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Publisher: Routledge

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International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tqse20>

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Published online: 13 May 2014.

To cite this article: Nolan L. Cabrera (2014) “But I’m oppressed too”: white male college students framing racial emotions as facts and recreating racism, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27:6, 768-784, DOI: [10.1080/09518398.2014.901574](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.901574)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.901574>

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“But I’m oppressed too”: white male college students framing racial emotions as facts and recreating racism

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(Received 17 December 2012; accepted 21 November 2013)

Most analyses of racism focus on what people think about issues of race and how this relates to racial stratification. This research applies Feagin’s *white racial frame* to analyze how White male college students at two universities *feel* about racism. Students at the academically non-selective and less diverse university tended to be apathetic while those attending the academically selective and more racially diverse campus tended to be angry. This study highlights the interconnectedness of affective and cognitive responses to race: two areas integral to both the maintenance and dismantling of systemic racism. It also highlights how men frequently frame emotions as facts, which can also support racial stratification.

Keywords: whiteness; white racial frame; higher education; racism; racial emotions; anger; apathy

A recent, provocative headline on CNN.com read, “Are whites racially oppressed?” (Blake, 2011, March 4). Blake’s reporting highlighted the upsurge, after the election of President Obama, of White people believing they are racially victimized. The Former Majority Association for Equality offered \$500 scholarships specifically to White males based upon the belief that, “[White men] have found the scholarship application process difficult because they do not fit into certain categories or any ethnic group” (Former Majority Association for Equality, 2011). The myth of reverse discrimination has become so pervasive, that White people now view anti-White bias as a bigger social problem than anti-Black bias (Norton & Sommers, 2011). The insistent denial that racism is a pertinent social issue by White people has been relatively consistent throughout US history as opposed to a recent development (Feagin, 2010). However, these current manifestations of White racial victimization are more pronounced and somewhat ironic given that the election of President Obama was supposed to have ushered in an era of “post-racialism.”¹

The racial dynamics of the larger society frequently play out within the college environment (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Given the persistent denial by White people that racism is systemic and widespread (Feagin, 2010; Norton & Sommers, 2011), it is not surprising that White college students and students of color experience the campus racial climate differently (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Students of color tend to encounter a great deal of racial hostility which is further exacerbated because White students frequently dismiss the idea that race is even an issue (Harper &

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Hurtado, 2007). White denial means that claims of racism (assuming they are lodged by students of color) are framed as: (a) an isolated incident, (b) a non-racial issue, or (c) minority students being overly sensitive.

Analyses of White denial frequently take a cognitively based approach within social science research. Scholars of Whiteness and racism tend to focus on what White people *think* about issues of race/racism and its relationship to the persistence of racial inequality (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994). Very little exists in terms of what White people *feel* about racism. The current analysis is a critical examination of White male college students and their affective responses to issues of race with particular attention paid to how emotions relate to the White racial frame (Feagin, 2010).

Literature review

Whiteness and higher education scholarship

Racial analyses in higher education tend to be framed in one of two ways. There is a body of scholarship demonstrating the positive social and cognitive impacts diverse learning environments have for all students (e.g. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Jayakumar, 2008; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). In addition, there is a body of scholarship that highlights the marginalization of students of color on college campuses (e.g. Aguirre & Messineo, 1997; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Pérez Huber, 2009; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). These important veins of multicultural higher education miss one key component: Whiteness. Whiteness represents the “other side” of the diversity debate because, if students of color are experiencing hostile campus racial climates (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005), many of their White peers are creating this marginalization. If students of color are the target of microaggressions (Yosso et al., 2009), there are White students perpetuating these racially charged actions, slights, and insults.

The literature on Whiteness in higher education tends to lack a *critical* component (i.e. analyzing Whiteness in relation to racial oppression), instead focusing on how individual students “work through their Whiteness,” develop their racial selves, and sometimes become racial justice allies (e.g. Cabrera, 2012; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009; Reason & Evans, 2007; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). There are, however, a few critical interrogations of Whiteness formation in higher education. Trepagnier (2006) demonstrated how well-intentioned, self-defined “not racist” college students continued to unconsciously perpetuate racist practices because they insufficiently took account of their racial biases and privileges. Chesler, Peet, and Sevig (2003) wanted to understand White college students’ racial cognizance development. The participants in their study tended to deny the historical and contemporary legacies of systemic racism, and within this context, they tended to frame White students as victims of multiculturalism. Cabrera (2011) found that White male undergraduates had significantly elevated, hierarchy-enhancing racial ideologies relative to their non-White and female peers, and they were the most immune to changing their racial ideologies during the first year of college.

Picca and Feagin (2007) analyzed racial diaries of White students, and found an unsettling trend. The behaviors of White college students change dramatically when students of color are present. During these encounters, the students tended to be politically correct racially in what Picca and Feagin (2007) call front stage performance. In predominantly White environments (i.e. backstage performance), many

White college students told racial jokes and openly used racial epithets, all in the context of knowing that these racist practices generally went unchallenged.

Whiteness and racism in higher education are largely analyzed in terms of what students experience or think about issues of race. There is little regarding how students feel about race and racism which is largely consistent with contemporary racial theory (i.e. racial theory also tends to focus on cognition). This is an important, missing component of critical analyses of Whiteness because racial stratification is maintained through a combination of both what White people think *and* feel about race (Feagin, 2010).

Racial theory and cognitive framing

A great deal of racial theory owes its intellectual lineage to neo-Marxism; in particular the concepts of hegemony and ideology. For example, Omi and Winant (1994) advanced the theory of racial formation which, in large part, applied Gramsci hegemony to the study of systemic racism. In their argument, the US was originally a totalitarian regime of White supremacy that was challenged in the 1960s. Subsequently, White supremacy remained intact, but its nature changed to a more malleable form of social stratification: hegemony. Within hegemonic structuring, domination is created and maintained through a combination of coercion (force) and consent (Gramsci, 1971). Consent is created as the ruling class “must elaborate and maintain a popular system of ideas and practices – through education, the media, religion, folk wisdom etc. – which [Antonio Gramsci] called ‘common sense’” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 67). This common sense masks the realities of racial domination and makes social stratification appear to be naturally occurring as opposed to structured.

Common sense, according to Omi and Winant (1994), leads to the formation of an, “ideology (in the broadest sense of the term), that a society gives its consent to the way in which it is ruled” (p. 67). Within their argument, a key to dismantling this oppressive social structure is the, “refusal of the ‘common sense’ understandings which the hegemonic order imposes” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 69). Essentially, Omi and Winant call for changing the ways the masses think about issues of racism. In the Gramscian sense, this means exchanging common sense for good sense: seeing inequality as structured instead of happenstance.

While Omi and Winant’s theorizing about racism has been integral in making the leap from totalitarian to hegemonic White supremacy, it is still based upon a cognitive analysis of racism. Common sense and ideology are framed as means of masking the true reality of contemporary racism that must be overcome through the development of a critical consciousness (i.e. it is a focus on dominant and subversive ways of thinking about race/racism). This is similar to how contemporary racial theorists, in more depth than Omi and Winant, analyze the dominant racial ideology and its relationship to maintaining racial stratification.

Bonilla-Silva (2006) argued that the dominant, contemporary racial ideology is one of *color-blind racism*. He used the concept of ideology as more than a synonym for being either politically conservative or liberal. Instead, Bonilla-Silva (2006) offered:

The central component of any dominant racial ideology is its frames or *set paths for interpreting information*. These set paths operate as cul-de-sacs because after people

filter issues through them, they explain racial phenomena following a predictable route. Although by definition, dominant frames must *misrepresent* the world (hide the fact of dominance) ... (p. 26, emphasis original)

While Bonilla-Silva developed the meaning, use, and impact of racial ideology in relation to racial stratification, he still applied it in a cognitively based frame. He argued that ideology sets a limiting frame for information interpretation but overlooked the role that emotions play in concurrently “misrepresenting the world.”

Leonardo (2005) took a theoretical approach to this subject by adapting Althusser’s four moments in the theory of ideology to the study of race. He pushed beyond the idea that ideology merely misrepresents the world as he argued, “we also understand that ideology is not limited to the realm of ideas, but also has material underpinnings” (Leonardo, 2005, p. 401). While Leonardo’s argument was still a cognitively based frame of racial ideology with the focus on ideas/thoughts/heuristics, he did give some credence to emotions supporting racial stratification. Specifically, he argued that one feature that helps create and maintain a dominant, oppressive racial ideology is fear of racial minorities.

Subsequently, Leonardo returned to a cognitively based frame as he maintained that the unconscious components of Althusser’s theory were the most applicable to the study of racism. Specifically, he argued, “Ideology is not an aberration to consciousness, which provides ideology’s sense of autonomy, but rather an integral part of it, embedded and unrecognized in the unconscious” (Leonardo, 2005, p. 401). Within this persistent focus on what White people think about racism, it is not surprising that Mills (1997) refers to Whiteness as an *epistemology of ignorance*. The missing component of this equation is what White people *feel* about race/racism and its relationship to racial stratification.

Emotions and racial analysis: the missing link

Most contemporary racial bias and racism tend to be unconscious in nature (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Sullivan, 2006); however, simply providing “racial facts” is insufficient to develop racial cognizance (Reason & Evans, 2007). As Leonardo (2005) argues, “Countering with scientific evidence an ideological mindset that criminalizes people of color becomes an exercise in futility because it does not even touch the crux of the problem, one based upon fear and loathing” (p. 402). In Schnick’s (2000) analysis of Canadian students taking a compulsory multicultural class, she described White students feeling threatened as the class disrupted their historical narratives regarding the “heroism” of White settlers. According to Schnick, this affective response allowed them to be dismissive of the racial information conveyed, which concurrently downplayed the significance of racism and allowed them to portray themselves as non-prejudiced individuals. Subsequently, the students in her class portrayed themselves as thoughtful, rational people, and those who disagreed with them as irrational and emotional (Schnick, 2000).

Some psychologists are linking views on race with the desire to maintain a positive view of self. For example, Unzueta and Lowery (2008) demonstrated that White Americans are more likely to define racism as minority disadvantage instead of White privilege because this allows them to maintain a non-racist sense of self. Essentially, White people are not implicated if the issue is “minority disadvantage,” but they are if racism is framed as “White privilege.” This is an interesting way of

framing the issue because racism and White privilege are inextricably linked. The end result of systemic racism is a combination of both racial minority marginalization and the privileges of Whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Psychologically, separating racism and White privilege allows White people to keep a positive sense of self by framing race as *their* problem (i.e. racial minorities’).

With respect to White men in particular, framing affirmative action as a quota system serves the same function: ego maintenance. White men refer to affirmative action as a quota, it functions to insulate them from negative appraisals of their abilities. If they are denied a job, it is because a quota system gave it to an “undeserving” racial minority. If they earn a job, it is interpreted to mean they were the best candidate (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008). The relationship between White women and affirmative action is more nuanced because, unlike their White male counterparts, they can be beneficiaries of the program. Unzueta, Gutiérrez, and Ghavami (2010) argued that for White women who think of themselves as beneficiaries of affirmative action, a belief that it is a quota system fosters a more negative self-image. If, however, White women do not view themselves as beneficiaries of affirmative action, framing it as a quota serves the same ego-maintenance function as it does for White men (Unzueta, Gutiérrez, & Ghavami, 2010). These psychologically based studies are beginning to address the interplay between White people’s desire to feel good about themselves and how this affective orientation frames their views on racism.

Despite this growing literature in psychology, there are currently few analyses of how White people feel about issues of racism. Most of the literature in racial theory tends to rely on a cognitive framing of race/racism (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2005). The current research begins to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on what White male college students feel about race. This is an important development because people are not fully rational beings, and their emotions frequently drive their actions (Sullivan, 2006). Therefore, a combination of how White people think *and* feel about issues of race maintains systemic racism (Feagin, 2010), but little is known about this affective component of racial stratification.

Theoretical framework

To theoretically frame this study, I rely upon Feagin’s *The White Racial Frame* (2010). Feagin argues that systemic White supremacy remains intact for two reasons. First, the advantages and privileges associated with Whiteness have been entrenched by, “centuries of slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary racial discrimination that have set firmly in place and maintained this country’s important geographical contours” (Feagin, 2010, p. 2). Second, White denial frames racism as a non-issue. This denial is the basis for the white racial frame² that Feagin (2010) argues, “is an overarching worldview, one that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations” (p. 3). Specifically, Feagin’s (2010) white racial frame comprises the following five dimensions:

- (1) racial stereotypes (a beliefs aspect);
- (2) racial narratives and interpretations (integrating cognitive aspects);
- (3) racial images (a visual aspect) and language accents (an auditory aspect);
- (4) racialized emotions (a “feelings” aspect); and
- (5) inclinations to discriminatory action (p. 10).

A key development of Feagin's over, for example, racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994) or colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) is that the white racial frame accounts for both what White people think *and* feel about issues of race. It accounts for racial ideologies, racial experiences, and racial emotions as interwoven components of this world view (Feagin, 2010).

The current analysis is not a thorough discussion of the research participants' white racial frame. Rather, it is an examination of the role affective reactions to the issue of race play in creating the white racial frame because racial emotions are both under-studied and under-theorized in contemporary racial analyses. It should not, however, be construed that cognition and affect exist as separate domains.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project that analyzed White male racial ideologies in higher education. Using a modification of Bonilla-Silva's (2006) Detroit Area Study interview protocol, I sought to identify White male college students' explanations for racial inequality as well as race in their lived experiences. I was initially interested in what the participants *thought* about race, and therefore, an analysis of racial ideology formation seemed appropriate. I identified two large, public research universities as institutional sites (Western University, WU; Southwest University, SWU) that differed in three key ways. First, SWU had a student population that was 65 percent White while WU was approximately 35 percent White (although historically it has been a predominantly White institution). In addition, SWU practiced affirmative action while WU did not. Finally, WU admitted approximately 20 percent of applicants annually while SWU admitted approximately 80 percent of applicants and most students who were rejected simply did not meet the admissions requirements. I hypothesized that each of these three institutional features would create a different manifestation of racial ideology formation as cross-racial contact (Pettigrew, 1998) and perceived threats to in-group interests (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007) would likely differ between WU and SWU. Specifically, I thought that the more White dominance was challenged either culturally (via proportion of minority students) or academically (via competitive admissions or affirmative action), the more participants would subscribe to hierarchy-enhancing ideologies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999); that is, those that naturalize the persistence of inequality.

The interviews lasted, on average 45 minutes, and involved participants also completing a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire tended to focus on what participants thought about race, how often they thought about it, and the quality/quantity of cross-racial interactions. While the questionnaire results are not part of this analysis, I offer this brief overview because they are discussed in the findings section as I asked participants to further explain some of their responses.

As racial ideology and political ideology are strongly correlated (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), I wanted to recruit a sample of students from a range of political orientations. To accomplish this, I used the online directories at WU and SWU, identifying student groups with implicit or explicit political orientations and with the groups' permission recruited during their weekly meetings. The groups solicited included, but were not limited to, Objectivists, Campus Republicans, College Democrats, and Students for a Democratic Society. This strategy yielded 43 total interviews, which I divided into two groups: those working through Whiteness (Cabrera, 2012) and those normalizing Whiteness (Cabrera, 2011). Those working through

Whiteness tended to have the following four traits: (1) systemic (as opposed to individualized) understandings of racism; (2) auto-criticism regarding racial bias; (3) support for race-conscious policies; and 4) actions that supported racial justice. Those normalizing Whiteness tended to hold the opposite views: (1) race was seen as minimally important in contemporary society; (2) they held individualized definitions of racism (i.e. it is a defect of a person as opposed to a systemic reality); (3) they opposed race-conscious social policies; and (4) they claimed no personal responsibility for racial inequality. This separation did have the unintended, but not unexpected, consequence of separating students by political ideology as those working through Whiteness tended to be strongly left of center politically. Those normalizing Whiteness were anywhere from being self-described Libertarians to liberal Democrats. Those normalizing Whiteness ($n = 28$; WU, $n = 15$; SWU, $n = 13$) are the subject of this analysis.

Analysis

I transcribed all interviews verbatim, and engaged in a constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965) as a means of building a theory of racial ideology formation. During this open coding process, affective responses to multiculturalism emerged. I began to conduct a side analysis specifically identifying instances where participants expressed emotional responses to issues of race as well as what these emotions were. This was very difficult because the interview participants tended to frame their emotional responses as statements of fact (e.g. "I mean pretty much the only racism that's all right is against White males," George, WU). In addition, men tend to be less emotionally expressive than women (Connell, 2005; Kring & Gordon, 1998). This does not mean that they necessarily have fewer emotions, but rather that they are more likely to suppress or regulate them (Gross & John, 2003; Martin & Doka, 2000). Therefore, when participants did not use the phrase "I feel ...", I had to rely upon raised voices, uses of profanity, sarcasm, and what I perceived to be mocking tones to identify affective responses to race/racism. Instead of being rooted exclusively in the transcript data, I returned to the audio recordings to listen for emotional responses. During this process, I coded the printed-out transcripts by hand, made detailed notes about tone, inflection, word choice, and any other parts of the interview that communicated an expression of emotion. I was also constantly writing memos detailing my best guess as to the participants' emotional responses to the questions, and I corroborated my initial hypotheses by listening to them and memoing a second time to see if my generated codes (anger and apathy) held. Finally, I uploaded my coding scheme into *NVivo*TM and used Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework to conduct a cross-site analysis which allowed me to see if/how emotional responses differed by university.

Validity

I relied upon the guidance of Creswell and Miller (2000) in establishing the validity of the coding, analysis, and interpretations of the data. Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that first the author/analyst needs to explicitly articulate the paradigm from which s/he is interpreting the data, which in this case derives from a critical Whiteness perspective (Feagin's *The White Racial Frame* [2010]). They then suggest that the author rely upon multiple people to verify the validity of the coding scheme and

subsequent analytical interpretations. This is ideally conducted by member checks, but after 14 participants were non-responsive to my requests, I abandoned this part of establishing validity.

Instead, I relied on a reviewer not affiliated with the project to review how accurately the codes and manuscript reflected the participant narratives. Having an external reviewer code 28 interviews that required listening to the audio recording was not reasonable and even getting a person to code one 45-minute interview in its entirety proved difficult. Instead, I conducted the coding, and then offered the reviewer approximately 10 percent of them, randomly selected, along with the audio recordings. The reviewer additionally provided feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript guided by the following questions from Creswell and Miller (2000): “Are the findings grounded in the data? Are inferences logical? Is the category structure appropriate? Can inquiry decisions and methodological shifts be justified? What is the degree of researcher bias?” (p. 128). When different interpretations arose, and this was rare, the reviewer and I discussed our views and came to a consensus.

Researcher orientation

At the beginning of the interviews, I verbally self-identified as Chicano (my primary racial identity), and had the participants verbally self-identify as well. I hoped to create a cross-racial interaction, where I hypothesized that political correctness might temper some of the participants’ responses (i.e. I wanted to take a conservative approach to the study). After the first four interviews were completed, I questioned whether or not my racial self-identification was having the anticipated effect as the participants tended to be very animated; using profanity, sarcasm, and raising their voices as they shared their views on race/racism.

Subsequently, I ended interviews by asking participants how much they thought about my racial/ethnic background during our interactions. Almost uniformly, they said they did not think about it. The reasons the participants offered tended to focus on my light skin as well as use of “standard” English: two areas that help me sometimes “pass” as White. Thus, my phenotypic ambiguity allowed my racial background to slip into the background, providing me with access to a group of students who are frequently inaccessible to researchers of color.

Being a man of color studying Whiteness did pose another methodological issue. The interviews frequently read like a continuous microaggression. Microaggressions are the common, subtle everyday slights against marginalized people which have cumulative, negative impacts stemming from this racial stress (Yosso et al., 2009). While the microaggressions did affect my emotional state, my masculinity did not allow me to admit that I was hurt by the participants’ narratives. Instead, I ironically (given the participants’ limited emotional responses) channeled these feelings into anger, which concurrently clouded my ability to effectively analyze the transcripts. It was not until one of those working through Whiteness opened up about his own trepidations, fears, and confusion about race, that I realized I was suppressing my own emotional state. From that point on, I have had to be keenly aware when participant narratives triggered an emotional response in me, and I extensively memoed about this as I conducted the analyses.

Finally, the male-to-male interaction also likely affected the interviews. I was surprised by the limited range of emotions the participants expressed (apathy and anger), but it supports existent literature where men are less emotionally expressive

than women (Connell, 2005; Kring & Gordon, 1998). Thus, this was not representative of the emotions the participants felt during the course of the interviews, but rather, represented those they were willing to express openly in front of another man – especially a man whom they had just met.

Findings

While participants across both institutional environments minimized the importance of contemporary racism (i.e. held a color-blind worldview), their emotional reactions fell into two divergent categories. The SWU participants tended to be apathetic (e.g. simply wished they could stop thinking about race) while the WU participants tended to be angry. Some could argue that wishing for a color-blind society represents more than apathy, but I argue that this classification is warranted because the participants identified as racially apathetic were not compelled to take any action and tended to treat race as a nuisance. Also, it is difficult to convey anger via the written word, so to help readers identify vocal inflections, I have italicized portions of quotations to indicate a raised voice or an additional emphasis the participant voiced.

Apathy

Students at SWU were frequently able to insulate themselves from issues of multiculturalism, and this corresponded to them being apathetic regarding race. For example, some were able to exist without having to form opinions on the subject. As Matt explained:

Q: OK. And so you said over here in the questionnaire that you think of race maybe like less than once a year. Why?

A: Because it's a non-issue for me. (Matt, SWU)

Part of Matt's White privilege was the ability to exist without thinking about issues of race. Later in the interview, he explained that he personally felt he suffered no ill effects from racism, and to the extent that it was a social issue, it belonged to racial minorities. Justin also said that racism did not affect him personally: "... I don't feel like that's really a pertinent issue for me right now. I don't feel like I need to necessarily have such a strong feeling that way" (Justin, SWU).

Kurt took this sentiment one step further by arguing that racism was not only unimportant in his life, but also society at-large, and this was why he did not bother forming an opinion about it:

Q: OK. And then you said in your survey that you don't think about race very much.

A: Not really.

Q: Is there any particular reason why?

A: I don't really think it's that ... really too important stressing upon which race you identify with as far as like your status within society. (Kurt, SWU)

Most students at SWU did not go so far as to claim racism was no longer an issue. Instead, they hoped for a time when race was irrelevant. As Joel explained, “[It’s] just that I wish it didn’t even have to be a subject at all ...” He continued, “I wonder if race will ever not be an issue like I wish it wouldn’t be” (Joel, SWU).

These views were frequently contextualized within optimism regarding racial progress since the Civil Rights Movement. In particular, the participants tended to describe millennial students as more racially tolerant than previous generations. As Kevin explained:

I would say that in general racism still exists and there’s kind of like class and things like that, but I think overall, we’ve mostly been able to kind of get past that and I think daily, like in life, we’re pretty much kind of past that and I think definitely the younger generation is more ... definitely more tolerant and more accepting, so I think there’s kind of a better outlook from this point on ... (Kevin, SWU)

While there has been progress made regarding the issue of race, there is still a lot of work left toward promoting racial equity (Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, 2010). This was not troubling to the participants at SWU. Rather, they tended to view their racial lives in terms of color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and within this context, some equated race-consciousness with racism. As Martin explained:

I [grew up] in a very [racially] neutral household in that sense. We didn’t really discuss race a lot, which I don’t think it necessarily should be discussed a great deal. It shouldn’t be over-emphasized because that’s what leads to racism. (Martin, SWU)

There was one participant from WU, Jeremy, who was also apathetic regarding issues of race and racism. He came from a home environment that promoted color-blindness, he lost part of it when he came to college, and wanted to return to his pre-college ability to ignore issues of race:

I don’t like [to be racially cognizant] because I honestly never even used to think about and it just ... I think that if you’re truly not thinking about it, about something like that, it’s not going to have an affect on anything you do involving the subject, and that could be a good or a bad thing. Like if you’re trying to be a racial activist in supporting diversity in whatever you do, it could be a bad thing, but for me, that’s the field I’m going to or anything and I feel like just being a person and interacting with people it’d be much better not to even notice things like that and I do more now. (Jeremy, WU)

Jeremy, like Martin, promoted a “color-blind” approach to contemporary racism, which Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues is actually a form of racism. Jeremy and many of the other participants at SWU existed in a state of racial apathy predicated upon racial ignorance. For those who could not escape multiculturalism, the story was very different.

Anger

Students at WU frequently could not avoid issues of race, and they also tended to exist in academically competitive environments where they sometimes felt their social standing was threatened by race-conscious policies such as affirmative action. For example, Jonathan was initially rejected by WU and he immediately blamed

affirmative action despite the fact that WU had not practiced race-conscious admissions for nearly a decade. He said:

... it makes sense that [affirmative action is] a good idea, but at the same time, it feels like *it infringes on fundamental freedoms* because ... So I think it should be totally based on academic ability, off of character, off the attributes of the individual and have *nothing to do with the skin* because ... or with their color or whatever because to me *that's just not fair* ... You know, you have someone who works really hard and then they miss out *because of their color*. (Jonathan, WU)

Jonathan saw his position at WU threatened by a policy that no longer existed and subsequently adopted a discourse of racial victimization. He was extremely frustrated by race-conscious policies that he believed disadvantaged him in addition to *infringing on his fundamental freedoms*. Roger, another WU student, made a similar statement: "But there are certainly obvious examples both within education admissions as well as in the job search, because of 'White privilege' [air quotes], Whites are expected to have *accomplished more*. And that makes it *harder for Whites*" (Roger, WU). He felt that race-conscious policies made it more difficult for Whites as a whole to accomplish their goals and this was unfair.

In addition, some WU students equated race-conscious policies with lowering standards. This, in their understandings, not only made it more difficult for White people to gain access to higher education, it also decreased the academic prestige of the institution. They advocated eliminating all race-conscious policies because to them, the system is generally open and success is a function of hard work. As George explained, "I mean if you want to succeed in life, you can't just bank on the fact that oh, I'm Black which means people should take pity on me maybe "cause it's been so hard for me."³ *That's bullshit!*" (George, WU). During the course of the interview, George stated that he was not the strongest student in high school, but that he worked harder than most and therefore deserved his spot at WU. He felt that efforts to diversify the undergraduate student body posed a threat to his social position, specifically, and White people in general.

In terms of race on campus, WU had an incident where a student was tasered by campus police and some students alleged racial profiling played a role. Many students in this study took the opposite view and argued that race had nothing to do with this confrontation. Keith became very animated in describing his rationale:

I'm not saying he should have gotten tasered five times, *but if the dude's being a douche-bag in the library affecting everything*, then like, *something needs to happen*. He doesn't necessarily need to be tasered, but [student who claims the incident was racially motivated] would say that no-... nothing should have happened to him. So bleeding heart people like that, they hear something, and their immediate reaction is, you know, *let's sympathize with the person who got hurt*, and not with, you know, *the rules or procedures* ... (Keith, WU)

Keith framed the issue in an interesting way. He began by dehumanizing the person ("douche-bag") which then allowed him to prioritize rules and procedures over the real pain of a student being tasered. Keith was also dismissive that race had anything to do with the incident, and framing those who thought it was profiling as simply being "bleeding hearts." There was a strong tension on the WU campus between students like Keith who doubted the significance of race and other students who were racially cognizant. Within this context, Lance felt his peers treated his views

on race as less valid because of his White skin. He explained, “*I really don’t give a damn what someone who thinks that my opinion is invalid because I’m White and haven’t experienced racism against Blacks as a victim. You know, someone who believes that isn’t really worth my time ...*” (Lance, WU). Lance insulated his color-blind world view by being immediately dismissive of people who claimed he could not understand racism because he is White.

This same tension was not evident at SWU, but this was not surprising given the minimal compositional diversity on campus coupled with less competitive admissions standards. There were, however, two participants at SWU who did express anger at multiculturalism and race-consciousness. Martin (SWU) had sustained contact with minorities via the Black people who lived in his apartment complex. His neighbors were almost exclusively acquaintances, but he interacted with them enough to be, as he described, “annoyed.” Martin understood tolerance to mean he had to be absolutely accepting of what he perceived as Black culture, and he took issue with this stance:

... there are a number of Black stereotypes of Black culture that I don’t care for. I don’t have to accept that stuff, I’m sorry. I mean, wearing bling-bling gold chains and wearing your hat backwards and baggy pants and, you know, talking unintelligently, *that’s bullshit*. I’m sorry, I don’t ... *that’s bullshit. I’m not obligated to embrace that or to say that, “That’s really great. Let’s accept cultural diversity.”* (Martin, SWU)

Martin did not feel he should have to be accepting of what he perceived to be Black culture in the name of promoting multicultural inclusion. Jeremy, another SWU student and conservative political activist, took issue with multiculturalism as a whole:

... *it just fucking sucks that [race] is even an issue. I just ... this is really ... sometimes it just really depresses me, it really does, just like ... it just really doesn’t matter and it bothers the hell out of me that it just ... I don’t know, that really all I’d say, why the fuck does this matter?* It just so doesn’t and I oftentimes will get pretty bothered. (Jeremy, SWU)

Jeremy’s words were very similar to others at SWU regarding multiculturalism (apathy), but the difference (aside from profanity) lay in the force of his comments. Jeremy did not have a great deal of contact with racial minorities, and his comment was primarily in response to race-conscious policies which he tended to frame as an assault on his political ideology.

Discussion

The affective responses to issues of race were salient features of the participants’ narratives regarding issues of multiculturalism, and these emotions tended to strongly differ by institutional context. In the less selective, predominantly White SWU, the participants tended to be apathetic regarding issues of racism. They tended to exist in White environments and did not see their positions at SWU threatened by race-conscious social policies. Consequently, they simply wished for a time when the rest of the population could treat race as a non-issue. Conversely, the students at WU tended to be very angry regarding issues of race, and this was a function of two issues. First, WU was no longer a predominantly White institution and the participants generally could not escape multiculturalism as part of their everyday lived experience. Second, the highly competitive academic environment at WU

meant that many of the participants tended to frame their social position as threatened by race-conscious social policies such as affirmative action.

There is a certain irony that the students at SWU, the institution that did practice affirmative action, rarely expressed anger at the program. Those at WU tended to have very strong, angry responses to a program that did not exist. In addition, participants tended to frame their affective responses, in particular their anger, as rational thought processes. Conversely, people of color were framed as playing the victim and, in part, irrational on their racial views. Thus, a less competitive, race-conscious admissions environment promoted more racial apathy, while a race-neutral policy coupled with high competition and multiculturalism led to increased anxiety and anger. The numbers are too small in this study to make this a generalizable finding; however, it is an area that needs to be investigated further.

Additionally, it is likely the participants in this research were not only participating in a discourse of Whiteness but also one of masculinity. According to his analysis of White masculinity in popular cinema, Carroll (2011) argues, “white masculinity makes its own appeal to injury” (p. 6). Within this discourse of victimization, these young men perceive they are being attacked for both being White and being male via multiculturalism and imagined affirmative action. Being from two unmarked social identities which help socially create the “other” (e.g. female, Black, or gay) despite these White men existing in a state of *racial hyper-privilege* (Cabrera, 2011). Within this paradigm, their appeal to injury is based on them confusing an erosion of unwarranted privileges with oppression (Carroll, 2011).

This begs the question: What processes produce these affective responses? While Feagin (2010) did not identify the specific racial emotions that comprised the white racial frame, he did identify the emotion it was missing: empathy. He argues, “Over time, white racist thought and action also involves a massive breakdown of positive emotions such as empathy, the human capacity to experience the feelings of members of an outgroup unlike your own” (Feagin, 2010, p. 110). In addition, Leonardo (2005) argues that White racial fear is a key component to the creation of racist ideologies, which in turn, recreate racial stratification. Perhaps, the more White students encounter multiculturalism, the more their xenophobia is triggered which, in turn, manifests in racial anger. Perhaps the more White students feel a threat to their group positioning (Lowery, Unzueta, & Knowles, 2006), the angrier they become at racial minorities whom they perceive as “infringing on their fundamental freedoms” (Jonathan, WU). Both of these emotions are predicated upon entitled assumption of Whiteness whereby diversity and inclusion are acceptable only to the extent that they do not harm White social positioning.

Regardless of the specific process, the current analysis uncovers two manifestations of White racial emotions in response to issues of race. Returning to the theoretical framework, Feagin’s white racial frame gives few indications as to the types of emotions that constitute the affective components of the white racial frame. This research offers two specific emotional manifestations that prevented these students from being racially empathetic: anger and apathy. To the extent that apathy and anger deny the power of contemporary racism, they concurrently function as components of racial stratification (Feagin, 2010).

The obvious question arises: What is to be done? There is a traditional liberal paradigm that ascribes racist practices and attitudes to a matter of ignorance (e.g. “If only they weren’t so ignorant, they wouldn’t be so bigoted”). This usually locates the problem of racism among Southerners/“rednecks”/“hillbillies” and the

prescription for decreasing racism becomes education. Mills (1997) agrees that racism is predicated upon a White epistemology of ignorance, but disagrees that it is primarily a function of “bad Whites.” Rather, it is widespread throughout the US via largely unconscious processes (Feagin, 2010; Leonardo, 2005). Therefore, disrupting the epistemology of ignorance requires more than providing facts to White people (Leonardo, 2005) because rational thought is insulated by anger and apathy.

There are several campus-based inner group dialogue initiatives meant to engender empathy and understanding across dominant/marginalized social groups (Zuñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). Facilitating an inner group dialogue is a very delicate process because the power dynamics of the general society can play out in small groups where the most privileged (heterosexual, middle-class, White men) can dominate the conversation, and even microaggress⁴ their peers in the process (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). This can take the form of dismissing the narratives of people of color, portraying themselves as racial victims, and/or using the forum as a means of self-serving, racial group therapy. Therefore, the promise of inner group dialogues is only realized under skilled facilitation (Zuñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002).

The challenge becomes breaking down the affective shield that helps insulate White denial, reframing affective racial responses as emotions instead of “facts”, while not allowing engagement with White students to silence the needs of students of color. This balance is essential to avoiding the pitfall of Whiteness that Apple (1998) cautions against: allowing analyses of racial privilege to dominate conversations on racism at the expense of voices of color. In addition, the reframing of emotions is particularly important among White men as they tend to suppress and regulate their emotions which feed into the myth that they are more “rational” than “emotional” women or people of color (Connell, 2005; Kring & Gordon, 1998).

The participant responses in this study provoke some pressing questions. How would White students’ affective responses to issues of racism be different at a university with low selectivity and high levels of compositional diversity? How would this differ from a highly selective school with low compositional diversity? How would the participant affective responses differ if women were also interviewed? Would their marginalized gender identity promote solidarity with racial minority marginalization, or would women be less sympathetic (e.g. “I made it in spite of gender, so you have no racial excuse”)? Would gay and bisexual White men be more likely to be empathetic, angry, apathetic, or perhaps express a different emotion?

Conclusion

Despite the popular rhetoric (Blake, 2011; Former Majority Association for Equality, 2011), anti-White racism is primarily a myth as opposed to tangible reality (Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, 2010). The power of this myth lies in the fact that it does not require a rational foundation. Rather, it is predicated on a feeling by many White people that racism against Black people is largely over but racism against White people is on the rise (Norton & Sommers, 2011). These feelings are both under-theorized and understudied in relation to racial stratification, but they appear to play an integral role in allowing the racially privileged to ignore the ugly realities of racism.

Much of this willful ignorance is predicated on White people wanting to maintain a positive view of their racial selves (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008). This becomes problematic when a positive view of self interferes with White people’s

abilities to see the realities of systemic racism. As West frequently says, “Who wants to be well adjusted to injustice?” (2006, p. 20). The work ahead, therefore, entails supporting White men in becoming maladjusted to racism; destabilizing their *epistemology of ignorance* (Mills, 1997), which is rooted in both what they think and how they feel about race.

Acknowledgements

A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2011 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana. The author would like to thank Zeus Leonardo for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

Notes

1. When referring to “post-racial” discourse, I use quotation marks because it accurately reflects how many commentators frame issues of race but it is also divorced from contemporary realities where race still matters in many substantial ways.
2. During the paper, I will usually capitalize the term White in addition to all other markers of race and ethnicity. I use lowercase when referring to the white racial frame to stay true to how Feagin represents his concept.
3. George said, “‘cause it’s been so hard for me,” in a high-pitched, nasal, almost whiny tone that I read as him mocking and dismissing racial minority claims that racism impedes their academic and economic opportunities. He did not raise his voice, so I did not italicize this section.
4. There is not an official verb for describing the act of committing a microaggression, but “microaggress” is one that has been used colloquially for years.

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