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2012

Exposing Whiteness in higher education: White male college students minimizing racism, claiming victimization, and recreating White supremacy

Nolan L Cabrera



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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Race Ethnicity and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cree20>

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Version of record first published: 28 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Nolan León Cabrera (2012): Exposing whiteness in higher education: white male college students minimizing racism, claiming victimization, and recreating white supremacy, Race Ethnicity and Education, DOI:10.1080/13613324.2012.725040

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.725040>



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## **Exposing whiteness in higher education: white male college students minimizing racism, claiming victimization, and recreating white supremacy**

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This research critically examines racial views and experiences of 12 white men in a single higher education institution via semi-structured interviews. Participants tended to utilize individualized definitions of racism and experience high levels of racial segregation in both their pre-college and college environments. This corresponded to participants seeing little evidence of racism, minimizing the power of contemporary racism, and framing whites as the true victims of multiculturalism (i.e. ‘reverse racism’). This sense of racial victimization corresponded to the participants blaming racial minorities for racial antagonism (both on campus and society as a whole), which cyclically served to rationalize the persistence of segregated, white campus subenvironments. Within these ethnic enclaves, the participants reported minimal changes in their racial views since entering college with the exception of an enhanced sense of ‘reverse racism,’ and this cycle of racial privilege begetting racial privilege was especially pronounced within the fraternity system.

**Keywords:** racism; higher education; white privilege; white supremacy; critical race theory; critical whiteness studies

### **Introduction**

Ralph Ellison wrote in the classic novel *Invisible Man* (1952), ‘I am invisible, understand, because people refuse to see me’ (3). Within this text, Ellison illustrated how a general societal lack of concern for black people rendered him invisible as a person. The same invisibility that Ellison highlighted, not only systematically oppressed blacks, but also privileged whites. Fifty years ago, Ellison was judged first and foremost based upon the color of his skin, and his racial identity overshadowed his humanity. Conversely, white skin was a symbol of superiority, but white supremacy has experienced many challenges and changes over the past half-century (Omi and Winant 1994).

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The 1960s were a time of salient challenges to the existing racial paradigm, whereby minority communities (and some majority allies) rose up, refusing to be a permanent underclass (Bonilla-Silva 2001). In response, the 1970s and 1980s were marked by a reformulation of whiteness from a symbol of *superiority* to one of *normality* yet remaining socially dominant (Omi and Winant 1994). This hegemonic structuring of whiteness renders racial power relations invisible which serves to naturalize racial stratification where whites remains at the top of the hierarchy (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003). There are many ways of explaining this contemporary form of racism (e.g. Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Omi and Winant 1994), however, the consistent theme through this work is the persistence of white supremacy through a forceful denial that racism is a pertinent social issue.

During this evolution of racism, the college<sup>1</sup> campus paradoxically has been both a site of whiteness normalization and disruption. Analyses of this contested space tend to focus on the experiences of students of color (e.g. Allen, Epps, and Haniff 1991; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996). Much less common are examinations of how white students see and experience race in college, and there is almost no scholarship regarding white men (Cabrera 2011, 2012, in press a, in press b). This is particularly important because coming from a state of what Cabrera (2011) refers to as *racial hyperprivilege*, they hold a disproportionate amount of societal power relative to women and people of color to both recreate and sometimes challenge the existing racial paradigm. Within this context, this study explores the following questions:

- How do white male college students explain racial inequalities (with a special focus on who are framed as victims within their narratives)?
- How do they experience race/racism in their lives, and what role do institutions of higher education play in their racial development?
- Finally, how do these narratives challenge and/or recreate white supremacy?

To contextualize these issues, I will first examine the literature on racism in higher education, offer a whiteness-focused version of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and argue that while CRT has been a valuable analytical tool for empowering communities of color, it is also an effective means of critically analyzing and disrupting white supremacy (Gillborn 2008).

## Literature review

### *White privilege and racism in higher education*

Whiteness is frequently recreated as socially dominant within the context of higher education because it is framed as normal (Cabrera 2011, in press a;

Feagin et al. 1996; Gusa 2010). One method of whiteness normalizing is the disproportionately high representation of whites in higher education, especially in four-year institutions (Brown et al. 2003). To the extent that a college degree represents increased earning potential and access to high-power social networks, the concentrated awarding of this valued commodity to whites serves to reinforce the existing racial paradigm (Chesler, Lewis, and Crowfoot 2005). However, proportional representation is only part of the higher education perpetuation of white supremacy. Other methods include an institutional stance on racism that is reactive instead of proactive, the exclusion of diversity in the mission statement, concentration of institutional power in white (often male) administrators, minimal representation of faculty of color, and a reliance upon 'traditional pedagogies' that disregard teaching across racial difference (Chesler et al. 2005, 53–4; Gusa 2010).

On the student level, there are a number of ways in which white supremacy is reified in higher education. A salient example is the fraternity/sorority system because students have the explicit ability to select members, frequently excluding people of color from participation. In addition, this is a campus sub-environment specifically related to white students increasing their sense of ethnic victimization (Cabrera in press a; Sidanius et al. 2004).<sup>2</sup> Astin (1993) argues that increased racial conflict on campus corresponds to increased participation in the fraternity/sorority system as, 'a good deal of racial strife may lead to the formation of social organizations that cater to a particular racial or ethnic groups or to conservative students who want to isolate themselves from racial interaction' (341). These racially homogenous sub-environments of the college campus and subsequent sense of victimization serves to further entrench white supremacy in two ways.

First, it insulates whites from racial antagonism which they frequently (and mistakenly) equate with racism (Cabrera in press a; Picca and Feagin 2007). This lack of overt racial conflict in turn leads to skepticism regarding minority claims of racial discrimination while reinforcing the *sincere fiction* that racism is largely a relic of the past (Feagin and O'Brien 2003). Within this context, anything race conscious becomes equated with 'reverse racism' including race-specific scholarships and affirmative action. This misunderstanding of the nature of racism further entrenches the sense of victimization, building increased hostility toward multiculturalism and people of color (Cabrera 2011, in press a, in press b; Chesler et al. 2005).

Second, this sense of white victimization serves to entitle white students to maintain their racially homogenous campus subenvironments (Chesler et al. 2005; Cabrera in press a). If the multicultural university is viewed as an environment where whites are victims, white enclaves become a means of creating social comfort (Picca and Feagin 2007), but this increased social comfort also leads to an increased sense of ethnic victimization (Sidanius et al. 2004). Thus, white students seek social comfort in the form of racial segregation, which leads to an increased sense of victimization, which in

turn justifies the persistence of racial segregation, and white supremacy is cyclically entrenched on the college campus.

White supremacy in the college campus also manifests itself in what Picca and Feagin (2007) refer to as ‘backstage performance.’ The authors analyzed ‘racial’ journals white students kept at 28 universities throughout the country, and they discovered a disturbing trend. The behavior of white students was markedly different in the presence of minority students than among their white peers. Within their white peer groups, participants reported their peers consistently telling racist jokes and using the *n-word*, among other manifestations of racism that publicly have fallen out of favor (Picca and Feagin 2007).

The ability of white students to racially self-segregate on campus has been related to a disturbing trend of ‘ghetto’-themed parties where students dress in costumes informed by racial stereotypes. In 2007, a group of students at a college in Texas decided to commemorate the MLK holiday by dressing up as Aunt Jemima, wear do-rags, drinking malt liquor, and eating fried chicken (Wise 2007, June 22). Some of these parties also focused on Latina/o stereotypes such as Santa Clara University’s ‘South of the Border’ where many white females in attendance dressed as pregnant maids (Georgevich 2007, February 15). These manifestations of white privilege allow the participants to enact racist stereotypes in relatively safe environments separate from their minority peers. These actions were not isolated as similar events were recently discovered<sup>3</sup> at over 30 institutions (Wise 2007, June 22), and these parties have been a problem on college campuses for years (Chesler et al. 2005, 48).

In addition, Wessler and Moss (2001) reported that in 1998, there were 241 reported hate crimes on college campuses, and race played a factor in 57% of them (5). I use the term *reported* because Chesler et al. (2005) argue that hate crimes provide such negative publicity for universities, there is pressure to handle these incidents behind closed doors. Hurtado et al.’s (1998) study of Texas A&M that found less than 10% of racial discrimination cases were actually reported. This is especially relevant in the aftermath of 9/11 when Muslim students are increasingly targeted (Chesler et al. 2005). These are some of the ways white supremacy is reified within institutions of higher education; however, it is sometimes disrupted as well.

### ***Diversity interventions in higher education***

There have been many initiatives attempting to address racism on college campuses. Engberg’s review of intervention studies outlines four broad categories: multicultural course intervention, diversity workshop and training interventions, peer-facilitated interventions, and service interventions (2004, 481). These represent a mixture of both content (e.g. courses on race) and contact (i.e. interactions across race). Engberg (2004) was unable to

determine which of these two foci was more important in improving inter-group relations; however, all demonstrated some efficacy across a range of studies.

The trouble with these interventions is that they are frequently limited to improving cross-racial group dynamics in higher education. The efficacy of the programs is defined by decreasing racial bias (Engberg 2004), and this is subtly, but importantly, different from understanding white supremacy. For example, there are initiatives aimed at ‘increasing tolerance’ in higher education, but one tolerates a headache or a baby on the airplane that keeps crying. Tolerance does not imply an analysis of racial oppression, and this highlights the fallacy of the political correctness movement of the 1990s. There was a misconception that if white people refrained from saying offensive words, racial problems would disappear (Feagin and O’Brien 2003). To move beyond tolerance, it is necessary to understand racism as systemic and make the invisible *visible* by highlighting the ways in which society structures and recreates the unmeritocratic privileges whites enjoy (Ortiz and Rhoads 2000). Making racial privilege visible is precisely what Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) does.

### Critical Whiteness Studies

CWS is a growing body of work intending to reveal the frequently invisible social structures that continually recreate white supremacy and privilege. Some take a historical analysis of whiteness formation; especially regarding the mainstream incorporation of previously racialized European immigrants (e.g. Brodtkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991). These works highlight how Europeans *became* white, undercutting contemporary myths about the openness of American society. Proponents of these myths point to the upward mobility of ethnic whites (e.g. Italians, Jews, and Irish) as evidence that there is something culturally deficient with racial minorities, and this explains their underclass position. This group of whiteness studies refutes the claims of people who play this ‘white ethnic card’ (Gallagher 2003).

Another strain of CWS involves critically analyzing *semantic games*, such as prefacing statements with ‘I’m not a racist but’ or ‘Some of my best friends are...’ to not appear racist (Bonilla-Silva 2002). Bonilla-Silva argues that such statements functionally allow white people to continue espousing racist views that are less offensive than using racial epithets (e.g. the *n-word*). Other rhetorical shifts include what Feagin and O’Brien (2003) refer to as *sincere fictions*. Sincere fictions are sincere because the respondents truly believe them, but they are fictions because they are divorced from a historical and contemporary reality (e.g. claims of ‘reverse racism’). Sincere fictions and semantic games have similar social functions: minimizing the power of racism and recreating white supremacy.

While reviewing five edited volumes on CWS (Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003; Fine et al. 1997; Hill 1997; Kincheloe et al. 1998; Nakayama and Martin 1999), eight of the 215 chapters included issues of higher education and only one of these eight examined whiteness construction as it pertained to students. This is indicative of a larger trend: When whiteness is discussed in education circles, it tends to focus on elementary and secondary education and not postsecondary (e.g. Gillborn 2005, 2006, 2008; Leonardo 2009; Sleeter 2011). In one of the few CWS studies in higher education literature, Chesler, Peet, and Sevig (2003) explored the development of white college students' racial awareness finding their participants generally came from backgrounds separate from minorities and these patterns continued through college. The participants' ahistorical and astructural interpretations of race allowed them to frame whites as victims of 'reverse racism'; further entrenching white supremacy (Chesler et al. 2003). With few examinations of whiteness in higher education there is both a limited empirical foundation for the current research but also possibility, as there are a number of un-interrogated spaces where white supremacy is continually recreated in colleges and universities.

### Theoretical framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a movement of intellectual inquiry that began in response to seemingly neutral litigation continually reproducing white supremacy (Crenshaw et al. 1995). CRT has expanded and been adopted by disciplines outside of law, and from this intellectual movement, five tenants have been developed:

- Centrality and intersectionality of race and racism
- The challenge to dominant ideology
- The commitment to social justice
- The centrality of experiential knowledge
- The interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano 1998, 122–3)

This theoretical framework has been applied as an activist-oriented means of empowering communities of color that have traditionally been excluded in the dominant discourse (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Solórzano 1998).

Applying CRT to the study of whiteness is slightly different than that described by Crenshaw or Solórzano even though all are dedicated to the eradication of white supremacy. White-specific CRT is still a *challenge to the dominant ideology*, but it is one that critically examines how the unmeritocratic and unwarranted privileges of whiteness are both enacted and normalized. There is no centrality of experiential knowledge because as Mills (1997) argues, whiteness represents an *epistemology of ignorance*. Within this context, relying upon racially privileged experiential knowledge would



serve to reify white supremacy as opposed to challenge it. Therefore, white CRT critically examines the discursive habits of privilege in relation to hegemonic whiteness (Gillborn 2006, 2008; Leonardo 2009; Omi and Winant 1994).<sup>4</sup> Within this context, I critically analyze the means by which whiteness is normalized and occasionally problematized by white male college student racial narratives.

## **Method**

Frequently, inquiries into issues of racial inequality focus on communities of color implicitly locating issues of racial inequality external from racially homogenous, white communities (Lewis 2004). Much less common are inquiries into how racially privileged people justify, maintain, or sometimes disrupt the reproduction of racial inequality. In addition, institutions of higher education as gatekeepers of upward mobility paradoxically reproduce white supremacy but also can serve as a challenge to it. This context frames the following ‘interrogation of whiteness’ in higher education.

## **Sample**

White men were solicited for participation in this study because: (1) they have the lowest expressed support for multiculturalism and racial equality (Astin et al. 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2006); (2) to match the gender of the interviewer; and (3) coming from a position of racial hyper-privilege (Cabrera 2011), they hold disproportionate power to both recreate and challenge the existing racial structure (Feagin and O’Brien 2003). Participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling method (Babbie 2007) that involved using a single university’s website to retrieve a list of registered student organizations. Groups were organized by political orientation because people to the political left tend to have higher levels of support for racial equality and political ideology tends to be highly correlated with racial ideology (Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Sniderman, Crosby, and Howell 2000). Mass, form emails were sent to student groups, a targeted subsample also from a range of political orientations was solicited in person at weekly meetings (e.g. Objectivists, Students for a Democratic Society, housed fraternities, Young Democrats, and Young Republicans). This sampling strategy was employed as a means of creating a sample from a range of political orientations (and hopefully, racial ideologies) as opposed those with the strongest feelings regarding race/racism.

## **Institutional setting**

The participants for this study were all recruited from a single institution known by the pseudonym ‘Western University’ (WU). WU is a public,

doctoral/research university, and, as the pseudonym implies, is located in the western region of the United States. In the fall of 2005, women comprised 57% of the student population, and men accounted for 43%. There is a total enrollment of over 30,000 students, and approximately 70% are undergraduates. WU is no longer a predominantly white institution as demographically, 38% of students are Asian/Pacific Islander, 34% are white, 15% are Latina/o, and 3% are black (US Department of Education. 2006). In addition, approximately 30% of the undergraduate population spends six or more hours per week involved in student clubs and organizations while 38% reported serving as the leader of a campus organization some time during their WU career. This is also an academically selective public institution that has recently been immersed in controversy due to a dramatic underrepresentation of black and Latina/o students relative to the demographics of the surrounding cities.

### *Interview procedures*

Participants first completed a brief questionnaire that focused on a combination of demographic variables and cross-racial interactions (see Table 1). They were subsequently interviewed using a semi-structured protocol based upon the 1997 Detroit Area Study (DAS) investigation of racial ideologies (Bonilla-Silva 2006), and interviews usually lasted about 45 minutes. The DAS was modified to both reduce the number of questions and focus more on issues of race/racism on the college campus. More specifically, the following questions contextualized this research:

- What is racism? Can you please provide an example?
- Why does racial inequality continue to exist?
- What is affirmative action? Do you think it is fair or unfair? Why?
- Have you seen/experienced any racism during your time at WU?
- Is being white in the United States an advantage or disadvantage? Why?
- How have your views on race changed since coming to WU?

The racial/ethnic background of the interviewer was made explicit in the introduction of each interview to avoid ambiguous interpretations by the interviewee. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and names replaced with pseudonyms.

A pattern matching technique was employed (Yin 1994) to examine how interview themes reinforced or differed from existing literature on whiteness. Specifically, it examined narratives regarding racism as an individual defect versus a systemic reality (Chesler et al. 2003; Pierce 2003); the minimization of the prevalence of racism (Gallagher 2003; Pierce 2003); white victimization (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin and O'Brien 2003); and the role of

racial segregation and the college environment in shaping these realities (Chesler et al. 2005; Feagin et al. 1996). Additionally, a critical constructivist perspective (Kezar 1996) was used while analyzing and thematically coding the transcripts. This entailed understanding how the participants experienced and constructed their racial worlds while concurrently taking a critical eye to how their discursive practices relate to the structure of contemporary white supremacy.

### ***Researcher orientation***

Despite being a bi-racial (Chicano/white) man of color, I am phenotypically and linguistically ambiguous and can sometimes ‘pass’ as white. I initially thought that by self-identifying as Chicano during the interviews (my primary racial identity), I would create a cross-racial dynamic that would provoke ‘politically correct,’ or more tempered responses to the generally contentious issue of racism. After some raised voices and very animated responses, including the use of profanity to emphasize frustrations when describing multiculturalism and race-conscious social policies, I questioned this hypothesis. I subsequently began asking participants at the start of the interviews what they thought my racial/ethnic background to be, and after interview completion I asked how much they thought about my race while we spoke. Half of the participants thought I was a person of color prior to the interview beginning, but almost all said my racial/ethnic identity slipped into the background during the course of the discussion. Some even volunteered they would not have been so open in their responses had I been a black man. Thus, my physical ambiguous appearance and linguistic patterns allowed me access to this group of students many people of color could not.

## **Findings**

### ***Description of sample***

The questionnaire results gave some indications regarding the participants’ demographic characteristics, political orientations, and the whiteness of their lived environments (see Table 1). The participants in this research held a wide range of political ideologies from Socialist to Libertarian. The range of political orientations was very important because it meant there was a higher likelihood of participants coming from a range of racial ideologies (Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Sniderman et al. 2000); not just those with the strongest views on race/racism. The participants tended to cluster at the upper end of the socioeconomic scale, which is frequently associated with a greater *hierarchy-enhancing*<sup>5</sup> ideological orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). None majored in a science or engineering discipline; areas of study specifically associated with *decreased* commitment to promoting racial understanding (Astin 1993). Thus, the participants likely had more egalitarian views on

Table 1. Participant questionnaire responses.

'Name'	Major	Year in School	Age	Political Orientation <sup>1</sup>	Parental Income	Neighborhood% White	School% White	High Minority <sup>2</sup>	Mealw/ Diversity <sup>3</sup>	Dated Black <sup>4</sup>	Dated Latina/o <sup>4</sup>
Lance	Math/Law	1 <sup>st</sup> Year Grad	22	Libertarian/Objectivist	More than \$200,000	50%-75%	25%-50%	yes	3	no	no
George	Sociology	2	20	Libertarian	\$100,000 to \$199,999	75%-100%	75%-100%	no	3	no	no
Adam	Philosophy	4	21	Libertarian	\$100,000 to \$199,999	~50%	0%-25%	no	3	no	yes
Hoyt	Linguistics	2	21	Strongly Conservative	\$100,000 to \$199,999	75%-100%	75%-100%	no	3	no	yes
Ryan	Economics	2	20	Republican	\$100,000 to \$199,999	50%-75%	0%-25%	yes	3	no	no
Mark	Political Science	3	20	Centrist	\$100,000 to \$199,999	75%-100%	75%-100%	no	3	no	no
Keith	Philosophy	4	22	Centrist	\$80,000 to \$99,999	~50%	~50%	no	3	no	yes
Robert	History	4	22	Slightly left of center	\$80,000 to \$99,999	0% -25%	~50%	no	3	no	no
Brandon	Business Economics	1	19	Centrist, but leaning Democrat	\$100,000 to \$199,999	75%-100%	0%-25%	no	3	no	no

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

'Name' Major	Year in School	Age	Political Orientation	Parental Income	Neighborhood% White	School% White	High School% White	Mealw/ Minority <sup>2</sup>	Diverse Friends <sup>3</sup>	Dated Black <sup>4</sup>	Dated Latina/o <sup>4</sup>
Roger Math/Economics	5	22	Democrat	\$100,000 to \$199,999	75%–100%	50%–75%		no	3	no	no
David Biology/Central & East European Studies	3	20	Far Left	\$60,000 to \$79,999	25%–50%	0%–25%		no	2	yes	yes
Josh Political Science/African-American Studies	3	21	Socialist	More than \$200,000	75%–100%	0%–25%		yes	1	no	no

<sup>1</sup>Response to the open-ended question: How do you describe yourself politically?;

<sup>2</sup>Question reads: Have you invited a black, Latina/o, or Native American for lunch or dinner recently?;

<sup>3</sup>Question reads: Think of your three closest friends, other than relatives. How many of these three friends are white?;

<sup>4</sup>Question reads: Have you ever had a romantic relationship with a person from the following racial groups?

race/racism than the general student population of WU. Participants represented an oversampling of fraternities as six were members, and this has been related to an increased sense of white victimization (Sidanius et al. 2004).

In terms of cross-racial interactions in college, only three participants recently had a meal with a racial/ethnic minority. Of the three friends the participants interacted with most on a regular basis, only two reported having *any* non-white people within this group. One participant dated a black person, and four dated a Latina/o. Their home neighborhoods tended to be overwhelmingly white, and while their high schools tended to have higher concentrations of students of color, two commented that there was internal racial segregation resulting from tracking. As Brandon described, 'It was like two separate schools in someway.' Thus, the participants came from relatively white, racially segregated backgrounds that persisted through college.

### *Interview themes*

I identified four interconnected themes from the transcripts related to white supremacy in higher education: (1) individualized definitions of racism; (2) minimization of issues of race; (3) white victimization/minority privilege; and (4) minimal change in racial views while in college.

#### *Individualized definitions of racism*

Beverly Daniel Tatum defined racism as, 'a system of advantage based on race' (1992, 3), and in her judgment, the current US structure is one that clearly benefits whites. All participants gave definitions of racism, and most saw it as an individual trait instead of systemic reality. Robert gave a standard answer, 'I guess it's just, um, treating people who look differently, different from you, as inferior. Like they're inherently inferior. And I guess not so much of a socioeconomic thing. It's like they were just born bad or something.' Robert's definition relied upon an antiquated understanding of racism where racial minorities were seen as inherently inferior (Omi and Winant 1994). Functionally, this definition located issues of contemporary racism external from Robert, for he later stated that he did not believe in the inferiority of non-white races. This view, by his understanding, was only held by fringe groups such as the KKK.

In addition to a belief in innate inferiority, some also defined racism in terms of feelings of racial hatred. As Keith explained, 'I think it's almost an inner disdain for a particular race that's not necessarily another race, but any race in particular.' In Keith's understanding, racism belonged to individuals and it could also be directed at whites. He added to his definition by saying

one must intend to be racist, ‘Yeah, but I think intent is something you need – that you need to intend to say a racist thing, or something like that.’ Keith developed this definition based upon his experiences with his grandfather and uncle. Both regularly said the *n-word*, however, his grandfather did not harbor an ‘inner disdain’ for blacks while his uncle did. Therefore, he included intent as a necessary component of labeling an action racist because he did not believe his grandfather to be racist while he thought his uncle was.

Roger also adopted an individualized definition of racism that included a different central component; that racism lacked a rational basis:

I think racism is when people judge another based on their color. When people classify individuals, especially those that they have no reason to other than their color, by their color. I think that there is racism that targets all colors – among communities of all colors.

The inclusion of reason in his definition was important because it allowed the possibility for dislike of a racial group if he could rationalize it (something his did later in his interview). His definition, like Keith’s, allowed for the possibility of minorities being racist against whites.

There was a minority of respondents who defined racism as a system that constructed and perpetuated racial inequality. Josh explained:

But, but racism, I mean is, once race is constructed, you then can start essentializing what it means to be, you know, that racial category. So the person may do something and it is *because* they are within this construct. It’s almost no way they can overcome that racial construct.

He came to this understanding by highlighting the interplay of history and the contemporary society. Josh believed the United States was founded as a white supremacist country, and it continues to be due to the persistent racial essentialism and the advantages/disadvantages accompanying those labels. The respondent definitions of racism were strongly related to their understandings of racial inequality and their location of responsibility for addressing this issue.

#### *Minimization of issues of race*

In Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) research, many of his participants downplayed the power of racism by questioning minority perceptions while forcefully attributing racially inequality to anything but racism (e.g. class, culture, or education). For the participants in this study, a key component of minimizing issues of race involved illustrating how complaints about racism were, in their minds, unfounded. For example, Robert argued that people of color are often too racially sensitive:

R:<sup>6</sup> So [racism] still exists, but sometimes, people, usually the people that make the most noise about it are reading too much into it. But not all the time.

N: Ok. Do you have an example of someone ‘reading too much into it’?

R: I don’t know, but sometimes you hear about people not getting jobs, and they immediately assume it’s, uh, because of their ethnic background.

Robert was generally dismissive of minority claims of racism in the hiring process even though he did not point to specific examples of this occurring. He gave token credence to the idea that racism still played a factor in employment decisions; however, he spent the bulk of his interview casting doubt on claims of racial bias made by racial minorities.

Ryan was also dismissive of the idea that racism ever played a role in employment practices. He was particularly skeptical of minority claims of racism in this environment:

[Minorities] say, ‘Well you fired me because I’m black’ or ‘You fired me because I’m Asian.’ And so I think that’s ridiculous. For example, they fired you because you weren’t doing your job which had nothing to do with your race...

Ryan tended to believe firings were issues of job performance and not race. His argument was interesting when juxtaposed against one of his later comments regarding minority stereotypes, ‘But it’s just generalizations. This is what stereotypes – they’re based on what the facts are pretty much.’ To summarize Ryan’s views, minority claims of racism are unwarranted, but racial stereotypes are acceptable because they are based on reality.

Participants frequently saw education as the path toward upward mobility, and therefore, educational inequalities (*not* racism) explained racial inequality. As Keith explained:

I don’t want to say it’s racial that, you know, legislators, senators give the schools less money, but there are, you know, white schools and private schools get a lot more money. So I guess education can be a main reason [for racial inequality].

Keith understood that racial inequality exists, however, reasons for this inequality were explained in terms of non-racist factors. This highlighted the consistency between Keith’s definition of racism and his explanation for persistent racial inequality. He did not believe elected representatives held an inner disdain for minorities that influenced their decisions, and therefore, educational inequality was not a function of racism, *per se*. Rather, the underlying issues were economic and educational which, in Keith’s explanation, were not racist.



Differences in educational attainment were sometimes understood more explicitly in racial terms, however, these narratives tended to focus on the value racial/ethnic groups placed on education. As Roger said, 'There are certain communities that are very focused on education. The Asian American community and the Asian society as well as the Jewish community have a huge push towards education.' Being Jewish, he argued that his community valued education and therefore, they were upwardly mobile. Conversely, he believed those who were not succeeding educationally (e.g. blacks and Latina/os) lacked these cultural values. Focusing on cultural explanations for racial inequality, Roger argued that minority relationships with education were the primary causes of contemporary racial inequality.

Offering a different perspective on culture, George posited that many minorities lack a desire for upward mobility. Specifically, he used this understanding to explain the discrepancies between white and Latina/o achievement, '[Latina/os are] probably not very, not very success-oriented. I'm sure they want their kids to be self-sufficient, but not wildly successful like they probably don't have aspirations for their children to be businessmen, doctors and stuff like that.' George was interesting because he saw Latina/os working the fields near his hometown, so he knew they could not be lazy. He also firmly believed a strong work ethic could overcome almost any obstacle, and did not think racism was a powerful contemporary issue. In George's understanding, racial inequality must, therefore, be the function of something else: *success-orientation*. In George's understanding, Latina/os perpetuate racial/ethnic inequality because they do not want to be successful. When I asked him how I, a Chicano PhD student fit within his formulation, he replied that I was the exception to the rule. George, like Roger, identified minorities as the cause of racial inequality even though he acknowledged they were the ones at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

Participants also tended to highlight the importance of hard work in disrupting racial equality. Within their understandings, the American system is generally open to those who want to take advantage. As Hoyt explained, 'I would attribute [success] primarily to a matter of will power, work ethic, just personal drive. There may be a certain amount of discrimination involved in that, but once again, I would say that amount is fairly limited.' Hoyt did not believe that racism was a powerful contemporary force, and therefore, anyone can succeed if s/he wants to (i.e. racism, in his understanding, is not an impediment). Thus, his prescription for addressing racial inequality was racial minorities increasing their work either and personal drive. Adam was more succinct in his assessment, 'if people work hard, they will succeed.'

While minimizing the power of racism, some participants became animated, condemning what they saw as excuses for minority failure. For example, Keith stated:

You need to work hard for yourself. I mean, like I was, I got my way through high school and I got into WU, and, if you want to succeed that bad, you can. And you shouldn't just get a free ride because you're a minority.

Keith saw his personal success as a function of hard work, and therefore, minorities making claims of racism were simply looking for a 'free ride.' Blaming racial inequality on a lack of minority desire for success, he also forcefully dismissed the power of contemporary racism.

There were only two participants who actually addressed how racism organizes society, and systematically privileges one group over another. As David explained:

[Racism is] systematic. It's kind of structured that way. And, you know a lot of times in a lot of cases it is white male privilege and you know in education a lot and in hiring and stuff like that. It's hard to break through that.

Through this structural analysis, he was able to begin identifying privilege (both race and gender), while understanding that oppression is widespread and informs inequality throughout society. For those participants not identifying racial privilege within themselves, they also tended to see whiteness as a societal disadvantage.

#### *White victimization and minority 'privilege'*

Feagin and O'Brien (2003) found their white, male participants frequently adopted a discourse of 'reverse racism' whereby multiculturalism was viewed as victimizing whites. Bonilla-Silva (2002) had similar findings as his white participants consistently located racism within communities of color. The participants in this study were not asked directly about 'reverse racism;' however, they frequently volunteered their thoughts on this subject. As George explained:

...minorities, I mean, they do experience some discrimination, but then again, the pendulum kind of swings back. And, white males, I think, get a really raw end of the deal because nobody sympathizes with [them].... I mean pretty much the only racism that's all right is against white males.

George viewed initiatives such as affirmative action and racially/ethnically-based organizations as marginalizing white men. In particular, he despised affirmative action:

...just because the color of [racial minority] skin, somebody else's skin, they're allowed to be less qualified for a job. I mean we're all human, and so, just because someone has darker skin than me that, I mean, that's a positive quality of them while my white skin is a neutral quality of me. And so they're not as good skills plus black skin is greater than my superior skills and white skin.

During the course of his interview, George minimized the power of contemporary racism, and this corresponded to his labeling of white skin as a 'neutral quality.' Within this context, he framed white males as the primary victims of contemporary racism. Adam was more succinct in his assessment of affirmative action, 'It's fighting racism with more racism.'

Ryan took discussions of 'reverse racism' in a different direction. When asked about where he has seen evidence of racism, he offered, 'And actually, a lot of the picking – like people picking on other ones or makin' 'em feel.... Actually was on some of the white kids at my school. So, I actually saw reverse discrimination.' During the course of his interview, Ryan gave credence to the possibility that minorities experienced racial discrimination, but the crux of his thoughts centered on white racial victimization.

Focusing on the university campus, many participants discussed what they viewed as racism by their minority peers. Roger explained, 'and lots of time I feel uncomfortable with people of color because I feel like they're attacking me and maybe they feel uncomfortable because they feel like I'm attacking them.' When probed on the subject, Roger did not have any experiences that led him to believe that minorities were attacking him; rather, it was just a general feeling of apprehension. To his credit, Roger understood the discomfort he felt navigating a multicultural environment was also possibly experienced by minority students.

Lance was less diplomatic in his determination that WU racism was primarily created by racial/ethnic organizations. He warned against what he saw as the potential consequences of campus multiculturalism:

[Multiculturalism means] having to view everything in terms of race and racism. I think it's a very predominant view in academia. You know trying to make everything about race. The pinnacle of that will be when we have, you know, the Chicano math department.

Despite the absurdity of having a 'Chicano math department,' Lance was truly frustrated with multiculturalism. He did not feel his opinion on issues of race were valued because he was white, and, in his view, this was the antithesis of rationality.

While many participants discussed reverse racism, few articulated where these views came from. To explain the origin of these feelings of victimization, David offered:

[white people] feel that [multiculturalism is] infringing on them. Their rights and their, you know, the fairness to them.... And as a white person, you know, you've never know any other system you've never known any other situation, so its really hard to see what benefits you're getting in this society.

David understood that white men are privileged in society, but these benefits tend to be invisible. Consequently, when minorities make even minor advances, whites frequently confuse an erosion of privilege for racial oppression.

### *Change in racial views while in college*

To assess the role of the college campus in shaping the participants' racial selves, they were asked how their views on race have changed since entering WU. The majority initially said their racial outlook has only changed moderately since entering college; however, the reasons tended to be related to racial segregation. While there were few black and Latina/o students on campus, Brandon saw himself moderately change his views on race in college. Even though he attended a relatively diverse high school, Brandon had almost no college-bound black or Latina/o peers. Since entering college his views changed as follows, 'I used to – I think – I knew very few people who were going to college in minority races...and now that I'm here, there's clearly – I mean not equal amount, but there's clearly a large community of [minority] people.' Going to college challenged Brandon's preconceived notions of what a college student looks like by showing him that blacks and Latina/os do go to college. This was a *very* modest development, but a development nonetheless.

Brandon was in the minority of participants as most were racially insulated from cross-racial interactions. There were many justifications offered, and most located the problem within communities of color. George said, '... there are barriers when interacting with people. I mean, the fact that there's groups of 10, 15 Asian people all speaking Chinese to each other...' To George, speaking Chinese signaled the exclusion of whites, and thus, he placed the onus on Asian American students for his minimal interactions across race. Within this context, George said his views on race did not change during his undergraduate experience.

Roger also identified minority student prejudices as a barrier to cross-cultural exchanges, 'because [minorities] see me as white, and not as something, or a Zionist oppressor or whatever. That's very frustrating for me.' Both Roger and George located the problem of minimal cross-racial campus interactions among communities of color. It was either Asian Americans were not speaking English or students of color prejudging white students that inhibited interracial interactions.

Lance took a relatively unique approach to the issue of cross-racial interactions. Rather than avoiding interracial contact, he was highly selective with whom he related:

I think, you know, most of my friends who are minorities don't have the impression or have judged that they are being discriminated against on the

basis of race. And I'm much more apt to judge, or to think, that my friends' opinions on this matter are correct since, well, my friends are Objectivists.

Lance openly admitted that he was only interested in interacting with minorities who saw the world as he did. This corresponded to Lance reported experiencing few changes in his views on race since entering college.

Ryan both had minimal cross-racial interactions, and saw minimal changes in his views on race since entering college. He did see one development however, 'Um, actually I have become more aware of racism against white people in general, and that's what I've come to see more.' Ryan was racially insulated within the fraternity system, and in this environment he developed an increased sense of ethnic victimization consistent with the findings of Sidanius et al. (2004). This heightened awareness of 'reverse racism' was relatively typical for participants who were fraternity members. They stood in contrast to the non-fraternity members who tended to say their views on race did not change.

Josh was one of the few participants who developed more racially egalitarian beliefs stemming from his undergraduate experiences. Coming from a white, conservative suburban existence in high school, he experienced some of the most dramatic personal changes. Through a combination of both interracial interactions and course content, he began challenging his pre-college views where he understood blacks were at the bottom of the social hierarchy due to laziness or a lack of desire. He highlighted the impact of a specific professor on his personal development:

And the way that [professor's name] would affirm the, the dignity of people who we might think were lesser because of maybe they lived in uh, um, sub-standard conditions. Or that they were, you know, I thought – Oh, they're, they're lazy.

Josh began to see the humanity of people not of his race, and this led him to realize that if he was a racial minority, he would also have to struggle with issues of substandard education, lowered expectations, and increased police scrutiny. Josh then offered the following critique of white privilege, 'And we don't, we [white people] don't feel this idea of linked fate [with racial minorities]. Like, they're existence is separate from mine.' His constant struggle, as he later described, involved linking his fate with that of the racially oppressed.

## Discussion

The participants were very forthcoming regarding their racial views, and this is surprising given the minority status of the interviewer. Political correctness was hypothesized to temper the responses given in the presence of a

Chicano, but the participants appeared to be very candid in explaining their racial views. Thematically, there was a general consistency in participants defining racism as an individual defect based upon an inner hatred of another race. While there are still white supremacist groups that fit within this definition, most people in the population do not (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that the participants tended to minimize or deny the power of contemporary racism, unless it was ‘reverse racism.’ Their views on race frequently remained unchallenged as they tended to exist in racially segregated, white subenvironments.

This persistent belief that contemporary racism is of minimal importance was related to individualized definitions of racism. Demonizing, for example, the KKK functionally served as a means of participants seeing themselves as not racist because they did not hate people of color. This meant these racially privileged people spend the majority of their time downplaying the importance of systemic racial oppression instead focusing on how minorities are ‘racist’ against whites. Many participants felt attacked by racial/ethnic-specific groups, affirmative action, and saw communities of color as the true perpetrators of racism. Essentially, the participants believed that racism does not matter except to the extent that it oppresses whites. This sincere fiction ignores the fundamental issue that racial minorities lack the societal power to be racist against whites (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Brown et al. 2003). This sense of victimization might, in part, be a function of their institutional setting as these white students could not avoid multiculturalism in the minority–majority WU. It will be interesting to see if white students at institutions where they are in a clear majority and not faced with as much multiculturalism feel the same amount of racial victimization.

While this research was conducted as a means of understanding how white male college students experienced race, their narratives seemed to not only engage a discourse of whiteness but one of masculinity as well. Following the guidance of Gillborn (2008), there is a need to include stronger analyses of multiple intersectionalities within CRT scholarship as opposed to an afterthought, or the ‘commatization,’<sup>7</sup> of non-racial forms of oppression. The intersection of race and gender was especially apparent in the narratives of reverse discrimination. For example, George said he felt victimized in terms of being both white *and* male. In addition, participants frequently argued that a stronger individual work ethic among racial minorities would lead to greater equality. This fits well within ideologies of hegemonic masculinity where hyper-individualism is paramount and help-seeking behavior is viewed as a feminine trait (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Sinn 1997). Carroll (2011) argues that white masculinity is a unique form of intersectionality that is continually adapting to maintain social dominance. As demands are placed on both systems of patriarchy and whiteness, ‘white masculinity [makes] its own appeal to injury’ (6). Thus, the participants appeared to be engaging in a unified discourse of both hegemonic whiteness

and masculinity that served a two-fold function. First, it blinded them to the realities of oppression in general and systemic racism in particular. Second, their racial analyses tended to focus on their perceived racial (and sometimes gendered) marginalization.

These perceptions of 'reverse racism' tended to be framed as rational interpretations of objective realities (e.g. 'multiculturalism is oppressive' as opposed to 'I *feel* oppressed by it'). The framing of feelings as intellectual analysis is an additional component of hegemonic masculinity where affect is equated with irrationality and the feminine (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Sinn 1997). This in turn, helped support the discourse of racial victimization that is central the maintenance of hegemonic whiteness (Carroll 2011; Feagin and O'Brien, 2003; Omi and Winant 1994). This was then related to participants framing racial inequality as a minority issue where they held no personal responsibility. This is not a new issue regarding how white men view their racial selves. For example, James Baldwin (1963) argued almost half a century ago in *The Fire Next Time*:

Therefore, a vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man's equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror. (109)

The participants in this research, like the white men Baldwin critiqued, forcefully refused to see their racially privileged selves and invested a great deal of energy in maintaining a positive view of the self. This finding was relatively consistent with the work of Lowery, Knowles, and Unzueta (2007) where they found whites' self-image was threatened when inequality was framed as privilege, but not when inequality was framed as anti-black discrimination. Within this formulation, white privilege implicates all white people and requires them to take personal responsibility for racism, whereas minority disadvantage is ostensibly a minority problem.

The participants tended to exist in racially segregated environments, especially in the fraternity system, but they did not see this as problematic. They used a number of legitimizing myths (Sidanius and Pratto 1999) which focused on locating responsibility for racial tension within communities of color. Given the lack of cross-racial interactions, it was not surprising the majority of participants had minimal changes in their views while in college or developed a heightened sense of 'reverse racism.' Cross-racial interactions were not always associated with increased racial egalitarian views as demonstrated by Lance. He was able to interact with only like-minded minorities, and these people served to reinforce his existing racial views. Thus, change in racial views is not simply a function of cross-racial interactions, but the quality of those interactions also needs to be taken into

account. This power of racism tended to be invisible to the respondents, and they were paradoxically racially privileged by concurrently feeling disempowered. As Whitehead (2002) explains, 'The individual cannot hold power, but (he) can exercise it through the dominant discourses' (quoted in Kiesling 2006, 10).

There were those few participants who adopted anti-racist identities, and they were also the ones who had increased interactions with minorities. However, the question remains, how did they develop these social networks? Instead of cross-racial interactions fostering increased commitment to anti-racism, it is plausible that increased anti-racist views allowed them to have more comfort in cross-racial friendships. More importantly, why is it the responsibility of students of color to be racial teachers to their white peers?

## Conclusion

Understanding the specific means white men justify and/or take account of their racial privilege provides insight into the process of hegemonic whiteness formation. These participants illustrated how white privilege allowed them to racially insulate, concurrently denying the power of racism in contemporary society. This created a powerful cycle whereby participants tended to portray themselves as the victims of multiculturalism, and then found nothing wrong with returning to their racially segregated social environments. It is therefore necessary to create and promote activities that push white students out of their racially homogenous comfort zones to disrupt this cycle of racial oppression. Colleges and universities have the additional responsibility of not only conferring degrees, but also promoting the democratic principles (Gutmann 1999). *Democracy* derives from the roots *demos*-meaning people and *-cracy* meaning rule. It is not possible to have a rule by the people if certain racial groups, with deference to George Orwell, are 'more equal than others.'

## Notes

1. I use the terms *college* and *university* to refer to four-year institutions of higher education within the context of the United States. When making a general reference to institutions of higher education, I use the term college. When specifically referring to a doctoral degree granting institution of higher education, I use the term university.
2. Sidanius and his co-authors also found an increased sense of ethnic victimization by students of color participating race/ethnic-focused campus organizations, and the authors treat these two phenomena equally. I disagree with this interpretation because it misunderstands the nature of contemporary US racism as a white supremacist society (Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Omi and Winant 1994). Within this context, racial and ethnic minority sense of victimization is a predictable response to systemic oppression.



3. This obviously does not include the number of these parties that go unreported to the general public, thus, the list is undoubtedly larger.
4. CWS is not simply a subcategory of CRT as it has been in existence well before CRT. Some trace the origins of CWS to DuBois' *The Souls of White Folk* (Doane 2003; Leonardo 2009). However, I apply a CRT framework to the current study because it represents a more coherent analytical focus than CWS.
5. A hierarchy enhancing ideological orientation refers to people whose worldview tends to justify and naturalize the persistence of most forms of social inequality (e.g. racial, economic, or gender). It is not surprising that upper income, white men tend to have the most hierarchy enhancing world views while lower income, racial minority women tend to have the most *hierarchy attenuating* ones (Sidanius and Pratto 1999).
6. *R* refers to the participant, Robert and *N* refers to the interviewer, Nolan.
7. Commatization refers to the idea that calls for increased intersectionality analyses tend to exist in discussion sections of scholarship where it takes the form of, 'and future research needs to address issues of (class comma gender comma sexual orientation) to see how they intersect with race.'

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