

“There’s not many people who are willing to stand up these days”: Race Counternarratives in Middle Childhood

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BACKGROUND

- Children understand race within a historically-established racial hierarchy, and have the agency to accommodate or resist this establishment as they form their racial identities.
- Previous research identified distinct narrative types that either *reinforce* or *disrupt* existing societal structures (Syed & McLean, 2016) and this framework has been applied to identity development in middle childhood (Rogers, 2018).
- As race exists and is experienced on multiple levels (i.e. individual, interpersonal, structural), we expect children’s own racial identity narratives to reflect these distinctions (Golash-Boza, 2016).
- Moreover, according to Cross’s racial identity development theory, “racial encounters” prompt racial exploration on multiple levels, including increased awareness of structural racism (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

Objective:

To analyze the content of children’s Counternarratives and prevalence of racial encounters over time

Narrative Framework

Master Narratives: *reinforce* hierarchy

- ❖ Difference Narrative - racial differences
- ❖ Inconsequential Narrative - “colorblind” ideology

Alternative Narratives: *disrupt* hierarchy

- ❖ Incongruent Narrative - accommodates and resists
- ❖ Counternarrative - explicitly challenges racism

DISCUSSION

- Counternarrative children discussed race mostly on the *structural* level (45%), suggesting that resisting racial hierarchy necessitates some structural thinking.
- Children’s references to *racial encounters* increased by 40% overall, and by 85% among children who switched from a Master Narrative, suggesting that concrete racial experiences may catalyze resistance, as predicted by racial identity models (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).
- Disapproving stereotypes* and current discrimination also increased, but not historical references, as children spoke of racial issues as pressing and current rather than something in the past.
- These results underscore children’s positive agency to injustice, which is critical for deconstructing racial hierarchy, and suggest that constructing a counternarratives is a route for positive racial identity development.
- Emphasizing a structural framework and concrete racial experiences could be helpful for children to resist inequality.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- On what levels (individual, interpersonal, structural) do Counternarrative children talk about race?
- Do children who move from Master Narratives into Counternarratives report more racial encounters?
- What themes are present in children’s Counternarratives?



METHODS

Semi-structured interviews were drawn from the Tacoma Identity Study (N = 105), a longitudinal mixed-method study of identity in middle childhood (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017).

Focal sample included 32 children who told Counternarratives during Year 3 of the study:

- 4th-8th graders
- 47% Black, 41% Mixed Race, 12% White

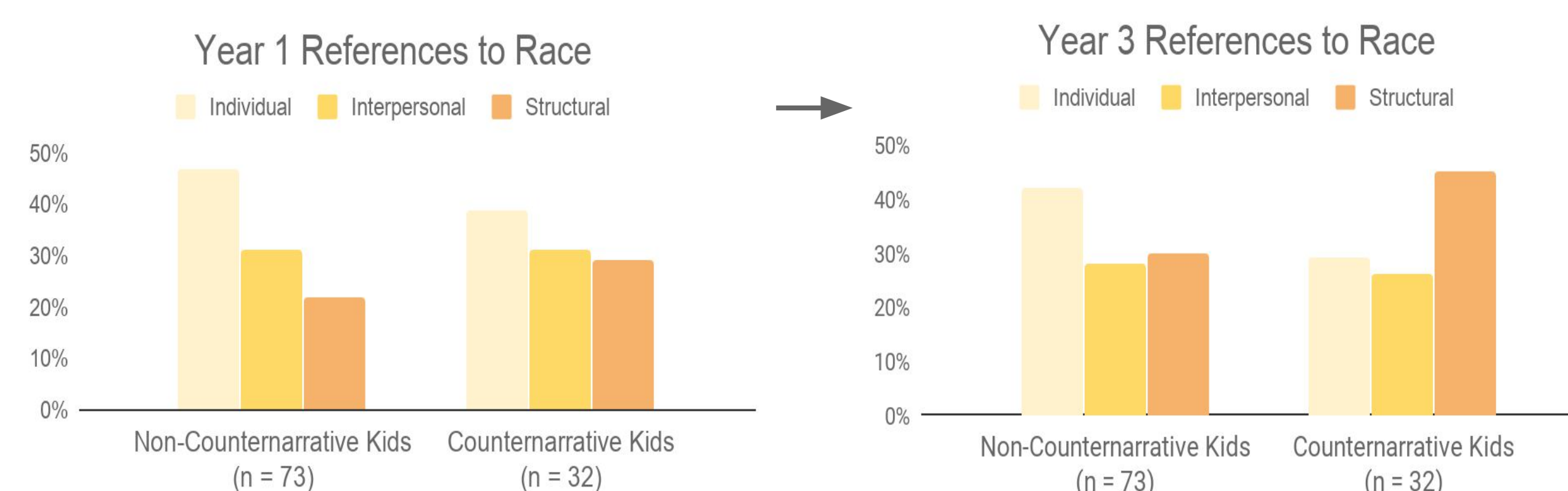
Interview transcripts were coded for:

- References to the levels of race: *individual*, *interpersonal*, and *structural*
- Racial encounters*: an anecdote of a racial experience they witnessed or learned about
- Central themes

RESULTS

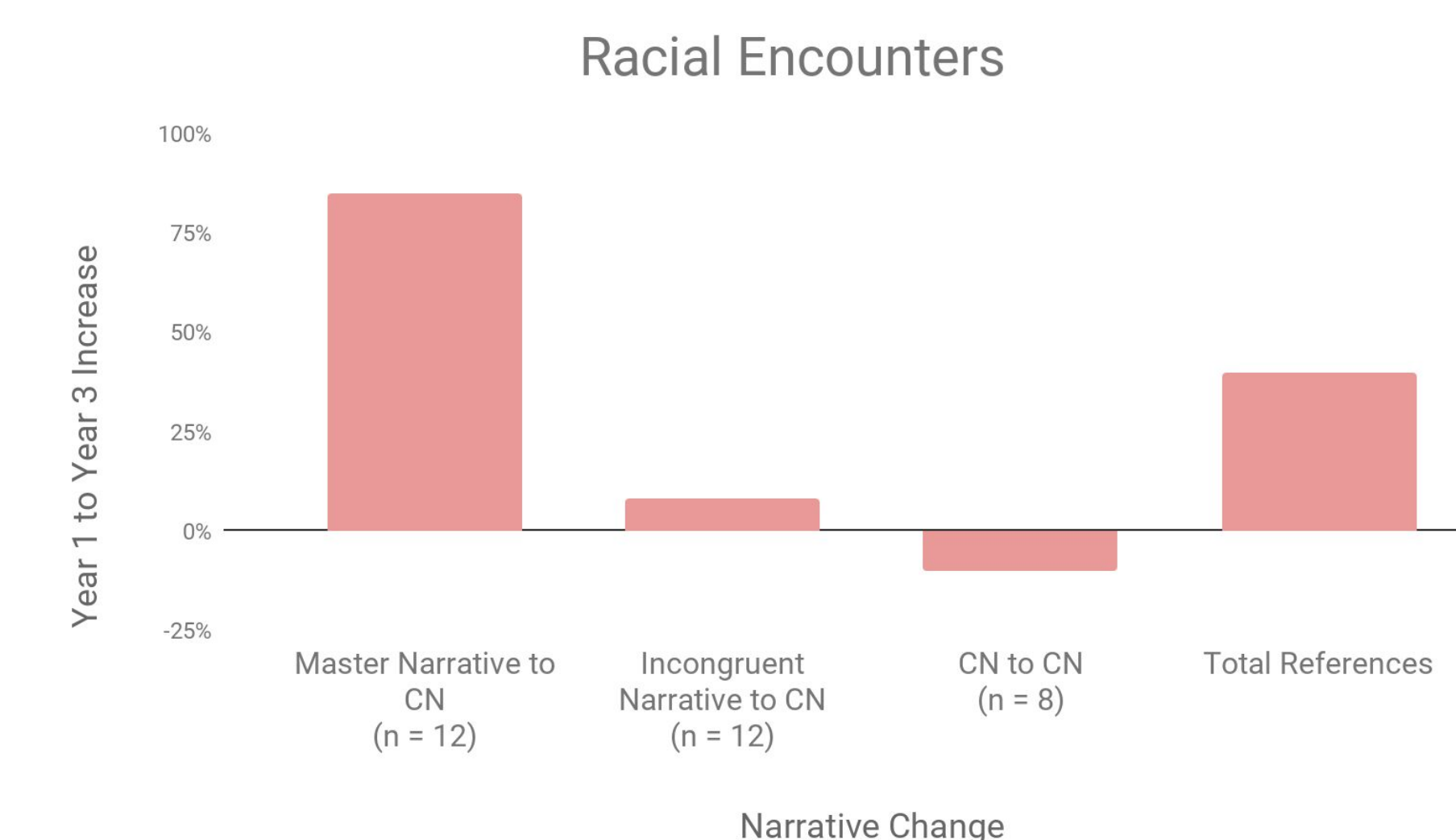
1. Counternarrative children make more references to race on a structural level.

“Black people are judged the most out of all the races I think, yeah that I know of, and it’s just tougher for Black people to do a lot of things than most other people of the other races, yeah...I think it’s kind of dumb because like we’re not the only race that messed up in the past or future or present, yeah.”
--Black girl, 7th grade, Year 3

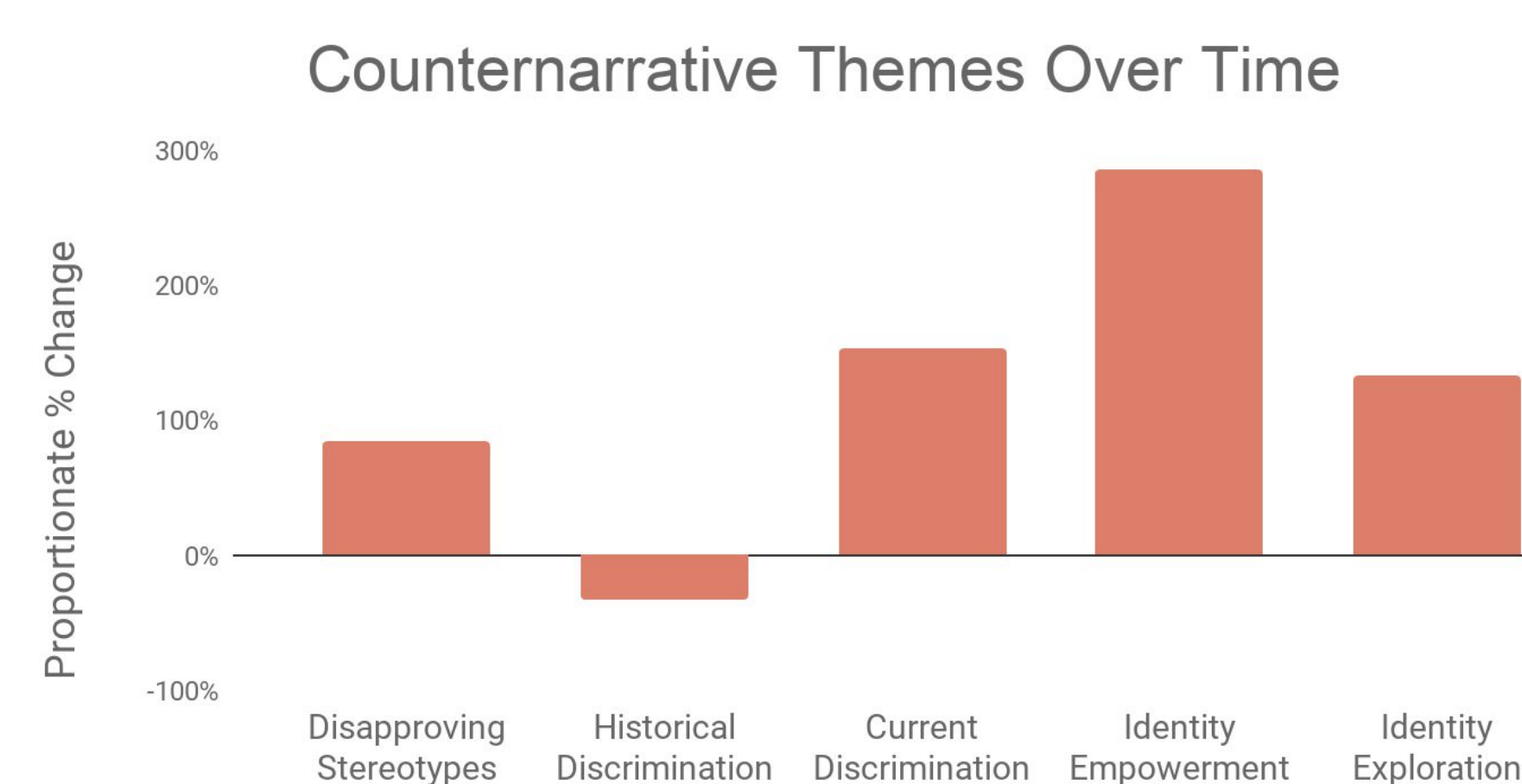


2. Racial encounters increased over time.

“It was like there was two people like there and there was one black and one white. They were like best friends. But then another white person came up and said, “You don’t need to be a black friend’s friend.”
--Mixed-race boy, 5th grade, Year 1



3. Counternarrative themes increased from Year 1 to Year 3, except for historical discrimination.



Q: Is there anything that’s hard about being White?
A: Mm, probably because like other people are like um yeah you’re White, so you’re all like prissy and sassy and like all those things, like preppy like you should go to [middle school]. It’s like that’s something I don’t like so people – some people are like, “Oh yeah you shouldn’t go to [this middle school] cause this is like a full on ghetto school.” I’m like, “Well I wanted to go here.”
--White girl, 6th grade, Year 1 (Disapproving Stereotypes)

Q: How important is being a Black girl to you?
A: I think a lot because my mom, when I come home and I’m feeling sad she says – my grandma says this too – she sings a song to me when I’m sad and she calls me Golden Lady because I’m Black and that’s in the song and she makes me happy and she says that I should be grateful that I’m Black and a girl.
--Black girl, 4th grade, Year 3 (Identity Empowerment)

FUTURE QUESTIONS

- What does the content of other identity counternarratives (e.g., gender, sexuality) sound like?
- How can education and counseling cater to children’s perspectives and agency on race?

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