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Working through Whiteness: White, Male College Students Challenging Racism

Nolan L. Cabrera

INTRODUCTION

Whiteness is a privileged social identity (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Mills, 1997; Reason & Evans, 2007; Roediger, 2003), but what can White people do to disrupt and challenge the system of racism from which they benefit? Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey take the position in the slogan of their *Race Traitor* journal that “treason to Whiteness is loyalty to humanity.” Their goal is to disrupt the certainty of White racial solidarity, which, in their collective vision, would lead to the elimination of Whiteness. Activist-scholar Tim Wise (2008) recently advanced this line of critical inquiry in his book *Speaking Treason Fluently: Anti-Racist Reflections from an Angry White Man*, a collection of essays that represent a series of “treasonous” analyses of racism and White privilege. These “treasonous” activities are based upon the following line of thinking:

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- Race is a social construct, and can therefore be deconstructed.
- Whiteness as a socio-political project has no redemptive value.
- It is the job of Whites to disrupt racial oppression by challenging racism in their everyday lives. (Garvey & Ignatiev, 1997)

These pronouncements, however, leave a great deal unexplored: What does one call a White person who refuses Whiteness? Is it even possible to refuse Whiteness or the societal privileges of Whiteness? Why would a person in a position of societal privilege challenge a system from which he or she benefits? If a White person challenges racism in society but does little to explore his or her personal racial privilege, can “treasonous” activities re-create racial oppression? The grand pronouncements of speaking treason to Whiteness exist on a meta-level, leaving local manifestations of White supremacy disruption relatively unexplored.

The higher education environment is an understudied but promising arena in terms interrupting racism. College represents a time where students undergo dramatic changes in their personal identity development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and many of these developments can involve how they view their racial selves (Helms, 1990; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). This qualitative study critically examines the means by which White male undergraduates learn about racism and White privilege and take action against racism, while exploring their continued struggles negotiating issues of race.

BACKGROUND

Criticizing White Supremacy

In the study of higher education, there is a tendency to discuss issues of racism in terms of either minority disadvantage (Diver-Stamnes & Lo-Mascolo, 2001; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Maseus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2009) or the universalistic, positive impacts related to enacting diverse learning environments (Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, Oseguera, 2008; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). These are both important components of creating diverse and inclusive institutions of higher education, but missing from the equation is a critical examination of how Whiteness mediated through systemic White supremacy continues to re-create racial stratification (Cabrera, 2009).

Notable exceptions are Ortiz and Rhoads (2000), who outlined a curriculum designed to challenge White students to deconstruct Whiteness as an important, frequently missing component of multicultural education. Chesler, Peet, and Sevig (2003) explored the development of White students' racial awareness in college, finding that their participants generally came from

backgrounds in which they were segregated from minorities and that these patterns continued through college. The students' ahistorical and astructural interpretations of race allowed them to view Whites as victims of "reverse racism," thereby entrenching hegemonic Whiteness. Deconstructing White supremacy (among other forms of oppression) and learning across difference are key components of intergroup dialogues that are occurring on many college campuses (Nagda & Zuñiga, 2003; Zuñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). However, critical examinations of White supremacy are hardly normative at institutions of higher education despite professions of the "radical leftist academy" (see, for example, Horowitz, 2007). Higher education research tends to be lacking the *critical* component of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), as the discourse on race centers around one of institutional preservation as opposed to social transformation (Chang, 2002).

To critically interrogate the hidden structures of White supremacy, some CWS scholars pursue a historical analysis of Whiteness formation; especially as it pertains to the mainstream incorporation of previously racialized European immigrants (e.g., Brodtkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 2003). Others illustrate how White supremacy is reified and re-created through the superficially race-neutral systems of law (Haney-López, 1996) or public education (Lewis, 2004). Still others critically analyze the construction of Whiteness as noble and superior through the written word (Morrison, 1992) and cinema (Vera & Gordon, 2003). CWS studies have even taken place in leftist circles. For example, White Marxists re-create racism by being economically reductionist (Mills, 2003), and White feminists frequently rely on racist stereotypes of Black men in their criticisms of patriarchy (hooks, 1990). CWS researchers therefore critically interrogate the means by which Whiteness is normalized and racism continually reproduced, frequently in the absence of overtly racist practices.

These critiques help uncover the underlying methods of White supremacy maintenance. Criticism in the absence of agency can build a sense of nihilism (Peet, 2006), yet agency is an under-theorized area in CWS. The primary form of agency development in CWS comes from a group of self-described "modern-day abolitionists": David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and John Garvey. Instead of abolishing slavery, these modern abolitionists seek to eliminate Whiteness. Roediger (1994) examines the history of Whiteness construction and proclaims that Whiteness is not only oppressive and false but "*nothing if not oppressive and false*" (p. 13; emphasis his). Within this frame, Whiteness exists only to oppress people of color and therefore must be abolished.

Ignatiev and Garvey agree, and they dedicated their journal *Race Traitor* specifically to the end of identifying strategies to proactively eliminate Whiteness. As Ignatiev (1997) argues, borrowing from his Marxist roots, "The point is not to interpret Whiteness but to abolish it." A key problem

with this argument lies in the following: If White people join the struggle against racism and disavow their White privilege, they still live in a racialized society. What happens to the racial identity of White people who struggle to abolish their Whiteness? Jennifer Harvey (2007) addressed this issue as she examined the implications of abolitionism:

Because Ignatiev and Garvey articulate Whiteness as reducible to a phenomenon of oppression, they refuse to consider whether White, as a racial identification could become something else. This leaves them no recourse when queried (which they frequently are) if Whiteness is to be abolished; but if we're not interested in abolishing Blackness, for example, what are those people who aren't Black going to be? Will "Whites" be human and everyone else have a racial identification? Clearly this is not a viable option. (p. 46; capitalization added)

Thus, the "modern-day abolitionists" ignore the practical realities of day-to-day struggles in favor of their utopian vision. They offer little direction in terms of steps White people can take to struggle against racism, leaving the concept of praxis (i.e., theory, social criticism, and action intersecting) relatively unexplored in CWS literature.

***From Criticism to Praxis:
What Are White People to Do?***

It may be true that Whiteness originated as a means of oppressing racial minorities (Roediger, 1994); however, this does not imply that Whiteness cannot be transformed. Theorists in the study of racial identity development have explored this potential. As Helms (1990) argues, "In order to develop a healthy White identity, defined in part as a nonracist identity, virtually every White person in the United States must overcome one or more aspects of racism" (p. 49). In the most advanced stages of White racial identity development, the person learns to be comfortable with him or herself as a White person and also to be comfortable with people of color (Helms, 1990). Identity development research is problematic for two reasons.

First, this psychological approach provides an individualistic framework from which Whites work on themselves in a type of racial therapy that is not necessarily related to larger social structures of oppression. In the formative stages of White racial identity development, there is a tendency for guilt to overtake people, creating what Tatum (2003) refers to as the "guilty White liberal persona" (p. 106). Self-flagellation never solved any social problems; and it falls into the trap pointed out by Apple (1998) in which Whites can recenter conversations on race to meet their own needs (e.g., how to cope with guilt). In response to guilt, those working on racial identity development frequently misstep, as illustrated by Tatum's (2003) comment: "We must all be able to embrace who we are in terms of our racial and cultural heritage."

For Whites coming to terms with racism, "Whiteness is still experienced as a source of shame rather than a source of pride" (p. 107).

While the shame component of racial cognance is unproductive, so is pride because it overlooks the arguments of the modern abolitionists. If Ignatiev, Garvey, and Roediger are correct that Whiteness was specifically created as a means of racial oppression and contains no intrinsic cultural value, of what is there to be proud? Harvey (2007) strikes a balance between the "modern-day abolitionists" and the racial identity development theorists in outlining a course for White action and responsibility: "To own and take responsibility for our racial heritage and culture? Yes. To recognize that we can choose to not be determined by it? Yes. To take pride in Whiteness? No" (p. 42).

Second, there is little discussion of praxis in research on identity development. Identity development is an incredibly difficult process because, contrary to the maxim, the (racial) truth does not set White people free. Peet (2006) demonstrated that a social justice curriculum by itself can actually have a counterproductive effect if it is not linked to action. As her research found, students in an MSW program learned about social inequality and oppression in class readings and discussions but developed no agency to struggle for equality. They felt guilty about their privileged social position, took no practical steps with this information, and subsequently felt high levels of frustration. It was only when the students learned how they could transform oppressive conditions that the potential of the social justice curriculum was realized (Peet, 2006). Thus, development of praxis is important beyond the individual because, as Owen (2009) argues, "Since Whites cannot simply give up White privileges, we have a responsibility to use it in the service of greater racial justice" (p. 202).

Moving beyond racial identity, Reason, Millar, and Scales (2005) created a model meant to develop racial justice allies in which Whites join the struggle toward the eradication of racism. In their model, factors positively influencing this outcome included promoting Whiteness awareness, minority experiences, coursework on race, anti-racist action, interactions with diverse friends, living in intentionally diverse arrangements, and racial justice role models (p. 543). A key focus of their research lies in the understanding that structural privileges are generally invisible to the beneficiaries; therefore, "initial involvement in ally behavior was not self-initiated" (Broido & Reason, 2005, p. 13). Developing racial justice allies is predicated on pushing privileged students out of their racial comfort zones. Action is a key development over racial identity theory as it links self-identification with praxis. With regard to the modern-day abolitionists, it de-essentializes Whiteness and shows the possibility for dismantling White supremacy from the positionality of those privileged by the system.

On Semantics, Terminology, and Framing

The term “ally” is intentionally a component of this identity because White people, when confronted with the realities of racism, frequently feel compelled to act. Unfortunately, “some who genuinely aspire to act as social justice allies are harmful, ultimately, despite their best intentions, perpetuating the system of oppression they seek to change” (Edwards, 2006, p. 39). This negative result derives from the desire of White people to promote change but without taking account of their personal social privileges. They patronizingly speak for minority communities, thereby reinforcing the oppressive, racist structures they wish to dismantle (Edwards, 2006).

An additional issue is the somewhat competing terminologies of “racial justice ally” and “anti-racist ally.” Tim Wise implicitly highlighted the semantic problem in his book *White like Me* (2005). He had participants in a workshop describe what was good about being from their specific racial group. The racial minorities tended to focus on tight-knit families, food, music, and culture. Conversely, the White participants highlighted how their intelligence was not questioned because of their racial background or they were not racially profiled. Comparing the two lists highlighted that people of color tend to be defined by who they are whereas White people are defined by who they are not (people of color). Wise’s conclusion is similar to the arguments made by Roediger (1994, 2003) and Ignatiev (1995, 1997) that Whiteness signifies no culture but rather was created as a means of insulating White supremacy. The problem with “anti-racist” is that it also defines Whiteness by what it is not (racist), albeit in a more positive fashion.

Furthermore, a framing issue is embedded in “anti-racist.” Linguist George Lakoff (2004) derides liberals for being reactive in their framing of social issues: highlighting what they are against instead of what they support. He illustrates this by having his students not think of an elephant; inevitably, they imagine an elephant (Lakoff, 2004, p. 3). Thus, the term “anti-racist” has the potential to engender mental frames of racism, provoking knee-jerk negative responses from those not adopting the identity, while providing no vision of the core values of the social movement. Therefore, I prefer “racial justice ally,” even though in many circles this term is synonymous with “anti-racist ally.” The former highlights what the person supports (racial justice) while also highlighting his or her position in the movement (allied and working with—as opposed to for—people of color).

Thus, the development of a White racial identity based on the pursuit of racial justice becomes a means by which racially privileged people can move beyond racial guilt paralysis and become allies in the movement toward racial equity. It creates a White culture that stands for a democratic ideal of equality instead of in relational opposition to people of color. Identity becomes an embodiment of praxis whereby ideas about race, racism, and racial identity

are challenged, contested, and transformed through the intersection of theory and action. Admittedly, this identity currently exists as a lofty ideal, as only a small proportion of White people struggle toward it.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To theoretically frame this research, I rely on Freire's conception of liberatory praxis (2000, 2007) to understand and analyze White men's development as racial justice allies. The first step in this process is developing a literacy by which a person can read the frequently invisible power relations that inequitably structure society. In Freire and Macedo's (1987) argument, true literacy occurs when one assumes "a more curious attitude toward their way of life. A critical attitude is characterized by one who is always questioning one's own experience, as well as the reasoning behind that experience" (p. 69). However, critically analyzing power relations is not an end in and of itself: "This perception is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action" (Freire, 2000, p. 49). Thus, it is insufficient to simply criticize systemic oppression; one must also take action against it that is informed by theory, thereby developing praxis.

Liberating action looks very different based on an individual's relationship to structures of power. Specifically, Freire argues that people of a privileged class are limited in the roles they can play in collective action because "the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead the struggle" (Freire, 2000, p. 47). This factor does not preclude socially privileged people from joining the struggle as long as they work *with* (as opposed to *for*) the oppressed (Freire, 2000). Returning to the subject of race, this distinction means that White people can play important roles in racial justice struggles as long as their involvement does not re-create racial oppression. The process begins with an increased racial cognizance (Reason & Evans, 2007), followed by critiques of White supremacy and personal racial bias (Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005), which, in turn, inform racial justice actions (Peet, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

Recruitment and Interview Procedures

I solicited participants using a purposeful sampling method (Babbie, 2007). The purposeful sampling procedure included using the universities' websites to retrieve lists of registered student organizations. I organized these groups by either explicit or implicit political orientation because people further to the left politically tended to have higher levels of expressed racial

tolerance (Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000), and political ideology tends to be strongly correlated with racial ideology (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

I sent form emails to these groups and solicited a targeted subsample in person at their regularly scheduled meetings (e.g., campus Democrats, Republicans, Students for a Democratic Society, fraternities, and Objectivists). I employed this outreach strategy as a means of obtaining a range of political views and, by inference, a range of racial ideologies. I collected a total of 43 interviews: 22 at Western University (WU) and 21 at Southwestern University (SWU) from a wide range of political orientations.

From the transcripts of these interviews, two separate theses began to emerge: how racial privilege is maintained and how it is challenged. I therefore divided the interviews into two sections: those working through Whiteness and those normalizing Whiteness. Those working through Whiteness ($n = 15$) are the focus in this study. I identified them through the following criteria that emerged from preliminary analyses of the interview transcripts: (a) systemic understandings of racism, (b) auto-criticism of racial bias, and (c) support for race-conscious policies. These 15 participants still had a number of racial issues to work through in their lived experiences, but their willingness to engage and interrogate issues of racism separated them from their peers who were normalizing Whiteness. While my operationalization is similar to work on racial justice allies (e.g., Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005), most of these participants were missing some components of what constituted this social identity. Therefore, I used “working through Whiteness” to differentiate this group from racial justice allies even though some in the sample could be described as allies.

Participants first completed a brief questionnaire that focused on a combination of demographic information, general racial attitudes, and cross-racial interactions. After they completed the questionnaire, I interviewed participants using a semi-structured protocol developed from the 1997 Detroit Area Study (DAS).¹ The DAS investigated racial attitudes and ideologies focusing on participant definitions of racism, experiences with race, and views on race-conscious social policies. I modified the DAS to reduce the number of questions and also to more closely examine issues of race/racism on the college campus. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and replaced all names with pseudonyms.

ANALYSIS

I entered the questionnaire data into Excel and conducted an initial analysis using basic descriptive statistics that set the context for the qualitative analy-

¹For the full DAS interview protocol, see the appendix in Bonilla-Silva's second edition of *Racism without Racists* (2006).

sis. I read the transcripts multiple times to generate and code themes from the text. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), “a theme is most commonly understood to be an element that occurs frequently in a text or describes a unique experience that gets at the essence of the phenomenon under inquiry” (p. 89). For the purposes of this study, the themes I present here are primarily related to unique participant experiences that highlight their means of working through Whiteness, which is the phenomenon of inquiry. I organized the codes using NVivo™ software.

To systematically analyze the transcript data, I employed a constant comparative technique (Glaser, 1965). The constant comparative analysis is a structured means of conducting grounded theory that involves the four stages:

1. Comparing incidents applicable to each category
2. Integrating categories and their properties
3. Delimiting the theory
4. Writing the theory (Glaser, 1965, p. 439)

Constant comparative analysis, as the name implies, requires, “*while coding an incident for a category, compar[ing] it with the previous incidents coded in the same category*” (Glaser, 1965, p. 439; emphasis his). It is initially a time-consuming process that involves coding, checking, and memoing to ensure that the codes sufficiently fit the transcript data. Eventually, the transcripts reach a point of saturation where additional cases add little to the definition of the coding construct (Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2006). At this point, the data are ready to be abstracted.

I used constant comparative analysis in this research because there is still little known about the process by which the racially privileged work through Whiteness. However, this approach poses a theoretical tension because Freire (2000) argues that those of the oppressor class are severely limited in their abilities to understand oppression. Thus, I had to strike a balance between describing the participants’ processes of working through Whiteness while also being critical of their narratives. I also intended to conduct a cross-case analysis because I recruited participants from two separate institutions, WU and SWU. The two sites differed substantially in compositional diversity and selectivity, and I anticipated differing manifestation of racial formation at each. However, the themes generated from the transcripts were remarkably similar across both universities. Therefore, I did not include cross-site analysis in this study.

Researcher Orientation

Being a light-skinned, biracial (Chicano/White) man of color studying Whiteness poses some methodological issues. The interaction between the race of an interviewer and interviewee can affect responses (Finkel, Guter-

bock, & Borg, 1991; Hatchett & Schuman, 1975). To avoid ambiguities in participants' interpretations of my racial background, I racially self-identified as Chicano (my primary identity) at the beginning of the interviews. At the end of the interviews, I asked the participants how much they thought about my racial identity during the course of the dialogue. The overwhelming majority said they tended not to think about it, and one participant commented that he would not have provided the same answers if I had been Black. Thus, my racial ambiguity and ability to sometimes pass as White provided access to a group of students that many people of color do not enjoy.

Description of Sample

All 15 White male undergraduates were majoring in some form of social science or the humanities, and all but two were either juniors or seniors. Most of the participants grew up in neighborhoods in which they were in the majority, but a substantial proportion reported coming from neighborhoods (27%, $n = 4$) or high schools (53%, $n = 8$) where Whites were *not* a clear majority. While these numbers are not sufficiently large to conduct statistical analyses beyond a basic description, they do highlight the fact that the participants frequently existed in racially diverse environments.

Racially diverse contexts persisted through college as 40% ($n = 6$) of those working through Whiteness described the majority of their closest friends as being racial minorities. This claim needs further interrogation because of the potential for White people to claim people of color as "friends," when they would more accurately be described as "acquaintances" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). An unintended, but not unexpected, consequence of using only those working through Whiteness was that the sample tended to be left of center politically and many were from either non-Christian and non-heterosexual backgrounds.

FINDINGS

In terms of the transcripts, four interrelated themes emerged: racial cognizance, critiquing White privilege, racial justice actions, and "work still to be done."

Racial Cognizance

Freire (2000, 2007) argues that those of the oppressor class are generally ignorant of the inner workings of oppressive systems. As applied to race, this argument means that most White people are generally unaware of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Mills, 1997). Thus, it was not surprising that developing racial cognizance set the context for the other themes, was one of the more complicated developmental processes the participants described, and tended to dominate their narratives. The participants in this study had

many experiences that helped develop racial awareness, particularly (a) cross-racial interactions, (b) multicultural education, and (c) minority experiences.

Cross-Racial Interactions. Tatum (2003) argues that the first time many Whites become aware of their racial identity is in their initial interactions with people of color. The same pattern was frequently true of my interviewees. Through these cross-racial interactions, participants not only became aware of the realities of people of color but also became more aware of their own racial backgrounds. Benji, for example, spoke about a Black friend who helped heighten his racial awareness during his undergraduate years:

Actually this is more of a new development. Since I've come to WU, I've had this dialogue with members of different communities, and that sort of thing, and it's really something that I've kind of come to realize. Like it's something that I have never thought about—race—on a daily basis. But then talking with a friend of mine who's a Black female, who says she has to deal with it all the time—it's something that she constantly has to deal with—has really kind of opened my eyes to that I would say. (Benji, WU)

Before knowing his friend, Benji was relatively oblivious to issues of race and racism, believing they were of minimal significance. Benji's friend provided him with a reality that was different than his own, and he developed an understanding that his racial experiences were not the same as those of many people of color. It was through an interpersonal relationship that he was open to hearing this information.

In addition to cross-racial friendships, two participants had a great deal of interracial contact in their pre-college environments as they grew up in towns where White people were not the majority. For example, Larry grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood, and he had to come to terms with his White identity early in his childhood:

It was weird because early in my middle school, high school, I had these sort of identity issues. . . . I did feel this need to sort of validate myself as the White person and being different from the other White people that I'd be at school with. (Larry, WU)

Larry critiqued the racial views of many of his White peers whom he believed physically separated themselves from racial minorities even though they attended a public school in which Blacks were the majority. Larry initially found himself needing to demonstrate that he was not "that type of White person," but then came to realize it was not an issue for his peers. Instead, these feelings were an offshoot of his personal insecurities.

Working through his Whiteness, Larry gained a newfound sense of social confidence such that he no longer felt he had to prove himself or seek validation for being White in majority-Black environments. Coming to terms with his racial identity also meant that he was racially cognizant from a very

early age. He began to view his Whiteness as a social advantage, even in this racially diverse environment. For example:

Like one time I got jumped because of whatever, and the police came and took a report from me rather than first assuming that I was being at fault because the people that jumped me were Black; or another time when I got in a big fight—it was me and a couple of my other White friends got in a fight with these Vietnamese dudes and the police were automatically like, “Oh, what happened to . . .” It was very much like [to the officers] we were clearly the victims and even if it was or wasn’t true. (Larry, WU)

Larry understood that, when fights broke out, he and his White friends were generally assumed to be the victims and not the perpetrators. Thus, he received immunity from police harassment that his Black friends were not able to enjoy. Increased racial cognizance via cross-racial interactions was important, but concurrently problematic. If the only way for White people to learn about race is from racial minorities, this dynamic creates an incredible social and psychological burden on people of color to be racial educators (Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Larry critiqued that position: “I don’t think it’s Latino or Black people’s responsibility to educate White people about how it is. The burden shouldn’t be on them.” Rather, he believed it was the responsibility of White people to educate themselves.

Multicultural Education. While courses focusing on issues of race and racism were generally few and far between, such courses frequently had profound effects on those working through Whiteness. For example, Josh’s initial college classes avoided most issues of race; and because of his self-described White, conservative, suburban background, he held a number of views that he now considers racist (e.g., that racial inequality is a function of Black laziness). His awareness changed dramatically during his undergraduate experiences. He vividly remembered a class in which the professor not only taught about racial inequality, but also humanized Black people in the process:

He would affirm . . . the dignity of people who we might think were lesser because of maybe they lived in uh, um, substandard conditions. Or that they were, you know, I thought . . . Oh, they’re, they’re lazy. They don’t have personal responsibility. And uh, so really, yeah, I think he helped me see the uh, the, the dignity in people that often we, we look at just through a distant lens and through a really detached way. And we don’t, we don’t feel this idea of linked fate. (Josh, WU)

This new perspective was a major shift in Josh’s thinking. Through high school, he had given in to what Hancock (2004) calls the “politics of disgust,” in which those at the bottom of the social ladder are viewed as social deviants, justifiably subject to scorn and removal of social support (e.g., Reagan and “welfare queens”).

Max's racial awareness development was more systematically ingrained in his communication major. For him, this area of study became an exploration of the power of media in shaping consumption patterns. In Max's understanding, he and society at large, were socialized by how the media frames issues and specifically by how this imagery frequently reinforces racial stereotypes. The information from his classes made him question his own vulnerabilities and his views on race. Having lacked much exposure to people of color either in high school or college, he realized that many of his racial beliefs were formed through his unconscious acceptance of racist media portrayals, in which, for example, Black men were constantly portrayed as thugs. As he described, it "[Classes] made the light bulb go on, but I still have a lot to learn" (Max, SWU). Like many of the other participants, Max gained increased knowledge of both society and himself once he entered college, especially in relation to the amount he did not know.

Race-conscious education was frequently an eye-opening experience for the participants, showing them a reality that differed from their own. The irony of these participants' narratives is that they consistently highlighted education as disrupting certainty, not creating it. The first major step many undertook with respect to race and education was realizing they did not understand racial issues. Rather than a banking model of education whereby the instructor presents essential knowledge and the student takes it in (Freire, 2000), the primary function for several of these interviewees was creating a heuristic for how little they actually knew about contemporary racism. Uncertainty led to self-interrogation, while they were becoming increasingly cognizant that fundamentally race matters (West, 1994).

Empathy and Minority Experiences. The final means by which participants increased their racial cognizance stemmed from their minority experiences. By minority experiences, I mean that they held a marginalized social identity within a system of oppression (e.g., being gay in a heterosexist society). This status meant the participants were targeted because of their social identity, which is important because Reason, Millar, and Scales (2005) argue that having a marginalized identity can positively affect racial justice ally development. While these experiences by themselves did not create an increased understanding of how racism structures society, they frequently engendered greater empathy and understanding for other oppressed communities.

Three of the participants spoke of how their status as a religious minority contextualized and informed their views on race. David was Muslim while Alex and Zeke were Jewish. David drew a connection between being a religious *and* a racial minority: "Well, you know, there's just certain things people assume about you and . . . a lot of visibility when they realize you're from some racial or religious minority, like, even for myself" (David, WU). He realized that people, on learning of his religious background, tended to

treat him differently. This difference was especially pronounced in a post-9/11 U.S. context where overt bigotry against Muslims became more prevalent. David saw people making Islam synonymous with terrorism, and thus, he developed empathy for racial minorities who are consistently viewed as “criminals, unintelligent, or promiscuous” (David, WU).

Zeke had a similar experience being Jewish. He talked about his father’s experiences with anti-Semitism and how they shaped his worldview:

Being Jewish, I don’t like to advertise it all that much because people seem to have preconceived notions about Jewish people, as they do all people, but I don’t exactly like to . . . I like to blend in and go under the radar. . . . Sometimes people say, like, “Oh, so your family must be really rich.” That’s a stereotype, or something like, “Oh, why aren’t you wearing that funny hat today?” . . . Maybe they don’t mean to be racist, but it comes out like that. (Zeke, WU)

Zeke realized he had the ability to assimilate into mainstream (Christian) society, and it became a constant negotiation to determine how outwardly Jewish he wished to appear. While this negotiation did not help Zeke understand how racism operates, it did help him empathize with others who constantly have to navigate socially hostile environments due to racially discriminatory practices and beliefs.

Just like being a religious minority, being gay or bisexual did not promote an understanding of how racism operates, but it helped familiarize these participants with what it is like to be persecuted, oppressed, and a socially marginalized target. Those sexual minorities who were working through Whiteness used their experiences of being gay or bisexual as a means of increasing understanding across racial lines. Jason said, “Yeah, and so it’s only because of my experiences as a [sexual] minority simultaneously with college that have finally allowed me, I think, to get a better picture of [racism]” (Jason, SWU).

Chris came to the same conclusion regarding the relationship between his sexual orientation and views on racism. Being White, he had difficulty understanding racism from the minority perspective, but he saw that heterosexual people had the same difficulty with respect to his being gay:

Well, I guess if you haven’t experienced being in a minority group, you wouldn’t have an opinion that matches that minority group, so even though I’m not a racial-ethnic minority, I’m a minority in terms of being gay and sexual preference. So I can identify with these different racial groups, and . . . that’s where my understanding comes from. So maybe if I were straight and White, I would probably have a different opinion. (Chris, SWU)

Chris specifically linked his understanding of homophobia to his empathy regarding issues of racial inequality. He believed that, if he had been hetero-

sexual, he might now have had the same understanding; but because of his minority experience, he saw parallels with racial justice struggles. Chris was also quick to criticize both groups (racial and sexual minorities) as needing to continue working through their own racism and heterosexism: "But I think that both gay people in general need to understand race matters and people that are [racial] minorities need to understand gay matters because there's a lot that we all have in common." Through these experiences, the participants not only learned to become more cognizant of how racism adversely affects the lives of people of color, but also how it privileges Whites.

Critiquing White Privilege

Just because a White person is racially cognizant and able to identify racial disadvantage does not mean that he or she will also acknowledge the privileges of Whiteness (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). This is, in part, because identifying racial disadvantage does not require self-interrogation regarding how one is complicit in the oppression of racial minorities. In addition, it avoids the question of how the achievements of Whites are partially facilitated by racial privilege. The participants who were working through Whiteness identified several ways in which skin color gives White people advantages over people of color, thereby discussing issues of racism in terms of both minority disadvantage and also White privilege.

Many of the examinations of White privilege focused on immunities that White people enjoy relative to people of color. For example, Benji felt that part of his White privilege was the ability to be oblivious to race if he so chose:

I don't have to think about my race and I don't have to worry if people are going to judge me on who I am as much as, like, any minority would, so in that respect, I guess there's . . . a lot of opportunity. . . . You know, I can turn on the television and see our White president or White rich business people. . . . Kids growing up White don't think like, "Oh, these aren't available opportunities because of my race." (Benji, WU)

Benji made his statement before the election of President Obama, and it would be interesting to see how his views have changed in terms of an analysis of racial role models. Regardless, he still felt that, as a result of his racial background, he never had to question how high he could rise in U.S. society.

Larry examined the question of White privilege through the community organizing work he did in low-income, minority areas. He critiqued many of the White people working in the nonprofit world as having a "savior complex":

I think there's this whole concept of White guilt, you know, like the whole White population in the nonprofit industry and all this to where in an effort to sort of assuage that guilt it's like, "Well, I serve these communities. You can no longer say this and that about me." (Larry, WU)

Larry appreciated those willing to work in the nonprofit sector, but he was critical of the reasons for pursuing a profession in that field. Larry did not feel that action driven by guilt was productive, because it eventually became self-serving.

Greg offered a more philosophical perspective on racism: The first step in working through Whiteness is looking within the self. He argued:

I think that you need to recognize [racism] in yourself first before you can even presume to change . . . to participate in changing it and I think that that's like . . . I think it's very common, that it's one to get over and recognize that we're all racist. Like that's a relevant moral position from which to begin. I mean, it's certainly not an end, but [it is a beginning]. (Greg, SWU)

Greg argued that self-interrogation was not an end in and of itself. Rather, it was an initial point from which to engage and challenge racism. Greg's perspective is similar to Freire's (2000) argument that the development of a critical consciousness is insufficient to promote social change if it is not coupled with action.

Racial Justice Actions: Developing Praxis

Freire (2000) argued that, in order to truly engage in liberatory praxis, people "must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49). The participants tended to channel their critiques into tangible actions, which can be problematic from the position of those in dominant social classes because their actions can sometimes re-create the very practices of oppression they are trying to combat (Edwards, 2006). Those who were working through Whiteness not only became aware of their racial privileges, but they also developed the agency to struggle against it with varying degrees of dedication and involvement. These actions were sometimes bold and dramatic (e.g., organizing rallies in favor of affirmative action) and other times behind closed doors (e.g., disrupting familial racism). Benji was part of the WU student lobby, and one of its key issues was promoting the California DREAM Act.² This act would allow undocumented students to receive financial aid at public institutions of higher education in California. Even though Benji was not an undocumented student, he worked on this issue because "I would say I think that undocumented students have the right to education just like anyone else" (Benji, WU). To him, it was a simple

²The California DREAM Act is different from the Federal DREAM Act as undocumented students in the state of California already pay in-state tuition as a result of 2001's AB540. For the text of the California DREAM Act, ultimately vetoed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, see http://info.sen.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/sen/sb_1301-1350/sb_1301_bill_20080220_introduced.pdf.

formulation: All students deserve an education regardless of immigration status, and he dedicated a great deal of time lobbying for an act from which he would never personally benefit.

Josh had a similar reaction to the issue of affirmative action and diversity on campus. He was loosely affiliated with the Black Student Union of WU when there was a collective lobbying effort of WU's Regents to take action against the record low numbers of Black students on campus. He said, "Well, last quarter we had the admissions crisis rally. Uh, I spoke somewhat on behalf of the Black Student Union to the Regents" (Josh, WU). Like Benji, Josh did not personally benefit from this action, but he also believed that, as a White man, he fit a "racial aesthetic" (Josh, WU) that would make the Regents listen more closely than if he were Black. Josh felt it was a proper course of action, and he dedicated his time to working with the Black Student Union, formulating strategic means of addressing the underrepresentation of Black undergraduates at WU.

Sometimes, the racial justice actions that participants took were in response to the racism of friends and family. For example, Jason (SWU) stated, "Well, only a couple of days ago, my grandfather sent me an email that said Michelle Obama's graduate thesis was *How To Kill Whites, Volume I*." Jason did not think the claim sounded factually accurate, so he checked the *New York Times* and Snopes (a website dedicated to debunking urban legends). He did not find anything to confirm this claimed thesis title, so "[I] went back to my grandfather and said, 'That email you sent me is wrong.'" His grandfather dismissed Jason's protest, calling him "out of touch." The rest of his relatives shunned him:

I mean, I call home once a week, check on how my siblings and such are doing, and I called. They were very curt. They said they were busy. I have a pretty extended family and we all do keep in touch, and so at first I just thought I was hearing some bad schedules, but then as it became more and more consistent, I finally realized that I'm in the racial doghouse for daring to defend a Black person. (Jason, SWU)

The situation was very difficult for Jason to deal with because he and his family were very close. At the end of the interview, Jason told me explicitly that none of his family members were as overtly bigoted as his grandfather. Jason's breach of familial etiquette came from contradicting the patriarch. Thus, his family members highlighted how power differentials can promote racist practices via silence. I asked Jason why he took action, and he responded simply, "Because it was fair" (Jason, SWU). I probed for more details:

Q: OK, but what makes it fair and why is it necessary to promote fairness? Let me put it this way. Growing up—all the time you're on the playground, Mom and Dad say, "Grow up, kid. Life's not fair."

A: Life is what we make of it; and if I want life to be fair, then the thing I have to do first and foremost is be fair to everyone I can around me. If life isn't fair, well, you know who's in charge of your life? You. And if you start making your life fair and the areas that you can influence fair, maybe life in general will get a little bit more fair once enough people do it. (Jason, SWU)

Regardless of reasoning, those working through Whiteness tended to come to the same conclusions: Race/racism is a pertinent, contemporary social issue and morally they needed to take action. Despite these developments, the participants still had a great deal of work left to be done on their racial selves.

Work Still to Be Done

Freire (2000) argued that people are necessarily incomplete beings who through analysis and experience are constantly in the process of becoming. Despite the numerous ways in which the participants in this study promoted racial equity through thought and action, they still had a great deal of work to be done on their racial selves. For example, Zeke was not fully aware of some of his unconscious habits of Whiteness (Sullivan, 2006) and how they can re-create racial power dynamics. He began by critiquing how racism disadvantaged racial minorities, and then essentialized disadvantage:

I think there are double standards and some people do treat African American people and Latino people differently. I try to be more positive towards African people . . . African American people and Latino people because I know they sometimes have harder times of it in our society, so I try to hold open the doors, I try to smile more, and then kind of . . . I guess maybe it's a reverse discrimination where I try to make up for what history has done to them. (Zeke, WU)

He openly admitted to taking a patronizing view toward racial minorities, not understanding how his thoughts and actions re-create what Trepagnier (2006) describes as "silent racism" or how well-meaning White people perpetuate the racial divide. Zeke very much wanted to take his White privilege and utilize it in the service of racial minorities; however, he did not understand that holding open doors does little to counter racism and can be interpreted as assuming minority helplessness.

Max discussed the guilt he encountered while attempting to navigate his responsibility as a privileged White person:

There's this guy . . . actually I became friends with him, Francis, but I think I overly was nice to him, so I guess that's like the White guilt syndrome or something, you know. He's a great guy and I like him a lot, but now. . . I just remember one time we went out and his brother was there and I was just overly nice to him and I just think some of that had to do with the guilt or something. I was just trying to be . . . I don't know. (Max, SWU)

While Zeke framed his response more as a moral responsibility he owed people of color, Max thought his actions derived more from White guilt, which he openly found problematic. Regardless of the motivation, both Max and Zeke described being “overly nice” to racial minorities. While well-intentioned these actions were also ineffective at combating racism.

Larry had a dramatically different experience but also continued to grapple with issues of race and his positionality as a White man. He was a strong supporter of public schooling but felt that part of his White privilege entailed the ability to send his children to private school, especially with a degree from WU and subsequent job opportunities. Larry was adamant that he did not want his future children to attend a private school, but his girlfriend continually problematized his viewpoint:

Me and my girlfriend have this argument all the time because I’m, like, “Regardless, my kids are going to all public schools,” and she went to all public schools too. She’s, like, “But you still can’t just say that. You have to evaluate the conditions of things. You can’t make your child a social experiment.” That’s true, too. So how can we as a White people really confront how we feel beyond the rhetoric, beyond the identifying points of, “Yes, I believe in civil rights. Yes, this . . .” Will you really go live in that neighborhood like you said? Will you really let so-and-so live next door and not feel weird about it or not think that . . . that challenge is on the burden of White people because with power comes responsibility. (Larry, WU)

Larry believed that private school education hurt those without access to it who tend to be poor and minority students. He did not want to be part of the system, but he also saw the value in his girlfriend’s position that he should not make his children a “social experiment.” Thus, he was caught between a path that he felt was correct in terms of promoting equity and the future education of his children. This was a constant struggle for Larry: To what degree was he willing to accept the social privileges of Whiteness and how could he use them to undercut the racial hierarchy?

Ultimately, Larry and many others working through Whiteness realized they did not possess all the answers. Negotiating race in a White supremacist society provides many difficult, situationally specific scenarios, in which the correct path is not, metaphorically speaking “black or white.” Rather, this ambiguity required constantly asking, “How do my actions reinforce or challenge the racism?” As Josh said, “It’s difficult to recondition yourself when you think about how conditioned you are. Um, and so that’s a constant process that I go through” (Josh, WU). This was a continuous development because he felt that he had been conditioned for many years, like a “cycle of socialization” (Harro, 2000), to put people into convenient racial boxes and his personal challenge involved reversing that conditioning process.

DISCUSSION

This project was initially intended as a means of analyzing White male racial ideologies and the collegiate experiences that influence them. Instead, the participant narratives illuminated the process by which White men engage and struggle with working through Whiteness. Their narratives tended to begin with racial cognizance development that was prompted through cross-racial contact and multicultural education. Both of these activities tended to rely upon the establishment of a personal connection to racism via a humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 2007). This humanizing pedagogy, whether employed in the classroom or in interpersonal relationships, made the issue of racism a tangible reality rather than an abstraction. The participants were also affectively primed by their personal minority experiences. While being a minority did not teach them specifically about racism, it prompted an awareness of systemic oppression and allowed them to draw parallels between their experiences and those of racial minorities. The intersection of emotional and cognitive preparation allowed the participants to criticize persistent, systemic racism, while also finding localized means of struggling against it. However, their narratives also demonstrated that just because one proactively combats racism does not imply that one has moved beyond race. Rather, the participants continued to struggle with racism in their daily lives and sometimes unconsciously re-created the very social oppression they tried to combat. The process, however, needs to be further interrogated.

The methods of developing racial cognizance were predominant in the participants' narratives, with less attention to critiques of White supremacy and praxis. This emphasis is expected because younger people tend to be less advanced in their racial identity development (Helms, 1990; Tatum, 2003). However, Apple (1998) cautions that CWS can unintentionally recenter Whiteness within debates about racism, thereby perpetuating the marginalization of voices of color. This dynamic poses some important, practical issues to those working with White college students: How much attention does racial cognizance development warrant? How much does this attention detract from supporting students of color? There is not a simple answer to these tensions; rather, they are questions that need to be consistently considered so that the support of students working through Whiteness does not re-create the marginalization of students of color this process is supposed to disrupt.

The participants' processes of working through Whiteness were additionally problematic given the importance of cross-racial friendships in helping develop racial cognizance. The participants learned a great deal from the formation of these interpersonal relationships, but to what extent should students of color be required to be the educators of their White peers? Where is the White students' individual responsibility for struggling against

racism? This consideration is especially important at predominantly White institutions of higher education where the potential for forming cross-racial friendships is limited due to the campus's compositional diversity.

Therefore, it was increasingly important that multicultural education (i.e., course content regarding race) also played a substantial role in shaping participants' understandings of how racism continues to differentially structure opportunity along racial lines. A key component of this type of education entailed a humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 2007) in which the participants did not simply absorb the numbers regarding racial inequality but in which their professors placed a human face on the social problem. Through multicultural education, participants partially disrupted the hegemonic, White "epistemology of ignorance" (Mills, 1997) both by increasing their knowledge base and by concurrently understanding that, when it comes to race, they have much to learn. Thus, they did not become experts on the subject of race but rather became aware of their personal ignorance.

College education facilitating these developments was very important for three reasons. First, it means that racial minorities were not expected to be the teachers of their White peers, which has been shown to take a psychological toll on them (Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Second, the ability to increase racial cognizance in the absence of racial minorities means that students can learn about issues of race regardless of their institutions' compositional diversity. Finally, the initial steps in racial justice ally formation are usually externally prompted, and classroom experiences in higher education can play an integral role in facilitating this process (Broido & Reason, 2005). Yet in terms of higher education practice, most in-class activities were not institutionally structured. Rather, it was individual professors and their ability to engage their students through both content and style that helped some of the participants realize the truth in West's (1994) pithy thesis: race matters. Thus, a great deal of racial justice ally development was lost at these two institutions because a humanizing pedagogy was happenstance instead of systemically sanctioned.

Despite this need for White students to be pushed to consider issues of racism, some participants were more affectively prepared to engage than others. One key factor related to this increased openness was a minority experience which helped engender a sense of empathy for racial struggles in much the same way that Peggy McIntosh's (1989) work in critical feminism helped open her to understanding the way race privileged her. This finding was not unexpected, and other scholars have made similar arguments (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005); however, this outcome is not universal to all minority experiences (hooks, 1990). Racism continues to persist among marginalized communities (Han, 2008; Roediger, 2003), and their experiences should not be idealized. Rather, for these participants,

their targeted social identity helped them create a sense of “linked fate” (Josh, WU) across oppressions.

To this end, those working with White students have the potential of utilizing intersecting identities, in particular the marginalized ones, to create understanding across difference. This pedagogical approach requires a delicate balance because it would be inappropriate to essentialize an oppressed identity and assume that it will be a springboard to working through Whiteness. Rather, professors and student affairs professionals need to highlight similarities across struggles against oppression, in particular, how those of a privileged social position tend to be unaware that they are privileged (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; McIntosh, 1989; Reason & Evans, 2007). Pedagogically, highlighting such privileged positions becomes a means of affectively priming White students for self-interrogation regarding their role in perpetuating racism, a process made easier if students have preexisting understandings of oppression (Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). Given the importance of marginalized social identities in promoting an increased willingness to engage issues of racism, future research needs to see if women tend to be more open to interrogating White supremacy than men. While that question lay beyond the scope of the current study, it will be very important to see how the further intersection of marginalized and privileged social identities informs students’ willingness (or unwillingness) to engage issues of racism.

The participants developed the ability to criticize the existing racial project, and many also used their awareness as a means of developing agency to struggle against systemic racial oppression. Some took bold actions on campus in supporting the diversification of the student body or working in community-based nonprofits. Others took action countering the racist actions of their friends and families. Thus, these participants developed praxis (Freire, 2000), seeing themselves as potential agents of social change. However, much like racially conscious course content, these actions tended to occur in the absence of institutional sanction.

Problematizing these manifestations of praxis, Freire (2000, 2007) argued that it is through collective action directly linked to oppressed communities that social transformation occurs. With the exceptions of Josh and Larry, most racial justice actions were taken in the absence of people of color. This pattern was not unexpected, given that many participants continued to exist in environments where they were in the racial majority. This critique is not to demean, for example, Jason’s stance against his grandfather’s racist email. Rather, a social movement of one is not a social movement at all. Those working through Whiteness demonstrated the ability to develop praxis, but a great deal of potential was lost because these actions were not taken in conjunction with people of color.

In addition, the participants continued to struggle with issues of race and racism, especially romanticizing racial minority experiences. Several fell into

the trap of colorblindness as they consistently reported forgetting the racial background of the interviewer despite my self-identification at the beginning of the interview. This continual struggle with racism highlights a key limitation in the existing literature on racial justice ally development. Reason, Millar, & Scales's (2005) model utilized Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) conceptual frame. In their analysis, the outcome (O) was a racial justice ally, but the problem with this formulation is that it treats personal development as an end achieved. If becoming a racial justice ally is an end met, then students who become allies can stop working on their racial selves. Instead, Feagin and O'Brien (2003) argue, working through Whiteness is much like being a recovering alcoholic: overcoming previous habits, forming new ones, and being aware of the potential to relapse. To this end, those working with White college students need to take care they appropriately frame the problem. There is a tendency of those in privileged social positions to engage oppression only to the extent that they can move beyond it (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin & O'Brien, 2003). Instead, working through Whiteness is not an end met, but a continual process engaged.

Finally, the narratives of these participants challenge some of the foundational research of CWS. In contrast to the visions of Whiteness espoused by Ignatiev (1995, 1997) and Roediger (1994, 2003), the participants demonstrated that Whiteness and racism are not necessarily synonymous. Larry and Josh were both markedly more advanced in their racial understandings and more committed to racial justice actions than the others. It is possible to refer to them as "racial justice allies" given their nuanced understandings of race and racism, critiques of racism both in society and within themselves, and engagement in racial justice struggles (Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). Even for participants less advanced in their racial identity development, their processes of working through Whiteness continued to challenge and transform what it means to be White. Moving beyond the essentialized version of Whiteness as inherently oppressive (Ignatiev, 1997; Roediger, 1994), the participants demonstrated that it is possible to struggle against racial privilege and continue to be White. Many of Larry's Black friends in high school took an Ignatiev approach to Whiteness and told him that he was so committed to community struggles while being a "cool guy" that he was Black. Larry appreciated the acceptance but questioned why he could not be socially conscious, cool, and White. After a few months of denying his race, Larry told his friends, "Naw, I'm White, and I'm still down!" (Larry, WU).

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