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# “There Are Stereotypes for Everything”: Multiracial Adolescents Navigating Racial Identity under White Supremacy

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**Abstract:** Despite the enduring popular view that the rise in the multiracial population heralds our nation’s transformation into a post-racial society, Critical Multiracial Theory (MultiCrit) asserts that how multiracial identity status is constructed is inextricably tied to systems and ideologies that maintain the white supremacist status quo in the United States. MultiCrit, like much of the multiracial identity literature, focuses predominantly on the experiences of emerging adults; this means we know little about the experiences of multiracial adolescents, a peak period for identity development. The current paper uses MultiCrit to examine how a diverse sample of multiracial youth ( $n = 49$ ;  $M_{age} = 15.5$  years) negotiate racial identity development under white supremacy. Our qualitative interview analysis reveals: (a) the salience of socializing messages from others, (b) that such messages reinforce a (mono)racist societal structure via discrimination, stereotyping, and invalidation, and (c) that multiracial youth frequently resist (mono)racist assertions as they make sense of their own identities. Our results suggest that multiracial youth are attentive to the myriad ways that white supremacy constructs and constrains their identities, and thus underscores the need to bring a critical lens to the study of multiracial identity development.



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## 1. Introduction

A persistent racial narrative in the United States is that multiracial folks are going to solve racism, or are even evidence that we are living in a post-racial society (DaCosta 2020; Mizrahi 2020; Velasquez-Manoff 2017). Critical Multiracial Theory (MultiCrit) asserts that framing multiracial people in this manner is misguided, arguing that the way in which multiracial status is popularly constructed is inextricably tied to efforts to maintain the white supremacist status quo in the U.S. (J. Harris 2016). As such, MultiCrit advocates for a critical analysis of the multiracial experience that is thus far missing from the literature, particularly with respect to racial identity, which too often “lacks a systematic analysis of racism” (J. Harris 2016, p. 797). Recent ecological developmental perspectives of identity similarly recognize the need to incorporate a systematic analysis of the impacts of structural racism and white supremacy on identity development (e.g., Galliher et al. 2017; Moffitt et al. 2021; Rogers 2018; Rogers et al. 2021b; Williams et al. 2020), but multiracial adolescents and the construction of multiracial identity are scarcely represented in these conversations.

In the current paper, we draw on MultiCrit and ecological perspectives of identity to examine how multiracial adolescents navigate their racial identities in a (mono)racist societal structure. We first review MultiCrit and the multiracial construct in the U.S., and then discuss the insights gained by bringing MultiCrit to the study of racial identity development among multiracial youth. Our analysis contributes to the field not only by bringing a critical, anti-racist developmental lens to the study of racial identity development in youth, but also by broadening the multiracial literature to include diverse multiracial experiences (beyond Black and white) that can elucidate the shared experience of being multiracial in a society that is structured by white supremacy.

## 2. Background and Literature Review

### 2.1. MultiCrit and the Multiracial Construct

MultiCrit adapts Critical Race Theory (CRT) to specify how the experiences of multiracial people are impacted by white supremacy and illustrate the ways in which race continues to be (re)constructed to uphold white supremacy. By analyzing interviews with multiracial women in higher education through the lens of CRT, J. Harris (2016) arrived at the eight tenets of MultiCrit. Six of these tenets were most relevant to our analysis: *challenge to ahistoricism; experiential knowledge; challenge to dominant ideology; racism, monoracism, and colorism; a monoracial paradigm of race; and intersections of multiple racial identities.*

*Challenge to ahistoricism* underscores the importance of contextualizing contemporary experiences of people of color within historical legacies of oppression in order to expose the continued effects of those legacies. This tenet is foundational to understanding the ways in which society and science have historically constructed and studied multiracialness—as a category, an experience, an identity—in ways that uphold and reify the racial hierarchy that is premised on white supremacy. The earliest widespread acknowledgement of the existence of people with multiracial backgrounds in the United States could be identified within the norms of hypodescent deployed before the Civil War. Hypodescent dictated that any children of Black enslaved women and white male enslavers were categorized as “Black”, leaving the white enslavers’ property and power unthreatened. Race became socially and legally constructed as “a biological phenomenon that existed in neat, pure, monoracial categories” in order to legitimize continued segregation and oppression (J. Harris 2016, p. 800; Masuoka 2017). After the Civil War, hypodescent became legally codified and more strictly enforced to maintain white supremacy even in the absence of slavery. Emphasis on monoracial categories, where everyone is expected to fit into a single racial group because of their ancestry, was reflected in early research on multiracial status as well. Multiraciality was framed as “marginal”, leading inevitably to racial homelessness and emotional and psychological distress (Park 1928; Stonequist 1935). Through this construction of the “Marginal Man” as troubled and dysfunctional, researchers used science to implicitly warn people away from cross-racial relationships or multiracial identities.

As racial categories are socially constructed and sometimes legally defined, racial identities are fundamentally political and vary greatly depending on the political histories and current contexts of different racialized communities (Masuoka and Junn 2013). Accordingly, the availability of multiracial status or identity in the sociopolitical arena has waxed and waned since the 1930s (Rockquemore et al. 2009), and at the time of this writing, multiracial identity has more widespread visibility and acceptance than ever. In the last twenty-five years, the US Census has allowed identification with more than one racial group, we have elected a multiracial president and a multiracial vice president to national office, and multiracial representation in popular media has greatly expanded. Multiracial individuals comprised 10.2% of the US population in 2020 (Jones et al. 2021b) and multiracial youth are the fastest growing youth population in the country (US Census Bureau 2012). The potential for multiracial identities or backgrounds to be a developmental asset (Shih and Sanchez 2005) has also come to the fore. Such changes reflect sociopolitical change as well as MultiCrit’s tenets of *experiential knowledge* and *challenge to dominant ideology* (J. Harris 2016), which together emphasize how centering the voices of multiracial individuals foregrounds their subjective experience and interrogates dominant constructions of race and multiraciality.

While many of these changes are positives for the multiracial community, such shifts have also been coopted by whiteness through the persisting narrative that multiracial individuals are evidence of racial harmony or a post-racial society (Mizrahi 2020; Velasquez-Manoff 2017). This narrative is especially salient in popular culture and even in some research on assimilation in political science, where interracial marriage is interpreted as a signal of fading lines between racial groups (DaCosta 2020). Far from heralding an end to racism, MultiCrit highlights that multiracial folks are often themselves subject to *racism, monoracism, and colorism* (J. Harris 2016) because they are frequently racialized as non-white (Chen et al. 2018) and shoehorned into a *monoracial paradigm of race* that leaves no room

for multiracial identities (J. Harris 2016). In particular, J. Harris (2016) emphasizes how physical appearance impacts the (singular) racial group one is assumed to occupy within a monoracial paradigm and how closer proximity to whiteness is positioned as “better” in public judgements of one’s identity.

Yet, because of the relevance of physical appearance, not all multiracial individuals experience the same levels of privilege or (perceived) proximity to whiteness. In fact, multiracial folks with lighter skin and higher socioeconomic status are more likely to self-identify (and be identified by others) as multiracial—or even monoracially white—than their darker-skinned and lower socioeconomic status peers (Chen et al. 2018; K. Harris 2018; Herman 2004). This aligns with MultiCrit’s *intersections of multiple racial identities*: not only does the intersection of singular social identities produce unique social locations that necessarily affect the subjective experiences of individuals, but different intersections *within* social identities (i.e., being multiracial Asian and white or multiracial Black, Latinx, and Asian) also matter (J. Harris 2016). Thus, despite change in the content of the multiracial construct over time, multiracial identities and experiences are still deeply implicated in and constrained by white supremacy.

In sum, a MultiCrit perspective calls us to examine multiracial identity in relation to the sociohistorical context of racism. Much research with multiracial folks, including MultiCrit, has thus far focused on emerging adults, leaving the experiences of multiracial youth underexamined. Identity, however, is a core developmental milestone of adolescence (Erikson 1968) and recent research on *racial* identity development has called attention to the context of racism in shaping youth identity processes (Rogers et al. 2021b; Williams et al. 2020). Including a developmental perspective and centering the experiences of multiracial youth contributes to MultiCrit and the multiracial identity literature.

## 2.2. Multiracial Identity Development in a (Mono)racist Context

Ecological theories of development locate the child within multiple nested layers of sociocultural, political, and historical contexts; as such, the whole of development, including identity development, is shaped by the reciprocal connections between layers of context (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Rogers 2018; Williams et al. 2020). The ecological context of development is organized from the *microsystem*—which is most proximal to the individual’s daily life and includes things such as family, peers, and home and school environments—to the *macrosystem*, which is most distal and represents the structures and embedded ideologies of society (e.g., Rogers et al. 2021a; Rogers and Way 2021). The influence of macrosystem ideologies is evident in patterns of racial identification within the multiracial community. Multiracial identification—whereby individuals identify with multiple racial categories or with *multiracial* as a racial category in its own right—is increasingly common, largely because such an identification is now socially available. However, society’s continued monoracial construction of race still pushes many individuals with multiracial backgrounds toward identifying monoracially. In fact, as many as 60% of adults with multiracial backgrounds do not identify as multiracial (Pew Research Center 2015). These patterns of multiracial identification are not exclusively due to dynamics at the macrosystem level, but are also constantly reconstructed and reinforced through everyday individual interactions at the microsystem level.

While there is ample research on racial identity development in monoracial youth (see Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014), extant literature on racial identity development in multiracial individuals has mainly drawn from the experiences of emerging adults or from standardized survey measures, leaving the subjective meaning-making of multiracial youth underexamined. This is despite evidence that even children can engage with their racial group memberships and find them meaningful (Derlan et al. 2017; Rogers et al. 2012). One of the few studies engaging with multiracial youth during adolescence interviewed nine multiracial Black and white youth (aged 5–16 years old) about their racial identity; they found that these youth do report an awareness of race that is often tied to discrimination, changes in the racial configurations of their environment, or being asked “what they

are”, highlighting the importance of context and the individuals within it for the identity meaning-making of multiracial youth (Kerwin et al. 1993).

In our previous research, we found that identity-relevant messages from others were prevalent in the meaning-making narratives of multiracial children (Jones et al. 2021a). Jones and colleagues analyzed semi-structured interviews with 41 multiracial youth (7–13 years old at Time 1) over two years, and found that, as children neared adolescence, they increasingly brought up messages from others in their interviews about racial identity. These messages were primarily negative, including *racism* and *invalidation*. At Time 1, such messages accounted for 23% of reported messages and nearly doubled to 43% of the messages at Time 2. By contrast, *affirmation* messages from others, which positively construed the child’s racial identity, were rare across timepoints. The main sources of messages also shifted, changing from *peers* such as classmates and friends, to *general others* such as “they”, “society”, and “people” over time, who accounted for 60% of all messages at Time 2 (Jones et al. 2021a). Overall, this paints a picture of children increasingly attending to what society thinks of them as they age toward adolescence, a picture that is overwhelmingly negative, restrictive, and (mono)racist.

Adolescence is a critical time for identity because of the expanding freedoms, increasing cognitive and socioemotional skills, and widening social worlds that characterize this developmental period (Erikson 1968; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014). As youth spend more time outside the home, they orient toward their peers and social status hierarchy as they try to figure out where they fit in (Dahl et al. 2018). Cognitive development also supports a more complex understanding of race—including its social consequences—and youth are increasingly able to integrate their race-relevant experiences across contexts and identify with their ingroup members (Quintana 1998; Williams et al. 2020). As a result, adolescents are primed to explore their racial identities with more nuance, depth, and personal understanding than ever before. Recognizing the kinds of messages and experiences adolescents are navigating is thus crucial to understanding how the racial identities of multiracial individuals will develop as they age, as well as the extent to which youth’s identities will ultimately promote social and psychological wellbeing. While we know that racial identity is likely to change over time for multiracial individuals (Mihoko Doyle and Kao 2007; Pew Research Center 2015), a snapshot of what youth are hearing during adolescence can inform our understanding of the racial identity structure they are being socialized into early in their identity journey.

#### Racial Socialization: The Multiracial Experience

Racial socialization, or the process through which messages about race are communicated to the individual by others, plays a meaningful role in how youth come to understand their racial identities (e.g., Hughes et al. 2006; Williams et al. 2020). Much research focuses on the role that families play in racial socialization for youth of color. Families may impart racial pride, cultural knowledge, and coping mechanisms in the face of the racism their child will likely face in society (Atkin and Yoo 2019; Hughes et al. 2006; Rollins and Hunter 2013; Umaña-Taylor and Hill 2020). However, as individuals move into adolescence, sources of racial socialization expand to include influences in their broadened social worlds such as peers, teachers, the media, and even “social myths” or stereotypes (Aldana and Byrd 2015; Davis Tribble et al. 2019; Hughes et al. 2016; King 2013; Terry and Winston 2010, p. 433).

Unfortunately, research suggests that the types of messages that people receive outside of the family context are most often negative in nature. Racial discrimination and stereotyping are two prevalent identity-relevant experiences that have been linked to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Hwang and Goto 2008; Cooper et al. 2008). Moreover, such messages are one way that individuals learn about their racial group(s) and society’s evaluations of them, which in turn informs how they understand their own racial identities (Way et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2020). For people of color, these experiences often communicate a devaluation of that individual’s racial group in the service of maintaining white supremacy.



Much of the previous research on discrimination and stereotyping has been done with monoracial individuals. While relevant for most multiracial people, it still does not capture a uniquely salient part of the multiracial experience: receiving messages from others which reinforce a monoracist structure. Monoracism excludes and oppresses multiracial folks by maintaining rigid beliefs about racial categories as discrete and singular; it reinforces a strictly compartmentalized racial structure by forcing multiracial people to choose a monoracial identity, policing the authenticity of multiracial people, objectification, or exclusion from monoracial groups or resources (J. Harris 2016). For multiracial folks, racial authenticity and expected group membership may be judged based on numerous factors, including appearance, cultural knowledge, and peer group demographics (Chen et al. 2018; K. Harris 2018; AhnAllen et al. 2006; Khanna 2011; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009). Racial group membership is also often judged based on an individual's ancestors' races, historically codified within systems of blood quantum, which legally defined categorization as Native American or Black in the United States. Categorization was based on what "fraction" of Native American or Black "blood" someone had, with greater fractions providing more weight for categorization into a given group. Blood quantum still influences how perceivers judge racial group membership today (Sanchez et al. 2011), and continues to guide membership in Native American tribes.

Monoracism offers a lens through which to interpret a common experience for multiracial folks called identity invalidation: where one's (multi)racial identity is denied, misconstrued, or questioned, (Franco and O'Brien 2018). Similar to discrimination, invalidation has been linked to identity detachment (Franco et al. 2019), which may compromise multiracial folks' ability to cope with racism by leveraging support networks within their racial communities. These types of negative messages have been reported coming from both outside *and* within the family context (Salahuddin and O'Brien 2011; Franco et al. 2018), belying the research emphasis on promotive familial racial socialization with monoracial families.

Existing identity research with multiracial adolescents often focuses on their physical appearance or social network racial composition as ways of inferring their experiences with others (Echols et al. 2018; Herman 2004), but very few studies consider how multiracial youth subjectively understand their own identity-relevant experiences, particularly the messages they receive about being multiracial within a rigid (mono)racial structure that upholds white supremacy. We know that racism, discrimination, and invalidation are salient socialization messages for multiracial adults, but little is known about the degree to which these messages are also salient for multiracial adolescents, where they come from, and how multiracial youth contend with those messages. The lack of research on the subjective experiences of youth ignores their *experiential knowledge* (J. Harris 2016). It also ignores the fact that youth are not passive in the socialization process; they actively process and react to the messages that they receive, a dynamic that can only be captured by taking a subjective narrative approach to understanding the multiracial youth experience (McLean and Syed 2015; Rogers 2018; Rogers and Way 2018). In fact, it has been repeatedly shown that youth recognize and actively resist stereotypes and messages that dehumanize them (Way and Rogers 2017). How resistance plays out among multiracial youth specifically is less studied.

### 2.3. The Present Study

The present study responds to J. Harris' (2016) call for a more critical analysis of race within identity development research and begins to fill the adolescent gap in the multiracial identity literature. Specifically, we were interested in the types of messages that multiracial youth report receiving from others about their racial identities and the degree to which those messages reflect dominant ideologies of race and white supremacy. Our analysis was guided by three research questions:

1. What types of messages do multiracial adolescents report receiving from others about their racial identity? Given previous research highlighting dynamics of monoracism, discrimination, and invalidation, and their role in maintaining white supremacy

- (Franco and O'Brien 2018; J. Harris 2016), we anticipated that these messages would be predominantly negative and reflect dominant ideologies of white supremacy and a monoracial construction of race.
2. What are the primary sources (e.g., peers, parents) of the identity-relevant messages that multiracial adolescents report? Drawing on an ecological identity theories and prior research (Rogers 2018; Williams et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2021a), we anticipated that the sources of identity-relevant messages would reflect an adolescent's developmental orientation toward peers and a broader world outside the home (rather than familial sources).
  3. How do multiracial adolescents react to the messages they receive from others? Given that meaning-making and agency are integral to identity development (McLean and Syed 2015; Rogers 2018; Williams et al. 2020) we also anticipated that adolescents would respond to messages in a variety of ways. In particular, we expected to see patterns of resistance as youth challenge restrictive and dehumanizing messages that question, invalidate, or undermine their identities (e.g., Rogers and Way 2018).

### 3. Method

Data for this study came from a larger, longitudinal, mixed-method study of socioeconomic status, health outcomes, and identity development conducted in a large Midwestern city from 2015 to 2019 (Miller et al. 2018). This study is a secondary data analysis, which draws specifically from the qualitative interview data collected from 2017 to 2019, when participants were in 10th grade.

#### 3.1. Participants

The larger study included a racially diverse sample of 277 youth who entered the study between the ages of 11 and 15 (63% girls,  $M_{age} = 13.5$  years old). For inclusion in this qualitative analysis, multiracial status was defined based on participant and/or parent report. Specifically, participants had to have either a parent-reported multiracial background *or* self-identify as multiracial during the interview. These inclusion criteria resulted in a sample of 49 multiracial youth, who were interviewed during their 10th grade year (61% girls,  $M_{age} = 15.5$  years old). This process is explained further in the Data Collection section below.

It is important to note that not all participants claimed a multiracial identification; 16 adolescents identified monoracially and one expressed that his identity changed across contexts. Most of the adolescents who identified monoracially did acknowledge a multiracial background, but ultimately chose a monoracial identity for themselves. Table 1 shows a detailed breakdown of the racial identities reported by adolescents. The range of identifications reflects the diversity of identity resolutions found within the wider multiracial community; not everyone with a multiracial background identifies as multiracial (Pew Research Center 2015; Rockquemore et al. 2009; Root 1990). Furthermore, three adolescents self-identified as monoracial white, and three more youth who identified as multiracial discussed how most others perceived them as white. This means that, in addition to contending with the messages that society has for people who are perceived as youth of color (multiracial or otherwise), a subset of the multiracial youth in this sample were contending with what it means to be racialized as white in a white supremacist context.

**Table 1.** Racial identity for the full sample. This includes a sample breakdown by parents' combined racial backgrounds, parent-reported adolescent race, and self-identified adolescent identity.

RacialIdentity Labels	Parents' Racial Backgrounds	Parent Reported Adolescent Race	Self-Identified Adolescent Race	Sample Interview Quote
Multiracial Labels	34 (69%)	40 (82%)	33 (67%)	
"Mixed"/"Biracial" <sup>1</sup>	NA	NA	13	<i>Mixed biracial child... I'm a lot of stuff.</i>
Black, Hispanic	4	5	6	<i>Just half Black and half, um, El Salvadorian, I guess.</i>
Hispanic, White	8	9	3	<i>Um, white with minority Hispanic.</i>
Asian, White	5	5	3	<i>Oh, um, well, uh, Korean, Japanese and German.</i>
Asian, Hispanic	0	2	3	<i>Well Asian first, Chinese, and Mexican, those are the two main ones.</i>
Black, White	10	8	2	<i>I'm Black, Black and White.</i>
Hispanic, Native American, White	0	0	1	<i>I'm European and, like, Latina, and a little Native American.</i>
Black, West Asian	0	0	1	<i>Lebanese-Ugandan.</i>
Native American, White	1	1	1	<i>I'm a quarter Native American on my mom's side ... then like 75% is probably mostly White.</i>
Asian, Hispanic, White	1	2	0	-
Black, Hispanic, White	0	2	0	-
Black, Native American, White	1	2	0	-
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic	1	1	0	-
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, White	1	1	0	-
Black, Hispanic, Native American	1	1	0	-
Black, Hispanic, Native American, White	1	1	0	-
Monoracial Labels	5 (10%)	9 (8%)	16 (33%)	
Black/African American	2	5	5	<i>I consider myself African American.</i>
Hispanic	2	2	5	<i>Overall, I would say I'm Mexican.</i>
White	1	2	3	<i>Um ... white.</i>
Asian	0	0	2	<i>Um, I would probably say Japanese.</i>

Table 1. Cont.

Racial Identity Labels	Parents' Racial Backgrounds	Parent Reported Adolescent Race	Self-Identified Adolescent Race	Sample Interview Quote
Native American	0	0	1	<i>Mostly Native before anything else.</i>
One Parent Not Reported <sup>2</sup>	10 (20%)	NA	NA	
Hispanic, NR	3	-	-	-
White, NR	3	-	-	-
Black, NR	2	-	-	-
Asian, Hispanic, NR	1	-	-	-
Black, Hispanic, NR	1	-	-	-

NA = Not Applicable; NR = Not Reported. <sup>1</sup> "Mixed"/"Biracial" were not options for parents' own racial backgrounds or for parent reported adolescent race. <sup>2</sup> At least one parent's racial background was reported for every adolescent, but racial background was not reported for both parents in every case.



### 3.2. Data Collection

Focal data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews designed to learn from youth regarding their racial and gender identity experiences and subjective meaning-making. Our analysis focused on the portion of the semi-structured interview discussing racial identity. All interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2019 by five trained staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers. All interviewers were either Asian or white, and four of the five interviewers were female. As a result, while the interviewers may have shared some racial or gender identities with the adolescents they were interviewing, this was not always the case. Adolescents generally seemed very open in their interviews, but it is possible that the degree to which identities were shared could have impacted what adolescents were willing to say about sensitive topics such as gender and race. Parental surveys also collected demographic and family information such as racial background, age, and socioeconomic status.

#### 3.2.1. Operationalizing Multiracial Identification

Multiracial status is fluid, personal, and political, and it matters for both individuals and the research literature on multiraciality. In the current analysis, we operationalized multiracial status in a multi-faceted fashion. To identify our sample, we first looked at parent-reported adolescent racial background and parent-reported parental racial background information. Parents were asked to disclose their child's racial-ethnic identity in a structured demographic interview, which was then recorded by the interviewer by circling all that applied from the following list: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Black or African American, and white. Similar processes were repeated for the parent's own race/ethnicity, as well as the race/ethnicity of the child's other parent. An adolescent was considered to have a multiracial background if (1) their parent reported more than one racial group for their child's racial-ethnic identity, (2) either of the adolescent's parents reported more than one racial-ethnic group for their own background, or (3) the parents had different racial backgrounds. All adolescents with multiracial backgrounds were included in our initial analysis, but one adolescent initially included on the basis of her parents' differing racial backgrounds was excluded when it became clear in her interview that she was an adopted monoracial adolescent.

Then, we turned to self-reported adolescent racial identity labels, which were determined as part of the semi-structured interviews. Adolescents were asked, "How would you describe yourself in terms of your ethnic or racial background?" The coding team read through the adolescents' responses to that question for all the interviews, coding their response into an identity label category: *multiracial* or *monoracial*. Anyone self-identifying as *multiracial* was added to the analysis, even if they were identified as monoracial based on the parental demographic interview information. Adolescents who were identified as multiracial by their parents but did not self-identify as multiracial were also included in our analytic sample. It is important to note that, while many youth characterized their racial identity consistently throughout their interview, a portion of adolescents fluidly moved between talking about their identity as multiracial or monoracial throughout the interview. For example, some youth would identify monoracially in response to the racial identity label interview question, but would later reference experiences tied to having a mixed background. Others would label themselves as multiracial at first, but would later answer certain questions specifically referring to only one of their racial group memberships. This reflects the flexibility of identity previously seen in research with multiracial individuals (Rockquemore et al. 2009).

Incorporating both multiracial background and multiracial identity in our sample selection allowed us to analyze a more diverse set of narratives about what it is like to be an adolescent with a multiracial background in a (mono)racist society. Previous research with multiracial adolescents and their parents show that there are often discrepancies between the adolescent's personal racial identity and how their parents would identify them, and so reliance only on

parental reports could have missed several multiracial youth (Mauer et al. 2020). Alternatively, constraining our sample to only those who self-identify as multiracial would have ignored the reality that not all multiracial individuals identify as multiracial (Pew Research Center 2015).

### 3.2.2. Multiracial Identity Socialization: Listening for Subjective Experience

Interviews were semi-structured and followed the principles of the listening guide in the interview relationship, which positions those being interviewed as the experts on their own experiences (Gilligan 2015; Seidman 2006). The interviews focused on how young people made sense of their racial identities and related racial experiences. The interview protocol did not specifically focus on the types of messages youth receive from others about their racial identity. Rather, we *listened* for the socializing messages that young people reported when describing their multiracial identities in response to a series of seven open-ended interview questions (see Table 2). Interview questions included: “What is good about being [selected race]?” and “What do you think it means to be [selected race]?” The participant’s self-selected racial identity label from the above questions was inserted in order to situate the conversation in their own language and identity perspective.

**Table 2.** Semi-structured interview questions on racial identity.

Interview Questions	
1.	How would you describe yourself in terms of your ethnic or racial background?
2.	What are some of the good things about being [racial label from above]?
3.	What are some of the things that are hard about being [racial identity]?
4.	What do you think other people think about your [racial identity]? What do you think about that? How does it make you feel when you think about what others think of you?
5.	Do you ever feel like people expect you to act a certain way or do certain things just because you are [racial identity]? Can you tell me about a time when you felt that way? Can you think of a time when you were treated differently because of your race?
6.	Try to imagine that you weren’t [racial identity]. How do you think things would be different? Would anything change?
7.	If you had to write an essay about what you think it means to be [racial identity], what are some of the things you’d write about?

## 4. Coding and Analysis

The coding was all inductive and indirect; the interview was not originally designed to specifically probe for messages from others, message sources, or youth’s reactions to these messages. All codes were generated from listening to the data. This analysis follows conceptually from a previous longitudinal analysis with children, which illustrated that messages from others about their racial identity were salient when making meaning of their racial identities (Jones et al. 2021a). In the current analysis, all messages from others mentioned by the adolescent in their interview were identified and then analyzed for content, or Message Type, Message Source, and the adolescent’s Reaction to the message.

A team of three coders read a subset of fifteen interviews to generate the coding scheme. This involved individual readings of each interview to develop an exhaustive list of types of messages, who messages came from, and how adolescents reacted to messages. The team then met weekly to discuss the themes and consolidate them into a coherent coding scheme, which would allow us to distinguish between meaningful differences but still enable us to understand broad trends. Once the team arrived at a coding scheme, the coding scheme was applied to the full sample, and underwent minor revisions to reflect the expanded data. The team met weekly to discuss coding and resolve any disagreements. The coding team did not go in with a set coding scheme. However, it was anticipated that the coding scheme could reflect schemes found in previous research with children.

Specifically, in accordance with our research questions we conducted three levels of coding: (a) Message Type, (b) Message Source, and (c) Reaction.

In developing our coding scheme, the primary voice we heard was multiracial youth who were racialized as people of color grappling with a white gaze that devalued them and their racial identities. In a smaller group of multiracial youth who identified as white or acknowledged that they were perceived as white by most others, we heard a different voice. Due to their (perceived) different position in the racial hierarchy, given their appearance, white-perceived youth had to negotiate their identity from within whiteness *as well as* from the critical gaze of people of color. This difference is captured in our Message Type coding.

#### 4.1. Coding Scheme

First, Message Type codes captured variations in the content, the superficial valence the message attaches to the adolescent's racial identity, and the ways in which the messages upheld the dominant (mono)racial hierarchy. The coding team identified three Message Types, which were mutually exclusive. The first two Message Types, **stereotypes** and **invalidation**, explicitly engaged with white supremacy, while the third, **affirmation**, was not explicitly responsive to white supremacy. All Message Types capture the perspective of the "other", and so convey how others are talking about or treating youth's identities. Messages were all spontaneously evoked in response to questions asking adolescents about their racial identity. While we do not claim that the messages that we found are the *only* messages that multiracial adolescents receive, we believe it is interesting to understand what messages adolescents *tend to bring up spontaneously*. In other words, what comes to mind for these youth when thinking about their racial identity, and to what degree do these messages reinforce white supremacy?

**Stereotypes** reinforced established racial hierarchy and expectations through the deployment of stereotypes or discrimination. These messages were varied and nuanced, and so were divided into two subcategories, which differed in terms of the superficial valence of the message: (a) *negative stereotypes*, and (b) *superficially positive stereotypes*. *Negative stereotypes* were further coded into subtypes, which reflected the racial positionality of the adolescent: (i) *hostile*, which included references to slurs, discrimination, and negative stereotypes directed at adolescents racialized as people of color, and (ii) *whiteness as oppressive*, which captured messages directed at white-perceived adolescents which conveyed how others linked whiteness to histories of racial oppression or communicated mistrust from people of color. *Superficially positive stereotypes* were also coded into subtypes to account for adolescents' racial positionality: (i) *benevolent*, which captured seemingly complimentary messages received by adolescents racialized as people of color, including the model minority stereotype (i.e., Asians are good at math), fetishization, and benefitting from colorism, (ii) *whiteness as goodness*, which were directed at white-perceived youth and associated whiteness with goodness, competence, and trustworthiness, and (iii) *expectations of no culture*, which associated white-perceived youth's whiteness with a lack of culture, a stereotype that was not explicitly valenced. While differing in superficial valence and intensity, all stereotype messages serve to constrain or commodify the individual's existence due to their racial identity.

The second Message Type that engaged with white supremacy was **invalidation** messages. These messages denied, questioned, or miscategorized an adolescent's racial identity (i.e., a message saying that an adolescent is not really Asian because they cannot speak Chinese). Invalidation messages reinforce the monoracial construction of race, which has historically operated to protect the strict boundaries of whiteness and white supremacy (J. Harris 2016).

The third *Message Type* was **affirmation** messages. These messages validated the adolescent's racial identity and framed it in a positive way. Importantly, affirmation messages involved meaningful appreciation of the adolescent's identity in a way that did not reinforce racial hierarchy and stereotypes.

Second, Message Source indicated who messages were coming from. We coded four key sources: (a) *family*, which included people such as parents or grandparents; (b) *peers*, which included classmates, friends, or even strangers around the same age as the adolescent; (c) *specific others*, which included people who were specifically identified but who did not fall into the other categories, such as teachers, faith leaders, and school security officers; and (d) *general others*, which included references to a generalized group of others such as “they”, “people”, or “society”. Importantly, Message Source codes were not mutually exclusive. While uncommon in this analysis, messages could be attributed to multiple sources at once (i.e., a teacher and security officer at school).

Third, Reaction codes focused on how youth responded to the message. This is where youth’s own voices and perspectives can be seen in our coding. There were five categories of Reactions: (a) *resistance*, when the adolescent reacted to a message by disagreeing with it, and asserting or reasserting their racial identity; (b) *negative emotion*, when the adolescent explicitly used a negative emotional word to describe their reaction; (c) *nonchalance*, when the adolescent “brushed off” a given message and asserted that it did not matter or did not affect them; (d) *other*, which captured all reactions not fitting into another category, such as positive emotional reactions, a distancing from their racial identity, and even acceptance of the message; and (e) *no response*, when the adolescent did not offer any processing or reaction to the message, an unsurprising code, since reactions were not specifically asked for by the interviewer. The coding team kept careful documentation of all codes within the *other* category, but there was no significant clumping of themes that would have warranted the addition of another category. With the exception of the *no response* code, reaction codes were not mutually exclusive to allow for the youths’ nuanced, layered reactions.

#### 4.2. Coding Reliability

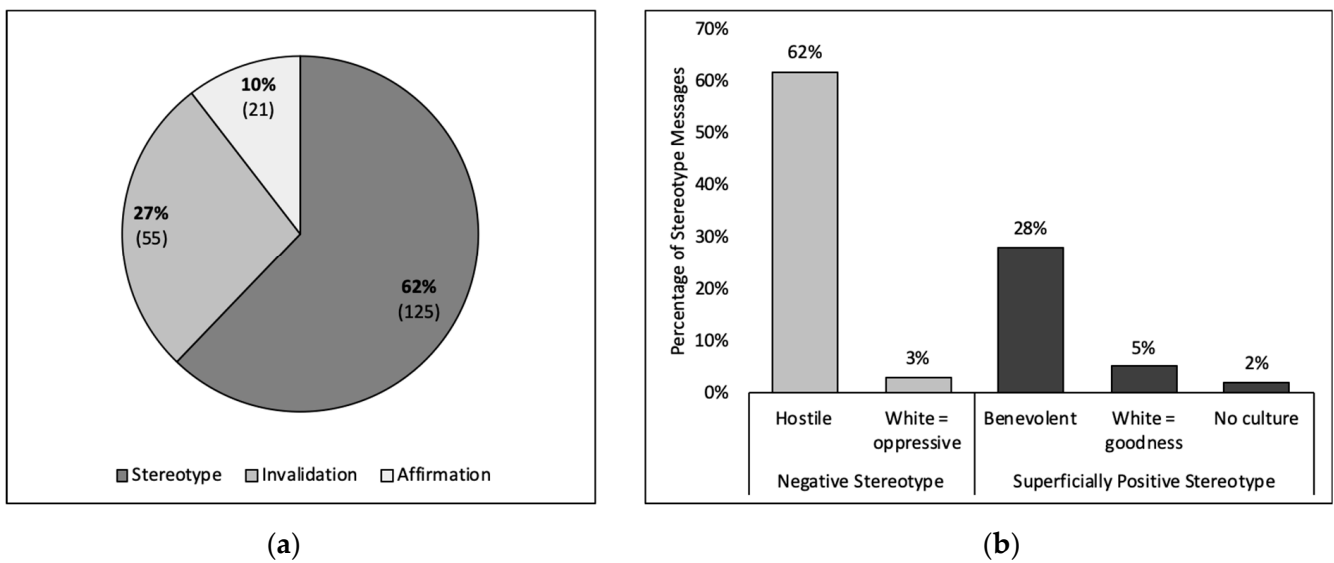
Interrater reliability among the three coders was calculated using an intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC), and ranged from fair, for *other* codes (0.61), to excellent, for *peer* codes (0.86). The *other* codes had the broadest possible reach, including any Reaction types that did not fall into the other categories, so more discrepancies in that code were to be expected. Discrepancies were resolved through conversation.

#### 4.3. Positionality and Coding Team

The coding team was comprised of three student researchers: a multiracial Asian and white woman; a multiracial Filipino, CHamoru, and East Asian woman; and a white woman. All coders are part of the same university and research lab in psychology. As is the case with all data analysis, our own experiences, beliefs, and ways of interacting with the world inevitably shape the patterns we find salient and interesting. One researcher’s personal experience as someone often seen as racially ambiguous heightened her awareness for the myriad ways that invalidation can show up in race-relevant messages. Another’s experiences made her particularly attuned to instances of implicit benevolent stereotypes and the need to distinguish those from hostile stereotypes (see the Coding Scheme Development section). In order to ensure our interpretations were robust, this work was repeatedly presented to a larger research group throughout the research process; the larger group consisted of members of multiple genders, academic backgrounds, and racial identities, including Black, Latinx, Asian, and white. This allowed the smaller coding team to access a broader interpretive community (Maxwell 2012) and ensure that our research was examined from and interpreted through diverse perspectives.

### 5. Results

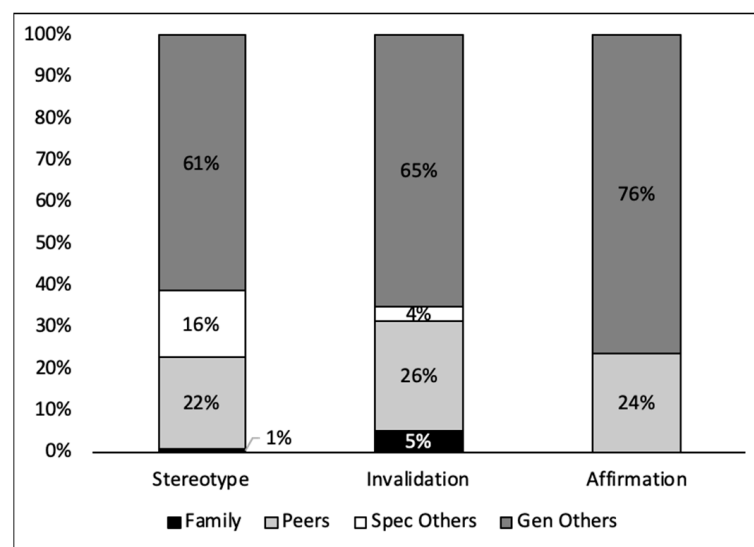
A total of 201 messages from others were reported across the sample, averaging 4.1 messages per adolescent. Every adolescent reported at least one message. Overall, **stereotypes** were the most prevalent, followed by **invalidation** and **affirmation** messages (see Figure 1a). We organized the results by Message Type. In each section, we report the findings on the Message Source as well as adolescents’ Reaction(s) to the messages they receive.



**Figure 1.** (a) Proportion and absolute number of external messages by *Message Type*. Note that the percentages in this figure add to 99% due to rounding error; (b) *Stereotype* message prevalence broken down by subtype.

### 5.1. Stereotype Messages

**Stereotype** messages accounted for 62% of all messages that youth reported receiving from others. These messages predominantly came from *general others*, followed by *peers* and *specific others*, and rarely came from *family*, a general pattern seen across *Message Types* (Figure 2). As shown in Figure 1b, stereotype messages were the most nuanced, with multiple subcodes reflecting the multiple ways in which stereotypes operate in the service of white supremacy. Unsurprisingly, adolescents who identified as people of color reported and engaged with stereotypes differently (and more frequently) than their multiracial peers who identified with (or were identified as) white/ness. For that reason, we discuss the results in ways that reflect the adolescents’ subjective identification and racial positionalities.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of messages attributed to each Message Source for each Message Type. Spec Others = Specific Others; Gen Others = General Others.



### 5.1.1. Negative Stereotypes

Negative stereotypes constituted 41% of all messages reported from others, the largest share of all codes. *Hostile stereotype* messages were the most prevalent (see Figure 1b) and only directed at multiracial adolescents racialized as people of color. These messages predominantly came from *general others*.

Michelle, a girl who identifies as Japanese, Korean, and German, talks about how people generally like to “joke around” about her Asianness. They say, “you’re Asian so you like to eat dogs and cats”, a common insult used to “other” Asians by framing them as weird and cruel. Michelle reacts with *nonchalance*, asserting that “I mean personally that doesn’t really affect me that much ‘cause like it’s just a joke, I know it’s not true” and saying that even if someone was “actually like trying to make that an insult towards me” it still would not affect her because clearly that person is “kind of an idiot and I don’t need to waste my time or breath being angry”.

While *general others* were the dominant source of *hostile stereotype* messages, *peers* and *specific others* were also noted in a significant proportion of messages. Josephine, who says she is “several things” but “overall” identifies as Mexican because she was raised in a Mexican household, first talks about what messages she receives from *general others* about being Mexican:

*People definitely do think you’re stupid ‘cause you’re Mexican. Like, I have experienced that, like people think that “oh, you know, like you’re Mexican, Mexicans are dumb” you know things like that, “oh like, you’re illegal” you know. Like, yeah, along those lines.*

Josephine then goes on to illustrate how her *peers* specifically reinforced these hostile stereotypes about Mexican identity in elementary and middle school:

*So, in like middle school and elementary, that’s when I was more surrounded with, um, Caucasian people, you know. And I did get before, like, it was like I think St. Patrick’s Day, and, you know, some people know, like you know, I’m Irish. But um, they’re like, “Oh, you’re Irish?” And I was like, “Yeah”, and then they’re, “why aren’t you like wearing green?” you know. And I was like “I don’t know”, and they’re like, “Oh, what else are you?” and I’m like, “Oh, I’m Mexican”, and they’re like “Ew”. Yeah, and then they’re like, walked away, and I was like “okay”, you know. Like, it was just like, wow.*

However, these messages have not stayed in the past for Josephine. She goes on to share how she still receives negative messages about her Mexican identity in the present day, citing Donald Trump, a *specific other*:

*Um, people think Mexicans, like, you know Donald Trump, like how he puts out there, you know, Mexicans are rapists and like, they’re mostly illegal and stuff like that . . . I feel like, that, from just that it definitely did give an even worse reputation to how people view Mexicans.*

Robby, who identifies as an African American male, also shares a story highlighting a message from a *specific other*, this time from his friend’s dad:

*Like, I remember, um, I was talkin’ to one of my friends [...] he was telling me about his dad, how his dad was like “you know you should be careful around him because you know, he might, you know, like steal your phone or something” and it’s just like, you know, I’ve never, I hadn’t met his father up until that point.*

Robby reacts to the message stereotyping him as a criminal by calling it “kinda disrespectful” and saying “it does make me kinda sad. It makes me kinda angry, little bit”, an example of *negative emotion*.

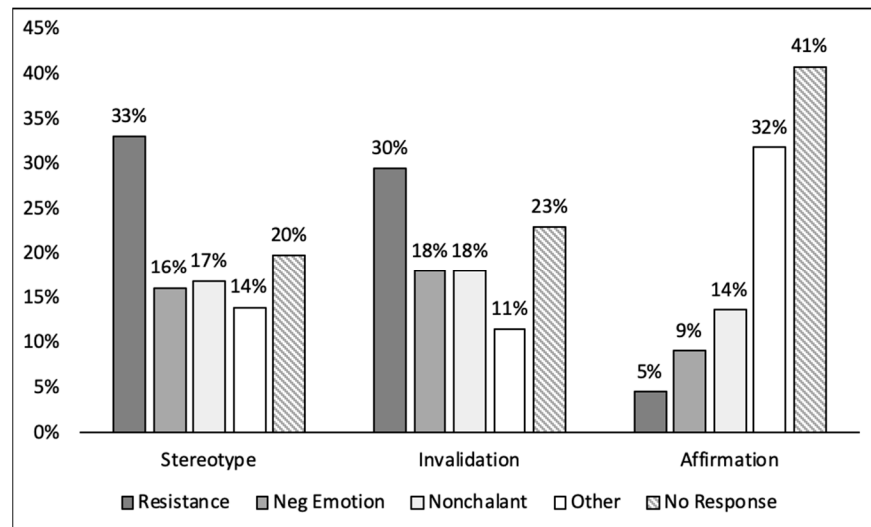
Overall, adolescents met *hostile stereotype* messages with *resistance* most often. *Resistance* is embodied in Celia’s response to stereotypes from teachers at her school about Black and Hispanic students:

*I feel like the Black kids like—they’re putting a stereotype on us of like a lot of Black people don’t go to college or finish high school and I feel like it’s a lot of Black or Hispanic that,*



now in this generation that would finish college and high school and I want to be one of them people that does that and doesn't just give up.

Here, Celia—who identifies as Black and Puerto Rican—*resists* the negative characterization of Black students as both generally inaccurate and as something she is going to personally disprove. *Negative emotion*, as seen with Robby, and *nonchalance*, as seen with Michelle, were also common. *Other* reactions—such as acceptance or exasperation—and *no reactions* were coded less frequently. The dominance of *resistance* followed by *negative emotion* and *nonchalance* largely follows the pattern of responses seen across stereotype messages (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Distribution of Reaction codes within each Message Type.

For the youth who discuss being perceived as white, *negative stereotype* messages highlighted a construction of *whiteness as oppressive* by people of color. This often communicated a distrust of whiteness or associated whiteness with histories of oppression and racism. Three of the six white-perceived participants mention *whiteness as oppressive* messages from *general others*. Alex identifies as Puerto Rican and Polish but acknowledges that most people see him as white. When asked about a time he was treated differently because of his race, Alex recounts a family trip to Puerto Rico. He says that even though “[he] can speak Spanish and everyone in [his] family can speak Spanish”, clarifying his Puerto Rican identity, it still “seemed like there were some people that didn’t want us to be around because we were white”. When asked how that made him feel, Alex said, “just a little uneasy really, nothing too harsh”, a (downplayed) *negative emotion* reaction, and then said, “I just didn’t say anything about it; I just let it happen and slide on past”, a response brushing off his unease and projecting *nonchalance*.

Caroline, who identifies as Native American and white but says she’s perceived as white, also says that if she was not white people would probably “be, like, less distant”.

‘Cause, like, sometimes, like, they’re like, “Oh, a white person, I don’t wanna”, like, you know, they like, ‘cause like the white privilege and stuff like that. So they might not have those, like, existing, like, barriers of like, “Oh, that person like has that, like, history in their ancestors” and stuff like that.

Of the four *whiteness as oppressive* messages reported by the white-perceived youth, two did not include the youth’s reaction to the message. The remaining messages were met with a combination of *negative emotion*, *nonchalance*, or an *other* reaction such as acceptance. None of the white-perceived youth reacted with *resistance*.

### 5.1.2. Superficially Positive Stereotypes

Superficially positive stereotype messages made up 21% of all messages from others. *Benevolent stereotype* messages were the most frequent subtype and were directed only at youth racialized as people of color (Figure 1b). The bulk of these messages came from *general others*, followed by *peers* and *specific others*. A small fraction of *benevolent stereotype* messages came from *family*, again mirroring the distribution of message source for all stereotype messages (Figure 2).

*Benevolent stereotype* messages included themes like fetishization, like this story from Eva who identified as a Black and Hispanic girl:

*Uh, I think, I feel like I'd talk about how it's like—I don't want to say it's fetishized but kind of like people are like "oh I want mixed babies" [...] I hate it when people say that, just because like—Like all the time, like, random like white girls in the hallway will be like, "What're you mixed with?" Like, "Oh my god, I really want mixed babies". I'm like, what?*

While the *benevolent stereotype* message implies that being multiracial is a good and desirable thing because 'mixedness' is cute, fetishization is dehumanizing and othering. It commodifies multiracial people, and mixed babies specifically in this example, as things that can be obtained and owned—it turns a person from a "who" to a "what" because of their racial identity. Eva acknowledges the negative impact of fetishization in her response, displaying a *negative emotional* response during the interview by repeatedly saying "ewww" and calling the message "creepy". She also pushes back on the idea that multiracial babies are "just" cute, saying "you need to be able to take care of, like, a Black baby. Like, it's so different, you know", *resisting* the idea that multiracial babies are commodities rather than living beings.

Krystal, who identifies as mixed, also specifically calls out fetishization in the messages she receives: "Some people are like, 'Ooh, you're so exotic' and some people are like, 'Yeah, whatever. Yeah. Continue.'" She specifically calls out that "the first part is like fetis-, feti-shi-zation. Which is no bueno", thereby joining Eva in *resisting* fetishizing messages.

Celia, a girl who identifies as Black and Puerto Rican who previously shared a *hostile stereotype* message, indicates another *benevolent stereotype* message as she recounts how people "will say they know I have 'good hair' so they know I'm mixed". She says it makes her "feel good about [her] race and telling them what [she] is", a positive emotional reaction which would be coded as *other*. While this sounds like a compliment on the surface, the message fundamentally privileges "good" hair—which is socially understood to mean hair types, styles, and textures traditionally associated with whiteness—and by extension multiracialness, because of its perceived proximity to whiteness.

Samuel, who identifies as Black and White and occasionally uses the term biracial in the interview, highlights similar messaging he has received from *peers* about skin color: "Most, mostly like my friends they like oh they wanna be biracial and stuff like that. I don't know. But they call it light-skinned, I guess. I don't know". When the interviewer asked what he thinks about that, he says:

*It's, I don't know, I find it funny . . . I don't know I just find it funny. But they wanna be . . . 'cause I guess there's like this term called "light-skinned", I guess. And everyone gets, like, they like light skin and stuff or something like that. That's just stupid . . . It's like light skin I guess is Black, but you're light skin, I don't know. I guess, I find it stupid because it's just another way to separate people because, I don't know, it's like going back to like slavery and only light-skinned people worked inside houses and Black people worked outside. It's just another way to separate and discriminate, I guess.*

Mirroring the comments Celia received about her hair, Samuel receives messages about how his light skin is good and desirable. This again reinforces proximity to whiteness as a positive. Unlike Celia, however, Samuel finds this line of reasoning "stupid", and *resists* it by identifying it as "just another way . . . to discriminate".

As we can see with Eva, Krystal, and Samuel, reactions to *benevolent stereotype* messages were predominantly *resistance*, followed by *nonchalance* and *other* reactions such as acceptance or positive emotion. *Negative emotion* and *no response* were least common. This follows the general trend seen more broadly in adolescent reactions to stereotypes (Figure 3).

Three of the white-perceived youth in this sample also reported stereotype messages that were *superficially positive*. For example, white-perceived youth negotiated the notion of *whiteness as goodness*. Gabriel, a boy who identified as white but also says he is “a fourth Mexican”, recounts that people expect him to “do things properly” because he is white:

*Like if I were to do a school assignment and I just got this teacher, I one hundred percent think that she would expect me to fill out the assignment because like I'm not disrespectful in class of course, but like if I don't do the assignment I feel like she'd be surprised because I seemed like a good kid to her, but I'm really just not that good of a kid.*

*Whiteness as goodness* messages often came from *specific others*, namely police officers, security officers at school, and teachers, or from *general others*. Unlike the trend we see with stereotype messages more broadly, *peers* were not a source of *whiteness as goodness* stereotype messages. Notably, these messages are not always embraced by adolescents. Despite their ‘positive’ attraction of privileging the youth’s whiteness, such messages were experienced as restrictive or problematic. Gabriel talks about how he wishes he could just be seen for himself:

*Um, like in school people when they see me, I'm a white kid and wear Converse and white people clothes, and I listen to a lot of rap and I hang out with a lot of Black kids, like I'm a white hoodlum, but people just assume because I'm white that I get good grades, I'm a good kid and do what I'm told, you know all that stuff. [ . . . ] I wish I could be white and just be white without having any baggage.*

Gabriel’s desire to escape *whiteness as goodness* stereotypes reflects how our white-perceived youth reacted overall; half of the *whiteness as goodness* messages were met with *resistance*, either because they felt it’s “pretty screwed up” that white people are privileged over others or because they felt constrained by the positive expectations, especially when they do not achieve them. The remaining *whiteness as goodness* messages were not met with any reaction at all.

White-perceived youth also referenced stereotypes of whiteness that were not explicitly valanced but still upheld whiteness as normal, such as having *expectations of no culture*, which was reported by two of the white-perceived adolescents and came exclusively from *general others*. Sydney, a girl who identifies as white, talks about how “people don’t expect” her to have any sort of culture even though her dad’s family is from Mexico and Argentina so she has “that side of [her]”. She says, “They just see this like blonde white girl who like doesn’t have anything interesting going on. Just very blank, like, plain . . . But, I mean, I don’t know”, and does not detail her reaction any further. Being “plain” in a society that explicitly others and assigns “culture” to those who are not white is not neutral; it instead reinforces the idea of whiteness as an invisible default that is separate from all other racial-ethnic groups in the monoracial hierarchy, an idea that is received by white-perceived adolescents as relevant to their racial identities. *No reaction* was reported to all *expectations of no culture*.

## 5.2. Invalidation Messages

**Invalidation** was the second most common Message Type overall, accounting for 27% of all messages (Figure 1a). As seen with stereotype messages, *general others* were the most common source of invalidation messages (Figure 2). These messages often arose in situations where others would become confused by someone asserting an identity that spanned racial lines. Trina, a girl who identified as European, Latina, and Native American, shared:

*A lot of people have a hard time understanding you can be two different things or more. So like, I have this happen all the time. “You said you were German, right?” I'm like*

*yeah, I'm also Mexican. "But I thought you said you were German!" And they'll be like, "You're Mexican, right?" I said German also! "But you're Mexican!"*

Trina received messages from "a lot of people" who refused to accept that she had a Mexican and a German identity, which framed her identity as surprising and, implicitly, impossible. Trina *resisted* this invalidation message by reasserting that she's "also" German or Mexican as appropriate.

*Peers, family, and specific others* accounted for the few remaining messages (see Figure 2). Winnie, who identifies as Asian and later mentions that her mom is Mexican and white, shares how her *peers* reacted to her Asian identity:

*When I told my friends that I was Asian they started laughing . . . And to me it, it gets me really upset when they sit there and they laugh and, you know, Asian people, they look at us 'cause our eyes are small. And they look at me like, "You're not Asian 'cause your eyes aren't small" and then I told them that doesn't matter the way you look. It's all different and you shouldn't be laughing at them, at anyone, 'cause of the way they look. And it, that hurt me like, you're—I'm tryin' to like tell you what I am and you're laughing. It's, it's hurtful.*

Winnie's friends invalidate her identity on the basis of her appearance, which does not stereotypically conform to the "Asian" prototype. Alongside her *negative emotional* reaction, Winnie *resists* her friends' message by asserting that looks do not dictate one's identity.

Antonio, a boy who identifies as Black and Puerto Rican, also talks about how his appearance features strongly in how *general others* judge his identity. He says he does not really mind explaining his identity to people, but

*sometimes people can be ignorant like to the fact that, about mixed people like because if you look a certain—because like there's like a lot of things that African-Americans have to deal with like injustices and stuff in society, so like if you don't appear to be African American they don't consider you [African American] 'cause you don't deal with the same like—like I appear to be like light-skinned so I get like I don't have to deal with um, like discrimination a lot but I still am, you know like half African American, so like they sometimes people don't consider me it.*

Like Winnie, Antonio's identity is not always taken seriously because of his appearance. He later mentions that people sometimes invalidate his Hispanic identity as well because he does not "really speak Spanish, um, or [he] can't dance". He responds to this invalidation with negative emotion, saying "sometimes it just like makes me mad and, like, I have to argue over it". However, he tries to manage his emotions with a degree of *nonchalance* as well: "But I don't let it get to me to like a point where it makes me so mad".

Invalidation messages were also received by adolescents who identified multiracially but were perceived as white by others. Caroline spoke of the denial she has faced when trying to claim her Native American identity despite her white appearance:

*Um, well a lot of people don't like believe me. They're like, "Oh, she's probably like one of those people that say I'm one eighteenth, like, Native American, like, Cherokee Princess". Something like that. But like, I tell 'em like, "No, that's not like", so, that's bad. I think people like don't believe me or like they need like some sort of proof because I'm like also, I'm like mixed, so, they don't, they need, they feel like they, that I need to like, I'm just tryin' to hide my whiteness and like cover it with something else. So, I'm like "I'm not white".*

Across adolescents, *resistance* was the most common reaction type to invalidation messages, followed by *negative emotion*, *nonchalance* and *other* reactions such as acceptance or distancing from one's identity (see Figure 3). However, *no reaction* was reported fairly often, accounting for almost a quarter of adolescent reaction to invalidation messages.

### 5.3. Affirmation Messages

The final Message Type, **affirmation**, was the only one that did not explicitly engage with or uphold white supremacy but instead uplifted the individual's identity. Affirmation messages were infrequent, accounting for only 10% of messages, and tended to be the least detailed and elaborated Message Type. *General others* and *peers* were the only reported sources of the affirmation messages (see Figure 2).

Melisa, who is Hispanic, Italian, and Black and identifies as biracial, says that she has "some people who are very like, they appreciate [her] culture and then it's not even their culture but they appreciate it". Though vague, this appreciation communicates to Melisa that others value her culture, which she ties strongly to her multiracial identity, in a way that does not seem to implicitly uphold racial hierarchy. Some adolescents also report messages from people that their identity is "cool". Angelica talks about how people at school see her Pacific Islander identity: "Um, the only comment that I really get about it is that's it cool 'cause it's like different, it's like our school's like not very diverse and there's like, you know, it's just like different". While messages that target difference have the capacity to other someone who is part of an underrepresented group, what is interesting about the message that Angelica received is that it actually casts difference as a positive factor. However, there may be an element of optimal differentiation at play; Angelica goes on to explain, "I like it, that, like, it's just like a little different 'cause like I'm only half [Filipino] and then the other half is, like, Scottish".

Michelle, who previously talked about how people negatively stereotyped her Asian-ness, also says that people see her *multiracial* identity as cool: "Most people think it's pretty cool actually 'cause, 'Oh, whoa, you're mixed, like you have all these different, like', whatever, whatever. I'm like yeah, cool, thanks (laughs)". When asked by the interviewer whether peoples' reactions to her identity are mostly positive, Michelle answers, "Yeah, mostly it's positive, yeah". The reasoning for Michelle's coolness is slightly different than the reasoning for Angelica's. While the uniqueness of Michelle's multiracial identity is implicit in the message, the message also explicitly holds up having access to multiple cultures, racial groups, and spaces as something positive, rather than construing it as abnormal.

Unlike stereotype and invalidation messages, most affirmation messages were met with *no reaction*, as we see with Melisa. The second most common reaction type was *other*, generally instances of positive emotion (see Figure 3). Additional reactions included *nonchalance* and *negative emotion*. No affirmation messages were found for our white-perceived or white-identifying participants.

## 6. Discussion

Our analysis used a critical developmental approach to better understand the experiences of a racially diverse group of multiracial adolescents, and specifically the messages they receive from others about their racial identities. This analysis yielded several insights. First, it is clear that messages from others are salient to adolescents when thinking about the meaning of and experiences associated with their racial identities; every adolescent mentioned at least one such message in their interview. Second, the content of those messages indicates the pervasive role of white supremacy, monoracism, and the maintenance of the multiracial construct (J. Harris 2016). Specifically, the messages that adolescents report predominantly uphold white supremacy through the deployment of identity **stereotypes** and **invalidation**, and these messages varied in nuanced ways based on whether or not youth were racialized as people of color. As interviews did not specifically ask about the messages youth receive from others about their racial identity, we cannot claim that these message types are exhaustive. *However*, it is interesting and important that when youth do spontaneously recall messages from others, these messages overwhelmingly reinforce white supremacy. Third, the messages that adolescents reported overwhelmingly came from *general others* and *peers*, and rarely came from *family*. This contrasts with and extends the broader literature on multiracial youth, which has focused heavily on socialization



practices and messages within the family context (i.e., [Atkin and Yoo 2019](#)). Finally, we show how youth respond to the messages they receive from others; most messages were met with a diverse set of reactions, including *resistance*, *negative emotions*, and *nonchalance*, underscoring that youth do not passively accept racialized messages but engage with them as they make sense of their own racial identities. From these four findings, we observe that the macrosystem of white supremacy is inseparable from the process of racial socialization that occurs at the interpersonal levels of family and peers (e.g., [Rogers et al. 2021a](#)), as evidenced in the everyday messages that multiracial youth receive from others. We discuss how these findings contribute to the study of multiracial identity and its development.

### 6.1. The Socializing Influence of White Supremacy: A MultiCrit Developmental Perspective

Racial identity is sociopolitical as well as personal; as such, ignoring the impact of societal structures and beliefs for youth racial identity development severely limits our understanding of their experiences and how they connect to broader systems of (mono)racism ([J. Harris 2016](#); [Williams et al. 2020](#)). Approaching the present analysis through the lens of MultiCrit allowed us to highlight the pervasive role of white supremacy as a restrictive force in the messages multiracial youth receive about their racial identities, despite narratives touting multiracial status as indicative of a post-racial future. The two most common messages that adolescents reported receiving about their multiracial identities were those which engaged with white supremacy—**stereotype** and **invalidation**—and together accounted for 90% of the total 201 race-related messages that were reported. This is a startling representation. Moreover, these messages were highly nuanced. The bulk were *negative*, namely *hostile stereotypes*, but also included *superficially positive* messages such as *benevolent stereotypes*. Critically, regardless of superficial valence, these messages served to reflect and reinforce white supremacy through the disparagement, commodification, and fetishization of non-white racial identities in ways that constrain what these youth “can” and “should” be.

In addition to stereotypes, adolescents reported a high frequency of invalidation, a multiracial-specific experience of monoracism that does not allow multiracial identities to exist. Invalidation messages also constrain what adolescents “can” be, communicating that multiracial identities are not a viable option. The pervasiveness of messages which engaged with (and generally reinforced) white supremacy means that they are salient for multiracial youth as they think about who they are and adds support to [J. Harris’ \(2016\)](#) call for a more critical lens in racial identity research.

Though the current study was not designed to assess specific messages from particular sources, we found that messages were overwhelmingly reported as coming from society at large (*general others*), but that *peers* also played a large role in policing racial boundaries through stereotypes and invalidation. This prevalence of sources other than *family* underscores the need to expand research on racial identity socialization beyond the home environment as youth age. The representation of society at large as a major Message Source aligns with MultiCrit’s critical structural emphasis and calls attention to societal ideologies and structures of racism as sources of socialization in youth development ([Rogers et al. 2021a](#)). The perceived ubiquity of some of these messages functions like master narratives ([McLean and Syed 2015](#)), governing how society understands and interprets multiracialness, and makes them transcend the interpersonal to the general. At the same time, the importance of *peers* in our analysis of Message Source also highlights how the structure of white supremacy is being enacted at an interpersonal level and supports previous developmental research on the impact of peers during adolescence ([Dahl et al. 2018](#)). Understanding the interpersonal level can give us a better idea of where to intervene to change the types of messages that youth receive about multiracial identity, an opportunity that is obscured when staying solely at a structural level of analysis.

In an encouraging and novel contribution, the analysis also highlights the degree to which multiracial adolescents respond to and actively *resist* oppressive messages from others as they define their own identities. That is, while prior research has mostly focused



on multiracial youth as recipients of socializing messages, discrimination, and invalidation, our analysis also showed the agency and meaning-making that youth ascribe to these experiences, uncovered by privileging their *experiential knowledge* (J. Harris 2016) through our methodological approach. In the identity literature, *resistance* speaks to the motivation youth have to hold onto their humanity and inherent value in the face of messages that try to strip those things away (Way and Rogers 2017; Rogers and Way 2021). It is notable, however, that *negative emotions* and *nonchalance* were also prominent reactions. These two Reaction types might reflect what has been identified in prior research as ‘resistance for survival’ strategies, which serve the short-term interests of the individual but do not necessarily challenge the system and may come at the expense of longer-term gains for the individual and their community (Robinson and Ward 1991; Rogers and Way 2018). *Nonchalance*, in particular, may represent resistance for survival: professing unbotheredness may help save face in the wake of dehumanizing messaging, but it also probably reduces one’s likelihood of reaching out for help, with potential ramifications for youth’s support-seeking as negative messages about their racial identity become dominant.

By taking a MultiCrit perspective and centering adolescent voices, we learn that multiracial adolescents are contending with white supremacy as they explore their racial identities. Such insights broaden our understanding of the ways in which multiracial youth are not only socialized into a racial identity, but into a white supremacist monoracial paradigm in their everyday lives, and the degree to which they push back against that paradigm.

### 6.2. Whiteness in the Multiracial Experience

Another contribution of this work is in its inclusion of and engagement with white-perceived multiracial youth. MultiCrit emphasizes that, while there are many shared experiences within the multiracial community, the multiracial experience is not homogeneous and instead reflects the *intersections of multiple racial identities* (J. Harris 2016). The addition of white-perceived and white-identifying youth to this analysis supports this diversity of experience and highlights different nuances in the messages that youth receive based on the position they hold (or are at least perceived to hold) in the racial hierarchy. While they constituted a small portion of this sample, the messages reported by the six white-perceived youth added a unique perspective to our analysis of the multiracial experience under white supremacy, a perspective often lost in a society that tends to assume all multiracial people are racially ambiguous (Skinner et al. 2019). For example, white-perceived multiracial adolescents in this sample also reported **stereotype** messages as the most common. However, the messages they received were qualitatively different than those received by their peers who were racialized as people of color; the messages reflected their race-privileged position as someone racialized as white in a white supremacist society. They were linked to oppression as the oppressor (rather than the oppressed), and stereotyped as “good” and “cultureless”.

Listening to the experiences of white-perceived youth in this analysis allowed us to understand the extent to which the gaze of people of color was salient, particularly in cases where whiteness was cast in a negative light. This was particularly evident when white-perceived youth named the stereotype that casts *whiteness as oppression*, linking whiteness to legacies of oppression and racism. This seemed to subvert (rather than reinforce) the racial hierarchy, which upholds whiteness as good, valuable, and positive. *Whiteness as oppression* messages seemed to come from the gaze of people of color rather than the white gaze that is traditionally inherent in messages about race, as in Alex’s and Caroline’s stories about being avoided by non-white folks, perhaps offering a reason for this subversion. Despite *resistance* being one of the most common Reactions to messages overall, *whiteness as oppression* was the only message subtype where adolescents did not offer any *resistance*. This perhaps indicates that white youth do not disagree (or do not feel they can publicly disagree) with more critical evaluations of the meaning of whiteness, despite it labeling them negatively.

At the same time, white-perceived youth noted the **stereotypes** equating *whiteness as goodness* or reinforcing *expectations of no culture*, which both aligned with white supremacy. These messages communicated a picture of white youth as inherently good because of their whiteness, and as the norm from which all other racial groups “with culture” deviated. While *general others* were still a major Message Source, *specific others* such as teachers and school security officers also featured heavily, particularly in messages of *whiteness as goodness*, highlighting the role of authority figures in perpetuating white supremacy in a school setting. While these stereotype messages tended to uphold whiteness as “good” and “normal”, white-perceived youth still found them restrictive and so *resisted* them. *Resistance* occurred either because they rejected the notion that white people should be privileged above non-white folks, or because those expectations were experienced as constraining and problematic for them as they tried to navigate their own individuality. While not all adolescents displayed resistance in response to stereotypes, the dominance of *resistance* as a reaction type reflects a hopeful trend across multiracial youth regardless of whether they are perceived as white or as a person of color. Though multiracial youth experience damaging stereotype messages in their daily lives, some youth identify those messages as restrictive and problematic and thus reject them.

Among the white-perceived adolescents who identified as multiracial, **invalidation** messages were also salient. For youth racialized as white, invalidation messages seemed qualitatively different to the invalidation messages received by their non-white-perceived peers because the messages ascribed a motive to their multiracial identification. As seen in Caroline’s narrative, these invalidation messages seemed to imply that claiming a multiracial identity was the adolescent’s attempt to distance themselves from their whiteness. Taken in combination with stereotype messages of *whiteness as oppressive*, it could be that claiming a multiracial identity when perceived as white is seen by others as an inauthentic attempt to absolve oneself of the legacy of oppression that whiteness carries with it, rather than a “true” representation of identity. The recent increased discourse around white fragility, or a state in which any racial stress is intolerable and met with behavioral responses to restore racial comfort (DiAngelo 2018), may contribute to the perception of white-perceived multiracial people as distancing themselves from whiteness, a common attempt to restore racial comfort (Chow et al. 2008; Langrehr et al. 2021). It is unclear from the narratives in our study whether any or all of these motives are at play for our white-perceived youth. The impact of the white fragility discourse on perceptions of multiracial folks has yet to be systematically investigated.

## 7. Limitations and Future Directions

The findings from this research are informative and novel but also leave space for future research. First, while this study indicates that these messages from others are important and salient for adolescents when thinking about their racial identities, this study was a secondary data analysis. These interviews were not designed to specifically discuss messages from others, and thus all mentions of messages from others were spontaneous. It is possible that our findings could be an artifact of the data. Future work should further investigate the role of messages from others, as well as the sources of and reactions to those messages, in racial identity development.

While it is important to understand what multiracial youth may experience in common as they navigate a society which primarily operates with a monoracial framework, we also acknowledge that different racial groups have different histories and positionalities within the United States, which may add nuance to individuals’ multiracial experiences. These nuances could not be accounted for in this analysis beyond the dynamics of being broadly white-perceived. Furthermore, the youth in this study were all from the same geographic area, and thus more research is needed with multiracial youth in other areas of the United States, which may have different social dynamics around race. Future work would also benefit from using a more intersectional lens to better understand the role gender plays in the racialized experiences of multiracial youth (Crenshaw 1990), which was not explored in

the present study. The emergence of *nonchalance* as a reaction type, for example, could be tied to masculinity and the associated pressure to inhibit emotional expression, especially expressions of hurt, as youth enter adolescence (J. Harris et al. 2020; Rogers et al. 2019). While some research has begun to highlight gendered patterns of multiracial experience (Newman 2019), the intersection of gender and multiracial identity still remains largely underexamined.

While we know that racial socialization messages matter for racial identity (Hughes et al. 2016; Williams et al. 2020), this analysis also did not investigate the causal link between Message Type and adolescent identity label because of its cross-sectional design. Do certain types of messages lead to a different racial identification for multiracial youth? Does holding a particular identity make certain kinds of messages more salient? With longitudinal data, might we see the link in the adult literature between invalidation and identity detachment? Future work should also consider how receiving messages that vary in message type may impact identity differently to receiving messages that all fall within a single message type. Almost all of the adolescents in our study reported receiving multiple messages from others, and those messages were generally distributed across at least two message types. However, there was a small subset of adolescents who reported messages clustered within a single message type. Might receiving consistent messaging have a stronger impact on identity than more varied messaging? The impact of messages from others on identity is rich area for future research.

## 8. Conclusions

The subjective perspectives of multiracial youth remain underrepresented in the racial identity development literature, despite the importance of adolescence as a time for deep and meaningful identity exploration and development. This study addressed this gap by spotlighting the perspectives of a diverse group of multiracial adolescents, and using a MultiCrit lens to seriously look at the impacts of white supremacy on identity development during adolescence. Our findings add to a growing body of the literature illustrating that the multiracial population is not a sign of a post-racial society (J. Harris 2016; Umaña-Taylor 2016). Rather, we find that multiracial adolescents notice the restrictions a racist society imposes on them, which reflect discrimination and stereotypes in common with those of monoracial backgrounds. However, these societal constraints also highlight the *unique* ways in which multiracial adolescents are often slotted into monoracial categories, or in which they are construed “positively” because of their proximity to whiteness and distance from Blackness. While more research is needed, one thing is clear: multiracial adolescents, regardless of racialization, are feeling the constraints of a racist hierarchical society during a developmental period that is characterized by identity exploration. Research needs to attend to these dynamics in order to help youth achieve a healthy racial identity in a society that all too often sees multiraciality as the ultimate “solution” for racism.

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