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“I’m just a girl; not a White girl”:

Intersectionality and Early Adolescents’ Race-x-Gender Identities

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Abstract

Social identity is defined, in part, as the sense of “we-ness” one forms with a social group. The social identity literature, however, is largely divided by *identities*—with racial identity conceptualized, measured, and interpreted separately from gender identity—rather than examining how youth understand these group memberships at their intersections (i.e., “we” Black girls or “we” White boys). The current mixed-method analysis examines the subjective importance and meaning of Black and White early adolescents’ ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.51$; $N = 63$) racial by gender identities. Black girls, in particular, rated their intersectional identities as important and White adolescents, overall, rated intersectionality as low in importance. Qualitative analyses further reveal that youth reason about the (in)significance of intersectionality on different levels: personal (the self), relational (others, peers), and structural (stereotypes, discrimination). We discuss contributions for studying identity development and intersectionality during adolescence.

Key words: intersectionality; racial identity; gender identity; early adolescence; social identity theory; mixed-methods

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During the adolescent years, a compilation of developmental processes position youth to be preoccupied with how they appear in the eyes of others and increasingly attuned to how they fit within social groups, such as gender and race. In a socially stratified society like the United States, the norms that define such groups are neither neutral nor benign. Rather, race and gender are sociopolitical locations where the homogenic ideologies of white supremacy and patriarchy intersect and manifest as identity stereotypes (Rogers & Way, 2018; Spencer, 2017). Thus, the identity stereotypes that construct Black girls as loud, angry, and ghetto are distinct from those that view Black boys as athletic and violent. Similarly, White girls are expected to be emotional and ditsy while White boys are stereotyped as competent, unathletic and weak (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Way, Hernandez, Rogers, & Hughes, 2013). While the content varies, all stereotypes reflect and reinforce a social hierarchy in which whiteness and maleness is privileged above all “others” (Nasir & Shah, 2011; Rogers & Way, 2018). It is within this structure, and at the intersection of these stereotypes, that early adolescents come to understand who they are.

In middle childhood (7-10 years old), children form a sense of “we-ness” with their social groups (Ruble et al., 2004), identifying with, evaluating, and assigning meaning to their gender racial/ethnic identities (Bennett & Sani, 2004; Frable, 1997; Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Yet, the social identity literature is divided by *identities*—racial identity conceptualized, measured, and interpreted separately from gender identity. Consequently, virtually none of this research examines how youth understand these identities at their intersections—such as, “we” Black girls or “we” White boys. The current paper examines how Black and White adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.51$ years) interpret the importance and meaning of their race-x-gender identities.

Framing Identity and Intersectionality

Identity and intersectionality are both constructs for which there are a range of definitions and approaches, many of which are contested among scholars within and across disciplines (Carbado, Crenshaw, May, & Tomlinson, 2013; Syed & McLean, 2016). As such, we first provide our working definitions of these constructs for this paper.

We approach identity as a *psychosocial* and *transactional* process, wherein self and society are inextricably linked and mutually constituted (Erikson, 1968; Rogers, 2018). Erikson (1968) defined identity as “located within the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture” (p. 23). The *psychology* of the self is in equal measure with the *social* norms that define and make salient particular aspects of the self. Rogers (2018) furthers this perspective proposing a *transactional* focus to underscore that individuals actively negotiate, respond to, and resist social norms and expectations in the process of identity development. It is the transaction between individual and society that identities are formed. From this view, race and gender are not individual-level constructs that define persons nor are they solely structural-level constructs that organize inequality. Rather, through transactional experiences with others, including societal norms and stereotypes, both selves and societies are reinforced—or resisted and restructured (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers & Way, 2018). Our interest, therefore, in race-x-gender intersectionality rises principally from a question about how identity processes unfold *within* and in response to the multiple and intersecting levels of the sociocultural context.

Interest in and reference to intersectionality has grown substantially within psychology, but there is little consensus of what “counts” as intersectionality (Collins, 1999) or what intersectional identities look like (Bowleg, 2008). The term intersectionality was originally coined by Crenshaw as an accessible metaphor to describe the discrimination experiences of

Black women. Black women, Crenshaw argued, not only experienced racial discrimination *or* gender discrimination, but a unique oppression the *intersection* of race *and* gender. The term is now used more broadly to refer to the systems of power, privilege and oppression that are built into a society's laws and policies, values and practices, which interlock to give meaning to social categories; namely, race, gender, social class, and sexuality (Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008). With disciplinary roots in legal studies and Black feminist scholarship, intersectionality takes a birds-eye view of society—a structural lens. As intersectionality has gained traction and moved across disciplines (Carbado et al., 2013) and been applied to a much broader sociodemographic (beyond adult Black women), alternate perspectives have come into view.

Identity is both an obvious and problematic link to intersectionality. It is obvious because the strata of inequality that comprise intersectionality—race, gender, sexuality—are also salient and relevant identity groups in research—racial identity, gender identity. But, in psychology in particular such work has been problematic for intersectionality because identity is often dissected in discrete pieces (race separate from gender) and mostly measured at the level of individuals. As a discipline, psychology tends to emphasize individual-level processes and privilege methodological tools and analytical models that assume discrete, linear associations, which contradict the structural premise of intersectionality (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2009; Syed & Ajayi, 2018). In this paper, we take caution with these tensions and consider the *psychology* of intersectionality in identity—that is, how the individuals subjectively interpret or make sense of the structural realities of racial and gender oppression and inequality in their own race-x-gender identities. Our intent is not to test whether or not intersectionality exists. Rather, our goal is to understand how intersectionality is *perceived* and *experienced* by persons who occupy these intersectional identity locations (Settles, 2006; Jones & Day, 2018).

Social Identities and Intersectionality in Early Adolescence

Social identity refers to how individuals understand their social group memberships, such as race and gender (Ashmore et al., 2004; Ruble et al., 2004; Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). By middle childhood, young people can identify, for example, their gender (“I’m a girl”), evaluate how they feel about it (“I like being a girl”), and define its relative importance to their overall sense of self (“Being a girl is important to me than being a student”) (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017; Turner & Brown, 2007). We also know that children can and do categorize themselves as members of multiple social groups and will subjectively rank-order the importance of different identities, including gender, race, family (daughter/son) (e.g., Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Although children rarely select race or ethnicity as their primary self-descriptor, gender is typically rated as more important to children than race/ethnicity and children are more apt to discuss gender-related processes compared to race (e.g., Brown, Alabi, Huynh, & Masten, 2011; Turner & Brown, 2007; Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). These social identity processes increase in complexity as youth enter early adolescence (11-13 years) and acquire greater social perspective-taking and have larger and more diverse peer interactions (e.g., Quintana, 1998). It is less clear, however, where and how intersectionality fits into the puzzle of identity formation.

There is evidence from qualitative research showing that early adolescents are aware of and interweave the multiple parts of their identities (Carter, 2006; Rogers & Way, 2016; Way et al., 2013). In a study of ethnic-racial identity among early adolescents, Way and colleagues (2013) identified ‘intersecting stereotypes’ as a central theme. For example, when a Black adolescent boy was asked about his racial identity, he replied: “I just like being a Black person... A lot of rappers are Black, a lot of basketball and football players are Black” (Way et al., 2013, p. 415). His response is not of Blackness per se, but of gendered Blackness relevant to Black

boys/men. Adolescents in this study similarly linked Whiteness with social class, “rich and smart”, even though interview questions asked only about racial identity (Way et al., 2013).

Identity perceiver research also shows that people evaluate and judge *others* differently at the intersection of social identities; for example, gender is perceived differently for White women compared to Black women (Goff, Thomas & Jackson, 2008; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). New developmental research by Ghavami and colleagues (Ghavami & Peplau, 2017; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019) shows that early adolescents use an intersectional lens when they ascribe traits to their peers. For example, when middle-schoolers evaluated the economic standing (e.g., rich or poor) of a peer, these ratings varied symmetrically based on the target peer’s race, gender and sexuality identity status. Specifically, they found that White peers, overall, were rated as more affluent than Black and Latinx peers (main effect of race), but also that White *gay* boys were perceived as more affluent than gay boys of Black, Asian, or Latino descent (intersection of race-x-gender-x-sexuality; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019). The current analyses build upon this research to examine how early adolescents make sense of intersectionality in their *own* identities.

Current Study

The current analysis used a mixed-analytic approach to examine how early adolescents assign significance and ascribe meaning to their race-x-gender identities. Early adolescence is a timely period to explore how intersectional identities are beginning to coalesce as youth are also making sense of the stereotypes about their multiple identity groups (Ghavami & Peplau, 2017; Way et al., 2013). We adopt a perspective of intersectionality in this paper that prioritizes the structural realities of oppression and simultaneously applies a psychological perspective that centers subjectivity—how individuals *experience and interpret* the realities structural of oppression. Our analyses explored two primary research questions:

- 1) How do adolescents' rate of the importance of their intersectional (race x gender) identities (relative to individual identities: race, gender), and do importance ratings vary as a function of intersectionality status (e.g., Black girls versus White boys)?

We did not pose a directional hypothesis, but anticipated that adolescents would rate their intersectional identities differently than singular identities, and that Black girls would view their intersectional identities as more important than White adolescents (Cole, 2009; Settles, 2006).

- 2) How do adolescents reason about or assign meaning to their intersectional identities?

Our interest was not simply in the themes or content of their narratives but rather their meaning-making. To this end, we applied an axial coding strategy (Wolcott, 1994) to examine patterns in how early adolescents discussed the intersectionality of racial and gender identities.

We consider two tenants of intersectionality in this analysis. First, the multiplicative and distinctiveness of intersectionality—the combination “Black girl” is qualitatively distinct from any additive combination of “Black” and “girl”. An empirical question is whether, or in what ways this tenant holds from a subjective perspective; that is, how do early adolescents combine or distinguish race and gender in their own intersectional identities? Does “White girl”, for example, carry a meaning and significance that is distinct from “White” and “girl”?

The second focal consideration in our analysis was the adolescent's social position. When assessing race identity, for example, White youth, who hold higher status in the racial hierarchy, score lower on measures of racial centrality and evaluation compared to Black youth (Phinney, 1990; Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). But, how does social position operate from an intersectional lens? Within the racialized patriarchy of U.S. society, White boys ostensibly hold privilege for race *and* gender whereas Black girls occupy marginalized locations for race *and* gender. Black boys and White girls, in contrast, occupy dual status locations, with privilege for one dimension

of their race-x-gender identity. How are these social positions are differentiated at the micro-level of subjective identity experiences? Research with adults suggests that Black women, specifically, may hold their intersectional identity in higher regard than either their racial or gender identity, and higher than White women (e.g., Settles, 2006; Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008).

We reiterate here that probing these tenants is not to ‘test’ intersectionality, rather to grasp the psychology of how individuals describe and reason about intersectionality in their own identity experiences. Understanding the psychology of intersectionality not only contributes to the social identity literature but may also allow us to imagine ways to redress intersectional inequalities not only from the level of systems and structures but also from the more micro-levels of individuals and relationships (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Method

Data for this analysis were drawn from a larger, three-year, mixed-method study of Children’s Self-Perceptions and Social Interactions (see AUTHOR). The interview data presented here focus specifically on the importance and meaning of race-x-gender identity. The data are not shared.

Participants

Of the 240 students interviewed in the initial year of the study, a total of 111 early adolescents completed a third wave of interviews two years later. The third year of data collection was an add-on to the original study design, which restricted follow-up with the whole sample (e.g., participants who transferred schools could not be contacted for follow-up assessments). Participants were recruited from two elementary and one middle school in the first year of the study. All participants attended public schools in the same district and each school

was racially and ethnically diverse with no more than 40% of any one racial group. The current analyses include only the Black (boys and girls) and White (boys and girls) participants from the larger sample who were interviewed in the final year of the study. Our analytic sample was 63 early adolescents: 17 Black girls, 10 Black boys, 16 White girls, and 20 White boys. Participants were in 4th - 8th grade and the mean age of was sample 12.51 years ($SD = 1.55$; range: 9-14 years).

Procedure and Measures

Only students with parental consent participated in the study. All data were collected at the participating schools, and participants were interviewed privately on school premises (e.g., conference room, empty classroom or office) during regular school hours. Participants received college-themed pencils and a \$5 gift card. The current analysis is based on a sub-set of interview questions that explicitly probed intersectionality.

Importance of intersectionality. The interview questions directly asked youth to assess the *importance* of their race-x-gender identity and probed for their interpretations of identity experiences. As part of the whole interview protocol, participants rated the importance of their identities separately using a parallel, 3-point visual Likert scale: *How important is being [gender] to you? How important is being [race] to you? How important is being [race-x-gender] to you?* Each question was presented separately during the interview, and at the beginning of the respective identity section. For example, a Black girl was first asked to rate the importance of being a “girl” using the Likert scale; this was followed by a series of open-ended questions about gender identity. The same sequence followed for the importance of being “Black” and finally regarding the importance of being a “Black girl.” As such, each participant provided three identity importance ratings: Gender, Race, and Race-x-Gender. Sample means for identity

ratings are presented in Table 1.

Meaning of intersectionality. Three open-ended meaning questions were asked about intersectional identity: (1) Why is being [race-x-gender] important/not important? (2) How would things change if your [race] changed? (3) How would things change if your [gender] changed? All interview questions were tailored to the participant using their identity labels. For instance, a Black girl was asked: “Why is being a Black girl important to you?” This was followed by: “How would things change if you were a White girl?” (race), and finally: “How would things change if you were a Black boy?” (gender). The anchors of the racial binary were utilized as interview questions to concretize the contrast for youth. Moreover, in prior studies when youth are asked to imagine being a different race, and no specific alternative is provided, youth default to the Black-White dichotomy, assuming that the ‘other’ is Black or White (Rogers et al., 2012; Way et al., 2013), which broadly reflects societal narratives about race (Wu, 2002).

Analysis and Coding

Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim by a professional company and then verified by trained research assistants. The Intersectionality section of the interview (containing the questions outlined above) was the unit of analysis. All transcripts were uploaded and coded in Nvivo Qualitative Analysis Software program, version 12. We used a mixed-analytic design. Mixed-methods can be defined simply as “the combination of words and numbers” which together “bring us closer to the complexity of developmental [phenomena]” (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil & Way, 2008, p. 345). Indeed, we draw upon adolescents’ qualitative responses to interpret the quantitative ratings of identity importance ratings.

The three identity *importance* ratings (scored 1-3) were entered and analyzed in SPSS. For the *meaning* of intersectionality, transcripts were first analyzed using inductive thematic

coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), documenting open-themes with intersectionality as the focal lens of analysis. Thematic coding was guided by “sensitizing concepts” relating to oppression and privilege (discrimination, opportunities, negative/positive evaluations and comparisons) and the two tenets of intersectionality under consideration: distinctiveness and social status. Through analytic memos and conversation of thematic codes, we identified two axial codes (Wolcott, 1994): *Significance* and *Reasoning* (Table 2). *Significance* refers the importance of intersectional identities (e.g., “How important is being a Black girl?”) and whether they believed anything would change as a result of being in a different identity position (e.g., “How would things change if you were a White girl?”). The second factor, *Reasoning* captured the explanation, or the why. During coding we found that adolescents reasoned about intersectional identities at different levels or perspectives; that is, adolescents not only raised different issues (content) but also approached the conversation from different perspectives. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and units of analysis (Rogoff, 1995) provided a linguistic framework for levels of *Reasoning* in our coding scheme: “Personal”, “Relational”, and “Structural” (Table 2).

The codes were not mutually exclusive. The first author and a trained undergraduate research assistant developed the coding scheme, in collaboration with the co-author, and completed the coding with strong percent agreement across cases (89-94%).

Results

We present the results in two sections: *Importance Ratings* and *Levels of Meaning-Making*. We first describe how youth rated the importance of their intersectional identities (race-x-gender) compared to singular identity labels (race, gender), and then use the qualitative data to describe how participants reasoned about intersectionality from multiple perspectives.

Importance Ratings

Quantitative description. Means for the identity ratings are reported in Table 1. To examine whether (a) early adolescents' ratings of the importance of race, gender, and race-x-gender differed systematically from each other (distinctiveness) and (b) varied as a function of adolescents' social position, the identity importance ratings subjected to a Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance. The repeated measure was importance (Race Id, Gender Id, Race-x-Gender Id) with intersectional group (Black girl, Black boy, White girl, White boy) as the grouping variable. Age was included as a covariate (patterns did not vary by age). Given the goals of our paper and the small sample size, we used statistical tests as a method of systematic description of the patterns observed in the numerical ratings.

As shown in Table 1, the primary pattern across the sample was that adolescents rated gender identity ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .71$) significantly higher than both racial ($M = 1.58$, $SD = .90$) and race-x-gender ($M = 1.62$, $SD = .79$) identity. The effect size was robust, $\eta^2 = .331$. We also examined whether the distinctively high rating of gender identity was consistent across groups. Here, we found that the pattern was most pronounced among White adolescents. White girls and boys showed a significant difference between the importance of gender compared to race and race-x-gender: White girls rated girl ($M = 2.44$) as significantly more important than White ($M = 1.00$) or White girl ($M = 1.31$). White boys also rated boy ($M = 2.05$) as more important than White ($M = 1.10$) and White boy ($M = 1.40$). In contrast, Black girls' identity ratings did not significantly differ: girl: $M = 2.53$, Black: $M = 2.24$, and Black girl: $M = 2.06$. For Black boys, boy ($M = 2.20$) and Black ($M = 2.40$) were equivalent, but Black boy was lower ($M = 1.80$).

Next, we examined whether the intersectional groups differed from *each other*—i.e., do White girls rate gender higher than Black girls? We ran 3 separate one-way ANOVAs with Intersectionality Group as the independent variable and each of the three Identity Importance

measures as the dependent variable. The model for gender identity suggested that all groups rated gender equivalently, but the difference for racial identity was robust, [$F(3, 59) = 17.323, p < .001$], with White adolescents rating racial identity as significantly less important than Black adolescents (Table 1). For race-x-gender identity, Black girls' ($M = 2.06$) ratings were significantly higher than White girls' ($M = 1.31$). In sum, Black adolescents' identity ratings were similar across but White adolescents differentiated gender from their racialized identities.

Qualitative interpretation: Identity mathematics. Listening to *why* adolescents assigned particular importance ratings to their intersectional identities revealed a theme we term 'identity mathematics'—adding, multiplying, and subtracting significance as if identity were an equation. For example, a White girl (8th grade), answered how important it being a White girl is to her:

A: Um {pause} well a little for a girl, and maybe {pause}{laughs} uh maybe a little? I don't know, maybe a little.

Q: Maybe a little? Ok, why maybe a little?

A: Um I think it's important for me to be a girl, I just, I like being a girl; I think, I mean for me, White wasn't important, and it didn't matter, um uh as much, but I think at least in my opinion I raised it up to a little because of the girl I guess, just yeah.

Rather than describing her intersectional identity as its own distinct label, she pieces together each component in a mathematical equation. A Black boy (5th grade) similarly explained that to him being a Black boy is "a little bit" important "[b]ecause being a boy is pretty awesome and then on being Black—it's in the middle."

These identity calculations did not always sum up with simplicity or neutrality. Some youth were explicit about the multiplicative realities of intersectional privilege and oppression, which either intensified or diluted their importance. For example, a Black boy, 7th grade,

explained: “Because you’re Black so that’s already enough, and you have to be a man on top of that, but it would be even harder because it’s harder to get jobs.” A White boy, 8th grade, said: “It’s like kind of, you get treated better [if you’re a boy]... You probably get more job offerings ‘cause you’re a boy and you’re white, which is terrible. But, it happens.” Both boys articulate a stair-step of privilege and oppression, as one moves up or down the social hierarchy, suggesting some distinctiveness to intersectionality.

The distinctiveness of intersectional identity was most evident among Black and White girls. Black girls discussed how the intersection intensified identity significance: “Like, being a girl and being Black, those are kind of two precious things because they [people] kind of expect more from you and like they kind of expect less at the same time” (Black girl, 7th grade). Another Black girl (8th grade) explained that “for an African-American female there would be a lot of reasons why [it is important] because- we get treated really, really different because they just look at the color of our skin.” Black boys also noted the distinctive identity of Black girls, while asserting it was not as relevant for boys: “Every boy is kind of the same”, one Black boy (8th grade) explained, but to be a Black girl “I think it would be hard. *Everything* would be difficult- more difficult than boys.” Notably, the increased importance is related to increased oppression.

The intersectional identity of White girl was also distinctively marked, but this fusion diluted its significance to the self. For example, a White girl, 8th grade, explained why being a ‘White girl’ is *not* important to her identity:

Probably because I’m getting called a ‘basic white girl’ or um I don’t know probably, maybe being judged by uh, Black people, or something. But it doesn’t really happen to me very much at this school.

Q: No? Okay, so, if someone calls you a ‘white girl’ like what does that mean?

A: Uh, it means you drink Starbucks every day, wear Uggs, shop at Pink and Hollister and Forever 21. Um, uh and wear leggings all the time and I don't know.

A number of White girls shared this stereotype of 'white girls'. As one White girl (8th grade), who said being a White girl is 'a little' bit important, explained: "Because I am White and I am a girl. But um, I'm not like—I try not to be like the stereotypical one." Even though gender, as social identity label, is implicitly racialized White (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013), when the Whiteness is named explicitly, 'White girl' takes on a distinct and dismissive meaning. "I get called 'little white girl' a lot", one 6th-grader said. "And the reason I started cussing was because people didn't listen to me 'cause I was a girl and 'cause I'm small and I'm White." The intersection of 'White girl' was viewed as a slander, "a term that's used *toward* White girls" (White girl, 8th grade).

Much like the Black girls in our sample, White girls noted the restrictive stereotypes about race, gender, and social class (Starbucks, Hollister, Uggs) woven into to this identity but unlike Black girls who tended to integrate both pieces as "precious", White girls explicitly disentangled the two, subtracting race from their identity "Because well, I like being a girl," one participant explained, "But I really don't care if I'm White." In response, White girls deployed their racial privilege to subtract race from the equation and reframe gender as race-neutral: "I'm just a girl; not a White girl" (White girl, 8th grade).

The deletion of an identity was not used exclusively by White girls, however. White boys engaged in a similar subtractive rationale:

Q: How about being a White boy, how important is that to you?

A: Um a boy, a lot; White, not.

Q: So together as a White boy—

A: Not much. Well, not all.

Initially avoiding the question, he separates the identities and rates them separately, and when pressed, suggests that White boy is not descriptive of his identity at all. Some Black boys also dismissed ‘race’, underscoring boy-ness as the central feature of their identity. But Black girls, they tended to subtract gender. For example, one Black girl, 6th grade, explained why her race-x-gender identity is “like really important” to her:

Because I said it was a little bit important that I was girl but um, and I said it was a lot about being Black, the fact that I’m a Black girl really just circles back to being Black, not really being a girl.

Another Black girl, 8th grade, suggested that intersectionality is “the same” as race:

The same. Um, yeah, pretty much the same as what I said about Black. Black girls and Black guys, they get treated the same. Like, there’s no difference if I’m Black—and a boy or if I’m Black and a girl.

Although both Black and White adolescents calculated intersectionality, what was added or subtracted and its resultant significance differed. Our interpretation is not that intersectionality is not multiplicative in its structural realities; it is. *And*, the psychology of intersectionality for early adolescents reveals a more nuanced meaning-making in the context of identity formation.

Levels of Meaning-Making: Personal, Relational, Structural

As shown in Table 2, we identified three co-existing levels of reasoning that adolescents to explain the (in)significance of intersectionality: *personal, relational, and structural*.

Personal Level. Intersectionality on the *personal level* focused primarily on the individual— characteristics, feelings and evaluations located within the person that figure into the (in)significance of identity. Such reasoning, which focused on phenotype and personality,

was sometimes used to underscore significance: “I like [being a Black girl] it a lot!” one Black girl (8th grade) explained: “I love that I have really thick hair {laughter} ...and I love when my hair’s curly cuz I just feel really great.” But most often it was used to explain the insignificance of intersectionality. For example, a Black boy (8th grade) said that being a ‘Black boy’ was not important “because every boy is kind of the same, I mean I don’t really go off my skin color; I don’t care about skin color.” A Black girl (4th grade) similarly said of being a Black girl, “It doesn’t matter at all!” Asked how things might be different if she were a White girl, she replied: “Well, then obviously my hair would be different. It’d be way easier...” Personal characteristics of the person (skin color, hair) would be different but the social world is either not referenced or explicitly denounced. Personality also justified the insignificance of intersectionality. A White girl (8th grade) explained why things would not change even if she were a Black girl because:

I would still be the same person I am today, so I just - I don’t really see how it matters that much; it’s just that you’re a boy or you’re a girl.

Across these examples, adolescents underscore the personal level: intersectionality does not matter to *me*, so it does not matter at all.

The personal level is the subjective (psychological) reality of a structural process, focusing on how an individual understands or makes sense of themselves within a stratified society. The personal-level analysis can fall short, however, as it is the lone level of analysis. Drawing conclusions about intersectionality at this level only extracts intersectionality from the socioecological context and misrepresents the complexity of identity processes. As we illustrate below, sometimes the same adolescents who claim the insignificance of intersectional identity *personally*, also acknowledge its relational and structural implications.

Relational Level. At the relational level, intersectionality moves from within the self to a

construct that operates in relationships and interactions with family, peers, teachers, and ‘others’ more broadly. We found that it was in describing the relational realities that some adolescents made sense of their own intersectional identities—why they did or did not matter.

A White boy (7th grade) who selected “not much” for the importance race-x-gender explained that things would be “not really” be any different if you were a Black boy because “a couple of my friends from [elementary school] were Black and I still hung out with them and they were good, so.” The insignificance of intersectionality, in other words, is evident in having a diverse social group. This reasoning, which was present in a number of interviews, also suggests if intersectionality mattered, it would matter in a negative or divisive way, such that one would *not* have racially diverse relationships. The relational space seemed to be where adolescents could tangibly *experience* intersectionality. For example, when asked whether anything would change if their race/gender changed, they most frequently said relationships with family and friends would change. “Well then I wouldn’t have the same family”, one Black girl (4th grade) explained, and a White boy (8th grade) explained: “It would be like how you act and your group of friends and all that stuff would change.”

Other people would also treat you differently. One White girl (8th grade), when asked how things would change if she were a Black girl, elucidated: “It’s kind of like racist but, I feel like they’re [teachers are] more trusting of like the White girls than they are of like a Black girl or something.” A Black girl (7th grade) similarly said: “I would get in less trouble.” She explained:

Uh because they always be like – they always think that Black people will be doing everything and I’m like yeah, sometimes we are bad-ish and they think we always be doing stuff, so that’s why.

From their respective social locations, both girls share the same truth about how intersectionality functions in their relational experiences at school and demonstrate that young people are aware of the ways in which their own social experiences are structured and influenced by the social identities and locations in which they inhabit.

The relational level also revealed the contradictions youth negotiated in making sense of intersectionality. In particular, the relational narratives note the tensions of the self, the other, and society. For example, a White boy (5th grade) explained that being a “White boy” was not important to him but “it might be a little important.” His reasoning came into view when imagining how things might change if he were a Black boy:

Um probably in some ways. Like I, I’d like to think like in my mind it shouldn’t matter, but a lot of- to a lot of people it does matter. So, like, if I’m - when I would be around those people they would—yeah, it would be different than it is now.

Q: Even if it didn’t matter—

A: Yeah, it didn’t matter to me but it still matters to some other people. So...

Making explicit the division and contradiction at the levels of the personal (“in my mind”) and relational (“but to a lot of people”), he suggests that the relational trumps the personal, because if it matters to everyone else, then “it still matters.” A White girl (8th grade) gave a similar answer, said that being a White girl is “Not at all important” to her,

but like, at my lunch table, there's like—‘cause all my friends are White. But that's cause, they're just – that’s just who I met. So that's just ‘cause of their personalities. Like, I couldn't care less if they were all Black, if I was Black. I couldn't care less. But at our lunch table, though, it’s just a bunch of White girls and one White guy.

Caught between caring and not caring, of acknowledging choice and chance, her response

reveals how personal (denial) and social (reality) can diverge. Another White girl, also 8th grade, explained it this way:

I don't think anything would be different [if race changed] but that would be up to like my friends and family and stuff. ... I don't think my friends would change but I would love to see how they would react! And my family, I'd really doubt they would, but like I said, I'd see how they'd react.

The idea that the influence of intersectionality is “up to” friends and family makes visible the relational realities, even if the personal rating of intersectional identity is low. Recognizing how intersectionality exists in transaction between people rather than within individuals, differs still (though is not distinct) from the structural level.

Structural Level. The structural level could be considered the original level at which intersectionality operates—where the oppressions and privileges that are built into societal systems (Crenshaw, 1991). Psychological research on intersectionality most frequently ignores this level (Cole, 2009), but listening for structure in the narratives reveals that adolescents are aware of the ways that societal stereotypes, discrimination, and inequalities that organize identities and filter into the relational and personal levels of experience.

Black girl, 8th grade: “Um, I think if I was a White a girl, like {pause} how it would be different.

Um, I think people wouldn't like judge me on certain things like because people say like when they met me I look rude, so probably if I was White, they would probably be like – uh, excuse me – not, um, dang. I think I wouldn't get judged as much as if I was White.”

White girl, 8th grade: [If I was a Black girl] I'd probably would have less privilege because a lot of White people are racist so I'd probably have less privilege and I think that's the only thing that would really change.

Q: How about if you were a White boy?

A: Um I'd have a ton of privilege; I'd be like the top of the food chain; I'd have so much privilege and I'd be like – yeah.

Both quotes resonate with the relational reality but also exemplify the structural level because they state that this judgment and bias are part of society. As one White girl (8th grade) said: “Um, [as a boy] you probably get treated more fairly, honestly. By everyone!” Although select individuals in one's immediate environment (parents, teachers) perpetuate these ideas, it is the ‘everyone-ness’ of these quotes that nests intersectionality in societal structure. Still, we can see the psychological nuance of intersectional oppression and privilege, as youth provide examples of how the ‘macro’ level of inequality manifests in the ‘micro’ of their personal and relational lives. A Black girl (8th grade) illustrates these ideas while imagining what it would be like to be a White girl:

If I was a White girl, I would probably get treated – I probably wouldn't get treated any way [be]cause they only say anything bad about Black – I mean I don't know what they say about White girls [be]cause I'm not White. But um, my hair would be different, all easy and nice ...And, since they're White, they get more jobs, so they have more money and so I would enjoy having more money. Or at least my mom might have more money.

This Black girl's description of White privilege is both about structures that privilege Whiteness and wealth but also physical appearance, access to employment, and familial wealth. At each of these levels, we hear how her awareness of and engagement with an intersectionality influences how she sees herself and others.

At the structural level, adolescents also communicated what it means, stereotypically, to be in respective identity locations: being a girl (instead of a boy) would make you “nicer” and

being Black (instead of White) would change “how you act”, how you “talk”, and the types of “sports” you play. When a Black boy (6th grade) imagined what it would be like if he were a White boy, he responded simply: “Not being good at sports.” Certainly, asking youth to imagine positions them to draw upon stereotypes, but some name them as social constructions and stereotypes whereas others reiterate them as facts; realities that come with the identity location.

One limit of the structural level is that individuals can be constructed as passive recipients of inequality and discrimination. Listening across the levels affords us the perspective to interpret also how individuals respond to, engage with, and resist these structures as they construct their identities. For example, when Black girls claim their intersectional identity as highly important because they “get to prove people wrong” and affirm that they too are worthy of “respect” and value, they are responding to and resisting the master narrative that positions them as inferior on the basis of their identities. One Black girl, 8th grade, explained that being a Black girl is very important to her:

Because I love the color of my skin; I think I’m fine and I hate when people say that we try to bleach our skin because they’re perfect just the way they are and if you can’t love yourself in one section how are you supposed to love yourself in another?

She implicitly responds to colorism and anti-blackness attitudes, which other Black girls made explicit in their narratives:

Um, it’s like because they always assume that we’re ghetto And, I always hate the terms like ‘nappy-headed’ or ‘bougie’ or something like that because not all of us are like that.

Q: Yeah. How does it make you feel when you think about those things?

A: Upset because we’ve been already pushed down so many times, like in slavery we would get raped by the White owners and stuff like that, so that’s why it just makes me

mad when people always talk rudely to a Black girls or lady.

Intersectionality, particularly for Black girls, gave space for resistance and reclaiming one's identity while reckoning with historical and present-day oppression (structural).

Discussion

The current study reveals that the intersectional “we-ness” of social identity is relevant to the social development of Black and White early adolescents. In accordance with new person-perception research in this area (Ghavami & Peplau, 2017; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019), we find that the subjective meaning of intersectional identities is a distinctive reality for some young people, but not all. Thus, while intersectionality is an established structural reality, the ways in which individuals interpret and integrate intersectionality into their own identities varies. In this way, our findings reveal the *psychology of intersectionality* – how individuals negotiate, interpret and make sense of intersectionality. Across groups, we found that White adolescents tended to avoid, or at least distance themselves, from race (and thus intersectionality) whereas Black adolescents rated race, gender and intersectional identities similarly in terms of importance. Yet, not *all* Black youth viewed intersectionality (or race or gender) as important and not all White youth dismissed it. Black boys downplayed race and the relevance of intersectionality in their own identities, but recognized the distinctive challenges of being a Black girl. And White adolescents varied as they calculated the significance of intersectionality on the basis of their race and gender identity memberships. Our findings add nuance to discussions of intersectionality, underscoring that within a stratified society, individuals also choose, within those constraints, how to make sense of that positioning. Given the dynamic change of early adolescence, this work gives a window into how young people are grappling with inequality through the lens of their own identity development.

We capture and explain some of this nuance in intersectionality within and across groups through our use of mixed-methods and a multi-level analysis perspective. Our use of mixed methods broadened the lens of intersectionality. Specifically, Black girls and White girls were polar opposites on the quantitative rating of intersectionality. From these reports, we might conclude, that this is evidence for the distinctive oppression of Black girls and women and irrelevance of intersectionality for White women. While this is part of the story, our qualitative data give insight into how and why early adolescent girls negotiate this structural reality. Black girls, overall, engaged the conversation about intersectionality at the personal, relational, and structural levels, and spoke of the unique experience of being a Black girl as both “hard” and “precious” to them. Thus, the high levels of importance were not simply about feeling good and happy about who they are, they were also about the need to embrace the wholeness of being a Black girl in response to the oppression and stereotypes they face at this intersection. As one Black girl (8th grade) in our sample explained: “If you can’t love yourself in one section, how are you supposed to love yourself in other?” White girls’ low ratings of intersectionality, on the other hand, also reflect their awareness and rejection of the White girl stereotype they wanted to avoid. Yet, naming the ‘Whiteness’ of gender was quite meaningful and White girls dismissed it by invoking their racial privilege to de-racialize gender: “I’m just a girl, not a White girl.” In this way, both Black and White girls acknowledge the social distinctiveness and problematizing of their intersectional identity locations. Understanding how these identity processes change over time and differentially relate to adolescent outcomes is an important next step for research.

We also capture in this analysis the psychological reasoning about intersectionality across levels of experience; not as distinct or graded (one ‘truer’ of intersectionality than the other), but as overlapping realities that youth draw upon to make sense of the inevitable inconsistencies that

come with growing up in a stratified society (Rogers & Way, 2018). Acknowledging that the personal level is *one* level of intersectionality rather than whole of it, reframes our interpretation. Ktiely and Richeson (2017) similarly argue that social identity researchers need “hierarchy-shaped glasses” to replace person- and group-level ones, in order to see how phenomena observed at the personal and group levels are reflections of the societal hierarchy. For example, looking solely at the personal level one might conclude that intersectionality is only relevant for certain groups. However, as discussed above, intersectionality was quite relevant to White girls, and their assertion of insignificance reveals their rejection of its relevance. That is, White girls actively distance themselves from their intersectional identity, not because they “don’t care” and it “doesn’t matter” but because of the negative ways it does matter. And Black girls, in noting the reality of wedded stigma, embrace intersectionality as a means of resistance—reframing what it means to be a Black girl. Likewise, the *relational level* reinforces that “others” (including society) structure and give meaning to intersectional identities. But if we locate intersectionality only in the other, we miss the way that the self is implicated; it is the responsibility of “others” to fix the inequality. Keeping the personal and relational, embedded in the structural, allows us to see the ways in which personal identity narratives often function to maintain the master narrative and the inequalities it supports (Syed & McLean, 2016). The *relational level* may be especially relevant during early adolescence, as peers and friendships take up primacy in their social worlds (Sullivan, 1953) and provide the direct reflection for the development of self and identity.

Certainly, if we are to understand the conditions under which humans develop and form relationships with themselves and others, we must take seriously the *structural* oppressions that regulate everyday peer/social interactions and experiences. But, to only privilege structure without attending to the ways that individuals experience and make-meaning of and negotiate

these cultural rhythms, is to miss the psychology of it—and miscalculate our potential to disrupt it (Hammack, 2008; Rogers & Way, 2018). Identifying the ways that youth engage with intersectionality calls for greater empirical attention to its role in early adolescent development. A multi-level perspective generates questions not only from the level of systems and structures but also from the more micro-levels of individuals and relationships. How does reasoning about intersectionality across these different levels and perspectives relate to early adolescents' own peer relationships and ability to form cross-racial friendships? How does this effect their academic engagement and career aspirations, particularly in industries (science, mathematics) wherein intersectional inequalities loom large persist? What is the link to their developing a critical consciousness of systemic inequality in society writ large? More than a single dimension of inequality, adolescents' own engagement with and interpretations of intersectionality are pivotal to how they form beliefs about themselves and the world through their adolescent years.

Limitations

The current analysis contributes novel data and analytical frameworks for studying intersectionality in identity research, but is not without limitations. The small sample limited the quantitative comparisons. The data reflect the early adolescent experience within a particular sociohistorical moment and local school contexts and therefore cannot be generalized to all youth, but rather utilized as a guide for probing intersectional identity processes. The method of asking directly about intersectionality also has limitations, and even in the practice of asking youth to rate each “piece” of the identity can already distort how they normatively think about or construct their identities (Bowleg, 2008). At the same time, our data captures where and how youth construct their race-x-gender identities, which is important for understanding how intersectionality operates psychologically. Our data also raise question about how adolescents

interpreted the interview question about identity importance. Some youth, for instance, explained that intersectionality was not important because they have diverse peer groups. This rationale implies that if race were important it would be because it is a “problem”, as in important enough to divide or exclude. This assumption differs from how importance or centrality is often conceptualized, but may warrant further exploration to assure our measures capture the intended construct of interest. Finally, the operationalization of intersectionality was limited to only two prescribed identities, and notably the ones most frequently examined: race and gender (Rogers & Nelson, 2019); sexuality, social class and other relevant identity locations (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019) b are not captured here but set the stage for future research.

Conclusion

Assuming that identity and intersectionality function at multiple levels of experience shifts the analysis and interpretation of identity processes. It creates a prism of realities, where structures and relationships and individuals coexist and interact, and from different angles, shine a different light on the complexities of identity and intersectionality. A prism is not neatly divided into equal parts and pieces, and no single piece or angle of prism can reflect the light. It is within the web of personal, relational and structural realities that youth are figuring out who they are and who they will become.

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*Table 1**Means (SDs) for Identity Importance Ratings by Intersectionality Group Status*

	Gender Identity	Racial Identity	Intersectional Identity
Black Girls (<i>n</i> = 17)	2.53 (.62)	2.24 (.90)	2.06 (.89)
Black Boys (<i>n</i> = 10)	2.20 (.79)	2.40 (.70)	1.80 (.91)
White Girls (<i>n</i> = 16)	2.44 (.63)	1.00 (.00)	1.31 (.45)
White Boys (<i>n</i> = 20)	2.05 (.76)	1.10 (.71)	1.40 (.68)
<i>Full Sample</i>	<i>2.30 (.71)</i>	<i>1.59 (.91)</i>	<i>1.62 (.79)</i>

Table 2

Axial Coding for Levels of Meaning-Making: Significance and Reasoning about Intersectionality

		<u>SIGNIFICANCE</u>	
		Consequential	Inconsequential
<u>REASONING</u>	Personal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who I am • I don't care • Pride 	White girl, 8 th grade: I: Like how important is it to you, being a white girl? R: {clears throat} It's weird because these are like my most proud of and least proud of paired up together. Um, I don't think it's that important.	Black girl, 7 th grade: R: It doesn't matter at all! I: How do you think things might be different if you were um, a white girl? R: Well then obviously my hair would be different. It'd be way easier..."
	Relational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family, peers, teachers • Differential treatment 	Black girl, 4 th grade: "Well then I wouldn't have the same family and I probably wouldn't have the same feeling at home probably not the same friends or school and stuff and my church because I really like my church and stuff."	White girl, 8 th grade: "Not at all important, but like, at my lunch table, there's like, cause all my friends are White. But that's cause, they're just – that's just who I met. So that's just cause of their personalities. Like, I couldn't care less if they were all Black, if I was Black. I couldn't care less. But at our lunch table, though, it's just a bunch of White girls and one White guy."
	Structural <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discrimination • General stereotypes 	Black boy, 7 th grade: "Yeah dealing with all these people that don't like Black people. ... Uh some of the cops I thought were okay, but some of these other cops don't have to kill people. But some of them kill them for no reason just like because they don't like Black people."	White boy, 8 th grade: "Um, Not much.... Like maybe a few decades ago with the civil rights stuff it would of mattered, but now a days it doesn't matter that much."