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White parents of adopted Black children in an era of racial reckoning: Challenges, tensions, and strategies

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Abstract

Objective: This study explores White middle-class adoptive parents' experiences with parenting Black children (M age = 12.3), attending to how intersections of children's race, gender, and developmental stage informed and nuanced parents' approach to racial socialization.

Background: Scholarly debate regarding the adoption of Black children by White parents centers on parents' ability to facilitate positive racial identity development. Limited work has explored how White parents' approach to racial socialization is shaped by Black children's gender and developmental stage, particularly as children grow older and encounter intensified racialized stereotypes.

Method: Twenty-five White parents (11 lesbian mothers, seven gay fathers, seven heterosexual mothers) were selected from a larger sample of 128 adoptive families because they adopted Black (including biracial/multiracial) children, and were interviewed as their children entered adolescence. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

Results: A typology emerged that captured parents' racial awareness and racial socialization approach: Minimizing and Reluctant, Worried and Fumbling, Aware but Cautious, and Reflexive and Purposeful. Additional cross-cutting themes centered on the role of the sociopolitical climate, gender, and developmental stage in racial socialization.

Conclusion: Contemporary adoptive parents of Black children are often constrained by their own White racial frame, but some parents, especially those who are younger or have monoracial children, are able to translate awareness of the complexities involved in raising adopted Black children into meaningful action and understanding.

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KEYWORDS
adolescence, adoption, African Americans, LGBTQ, race, socialization

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the persistence of racist acts, including violence, against Black people and especially Black men in the United States during the past half-decade, parents of Black children must navigate the challenging and delicate balance of ensuring their children's survival while also honoring their authentic beauty, humanity, and soul. White parents parenting Black children via adoption are in a complex predicament, wherein it is increasingly hard to believe in a colorblind society; yet, as White parents, they lack the lived experience, and the tools it provides, that inform racial socialization efforts. This study explores the experiences of 25 White adoptive parents (lesbian, gay, heterosexual) with Black (including biracial/multiracial) children (*Mdn* age = 12), with attention to how the intersections of children's race, gender, and developmental stage informed and nuanced parents' approaches to racial socialization, during 2018–2021.

This study draws on Feagin's (2013) concept of the "White racial frame." White people may maintain a "White racial frame" wherein they do not recognize the ways in which their perspective, beliefs, and assumptions are fundamentally White-centered, and/or do not grasp the nature and reach of structural and systemic racism, often conceptualizing racism solely at the level of the individual (e.g., in terms of racist beliefs/actions). Even White people who see themselves as anti-racist may, due to their own socialization in a White dominant society, hold a White frame that provides an overarching worldview consisting of racialized beliefs, language, feelings, and actions that act as a "comprehensive orienting structure" (p. 12). Thus, a White adoptive parent of a Black child may view the world through a lens that obscures their awareness of both the systemic structures and everyday acts of racism that impact their child, and, in turn, fail to act in ways that prevent, minimize, or redress injustice. They may also fail to learn counter-frames that would enable their own and their children's resistance to White supremacy.

Feagin (2013) argues that people can carry several perspectival frames in their head. In addition to the dominant White frame, anti-oppression counter-frames have been developed by Black people and others targeted by oppression to fight back or just survive. Contemporary anti-racist counter-frames may, for example, "critically problematize white cultural imperialism" (p. 177). Of interest is whether and how White parents can develop and operate from a counter-frame wherein they learn (and teach their children) to critique the surrounding racist environment and "question, call out, and challenge racist stereotypes and discriminatory actions" (p. 180).

This study is also informed by intersectionality theory (Collins, 2015, 2019; Few-Demo, 2014; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020), which articulates a "matrix of domination that is composed of interlocking systematic oppressions that are generated by intersections among race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality across time and geography" (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020, p. 329). The identities and experiences of Black adopted children, for example, are mediated by the complex intersections of their racial, gender, and adoptive identities, as well as other social locations, to produce varying levels of tension or conflict across a variety of situations and contexts (Few-Demo, 2014). Children whose identities do not fit comfortably within "mono-categorical frameworks" (e.g., race and gender binaries) may experience particular, and/or heightened, marginalization (Collins, 2019, p. 26). Children's intersecting identities may inform parents' racialization approaches and strategies, in the sense that parents may view certain children as more disadvantaged by interlocking systems of power and oppression than others. Yet parents' own intersecting identities also interact with children's identities to shape parents' socialization approaches, such that some parents may be more likely to develop and deploy "counter-frames" (Feagin, 2013). Like their children, White adoptive parents are not a monolithic group, and

their varying social identities (e.g., based on gender, sexual orientation, social class, and age) and associated systems of power and privilege may also impact how they enact parenting and racialization processes. The current study, then, seeks to explore how the intersection of children's identities, interacting with their parents' identities, shape White adoptive parents' racial awareness and racial socialization at a key historical moment in the fight for racial justice.

White parents adopting Black children: The subject of debate

The adoption of Black children by White parents has long been the subject of discussion and controversy (Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002). The debate often centers on the importance of racial identity development (of the child) and racial socialization practices (of the parent), with the argument being that White parents are often not equipped to provide the personal and contextual resources necessary to facilitate positive racial identity development (Butler-Sweet, 2011). In 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers asserted: "Black children belong physically and psychologically and culturally in black families where they receive the total sense of themselves … Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as black people" (pp. 2–3). This statement has had a lasting legacy, pushing adoption agencies to consider the importance of a race-aware versus race-blind approach in adoption. In turn, White parents who adopt Black children in the United States should recognize that they do so amid a racially charged climate characterized by pervasive racism and discrimination.

Echoing the broader societal climate—and legacy of White supremacy—Black children are overrepresented in the child welfare system and among the hardest to place, as potential adopters are less willing to adopt Black children than children of other races (Pinderhughes et al., 2016). Further, White parents often prefer adopting biracial/multiracial rather than monoracial Black children, believing they will have more in common with the former or presuming that such children could pass as White (Sweeney, 2013). Some White people are more open than others to adopting a Black child—for example, because of experiences living in multiracial environments (Hatzipanagos, 2021). White lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and trans (LGBTQ) people may be especially likely to adopt Black children (Goldberg & Smith, 2009), citing their marginalized positionality and lack of investment in conforming to ideals of "real" (biological) families as reasons for their openness, but they are also aware of the visibility their families will face as multiracial and LGBTQ parented (Goldberg, 2009; Richardson & Goldberg, 2010).

Racial socialization of Black children

Racial socialization encompasses parental practices that promote children's racial awareness, knowledge of racism, and racial/ethnic pride (Lee et al., 2015), and, in the case of Black children, involves teaching them about the meaning, history, and significance of being Black (Caughy et al., 2002; Hill, 2001). Racial socialization includes preparing children for the reality of racism (e.g., talking about racism and how to respond; encouraging them to share experiences with race), giving them the skills to address racism, and, to the extent possible, protecting them from racism (Dow, 2016, 2019; Hill, 2001). The process of instilling racial/ethnic pride can include participating in cultural events and attending racially diverse schools (Hill, 1999; Pinderhughes et al., 2016). Racial socialization processes are not one-sided (i.e., parents dispensing guidance), but synergistic, such that children's questions and experiences may also "prompt parents to share attitudes, values, and information regarding race and intergroup relations regardless of parents' intended racial socialization agendas" (Hughes & Chen, 1999, p. 469).

Parents' racial socialization practices are linked to positive psychosocial outcomes, including higher self-esteem (Hughes et al., 2006; Pinderhughes et al., 2016). Messages that emphasize racial pride in particular (as opposed to preparation for bias) promote well-being (Caughy et al., 2002; Stokes et al., 2020; Ward, 1996), while denial of race/racial difference is related to less positive racial identity outcomes (Butler-Sweet, 2011).

Notably, educational and financial resources may impact Black parents' socialization processes, such as by enabling access to enrichment opportunities that promote learning about Black history, as well as shaping perceptions of and responses to bias, such that Black parents with greater resources may be more likely to describe, and be directive in addressing, racial bias against their children (Caughy et al., 2002; Hill, 1999; White-Johnson et al., 2010). Resources may also enable Black parents to ensure greater protection from racism for their children (e.g., via choice in neighborhoods), although seemingly safer settings may not be protective, as Black youth may face scrutiny in mostly White neighborhoods and schools (Dow, 2015, 2016, 2019).

Racial socialization by White adoptive parents of children of color

Studies generally suggest that White heterosexual parents who have adopted children of color (i.e., across race; transracially) engage in low to moderate levels of racial socialization, although there is variability (Berbery & O'Brien, 2011; Brown et al., 2007), reflecting, in part, parents' varying levels of racial awareness, which motivates racial socialization (Lee et al., 2018). In the context of transracial adoption, racial awareness refers to parents' awareness of the role and impact of race both in their own life (i.e., "racial reflexivity"; Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012) and in others' lives (Berbery & O'Brien, 2011; Lee et al., 2018). Existing work has generated evidence of several broad "types" of White adoptive parents with regard to racial socialization approach and efforts (and, at times, racial awareness). These generally fall into several categories: parents who show awareness of race and racism and engage in some (and sometimes multiple) forms of racial socialization; parents who espouse ambivalent or conditional racial socialization efforts (e.g., they discuss race only when children bring it up; or, they engage in certain activities but not others); and parents who are "color blind" and engage in little racial socialization (Barn, 2013; Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 2011; Goldberg et al., 2016). Research using a mostly White sample of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents of children of color (M age = 6) found that many parents described initiating conversations aimed to instill pride and educate about racism, while others acknowledged their child's race but did not wish to "overly focus" on differences from family/friends, with a few avoiding race completely (Goldberg et al., 2016). In a study of mostly White parents who adopted transracially, Barn (2013, 2018) differentiated among humanitarian parents, who endorsed "color blind" beliefs; ambivalent parents, who showed muted awareness of race; and transcultural parents, who sought authentic connections with their children's racial/ethnic community. Barn (2018) observed that true immersion (e.g., in communities of color) was rare, but building social capital for the child (e.g., sending them to a racially diverse school) was more common. Both demand action, may involve parental discomfort, and can lead to a transformed relationship for the child and family vis-a-vis communities of color—in contrast to activities that are solely child-focused and do not transform White adoptive parents' social networks (e.g., finding a role model of color; Barn, 2018).

Studies of racial socialization in transracial adoptive families generally include adopted youth who are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse and often of varying ages (e.g., Barn, 2013, 2018; Degener et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Vonk et al., 2010), with few studies focusing on White parents of Black youth (DeBerry et al., 1996; McRoy et al., 1984; Smith et al., 2011; Smith & Juárez, 2015), which is important given the

unique sociopolitical dimensions of Blackness and anti-Blackness in U.S. society and tensions surrounding White parents adopting Black children. Further, such studies have rarely shed insight into how White adoptive parents think about their own Whiteness or racial privilege, because this was not a study focus and/or it did not emerge as a salient theme.

Although research on the racial socialization of Black children by White adoptive parents is limited (DeBerry et al., 1996; McRoy et al., 1984; Smith et al., 2011; Smith & Juárez, 2015), it is clear and consistent in suggesting that although parents may acknowledge race/racism (e.g., preparation for bias) and emphasize the celebration of Blackness (racial pride), "race lessons" are often dispensed through a lens of Whiteness (Smith et al., 2011), reflecting the legacy of White racism. For example, some White parents may teach their children to forgive White people for their "ignorance" (racism) and emphasize that they can be educated, thus privileging White people and excusing White racial ignorance (Smith et al., 2011). Growing up in a White supremacist society, White adoptive parents may have absorbed values that center White people's experiences and denigrate those of Black people, yet are also positioned to challenge such beliefs through their parenting. Although typically a minority in studies of White adoptive parents, some parents are sensitive to racial bias, seek to prepare children to survive amidst societal stigma, grapple with their privilege, educate about Black history, seek connections to a Black community, and learn about activities of daily living (hair, skin) that promote a positive Black identity (Smith & Juárez, 2015). Many, however, struggle to parent in ways that are fully consistent with anti-racist ideologies, such that White parents with Black and multiracial adopted children tend to live in mostly White communities, with parents in more integrated communities describing visibility and discomfort in Black centered spaces, such as churches and barbershops (McRoy et al., 1984; Smith & Juárez, 2015). Even when White parents endorse the importance of racial/cultural socialization, they may pursue culture or community as a "thing," a resource they do not possess but seek to acquire for their children (e.g., via Black camps/books/churches), which may render both children and parents "cultural tourists" (Smith et al., 2011, p. 1215), echoing research on transracial adoption more generally (Barn, 2018).

Racial socialization, gender, and developmental stage

How parents engage in racial socialization is informed not only by children's race, but children's gender and developmental stage. Little work has addressed the gendered nature of racial socialization (Hill, 1999; Smith-Bynum et al., 2016). This is problematic in the case of Black youth with White parents because they may have unique experiences with prejudice by virtue of their intersecting racial and gender identities. White parents may face challenges (a) identifying the ways in which gender and race interact to produce different forms of prejudice for their Black children (Stokes et al., 2020; Sweeney, 2013; Turner, 2020), and (b) communicating racial socialization messages based on gender. Such practices may be especially difficult for parents who differ from their children in race and gender, such as White mothers of Black sons. Notably, Black boys are viewed as older, less innocent, and more prone to criminality than boys of other races (Goff et al., 2014; McHale et al., 2006). Black girls are read as older, viewed as aggressive and volatile, objectified sexually, and face discriminatory beauty standards rooted in anti-Blackness (Davis Tribble et al., 2019; Morris, 2007), reflecting the gendered nature of the White racial frame (Feagin, 2013). If White parents of Black children lack awareness of the intersectional nature of societal stereotypes, they may be poor agents of racial socialization.

Gendered racial socialization may be more beneficial than general racial socialization as it targets children's intersecting identities and teaches them how to cope with gendered racism (e.g., racialized stereotypes; Stokes et al., 2020). A study of Black women with Black parents found that parental messages about racial pride, specifically about Black girls, were related to positive feelings about being Black, which were in turn negatively associated with depression

(Stokes et al., 2020). Some work has focused on processes of gendered racial socialization, finding that Black mothers seeking to promote positive racial identity in their Black daughters may highlight the versatility and beauty of their hair, exposing them to images of Black women with similar hair via the media and family photos (Bailey-Fakhoury, 2014). In some cases, Black mothers seek to convey affirming messages about hair, but also uphold standards of attractiveness (e.g., short hair, natural hair, or cornrows are implied to be less desirable, as they might invite discrimination; Davis Tribble et al., 2019; Dow, 2019). In this way, Black mothers may seek to promote self-esteem and pride while remaining sensitized to Western beauty standards.

Gender is also relevant to the racial socialization that Black children receive insomuch as parents tend to emphasize different types of messages based on gender (Hill, 1999, 2001; Taylor et al., 1990). Black girls with Black parents report receiving more messages about cultural pride and fewer messages about racial bias, while Black boys report receiving more messages about managing racial bias and fewer messages about cultural pride (Davis Tribble et al., 2019; Smith-Bynum et al., 2016), possibly reflecting Black parents' expectation that boys will be exposed to more racialized stigma (McHale et al., 2006). Black mothers fear for their sons' safety and worry about their exposure to violence (Dow, 2016; Malone Gonzalez, 2019), and may encourage them to dress in ways that do not reinforce stereotypes of Black boys as criminals (Turner, 2020). Such messages may be further shaped by skin color, such that preparation for bias messages are more often dispensed to boys with darker skin than boys with lighter skin (Landor et al., 2013). One form of bias preparation is the "police talk," wherein Black parents converse with children about how to manage interactions with law enforcement in order to avoid violence (e.g., show your hands; no sudden movements; Dow, 2016; Hill, 2001; Malone Gonzalez, 2019). Black parents more often engage in such conversations with sons than daughters, reflecting gendered notions of racial vulnerability to profiling, and a failure to anticipate Black girls' risk of sexual harassment and violence from police (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Malone Gonzalez, 2019).

In addition to children's gender, children's developmental stage may inform and nuance parents' racial socialization practices, such that as Black youth move into adolescence, they receive more messages of preparation for bias and promotion of mistrust (e.g., Black children are warned to be wary of other racial groups as a protective measure; Hughes et al., 2006; McHale et al., 2006). In turn, as Black children enter adolescence, they are vulnerable to stereotypes about Black adults (e.g., men as dangerous; women as promiscuous or overly assertive), thus enhancing their risk of mistreatment (Morris, 2007; Turner, 2011).

Notably, both Black (Herman-Giddens et al., 2012) and adopted (Mul et al., 2002) youth may enter puberty earlier than their White and nonadopted peers, rendering them especially vulnerable amid stereotypes of Black boys as dangerous and Black girls as sexualized. That is, Black adopted youth may face certain stereotypes and negative interactions before their peers, and be unprepared to perceive, absorb, and respond to such incidents. Teachers, for example, may judge Black early-developing girls more harshly than their White counterparts, likely due to stereotypes they hold about Black adults, and the "adultification" of Black children by White people (Carter et al., 2018). What White parents do vis a vis race and gender socialization at this time is significant, especially since early puberty may be linked to negative psychosocial outcomes among girls especially (Mendle et al., 2014). Racial socialization that is sensitive to children's developmental stage and includes messages of pride has been found to help Black youth maintain a healthy sense of self in the face of stigma (Seaton & Carter, 2020; Ward, 1996).

Racial socialization: Incorporating parent identities

Children's gender and developmental stage may intersect with parents' race, gender, and the gender makeup of the parental unit (e.g., two mother, two father, mother–father) to shape

parents' approach to racial socialization. Considering research on non-adoptive samples, some research has found that Black mothers engage in more racial socialization than Black fathers (Thornton et al., 1990). Other work (McHale et al., 2006) found that Black fathers (but not Black mothers) engaged in more preparation for bias with their sons than their daughters, perhaps reflecting sensitivity to sons' greater vulnerability to racial discrimination. Brown et al. (2010) instead found that Black mothers were more likely to handle matters of race/ethnicity with children across multiple domains of parenting socialization (e.g., racial pride, preparation for bias) than Black fathers, perhaps reflecting the tendency to cast such emotionally loaded topics as the responsibility of mothers, as the primary caretaker-nurturers.

Such gendered patterns of racial socialization may be disrupted in the two-mother, two-father context, in part because parents are parenting outside of heteronormative structures and scripts. Indeed, LGBTQ parents are in a unique position when managing their children's racial (and gender) socialization. Operating from a marginalized and subordinated status as sexual and/or gender minorities, they may approach parenting in ways that differ from members of the heterosexual, cisgender majority (Collins, 2019; Goldberg, 2009). They may be less likely to enforce strict gender norms (e.g., in terms of toys, activities, and appearance; Goldberg & Garcia, 2016) than heterosexual cisgender parents, yet are also aware that society will likely blame them as sexual/gender "deviants" for their children's departure from mainstream sexual/gender norms (Averett, 2015). LGBTQ parents of Black children weigh this awareness of societal scrutiny regarding children's gender (and their own parenting practices) with awareness of the racial dimensions of gender nonconformity (Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011), perhaps cognizant that Black boys and girls who fail to conform to masculine and feminine stereotypes may face intensified rejection or discrimination (Spivey & Greene, 2014), which may be further amplified by aspects of their parents' gender and sexual orientation (e.g., a Black boy with two moms).

Racial socialization amidst the Black lives matter movement

Prior work on Black parents raising Black children suggests that sociopolitical climate and current events can play a role in how and to what extent parents talk about race and racism (Threlfall, 2016). The assaults on unarmed Black men by law enforcement during the last half-decade in particular may serve as stimuli for conversations about physical and emotional survival (Threlfall, 2016). White parents with White children may be silent about racial tensions and protests out of a desire to "preserve their innocence" as well as due to a perceived lack of relevance (Abaied et al., 2021; Underhill, 2018). When White parents do engage in such discussions, they rarely initiate them, but do so in response to children's queries (Underhill, 2018). Many White parents do not even show racial awareness, with a study of White parents' reactions to the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests finding that 25% were skeptical that racism exists; likewise, many communicated "mixed messages" about racism to their White children, with just 2% mentioning their White privilege in the context of discussing the protests (Abaied et al., 2021). White parents of Black children cannot as easily dismiss such protests as irrelevant and deny the existence of racism, but still may be influenced by their White racial frame. Little is known about how White parents of Black children are navigating the current sociopolitical climate—yet this subject is timely amidst awareness that transracial adoptees, and their White parents, are experiencing their own racial reckoning as the United States confronts its historical scars (Hatzipanagos, 2021).

The children in the current sample were moving into adolescence at a time of political unrest and racial reckoning: the latter half of the Trump Presidency, a time when BLM protests amidst police violence against Black people (especially men) were sweeping the U.S. Of interest was White parents' attunement to their Black children's, and especially sons', vulnerability, as they

were beginning to look more like "adults" and were thus at risk for the kind of general violence and police brutality that was the increasing focus of media attention.

Research questions

The current study focuses on White adoptive parents of Black/biracial children, in contrast to much of the transracial adoption literature, which includes children of varying racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Vonk et al., 2010). The experiences of White parents with Black/biracial adopted children in the United States are unique, given the historical legacy of racism and the ongoing complexity of Black–White relations, especially at the current sociopolitical moment, which is characterized by turbulence, unrest, and agitating for racial justice. Further, the children in this sample are in the midst of puberty, an intense time of physical and emotional change, with racialized and gendered implications for how they are perceived and treated.

Our key question of interest is: For White parents of Black adopted children, how do their children's race, gender, and adoptive status, interacting with their own gender and sexual orientation, intersect to shape their racial awareness and approach to racial socialization at a key developmental period? Our sub-questions are: (a) How are White parents' awareness and socialization further shaped by the broader sociopolitical context, including social movements and political climate? (b) How does children's physical development and appearance interface with their race and gender to shape parents' gendered racial socialization?

METHODS

Sample

The sample consists of data from 25 families: 11 White lesbian mothers, seven White gay fathers, and seven White heterosexual mothers. Two lesbian mothers had Black partners, and one gay father had a Latinx partner; the remainder of parents had White partners. Twenty parents were married and five were divorced. Parents were interviewed between 2018 and 2021. All parents had adopted their children about 12 years earlier, 17 via private domestic adoption, seven via public domestic (child welfare) adoption, and one via international adoption.

Table 1 contains demographics by family type. Twelve children were identified by their parents as Black, 10 as biracial (i.e., half Black, half White in eight cases and half Black, half non-White Hispanic, in two cases), and 3 multiracial (Black, White, and some other race). Among lesbian mothers, 6 had Black children and 5 had bi/multiracial children; among gay fathers, 2 had Black children, 5 had bi/multiracial children; and, among heterosexual mothers, 4 had Black children and 3 had bi/multiracial children. Children were 12.26 years old, on average, when parents were interviewed ($SD = 1.33$); 20 were 11–12, and 5 were 13–15. Eleven were girls, 11 were boys, and 3 were nonbinary. Among lesbian mothers, three had boys, five had girls, and three had nonbinary children; among gay fathers, four had boys, three had girls; and among heterosexual mothers, three had girls, and four had boys. Fourteen of the 25 children had siblings who were adopted after they were adopted.

Parents were well-educated: 1 had a high school diploma, 6 had a bachelor's, 12 had a master's, and 2 had a PhD/JD/MD. Parents were employed in mainly professional (e.g., teacher, social worker, doctor) and managerial jobs (e.g., director, executive; International Labor Organization, 2012). Family income ranged between \$34 K and \$750 K, with most reporting a family income between \$100 K and \$200 K ($M =$ \$189 K, $Mdn =$ \$145 K, $SD =$ \$172 K). With

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics of White adoptive parents of Black children ($N = 25$)

	Lesbian ($n = 11$)	Gay ($n = 7$)	Hetero ($n = 7$)	Full sample ($n = 25$)
Family variables				
Family income ($) (*M*, [*Mdn*] *SD*)	$119,250 [$110,000] ($72,497)	$317,714 [$240,000] ($244,972)	$133,167 [$127,500] ($59,984)	$189,381 [$145,000] ($171,529)
Parent demographics				
Marital status				
Married	7 (63.6%)	7 (100.0%)	6 (85.7%)	20 (80.0%)
Divorced/separated	4 (36.4%)	0	1 (14.3%)	5 (20.0%)
Partner's race				
White	9 (81.8%)	6 (85.7%)	7 (100.0%)	22 (88.0%)
Black	2 (18.2%)	0	0	2 (8.0%)
Latinx	0	1 (14.3%)	0	1 (4.0%)
Level of education				
High school diploma/GED	0	0	1 (14.3%)	1 (4.0%)
Bachelor's	1 (9.1%)	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)	6 (24.0%)
Master's	7 (63.6%)	2 (28.6%)	3 (42.9%)	12 (48.0%)
PhD/MD/JD	0	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)	2 (8.0%)
Occupation				
Professional	7 (63.6%)	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)	14 (56.0%)
Managers	1 (9.1%)	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.3%)	5 (20.0%)
Services/sales	0	0	1 (14.3%)	1 (4.0%)
Homemakers	0	0	1 (14.3%)	1 (4.0%)
Child demographics				
Child race (*N*,%)				
Black/African American	6 (54.5%)	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	12 (48.0%)
Biracial/Multiracial	5 (45.5%)	5 (71.4%)	3 (42.9%)	13 (52.0%)
Child age (*M*, *SD*)	12.60 (1.28)	11.57 (0.53)	12.43 (1.81)	12.26 (1.33)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Lesbian (n = 11)	Gay (n = 7)	Hetero (n = 7)	Full sample (n = 25)
Child gender (N, %)				
Girl	5 (45.5%)	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	11 (44.0%)
Boy	3 (27.3%)	4 (57.1%)	4 (57.1%)	11 (44.0%)
Trans/nonbinary	3 (27.3%)	0	0	3 (12.0%)
Adoption type (N, %)				
International	0	0	1 (14.3%)	1 (4.0%)
Domestic private	6 (54.5%)	6 (85.7%)	5 (71.4%)	17 (68.0%)
Domestic public	5 (45.5%)	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)	7 (28.0%)

Note: Where percents do not add up to 100%, there were missing data.

the exception of the gay-father families, most of whom would be considered affluent/upper-class, most of the families in the sample would qualify as middle-class (Bennett et al., 2020).

Data collection

Participants completed an interview with the principal investigator or a trained doctoral student in psychology. All interviewers identified as White. Interviews lasted 1–1.5 h and were transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by Clark University's internal human subjects review board. Interviews focused on parents' experiences navigating the physical, emotional, and social changes associated with the transition to adolescence, and included questions like (1) What is your relationship with [child] like? How has it changed? (2) Are there things about [child's] puberty experiences that are different from what you expected? (3) How do you think [child's] race shapes their experience of puberty? (4) Has adolescence raised any new conversations about racial identity or preparing your children for stigma? (5) As a parent of a child of a different race, what has been hard about navigating adolescence? (6) As [child] continues to mature, what do you worry about or hope for?

Sample selection

The sample of 25 families was selected from a larger sample of 128 families (40 lesbian-, 39 gay-, and 49 heterosexual-parent) that participated in interviews 12 years after they transitioned to adoptive parenthood. Each set of parents was asked to select one parent to be interviewed (one parent per household was included). Our sample of 25 parents was selected because they identified as White and they identified their children as Black/biracial.

Data analysis

Parents' responses were transcribed and examined using thematic analysis, a rigorous and deliberate yet theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data involving exploration of recurrent patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Data analysis focused on parents' awareness of race, racial socialization practices, and the salience of parent and child identities in parents' narratives. The authorship team comprises five cisgender women, four White, and one Black, of varying sexual and parent identities. We initiated the coding process with open coding by reading the transcripts multiple times to gain a deep understanding of each parent's perspective, and highlighting passages to inform preliminary ideas about the intersecting identities of children and parents and parents' racial socialization processes.

Following the initial open coding, all authors independently read through the transcripts of lesbian parents only, and wrote memos for each participant to process their understanding and generate ideas about emerging codes. We then discussed salient patterns related to parents' racial awareness, descriptions of conversations with their children about race, and the nature and extent of their racial socialization efforts. We next read transcripts of gay fathers, and heterosexual mothers, and repeated the memo writing. Selective coding was then used to sort the data into initial categories that stayed fairly close to the data and were specific and succinct (e.g., "the police talk"). We also, at this stage, sought to identify larger themes or groupings that serve to unify and provide meaning to codes. For example, "bias preparation" is a theme that subsumes "police talk," and is also connected to larger constructs of interest (e.g., racial socialization).

We refined and elaborated upon our emerging coding scheme as we moved through the coding process. For example, themes related to racial awareness and socialization efforts

(e.g., bias preparation) became more nuanced, and a typology emerged, such that parents could be categorized according to their awareness of race/racism and their approach to racial socialization. We also examined the extent to which child and parent characteristics (e.g., child gender, skin tone, pubertal status; parent gender, sexual orientation, age, social class) intersected with key themes (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). At the final stage, all authors attended to the "storyline" of the findings, such that the data are organized in terms of the typology that emerged as well as cross-cutting themes (i.e., the role of the sociopolitical context in, and the gendered nature of, racial socialization).

FINDINGS

Typology of parents: Racial awareness and socialization

A typology of parents emerged along two key dimensions: awareness of the meaning and reality of race and racism (including reflexivity surrounding their own racial privilege), and approach to racial socialization. In turn, this typology, depicted in Table 2, captures four groups of parents: (1) Minimizing and Reluctant: Parents who were minimally engaged with the realities of race and racism, lacked racial reflexivity, and described minimal racial socialization; (2) Worried and Fumbling: Parents who possessed some awareness of race and racism, but lacked racial reflexivity, and described racial socialization efforts that were limited in scope (e.g., focus on role models); (3) Aware but Cautious: Parents with awareness of race and racism but limited racial reflexivity, and detailed racial socialization efforts that were moderate in scope and generally reactive (e.g., to events or child questions); and (4) Reflexive and Purposeful: Parents with awareness and reflexivity around race and racism, who narrated multiple, often multifaceted dimensions of engaging with children around race. In our analysis, we describe ways in which parents' awareness and actions surrounding race were informed by parents' race, gender, sexual orientation, and age, and children's gender, skin tone, developmental status, and other factors.

Minimizing and reluctant: "I don't see their race being a factor in how they're treated"

Five parents (4 gay fathers, 1 lesbian mother), all White with White partners (except for one White gay father with a Latinx partner), four with biracial children and one with a Black child

TABLE 2 Typology of White adoptive parents: Racial awareness and racial socialization ($N = 25$)

					Racial awareness					
		Racial socialization efforts			**Awareness of the salience of their own racial identity (i.e., reflexive)**			**Awareness of the salience of race in society**		
Parent typology	***N*** **(%)**	**Low**	**Moderate**	**High**	**Low**	**Moderate**	**High**	**Low**	**Moderate**	**High**
Minimizing and Reluctant	5 (20%)	x			x			x		
Worried and Fumbling	2 (8%)		x		x					x
Aware but Cautious	6 (24%)		x			x			x	
Reflexive and Purposeful	12 (48%)			x			x			x

(2 girls, 2 boys, 1 nonbinary), minimized the salience of race and racism for their child and espoused a reluctant, minimalist approach to racial socialization. This group of five parents was generally older (four in their 50s), and affluent (*M* income = $219 K [$266 K excluding the lesbian mother], *Mdn* = $155 K, *SD* = $207 K), suggesting that their multiple privileged statuses may have enabled a lens that centered their own comfort and therefore led them to engage minimally with potential tensions. Lacking reflexivity and espousing a colorblind approach to race, they discounted the relevance of race in their children's lives, thereby invalidating any need to address or engage with race vis a vis their children. Geoff described race as a "ridiculous concept," and Leo mused, about his son, "all of his friends, I don't even know if they see color." A lack of discussion about race seemed at times to reflect avoidance. Geoff, whose son Tim was biracial, noted that when people told Tim that he gets a "really good tan!," Geoff did not feel it was his "place" to say that Tim was half Black.

All four parents of biracial children commented that their children were light-skinned, and downplayed their racial dissimilarity from their White parents and peers ("Zoe is so light-skinned that I think a lot of people don't even realize that they are biracial"; said Tara). These parents insinuated that race was only salient in the context of being dark-skinned and less able to blend in with White people, and implied that racial socialization (and specifically preparation for bias) was therefore less necessary since their children were unlikely to face stigma due to their skin tone. They also asserted that their children knew not to put themselves in situations that might elevate their risk of harm. Geoff said his son was "compliant," followed rules, and knew "not to wear hoodies." Leo, who also talked to his son about "not wearing hoodies," noted that so far, "nobody's been threatening … we're just living life like normal people." Thus, these parents did discuss potential bias with their children, but such conversations were depicted as "one-offs," rather than grounded in ongoing discussions about race/racism, and consisted of directives about how to avoid trouble. These parents saw the risk of bias as low due to their children's light skin and behavioral awareness, and their "safe" communities, which all five parents described as mostly White, and suburban or rural.

Not only did these parents minimize the need to discuss race with their children, they also downplayed the need to connect them to or engage with communities of color. Their narratives suggest that they distanced themselves from or did not engage with certain communities (e.g., Black hair salons, neighborhoods, churches) not only because of their children's light skin tone but also because they were uncomfortable in these communities. In researching hair salons for his daughter, Chris determined that those in his area had photos only of "White [people], with blond hair." Contrasting these with those in a neighboring city that was 25% Black, he noted, "They look like they're near broken down ghetto areas. People are praising how wonderful they are, but it's just the look of where they are. [Partner] said, 'I don't want her to associate that with where somebody who is going to be doing your hair.'" Chris's central focus was on the negative associations his daughter might form, versus the benefits of having her hair done in a Black-centric salon, suggesting she likely had few encounters with mostly-Black communities.

Worried and fumbling: "I don't know how to bridge that gap"

Two parents, both White heterosexual mothers with White partners and sons (1 Black, 1 biracial), were highly cognizant of the significance of race in society and worried about their sons' vulnerability to discrimination and violence. Despite this awareness, they lacked racial reflexivity, and also described limited racial socialization efforts. In their 40s, with a mean family income of $110 K, they grappled with an aversion to the role models their sons were drawn to (e.g., Black media personalities) and voiced dislike for some of their sons' Black friends ("He's a jerk and he's mean … he's bad news"; Sara). Both women's narratives were marked by helplessness and desperation: they sought out Black role models (reflecting both their sense of

responsibility as women and mothers, as well as their perceived positionality outside of the Black community) but did so awkwardly and without success. They recognized their own limitations as White women in terms of accessing Black male role models, but failed to critically reflect on the (in)actions that led to their current sense of alienation and desperation, or the ways in which their judgment of their sons' chosen role models were grounded in privilege and racism.

Sara, for example, said she had tried to, but could not, find people to act as mentors to her son, even in her own "diverse" church (diverse, by her own description, in that it contained "several Black, biracial boys" and "a Black pastor"). Sara had even "said to some friends, 'If you know of any high school African American boys who would love to mentor Jeremy, like, we would love that' … I want him to feel like there's someone in his life who understands that part of him but that's never gone anywhere." Emily felt an intense "need" for Black role models beyond the rap artists her son Rob gravitated toward (especially amidst his recent interactions with the police), but did not feel confident in her ability to find them in their "mostly White" suburb. Thus, as much as these mothers disliked their sons' chosen role models, they voiced a sense of futility in finding alternatives in their mostly White neighborhoods and communities.

Significantly, both women said their sons were voicing distress and anger, telling them they did not "get it" (i.e., their experiences as Black boys). Both women acknowledged their sons' hurt, as well as their own Whiteness, but stopped short of elaborating on how they were working to address the harm they had caused. Said Emily: "He's talked about how our Whiteness has hurt him … Because we don't understand. I get it! I do! So what am I supposed to do? I can't suddenly change that. I can support his desire to explore his culture … But I can't totally change my race." Sara shared, "When he gets mad he says, 'You guys don't understand me because you're not Black.' He says Daddy doesn't understand what it's like to be a Black man. I think that a part of that is true. But I don't want him to fall into a stereotype of what he thinks Black culture is." Thus, Sara conceded, with some hedging, that she could not fully connect to her son's experience as a Black boy in America, but also resisted what she saw as negative representations of Black masculinity for her son (e.g., thugs, rappers). In this way, she pushed back on what she viewed as "controlling images," but lacked ready access to positive alternative images (Dow, 2016). These women's accounts are characterized by helplessness amidst "good intentions"; and, while aware of race, they do not appear to move beyond an acknowledgement of their positionality as White to grapple with the tensions inherent in their experience of parenting Black children with whom they do not share important aspects of lived experience (Barn, 2018). Thus, while they differed from the first group in demonstrating some racial awareness (i.e., they acknowledged, with some tension and reluctance, the significance of race), they lacked racial reflexivity, and in turn demonstrated little meaningful action or engagement with regard to racial socialization.

Aware but cautious: "We brought George Floyd up because we knew she'd hear about it"

Five White parents (3 lesbian mothers, 1 heterosexual mother, 1 gay father), all with White partners, four of whom had biracial children, and one of whom had Black children (2 girls, 2 boys, 1 nonbinary), voiced an awareness of and described engaging in conversations with children about race and racism. Like the "Worried and Fumbling" parents, they demonstrated limited racial reflexivity—but they described more extensive, albeit reactive, racial socialization efforts. These parents, who were in their 40s and had a mean income of \$129 K (Mdn = \$79 K, SD = \$99 K), most often engaged in conversations about race in the context of widely publicized racialized events or in response to children's comments or questions. In this way, they characterized themselves as embodying a responsive approach: They generally did not initiate

or guide such discussions, but waited for their children to take the lead. Marisa, a heterosexual mother, said, "There's a lot of racial education going on [at school] [with] George Floyd … We've been talking about it. I've brought it up myself, but I often let *him* lead that kind of conversation." These parents spoke of validating children's anger about racial injustice and encouraging their activism. They seemed aware of their obligation, as White parents of Black children, to expose their children to same-race peers and adults. In turn, they drew support from Black friends, teachers, and therapists, illustrating a tendency to build children's social capital (Barn, 2018) but also did not immerse themselves in Black communities. Notably, two lesbian mothers named other identities that they viewed as more salient than race which they were seeking to support (e.g., a nonbinary identity; boy with two mothers) via nonbinary and male role models. Kristy, a lesbian mother of a biracial son whom she described as "light skinned", said: "I think having two moms impacts him more [than race]. I know he has said that he wishes he had a dad."

Of note is that while these parents engaged in conversations about race and sought out role models, they generally reflected minimally, if at all, on their own White privilege and did not describe efforts to intervene in racist situations or resist/interrogate racist structures and practices. Several took non-critical stances on practices that might be viewed as adaptations to White dominant culture—such as hair straightening (e.g., Justin thought his daughter looked especially "gorgeous" when she straightened her hair) or the idea that it is always a "good idea" to put up one's hands when encountering a member of law enforcement, as one lesbian mother endorsed. Such practices contrast with the next group of parents.

Reflexive and purposeful: "I feel like holding up the mirror to myself a lot these days"

Thirteen White parents (7 lesbian mothers, 4 heterosexual mothers, 2 gay fathers), 11 with White partners and 2 with Black partners, 9 with Black children, and 4 with biracial/multiracial children (7 girls, 5 boys, and 1 nonbinary child), articulated both an awareness of the salience of race and racism in society as well as reflexivity around their own race and racial differences within the family. In contrast to the other three groups of parents, these parents engaged in racial socialization efforts in a multitude of ways. These parents varied in age, with most in their late 30s and 40s, with a high mean income ($212 K), similar to the "Minimizing" group ($Mdn = \$155$ K, $SD = \$195$ K), highlighting how class privilege did not emerge as a singularly salient social identity vis a vis racial socialization processes. These parents recognized their responsibility to intentionally facilitate their children's racial socialization and identity development in a White supremacist society. These parents were distinct in naming their own racial privilege—such as Becky, a lesbian mother, whose son and ex-wife were both Black—and identifying the conundrum of trying to teach their children about racism when they were White. They were aware that they could "learn [about race and racism], but it's still not the same as living it" (Noreen, lesbian mother). They were distinct from other groups in recognizing the weightiness of being White parents raising Black children in a White supremacist society. Tom, a gay father of a Black son, said, "I spend far less time thinking about them growing up with two dads than I do thinking about them growing up Black." Several parents explicitly noted that their child's race was a "bigger deal" for them in school and society than the fact that they had two moms/dads. Andrea, whose partner and daughter were both Black, said, "We almost talk about [race] more than being part of a queer family. That's come up a lot more around her relationships with school and friends [and] not having many kids with the same skin color in various groups."

These parents described racial identity, privilege, and incidents in ways that went beyond a nod to the "importance" of discussing race, often noting their own gradual awareness and efforts involving race and racism, and recognizing the need to do this work for the sake of their

child's racial identity and self-image. Rather than shying away from racial issues, they tackled them head on, such as addressing racist incidents at school (e.g., discipline of their children for behavior that was tolerated among other students, such as "being loud"; failure to punish children who used racist language), and switching schools in two cases due to racist treatment. Lara, a heterosexual mother, took her daughter out of school after she was "suspended three times" from her gifted program, feeling that they were "leaning on her too hard because she's the only Black kid." These parents drew upon their class privilege to resist school structures they saw as perpetuating unfair treatment (Dow, 2016). That they recognized teachers as potential threats, and not simply as well-meaning resources—the perspective of many middle-class parents—speaks to their ability to broaden their racial frames to recognize the racially distinct and potentially harmful practices that teachers were perpetuating on their children (Dow, 2016).

Some parents detailed their journey to grappling with their own White privilege, and their discussions with their children about (shifting) privilege. Pat, a gay father, said:

> I [think] about how my Whiteness affects them … There may be times where it will protect them… privilege by association. I know there will be plenty of times when it will not. That I do not have the experience of being Black in this country may be a detriment to them because, as much as I try to educate myself and see all the challenges they will have, I may not fully or adequately prepare them. So I keep trying to do my homework.

Thus, these parents were united in their efforts to adjust—or at least be mindful of the impact of—their White racial frame, such that they could consider other ways of seeing and doing. These parents were also united in their description of seeking out and forming authentic relationships with Black people, enacting mindful approaches to parenting Black children, discussing national events involving racial injustice with children, and encouraging their activism (e.g., making a BLM sign, writing a symbolic letter to George Floyd's murderer).

Only a few of these parents—in contrast to none in prior groups—spoke explicitly to efforts to cultivate positive racial identity and racial pride, with most focusing more on avoidance of and preparation for bias, which may reflect the role of the current sociopolitical context. Parents' tendency to focus on their concerns, anticipation, and efforts to minimize racial discrimination in relation to their children points to the heightened relevance of such topics amidst the pervasiveness of BLM in their communities and across the country. Brandi, a lesbian mother, went out of her way to underscore how there were "lots of different ways to be a Black woman," also noting that "when [daughter] complains about feeling ugly, I say, 'Right, but you think [birth sister] is beautiful, and you look exactly like her.' And that's powerful for her; she feels connected to something bigger." Erica, a lesbian mother of a Black son, shared that her child sometimes expressed the wish that "my skin was White like yours," to which she responded, "Your skin is beautiful, your hair is beautiful, you're amazing and I hope you grow up into an adult that appreciates that.'" Erica and several others recognized hair and skin care as key contexts for self-care and self-expression, and areas in which they sought to develop competence, such as by learning how to do their children's hair from friends.

The BLM movement: The backdrop of and impetus for awareness and socialization

Most Reflexive/Purposeful parents, and some Aware/Cautious parents, invoked the sociopolitical climate, and specifically the murders of Black people and the racial justice and BLM movements, as impacting how they were engaging with race and racism with their children. These

movements, which were punctuated by media coverage of Black people being shot by police, citywide protests, and calls for action, served as cultural touchstones for talking about race. These Reflexive/Purposeful and Aware/Cautious parents noted how the deaths of Freddie Grey, Breonna Taylor, and others prompted discussions about racism, social justice, and resistance. Said Pat, a Purposeful gay father: "We lived in St. Louis following Michael Brown, so we talked about the shooting and the violence and racism. Those things are there. It's not like we hit on them all the time, but when we do … he seems to take it really seriously." Several Purposeful parents noted that while national events and protests were salient touchstones for conversations about race/racism, they did not prompt "the" conversation. Tom, a gay father of a Black son, said, "With George Floyd, the conversation we did have—we did not use that as a moment to have a big conversation [about race and racism] because I feel we've been having that all along."

Most Reflexive/Purposeful parents and some Aware/Cautious parents described the recent murders and accompanying protests as prompting discussions that centered on injustice. They validated, and expressed, rage over the killing of Black people, often noting the larger systemic inequities at play. They also stressed preparation for bias in the context of keeping their children safe. At the same time, they drew on the racial justice movement to cultivate awareness and encourage activism. But tensions emerged as some balanced a wish to protect their children emotionally and physically, and a few hung back from attending protests out of a desire to avoid exposing children to the full range of the events. Some may have felt unable to deal with the emotional sequelae of interacting with counter-protesters or police. Dani, a Reflexive/Purposeful heterosexual mother, recalled encountering a group of counter-protesters and struggling with how to respond to them. She imagined herself saying, "You came a very long way to protest my kid's humanity. Screw you," but realized, "these guys came for a fight, and I didn't want [child] to be exposed to that."

Some Reflexive/Purposeful and Aware/Cautious parents, particularly those with sons, acknowledged how the recent murders and protests were not simply a vehicle for awareness and discussion, but also intensified worries related to their children's safety. In turn, a few parents voiced an amplified tension between wishing to keep their children safe yet not wanting to allow fear to dictate their parenting. They sought to prepare their children for bias and teach them ways to protect themselves, but also allowed them some autonomy as they moved into adolescence—albeit at a racially charged time. For example, despite fears about his son's safety, Pat allowed his son to play basketball in the park, recognizing that parenting from a place of anxiety was "not the answer." Amidst a "racing heart" and "worry about what happens if somebody calls the cops on this kid," Pat sought to "let him take age-appropriate strides toward independence."

A gendered, developmentally-informed approach to racial socialization

Parents across the typology, but especially Cautious/Aware and Reflexive/Purposeful parents, tried to prepare their children for, and ideally help them to avoid, racial stereotypes and discrimination. However, parents' concerns and approach to conversations were impacted by the intersection of their children's gender, gender expression and appearance, and pubertal status. Girls who were on time or underdeveloped (still looked "like kids"), gender-conforming, and quiet/compliant, were seen as less likely to encounter sexualized treatment, discrimination, or violence, and in less urgent need of bias preparation. Parents of children assigned female at birth (AFAB) who were early-developing, gender-nonconforming, or "outspoken", were concerned about their vulnerability to sexualized treatment and bias. Parents of sons, particularly early-developing boys, recognized that their children might be seen as threats, and worried about their vulnerability to violence. Parents balanced a desire to prepare their children for and

help them avoid bias with a wish to allow "kids to be kids," amidst general awareness that the need to prepare their children for racist treatment was itself unfair.

Many parents voiced concern about how the intersection of their child's Blackness, gender, and developmental stage would put them at risk for objectification and/or violence. Almost half of parents—across all four types—described their children (7 girls, 4 boys, and 1 nonbinary child) as physically ahead of their peers (i.e., "early developers"), which is notable given evidence that adopted children enter puberty earlier than non-adopted children (Mul et al., 2002). Early developing status interacted with gender to shape parents' racialized concerns and socialization. White parents were aware that their Black daughters' bodies were rendered more visible and on display due to the ways in which they "stood out" from their majority White, on-time developing peers, and were thus more susceptible to scrutiny. Brandi, a lesbian mother, said: "She gets read as being much older than she is. I don't know how much she understands that that's happening, in part because her body is bigger, and in part because she's Black." Brandi struggled with how much she should monitor her daughter's clothing ("Is she allowed to wear crop tops? And what even is sexy?"), such that, "We'll talk about, 'this shirt, you have to wear a shirt underneath it to fit school uniform guidelines.' I try not to be too pushy beyond that, but at the same time I do know that she's going to be seen as more sexualized than a White girl." Parents of early-developing Black girls struggled to find a balance between letting their children "be" (e.g., dress how they want; navigate the world freely) and engaging them with the possibility of how they might be "read" as older and perhaps at risk for sexualized victimization.

A range of parents (i.e., Worried and Fumbling, Aware but Cautious, Reflexive and Purposeful)—including but not limited to the parents of four boys who were described as early developers—were concerned that as Black boys, their children were perceived as older than their age (12) and thus seen as potential "threats," rendering them at risk for victimization, especially at the hands of law enforcement. Erin, a lesbian mother, stated, about her nonbinary child who was assigned male at birth:

> They understand that they are not little and cute anymore, and so feel more acutely aware of how that's affecting them out in the world. They've always had a healthy fear of police officers, but definitely felt more safe when they were younger because it's slightly more safe to be little and cute than to be bigger and taller. Unfortunately that's sort of the reality for most Black kids, and from afar, somebody could think my kid was 16 or 18.

Sensitive to the significance of their children's intersecting identities, these parents often felt compelled to educate their children about the potential for discrimination and violence, and guide them toward behaviors (e.g., politeness) and appearance (e.g., hairstyles, dress) that they believed would reduce the likelihood of negative treatment. Erica, a lesbian mother, said: "I do drill into [both boys], 'If the police ever approach you, make sure your hands are not in the pockets … Even if it's not fair, even if they're wrong, you do whatever they tell you to.' It sounds terrible, but every once in a while, I pop-quiz ask them: 'What do you do if you police approach you?' And they hold their hands up … It's like a muscle memory."

Children's gender nonconformity—specifically in relation to physical appearance, including hair and dress—also intersected with gender and race to shape some parents' racial socialization concerns and efforts. Specifically, several Reflexive/Purposeful parents said their daughters were often mistaken as boys, and voiced worry that they were at increased risk for victimization, wherein they might be viewed as a threat (e.g., because of their masculine appearance) and attacked. In this way, girls whose gender expression blurred the boundaries of male and female were seen as subjects of potentially heightened or unique forms of marginalization (Collins, 2019). Noreen, lesbian mother, said: "She looks like a teenage boy. I did not think that I'd be in a position of having to deal with the particular malice that is often directed at African

American males … We were in this tourist shop, and this guy who worked there was just on her, following her … With his arms crossed." Noreen seemed to believe that her daughter would be less vulnerable to discrimination and violence if she was feminine-appearing, echoing work on Black mothers who saw race as the key reason why their daughters would be vulnerable to targeting by police, while they perceived their sons' vulnerability in terms of the intersection of race and gender (Malone Gonzalez, 2019).

Similarly, a few Reflexive/Purposeful parents worried that their daughters' refusal to behave in a compliant manner (e.g., voicing resistance to being treated unfairly by authority figures) might invite a particular type of retribution (i.e., as a Black female). Lara, a heterosexual mother, voiced concern that her daughter—who was gender nonconforming in appearance, and whose escalating behavioral problems had led to tensions with White teachers—would be the "next Sandra Bland." Lara, and several other parents of gender nonconforming and/or early developing girls gave their children directives designed to keep them safe amidst a potentially elevated threat for scrutiny (e.g., stay calm when dealing with authority figures; always "get a receipt" from stores; "have a smaller pocketbook because with a really big bag, security might follow you").

DISCUSSION

This study of White middle-class adoptive parents of Black/biracial children is unique in addressing parents' racial socialization during a critical juncture in racial politics in the United States. It also includes parents of diverse genders and sexual orientations. The sample diversity lends itself to shedding light on how child and parent identities may intersect to shape the racial socialization of Black/biracial children by White parents and raises many areas for future research.

We documented a typology of White adoptive parents of Black/biracial children who could be characterized according to racial awareness (including racial reflexivity) and racial socialization efforts. In some ways, this typology maps on to some prior work on racial awareness and socialization with White transracial adoptive parents with children of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds, such as that of Barn (2013), whose sample of 15 White heterosexual mothers were characterized as humanitarian (color-blind), ambivalent (minimal awareness of race/racism), and transcultural (aware of racism; intentionally living in racially diverse communities). Studies of racial socialization among White adoptive parents of Black children have similarly made distinctions among parents based on whether they acknowledged or minimized race and how much they provided access to (and personally engaged with) racially diverse communities, as well as how they talked about race with their children (DeBerry et al., 1996; McRoy et al., 1984; Smith et al., 2011). Our typology is distinct insomuch as it captures parents of Black children specifically, who are parenting at a particular sociopolitical moment that warrants—if not demands—racial reckoning. It also includes the component of racial reflexivity, which typologies of transracial adoptive parenting rarely center, but which is highly significant insomuch as it likely infuses parents' conversations, decisions, and socialization behaviors in key ways. Our attendance to this dimension was informed by Feagin's (2013) concept of the White racial frame, which highlights how most White parents of Black children, like most White people, likely do not recognize or interrogate how their beliefs and assumptions are fundamentally White-centered and thus restrict them from centering their Black children's experiences. Our findings suggest that future research on transracial adoptive parents should explicitly incorporate examination of racial reflexivity as a component of racial awareness.

We found that that one group of adoptive parents—all White and mostly affluent gay men in their 50s, with mostly biracial children—described a Minimizing and Reluctant approach to racial socialization, which they appeared to view as non-urgent and elective, amidst a

perception of race as lacking salience in their children's and thus their own lives. Of note is that the one lesbian mother in this group had a nonbinary child, suggesting that perhaps their gender identity may have seemed more salient than their race at this stage. These parents evidenced their White racial frame both through their denial of the significance of race in society and, at times, their possession of stereotypes associated with Black people. For example, one father displayed nervous avoidance of "ghetto" neighborhoods, viewing the possible risks of such exposure as outweighing the potential benefits. There was also evidence that these parents might be uncomfortable in Black spaces. The practice of sacrificing one's comfort for one's child's and choosing to be the racial minority in a given context (e.g., a barbershop) is rare in research on White adoptive parents, but such accounts do exist (Hertz, 2008; Smith & Juárez, 2015).

These parents' privileged statuses as White, mostly male, and affluent may contribute to their tendency to deemphasize the importance of race, and their choice to minimize contact with Black communities (e.g., they lived in rural or suburban White areas). Their older age (mean age in their mid-50s) compared with the other groups of parents (mean age in their 40s) may reflect the legacy of color-blind attitudes learned during their young adulthood in the 1990s, at the peak of color-blindness rhetoric (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000), which, in tandem with race and economic privilege, may obstruct their awareness of and engagement with systemic and everyday acts of racism (Feagin, 2013). Consistent with prior work on affluent White gay fathers, they may prioritize resource-rich settings (e.g., schools, communities) over racially diverse ones because they perceive these as "safer" and also offering greater social advantages (Goldberg et al., 2018). In some ways, this echoes the tension faced by many Black mothers in trying to calculate the trade-offs to their children being educated in "safer" but Whiter schools (Dow, 2015)—but these parents do not appear to be making such trade-offs consciously. Indeed, financial resources do not necessarily translate to increased racial socialization efforts, if unaccompanied by acknowledgement of the impact of one's White racial frame (i.e., reflexivity).

An awareness of the many ways their family is "different" might also help to explain these parents' avoidant approach to race: They may wish to emphasize similarities as opposed to differences in their families, knowing their children may already be labeled as disadvantaged due to not having a mother (Averett, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2016). Further, their children's biracial status may have served to facilitate and justify diminished emphasis on race, amidst awareness of White-centric societal valuation and privileging of light skin over dark skin (Landor et al., 2013). This possibility echoes prior work on racial preferences in adoption, whereby White adopters seek to adopt biracial children out of a belief that they will "blend in" and face less stigma than monoracial Black children (Barn, 2013; Sweeney, 2013). Such perceptions may be shared by some Black parents themselves, who may, for example, worry less about their light-skinned sons being negatively stereotyped (e.g., as thugs or criminals) than their dark-skinned sons (Dow, 2019), and echo prior work suggesting that parents who perceive their biracial (Black/White) children as "White-passing" engage in less frequent discussions of race (Csizmadia et al., 2014).

A second group of Worried and Fumbling parents, two heterosexual mothers, described worry and helplessness in relation to their Black sons. Although a small group, their experiences and concerns are important. These women seemed to have internalized (as women) their responsibility for racial socialization (Brown et al., 2010), but as White people, and women, they lacked the lived experience, and tools and strategies, to help their sons navigate their Black identity development. These women vocalized a sense of desperation amidst their search for Black male models in their White communities: echoing Barn (2018), they seemed to view racial socialization as something that can be imported from "out there" and "for" their sons, as opposed to something which their families could and should immerse themselves in. Yet contrastingly, their approach did not seem to reflect lack of awareness of the benefits of integration into Black culture—but, rather, lack of confidence in their ability to access and engage in it with

their children, by virtue of their Whiteness. Further, they appeared to conceptualize culture, and Black culture, as something that is external rather than something that can be embodied through practices within the home—such as by incorporating aesthetics and socialization practices that center a Black lens rather than reproducing the White racial frame (Feagin, 2013; Twine, 2004).

In the absence of a Black community, their sons were left to learn about Black masculinity from popular media, which these women resisted because they believed their sons' chosen role models embodied negative Black stereotypes. These women's disapproval reflects their failure to recognize that "being Black in America carries 20 generations of negative White racial frames" and the challenging predicament that Black male adoptees contend with amidst pressure to "be more White and less Black" (Smith, 2015, p. 5). Nor did they engage their own potential role in their sons' lack of access to alternative models or images of Black masculinity: indeed, they appeared to have only recently recognized the critical importance of such role models as their sons began to engage with their own emerging Black manhood (Smith, 2015).

Aware but Cautious parents, and Reflexive and Purposeful parents, both enacted racial socialization strategies, but these groups differed in key ways. Aware but Cautious parents generally did not name their own White privilege, and often described their race-related conversations as reactive (i.e., child-initiated) and specific (e.g., tied to a specific child question or racialized event)—and not generally tied to larger issues of structural racism, ongoing self-reflection about their racial identity, or their efforts to connect themselves to the Black community. In this way, they possessed some racial awareness, but lack racial reflexivity, and did not demonstrate the same level of self-initiated, sustained, and engaged racial socialization as Reflexive and Purposeful parents—somewhat echoing work by Lee et al. (2018) showing that among White parents of transracial adoptees, racial awareness is strongly related to racial socialization, such that parents who report high racial awareness feel more confident in their ability to engage in racial socialization, and ultimately do more in terms of both preparation for bias and fostering racial pride.

Indeed, Reflexive and Purposeful parents—who were mostly the parents of Black as opposed to biracial children and thus perhaps especially attuned to the challenges that their possibly darker-skinned children might be facing (e.g., at school; Landor et al., 2013)—recognized the structural nature of racism, pursued relationships with Black people not just for their children but for themselves, sought knowledge about Black hair/skin care, and named their White privilege. Seemingly conscious of the legacy and presence of White racism in the U.S. society, they appeared to recognize the White racial frame, and sought to absorb and teach alternative frames to their Black children. This was especially evident in their resistance to the racist nature of school structures. By refusing to request that their children adapt to majority White institutions, they communicated important lessons that may have had protective effects on children's self-esteem and identity (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002). Particularly notable is that they were equally well-resourced as Minimizing and Reluctant parents, yet such resources were deployed differently in the presence of high racial awareness, such that they felt empowered (perhaps aided by racial and financial privilege) to be directive in addressing racial bias against their children, echoing work on middle-class Black parents (Caughy et al., 2002; Hill, 1999; White-Johnson et al., 2010). Also notable is that Reflexive and Purposeful parents were younger, as a whole (30s/40s), perhaps reflecting exposure to a more liberal set of social attitudes and behaviors regarding race during their formative years (Davis, 2001). Most were also lesbians, who may have been especially attuned to issues of privilege and difference amidst their own multiply disadvantaged statuses as women and sexual minorities, as well as their own personal experiences handling discrimination (Goldberg, 2009; Richardson & Goldberg, 2010).

Both Aware but Cautious, and (especially) Reflexive and Purposeful parents, invoked the racial justice movement and specific murders of Black men at the hands of law enforcement in outlining the impetus for, and nature of, recent race-related conversations with their children,

particularly their sons. Witnessing events that involved activism (e.g., protests) also appeared to facilitate valuable discussions about justice, more broadly. Yet tensions emerged as some parents voiced concerns about children's vulnerability amidst activist encounters and protests (Abaied et al., 2021; Underhill, 2018). Their reluctance may have been fueled by anticipation of the difficult feelings that such events might engender in them (Hertz, 2008) and their children (e.g., about differences in privilege), as well as general concerns about unrest and violence. Attendance at such events likely evokes a complex set of feelings, as documented by recent findings that Black adolescents who participated in BLM protests experienced both positive emotions as well as vulnerability (e.g., exposure to risk of violence; Baskin-Sommers et al., 2021).

Children in the sample were at a critical developmental period, on the cusp of or just entering their teen years. Consistent with prior work documenting earlier puberty among Black (Herman-Giddens et al., 2012) and adopted (Mul et al., 2002) youth, half of parents described their children as early developers—which has racialized and gendered implications (e.g., in terms of how they may be seen by outsiders). In turn, gender intersected with appearance (e.g., appearing older or gender-nonconforming) to shape children's experiences and parents' perceptions of urgency in preparing their children for bias. Echoing prior work (McHale et al., 2006), and in line with a gendered racialized frame (Feagin, 2013), parents were more likely to engage in preparation for bias with sons than with daughters, especially when they looked older than they were; or, when AFAB children could be mistaken for Black men, reflecting concerns about stereotypes of Black men as threatening (Goff et al., 2014). Thus, few parents—and generally parents of more masculine-appearing girls—noted an awareness that their Black daughters might come under scrutiny for being too loud, aggressive, or unladylike, and thus face the risk of harassment by authority figures (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Malone Gonzalez, 2019; Morris, 2007), underscoring how attention on Black men as violent may undermine parents' understanding and preparedness related to Black girls' gendered racial vulnerability (Leath et al., 2020). Notably, some parents were concerned about their Black daughters' risk for sexualization, a theme that has been discussed in relation to Black mothers of Black daughters (Leath et al., 2020), but one that may be more challenging or awkward for White parents of Black daughters to raise, given a lack of shared experience. Finally, hair care/styling also emerged as a site of gendered racial socialization, whereby parents of Black girls sometimes cared for and celebrated children's hair, but also—with the exception of Reflexive and Purposeful parents—showed allegiance to Western beauty ideals, messaging that may impact girls' racial pride versus shame (Davis Tribble et al., 2019).

Limitations

Our sample was relatively small and did not include heterosexual fathers, limiting the range of perspectives that we documented. Such inclusion may have enriched our understanding of how parents' gender may intersect with their own identities and those of their children to shape their parenting and racial socialization. Further, most parents were well-educated and financially stable (although incomes varied widely, from $34 k to $750 k), which necessarily interfaced with their race and gender, as well as their children's race, age, and gender, to shape parents' attitudes and behaviors vis a vis racial socialization (e.g., choice of communities and schools). And, perhaps because the sample was generally well resourced, we had limited ability to document how parents' racialized practices or concerns varied by social class within the sample. Further, although generally affluent, the sample was heterogenous in many ways, limiting our ability to explore many intersections in depth. Future research is needed to probe the lived experience of these intersecting identities among adoptive families.

We intentionally focused on the experiences of White adoptive parents of Black/biracial children to learn how they are navigating racial socialization amidst a different lived racial

experience from their children. Attention to the racial socialization experiences of Black adoptive parents, adoptive parents of other racial identities, and adoptive parents in interracial relationships, who are parenting Black and biracial/multiracial children, is needed. Also, while parents often commented on the skin tone of their children in ways that suggested a rough correspondence of monoracial Black and biracial with darker and lighter skin tones, respectively, we did not explicitly inquire about it. Given the significant variability across both Black monoracial and biracial children, future research should more systematically inquire about skin tone so as not to falsely equate mono/biraciality with skin color. Relatedly, we relied on parents' descriptions of their children's race. Children might describe their race differently. Future work should explore both parents' and children's racial identifications, as these might differ from each other and/or have different relationships to parents' socialization processes (Landor et al., 2013).

While this study was timely in that parents were interviewed in the years following the beginning of the BLM movement and amidst a period of racial and political unrest, their narratives represent only a snapshot of White adoptive parents' attitudes toward racial socialization during a particular moment in time. Although some parents did reflect on their personal development of racial awareness, we did not specifically ask about changes related to racial attitudes and socialization over the course of their children's lives. Many of the parents in this study may have been less aware of systems of power and privilege when they adopted Black children over a decade ago. Amidst the ongoing shifts in the current sociopolitical context, it would be valuable for longitudinal work to explore the evolution of racialized attitudes and awareness among White adoptive parents of Black children over time.

Implications

Our study is based on the accounts of a heterogenous group of 25 middle-class adoptive White parents. In turn, while future research is needed, our findings suggest that adoption agencies and prospective adoptive parents should recognize that not all White parents should adopt a Black child. Further, agencies should ensure that all White prospective parents who are interested in adopting a Black child receive in-depth training and guidance that critically challenges their White racial frame. White parents who ultimately adopt Black children should receive ongoing support from adoption agencies as their children grow, to facilitate racial reflexivity and sustained racial socialization efforts (Goldberg, 2009; Twine, 2004).

Our findings suggest that racial socialization can often be a challenging process for both White adoptive parents and their Black/biracial children, with notable variability in parents' chosen approaches. Understanding this variability is aided by incorporating awareness of Feagin's (2013) concept of a White racial frame, in tandem with an intersectional approach that attends to children's and parents' identities in an effort to better understand which parents, in which situations, are most and least likely to enact and deploy alternative counter-frames.

Clinicians working with multiracial families formed by transracial adoption should ensure that their treatment plans and resource offerings incorporate racial socialization as a key aspect of multiracial family well-being.

CONCLUSION

As Smith (2015) notes, "Living in a Black body in a White family carries the daily stigma of race that middle class affluence cannot resolve beyond the boundaries of the home" (p. 5). Parents in our study showed some awareness of this fact, but this awareness was not always deployed into productive action. Some—mostly gay fathers—chose to downplay the

significance of race. Several heterosexual mothers voiced a sense of helplessness amidst their awareness of the racism that their Black sons would likely face. Aware/Cautious and Reflexive/Purposeful adoptive parents both discussed race with their children—yet the reactive approach favored by the first group may render their racial socialization messages less impactful than the more proactive approach of the latter. The contrast between these two groups of parents also reveals the importance of learning about structural racism for White adoptive parents (Feagin, 2013): It is this knowledge that enables them to be prepared as consistent agents of racial socialization rather than delivering messages about race in response to racialized events as they occur. Overall, our findings provide insights into the nuances and complexities involved in raising adopted Black children, especially in our current sociopolitical context in which there is a collective call to action for racial justice.

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