Learning (Not) to Know: Examining How White Ignorance Manifests and Functions in White Adolescents′ Racial Identity Narratives

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ABSTRACT

In critical approaches to the study of whiteness, white ignorance refers to systematic and intentional ways of (not) knowing that function to perpetuate racism. The current critical qualitative analysis examines how white ignorance surfaces in the racial identity narratives of white adolescents ($N = 69$, $M_{age} = 15.91$, $SD = 0.49$, data collected 2017–2019). Using semi-structured interview data, we identified three manifestations of accommodation to white ignorance: *constructing white as disadvantaged*, *framing race(ism) as unimportant and elsewhere*, and *the active refusal to know or imagine racial oppression*. Alongside this accommodation we also observed a less common but important thread of resistance to white ignorance: *seeing (and naming) systemic racism*. The findings reveal how white ignorance as a macrosystemic cultural practice becomes embedded in, and strengthened through, the micro-level racial identities of white adolescents. Implications for conceptualizing and contextualizing white racial identity in developmental science are discussed.

1 | Introduction

There has been increased attention in developmental science to confronting whiteness, evident by the number of special issues focused on fostering anti-racism in childhood and adolescence (Cooper, Hurd, and Loyd 2022; Kornbluh, Rogers, and Williams 2021; Spanierman 2022). While these efforts are not limited to studies of white children, developmental scholars have increasingly turned to studying race among white youth and families examining micro-level processes of white identity development (e.g., Grossman and Charmaraman 2009; Satterthwaite-Freiman et al. 2023), individual racial attitudes and biases (e.g., Rizzo, Britton, and Rhodes 2022; Pahlke, Bigler,

and Suizzo 2012), and racial socialization beliefs and practices (e.g., Abaied and Perry 2021; Zucker and Patterson 2018). These studies are important for informing how white children and adolescents perceive, learn about, and negotiate racism within their micro-systems of development. However, such micro processes are embedded within the broader macrosystem of a racial hierarchy organized by white supremacy, and yet this macrosystem and its material effects have been un(der)examined or relegated as secondary in developmental studies of whiteness. Rogers et al. (2021) introduced the *m(ai)cro* framework to make explicit the inextricable and recursive nature through which the macro- and micro-systems shape each other in human development. M(ai)cro flips the starting point, centering the racial

macrosystem of white supremacy and anti-Blackness in developmental studies in an effort to reveal how racial domination and power are implicated in, and never separate from, micro-level processes (Rogers et al. 2021).

In the current paper, we take a m(ai)cro developmental lens to investigate the macro and micro dynamics of white ignorance during adolescence. White ignorance is the epistemic dimension of structural white supremacy and systemic racism (Boodman 2022; Mills 2007). It is a collective epistemology of erasure, a distorted way of (not) knowing that is rooted in violent histories of colonialism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity (Foste and Tevis 2023; Roberts 2011). To date, white ignorance has not been an explicit point of study in the developmental literature, however, making known the specific ways that white ignorance manifests during adolescence can provide insight into how to dismantle, dislodge, and deconstruct the cultural practices that (re)produce white racial domination. In the present analysis, we use a m(ai)cro white ignorance lens to examine qualitative interviews with white adolescents (15–16 years old) to listen for how the macrosystem of white supremacy surfaces in white adolescent racial identity development.

1.1 | A M(ai)cro Developmental Lens to Epistemologies of White Ignorance

Epistemology refers to knowledge and conceptions of truth; our ways of knowing about and understanding the world (Sullivan and Tuana 2007). The concept of white ignorance as epistemology emerges from Charles Mills's work on the *Racial Contract*, wherein he describes ignorance as an "inverted epistemology" characterized by "pervasive patterns of not-seeing and not-knowing" (Mills 1997, 2003, p. 46). Applebaum (2010) similarly defines white ignorance as a "pattern of (mis)understanding the world that is connected to and works to sustain systems of oppression and privilege" (p. 37). In other words, white ignorance does not refer to a mere absence of knowledge but rather is in and of itself a particular way of knowing and being in the world that is deliberate and available because social structures support and endorse white ignorance as a form of *knowledge* (Applebaum 2010). For instance, Mills (2003) describes white ignorance as a "non-knowing which is not the innocent unawareness of truths to which there is no access but a self-and social shielding from racial realities" that is made possible in a white supremacist racial system (p. 45). This particular form of racial (not) knowing avoids, distances, and downplays the oppressive realities of white supremacy at both the macro-level of politics, social institutions, and cultural practices, and the micro-level of identity, attitudes, and behaviors (Coleman, Collins, and Bonam 2021; Leonardo 2009). In this way, white ignorance is not a passive individual process but structural and intentional (Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2023). In sum, an epistemology of white ignorance actively maintains certain ways of knowing and seeing the self and society that are in service of justifying, upholding, and (re)producing white racial domination (Mills 2007).

In the current study, we bring the concept of white ignorance into conversation with developmental science to examine how the structural practice of white ignorance is learned, refashioned, and potentially resisted during adolescence. To do so, we apply a critical developmental lens (e.g., the m(ai)cro model of human development) that positions systems of power not as distant or distal in development, but as close and proximal, intimately experienced and negotiated in identity development (Rogers et al. 2021). The m(ai)cro model of human development situates all aspects of development in the macrosystem of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. In doing so, m(ai)cro demands simultaneous attention to the macro- and micro-systems in order to make visible how power and hierarchy surface in developmental processes, while at the same time underscoring the agency that individuals possess to respond, challenge, or resist dehumanizing systems. M(ai)cro also frames the racial macrosystem itself *as a source of* socialization, meaning that by virtue of children's development in a white supremacist society, they learn, encounter, and negotiate dominant racial scripts and ideologies that inform how they make meaning of themselves and others (Rogers et al. 2021; Rogers, Rosario, et al. 2021).

In the context of whiteness, a *m(ai)cro white ignorance* lens is distinct from psychological approaches to studying white identity (Helms 1995) and anti-racism (Hazelbaker et al. 2022; Woolverton and Marks 2024) because the individual is not the sole unit of analysis nor the starting point for interpretation (Rogers 2018). In traditional developmental models, the white person's racial narrative or location on their journey toward anti-racism is the primary focus (Dull, Rogers, and Charlson 2024). A m(ai)cro approach to studying whiteness differs in that it does not seek to demarcate "where" a white person is on a developmental set of stages or statuses, but rather the nature through which the macrosystem of white supremacy is (re)produced, maintained, and challenged within the micro-system. By doing so, m(ai)cro is explicitly transactional in that it views self and society as "actively and jointly (re)constructed" making visible the recursive nature through which the macro and micro shape each other (Rogers 2018, p. 2). Thus, taking a m(ai)cro perspective to white ignorance identifies the macrosystem of white supremacy as a central object of study and critique when investigating micro-level narratives of white identity (Rogers et al. 2021).

1.2 | The Development of White Ignorance and White Identity During Adolescence

Foregrounding a m(ai)cro white ignorance lens in studies of white child and adolescent development disrupts the notion of a "neutral" racial development. As opposed to becoming more knowledgeable about racism and one's own racial identity (as is most often the case with children of color; Rogers et al. 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014), considerable research has shown that the normative trajectory for white children is learning to not know and not see the racial realities that shape themselves and society (e.g., Perry 2002; Hagerman 2018; Rogers, Moffitt, and Foo 2021; Moffitt, Rogers, and Dastrup 2021; Wray-Lake et al. 2023; Dull, Rogers, and Charlson 2024). For instance, Apfelbaum et al.'s (2008) experimental study speaks to the process through which (mostly white) children learn to "not" talk about race. The authors find that 8–9-year-old children outperform 10–11-year-old children on a task wherein naming and acknowledging racial differences facilitates one's performance. Though the authors describe this as a "developmental anomaly," a white ignorance lens interprets this as a predictable pattern

given one's socialization into a racial system that encourages and rewards racial not knowing. Or put in another way, the macrocontext of white supremacy constructs white ignorance as the normative developmental competency for white children. Importantly, this developmental trajectory toward white ignorance is not "natural" or "inherent" but is the product of a culture organized by white supremacy (Roberts 2011). Positioning white ignorance as *learned* directs attention to the developmental processes and contexts that are implicated in facilitating and preserving the intergenerational transmission of white ignorance (and thus, white supremacy; Spanierman 2022).

Centering the structural and cultural context of white ignorance and white supremacy in studies of white identity development does not negate or suggest that white children and adolescents are passive recipients of this cultural context. Like all youth, white adolescents *actively* negotiate and take up or rework dominant ideologies and epistemic practices during adolescence (Rogers and Way 2021). A m(ai)cro white ignorance frame is attuned to the agentic ways that white children resist (i.e., challenge structures and dehumanizing ideologies) and/or accommodate (i.e., align and maintain structures and dehumanizing ideologies) to dominant racial narratives as they construct their racial identities (Rogers et al. 2021; Rogers and Way 2021). By doing so, m(ai)cro holds space for liberation, framing resistance to white supremacy as a normative and necessary developmental outcome for white adolescents (in addition to youth of color). For instance, whereas youth of color in the United States must resist narratives that position them as inferior to white people, it is the work of white youth to learn to resist those same narratives that position them as superior to and dominant over all "others."

Though there is a paucity of research in this area, the extant literature does not find that white youth resist white supremacy very often (Moffitt and Rogers 2022). Indeed, most research shows how white children and adolescents regularly accommodate and uphold the system of white supremacy during development through many facets, such as viewing whiteness as inconsequential to their sense of self (Hazelbaker and Mistry 2022; Moffitt, Rogers, and Dastrup 2021), in addition to forgetting and strategically not knowing or caring about the injustices and privileges they are aware of (Dull, Rogers, and Charlson 2024; Hagerman 2018). Further, while developmental studies have not explicitly used the concept of white ignorance per se, there is evidence of the ways in which ignorance manifests in white youth's development as colorblindness. Colorblindness refers to an ideology that denies and dismisses the significance and existence of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2021; Doane 2017). Developmental research finds that many white parents engage in colorblind racial socialization practices with their children (if they discuss race at all; Abaied and Perry 2021) and that many white adolescents endorse colorblind attitudes and beliefs when talking about race and identity (e.g., Hagerman 2018; Moffitt, Rogers, and Dastrup 2021; Rogers and Way 2021).

Importantly, white ignorance includes, but is not restricted to, colorblindness. As many critical whiteness scholars argue, whiteness is an ongoing process that shifts and transforms in an effort to maintain dominance (Leonardo 2009; Doane 2017). Thus, a developmental white ignorance analysis can broaden our lens to reveal both the emerging and sustained cultural ideologies and practices that white youth have access to as they negotiate and form their racial identities (Mueller 2017). In other words, whereas colorblindness or "not seeing" race has been a dominant way of knowing, a white ignorance frame allows for new logics (e.g., "seeing" race but misrepresenting racism) that continue to reflect and reinforce the interests of whiteness (Mueller 2020).

1.3 | The Current Study

The current study extends existing developmental research by foregrounding the macrosystem of white supremacy in analyses of white identity development. Specifically, we apply a m(ai)cro white ignorance lens to make visible how white supremacy shapes, and is (re)produced through, everyday practices of racial (not) knowing in the lives of white adolescents (Mueller 2020; Rogers et al. 2021). Our analysis was exploratory and guided by the following research question: *How do white adolescents demonstrate and engage with (via accommodation and resistance) white ignorance in their racial identity narratives?* In our analysis and interpretation, we center the macrosystem of white supremacy (and anti-Blackness) by positioning (a) white ignorance as a structural, collective, and intentional practice in the U.S., while also (b) attending to the transactional nature through which individual practices of white ignorance feedback into the system of white supremacy. Importantly, the aim of the present analysis was not to test or "prove" whether white ignorance exists; rather our analysis starts from the macrosystem of white supremacy and asks *how* and *in what ways* white ignorance shows up in white adolescents' developing racial identities. In this way, studying white ignorance during adolescence provides a window into how the system of white supremacy is inextricable from the development of white identities.

2 | Methods

The data for the current study are from a larger mixed-methods longitudinal study that investigated relations between adolescent physical and emotional health, socioeconomic status, resilience, and identity (Miller et al. 2018). The full study included 277 adolescents from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds located in the Midwestern United States who participated in three waves of data collection from 2015 to 2019. All participants were invited to complete a semi-structured interview focused on identity ($N = 253$ completed the interview) in order to examine how youth understood and interpreted societal privilege and oppression related to their identities. The current analysis includes the white adolescents who completed the interview.

2.1 | Participants and Procedure

Our analysis includes the 69 monoracial (non-Hispanic) white adolescents ($M_{age} = 15.91$, SD $= 0.49$). Sixty-two percent of the participants identified as female ($n = 43$), and the remaining identified as male ($n = 26$, 38%); other non-binary genders were not included on the demographic measure. Socioeconomic status was measured through parent's highest level of education

where 84% of participants had a parent with a bachelor's degree or higher (48% had graduate degree), with the remaining parents having either a high school diploma (12%) or some college education (4%). We also assessed the percentage of white students in participants' schools ($n = 58/69$ reported school information) finding that many white adolescents (74%) attended schools where white youth made up less than 50% of the school population. Similarly, for neighborhood characteristics (measured at the census block level), the mean number of white people in participants' neighborhoods was 64% ($SD = 0.20$), and the median neighborhood family income was $139,868. Table 1 presents further demographic details.

Participants completed a single, one-on-one semi-structured interview at an on-campus university research center. The interview length ranged from 20 to 45 min and took place between 2017 and 2019. The interviews were conducted by trained staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers. The racial identities of the researchers were either Asian or white. That some participants did not share a racial identity with their interviewer may have impacted the comfortability of some white adolescents, though in general, participants seemed open in their interview responses. All participants and guardians signed written assent and consent forms to participate in the study, and the procedures were approved by the university research board.

2.2 | Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' meaning-making around their racial and gender identities and experiences. The current analysis focuses on the part of the interview that asks specifically about white racial identity. Participants were asked a series of questions such as, "What are some of the good things about being white?"/"What do you think other people think about white people?"/"Try to imagine that you weren't white, how do you think things would be different?" (see Appendix S1 for the interview protocol). Through the lens of racial identity, we were able to capture how white participants understand and make meaning of their racial location within the context of white supremacy (Dull, Rogers, and Charlson 2024). In other words, in asking white youth about their own racial identities we not only learn about "individual" experiences but also the cultural ideologies and practices that are inextricable from how youth construct meanings around themselves and others (Rogers 2018; Rogers, Moffitt, and Jones 2021).

2.3 | Positionality and Reflexivity

Both positionality and reflexivity were embedded throughout the research process to consider how our own ways of knowing and being shaped the ways in which we interpreted and made sense of the data. To ensure that the data were not interpreted from a single viewpoint, the authors intentionally used *intersubjective recognition* (Levitt et al. 2021). Intersubjective recognition actively seeks to disrupt epistemic privilege by foregrounding multiple perspectives in the research process, but most especially during data analysis and interpretation. Such an approach

TABLE 1 | Participant demographics ($N = 69$).

Demographics	M (SD) or n (%)
Age	15.91 (0.49)
Gender	
Female	43 (62%)
Male	26 (38%)
Parent education	
High school diploma	8 (12%)
Some college	3 (4%)
Bachelor's degree	25 (36%)
Graduate degree	33 (48%)
School ($n = 58$)	
Public school	48 (83%)
Private school	10 (17%)
Census block ($n = 69$)	
% white	64% (0.20)
Average family income (Mdn)	$139,868

Note: Age was reported at time of the interview and non-binary genders were not included on the demographic questionnaire.

underscores that multiple interpretations or ways of seeing the data are not nefarious or harmful to the integrity and trustworthiness of the analysis. On the contrary, that we approached the data from various epistemological standpoints (the first author identifies as a white man, and both the second and third authors identify as Black women) increased our ability to wrestle with multiple interpretations and more fully uncover the complexity in how white adolescents displayed, endorsed, and at times, resisted, white ignorance. This critical epistemology informed our orientation to the data not only in how we analyzed and made sense of the narratives but also in how we position and situate this data within the broader literature. Our interest was not to investigate white racial identity and white ignorance because it has been studied little, but rather because making visible the ways that whiteness is socialized, understood, and negotiated by those who it benefits (in this case white adolescents) is one such way to begin to dismantle the current racial system and reimagine alternate ways of being that are rooted in justice and liberation.

2.4 | Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in NVivo qualitative software program. Our qualitative analysis followed Wolcott's (1994) three levels of analysis (description, analysis, interpretation) and was primarily inductive, listening firstly to what and how white adolescents described their racial identities and experiences with whiteness (Rogers, Moffitt, and Jones 2021; Wolcott 1994). To make sense of the emerging codes, we applied the concept of white ignorance (Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2023) to guide the development of the codebook and analysis of the data.

Corces-Zimmerman and Guida (2023) outline three central characteristics of white ignorance. First, that white ignorance is characterized by a *not* knowing or an unwillingness to consider what one does not know all the while believing that one knows (Applebaum 2010). Second, an epistemology of ignorance is the default, meaning that though white people may resist or challenge white ignorance in certain moments, white ignorance is a habitual and everyday way of knowing that white people in the United States are socialized into. Last, white ignorance is not merely an individual deficiency but is a "systematically reinforced way of thinking" that reflects and reinforces white supremacy (Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2023, 76). These three characteristics provided a lens, a way of seeing, situating, and making sense of white ignorance in our analysis.

In the first analysis phase, *description*, the first and third authors became familiar with the data by reading all the interview transcripts and memoing on salient moments in the interview, particularly moments in which participants spoke about the existence or absence of racism in their lives (Birks, Chapman, and Francis 2008). During this process, we also performed "open coding" to capture the many ways in which we heard, or did not hear, white ignorance surface in white youth's racial identity narratives (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In this initial phase, we listened for white ignorance in terms of what participants claimed to (not) know about racism, whiteness, privilege, and oppression. The open coding process generated data-driven codes such as "reverse racism" and "refusal to imagine." The purpose of this phase was to (a) consider whether a white ignorance lens could be applied to the data and (b) uncover preliminary patterns. All authors reviewed the coding and memoing and decided to focus the analysis on the development of white ignorance during adolescence.

Importantly, in this first phase of coding, we noticed that seven of the participants (10%) focused the interview only on their ethnic background and thus provided little to analyze in relation to white ignorance. The narratives of these participants mostly focused on cultural traditions and heritage, rather than race and whiteness. For instance, Freya, when asked what the good things about her racial identity are responded: "I describe myself as being like Serbian... Um we res- like we respect our culture, we like cherish like holidays like, even though we have like, some different holidays." Although racialized as white in the U.S. context where they resided, these seven participants did not discuss their experiences with whiteness and thus were not included in the subsequent coding and analyses. It is important to note, however, that focusing on ethnicity and ignoring race is itself a form of not knowing that is aligned with white ignorance (Moffitt and Rogers 2022). To keep close to the data, the remaining coding and analysis focused on those participants who explicitly reflected on race and whiteness as prompted in the interviews ($n = 62/69$, 90%).

In the second phase, *analysis*, the authors discussed and organized the codes generated from open coding into a preliminary codebook. During this process, the codes were situated into an accommodation or resistance framework (Rogers and Way 2021) to capture the diverse ways that white adolescents were engaging with epistemologies of white ignorance. For example, one of the open codes, "*reverse racism*," was situated under *accommodation to white ignorance* because it upholds not knowing about racism. In contrast, the open code, "*named systemic racism*," was interpreted as *resistance to white ignorance* because it counters race silence and denial. The first and third authors then coded the same 50% of interviews with the codebook ($n = 35$). After verifying that the initial codebook was accurately capturing the breadth of the data, and that both coders were applying and interpreting the codebook in a similar manner, the remaining 50% of the interviews were divided and coded by the first or third author. The coders met weekly during this phase to discuss the coding process and consider the various interpretations of participants' narratives (Levitt et al. 2021). All coding decisions were made with consensus among team members after careful reflection on multiple interpretations and critical approaches to white ignorance.

In the final phase, *interpretation*, we integrated the m(ai)cro model of human development with the white ignorance literature in critical whiteness studies (i.e., *m(ai)cro white ignorance*) to make sense of and situate our findings. A m(ai)cro white ignorance lens oriented us toward seeing and hearing how white supremacy served as a developmental context and source of socialization in white adolescents' racial identity development (Moffitt and Rogers 2022). This approach also foregrounded agency within the system (e.g., Rogers and Way 2021), which meant analyzing how white adolescents' engagement with white ignorance reinforced or disrupted the larger macrosystem of white supremacy. Importantly, by taking up the m(ai)cro lens, our aim in this analysis was not to identify individual white adolescents as racist (or anti-racist), but instead to reveal the ways in which white adolescent racial identity development is inextricable from the macrosystem of white supremacy, which supplies white youth with readily available, and often problematic, resources for making sense of themselves and others (Bucholtz 2011; Moffitt and Rogers 2022).

3 | Results and Discussion

We identified three themes that captured how white adolescents engaged with and accommodated to white ignorance in their racial identity narratives: (a) *constructing white as disadvantaged*; (b) *framing race(ism) as unimportant and elsewhere*; and (c) *the active refusal to know or imagine racial oppression*. We also uncovered one thread of resistance, which was characterized by white adolescents *seeing (and naming) systemic racism*. In our analysis, we did not find a singular way in which white ignorance manifested for each participant. Rather, white adolescents often voiced multiple forms of white ignorance such that the themes, as shown below, overlap throughout their interviews (see Table 2).

3.1 | Constructing White as "Disadvantaged"

One manner through which white ignorance surfaced was in how white adolescents distorted and denied systems of white supremacy to construct whiteness (and themselves) in a position of disadvantage. Rather than downplay or negate the existence of racism, white youth, instead, articulated how the system of

TABLE 2 | Qualitative themes of white ignorance in white adolescents' racial identity narratives ($n=62$).

Themes of white ignorance	n (%)	Description	Example quote
Constructing White as Disadvantaged			
"Prejudice against white people"	15 (24%)	White adolescents described being discriminated against because of their position within the racial system	I feel like normally you're treated better because you're white, that's what the stereotype is, but from what I've experienced the—pendulum I think is the expression—it's swung the other way. I feel like since everyone is trying to be correct that it's more negative.—Ryan
"All white people are racist"	26 (42%)	White adolescents described the "stereotype" they must contend with, that all white people are racist, as being a form of discrimination or unfair treatment	I think people always think of white people as being more racist. Like I like a lot of people so it's like somebody calling me a racist is not correct.—Adam
Framing Race(ism) as Unimportant and Elsewhere			
"We're all the same"	20 (33%)	White adolescents downplaying or ignoring the manifestations of racism, arguing that they do "not see" race	I don't, I don't see anybody else as different like at all. Like I don't really care what your skin, what your race is like you're still the same person on the inside even if you look different on the outside….—Connor
"There's not really any of that here"	31 (45%)	White adolescents acknowledging the significance of race and racism but contradictorily not seeing or noticing race in their own proximal contexts	Um I mean there would be people that like– not really around here just 'cause it's kind of a more liberal place—but in other places there would be people that like hated you just for no reason just because of your race or ethnicity, um.' —Sophie
The Active Refusal to Know or Imagine Racial Oppression			
"Uh, I don't really care"	13 (21%)	White adolescents refusing to know about racism by not caring or engaging	Q: How does it make you feel when you think about what others think of your race? A: Um, it doesn't really bother me; I just don't really think it has that much effect.—Rachel
"Um, I don't know"	16 (26%)	White adolescents being unable (or unwilling) to imagine themselves as racialized or how they themselves benefit from, and contribute to, the racial system	A: I don't know; it's not really anything that's hard about it [being white] because that's just how it is, so I don't really super know the difference I guess. [Q: Okay. So, what do you think other people think about your racial identity?] A: Um I don't really know.—Noah

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Themes of white ignorance	n (%)	Description	Example quote
Resisting Ignorance: Seeing (And Naming) Systemic Racism			
"That is a deep-rooted belief in America"	10 (16%)	White adolescents discussing racism as systemic and/or the current reverberations of historical racism	Q: If you had to write an essay about what you think it means to be white what are some of the things you'd write about? A: Um history. [Q: What about the history?] A: How white people have continued to stay on top of the metaphorical food chain. [Q: And why do you think that's important?] A: Because our history is really important, it's where we come from; um it's how we like, it's how we learn not to make the same mistakes twice.—Bethany

Note: The white ignorance analysis focuses on the 62/69 adolescents who discussed being white.

racism negatively impacts them. This occurred in two distinct ways: (a) claims of reverse racism or discrimination ("prejudice against white people"); and (b) describing the "negative" racist stereotypes white people endure in the current sociopolitical context ("all white people are racist").

"*Prejudice against white people.*" Some white adolescents described being discriminated against *because* of their (privileged) position within the racial system ($n = 15$, 24%), which was more commonly voiced among white boys (though not exclusively). For instance, when asked what some of the good things are about being white, Oliver responded:

> I think there are less good things about being white right now, you know, I, you know, the whole thing about how white people get what they want; I don't really, haven't really experienced that. I applied for a job at Whole Foods and I was the only white male there and you know if that stereotype was right then I would have gotten that job because, you know, I was the male and I was white, and it was all transgender women, colored women and women, so I was the one male and there were other males but they were obviously other colors, but that stereotype would have been correct but I didn't get that job.

Here, we see Oliver claim that if the racial system was working by design, he should have "gotten that job" above all others, given his positionality as white and male. In other words, Oliver "knows" and recognizes how his positionality is granted privilege in society; however, since he ultimately "didn't get that job," he attributes this to the "less good things about being white right now." Another participant, Sam, also located whiteness in a position of disadvantage, explaining that "it's hard" to be white because "it's harder to get into colleges, some colleges want unique, more unique people. So, if I have the same stats as another student but he's like a Pacific Islander then maybe he gets in before me." Reflecting what he seems to know about the former policy of affirmative action, Sam, like Oliver quoted above, articulates a perceived racial disadvantage that does not recognize the systematic effort to recalibrate the legacy of white racial advantage in education (and society writ large).

Interpreted through a m(ai)cro white ignorance frame, neither Sam nor Oliver demonstrate an absence of racial knowledge, but rather reflect the macro epistemology of white ignorance that positions whiteness as disadvantaged. This reconstrual serves to redirect the focus from the systemic and historic realities of racial oppression toward individualized accounts of "reverse racism" in the present. In doing so, Sam and Oliver illustrate how white ignorance is not the *lack of knowing* but a *way of knowing* that is distorted and inaccurate; it is a knowledge of race that "severs the present from any legacy of racial domination" (Mills 2015, p. 220).

Similar to the above narratives, Andrew described "prejudice against white people" when he noted the hard things about being white:

A: I don't think it personally affects me or I've seen it in my life, but like I've been reading in the news there is an increased amount of prejudice against white people; it's like I can't really uh pinpoint any specific examples; it's like I think people are generally also quick to blame white people for crimes and things that go wrong.

Q: What do you think about that?

A: It's messed up, it's honestly messed up.

Andrew's narrative about "prejudice against white people" illustrates the ways in which white ignorance is abstracted from the truths of racism. In other words, Andrew's claim that white people are "generally blamed for crimes and things that go wrong," belies the fact that Black people in the United States are many times more likely to be innocently "blamed," racially profiled, and incarcerated for all major crimes as compared to white people (Gross 2022). And importantly, Andrew, like many adolescents in the sample, could not "pinpoint any specific examples" to support this claim but maintains that the "prejudice against white people" has "increased" and is "honestly messed up." In this way, he understands that prejudice is wrong ("messed up") but shepherded by the macro epistemology of white ignorance, which protects white supremacy, Andrew misreads the reality of racial prejudice.

This type of narrative was also reflected in Will's interview, who, in response to the same question, said: "Uh, you know, I mean we [white people] get kinda blamed for everything." When asked whether he has ever experienced being "blamed," he responds: "No, I mean, I've heard other people who might have been, you know." Both Andrew and Will's narratives (and more broadly in the data) showcase how white ignorance does not necessarily require concrete evidence to substantiate its claims ("I mean, I've heard other people who might have been"). This is especially relevant for adolescent development: a white racial identity that is crafted through the lessons of white ignorance positions white youth to construct a distorted reality about race and racism. And importantly, it is the macrocontext of white supremacy that supplies and validates white adolescents' claims of "reverse racism" (e.g., the news, social media sources, the 2023 US Supreme Court's reversal of affirmative action, etc.) because the maintenance of an unjust racial system requires and depends on white youth learning to "see the world wrongly"—that is, as unfair and prejudiced toward white people (Mills 2007).

"*All white people are like racist.*" Another thread of constructing white as disadvantaged surfaced in how white adolescents described the "stereotype" they must contend with, that "all white people are racist" ($n = 26$; 42%). Participants often responded to this "stereotype" by distancing themselves from their whiteness and arguing for their innocence in racism; two fundamental features of white ignorance. For instance, when asked what some of the hard things are about being white, Elizabeth responded:

> Um, I feel like a lot of people recently are starting to like there's kind of like, I don't know, it's like a backlash or backlash to backlash to whatever but like people are starting to like think that all white people are like racist or whatever. Which like I know that

> there are a lot of white people who are racist but I don't, that whole thing is like another stereotype and there's like the whole issue of like reverse racism. And I don't like people thinking that I'm a bad person {laughs} 'cause I really like people to like me.' So, like, that's kind of hard but like other than that I don't really think there's anything. I mean I try not to like think racially.

The threads of white ignorance surface in a number of ways in Elizabeth's response and it is important to situate her narrative in the sociopolitical and historical moment. It is 2017; the years surrounding the Obama Family's residency in the White House, the start of the Trump administration, and the rising attention to Black Lives Matter after the murder of Michael Brown. In this context, she describes the "backlash to backlash" where "people are starting to think that all white people are racist." Elizabeth is not unaware or colorblind; she acknowledges "that there are a lot of white people who are racist," but asserts this is "another stereotype" and an "issue of like reverse racism." Elizabeth's desire for racial innocence, or for wanting "people to like [her]," is not merely an individual trait but reflects the structural logic of white ignorance wherein maintaining one's sense of self and identity as a "good" person depends on distancing oneself from the realities of racism. Indeed, the harm of white ignorance is perhaps most evident in Elizabeth's commitment to "try not to like think racially" as opposed to the more critical practice of locating herself within and against racism. This type of response, wherein white youth name yet distance themselves from racism, was voiced by many participants in the current study.

Ava, for instance, when talking about what it means to her to be white says: "I kinda wish, I kinda wish I was like another racial ethnicity because... because like there's a whole lot, there's like a lot of um hate towards white people 'cause like, everybody's like 'oh, they're all racist.'" Here, Ava attempts to distance herself from this "stereotype" and the "whole lot of hate towards white people" by desiring to be "another racial ethnicity." Although it is understandable to separate the self from such negativity, this strategy is one that upholds white supremacy and showcases how white ignorance is a way of understanding race that allows white youth to negate and invisibilize (rather than confront) the privileges of whiteness. This is not dissimilar to Phoebe, who describes how the Black Lives Matter Movement, a racial justice movement that seeks to dismantle the embedded nature of white supremacy and anti-Blackness in policing and society more broadly (Rogers, Rosario, et al. 2021), "is divisive" because now people automatically assume that she's racist: "I just, like I wish I could express that I'm not racist to those people because sometimes when I walk into areas that have other races, I don't want them to automatically assume that I'm racist."

Narratives like Phoebe and Ava's call attention to adolescents' experience of navigating others' racial expectations in their identity development (e.g., Way et al. 2013), and showcase how white adolescents can rely on white ignorance to distance themselves from the racial system by positioning information about race and whiteness as "backlash," "reverse racism," "not true," and "divisive." In a white supremacist society, such

responses foreclose opportunities for further racial analysis and resistance. And as reflected above, this default response is characterized by an attempt to detach oneself from the racial system by arguing that one "is not racist," a practice that misconstrues the structural nature of white supremacy; that is, recognizing how *all* white people are implicated in racism (Applebaum 2010; Dull, Rogers, and Charlson 2024). Such an explicit focus on the self, of being preoccupied with being perceived as "good" and *not* racist, is emblematic of white ignorance as the individual takes precedence over priorities to dismantle racism or concern for people of color who continually navigate and encounter racist systems.

From a developmental perspective, applying a m(ai)cro white ignorance frame to these narratives illuminates that such displays of white ignorance are not merely individual choices or attitudes, but rather, connected to, and a product of, the macrosystem of white supremacy that infuses adolescent development. In other words, in listening to white youth construct whiteness in a location of disadvantage, we hear how white supremacy serves as an intimate source of socialization in white children's racial identity development, providing particular ways of (not) seeing and (not) knowing that serve to protect whiteness from critique and challenge.

3.2 | Framing Race(ism) as Unimportant and Elsewhere

White adolescents' minimization of race and racism was another manifestation of white ignorance. For some, this took on the traditional form of colorblind ideology, endorsing the belief that "we're all the same" and race does not matter. For others, they described being aware of racism but did not see or notice race in their micro proximal contexts, strategically placing racism as *elsewhere* ("there's not really any of that here").

"*We're all the same.*" Colorblind ideology surfaced in a typical fashion ($n = 20$, 33%). When James described his basketball team, he said: "I have white teammates, I have Black teammates, I've had Latino teammates and like, honestly like, I see like no difference between like any of them." Similarly, Brad said that he wants people to know that white people are "not different than other people. We're all the same. The color of your skin doesn't matter." A fair number of white adolescents, like James and Brad, simply did not view race as important and used the presence of diversity to justify their racial perceptions. Interpreted through a m(ai)cro white ignorance frame, such narratives illustrate an ahistorical, acontextual, and individualized knowing that strategically eclipses the structural realities of racism and though it appears benign and humanistic it is in actuality reductive and illusory (Moffitt, Rogers, and Dastrup 2021; Rogers, Moffitt, and Foo 2021). This colorblind stance is a tool of white ignorance, in that it is an "agreement to misinterpret the world" that aids and ensures the preservation of white supremacy (Bailey 2007).

Isabelle further illustrates this colorblind narrative. When asked to imagine how her life might be different if she was not white, Isabelle responded:

A: I mean on one of my dance teams I'm the only white girl. Actually, two of them. So, I've never like distanced myself from them [people of color on the dance team]. I've never like acted in any different way than they do. So, I don't really see like a division between like races. I mean we're, we're, I could be blue, I could be pink …

Q: So, do you think anything would change?

A: No.

Q: Um, and why do you say that?

A: Because like I said, I don't see color.

Isabelle's adherence to colorblindness means evading the structural aspects of white supremacy and racism. She offers an individual-level explanation for why racism does not matter, the fact that she has not seen "any division" among races, and personally does not "see color," leads her to believe that race(ism) is inconsequential. Importantly, however, though Isabelle is certainly agentic in adopting and taking up this colorblind narrative, colorblind ideology is a culturally *available* frame that is endorsed and socialized at all levels of society (Bonilla-Silva 2021). In other words, colorblindness is a ready-made cultural way of knowing and being that becomes embedded in children's personal narratives as they make sense of race and racism in a colorblind society (Rogers, Moffitt, and Foo 2021).

"*There's not really any of that here.*" While some adolescents invoked the traditional colorblind ideology where one does not "see" race at all, we also found that nearly half ($n = 31$, 45%) of the white adolescents in our sample acknowledged the significance of race(ism) as something that happens *elsewhere*; they located racism as outside or distal to their proximal environments, which were mostly racially diverse. For instance, Megan, who attends a school that is 54% students of color, and lives in a neighborhood that is 32% white, responded in the following way when asked how her life would be different if she was not white:

> Um, well like being here in [suburb], I don't know if it affects you as much just because we're so, like we're a very diverse town. It's definitely places like [other suburb] is mainly like white people, but like other than that I think the opportunities for every like race is like the same here. But if I were a different race in like a different part where it was like mainly like white people I think it would be different, like less opportunities and like maybe go to like different schools or something like that.

Megan states clearly that race and racism do shape one's opportunities and schooling, however, she argues that this does not happen in her proximal context, it happens *elsewhere*. She attributes this to racial diversity, describing race as not "affect[ing] you as much" in her "diverse town." This was not dissimilar from Josh (school 35% students of color; neighborhood 66% white), who in response to the same question said: "Nothing would change… I mean I went to a very good school, and I've never really come across severe racism or other attacks based on race, which is lucky and probably rare today."

Both Megan and Josh illustrate how a macro epistemology of white ignorance functions, even when white youth are "aware" of racism (both participants name and acknowledge racism in their narratives), white ignorance works to maintain the innocence of one's self and proximal contexts in the reproduction of white supremacy (Applebaum 2010). It is also striking that both Megan and Josh can assume with such certainty to know what the non-white peers in their communities experience and that race does not in fact impact them. This finding stands in contrast to the notion that the presence of racial diversity makes white youth more attuned to racial inequity and their own white identity (Burke et al. 2023; Juvonen, Kogachi, and Graham 2018). Rather, it seems that white ignorance does not dissipate in racially diverse environments but continues to maneuver in specific ways rendering the effects of, and one's connection to, white supremacy unnoticed. Indeed, a m(ai)cro white ignorance lens to these narratives troubles the accuracy of white adolescents' claims of "no racism here"; in a society organized by white supremacy, racism is an everywhere and everyday feature (Mills 1997).

To give another example, Elizabeth, who attends a school that is 75% students of color, and lives in a neighborhood that is 35% white, said the following when asked what she thinks other people think about white people:

> I think generally like sick of white people. They're kind of like "stop it", you know. 'Cause there are like, you know, I go, you know I drive through the South every year. Like I have family who live in like in Mississippi and stuff. So like, I like, I know that kind of white people. Like that's what people think of I think when they think of white people – it's like racist white people but then like I grew up in [large urban city] so, like there's not really any of that here. Everyone's kind of like peaceful, not peaceful but you know like used to like what's that, diversity {laughs}.

Similar to the above narratives, Elizabeth is not denying the existence of racism *elsewhere*—in the South, to be precise—but she names the "diversity" of her city as justification for the lack of "racist white people" in her proximal context ("there's not really any of that here"). The distancing of racism as something that happens "elsewhere"—in another place (i.e., the South) or time (i.e., the past)—is a manifestation of white ignorance, a form of not knowing the ever-present realities of racial violence, discrimination, and harm that pervades this country. The logic of white ignorance encourages such structured blindness because to recognize racism in one's own micro-system would require seeing the persistence of white supremacy and oneself as a part of, and complicit in, a racist system (Mills 1997).

3.3 | The Active Refusal to Know or Imagine Racial Oppression

The final manifestation of white ignorance was in how white adolescents refused to know or care about racism ("Uh, I don't really care") and/or were unable (or unwilling) to imagine the ways in which race structured theirs and others' lived experiences ("Um, I don't really know").

"*Uh, I don't really care.*" Some white adolescents explicitly maintained ignorance by not caring about, or refusing to engage with, racism (*n* = 13; 21%). For instance, Austin, when asked about how it makes him feel when people think of him racially, responded: "I really could care less what other people think of me; like I'm my own person and I have my own friends and everything. I'm fine, and people can think what they want; I don't really care." Here, Austin endorses the logic of white ignorance, wherein race is constructed as unimportant and inconsequential to one's sense of self ("I'm my own person"). His narrative also epitomizes a masculine emotional stoicism, asserting that he "could really care less" what other people (read: people of color) think about him provides justification and an alibi to maintain a racial not knowing. Perhaps if Austin were responding to a question about how he handles peer pressure, such a response could be interpreted differently; but in the context of race and whiteness, his response suggests the precise personal and emotional disconnection that white supremacy requires (and desires). Interpreted through a m(ai)cro white ignorance lens, such ways of (not) knowing uphold and maintain white supremacy because race is constructed as the responsibility of others, it is their problem, not his: "I'm my own person…I'm fine…I don't really care."

This epistemic stance and refusal to know also surfaced in Ava's narrative, where she describes a racial incident that occurred during choir where she was accused of being racist:

A: I was, there was this little girl that was like being really annoying during choir and like talking during a performance and I told her to stop. And she's Black, and she got, and she was like "I don't know if you have a problem with my race or something" and I was like whoa, okay you, that is, no. Just, you do not assume that about somebody and I was like, ooh, I was so pissed.

Q: Mm-hm. And how did you handle it?

A: Um, I, I didn't talk to her ever again and like I kind of lost all respect for her after that point, so.

An epistemology of ignorance is evident in Ava's refusal to engage with the perspective of her classmate, the Black girl, in this narrative. Indeed, when Ava reprimanded a peer for talking during class, the Black girl responded by naming the racial reality of the interaction, asking Ava if she has "a problem with [her] race." Perhaps Ava was unaware of the pervasive racial gender stereotype that portrays Black girls as "loud" and thus the act of telling a Black girl to quiet down has a racially entrenched history, but rather than be curious or ask why her comment was taken as racialized, Ava reports that she loses all respect for her classmate and never talks to her again. This disrespect is reflected in Ava's discursive choice to refer to her classmate as "this little girl" who was "really annoying." This practice of refusing to engage with or consider the perspective of people of color (or the Black girl in this narrative whom Ava dismissed and never talked to again) is emblematic of the function and purpose of white ignorance.

By refusing to hear or consider, Ava can avoid "correcting misconception and/or acquiring knowledge" about racism that would necessarily require Ava to redefine how she sees her (white) self and others (Medina 2012, p. 57–58).

In several instances, white adolescents' racial ignorance was evinced by a refusal to know, care, or engage with the lived experiences and knowledges of people of color. Like when Ryan shared about noticing racism, he explained: "I mean I know there's like problems with the Chicago police um, it's not really, like – I don't think too much of it." In other words, it is not a complete lack of knowledge or awareness but an active ignorance and distancing from knowing or engaging with such knowledge. From a m(ai)cro white ignorance lens, this way of (not) knowing reinscribes white supremacy by protecting white youth from engaging critically with how the racialized truths they are aware of would require the white self to recognize racial harm and reconsider their own complicity in racism.

"*Um, I don't really know.*" White ignorance also emerged in white adolescents' inability to imagine how their lives might be different if they were not white ($n = 16$, 26%). The interview question ("try to imagine that you weren't white – how do you think things would be different?") was designed to elicit reflections about one's situatedness within the racial system; this question has been used in prior interview studies with racially diverse children and adolescents (7–18 years) to probe understandings of race and racism (e.g., Rogers, Moffitt, and Foo 2021; Way et al. 2013). And yet, many white adolescents, 15–16 years old, were unable (or unwilling) to consider how their experiences might be different, illustrating the ways in which a macro epistemology of white ignorance works to isolate the white self from the lived realities of racism. To illustrate, James, after answering "I don't know" to how things might be different if he was not white responded to a follow-up probe about if anything might change specifically with his family:

A: Uh, I don't think so.

Q: And why do you think nothing would change?

A: Uh, because I feel like if we weren't, 'cause if I'm not white than my family wouldn't be white either so, like, I feel like it wouldn't be like any sort of like different like kinda connection with each other.'

James avoids considering the structure of race and how being another race might shape his lived experience by focusing on race as exclusively private and interpersonal; if he's not white, then his family wouldn't be either and so they would have the same "like kinda connection with each other." All else equal, family is family; race has nothing to do with it. Daniel similarly struggled initially to describe how his life would change if he were a different race, but then was probed to reflect on how race may change his school experiences and relationships:

Q: Do you think you would go to the same school if you weren't white?

A: Probably, yes.

Q: Mm-hmm. And how do you think your experience would be? Would your experience change at all?

A: Um, not really. No, I don't think so.

Q: Anything else like in your family or with your friends you think would change if you weren't white?

A: Um, no. No. Even like, for example, if I was adopted and I wasn't white. And my parents were still white I don't think much would change, no.

Daniel goes further than James arguing that even if he was a different race, was adopted, and his parents remained white, nothing would change.

As illustrated by James and Daniel, and in the data more broadly, a considerable number of white adolescents were unable to imagine anything that might change about their lives (good or bad) if they were "not white" (i.e., a person of color). This is precisely what white ignorance does; it facilitates collective erasure—a unified not knowing about the horrors and systemic privileges of whiteness while at the same time encouraging a collective forgetting about the humanity and lived experiences of people of color (Foste and Irwin 2020; Sullivan and Tuana 2007). White adolescents' inability or unwillingness to racially imagine serves to illustrate more broadly the ways in which ignorance perpetuates white supremacy by allowing white "individuals [to] consciously or unconsciously resist considering the impact of injustice on their societies, interpersonal relations, ways of knowing, senses of self" and the lives they impact (Whitt 2016, p. 434). That many white adolescents could not imagine or consider racism in their lives, even at the level of the imaginary, has deep seated implications for how we collectively (re)imagine alternate futures and ways of being that are rooted in liberation and justice, a point we return to in the general discussion below.

3.4 | Resisting White Ignorance: Seeing (And Naming) Systemic Racism

Though the majority of white adolescents accommodated to practices of white ignorance, there were instances in which white adolescents resisted "seeing the world wrongly" (Mills 2007). These moments, where white adolescents challenged an epistemology of white ignorance make explicit the active process through which youth make meaning of, and respond to, their cultural environments. In particular, some white adolescents resisted framing racism as an "individual problem" and/or ignoring how they themselves contribute to, and benefit from, white supremacy ($n = 10$, 16%). In the case of rejecting individualized framings of racism, Cody when talking about what it means to be white responded: "Um, just like, essentially yeah, like a lot of the country and stuff is just like set up so that, you know, white men can succeed and so, I feel like I benefit a lot from that." Here, Cody situates racism as not only individual "bias," "prejudice," or "racists," (which was how many of the participants discussed racism) but rather infused into the practices and structural foundations of "the country." Moreover, he recognizes the ways in which this unjust racial system (macro) structures his lived experience (micro) as a white male, while

also implicating patriarchy as a mutually reinforcing system to white supremacy. Cody does not necessarily reflect this position or indicate ways he works to counteract it, however, by naming race as a system of white privilege that *he* directly benefits from, he resists taking up white ignorance as a frame of knowing.

Leah also framed racism as structural and said that her life would be harder if she was not white, and when asked why, responded: "because of how our society is set-up. They make people of color work harder and go through more struggles and challenges to get to the same place that a white person can get to very easily." Amber similarly acknowledged how school would change if she was not white:

A: Um I don't know if I would be in as many advanced classes and not because I'm not as smart but just because people would expect less of me.

Q: Okay. So why do you think that is?

A: Just because that is a deep-rooted belief in America.

Both Leah and Amber view racism as structural—a system ("how our society is set up")—and ideological ("a deep-rooted belief in America") rather than individual; they are not talking about horrors of history or the progress of the present, but the persistent truths of a system that was built to "make people of color work harder" and "expects less" of them. Though recognizing the structural underpinnings of racism is only the beginning of an anti-racist praxis for white people (Boodman 2022), it was quite rare for participants in our sample to break out of the white ignorance lens and acknowledge the system of white supremacy at work.

Further, some white adolescents resisted the practices of white ignorance that encourage a collective forgetting about the violent and terrorizing history of white supremacy. For instance, Anna when asked what she would write in an essay about what she thinks it means to be white, responded:

> I would write about like the history of colonialism... Because I feel like a lot of people forget, not really with America – how the British, yeah how the British came in like and settled their people here and then how the U.S. Government kicked out all the Native Americans and stuff, but I think, I think that's like more well known, but like in how the European countries basically split up Africa and they all like went and like took their different parts and I think that that's something a lot of people forget about, so... it's important to recognize that that happened so that – 'cause it's like people who don't know history are doomed to repeat it, something like that, you know so that, so that wouldn't happen again.

While Anna's account of colonialism certainly leaves out important details, the fact that she mentions colonialism as tied to what it means to be white is a resistance to erase, disregard, and forget about the violent foundations of white supremacy. By changing where the story of U.S. history starts (Adichie 2009), Anna disrupts white ignorance to tell a more complete truth about the

colonial and racial violence that founded this nation. This type of historical consciousness was rare, but was also mentioned by Caitlin who, in response to the same question, responded:

> I would write about like that white people or just people of European descent really, have kind of dominated the world in a sense, not literally, but white people are kind of born with a sense of privilege just because of what has happened in history just because Europe tried to colonize everywhere...

For both Anna and Caitlin, there is an explicit resistance to white racial practices of not knowing or not caring what it means to be connected to histories of colonialization and violence. Since white ignorance is in part "a form of not knowing (seeing wrongly), resulting from the habit of erasing, dismissing, distorting, and forgetting about the lives, cultures, and histories of peoples whites have colonized," these historical narratives showcase how resisting white ignorance is essential to tell a more accurate story about the enormity and pervasive realities of white supremacy (Bailey 2007, p. 85; Foste and Tevis 2023).

4 | General Discussion

The current study sought to explore how white ignorance, a structural and deliberate epistemology tethered to white supremacy, manifested in white adolescents' racial identity narratives. In particular, we listened for the different ways that white adolescents displayed, justified, and at times challenged a *not* knowing about racism and white supremacy. Our aim in this analysis was not to simply describe where white adolescents were in the process of white racial identity development (Helms 1995), but to be attuned to how white supremacy, as an oppressive racial system tied to violence and hierarchy, is (re)produced through adolescent racial identity practices, like white ignorance. As our findings demonstrate, white ignorance is a socializing force of white supremacy that shapes the racial identities of white adolescents through encouraging *particular ways of (not) knowing* about the lived and structural realities of racism. In other words, we did not find that white youth had an absence of racial knowledge, but rather that their racial knowledge was organized by white ignorance, such that they misconstrued, ignored, and/or recused themselves from the racial system. In this way, white ignorance as a macrosystemic cultural practice was embedded in, and strengthened through, the (micro) racial identities of white adolescents (Rogers et al. 2021). And as Leonardo (2009) argues, this type of knowing has "functions and consequences" (p. 109).

4.1 | White Ignorance in White Adolescents' Racial Identity Narratives

Though developmental research that critically studies whiteness among white adolescents is increasing, there still exists a dearth of research that listens to how white youth articulate their racial identities in the context of white supremacy (Dull, Rogers, and Charlson 2024; Hagerman 2018; Moffitt, Rogers, and Dastrup 2021; Rogers, Moffitt, and Foo 2021). The present study begins to fill this gap by listening to white youth's voices with a

critical ear. In doing so, however, we were attuned to how the story of white ignorance that we uncovered does not begin with the white adolescents themselves. Our framework of m(ai)cro white ignorance starts with the macrosystem of white supremacy to make visible how (micro) white ignorance is attached to structures of racial domination that were built to maintain and perpetuate certain ways of knowing and being that serve the interests of whiteness (McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen 2000). Thus, while white adolescents are agentic in how they take up and respond to systemic white ignorance, the macrosystem of white supremacy must be visible to not only demonstrate the function of white ignorance but also the ways in which youth's racial identity narratives reinforce or resist the broader racial system. From this lens, we found three ways in which structural white supremacy, vis-à-vis white ignorance, became embodied and negotiated in the racial identity narratives of white youth: (a) *constructing white as disadvantaged*; (b) *framing race(ism) as unimportant and elsewhere*; and (c) *the active refusal to know or imagine racial oppression*.

In the case of the first, we found that many white adolescents *constructed white as disadvantaged* in the current sociopolitical context. This finding corresponds with other research with white college students that shows how white people (often white men) understand themselves to be the "victims" of racism (Cabrera 2014; Jayakumar et al. 2021), despite reverse racism being a myth and abstracted from racial realities; a direct product of white ignorance (Lara-Steidel and Thompson 2023). Indeed, we found that many of the white adolescents who voiced this narrative could not cite any instances, quite literally saying: "I can't really uh pinpoint any specific examples." Moreover, we observed that when white adolescents were confronted with information that challenged or questioned their ways of knowing (i.e., "all white people are racist"), they maintained their racial innocence and constructed such information as "reverse racism." By doing so, they ultimately foreclosed opportunities for further racial analysis and maintained the "comfortably unaware world-views" that emerge from, and sustain, the system of white supremacy (Cabrera and Corces-Zimmerman 2017; Whitt 2016, p. 430). These findings add to the existing literature by demonstrating that claims of white disadvantage do not merely appear in adulthood but are built and refined during adolescence.

The second manifestation, *framing race(ism) as unimportant and elsewhere*, showcases how epistemologies of ignorance strategically downplay or ignore the macro and micro dynamics of racism. Developmental research has generally shown that many white children and adolescents endorse a colorblind perspective on race (Hagerman 2018; Hazelbaker and Mistry 2022; Moffitt, Rogers, and Dastrup 2021; Rogers, Moffitt, and Foo 2021). We similarly showcase how white adolescents often claim that they "do not see color," though we connect such colorblindness to the larger project of white ignorance. However, in our sample, colorblindness, in the traditional sense, was not as common as white adolescents recognizing racism, but positioning it elsewhere. Other research has similarly found how white youth, even if cognizant of race (or claim to "see color"), often do not see racism in their proximal spaces (Hagerman 2018). This *discourse of elsewhere* showcases the default and habitual nature of white ignorance to not know or notice, which undermines

more critical dispositions that see and act against white supremacy (Sullivan 2006). This suggests that simply being "aware" or willing to acknowledge that racism exists *somewhere* is insufficient for anti-racist change. Thus, to engage white youth in anti-racism and social justice, we must attend to and dismantle structures of white ignorance that continually work to reward and justify practices of racial "not-knowing" and "not-seeing" (Mills 2003).

The third thread of white ignorance was in white adolescents' *active refusal to know or imagine racial oppression*. We found that some white adolescents intentionally disengaged in matters of race and racism to maintain a not knowing. In other words, they displayed a resistance to know that is rooted in protecting the white self from discomfort or considering how one is implicated in the system of racism (Applebaum 2010). Stated simply, by "not caring" or "not engaging" with race(ism), white adolescents can sustain not knowing. Importantly, this epistemic lens of ignorance is a learned, culturally sanctioned practice; it is embedded in macro (cultural practices, societal discourse, ideologies, etc.) and micro contexts (school, family, peers, etc.); it is actively taught via whitewashing history and school curriculum to hushing racial conversations and observations in childhood. Such practices not only allow for but also encourage white adolescents to not know and disengage from the racial system. This ignorance was also evident at the level of the imaginary (Alcoff 2015). The reluctance or inability for white adolescents to meaningfully engage in racial imagination from the perspective of the racial "other" was notable. In particular, this powerfully demonstrates the ways in which epistemologies of ignorance can sever oneself from "knowing" the lived realities and histories of racism—from basic socio-cognitive capacities for empathy and perspective-taking (Foste and Irwin 2020). In short, white ignorance works against white children's development of critical social and emotional competencies that are necessary for anti-racist change (Leonardo and Manning 2017). And ultimately, the inability to imagine reveals how white ignorance shapes how we relate to ourselves and others in ways that foreclose certain possibilities for resistance and (re)imagining (Medina 2012). If we cannot imagine beyond what is, we will continue to operate as if the "is-ness" of the present is predetermined and absolute (e.g., Hersey 2022; Kelley 2002).

4.2 | Moments of Resistance

Though white adolescents cannot disavow or denounce their relationship to white supremacy in a white supremacist system, they can relate to their whiteness in ways that disrupt the operations of racial domination (Applebaum 2010; Boodman 2022; Foste and Irwin 2020). Examining only how white adolescents embody and practice white ignorance in their emerging racial identities can mask the possibilities for, and practices of, resistance. Indeed, listening for resistance is necessary for building a transformative developmental science that moves toward liberation (Rogers and Way 2021; Rogers et al. 2024). The current analysis reveals how some white adolescents *do* resist white ignorance by seeing racism as systemic, historical, and present. The most central way we observed this in our data was through retelling history. A few white adolescents recognized the need to start the story of the U.S. not with ideals of "freedom" but with

colonialism and the violent erasure of Indigenous peoples. They also acknowledged the racial *system* rather than racist individuals, shifting the racial lens from the micro to the macro. Such findings emphasize that a racial development toward white ignorance is not the only path for white children. Much like how adolescents of color engage in resistance to dehumanizing ideologies (Heberle, Rapa, and Farago 2020; Rogers and Way 2021), white adolescents can, and must, also too resist against perpetuating racial harm by unlearning oppressive racial habits and ways of knowing. As Boodman (2022) argues: "if white people uphold white benefit and dominance in their everyday lives, they can also challenge it" (p. 102).

Any focus on the (white) individual as a site of transformation, however, must also consider the broader structural arrangements that regardless of individual resistance, continue to maintain racial injustice and ignorance in systems, institutions, cultural practices, and ideologies (Rogers et al. 2021). Thus, efforts to dismantle white ignorance must be *m(ai)cro*—attending to how the making of identity is inextricably tied to the (re)making of society—to effectively dislodge the ways in which white supremacy infiltrates the macro- and micro-systems in human development. For example, schools and educational curricula are perhaps the most obvious systems where youth are often explicitly and implicitly taught not to know about racism; more critically conscious, anti-racist education may be key to dismantling white ignorance (Heberle, Rapa, and Farago 2020). Family and parental socialization is another site for critical disruption of white ignorance—countering the socialization to "see wrongly" (Perry et al. 2024; Scott et al. 2023). Future research is sorely needed to identify the most effective interventions for dismantling white ignorance in child development and society more broadly.

4.3 | Implications for Developmental Research on White Racial Identity

The current study extends the existing developmental literature on white identity by revealing the myriad ways in which white ignorance, a cultural and systemic practice, surfaces in, and becomes entangled with, white adolescents' racial identity narratives. In doing so, the findings redirect the current constructions of white racial identity that often acknowledge systems but exclusively measure and analyze whiteness at the level of the individual (e.g., Helms 1995; Hazelbaker et al. 2022). Such definitions and approaches to study white racial identity do not fully capture the transactional process of self and society (Rogers 2018) or ways in which white supremacy as a system "take[s] root in people's selves" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 4). In the current analysis, despite whether or not white youth considered whiteness as important to the self, we paid attention to the ways that whiteness shaped their ways of being, knowing, and relating to the self and others. We contend that a critical approach to studying white racial identity development does *not* begin with the white self (e.g., how important whiteness is to one's sense of self) because such approaches fail to describe, examine, or deconstruct how broader social arrangements, systems of racial power, and sociocultural practices are implicated in and enable the various expressions of white identity. Starting from the macrosystem of white supremacy shifts the study of white identity

development toward the ways in which the cultural, social, and political system of whiteness *comes* to organize, shape, and "take root" in the self, and the ways in which white children and adolescents' racial identities reinforce or disrupt the racial system in which they are embedded (Sullivan 2006; Rogers et al. 2021; Rogers 2018). This means that no matter whether whiteness is central to the self, whiteness is constitutive of the self because histories of white racial domination pulsate through every channel of society shaping what it means to *be(come)* white.

To our knowledge, white ignorance as a critical interpretive framework to understand the intergenerational transmission of white supremacy during childhood and adolescence has not been used in developmental research (Spanierman 2022). However, the present findings speak to the need to integrate white ignorance as *central* to the construction and measurement of white identity development. Because white ignorance is a structural epistemology, it is inextricably embedded in the normative course of white youth's development (Coleman, Collins, and Bonam 2021; Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2023). The consequences of this are not only in how it shapes what white youth know about the racial "other" and themselves but also that white ignorance is an impediment to creating an anti-racist society (Medina 2012). Thus, studying white ignorance in developmental science is necessary in that it expands psychological definitions of white identity beyond individual attitudes and beliefs about one's whiteness to also include how the structural and cultural elements of whiteness shape white ways of knowing, being, and relating in ways that preclude racial justice (Rogers 2018).

4.4 | Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study is one of the first to investigate white ignorance during adolescence, it is not without limitations. First, though qualitative studies often do not seek to generalize from sample to population, there are aspects of the participants that likely shaped how they discussed and reflected on their whiteness. Many of the white adolescents in the current study were from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and lived in urban racially diverse contexts (see Table 1). For this reason, the manifestations of white ignorance that we uncovered may be specific to the particular contexts in which our sample resided. Second, most of the questions focused on adolescents reflecting on their own racial identity, which meant that conversations about societal-level racial inequities were not asked. Though these conversations still surfaced in the interview, it would be interesting to investigate how white ignorance surfaces beyond identity-related questions. Last, and relatedly, our interview questions did not explicitly tap into intersectionality. Intersectionality captures how interlocking systems of power, privilege, and oppression operate at both the macro and micro levels to perpetuate social injustice and shape lived experience (Crenshaw 1991). Scholars have argued that white ignorance intersects with other systems (e.g., classism, patriarchy) to shape white epistemic habits and practices (Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2023). We encourage future research to examine how structural white ignorance intersects with other systems to shape how white children and adolescents come to (not) know about white supremacy and racism (along with other systems of oppression).

5 | Conclusion

White ignorance is an epistemic practice rooted in histories of racial domination and violence, which continually serves to disregard and dehumanize people of color by holding white supremacy in place (Mills 2007). In the present study, we name and show how white children's racial development is intertwined with white ignorance. That is, rather than assuming that white youth have no knowledge about racism and racial inequality, or have yet to learn about it, we instead uncovered how their construction of race—that was in large part a not knowing about racism—is a form of learning shepherded by white ignorance. However, white adolescents did not only accommodate to white ignorance; we also observed a substantially smaller thread characterized by moments of resistance, moments where white youth revealed what they could know about whiteness and racism if they set aside white ignorance (Dull, Rogers, and Charlson 2024; Moffitt and Rogers 2022). Moving forward, at both the macro (cultural, institutional, political) and micro (schools, parents, teachers) levels, it is imperative that we reimagine and divorce what it means to be(come) white from the confines of white ignorance and white supremacy, only then might we move resistance from the periphery to the center in white adolescents' emerging racial identities.

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