**Religious Messaging on Race and Youth Attitudes Towards Race**

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Literature addressing connections between American Christianity and attitudes towards race, racism, and racial injustice focuses on adults with scant attention to the role of youth religious education on racial socialization. One study examining how youth groups deal with issues surrounding race, reveals that youth are already exploring racial themes amongst each other and want to explore these themes in their youth groups but youth groups are ill at ease and ill equipped to have these discussions, even going so far as to state that race is not something that should be talked about in church. [[1]](#endnote-2) Another study on children’s religious education and spiritual formation has exposed a null curriculum regarding issues of race and racism, suggesting an ideological vacuum that allows for the formation and reinforcing of a white Christian imagination. [[2]](#endnote-3)

There is an empirical and theoretical gap on churches and religious education spaces as socialization spaces into non-religious norms, especially norms surrounding race and racism. This paper focuses on a quantitative study testing a theoretical framework for youth race socialization in religious spaces developed by the first author. Specifically, this paper explores the question: How do religious messages and religious beliefs surrounding race and racism influence youth attitudes on race and racism? Prior to discussing the study and its implications, the terms “race” and “racism” are explicitly defined. Next, there is a discussion of three approaches to child/youth race socialization: psychological, interpretive, and structural. Finally, a structural model of race socialization within religious spaces is presented as a theoretical framework that this study examines.

**Defining Race and Racism**

“You do not come into this world African or European or Asian; rather, this world comes into you.” [[3]](#endnote-4)

When researching race and racism, it is essential to define what by those terms. While United States history cannot be told without acknowledging the blight of racism, this current time and place in history seems to be especially racially divided. In an age where white supremacy masked as populist nationalism is once again gaining steam globally, it would be erroneous to assume a sense of common ground when using “race” and “racism.”

This paper employs Desmond’s and Emirbayer’s definition of race: “…*a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category* [emphasis in original].” [[4]](#endnote-5) Race is symbolic in that it is a category that only has meaning through the interactions of individuals. Race exists as a symbolic way to delineate between groups of people based on the physical appearance of individuals and/or their genetic parentage. The specific meanings of racial categories and the people placed in those categories are dependent on social, political, and economic forces and are subject to change from one historical period to the next. [[5]](#endnote-6) The final characteristic of race categories is that they are presented as common-sense categories based on essential characteristics such as biology, ethnicity, or geographic “origins.” Therefore, race is both bestowed upon groups and individuals by society and is continually negotiated within the context of everyday interactions.

Next, consider the definition of racism. While there are institutional and interpersonal forms of racism, this paper defines “racism” as the systemic privileging of one race over another through the explicit and/or implicit use of power through social institutions, cultural norms, political systems, and economic forces to dominate minority racial groups. [[6]](#endnote-7) In the current historical context, this means that racism sets up a social system that privileges Whites over other racial groups. While racial groups other than Whites can exhibit feelings and actions of superiority towards other racial groups, only non-Whites can be victims of racism in the context of this definition. Defining racism in this way places the impetus of racial domination on what Bonilla-Silva emphasizes as racial ideologies. [[7]](#endnote-8) It is these racial ideologies that form the foundations upon which children and youth are socialized into race. The following three sections describe separate approaches to how one is socialized into a racist society: psychological, interpretive, and structural.

**Psychological Approaches to Race Socialization**

Much of the early literature on racial socialization follows a developmental view of children. [[8]](#endnote-9) As a result, several studies proposed age-dependent stage models for race socialization that draw from Piaget’s theories of cognitive development. [[9]](#endnote-10) The Clark Doll Test Study was one of the earliest psychological studies to suggest that young children can recognize skin color to categorize themselves and others. [[10]](#endnote-11) Consistent with linear cognitive development models, the older the children were, the better they were at drawing connections between skin color, race, and ethnicity. Even considering those results, cognitive development models assume that young children are limited in their ability to abstractly conceptualize race beyond simple categories of similarities based on shared physical characteristics, like skin color. For example, Lerner and Schroeder suggested that when young White children are given more open-ended means to respond to questions about race and ethnicity, their categorizations of race and racial preferences are more ambiguous. [[11]](#endnote-12) Nevertheless, developmental models state that as children get older, they progress through the cognitive stages of development gaining more complex and nuanced understandings of race and ethnicity and the meanings associated with racial categories. [[12]](#endnote-13) Developmental understandings of racial socialization can be grouped into two approaches: individual psychological approaches and social psychological approaches.

**Individual psychological approaches.** Individual psychological approaches to racial socialization recognize two different components to racial awareness: cognitive and affective. By a cognitive component, I mean that early studies state that children and youth “actively process information, including information about people and interpersonal relationships” [[13]](#endnote-14) and build on their understanding as they age. While cognitive measures exhibit children’s abilities to categorize people based on race, they do not account for *why* some choose to self-identify as a certain race, especially in cases where children identify as a race other than their own.

In addition to cognitive measures, individual psychological approaches have considered children’s affective responses to racial categories. In other words, individual psychological approaches recognize that children express preferences based on how they feel about racial categories. [[14]](#endnote-15) The complexity with which children emotionally express their preference is dependent on age and race. When considering the spontaneous responses of the children during their experiments, Clark and Clark suggested that the African American children in their study had absorbed cultural messages that White is better than Black. [[15]](#endnote-16) Other studies similarly found that both White and Black children preferred to be White. [[16]](#endnote-17) While individual psychological approaches to understanding children’s racial socialization reveal that there are cognitive and affective components to understanding race, these approaches do not examine where racial preferences originate or why/how they change as children grow older.

**Social psychological approaches**. Social psychological approaches combine personal identity with social identity. Social psychological approaches recognize “[t]he likelihood that the child will construct social categories in an idiosyncratic way is reduced by the existing categories and intergroup relations that are already structured and recognized by the community.” [[17]](#endnote-18) In other words, social psychological approaches account for the effect of social structure on individual race socialization; the concept of “social identity” encapsulates this effect. [[18]](#endnote-19) The social identity is formed as a child interacts with racial categories set by the larger social structure. Those categories and the relationships between those categories—intergroup relations—provide the child with a framework to learn about and understand race and the meanings attached to racial categories. A social psychological understanding of racial socialization explains variation in how children’s conceptions of race and racial categories change in relation to age, context, and history by considering the larger social structure and its effect on personal identity.

**Interpretive Approaches to Race Socialization**

While psychological approaches offer insight into the cognitive machinery by which race is internalized, they essentialize those cognitive processes and downplay the effect social structures have on one’s ability to shape an identity. Interpretive approaches encapsulate the process of creating, transforming, and reproducing meaning through social interactions.

Using an interpretive reproduction approach, [[19]](#endnote-20) Van Ausdale and Feagin offer eye-opening findings on how young children construct their understanding of race and how they negotiate race as part of their initial peer cultures. [[20]](#endnote-21) Their 11-month long ethnographic research within a diverse urban preschool focusing on how children learn about race when not being surveilled by adults, revealed that children as young as 3 years old have very complex and nuanced understandings of race and use those understandings as inclusive and exclusive strategies amongst their peers. [[21]](#endnote-22) Moreover, Van Ausdale and Feagin found that young children can understand the hierarchical nature of race relations, perceiving whiteness at the top of racial stratification within the United States. [[22]](#endnote-23) Throughout the study, parents and educators continually asked where or from whom children were learning about racism. Van Ausdale and Feagin argue that children gather racial attitudes from the larger culture and are racialized as they use what they gain from the larger culture within their interactions in their peer groups.

While Van Ausdale and Feagin offered a nod to “larger culture” regarding the source of children’s initial conceptions of race, Perry offers a less ambiguous origin for children’s interpretive constructions of racial categories and meanings. [[23]](#endnote-24) Perry argued that racialization occurs with children in interaction with each other because those interactions occur within a specific cultural context that delimits those interactions. Specifically, that cultural context is one where white culture is the “invisible norm.” In other words, whiteness is perceived as cultureless, which means that in majority white contexts, whiteness is “normal” and everything else is “other.” In contexts where white is not the majority, whiteness is “rational,” which means behaviors, actions and characteristics that are mostly associated with those who are white are the more desirable behaviors, actions, and characteristics. Anything else is see as irrational and less desirable. When children interact in an environment where whiteness is “normal” or “rational,” those evaluations enable and constrain children’s interpretive reproductions of race.

**Structural Approaches to Race Socialization**

While interpretive approaches to children’s racialization focus on children’s agentic role, it is important to acknowledge how social structures, themselves, racialize children. Structural refers to the collective norms, behaviors, ideologies, and social institutions within a society. To borrow from how Durkheim talks about social facts, social structures are external to and coercive of individuals.

Bonilla-Silva argues that current racism should be described in terms of a racialized social system. “This term refers to societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races.” [[24]](#endnote-25) Moreover, racialized social systems are marked by a racial hierarchy where the dominant race maintains social, economic, and political benefits. Since this is part of the social system, then the disparities between racial groups is incidental to natural and meritocratic processes. Put differently, racialized structures set up invisible systems of advantages and disadvantages based on racial categories, which lead to a sense of group position based on shared experiences. It is this sense of group position that influences one’s sense of racial identity and the implications that identity has on one’s life chances.

In what ways does a racialized social system racialize youth? One way is through the structural normalization of whiteness in education institutions. This is not the same type of cultural normalization [[25]](#endnote-26) that is described above. This type of normalization is accomplished through racial ideologies [[26]](#endnote-27) and a “racial grammar.” [[27]](#endnote-28) Racial ideologies normalize the interests of the dominant race, and “racial grammar” refers to an ontological stance maintaining that the dominant race has control over what are legitimate forms of knowledge and legitimate ways knowing and doing. It is by way of “racial grammar” that whiteness is normalized. Lewis points out that schools have a hidden curriculum that privileges the typical behaviors, actions, and strategies of White students over that of non-White students. [[28]](#endnote-29) Further, teachers, school administrators, and other school officials ignored or downplayed racialized incidents between students or categorized those incidents as something unrelated to race. In so doing, Lewis argued that schools become implicitly racialized spaces that contribute to how students are racialized. I would further argue that schools perpetuate a white habitus, which “leads to the creation of a positive [white] self-view and a negative other-view.” [[29]](#endnote-30) This habitus is further entrenched through a null curriculum [[30]](#endnote-31) on issues related to race. In other words, many schools leave out discussions of race and/or racism in the curricula, which creates an ideological vacuum on race in the classroom that is uncritically filled with the dominant cultural ideologies on race.

**Race Socialization in Religious Institutions**

The racially segregated nature of churches [[31]](#endnote-32) suggests that churches are not exempt from the influence of racialized social systems. For example, a recent study shows how predominantly white churches employ various “race tests” to implicitly police how people of color are expected to engage in congregations. [[32]](#endnote-33) In this way churches uncritically incorporate a racial grammar that normalizes whiteness and reproduces it in the form of a white Christian imagination. This not only happens in adult spaces; white spirituality is normalized in child and youth religious education spaces. [[33]](#endnote-34) Rather than simply being sites where children are socialized into religious norms, youth groups and Sunday schools also socialize children into secular group norms [[34]](#endnote-35) such as race.

Figure 1 illustrates a simplified model of how a structural approach might explain socialization in religious education spaces like youth groups and Sunday school. Youth interact with each other and leaders in the Sunday school space where they learn about God and the Bible. However, that space is not isolated from outside influences. Youth and leaders are influenced by cultural ideologies outside the Sunday school space—including ideologies regarding race and racism—and they bring those ideologies with them into that space. While this theoretical model challenges the idea that religious spaces are isolated from outside cultural forces, it does not offer an adequate explanation for the persistence of a white Christian imagination in many U.S. Protestant churches, nor does it take into account the effect of individual church histories and cultures.

Figure 1. *A Structural Model of Socialization*.

Dominant Cultural Ideologies

Institutional Space

Figure 2 expands the structural component of socialization from one component to three reinforcing components to account for institutional structures (material/symbolic culture embedded in curricula, physical materials, and governing documents and normative culture embedded in historical cultural practices) in addition to larger social influences. This structural model of socialization in institutional spaces is based on ethnographic research that explored how understandings of race and gender were constructed, reinforced, challenged, and reproduced in religious education spaces. [[35]](#endnote-36) Youth interact with each other in the Sunday school space where they bring with them influences from the larger culture. Elements of the larger culture are also embedded in the material and symbolic culture of the institution through curricula, symbolic cultural artifacts (e.g., artwork, physical spaces, argot, etc.), and institutionalized bureaucratic procedures and governance. Larger culture also shapes the normative culture of the institution through historical, economic, and political processes. In turn, these three structural and institutional factors influence how youth are socialized into secular and religious norms within the Sunday school space.

Figure 2. *A Structural Model of Socialization in Institutional Spaces*.

Dominant Cultural Ideologies

Normative Culture

Material/Symbolic Culture

Sunday School

To measure the predictive influence of each of these factors, they were operationalized into four experimental variables. (See Table 2.) The purpose of religion variable measures youth’s internalization of messages tying religion to anti-racism. The church teach race variable measures the influence of institutional material and symbolic culture surrounding anti-racist messaging in the church. The home teach race variable measures the influence of the larger culture. The model race variable measures the influence of institutional normative culture regarding anti-racism.

**Hypotheses**

1. Respondents who agree that an important purpose of religion is to help get rid of unfair treatment of minority races have more favorable attitudes towards people of different races and understand racism as a function of social structural factors.
2. Respondents who hear sermons or lessons about what God or the Bible has to say about the unfair treatment of minority races have more favorable attitudes towards people of different races and understand racism as a function of social structural factors.
3. Respondents who come from homes that talk about what God or the Bible has to say about the unfair treatment of minority races have more favorable attitudes towards people of different races and understand racism as a function of social structural factors.
4. Respondents with pastors, church staff, or volunteer church leaders who have relationships with or regularly talk about relationships they have with people from a variety of racial backgrounds have more favorable attitudes towards people of different races and understand racism as a function of social structural factors.

**The Survey**

I distributed a 33-question electronic survey to grade 6-12 youth in January-March 2023. Since I was focused on responses from youth who attended Protestant churches, I purposively reached out to various denominational agencies, religious education publishers, parachurch organizations, and personal contacts within the United States to distribute the survey link to youth within their networks. After a month of collecting survey results, I posted the survey link on various youth ministry focused Facebook pages and on my Twitter feed to gather more responses. There were 3979 responses upon closing the survey. After cleaning up the data to remove invalid responses (e.g., incomplete surveys, non-Protestant respondents, surveys completed in less than 15 minutes, respondents not in grades 6-12, outliers, etc.), there were 327 valid responses.

**Variables/Scales**

**Model 1.** Four items were adapted from the Young Adolescents and Their Parents: A National Study [[36]](#endnote-37) to create the Personal Racial Attitudes Scale. Reliability analysis revealed acceptable internal consistency for this measure (α = .71). An example item states: “I don’t trust people of other races.” Responses were selected on a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree. Higher scores were associated with more racist beliefs.

**Model 2.** Four items were adapted from the Racial Bias Preparation Scale [[37]](#endnote-38) to create the Structural Racism Attitude Scale. Reliability analysis returned poor internal consistency of the measure (α = .35), which is a notable limitation for this model. An example item states: “Someone’s race will not affect their opportunities in jobs or education.” Response options included a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree.

To answer how religious messages and religious beliefs surrounding race and racism influence youth attitudes on race and racism, Multiple Linear Regression analyses were conducted to evaluate the prediction of 1) Personal Racial Attitudes and 2) Structural Racism Attitudes from sex, age, mother’s education, father’s education, exposure to diverse races and ethnicities, religious practice, and religious salience. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics. Four additional regressors were included as experimental variables in secondary models for both outcome variables (see Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Predictor Variables

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Descriptive Statistics* | | | |  |  |
|  | Mean | Std. Deviation | N | Min. | Max. |
| Sexa | 1.43 | .49 | 327 | 0 | 1 |
| Age | 14.83 | 1.98 | 327 | 11 | 18 |
| Mother’s Education | 5.40 | 1.21 | 324 | 1 | 8 |
| Father’s Education | 5.98 | 1.27 | 327 | 1 | 8 |
| Exposure to Diverse Races & Ethnicities | 3.30 | .58 | 327 | 1 | 5 |
| Religious Practice | 3.80 | .57 | 327 | 1 | 5 |
| Religious Salience | 3.79 | .57 | 327 | 1 | 5 |
| Purpose of Religion | 3.63 | 1.10 | 327 | 1 | 5 |
| Church Teach Race | 2.91 | 1.28 | 327 | 1 | 5 |
| Family Teach Race | 2.85 | 1.23 | 323 | 1 | 5 |
| Model Race | 2.82 | 1.35 | 326 | 1 | 5 |

*Note. a* 0 = Female, 1 = Male

Table 2. Experimental Variables; Source: Young Adolescents and Their Parents: A National Study (1984)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Item | Response Options | Variable Name |
| An important purpose of religion is to help get rid of unfair treatment of minority races. | (1) Strongly Disagree  (2) Disagree  (3) Neutral  (4) Agree  (5) Strongly Agree | Purpose of Religion |
| At church, youth group, or Sunday school, I hear sermons or lessons about what God or the Bible has to say about the unfair treatment of minority races. | (1) Never  (2) Rarely  (3) Sometimes  (4) Often  (5) All the time | Church Teach Race |
| At home, how often do you talk about what God or the Bible has to say about the unfair treatment of minority races? | (1) Never  (2) Rarely  (3) Sometimes  (4) Often  (5) All the time | Family Teach Race |
| My pastors, church staff, or volunteer leaders have relationships with or regularly talk about relationships they have with people from a variety of racial backgrounds. | (1) Strongly Disagree  (2) Disagree  (3) Neutral  (4) Agree  (5) Strongly Agree | Model Race |

**Regression Results**

**Model 1.** The first model utilizes the Personal Racial Attitudes scale as a continuous outcome variable. The results of the Multiple Linear Regression analysis revealed sex (*p*=.22), age (*p*=.15), mother’s education (*p*=.54), and religious salience (*p*=.06) not statistically significant to the model (*p*>.05). However, statistically significant associations were found between father’s education (*p*<.001), exposure to diverse races and ethnicities (*p*<.001), and religious practice (*p*=.028). The model was significant, *R*2=.149, *F*(7,323)=7.92, *p*<.001, suggesting that three predictors explain 14.9% of variance in personal racial attitudes. See Table 3.

Father’s education level (*β=-*.29, *t*=4.59, *p*<.001), exposure to diverse races and ethnicities (*β=*.23, *t*=4.27, *p*<.001), and religious practice (*β=*.13, *t*=2.21, *p*=.03) contributed significantly to the model. With each additional increase in a father’s education level, personal racist attitudes decrease by approximately -.29. As exposure to diverse races and ethnicities increased, personal racist attitudes increased by .23. With each additional increase in religious practice, personal racist attitudes increased by .13. The null hypotheses, that there are no associations between personal racial attitudes and father’s education, exposure to diverse races and ethnicities, or religious practice are rejected.

In Model 1.1 (four supplemental regressors added), father’s education (*β=-*.25, *t*=-4.25) and exposure to diverse races and ethnicities (*β=*.31, *t*=6.14) remained significant (*p*<.001), but religious practice was no longer significant (*p*=.59). Three of the four experimental variables contributed significantly to the model: purpose of religion (*β=-*.17, *t*=3.43, *p*=<.001), church teach race (*β=*.17, *t*=2.71, *p*=.007), and family teach race (*β=*.30, *t*=4.62, *p*<.001). The model was significant, *R*2=.326, *F*(11,318)=13.49, *p*<.001, suggesting that five predictors explain 32.6% of the variation in personal racial attitudes. See Table 4.

**Model 2.** In the second model, the Structural Racism Attitude Scale was tested as a continuous outcome variable. Similar to Model 1, the results of the Multiple Linear Regression for Model 2 returned no statistical significance for sex (*p*=.58), age (*p*=.96), mother’s education (*p*=.63), or religious salience (*p*=.41). Furthermore, religious practice (*p*=.70) and father’s education (*p*=.34) were not statistically significant in Model 2 (*p*>.05); however, exposure to diverse races and ethnicities did exhibit statistical significance (*β=*-.17, *t*=-3.07, *p*=.002). The model was significant, *R*2=.044, *F*(7,323)=2.06, *p*<.05 suggesting that exposure to diverse races and ethnicities explains 4.4% of variance in structural racism attitudes. As exposure to diverse races and ethnicities increases, structural racism attitudes decrease by approximately -.17. The null hypothesis, that there are no associations between structural racism attitudes and exposure to diverse races and ethnicities is rejected. These results are interpreted with caution, given the low reliability (Cronbach’s alpha, α = .35) of the outcome variable. See Table 5.

With the experimental variables added in the model (Model 2.1), exposure to diverse races ethnicities remained significant (*p*<.001); additionally, religious salience (*p*=.04), purpose of religion (*p*=.002) and model race (*p*=.03) contributed significantly to the model (*p*<.05). The model was significant, *R*2=.093, *F*(11,318)=2.85, *p*<.001, suggesting that four predictors explain 9.3% of the variation in structural racism attitudes. Exposure to diverse races and ethnicities (*β=*-.19, *t*=-3.27, *p*=.001), purpose of religion (*β=*-.18, *t*=-3.14, *p*=.002), and model race (*β=*-.14, *t*=-2.22, *p*=.03) all significantly predicted a decrease in structural racism attitudes.

**Regression Tables**

Table 3. Results of Model 1: Personal Racial Attitudes

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Estimate | *SE* | 95% CI | | *p* |
| *LL* | *UL* |
| Sex | .07 | .10 | −.07 | .32 | .22 |
| Age | −.08 | .02 | −.08 | .01 | .15 |
| Mother’s Education | .04 | .05 | −.07 | .13 | .54 |
| Father’s Education | −.29\*\* | .05 | −.31 | -.12 | <.001 |
| Exposure to Diverse Races & Ethnicities | .23\*\* | .09 | .20 | .54 | <.001 |
| Religious Practice | .13\* | .10 | .02 | .41 | .03 |
| Religious Salience | -.11 | .10 | −.37 | .01 | |  | | --- | | .06 | |

*Note.* \*p<.05, \*\*p<.001

Table 4. Results of Model 1.1: Personal Racial Attitudes + Experimental Variables

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Estimate | *SE* | 95% CI | | *p* |
| *LL* | *UL* |
| Sex | .07 | .09 | -.04 | .32 | .13 |
| Age | -.02 | .02 | -.05 | .04 | .75 |
| Mother’s Education | -.06 | .05 | -.14 | .04 | .30 |
| Father’s Education | -.25\*\* | .04 | -.26 | -.10 | <.001 |
| Exposure to Diverse Races & Ethnicities | .31\*\* | .08 | .34 | .65 | <.001 |
| Religious Practice | .03 | .09 | -.13 | .22 | .59 |
| Religious Salience | -.08 | .09 | -.31 | .05 | .15 |
| Purpose of Religion | -.17\*\* | .04 | -.24 | -.06 | <.001 |
| Church Teach Race | .17\* | .05 | .04 | .22 | .01 |
| Family Teach Race | .30\*\* | .05 | .13 | .33 | <.001 |
| Model Race | .05 | .04 | -.04 | .11 | .35 |

*Note.* \*p<.05, \*\*p<.001

Table 5. Model 2: Structural Racism Attitudes

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Estimate | *SE* | 95% CI | | *p* |
| *LL* | *UL* |
| Sex | -.03 | .08 | -.20 | .11 | .58 |
| Age | .00 | .02 | -.04 | .04 | .97 |
| Mother’s Education | .03 | .04 | -.06 | .10 | .63 |
| Father’s Education | -.06 | .04 | -.11 | .04 | .34 |
| Exposure to Diverse Races & Ethnicities | -.17\*\* | .07 | -.34 | -.08 | <.001 |
| Religious Practice | .02 | .08 | -.12 | .18 | .70 |
| Religious Salience | .05 | .08 | -.09 | .21 | .41 |

*Note.* \*\*p<.001

Table 6. Model 2.1: Structural Racism Attitudes + Experimental Variables

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Estimate | *SE* | 95% CI | | *p* |
| *LL* | *UL* |
| Sex | -.02 | .08 | -.19 | .12 | .66 |
| Age | -.01 | .02 | -.04 | .04 | .92 |
| Mother’s Education | .04 | .04 | -.06 | .11 | .55 |
| Father’s Education | -.06 | .04 | -.10 | .04 | .40 |
| Exposure to Diverse Races & Ethnicities | -.19\*\* | .07 | -.37 | -.09 | <.001 |
| Religious Practice | .02 | .08 | -.13 | .18 | .73 |
| Religious Salience | .13 | .08 | .00 | .31 | .05 |
| Purpose of Religion | -.18\*\* | .04 | -.19 | -.04 | <.001 |
| Church Teach Race | .05 | .04 | -.06 | .11 | .53 |
| Family Teach Race | .00 | .04 | -.09 | .08 | .96 |
| Model Race | -.14\* | .03 | -.14 | -.01 | .03 |

*Note.* \*p<.05, \*\*p<.001

**Discussion**

Statistical analysis of the data created more questions than answers. While some of the results yielded expected outcomes, other results seemed to contradict expectations based on a structural model of socialization in institutional spaces (Figure 2). After further examination of the statistical results—questioning methodological assumptions and considering theoretical explanations for statistically predicted outcomes—explanations for the results began to arise, yielding novel insights into effective (and ineffective) strategies to counteract a white Christian imagination in religious educational spaces as well as directions for future research on children’s and youth ministry spaces as sites of race socialization. In this section, I will tackle each of these—insights and further research—in turn.

**Making sense of the results**. Based on a theoretical framework of how socialization works in institutional spaces, I expected youth personal attitudes towards race to become less racist and to become more favorable towards understanding racism as structural the more they agreed with the statements in Table 2. Rather, the results were varied, and in some cases seemed to contradict theoretical predictions. Below, I will discuss the results of each regression model and offer explanations for what the varied results suggest including implications for how to approach issues of race in youth ministry.

In Model 1, only three of the experimental variables significantly predicted youth’s personal attitudes towards race: purpose of religion, church teach race, and family teach race. Only one of these variables predicted youth’s personal attitudes on race as hypothesized. The more youth agreed that an important purpose of religion is to help get rid of unfair treatment of minority races, the more positive (less racist) their personal attitudes towards race were. This supports hypothesis H1, strongly suggesting that specific messaging linking religion to actions leading to the eradication of racial prejudice and discrimination directly shapes how youth personally think and relate to people from minoritized racial/ethnic backgrounds. Since this variable does not specify where youth internalize this messaging, it is possible that the location/source is not significant. Rather, what is significant is the specificity of the message linking religion to “getting rid of” unfair treatment of minority races.

In contrast the other two significant variables predicted youth’s personal attitudes on race in ways that did not support hypotheses H2 and H3. The more youth heard lessons in church about what God or the Bible has to say about the unfair treatment of minority races, the more negative (more racist) their personal attitudes towards race were. The results regarding conversations at home about what god or the Bible has to say about the unfair treatment of minority races were similar. At first, these results were rather surprising and contradictory to what was expected based on theoretical assumptions, which called into question the validity of the survey and responses. Further consideration and analysis of these specific experimental variables revealed that the assumptions regarding the validity of the statements for church teach race and family teach race were flawed. The key is in how these statements were worded. While the purpose of religion variable refers to “getting rid of” unfair treatment, the church teach race and home teach race variables refer to “talking about what God has to say about” unfair treatment. The former requires intentional action and emotional investment, while the latter is passive and simply raises awareness to racism and racial discrimination. These are fundamentally two different types of statements: one active and the other passive. When the survey was distributed, the assumption was that all of the experimental variables were testing equivalent phenomena, which is not the case!

With this new insight, the unexpected results from youth’s responses to church teach race and home teach race make more sense. By measuring the level of awareness to racism and racial discrimination, these two variables are akin to measuring the “contact” youth have with people of different racial backgrounds, albeit indirect contact. According to interpersonal contact theory, this type of superficial contact can reinforce a group’s stereotyping of those who are outside the group. [[38]](#endnote-39) When applied to the current study, this means that an increase in church teach race and home teach race actually does predict an increase in youth’s negative attitudes towards race. Allport states that for contact to significantly reduce prejudice, the contact must be between groups on equal status, working together towards similar goals with the support of some sort of “outside” authority (i.e., government, church, etc.). [[39]](#endnote-40) This may also explain why youth’s responses to model race did not have a significant effect on their personal attitudes towards race. It is possible that the effects of racial colorblindness in larger culture combined with superficial contact, diluted any effects youth’s response to model race might have on their personal attitudes towards race.

In Model 2, only two of the experimental variables significantly predicted the degree to which youth attributed racism to social structural factors: purpose of religion and model race. Both variables predicted youth’s responses to racism as structural as hypothesized. The more youth agreed that an important purpose of religion is to help get rid of unfair treatment of minority races, the more youth attributed racism to structural issues. The purpose of religion variable yielded similar results to Model 1 and supports hypothesis H1. Not only do youth’s increasing belief that religion should be instrumental in ending racial prejudice and discrimination predict their personal racial attitudes, but it also predicts their attitude towards structural racism. This suggests that explicitly linking religion with anti-racism significantly shapes how youth interact with race on structural and interpersonal levels, causing them to have less racist attitudes and be more aware of structural causes of racism. While the results of this paper do not directly identify the most effective ways of helping youth achieve a belief that an important part of religion is to help get rid of unfair treatment of minority races, the seemingly contradictory results in Model 1 suggest that instruction needs to be intentional and explicitly anti-racist. To test the efficacy of explicitly anti-racist messaging in Christian education, further research needs to operationalize questions that probe for exposure to anti-racist lessons/sermons and check for any causal relationships between those lessons and youth attitudes towards race and racism.

In addition to the purpose of religion variable having a significant effect on predicting youth attitudes towards structural racism, the model race variable also was significant. Specifically, the more exposure youth had to church leaders who had relationships with or talked about their relationships with people from various racial backgrounds, the more youth affirmed that racism has roots is social structures. This is consistent with the extended contact hypothesis, which states that if someone (Person A) knows another person (Person B) in their own group who has significant relationships with people outside of their own group, then Person A is more likely to have less prejudice towards people outside of their own group even though Person A has had no direct contact with those outside the group. [[40]](#endnote-41) This finding, coupled with the insignificance of how often youth hear messages at church or at home about what God or the Bible has to say about the unfair treatment of minority races has on youth’s attitudes towards structural racism, suggests that absent explicit messaging about what God and the Bible has to say about getting rid of racial prejudice and discrimination, exposure to significant relationships with people from different racial backgrounds creates a sense of empathy regarding their experiences with structural racism.

**Suggestions for further study.** Although the findings in this study were varied, they did expose a methodological flaw in how institutional structure (curricula, governing documents, and other material culture) and external cultural influence (dominant ideologies, etc.) were operationalized for this study. Rather than measuring how often youth hear anti-racist messaging at church and at home, the church teach race and family teach race variables measured messaging that made youth aware of what the Bible or God had to say about the unfair treatment of minority races. Future research needs to better operationalize measuring anti-racist messaging in church and at home to see if those significantly predict youth’s personal attitudes towards race and their attitudes about structural racism.

**Conclusions**

For those who teach youth ministry and those in youth ministry, this research highlights two practical considerations to more effectively prevent reproducing a white Christian imagination within youth ministry spaces. First, discussions about God, the Bible, and racism need to be intentionally and explicitly anti-racist. Second, youth ministry leaders and other church leaders should engage in meaningful relationships with people from a variety of racial backgrounds and regularly discuss those relationships with the youth in their ministries.

When broaching the topic of racism, the data suggests that simply talking about what the Bible *says* about the unfair treatment of minority races—whether in church or at home—does not make a difference on whether youth perceive racism as a function of structural forces or not. Further, discussions that only focus on what the Bible *says* about racism have a deleterious effect on youths’ personal attitudes towards people of other races. On first glance, this finding is discouraging and could support popular arguments and assumptions that it is better to keep discussions of race outside of church and other religious contexts. Rather, we argue that discussions with youth about the Bible and race need to move beyond awareness and representation to explicitly being anti-racist. This can be seen in the significance of youths’ response to the statement, “An important purpose of religion is to *help get rid of* unfair treatment of minority races.” This statement moves beyond religion bringing awareness of racism to religion providing an impetus to take actions against racism. The more youth agreed with this statement, the more favorable their attitudes towards people of other races and the more they affirmed social structure as a factor in people’s racially discriminatory experiences. While further study is needed into the actual effect of anti-racist and anti-colorblind discourse in church and the home, the data points to the hopeful possibility that explicitly highlighting anti-racism in conversations and lessons about God and the Bible could significantly influence youth to have more favorable attitudes towards people of other races and influence youth to affirm that racism is a function of social structures.

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