whiteness. In our data, this sense of ambiguity and confusion seemed to be captured in

children's references to racism as something of the past, or something that may exist elsewhere, but not in their present reality. For instance, after a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade boy said he had never seen kids treated unfairly because of their race, he went on to explain, "Because that time is really far behind us and [coughs] and it doesn't - you know it just doesn't really matter." Statements like this, which were coded as *Racism as historical or elsewhere* were often coupled with statements coded into *Shame and guilt about (historical) racism*. For example, a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade girl who had just claimed there was nothing hard about being white added:

*P: Unless like in 4<sup>th</sup> grade we were learning about slaves and I felt kind of weird like during that time when we were learning about it; it was kind of like, uh oh, what did we do, what are we learning?*

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She went on to say that it was hard to talk about, "Because it's like, like you feel bad sort of and like it's so long ago and it's different now so it's like hard to like, to like get why and... but yeah..." Her reasoning reflects that of most statements included in this code—she felt bad while learning about slavery because she felt implicated in this history as a white person, yet her focus remains on herself and her own unease. As Helms (2020) notes:

*By feeling guilty about a situation that they cannot change, living in a racist society, people using Disintegration convince themselves that they have no responsibility for racism and, thus, they seek ways to restore their good feelings about themselves as White people without doing anything beyond feeling guilty (p. 43).*

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Beyond Ethnicity:  
Applying Helms's  
White Racial  
Identity  
Development  
Model among  
White Youth

**89**

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Situating racism solely as historical may be one way to remain convinced that one has no responsibility beyond occasional feelings of guilt. Rather than drawing the links between past and present, participants with statements in these codes distanced themselves from racism by framing it as irrelevant to their lives today. Among children who made such claims, the WRID model can help us recognize how they are making sense of what they learn from parents, teachers, and other sources of socialization. While many participants mentioned learning about historical racism, specifically with references to slavery, Jim Crow era racial segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement, few discussed learning about its present forms, and none drew historical through lines. This lacuna is telling regarding what is taught and what white youth internalize.

Another strategy included in the Disintegration schema is *Active denial of whiteness as important*. This code differed from *Whiteness as normal* in the Contact schema in that participants

were recognizing their own whiteness while simultaneously arguing that it does not affect them. For example, after explaining that she does not "really see a difference between skin colors," a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade girl went on to explain that this is important because "then people won't think that I'm like racist or something like that." This explanation offers a stark example of a strategy used to mitigate being perceived as a "bad white person" in a system understood in interpersonal terms. More explicit than most, this girl explained that her color-blindness is not a product of obliviousness, but is intentional and self-protective.

*Reintegration.* The least prevalent Phase 1 schema, 8% ( $n = 66$ ) of all coded statements were included in one of the four data-driven codes in Reintegration. This may reflect the nature of our data; we only coded verbal statements made during our interviews, rather than behavioral responses or in vivo interactions. As Helms (2020) explains, "White superiority can be expressed overtly or covertly" and failing to challenge others' racist acts is an example of "covert Reintegration" (p. 48). Thus, it is possible that more participants were engaging Reintegration than what we captured in our text-based coding of interview data.

Despite this limitation, we did find examples of the more overt side of this schema. Among the data-driven codes, the most common was *Descriptions of "reverse racism,"* in which participants explained how white people are the ones being disadvantaged in school or in U.S. society. For instance, when a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade boy was asked why he selected "white" as the least important identity during the card-sorting task, he first explained, "Because... people kind of use that in bullying," before then arguing that being white in fact matters a lot:

*P: Um, because um I kind of - cuz a lot of the troublemakers who are Black, um they - they act kind to uh they act nice to the people, even to the people that are like, have the same color, even if they're not friends and not um like in their group of troublemakers and stuff, but then whenever they uh—but with the other, with some of the white people they just um are really, are really mean.*

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With this explanation, he touches on the attitudes and perspectives characteristic of Disintegration, including anger toward BIPOC individuals and the "belief that Whites are no more racist than other groups" (Helms, 2020, p. 49). That this boy feels excluded or even bullied by classmates is not acceptable, but the ways in

which he racializes and makes sense of his experience also perpetuate harm. Helms (2020) describes this schema as stable and widespread because it reflects the racial inequity shaping daily life in the United States. The racism white youth perpetuate as they engage the Disintegration schema can have direct negative consequences for Youth of Color (e.g., Sladek, Umariataylor, McDermott, Rivas-Drake, & Martinez-Fuentes, 2020). In terms of their own racial development, if white youth recognize this harm, they may shift to Phase 2 schemas.

*Evidence of Phase 2 schemas. Pseudo-independent.* This was by a large margin the most commonly engaged of the Phase 2 schemas, with 23% ( $n = 195$ ) of all 843 statements in one of the five data-driven codes. Using these codes, we were able to capture examples of the internal conflict Helms (1990, 2020) describes as what can push white individuals toward greater racial identity development. This often included an acknowledgment of racism perpetuated against BIPOC individuals, though participants' solutions and explanations tended to remain superficial, which is characteristic of this schema. For example, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade boy offered the following reasoning when asked why being white does not matter:

*P: Because everybody should be treated the same because it doesn't matter what people see; it matters what you are.*

*I: Where did you learn that or how do you know that?*

*P: I know that because I've seen people -I've seen white people pick on Black people and I don't think it's okay because it's like we're the same; it's just different skin color.*

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This boy is simultaneously engaging the logic of color-blindness while also pinpointing the racism he has witnessed. Coded into *Race shouldn't matter* and *Recognition of differences in treatment*, these codes both capture the Pseudo-independent perspective casting racism as an issue of "bad white people" (Helms, 2020) rather than as systemic. This boy contends that the way to stop racist bullying is to focus on individual traits and downplay the meaning of race. Again, while the immediate outcomes of this kind of reasoning necessarily look different for a 4<sup>th</sup>-grader than for adults, the WRID model can help us make sense of both. This boy is vying with dueling realities, on the one hand the color-blind socialization he is likely receiving, and on the other hand the fact that he is growing up in a society shaped by white supremacy, wherein racism persists (Umaha-Taylor, 2016). This duality underscores the likelihood of holding perspectives spanning multiple schemas, which may be particularly common among white youth. The strength of color-blind

socialization may mean that some white youth remain tethered to the Contact schema even as they begin progressing in their racial identity development in other ways. This 4<sup>th</sup>-grade boy recognizes his whiteness and acknowledges the existence of racism, but does not examine his own role within it, instead keeping his view outward.

An outward facing perspective is characteristic of this schema, in which individuals recognize the role of race in structuring society, without engaging in work to bring about systemic change (Helms, 2020). This can take multiple forms, including the explicit valuing of diversity or multi-culturalism without a concomitant recognition of racial inequity. This occurred in our data primarily when participants talked about their schools, peer groups, or friends, as in the following example from an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade girl, "And like I'm white and that's it and my friend Rashida, she's from Jamaica. And, and like, it's just good that I can be around all these different people and not only just one type of person." With this statement, she is casting the diversity of her friend group as something positive *for her*. This girl may have heard this type of "benefits of diversity" rhetoric from her parents or teachers. Regardless of source, this fits with Helms's (2020) description of the Pseudo-independent schema as characterized by behaviors and perspectives embracing a positive view of race relations without engaging in anti-racist action.

This tendency was more explicit in exchanges about witnessing interpersonal racism. For example, a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade girl said, "Sadly, but still it's going on sometimes" in response to whether she had ever seen kids getting treated differently because of their race. She was then asked, "So what usually happens when something like that happens?" to which she replied, "Oh I just hear it and I just walk away, but they're not saying it to me but I still think it's wrong." This aligns with what Helms (2020) calls an "Ain't it a shame" strategy, which "allows the White person the illusion of sensitivity without requiring that he or she actually do anything about it" (p. 57). By and large, white youth are not expected to "do anything" about racism, particularly in terms of interrogating their own role within it; they are instead taught the values of being a good person and treating everyone equally. While these values are positive, their individual focus can passively work to maintain systemic inequity—if I am a good person *then* I have done all I can do and the bad things that happen

must be happening to bad people (Helms, 2020). If, however, white youth are pushed to turn their gaze on their own whiteness and to recognize the systemic nature of racial inequity, they may begin engaging the final two Phase 2 schemas.

*Immersion/emersion.* Overall, just 4% ( $n = 30$ ) of coded statements were situated within the three data-driven codes in this schema. The Immersion/ Emersion schema is characterized by a critical examination of whiteness and a move away from an assimilationist stance (Helms, 2020). The most common way it was coded was as *Critique of white privilege*. For example, when an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade girl was asked about seeing kids get treated differently because of their race, she mentioned that teachers treat her differently because she is white. She explained, "Like they treat me with more respect I kind of think... And like, they like trust me a lot more." When asked how that makes her feel, she replied, "I feel like it's kind of unfair."

Acknowledging the ways in which white supremacy shapes her school experiences, this participant is recognizing that racism not only disadvantages BIPOC individuals, but it advantages white people. Recognizing that positive treatment from teachers may be a product of racial inequity rather than individual merit represents the critical reflection characteristic of this schema.

One aspect of white privilege some participants touched on was captured in the code *Descriptions of police violence against Black people*. This occurred in the following exchange with an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade boy who was asked about being treated differently because he is white:

*P: Um... well we've all heard about all the police shootings and stuff and that really just doesn't happen with young white males. All the systems really are kind of racist, a lot of them are really racist in some cases.*

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This boy names the systemic racism under girding the ongoing police violence against Black people in the United States, pointing out that he does not face the same threat. Such an acknowledgment of the ways in which systemic racism shapes one's own experiences was very uncommon among our participants. Based on what we know of socio-cognitive development and racial perspective taking (Quintana, 1998, 2008), this was not surprising. Helms (2020) also points out that even among white adults, Immersion/Emersion "rarely becomes a dominant schema" (p. 63). She explains that the deep and critical examination of



both oneself and society that characterizes this schema can be painful and isolating from other white people who are not at a similar place in their own racial identity development (Helms, 1990, 2020). For white youth, without explicit anti-racist socialization, engaging the final Phase 2 schemas may be unlikely.

*Autonomy.* The last schema of Phase 2 was by far the least represented, with only 1% ( $n = 11$ ) of overall coded statements situated in the single data-driven code, coming from a total of seven participants. Individuals engaging Autonomy have reflected meaningfully on what whiteness means to them and reached a level of comfort with their anti-racist white identity (Helms, 2020). Autonomy is characterized by regular engagement with issues related to racial diversity, including an acknowledgment of interconnected systems of oppression. For this reason, the sole data-driven code situated in this schema is *Recognition of intersectionality*. No participant brought up intersectionality, or the ways in which their multiple privileged or oppressed identities are interconnected (Crenshaw, 1994), without being prompted. All statements in this schema were in response to the final questions from the T2 interviews.

For example, when an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade girl was asked how things might be different for her if she were a white boy she responded, "Um, I'd have a ton of privilege. I'd be like the top of the food chain, I'd have so much privilege," indicating that she recognizes her own racial privilege as a white person, that she is aware of male privilege, and that she has reflected on how the two may intersect. The other statements coded into this schema were similar—recognizing that race and gender overlap to influence experience. One 8<sup>th</sup>-grade boy reflected on the impact of cumulative experiences of racism he would likely experience if he were a Black boy, noting, "if I were to just instantly swap it probably wouldn't change me much. But if I were to have grown up as an African American it definitely would have affected me." Yet, no participant

spoke at length about their own or others' experiences at the intersection of race and gender, and a critical reflection on the interconnectedness of systems of oppression was notably absent.

### **WRID Distribution and Age Variation**

Our second research question explored the distribution of participants' coded statements across schemas and phases at T1 and T2, as well as whether age-related variation was found. Although there was a clear tendency toward engaging Phase 1 schemas more than Phase 2, we were interested in whether there was any change in this trend across the two time points. An overview of the proportions of coded statements across schemas at T1 and T2 can be seen in Figure 2. Overall, 82% of our participants' statements at T1 were coded within the three Phase 1 schemas; this dropped to 64% at T2. Thus, at both time points, the majority of our sample engaged in greater accommodation of than resistance to internalized norms of white supremacy. Despite the decrease from T1 to T2, the fact that the majority of participants' statements were coded in Phase 1 schemas at both time points was not surprising, given the prevalence of color-blind socialization among white parents and teachers (Loyd & Gaither, 2018), and the systemic privileging of white students and perspectives in U.S. schools (Aldana & Byrd, 2015).

Yet, the trend toward greater engagement of the Phase 2 schemas suggests age-related change, possibly indicating that some combination of lived experience and increased socio-cognitive capacity may prompt white racial identity development. To parse possible age-related differences in the shift toward greater engagement with Phase 2 schemas, we divided our sample into two groups: middle childhood (2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade at T1) and early adolescence (6<sup>th</sup> grade at T1). We then compared these groups in terms of their change in overall percentage of Phase 2 statements. Due to the small sample sizes, no statistical analyses were conducted; the comparison offers a descriptive overview. Because the percentages represent proportion of total coded statements, an increase in Phase 2 statements necessarily means a decrease in Phase 1 statements. Among participants in middle childhood, 7% ( $n = 7$ ) of their statements were in Phase 2 schemas at T1 and 10%

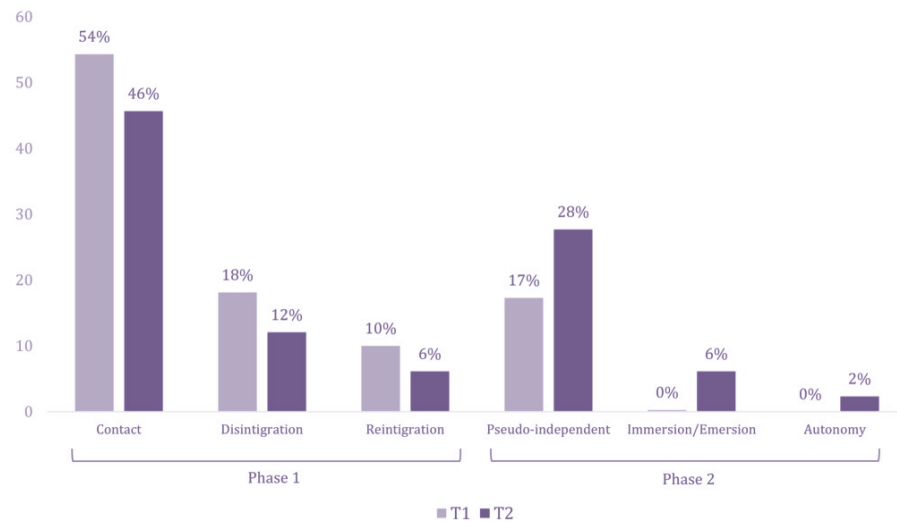
( $n = 11$ ) at T2. Among participants in early adolescence, 21% ( $n = 58$ ) of their statements were in Phase 2 schemas at T1 and 44% ( $n = 160$ ) at T2. This breakdown shows a marked change across time and by age group. Specifically, the proportion of Phase 2 responses remained stable and low among participants in middle childhood. However, among those in early adolescence at T1, we see a greater proportion of Phase 2 responses overall and the prevalence doubles from T1 to T2. Taken together, there is evidence of both within-person development and age-related differences among these participants, with the overall percentage of Phase 2 statements increasing over time, driven almost exclusively by the early adolescents in our sample.

To add texture and illustrate what the differences in white racial identity can look like at the person level across time points, we conclude with two brief case studies. These case studies are neither exhaustive nor representative of our full sample. Instead, they offer examples of trajectories found within our data. The first describes a white youth in middle childhood who remained primarily in the Phase 1 schemas across time points, as was the case for most of the younger participants. The second is illustrative of a white adolescent who was primarily engaging Phase 1 schemas at T1 and primarily Phase 2 schemas at T2, which occurred more frequently among our older participants.

*Case Study 1: Sam.* Sam was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at T1, when 100% of the race-related section of his interview was coded into Phase 1 schemas. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade at T2, 69% of his statements were situated in Phase 1. Although he shifted to some degree, the four Phase 2 statements he made at T2 were all coded into Pseudo-independent. Such a minimal shift toward Phase 2 was common among our younger participants, indicating that early adolescence may indeed be the developmental period wherein some white youth begin

reflecting more deeply on their racial identity and socialization into a society shaped by white supremacy.

**FIGURE 2: Breakdown of coded statements by schema at Time 1 and Time 2.**



*Note.* The percentages reported here reflect the proportion of coded statements in a given schema out of the total statements made at each interview time point. For instance, 54% of statements at T1 were coded into Contact, whereas 46% at T2 were coded into Contact.

When asked at T1 how much being white matters to him, Sam responded, "Um not so much, because it doesn't matter what skin color you are." He then explained:

*Sam (S): Because like when Martin Luther King was alive he, he wouldn't, because it's like, because there were certain drinking fountains for certain people and so it doesn't really matter what skin color you are; it doesn't matter.*

This type of reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. was fairly common, particularly among our younger participants, who seemed to be grasping for the race-related education they received while showing minimal understanding of its implications. Sam highlighted Dr. King and historical inequity to bolster his color-blind reasoning—racism is in the past, Civil Rights have been achieved, race does not matter. Although he may have been unaware of his motivation for doing so, this strategy offers a prime example of the Contact schema.

At T2, Sam again stated "Not much" when asked how much being white matters to him. In the follow-up questions, while his initial answer continues to reflect the Contact

schema, his response to the interviewer's follow-up question diverges in substance and strategy:

*I: Yeah? Is there anything hard about being white?*

*S: No, except for like - because like another thing that's about race is that - the one thing that I don't like about being white is because everybody will judge a white person because they can't like - everybody thinks that white people are less - so everybody thinks that Black people are more like athletic than white people...*

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Sam is referencing a stereotyped expectation that Black people are better athletes, which came up multiple times across our interviews and was coded into the Pseudo-independent schema under *Recognition of racialized expectations*. This "positive stereotype" reinforces an essentialist understanding of race, while masking its harm. Moreover, Sam is highlighting this stereotype while also indicating that he feels directly slighted by it, a perspective that could also be situated within Reintegration. Overall, Sam's interview responses at T2 displayed somewhat greater complexity than at T1, but only minimally more engagement with his own white identity.

IJSSP  
44, 15/16

**98**

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*Case Study 2: Hailey.* In 6<sup>th</sup> grade at T1, 63% of Hailey's coded statements were situated in Phase 1, whereas only 44% were coded in Phase 1 from her T2 interview when she was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Moreover, at T1, the only Phase 2 schema Hailey coded in was Pseudo-independent, whereas at T2, she had statements coded into all three Phase 2 schemas.

Although Hailey chose "white" as the least important category in the card-sorting task at both T1 and T2, her responses regarding how she makes sense of her own whiteness differed across time points. At T1, when asked how important being white is to her, she stated "not much," then went on to explain that it's because her school is "super diverse," adding:

*Hailey (H): And... I think because of that we don't judge people by what they look like (pause) um as much as opposed to other middle schools.*

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I: Okay.

H: *Um... and it just doesn't really matter to me that much. Really. Coded as Active denial of whiteness as important and Race shouldn't matter, in the Disintegration and Pseudo-independent schemas, Hailey acknowledged that racism exists, but downplayed its presence at her school before denying the importance of race to her personally.*

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Beyond Ethnicity:  
Applying Helms's  
White Racial  
Identity  
Development  
Model among  
White Youth

**99**

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In her T2 interview, she claimed that being white matters "a little" before shifting into a story her father told her about white privilege when traveling and BIPOC individuals undergoing additional screening. She noted, "it's not good that that happened that way, you know?" With this example, Hailey draws on what might be considered the parallel to "preparation for bias" common within racial socialization among parents of color (Priest et al., 2014), instead explaining that her father prepared her to be aware of racial privilege. She recounts her father's story as evidence that being white can and does affect one's experiences, including her own. Such race-conscious socialization may act as the type of interpersonal catalyst Helms (1990, 2020) describes, pushing white youth like Hailey toward the Phase 2 schemas and away from the continued internalization of white supremacist norms characteristic of Phase 1.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study achieved two key aims: First, we successfully applied the WRID model to data-driven codes generated from our participants' racial identity narratives; and second, using this model as an organizational framework, we examined patterns of change in white youths' racial identity development across time. Like the majority of ERI scholarship including white samples, the white participants in our study largely viewed their racial identity as unimportant. However, by disentangling race and ethnicity and focusing specifically on whiteness, we could investigate the reasons *why* that is, including by situating our findings in the context of normative white supremacy. In particular, our data suggest that white youth employ multiple strategies to downplay and distance themselves from whiteness, which suggests that they are knowledgeable of the socio-historical significance of race. At the same time, we captured how some white youth were

reckoning with whiteness and shifting beyond the status quo. As a race-focused model, WRID offers an organizational frame for identifying and interpreting the nuanced ways that white children and adolescents make sense of race. The overarching goal of the current study was not to situate white youth within a given WRID schema, but rather to use this model as a tool to analyze participants' racial identities through a critical, socio-historical lens.

In terms of development, our data displayed a shift toward the Phase 2 schemas of the WRID model at T2, indicating greater resistance to the inequitable status quo and more meaningful reflection on whiteness. When examined by age group, it became clear that the participants in early adolescence made far more statements coded into Phase 2, with those in middle childhood displaying much less change across time points. There was high variability across our sample, however, indicating that movement through the WRID schemas is not contingent on socio-cognitive development alone. This aligns with [Helms's \(1990, 2020\)](#) theorizing, underscoring that the WRID model does not offer a normative or age-related trajectory, but rather a possible path white people may take, given sufficient socio-cognitive ability coupled with interpersonal socialization, societal circumstances, or a combination thereof.

Importantly, a large majority of our participants' Phase 2 statements were coded into the Pseudo-independent schema, which is characterized by assimilationist perspectives and superficial engagement with one's whiteness ([Helms, 1990, 2020](#)). [Helms \(2020\)](#) notes that for many white adults, this schema comprises the final step in their WRID. Interpreted in light of our findings, this means that for many white people, racial identity development may stagnate in early adolescence. To examine this postulation further, more research is needed across developmental periods, including through late adolescence and into emerging adulthood. Greater exploratory research would also

help assess whether white individuals begin to consolidate their racial identities more succinctly into given schemas or phases as they develop. In particular, more longitudinal work drawing on qualitative data would help generate a theoretical foundation for this possibility reflective of lived experience.

Unsurprisingly, the ways in which white children and adolescents talk about race often differ from white adults in terms of content and complexity. Based on our analysis, however, it is evident that the strategies white youth employ to make sense of race, consciously or unconsciously, reflect the white normativity and racial hierarchy shaping the world they live in. This finding matters at both the individual and the societal level. [Helms \(2020\)](#) acknowledges that engaging the final schemas of Phase 2 takes work. Shifting from a color-blind, "good" versus "bad" perspective on the world necessitates critical thinking, including on the through line from historical oppression to present inequity, and the interconnections between systems of power (racism, sexism, classism, etc.). Complex reasoning about societal inequity has been increasingly studied among BIPOC adolescents (e.g., [Tyler, Olsen, Geldhof, & Bowers, 2020](#)), yet there is far less research into critical awareness and action among white youth. The notion that racialized encounters spur racial identity development is at the heart of models of both Black and WRID ([Cross, 1995](#); [Helms, 1990](#)). For BIPOC youth, such encounters may take the form of harmful discrimination and racism, which often occur by middle childhood ([Brown & Bigler, 2005](#)). For white youth, factors such as color-blind socialization, the positioning of racism as an interpersonal issue of "bad" white people, and the overarching invisibility of whiteness as a structuring principle in U.S. society may mean that many exit adolescence without "encountering" race in a way that prompts critical reflection.

Thus, facilitating anti-racist identity development among white youth will likely require intentional intervention from parents, teachers, and other important figures in youths' lives (e.g., [Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018](#)). Yet, to be effective, these white adults must themselves engage in anti-racist identity work. By *not* doing so, white individuals continue accommodating to a status quo that perpetuates incalculable



harm. By drawing on the WRID model, developmental psychologists can further investigate these reciprocal links between person and context (e.g., Rogers, 2018), highlighting opportunities for intervention and transformation.

#### LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Despite these important findings, our study has multiple limitations. First, our sample was unequally distributed in terms of age, with fewer younger participants. Thus, although relevant patterns were found across age groups, future studies should further examine this trend, including pinpointing factors that may prompt Phase 2 identity development. Second, as our aim was to apply the WRID theory qualitatively, we did not evaluate either the original (Helms, 1990) or adapted (Lee et al., 2007) quantitative measurement tools. Because the bulk of critique of the WRID model centered on these scales (Behrens & Rowe, 1997; Rowe, 2006; Rowe et al., 1994), future studies could use mixed-methods design to examine both the theory and the quantitative measurement instruments in tandem, with the aim of validating a youth-oriented scale.

Regardless of method, our findings support the value of moving beyond ethnicity when studying racial identity among white youth. Whiteness is not an ethnic or cultural group, but rather a construct borne of domination and dehumanization, which continues to shape societal norms, policies, and opportunities (e.g., Winant, 2004). Race-focused frameworks, such as the WRID model, intentionally assess the ways in which white youth resist and accommodate to the myriad forms and consequences of racial inequity structuring their daily lives. Although identity development occurs at the micro-level of individuals and relationships, theory and analysis that incorporate macro-level structures of racism, privilege, and oppression allow us to ask different questions, and in turn draw different conclusions (Rogers, Niwa, Chung, Yip, & Chae, in press). By centering the reality of whiteness within a

race-focused and group-specific theoretical framework, psychologists can gain a more socio-politically relevant understanding of racial identity among white youth, thus thus working toward a more just society (e.g., Hagerman, Hagerman, 2015; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018).

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**104**

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