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Social Construction Is Racial Construction: Examining the Target Populations in School-Choice Policies

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Purpose: We examine policy influencers' perceptions of the targets of school-choice policy across five states, exploring how constructions varied for White and racially minoritized families, whether policy actors conceived of the "target" of policy as the child or the parent, and how these racialized constructions varied across different types of school-choice policies. **Research Methods/Approach:** We conducted 56 semistructured interviews in 2019 with state-level stakeholders across five states. **Findings:** We found that policy actors generally viewed White families as strong and racially minoritized families as weak. However, for both groups, we found variation in whether these constructions were positive or negative and differences between students and parents. We find that social constructions are fluid, with varying, sometimes conflicting and contradictory views of racially minoritized and White parents in the same period, within the same state context. Despite the salience of race throughout social constructions of the target population, policy actors primarily used color-evasive references. In general, we found little variation in policy components at the state level. **Implications:** Our work demonstrates how racialized social constructions matter for equity in school-choice policy, with implications for local, state, and federal policy and for future research.

School-choice policies, including charter schools, open-enrollment plans, and school vouchers, are intended to expand schooling options for families. These reforms often target children from racially minoritized groups and children living in poverty in large urban contexts (Scott and Holme 2016). Research has shown that advocates employ equity-based rationales for choice, arguing that school-choice policies give marginalized families access to better schooling options (Scott 2011), but charter schools (Angrist et al. 2013; Berends 2015) and school vouchers (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2015; Jeynes 2012) have had mixed results in improving student outcomes. And research has documented how school choice reproduces, or widens, inequalities in education (Frankenberg et al. 2011; Jennings 2010; Lenhoff 2020; Lubienski et al. 2009; Phillips et al. 2015; Stein 2015).

How school-choice policies are designed, and by whom, influences student outcomes (Levin 2012; Verger et al. 2020) and structural inequities in access to high-quality schools (Jabbar 2016). Elected leaders and government officials, as well as nonsystem actors, including professional associations and advocacy

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groups (Coburn 2005), have significant influence over how educational policies are designed, implemented, or amended. Previous scholarship on the racial politics of school choice identifies networks of powerful, elite actors (Anderson and Donchik 2016; Au and Ferrare 2015; Scott 2009), who promote policies in ways that disempower racially minoritized communities (Buras 2011; Henry and Dixson 2016). Historically, for example, elite philanthropic actors have promoted educational programs for Black children that would both provide opportunity and uphold prevailing racist views (Anderson 1988; Fultz 1995; Scott 2009). Yet we know little about how elite actors, advocates, policy makers, and leaders—whom we refer to as "policy influencers"—describe the targets of school-choice policies, and how their conceptions are shaped by race.

Social constructions are typically defined as cultural characterizations or popular conceptions of a particular group that are co-constructed in a given policy context.[1] Research focused on policy sectors beyond education highlights the important role that social constructions of the target population play in policy design and implementation (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Policy influencers are embedded in a social system with particular constructions of target groups and may support policies that help groups viewed as deserving or punish those considered undeserving (Brown 2013). Individuals thus produce social constructions but are also influenced by them. Policy influencers can reify or exacerbate existing racial inequities through social constructions that reflect implicit bias and racialized assumptions or stereotypes about target groups and become embedded in policy design.

Social constructions have real consequences for minoritized groups. For example, public support and funding for social-welfare policies decline when minorities are perceived to be the targets (Katz 1989; Keiser et al. 2004; Quadagno 1994). We draw on theories related to the social construction of target populations, including an updated "racial classification model" that merges Schneider and Ingram's (1993) seminal work with models of implicit racism (Fording et al. 2011; Soss et al. 2008). Furthermore, we draw on constructs from critical race theory to enhance the social construction framework to explain how policy actors' views of the target population can be color evasive and employ coded racial appeals (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Haney López 2014).

Researchers have used quantitative methods to test the racial classification model in social policy, but we know less about how policy influencers perceive target groups and about how race shapes those perceptions—even though these perceptions can have real consequences. Using qualitative interview methods, we examine policy influencers' perceptions of the targets of school-choice policy across five states, exploring how constructions varied for White and racially minoritized families, whether policy actors conceived of the "target" of policy as

the child or the parent, and how these racialized constructions varied across different types of school-choice policies.

Background

Social Construction of the Target Population

To guide our research, we drew on theories of the social construction of target populations. How targets of policy are socially constructed—shaped by popular stereotypes and images in politics, culture, and media—matters for policy design and outcomes (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Part of the "interpretive turn" in policy analysis, this tradition of scholarship takes a constructivist approach to policy, bridging sociological and political theories. It emphasizes that policy study is not just the "rational and instrumental components" of policy design but also the "value-laden components, such as social constructions, rationales, and underlying assumptions" (Schneider and Sidney 2009, 105).

Schneider and Ingram (1993) identify four types of social constructions along two dimensions: power (whether the target group is weak or strong in society, based on factors such as wealth and the propensity to mobilize for action) and constructions (whether the group is viewed positively or negatively). Those who are strong and positively constructed are the advantaged (e.g., elderly people, businesses, veterans), whereas those who are strong in power but negatively constructed are contenders (e.g., the rich, big unions). Groups that are weak but positively perceived include dependents (e.g., children, mothers, the disabled), and those who are weak in power but negatively perceived are deviants (e.g., criminals, drug addicts).

Schneider and Ingram (1993) sought to understand power, or why some groups are advantaged, and how policy can reinforce or alter such advantages (Pierce et al. 2014). Through these social constructions, Schneider and Ingram argue, policy makers allocate "benefits" and "burdens" to different groups, with advantaged populations receiving more beneficial policy than is warranted, often because they are able, or perceived to be able, to shape policy agendas directly. Dependents and deviants, they predict, will receive too little beneficial policy, partly because they have little political power to redirect resources. Deviants will receive burdens, or policies that are punishing. Because policy makers want to appear aligned with dependents, policies in this realm are often symbolic or lack sufficient resources and "tend to be left to the lower levels of government or to the private sector" (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 338). Policy makers also anticipate public feedback on their policy designs and act accordingly to secure their political power (e.g., through reelection; Schneider and Ingram 2018).

Racialized Social Constructions

In their work, Schneider and Ingram (1993) acknowledge that racial stereotypes shape policy and that policy can reproduce these stereotypes; yet their work does not examine this further. Soss and colleagues (2008) build on the classic model to highlight the role of race in social construction of policy targets. They examine how racial stereotypes shape policy makers' expectations of how people will respond to a particular intervention, and, thereby, influence policy design. Qualitative research, too, shows that policy categories used by policy makers and practitioners are imbued with race, even if not always explicitly (Ross 2006; Stein 2001).

Public policies, even those that are purportedly race-neutral, can have disparate outcomes and racialized effects (Soss et al. 2008). One reason for these disparate outcomes is that staff implementing rules and procedures may discriminate against some targets of the policy. However, policy design itself can produce racial disparities without implicit or explicit racial bias on the part of policy implementers. In other words, policy influencers' beliefs and constructions of the targets of policy can become embedded in the policy design and enactment, sometimes resulting in disparate outcomes by, for example, having more stringent "tests" that are burdensome for low-income people or racial minorities, limiting their access to programs. In other words, social constructions can reify existing racial inequities. Therefore, it is important to examine how policy influencers construct the targets of policy to identify some of the mechanisms through which policy can have inequitable impacts.

We draw on the racial classification model developed by Soss and colleagues (2008), which has several basic premises. Policy actors rely on "salient social classifications and group reputations . . . to bring coherence to a complex social world or determine appropriate action" (Fording et al. 2011, 1619). The salience of racial minorities in a policy context will influence the social construction of policy targets and the extent of racial disparities. For example, if Black people are plentiful in a particular policy program, "a legislator may make important assumptions about participants' levels of human capital, tendencies toward social dysfunction, barriers to self-sufficiency, or vulnerability to labor-market discrimination" (Soss et al. 2008, 540), or policy actors may consider widely held stereotypes, anticipating public feedback (Schneider and Ingram 2018). Although the racial classification model does not deny the existence of discriminatory intent, this motive is not necessary for policy choices to be shaped by race. The model draws on concepts of implicit bias and structural racism to explain how race shapes policy choices and, ultimately, outcomes.

Empirical studies using the racial classification model have examined, for example, how race shapes decisions regarding the devolution of welfare policy

(Soss et al. 2008). They found that the prevalence of Black populations in a state was related to legislative decisions about welfare. Schram and colleagues (2009) applied the racial classification model to test bias in welfare sanctions and found that when cases reinforce racial stereotypes, versus when racial cues are stereotype-inconsistent, case managers more often reported that they would apply sanctions to hypothetical clients. Keiser and colleagues (2004) examined the implementation of welfare sanctions and found that the racial context, more than the political culture, shaped how clients experienced public policies, such as welfare programs. These quantitative studies have not explained how policy makers actually perceive target groups and how those perceptions are influenced by race.

Furthermore, we draw on concepts from critical race theory (Bell 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2017) to explore racialized constructions in public policy. In particular, whereas the racial classification model attends to implicit bias and structural racism, critical race theory emphasizes that racism is endemic in society and policy, and how it can be strategic (Haney López 2014), where politicians and policy actors use coded appeals to racial fears among White people. Schneider and Ingram (2018) have described how policy makers use deception—they manipulate or distort social constructions and stereotypes to mask the consequences of policy for particular groups. By drawing on critical race scholars, such as Haney López (2014), our work goes further to emphasize the racialized nature of such deception, and how policy makers use "dog-whistling" to communicate with their constituents about race. Such "dog-whistling" relies on the climate of color-evasiveness (Haney López 2014), where racism arises "without racists" (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Our aim is to bring the racial classification literature in conversation with more critical constructs, such as color blindness theory (Bonilla-Silva 2006), which, going forward, we refer to as color-evasiveness (Annamma et al. 2017), to examine social constructions of policy targets.

Unlike in previous eras, such as Jim Crow, racism over the past several decades has become less explicit but persists through color-evasive racism, which uses more subtle institutionalized practices to maintain White supremacy. Without a structural-institutional analysis of racism, color-evasion often leads to "blaming the victim" (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 53), such as when "culture of poverty" explanations, which blame the poor for their situation, are provided for inequality (Small et al. 2010). Drawing on the concept of color-evasion, Amundson and Zajicek (2018, 383) found that state legislators' discourses on welfare drug testing moved away from "explicit racialized and gendered discourse and toward implicit constructions of race and gender," with a focus on social class, including characterizations of the poor as "unworthy, suspect, and deviant." Indeed, without a structural analysis of racism, policy actors must draw on "culture" to explain the widespread disparities among racial groups in the United States

(Haney López 2014). Discourses regarding target populations can thus use race-neutral language while still conveying racist ideas.

Some studies in education have examined how color-evasive constructions influence policy implementation. Stein (2001) conducted an interview-based study of education Title I programs and explored how the category "Title I" shaped practitioners' conceptualization of students. Her work, though not explicitly drawing on critical theories of color-evasion, illuminates how race-neutral labels for students, such as "Title I" or "disadvantaged children," were introduced by policy makers and how they influenced the social constructions of individual practitioners, especially their perceptions of students. In particular, Stein's work reveals that the new "cultural categories" encouraged practitioners to adopt deficit frames that were also racialized, even though most staff did not use the term "Black." A similar finding emerged in a study of teachers' conceptions of students, where teachers attributed the problem of poor outcomes for English-language learners not only to instructional practices but also to innate student characteristics (Bertrand and Marsh 2015). These implicit beliefs, shaped by broader social constructions in the environment, can shape actors' sense of efficacy and theories of change via policy and practice. Arias (2012) finds that deficit narratives of English learners, which were embedded in state policy, shaped preservice teachers' beliefs, reproducing prevailing ideologies. These studies illuminate the reproductive nature of social constructions in policy and practice.

Explicitly discussing race in public policy is risky. Strong associations of a racial group with a particular policy can undermine support for such policies (e.g., association of Black families with welfare). However, policies that fail to account for race, or that do not identify and address broader racial disparities that generate disproportionate representation of racially minoritized groups in public assistance or social programs, can reproduce inequities (Schram 2003). It is important, then, to understand how policy influencers construct the target population, particularly in a policy environment that promotes color-evasive racism.

School Choice and Targets of Policy

Some education policy research has identified how school-choice policies have been racially exclusive, premised on assumptions about parents and children from racially minoritized groups. This work, although not explicitly using the theory of social construction, contributes to our understanding of how racially minoritized groups are framed in education policy. Research has, for example, illuminated how policy actors constructed schools in New Orleans, before Hurricane Katrina, that were largely led, staffed, and attended by Black people, as "failing"—framing that helped usher in charter schools after the storm (Buras 2011). Similar patterns proliferated in Chicago with the "Ren2010" reforms,

wherein emphasis on failure and the need to "clean out" and "rebuild" demonized low-income Black people who were displaced (Lipman and Haines 2007, 492). In an analysis of racial references in charter school marketing materials, Hernández (2016) also finds that despite having few explicit references to race, charter management organizations relied on images of students of color alongside color-evasive language. This served to convey negative racial stereotypes of families of color as trapped in poverty and in communities plagued by violence, and it framed charter schools as the solution. In many of these contexts, Black adults were framed as deviant, based on Schneider and Ingram's categories, and Black children were dependents needing to be rescued from failing institutions.

Education research demonstrates that these constructions are politically contested, even if marginalized groups have less power to shape policy outcomes (Buras 2011; Scott 2011). The exclusion of working-class and Black families from decision-making about reforms in New Orleans and Chicago schools (Buras 2011; Dixson et al. 2015; Lipman and Haines 2007), for example, provides insight into how such families are constructed as weak and incapable of contributing to policy decisions—either as dependents or deviants. How policy actors view families who resist such reforms is an open question (Kretchmar 2011). Are they powerful because they seek to exert their influence to create change, or are they deviants, or roadblocks, in the path of reform?

Other scholars have addressed these conflicting conceptions. Dumas (2013, 532) argued that choice-based policies, as represented in the film *Waiting for Superman*, for example, are meant to "either save black people . . . or save the nation *from* black people, and particularly their claims to redress for persistent racial inequities in education." These characterizations represent competing and conflicting views of Black people as either (*a*) dependents needing to be saved through education reform, subject to the "patronizing liberal-multicultural gaze" (534) and lacking agency, or (*b*) deviants needing to be tamed through reforms that can quell unrest and calls for greater change. The "dependent" frame has gained prominence as education reformers argue that their efforts are primarily concerned with the well-being of students (Scott 2011); yet these advocates are often "silent on the growing inequalities that impact communities of color disproportionately" (589), often adopting an ahistorical and decontextualized approach to educational inequity. When communities and leaders from racially minoritized groups resist the expansion of market-based reforms, however, they are demonized, classified as "deviants," or as dependents who are simply "duped" by teachers unions and the educational establishment (Scott 2011, 590). In other words, within the school-choice policy environment, policy influencers construct racially minoritized families, particularly Black and Latinx families, in contradictory ways.

Although these researchers have started to illuminate the social constructions of families under choice policy, our work extends this research by applying

Schneider and Ingram's (1993) categories for social construction of the target population to the conceptualizations of policy leaders across multiple state contexts. We draw on critical race perspectives on policy to enhance Schneider and Ingram's framework. We aim to better understand how racially minoritized families are constructed, and how constructions vary across policy contexts and in relation to White families, by interviewing policy influencers and asking about their conceptions of the target population. Researchers in public policy have called for more qualitative studies of the social construction of target populations to advance the field (Schneider and Sidney 2009). Furthermore, a review of the literature suggests that most research on social construction of target populations focuses on federal policy, with only 12% of studies examining state policy and only 27% of studies using qualitative empirical methods (Pierce et al. 2014).

To answer these calls, we used semistructured interviews to examine how state-level policy influencers construct target populations for school-choice policy. Our work explores how such conceptions are racialized and how they might differ for the subtargets of school-choice policy. Choice policies target households or families, but parents might be constructed differently than children or youth (Ross 2006); in addition, White families might be constructed differently than racially minoritized families. Our work also begins to explore how social constructions influence education policy design, and the implications for equity. We ask:

1. To what extent and how are policy leaders' social constructions of the target population racialized?
   a. How are White and racially minoritized families constructed differently?
   b. How do these social constructions vary by school-choice policy (e.g., vouchers, open enrollment, or charter schools) and across different state contexts?

2. How are racialized social constructions of the target population associated with policy enactment?

Data and Method

We draw on interview data from a multiple-case study of Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Oregon, and Michigan (Yin 2013). These data came from a larger explanatory comparative case study, where the phenomenon of interest was how state policy makers and education leaders think about school choice policy and how issues of equity show up in state-level discourse and action. For this article, our focus was specifically on how policy actors socially constructed the targets of

school choice policy. The states were purposely sampled to offer a range of student demographics, geographic locations, and types of choice policies (open enrollment, charter, and voucher programs) with varying levels of maturity (i.e., years since enactment of a choice policy, and subsequent modifications; see table 1). All states had charter schools, but Louisiana and Florida also had voucher programs, and Michigan, Colorado, and Oregon had open-enrollment choice programs.[2] Thus, each state had two of the three choice policies of interest. We also selected Colorado, Louisiana, and Michigan because they included urban districts that had enrollment systems or high concentration of charter schools and because we were able to build on the mixed-methods work that members of the research team have conducted in these cities for many years (e.g., Jabbar 2016; Marsh et al. 2021).

We defined our case as follows. Each site offers insight into our core phenomenon of interest: how policy influencers construct target populations, and how those constructions might relate to policy enactment in each site. We explored these factors within the context of school choice policy (a slightly narrower case), and then we specifically selected several cases (or states) that can shed light on potential differences in social construction and policy enactment and design. In this way, each state's school choice landscape, and the collective narratives evident in these settings, is a case of social construction of target populations. Our cases offer variation in political and demographic contexts while having overlapping types of school choice policies (e.g., charter schools), which allows us to compare across cases and also identify overarching themes.

Data Collection

We conducted 56 semistructured interviews (Patton 1990) in 2019 with state-level stakeholders (see table 2). Interviewees were purposefully selected based on their key statewide leadership roles and to maintain similarity in positions across states. State policy is designed not only by government actors, such as legislators and state bureaucrats, but also by advocacy groups representing different views on reform (e.g., DeBray et al. 2014; Scott et al. 2009), lobbying groups (e.g., Anderson and Donchik 2016), and unions and professional associations (e.g., Cowen and Strunk 2014; Young 2011). These policy influencers may disagree with one another on key aspects of choice policy, and they have different levels of power to influence policy, but they were all part of a broader policy community contributing to and influenced by the state's sociopolitical context.

We bounded the case by first identifying state policy actors who would have knowledge of school choice policies in each site, targeting several categories. We aimed to recruit one to two state-level policy makers (e.g., governor's office staff, legislators or staffers on education committees), one to two members of state

TABLE 1

Choice Policies by State

Category	Definition	Colorado	Florida	Louisiana	Michigan	Oregon
Charter schools	Publicly funded nonprofit or for-profit school operators, authorized by state/local governments	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interdistrict open enrollment	Options for students to transfer to another district to attend public school	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Private school voucher	Public-funded vouchers/tuition to attend private schools	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Racial demographics:	Student racial demographics					
Black (%)		4.5	21.9	43.2	17.9	2.0
Latinx (%)		33.6	33.9	7.6	7.3	23.0
White (%)		53.4	37.4	44.2	67.5	62.0
Other (%)		8.5	6.8	5.0	7.3	13.0

TABLE 2

Interviewees by Role and State

Respondent Type	Colorado	Florida	Louisiana	Michigan	Oregon
State legislators/governor/staff	1	2	1	3	1
State board of education	2	–	–	1	1
State department of education	1	1	5	–	2
Administrator/school board/teacher associations	3	2	1	3	2
Parent/community organizations/advocacy groups	5	6	6	3	5
Total*	12	10[†]	13	10	11

* Number of interviewees ($n = 56$).
[†] One interviewee represented two categories.

boards of education, and one to two staff members in the state department of education. We also wanted to recruit actors who have varying degrees of power in each state, including educator representatives (e.g., one to two administrator or teachers' associations representatives) and four to five advocates potentially representing diverse views on school choice (e.g., education reform organizations as well as various groups that advocate for marginalized populations in the state). Each team focused on a particular state and generated lists of potential participants based on local knowledge, media, and discussion with researchers in the region. We then contacted all participants by email and phone to schedule interviews.

We asked participants to describe current choice policies within the state and the policies' intents and outcomes, particularly for historically marginalized students. A portion of our protocol was designed to capture their social constructions of the target population. We also asked about how various policy levers influenced equity in school choice: the provision of information regarding school choice options; policies relating to enrollment in schools, for example, lottery requirements, weighted lotteries, or means-testing; and transportation, or buses or other means by which families were helped to reach schools of choice. We conducted 1-hour phone interviews; all but one were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Our team comprised 15 trained interviewers representing a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Given our questioning around race, class, and equity, participants may have been more or less comfortable responding based on their assumptions about the interviewer's background. Although interviews were conducted by phone, participants could still make assumptions—based on name and voice—about researchers' racial identities that could reinforce social desirability bias. We designed our protocol accordingly, asking open-ended questions about the goals of the policy (e.g., "Let's start with [charters]. What are the goals of this policy? What specific problems do they seek to address?") before explicitly

discussing equity or race or asking about whether the policy prioritized or intended to serve particular groups of students (e.g., "Are there particular groups of students that are prioritized or intended to benefit in particular from this policy? Probe on different marginalized student groups and how the policy is meant to serve them."). In most sites, the "racially minoritized" groups discussed were Black and Latinx. Because, as we describe later, participants often used color-evasive language, we could not always specify which minoritized group they referred to, so we use the broader category to capture all of those groups.

To understand the nature and design of school-choice policies in each site, we also reviewed state policy documents, websites, and, in some cases, legislation related to choice policy.

Data Analysis

We coded interview transcripts in Dedoose using a provisional list of codes (Saldaña 2013), including codes for types of school choice and marginalized student groups. We then wrote detailed state-level case profiles (35–50 pages each) that captured key themes and evidence of the social construction of target populations (Maxwell 2013; Saldaña 2013).

Initial analysis of the case profiles determined our focus on how race influenced the social construction process. We created matrices to examine how different racial groups were socially constructed within each case (Miles et al. 2014), categorizing participants as White, racially minoritized, or "all" families. We identified instances of racial bias and deficit assumptions about target groups, but identifying color-evasiveness was trickier. We used demographic data and our judgment to determine whether color-evasive language referred to racially minoritized groups or not. For example, we coded responses as referring to racially minoritized families when participants responded to a question asking about students of color, even if they did not use that language, or if they referred to public schools that had predominantly racially minoritized students. For instance, one advocacy organization representative said that the goal of school choice was to give all students access to high-quality schools, regardless of where they lived ("It shouldn't matter where in the city you live"), but did not mention race. After a group discussion, we determined that in this case we could assume the participant was indirectly referring to race, because they were talking about choice in the context of New Orleans, which the participant had earlier referenced as a place that had "primarily African American students in public schools." We met regularly to discuss our interpretations of this color-evasion and to check one another's assumptions. We wrote analytic memos based on the quotes and evidence in each cell, and we constructed a "meta-matrix" to examine patterns across the five states (Miles et al. 2014). For each research

question, we created versions of Schneider and Ingram's (1993) two-by-two table of social constructions, shading in the cells based on the prevalence of that type of construction in the interview data from each site. We examined whether constructions differed by choice policy (e.g., charter schools, open enrollment plans, and school vouchers).

To examine connections between the constructions and the policy levers, we created matrices to look for patterns between social constructions and the policies associated with each policy lever, and we wrote memos about the linkages we identified. We focused on cross-case analyses (Yin 2013), aggregating data across the states to explore larger themes, noting differences in policy contexts. To validate and refine our findings, we held regular peer feedback sessions.

Limitations

Our research had two key limitations. First, our sample comprised predominantly individuals who identified as White. Although we recognized that this sample could influence the racialized responses, it was representative of who has decision-making power in state-level choice systems in our sites. Second, although our initial design focused on social constructions, our identification of the link between social constructions and policy design emerged during analysis, and we were thus unable to follow up on these themes in our interviews. We thus caution that those results are exploratory, showing how social constructions have implications for equitable policy enactment and identifying areas for future research.

Results

Racialized Social Constructions of Target Populations (Research Question 1)

We applied Schneider and Ingram's (1993) categories of target populations, which are viewed as either "weak" or "strong" and either "positive" or "negative." We found that policy actors generally viewed White families as strong and racially minoritized families as weak. However, for both groups, we found variation in whether these constructions were positive or negative and differences between students and parents (see fig. 1). We also found some variation by school-choice policy context (e.g., charter schools or school vouchers).

White parents.—Policy actors usually viewed White parents as strong and positive—as "advantaged" (Schneider and Ingram 1993) and deserving of the ability to choose schools because it was assumed they would make the best choices for their children and drive innovation in schools. Participants noted that White communities help their children academically and professionally by
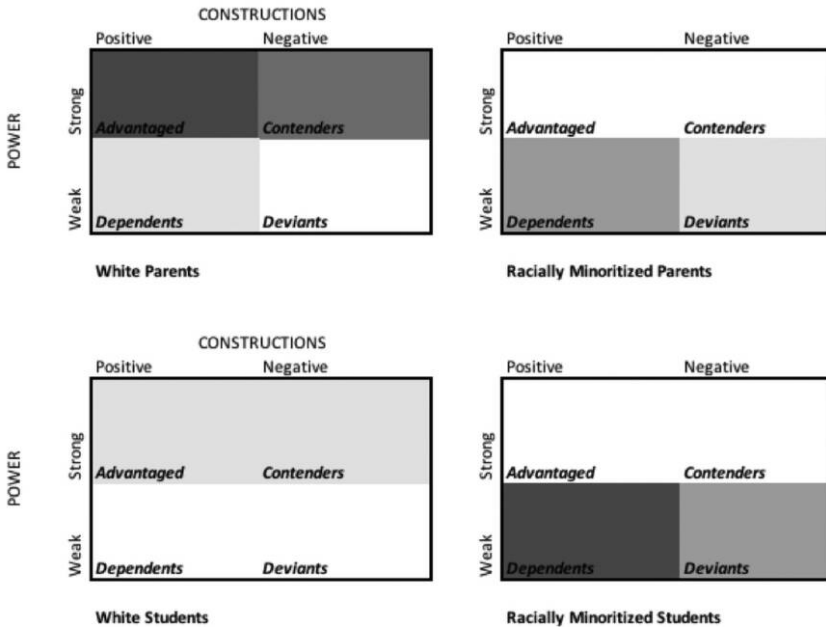
FIG. 1.—Overall social constructions. The shading indicates the prevalence of that type of construction in the interview data across sites. The darker the shade, the greater the strength of evidence.

putting "more money into the schools," according to a staff member in Florida's State Department of Education, or, according to a Florida policy advocate, by using their connections and "making a phone call" to secure their child a prominent internship. In Colorado, a state board member described White parents as using the choice system to access alternative curricula: "There are parents who want Montessori, core knowledge, on and on and on, different programs for their kids." A policy advocate in Colorado, referring to White families, similarly noted that the charter movement was "driven by . . . parents wanting a different kind of school." In the context of discussions about charter-school policy, White parents were always viewed as strong and mostly as positive.

One of the few instances in which White parents were constructed as dependent (weak and positive) involved vouchers in Florida.[3] Although policy actors did not describe White families explicitly, they constructed "middle-class families" as victims of a choice policy that was "originally intended for very low-income students," according to a union representative, and even punitive for "middle-class families [whose] incomes grew" over time, according to a policy

advocate, which made them ineligible for the program. A recent revision of the state's voucher program had opened it up "for almost anybody." Because the initial policy targeted low-income students only, and mostly racially minoritized students, "almost anybody" likely refers to middle-class and White families. Policy actors in Florida framed White middle-class families seeking to use vouchers as dependents, positioning them as a group that deserved education policy interventions on their behalf. This lens could be a form of deception or strategic reframing intended to advance policies for already powerful groups (Schneider and Ingram 2018).

In other cases, White parents were viewed as "contenders." One policy advocate in Louisiana, who worked for a youth advocacy organization, noted that White parents "always tend to be right there, able to take advantage of the highest-performing schools." White parents were seen as increasing segregation by selecting schools that were "less ethnically diverse," according to a union representative in Louisiana. They participated in White flight, as a teachers' union representative in Oregon noted: "Upper-middle-class White parents pull their kids out of more diverse schools to put them in charter prep schools"; or they use open enrollment to prevent "their little darlings [from] going to school with … Black and brown kids." This framing of White parents as negative and strong was especially prevalent in the context of open enrollment policies in Michigan and Oregon but not in Colorado, where White parents were advantaged (positive and strong). In most open-enrollment contexts, districts must approve transfers, or they have policies restricting who can transfer in. This put White families, who were often already enrolled in the districts with the most resources, at an advantage. These examples show how some policy actors viewed White parents' use of resources to secure opportunities for their children as negative because they viewed these parents as too powerful, as manipulative, and as potentially taking opportunities away from racially minoritized parents by focusing on their own children at the expense of the overall education system.

Even when policy actors described White parents critically, they assumed that White parents were simply doing the best for their children, with "unintended consequences" for racially minoritized groups or for society as a whole. In Oregon, a staff member working at a state research and advocacy nonprofit organization noted: "Whenever there's different opportunities, … people with higher socioeconomic status tend to take advantage of it disproportionately, just because they're more likely to be aware of it." When White, affluent families were "taking advantage" of opportunities, their actions were seen not as being intentionally exclusive but simply as resulting from their being more aware of opportunities. Policy actors describe the inequities that emerged as simply the result of many individual actions—unintended consequences of the policy and of White parents' individually rational behavior. Many policy actors, including both those who supported and those who opposed school choice policy,

interpreted unequal outcomes or segregation as a seemingly natural outcome of the marketplace rather than as a structural feature of the choice system.

White children.—White students were viewed as powerful and as having greater access to the most selective schools; yet the framing was not necessarily positive or negative, as the agency was ascribed to their parents. White children were not even mentioned in interviews in two states—Florida and Michigan. Policy actors noted that because of their parents' efforts, White students ended up in "good schools," which were "less ethnically diverse," according to a Louisiana teachers' union representative, and not always reflective of the city demographics as a whole, as a staff member at a youth advocacy organization in Louisiana noted. In contrast to racially minoritized students, who were often viewed as dependents, White students were never viewed as dependents.

In Oregon, policy actors described White students as the majority and as overrepresented in charter schools, but they did not ascribe any agency to that overrepresentation. They simply noted that, according to statistics, a large proportion of White students used the choice system. As a state school board representative in Oregon noted: "Until a curriculum or a program or something is specifically targeted to students of color or communities of color or under-represented students, you look at the population of charter schools in Oregon—it's a lot of White kids." Policy actors viewed White children as the status quo in a system that was geared to serving them and referred to them with detached affect. This behavior is consistent with research on whiteness and color-evasion, where "White" as a race is erased or seen as neutral or the status quo, as Whites avoid identifying with a race (Leonardo 2002).

Racially minoritized parents.—In contrast to White parents, racially minoritized parents were viewed by policy actors as weak—sometimes positively, as dependents, and sometimes negatively, as deviants. As dependents, policy actors argued, racially minoritized parents needed school-choice policies to "empower" them. A Louisiana State Department staff member said that school vouchers were "all centered around providing low-income families more options." She noted that "many low-income families don't have the money to afford a private school education. . . . If things are not working out at their traditional public school . . . many low-income parents don't have any other option. And so this was really a program to give them more options to consider." In Michigan, too, most respondents constructed racially minoritized and low-income parents as weak—because their communities had been historically neglected, or, from a deficit-based view, because they did not have the "will" or "wherewithal" to make choices. One teachers' union representative noted that racially minoritized parents "want to do as much as we're [wealthier parents] able to do for our kids; [they] just don't have the experience or the resources to do it." In Colorado, one policy advocate, whose organization promotes choice and taxpayer account-ability, similarly stated that racially minoritized parents are "left behind" by the

current system and that charters are designed to help "the people" who have been left behind.

In the context of charter-school and voucher policy, racially minoritized parents were always weak but were positively viewed (as dependents) in Florida, Oregon, and Colorado and with mixed views in Louisiana and Michigan. Policy actors, surprisingly, did not discuss racially minoritized parents as a target of open enrollment policies.

In describing racially minoritized parents as dependents, a few participants suggested that parents' power was limited because of structural racism and class inequality. In Florida, racially minoritized parents were constructed as agents who, because of wealth gaps and differences in social capital, were unable to access opportunities that would benefit their children. Structurally, low-income racially minoritized parents were constructed as powerless, so stakeholders "get power to low-income people in public education [by giving] them control of the money," through school vouchers, for example, particularly for those who "historically haven't had power." This perspective positioned racially minoritized parents as politically weak but within a historical context of structural oppression, as opposed to deficit-based constructions that depict racially minoritized parents as uninvolved or incapable of pursuing the best opportunities for their children.

However, racially minoritized parents were also at times constructed as barriers to their children's success. One participant exemplified blatantly deficit views of racially minoritized parents, but this perspective was present in subtler ways across sites. A Louisiana state representative explained why racially minoritized parents were unable to invest in early childhood education, saying that when "parents are struggling because they may be holding down two or three jobs, they just don't have an opportunity to get the youngster the needed information." Although the representative's depiction of low-income families seems at first color-evasive and sympathetic, he positioned parents' employment and socioeconomic status as a detriment to their children's academic success. He later described how Black families were also blocking reforms that would serve them: "When they present a voucher program, the Blacks, for some reason, they don't like it. They'll . . . try to defeat it. I don't understand that . . . Some of us that are not African American are trying to do the right thing to help 'em. And that just befuddles me all the time."

Here, Black families are simultaneously dependents who require "help" and deviants who resist help from White school-choice advocates. The representative described this contradiction, acknowledging that "sometimes the results [of school-choice policy] are not what you would like to think that they are" but noting that the decision is the parents': "They make the choice of where they want to go. So I can't blame the system and I don't really want to blame the parent, but the parent probably needs to do a little bit better job of doing research to recognize the fact that some of their decisions . . . may not be in the

best interest of their youngster." In this way, racially minoritized parents, particularly Black parents, were constructed as weak, with both positive and negative associations.

In typical formulations of choice policy, parents are the key agents to facilitate their children's success; but racially minoritized parents are simultaneously constructed as barriers to policy or blamed for making poor decisions about their children's schooling. Furthermore, some respondents assumed that the child needed to be taken out of their communities or "environment," as the Louisiana state representative noted. In Michigan, too, some respondents described an abstract negative community "culture," or a "culture of failure," that implicated racially minoritized families and is reminiscent of "culture of poverty" arguments. A Michigan state legislator said that the students need to be "removed from a lot of that culture" to succeed. Although these comments refer primarily to students, constructions of parents are inherently tied up with constructions of students as dependents, who, in this formulation, need to be "saved" from their deviant parents. One critic of choice policies in Louisiana, the youth policy advocate, articulated this connection between the "dependent" and "deviant" conceptions:

> It's just Black families we're not seeing as a solution, we're not seeing as who to listen to—we're seeing as part of the problem and who are now seen as that they should be grateful. And if they're not, they just don't understand. . . . I think the whole charter system is based on the idea that Black children and their families need saving and were harmed by public school boards . . . the schools and teachers view parents as also being part of the problem, not part of the solution. Not partners in this but impediments or, at the very least, unnecessary.

Racially minoritized students.—Racially minoritized students were largely viewed as dependents—always as weak and usually positively. But, like their parents, they were also sometimes viewed negatively, as deviants. We found these mixed views regardless of choice policies. We also found that there was a widespread lack of reference to race directly when speaking about students. Instead, policy actors primarily used color-evasive language to talk indirectly about racially minoritized students, often using geography as a code for race. Almost all policy actors referred to the purpose of choice policy, especially charter-school policy, as ensuring that "it shouldn't matter where in the city you live," as a Louisiana policy advocate whose organization supports expansion of school choice policy said. A Louisiana State Department staff member noted that choice policy would "ensure a high-quality education option for every student regardless of where they live," and a policy advocate in Florida said choice would free those who were "entrapped by their zip codes." Still others described the targets of choice policy as "marginalized" (Louisiana charter association), "underserved"

(Florida policy advocate working for an organization supporting school-choice policy), or "historically disadvantaged in some way" (Louisiana State Department representative).

In all these cases, the coded language used to refer to racially minoritized students emphasized their status as dependents, weak, at an academic deficit but deserving of intervention via choice policies. Although other researchers have examined the role racial demographics play in the social construction of the target population (Soss et al. 2008), and our work, too, suggests that policy makers make assumptions and use social classifications based on race, we found they were rarely explicit about these classifications. Instead, they used color-evasive language to sidestep race, even as they constructed racially minoritized groups in patterned ways.

When participants did mention racially minoritized students directly, which was rare, they constructed racially minoritized students as low-income and low-performing. Typically, participants simply cited statistics noting that racially minoritized students were simply concentrated in particular types of schools. When respondents adopted deficit views of the students and their families, they still viewed the children positively but blamed their "neighborhoods" or communities, often evoking arguments that rely heavily on notions of a "culture of poverty" from which students need to be rescued.

Two respondents did note that racially minoritized students were often viewed as deviants by other policy actors, namely district leaders and White families, who sought to prevent the enrollment of racially minoritized students in some districts. One union representative in Michigan noted, "Without naming communities, . . . one obstacle is clearly race. You know, if that means kids are coming, maybe I'm not . . . I not so much want those kids here, right? . . . There's some people in the community would say that . . . would probably lobby against being an open district. But the sole motivation is we need the money, and they understand they do need the money." This participant did not appear to want to identify White communities specifically. Instead, they observed that "some" communities viewed racially minoritized students as unwanted outsiders, or enrolled them only because of financial incentives rather than to drive racial equity.

Participants working in advocacy organizations opposed to choice policy were more likely to speak explicitly about race; they believed that the charter system in particular was not serving the most marginalized groups well. As one policy advocate in Louisiana, who worked for an organization focused on equitable school discipline practices, noted, Black children were socially constructed as deviant and even "nonhuman" by choice supporters: "I don't think they see these children, a lot of them that they operate schools for, as human." She added, "From a policy maker's standpoint, they just kind of be like, 'Well, if all these Black children are getting suspended, there must be behavior problems in the Black community.'" In these contested political debates about school choice, the

largely color-evasive language from most policy makers and policy actors, with only critics speaking explicitly about race, raises questions about the depth and substance of these discussions and about whether policy actors are simply speaking past each other or are part of very different policy conversations.

Summary.—These social constructions based on race relate to positions of power in society, and they reflect assumptions and stereotypes about the target populations. However, it is unclear how these constructions shape policy enactment or redesign of policy. If White parents are viewed as powerful, which is generally the case in our study—except in the context of Florida voucher policy, where it was politically useful to view them as weak—does it matter whether they are positively or negatively constructed? Policy actors sometimes described White families as opportunity hoarders, but does that conception lead to policies that increase access to choice for racially minoritized families? Policy actors that view White families as contenders could simply be signaling their awareness that White families may be positioned to take greater advantage of choice policy but that ultimately social construction may have no impact on policy enactment. This, too, could serve as a form of deception intended to advance particular policies without political repercussions (Schneider and Ingram 2018). We attempt to answer some of these questions in the next section by examining how constructions were associated with policy levers and policy changes in our sites.

Social Constructions and Policy Enactment, Equity,
and Access (Research Question 2)

We explored whether differences in social constructions of the target population in school choice were associated with variation in school-choice policy levers in each context. In general, we found little variation in policy components at the state level, particularly for the three policy levers we identified that could potentially increase equity and access in the system (Bulkley et al. 2020; see table A1). However, one area in which we did find some notable patterns is enrollment policies.

One of the few differences we observed between sites was variation in how policy actors viewed White families. As noted earlier, in all but one case, they were viewed as strong; but sometimes they were viewed positively, as advantaged, and in other cases negatively, as contenders (albeit well-intentioned ones). We examined whether these differences in perceptions appeared to shape policy development and enactment. In other words, if White families are viewed positively, whether as advantaged or dependent, there may be policies that expand school choice but few policies that ensure equity in choice systems (e.g., few policies ensuring greater access to information or transportation, or fewer policies leveling the playing field in enrollment processes). When White parents or

families are viewed negatively, particularly as "opportunity hoarders," there might be greater policy effort to curtail their power by expanding opportunities for racially minoritized groups. We found some evidence of this. We observed lotteries and stricter requirements as a policy response to "contender" construction in voucher policies in Louisiana and open enrollment policies in Michigan and Oregon, with the opposite in cases of "advantaged" construction and "dependent" construction (such as in Florida's voucher program).

In the two states with private school voucher programs (Louisiana and Florida), we saw differences in how White families were perceived. In Louisiana, White parents were viewed as contenders, whereas in Florida, White parents were viewed as dependents. In both states, vouchers were means-tested in terms of enrollment—families had to meet some criteria to be eligible. In Florida, however, these criteria had recently expanded to allow "almost anybody" to participate, including many White middle-class families who had previously been ineligible for the program. In Florida, where White families were seen as dependent and in need of more school options, opening up choice policies to this group was a logical next step in the policy redesign.

In contrast, in Louisiana, where White families were viewed negatively, not only were requirements determining who was eligible for a school voucher more stringent, but in private schools that had more voucher applicants than seats, a lottery was also required. No lotteries were required in Florida, which meant that schools could control their admissions processes. The lottery requirement in Louisiana could be viewed as a mechanism for restricting the power of White, middle-class families in securing access to private schools of their choosing, perhaps toward a fairer system of enrollment in voucher programs and as an attempt to maintain equal access to schools that are particularly desirable.

Aside from holding lotteries, little effort was made in Louisiana to curtail the power of White parents, despite their negative social construction, or to expand access to choice for racially minoritized groups by, for example, providing free transportation. This could have been the case because, as one state representative's earlier comments indicated, conceptions of racially minoritized parents were mixed—as both needing access to choice and opposing reform—which could lead to inaction. In contrast, in Florida, where everyone clearly and neatly fits into the "dependent" category, with no perceived power differentials, more universal policies existed to help all families access choice (e.g., through required notification of information on choice options), but no effort was made to ensure fair enrollment in the system by requiring lotteries. This dynamic could enable informal processes to play out in ways that might advantage White, middle-class, or higher-performing students and families, if schools select such students.

We found similar patterns in the context of open enrollment policies. Three of our sites—Colorado, Michigan, and Oregon—had open-enrollment policies: students could opt out of their local school or school district to attend a public

school in a nearby area. In two of the three states, White parents were discussed as being powerful and negative, working to block racially minoritized students from enrolling in their districts. In Colorado, however, policy actors viewed White parents positively. In Michigan and Oregon, where White parents were negatively constructed, lotteries were required, perhaps to increase access for racially minoritized families. Of course, it is important to note that these findings simply show the co-occurrence of social constructions and policy enactments, and we cannot determine the causal direction. It could be that racialized constructions drove policy changes, or that policy modifications changed racialized constructions. Indeed, as we note in our framework, these are bidirectional relationships in that policies are both shaped by social constructions and can create or shift existing social constructions of target populations.

Conclusion

In our work, we sought to examine the racialized social constructions of target populations in school-choice policy in efforts to reveal how these constructions influence policy enactment. We explored one way in which race-based inequities in educational access are reproduced: through the perspectives and actions, or inactions, of policy actors. We found that the categories in which groups are constructed are perhaps more fluid than previously theorized. Although "strong" or "weak" was generally consistent for each group (White parents, White students, racially minoritized parents, racially minoritized students), with few exceptions, whether they were viewed positively or negatively varied, even within a particular state context. Although Schneider and Ingram described these categories as being somewhat fixed, at least in the short term or in a particular political moment, they acknowledged that they can change over time. Our evidence, however, suggests that they are even more fluid, with varying, sometimes conflicting and contradictory views of racially minoritized and White parents in the same period, within the same state context. These contradictory views can be leveraged strategically by policy actors, through dog-whistling, for example, to allow choice policies to purportedly serve those "deserving" of policy intervention while simultaneously limiting their access to benefit already privileged families. Racial classification models that build on Schneider and Ingram's work, to incorporate race more explicitly, have emphasized how implicit bias can result in policy designs and decisions that have racialized effects (Fording et al. 2011). Yet our work draws on critical perspectives that show how these frames, or scripts, can be intentional, to activate racial animus (Brown 2013; Haney López 2014).

Our work also highlights how seemingly contradictory views of families of color are, in fact, aligned when viewed from a frame of White supremacy. Although in previous research both children and mothers were typically viewed as

dependents, as positive but weak actors (Soss 1999), in our study, policy makers sometimes also viewed racially minoritized mothers, or parents, as deviant (weak and negative)—contradictory views that are racialized and predicated on deficit views of Black parents in particular. Our work relates to other research on racialized policy formation, which has shown how policy advocates have historically emphasized the "damaged Black psyche" to garner White sympathy, notions that also rely on racist stereotypes of Black people (Scott 1997). These seemingly contradictory stances—pity and contempt—are, in fact, linked, in that White liberalism that aims to help racially minoritized groups may be rooted in White supremacist ideas (Scott 1997). Indeed, in the US context, where individualism and "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" is so strongly valued, the poor, and in particular poor people of color, are both dependent and deviant, because they are not able to escape poverty or achieve social mobility on their own.[4]

Although White parents were sometimes viewed negatively as well, it was because they were agentic or strong, cared "too much" for their children, and were willing to hoard opportunities for them. Policy actors sometimes described White parents as seeking the best resources for their child only. This was often constructed positively: White parents are invested in the success of their children and simply "doing what is best for their child." In this way, individual actions that historically have led to inequitable outcomes became both depoliticized and unassailable. White families were engaging in "good" individual acts that had "bad," or unfortunate, social consequences. This perspective neglects how White parents might be seeking to preserve White privilege for their children, or be motivated by racial bias. This individual framing also ignores how White families have acted in collective ways to prevent racially minoritized families and students from enrolling in their schools—through open enrollment policies, for example, in our study, and historically by mobilizing against desegregation (Bell 2004; Margonis and Parker 1995). By conceptualizing White families as neutral or ambivalent actors, participants failed to interrogate a system that permitted and reinforced inequitable outcomes. Furthermore, in the context of Florida, where choice policies were seen as primarily benefiting low-income families of color, White families were constructed as "victims," similar to discourses around Whites as the victims of policies such as affirmative action, for example, the concept of "reverse racism" (Omi and Winant 2014).

White families, then, are an ambiguous policy target, even as they benefit from choice policies. Although some previous research found that middle-class families are viewed as "advantaged" (Camou 2005; Palley and Palley 2000), White middle-class families have not typically been viewed as "contenders," who are negatively constructed. Much of the existing research focuses on populations viewed as deviant or dependent. How policy influencers view policy targets who have more power is a comparatively underexplored area. We find that there is

fluidity and a lack of clarity in how White parents and children are socially constructed by policy actors, whereupon they sometimes fit into multiple categories of Schneider and Ingram's (1993) framework simultaneously.

Furthermore, we find that policy actors sometimes constructed parents and students from the same racial group differently. For example, actors could see racially minoritized parents as deviant and their children as dependents, even though the logic of choice policy requires that parents choose on behalf of their children. This perception raises questions about how policy actors perceive intrahousehold dynamics and parental involvement. We argue that, without a structural analysis of racism, policy actors can hold contradictory views of racially minoritized families. They blame racially minoritized parents and their communities for poor outcomes for their children but also regard parents as agents who will be empowered by school choice and choose educational options for their children. When policy actors adopted a culture-of-poverty-influenced argument, they conceived of parents not only as the agents of change but also as the reason choice was needed in those communities. These seemingly contradictory views can arise when policy makers rely on color-evasion, are not willing to identify racial disparities as being the result of structural inequity, and must therefore turn to "cultural" explanations for race-based disparities in society (Haney López 2014). These constructions reveal tensions within the framing of choice policy as "empowering" parents to act in the best interests of their children.

The conflicting constructions can be strategic, as the targets that policy actors view as deserving can, in theory, use choice policy to escape their negatively constructed social group, and those who are unable to can be cast as deviant and undeserving. These conflicting conceptions allow policy makers to promote individualistic solutions, such as school choice, for structural problems, putting the burden on individuals while expressing sympathy for marginalized communities. Our work builds on previous research by Schneider and Ingram (2018), which has shown how politically weak groups, such as racially minoritized families, are often promised policies that target their needs but receive few material benefits. Indeed, privatization is a way in which policy makers deceive and manipulate the public, exploiting a "sympathetic social construction of children, especially of lower income families," and, we would argue, racially minoritized families, but simultaneously reducing "the responsibility of government to provide for their education" (Schneider and Ingram 2018, 224). Indeed, research suggests that even elites who claim to be committed to Black lives often buy into neoliberal ideas of upward mobility and escaping poverty, and they often point to personal and moral failings of poor Black people rather than to structural issues (Spence 2015). Policy actors' desire to hold onto both of these ideas—that there is social inequality in the United States and that individualistic and market-oriented policies, such as choice, can ameliorate some of these inequalities—creates a paradox. Within this context, racially minoritized groups can be framed as weak

or strong, positive or negative, depending on the context, a fluidity that allows the status quo to be maintained.

Despite the salience of race throughout social constructions of the target population, race was rarely discussed explicitly. Instead, policy actors used color-evasive references (Annamma et al. 2017; Bonilla-Silva 2006). Color-evasion could be considered a form of deception that obfuscates the targets of policy for political reasons (Schneider and Ingram 2018). This idea is important for future work and theory examining the social construction of target groups and how racial stereotypes and assumptions shape those constructions, as scholars must attend to and capture the ways in which race emerges in ways that are not explicit. Indeed, our work points to the need to bring traditional public policy research in conversation with critical perspectives, such as critical race theory, to illuminate the ways in which race shapes social constructions of target populations. Some of our findings on negative, or "deviant," racialized social constructions are particular to Black children and parents, suggesting a need to attend to specific ways in which antiblackness shapes social constructions and education policy discourses (Dumas and ross 2016; ross 2020; Sondel et al. 2019).

Our work moves beyond politics and "rational" ideas of policy making to illuminate how policy is shaped by people's understandings, cognition, and interpretations. In particular, we highlight how social constructions are racialized, and we begin to identify implications for policy enactment and redesign. Our research also facilitates understanding of the inequitable power dynamics in educational policy and of how school choice can reproduce inequities, by demonstrating empirically how this occurs partly through social constructions. Although we found little variation across the board in state-level choice policy, some equity-oriented policies, such as the requirement to hold lotteries, did emerge when policy actors perceived that White parents had outsized power. In other areas, however, we found few suggestive links between the social construction of the target population and charter-school policy enactment. The dearth of links may have arisen because although policy makers want to appear to be aligned with dependents—which, in our case, were most often racially minoritized families—policies in this realm can often be symbolic or lack sufficient resources and be relegated to lower levels of government or to the private sector (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 338). Without more policy mechanisms to enhance access to schools through transportation and information, these commitments may be more symbolic than actual, with rhetoric around expanding choices being plentiful but with few policies in place to increase access for racially minoritized families.

Our work also identifies areas for future research. First, our study focused on some "nonsystem" actors, such as advocacy groups, but future research might incorporate a broader set of actors, including elite philanthropy and powerful lobbying groups, such as the American Legislative Exchange Council, as well as

business or corporate leaders, to explore how they construct target populations and how those conceptions are taken up in policy advocacy. Second, future analysis might explore how an actor's role (e.g., bureaucrat or advocate) and other background characteristics (e.g., membership in a marginalized group) or experiences (e.g., educator) might shape individuals' perceptions of the target population and the implications for policy. Finally, our work was conducted in a particular political and policy moment. During the Trump administration, there had been a rise in explicitly racist rhetoric and promotion of White supremacy (Williamson and Gelfand 2019). At the same time, and particularly in the summer of 2020, with the movements against racial injustice, we witnessed a rise in awareness of Black Lives Matter, antiracism, and antiblackness among a broader population (Cohn and Quealy 2020; Kaplan 2020). Future research might attend to the ways in which these dueling trends in the national policy environment shape federal-, state-, and local-level policy discourses, particularly in terms of how target populations are constructed. Finally, our work illuminates contradictory views of the target population among policy actors, driven by the intersection of neoliberal policies and structural racism. For example, we find that the ostensible beneficiaries of school-choice policy—racially minoritized parents who would be "empowered" by choice as individuals—can be negatively constructed as a group, in ways that cast them as weak and deviant. Future work could explore social constructions in other countries with school choice—where there may be less of a cultural focus on individualism, and different histories of racism—to see if these contradictions remain, or how different tensions might arise.

School-choice policy has often attempted to address educational inequity by shifting responsibility to local governments, in the case of open enrollment, or to the private sector, in the case of nonprofit and for-profit charter schools and private schools. Because dependents are, by definition, weak in political power, there may be less political will or momentum at the state level to address key issues, including transportation and information, that affect their access to choice. Instead, states leave these decisions to local districts (Bulkley et al. 2020). Our work reinforces studies that have found that devolution is common for target populations viewed as dependents, which could increase inequity (Schneider and Ingram 1993). In addition, our work suggests that when racially minoritized groups are subsumed in a color-evasive category of "all families," there may be little political will to design, or redesign, policies to increase equity or expand access in school choice.

Notes

1. The concept of social constructions is rooted in the social constructionism epistemology: the idea that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed, not objective and measurable outside of the mind (Crotty 1998).

2. The open enrollment policy in Oregon has since ended, as of the 2018–19 school year.

3. We include tables depicting differences in social construction by school-choice policy in the appendix (available online).

4. We thank Erica Turner for this interpretation.

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