

Perceptions of White Identity and White Liability: An Analysis of White Student Responses to a College Campus Racial Hate Crime

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This study takes a qualitative approach to understanding perceptions of White student identity in response to a racial hate email circulated to minority students throughout a predominantly White university campus community in the U.S. in 1999. This investigation adopts a critical White studies framework. Results indicated that even though White students did not feel the need to identify themselves as "White" because of its sense of normalcy, they still enjoyed and expected the privileges of being a member of that race. There is also a sense that their Whiteness is perceived as a negative attribute that now places them at a perceptual disadvantage in society. Additionally, the participants reported that their Whiteness should not be used as a marker of liability for continuing racial hate against minorities.

It has been acknowledged for quite some time that racial and cultural identities are not only conspicuously communicated via visible physiognomic cues, but are also socially constructed and negotiated (Kovel, 1984; Sleeter, 1994; Terry, 1981). The negotiation of racial and cultural identities or the rendering of cultural contracts (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, in press; Jackson, in press) implies that self-definitions may shift in relation to both the interactants involved and the context itself as defined by time, place, and space. We, as racial and cultural beings, in many ways shape who we are and how we see the world. Likewise, we are being shaped by others' perceptions and social constructions, which suggests that there is an exchange of cultural values, mores, beliefs, orientations, and worldviews that takes place constantly in communicative episodes, and this contributes to the constitution of the self (Jackson, 1999a; Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Often that exchange is unequal or strained in Black-White interracial encounters because of

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the collective power imbalance between the two in the United States. This tension has a deleterious effect upon race relations and promotes the emergence of hate crime activity.

Within an episode where racism is communicated, the dialectical exchange between interactants is immediately engaged by the instrumentation of race—its corporeal visibility, instinctive historical gaze, profound modernist obsession, and signficatory political meaning (Jackson, 1999b). Identity negotiation is already intricate; race complicates the discursive equation and invokes polarity, skin color politics, normativity, and, perhaps most of all, liability. Instantaneously, it calls White identities into question for two reasons: first, because racism is a power-laden activity meant to sustain privilege, and, second, the logic of race equates White identities with privilege (Wiegman, 1995).

Racial hate crimes almost seem endemic to academic institutions, where freedom of expression is celebrated and incivility is often mildly penalized. The fact is that mediocre responses to racial hate crimes promote more hate crimes because they are seen as permissible. For too long, studies of race and racial hate crimes have left the responsibility of change to the victims of the crime. We can no more expect a rape victim to alter the prospects of rape in the minds of potential rapists than we can racial hate crime victims to single-handedly resolve the problem of race without the help of potential racists.

The investigation of race demands an investigation of both its function and liability. In an effort to explore the confluence between racism, privilege, Whiteness, and perceived liability, the present study examines White student responses to a campus racial hate crime committed via the Internet on a large, northeastern U.S. college campus. Examining White identity and perceptions in the context of a racially motivated hate crime on a predominantly White campus offers a unique perspective on racism in higher education. The rational impulse in deciphering the resultant effect on identity after a hate crime is to analyze the responses of marginalized group members as targets of the hate crime. Instead, in the aftermath, we have chosen to investigate both the identities of Whites and the social perception of White liability. In order to accomplish this, we first provide a theoretic framework explaining the social construction of race in the U.S. Secondly, we offer some background of racial hate crimes, then a review of the literature concerning White positionality as well as profiles and recommendations for surveillance of hate crime perpetrators. Finally, we discuss methods, results, and implications for future research.

The Social Construction of Race

Race is a social construction, not simply a biological one. The school of thought known as social constructivism refers to the idea that people understand themselves and their behaviors through association with others. Social constructivism or social construction of reality originates from George Kelley's personal construct theory, which suggests that we are all "naïve scientists" constantly seeking to reduce uncertainty in our lives. Hence, social constructivists argue that people use

observations within a given society as a template for appropriate behavior in that society. As social constructs become concretized, they become ordinary and are then sustained within our patterns of communication behavior. They become contextualized ways of knowing. Race is one social episteme that has been constructed, sustained, and normalized.

Although West (1993) points out that French physician François Bernier created the term "race" in 1684 to classify dead bodies, the contemporary use of race is predicated on the social implications of visible physiognomic differences. As Wiegman (1995) notes, race is a visible economy, a factor that does not just signify cultural difference, but also life possibilities. We agree with Yehudi Webster (1992), author of *The Racialization of America*, who clarifies race as being the product of a classification scheme in which anatomical differences are tantamount, but social meaning is ignored. Jackson (2000a) explains this idea further by theorizing race as a preverbal communication construct reified via "corporeal zones" such as the skin, face, lips, and nose. These zones facilitate the immediate placement of interactants in racial categories before the talk begins. This becomes the catalyst for assigning social relevance and meaning as well as racial stereotypes. In other words, the social construction of race is the perceptual component that translates into social cognition based upon the visible recognition of difference (Essed, 1991).

Background on Racial Hate Crimes

A growing awareness and increasing concern about hate crimes as a major category of criminal activity prompted the United States Congress to enact the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990. This Act mandated that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) develop and maintain a hate crime statistical data collection system. In 1994, the Hate Crimes Statistics Act was amended to expand the criterion used for defining what qualifies as a hate crime. Currently defined by the FBI (Hate Crime Statistics, 2000):

A hate crime, also known as a bias crime, is a criminal offense committed against a person, property, or society which is motivated in whole or in part by the offender's bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity/national origin. (www.fbi.gov/ucr)

In 1998, the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program revealed 65.5% of the total 7,755 incidents of reported hate crime were motivated by racial bias. Keep in mind that these numbers were voluntarily reported. Except under audit or coercion, many organizations are hesitant to report such negative information because the possible publicity that comes along with such a report might reduce clientele or limit the success of a business. Consequently, these numbers are actually deflated. Postsecondary institutions reporting any occurrence on campus of specified criminal offenses that manifest evidence of prejudice indicate only 1% for the years 1992–1994 (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs>). This latter figure, however, can be challenged in light of recent news headlines regarding racial hate crimes on college and university campuses. Unlike the typical college campus hate crimes in-

volving direct physical confrontation or an indirect memo slipped under a dormitory room door, there is a marked increase in hate crimes committed via the internet. Drucker and Gumpert (2000) agree and assert, "The Internet provides new opportunities for criminals. . . . It is a medium of convergence both technically and socially" (p. 134).

In November 1999, the campus racial climate of a predominantly White institution, the Yurugu University,¹ was spotlighted as a direct result of a racial hate crime committed against Black students via campus email. This university was selected as the research site for the present investigation because of the exigency and intense responses regarding this racial incident. Additionally, Yurugu University is one of the largest and most elite universities in the United States. Rather than analyze the discourse that resulted from the incident, we decided to examine the issue of Whiteness that is implicit in any discussion of racial hate crimes. Because the perpetrator of this incident is still unknown, that person could be of any racial origin. Yet, due to the nature of race as a White-Black or White-non-White concern in the U.S., it seemed both logical and heuristic to seek the perspectives of Whites as it pertains to in-group/out-group perceptions and responsibility for campus racial hate crimes. Although studying the impact of these hate crimes from the victims' perspective offers potential insight into the social cognition of marginalized group members, it is clear that the true force and influence of hate crimes is attributable to the power and dominance of centralized groups like middle- and upper-class Whites, heterosexuals, and males in the U.S. In avoiding the superior-inferior dialectic inherent in discussions of White dominance, one also expunges the rudiments of what constitutes a *racial* hate crime as a bias crime. In order to explore this dialectic with respect to hate crimes, a discussion of White positionality is necessary.

White Positionality and Hate Crimes

With the prospect of White Americans becoming the statistical minority, a climate of fear is liable to emerge from the perceived shift of the country's wealth. Race relation theorists propose that a threat to group position provokes racial conflicts when the dominant group perceives the possible loss of power, resources, or other advantages (Gresson, 1982; Hurtado, 1992). This competition for resources may be a critical factor in shaping student perceptions of opportunity within an increasingly diverse society.

Gresson (1982) concurs with the notion of a potential loss by Whites through the concept of *backlash*. Backlash is described in connection with the sociological thought of betrayal phenomena that refer to "acts and accusation within and between different racial/ethnic collectivities" (Gresson, 1982, p. 61). He defines backlash as "a sociopolitical reaction to a felt invasion, violation or restriction of rights" (Gresson, 1982). Backlash can be viewed as a consequence of a marginalized effort, such as affirmative action, to challenge social oppression. Therefore, Whites

¹ This is a pseudonym used to protect anonymity in accordance with IRB standards.

may feel anger regarding their perceived suffering as a result of gains for minorities. This conflict for Whites can be linked to the notion of White privilege, often an unconscious sense of entitlement.

McIntosh (1992) suggests that at this historical juncture, White privilege is unacknowledged, denied, and protected by many Whites. She states, "As a White person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage" (McIntosh, 1992, p. 70). She further describes this privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets . . . which was "meant" to remain oblivious" (p. 71). It is important that we consider McIntosh's ideas in the context of the late 20th century, when her essay was written, and early 21st century in which we currently live. Before the civil rights movements (civil rights, Black power, women's liberation movements) of the 1960s and 1970s, Whiteness was far from invisible. Whiteness was consciously understood as a visible marker of privilege with "For Whites Only" signage everywhere denoting exclusive access to facilities such as restrooms, water fountains, lunch counters, and schools. That privilege is perhaps not as visible in many parts of the U.S. today, but hate crimes are evidence that racist attitudes still exist.

Monitoring Hate Crime Perpetrators

Although nationally known White supremacist groups like the National Alliance are usually the immediate associations made with hate crimes, the statistics reveal a much different perpetrator. Offenders can be categorized as three distinct types; thrill seekers, reactive offenders, and hard-core fanatics. Lawson and Henderson (1999) report that approximately 60% of offenders are "thrill seekers" often looking for approval and acceptance from peers through victimization. The second most common perpetrator is the "reactive offender." This perpetrator commits the crime because he perceives an assault has occurred upon his values or his identity. Finally, the most notorious, but least common, offender is the "hard-core fanatic." This perpetrator reportedly commits less than 1% of hate crime (Levin & McDevitt, 1999). Lawson and Henderson (1999) describe a fanatic as "imbued with the ideology of racial, religious, or ethnic bigotry and often a member of, or a potential recruit for, an extremist organization" (p. 24). Although all three types of perpetrators may be present on college campuses, the most common—"thrill seekers"—can often be the least detectable and most overlooked.

As a large predominantly White campus, Yurugu University has its share of racial tensions. Studies (Loo & Rolison, 1986; McClelland & Auster, 1990) have revealed that

even on relatively calm campuses there are differences in students' racial attitudes and considerable social distance among students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Alienation from the mainstream campus life is also reported to be particularly acute among minority students on White campuses. (Hurtado, 1992, p. 541)

Additionally, Hurtado noted that racial conflict should be seen as an indication of unresolved racial issues in college environments and not merely as isolated or abnormal incidents. These racial tensions, if not monitored or addressed, could lead to much more stigmatizing and harmful happenings as in the case of Yurugu University's hate email incident.

Colleges and universities are feeling increasing pressure from the federal government regarding the reporting of hate crimes on campus. In 1999, then President Clinton called upon the U.S. Education Department to collect and periodically publish data on hate crimes that occur at the nation's colleges and universities. Colleges had already been required to report such data to the FBI as a result of the amended Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1993. However, according to a 1998 article:

of the 487 colleges that sent reports for 1996 to *The Chronicle [of Higher Education]*, just over one third listed the category of hate crimes. And only a handful of those colleges said they actually had a hate crime occur on the campus. (Lively, 1998, p. A57)

As would be expected, colleges and universities do not want to be labeled as racist institutions, so they do not always volunteer this information. The new legislation passed in Fall of 1998, however, mandates institutions to submit hate crime information to the Education Department for the review of statistics and release to congressional committees and the public.

Method

The data gathered in the present study emerged from two focus group interviews. The groups consisted of eight and seven students, respectively. The two focus groups, entirely comprised of White students, were conducted at a predominantly White university in the northeastern U.S. (Yurugu University), by a 25-year-old White female facilitator. The 15 focus group participants represented a convenient sample recruited via student affairs administrators, student organizations, and word of mouth. All respondents were voluntary participants. They were undergraduate students majoring in several disciplines, including education, sociology, psychology, and premedical. There were four women and four men in the first focus group, and six women and one man in the second group. The age range of these respondents was 18 to 23. Both interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded. Anonymity was preserved and, after transcribing, the tapes were destroyed in accordance with the institutional review board requirements. Rather than attempting to represent how all Whites feel, the research was intended to gain in-depth information on how a few White students characterize their Whiteness in relation to non-White students. Approximately midway through the interviews, participants were asked to read a copy of the hate email (see Figure 1) and to discuss it. Naturally, this was in light of the recent racial hate email message sent to Black students at Yurugu University.

From: "James Hitler" <gaypirate@hotmail.com>
To:
Date: Tue, 02 Nov 1999 23:27:51 GMT
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; format=flowed

Kill all Niggers. You never will survive on our campus, so take your diversity grant and shove it up your ass. we will have our march to uphold true and authentic american values.

Figure 1. Text of Yurugu University's racist hate email.

The primary objective of the study was to discover how students who identify themselves as White define or redefine their identities in the temporal context of a recent racially motivated hate crime. The principal research questions that underlie the study areas follows: How do White students define and order their identities? How do White students feel their identities are defined and ordered by non-White students? Do White students feel they are being held liable for the recent racial hate crime incident because of their Whiteness?

The data that emerged from the group interviews was analyzed using the constant comparison method. This technique, recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), suggests "unitizing and categorizing . . . units of information" (p. 344) to discover emergent themes. The technique dictates that each unit or idea has value and should be recorded on individual note cards. After the note cards are shuffled, they are then each reviewed and categorized. All the cards must be examined and assigned to their appropriate category and thematic set. The categories are often researcher imposed, whereas the themes are emergent. These sets are then reviewed for inconsistencies and double-checked by a second reviewer. The first author of this essay served as that external auditor. Lincoln and Guba recommend that this be done to establish the confirmability and preserve dependability of the interpretations.

Perceptions of White Identity and Racial Liability

Eleven themes emerged from the focus groups and were organized into three distinct categories by the researcher. The themes listed in Table 1 are included under these categories: White Identity Defined by Self, White Identify Defined by "Other" or Non-White, and White Perception of Liability.

Category 1: White Identity Defined by Self

As noted in Figure 2, category one emerged to represent "White identity defined by self." Five themes surfaced within this category as the respondents attempted to define salient components of their identity.

Theme 1, "resistance to define," indicates the students' hesitancy about labeling

Table 1. Emergent Categories and Themes

Category 1: White identity defined by self

- Theme 1: Resistance to define
- Theme 2: Race as nonconcern
- Theme 3: American "mixing bowl"
- Theme 4: Assumed privilege
- Theme 5: Nonracist

Category 2: White identity defined by "other" or non-White

- Theme 6: Privilege
- Theme 7: Power
- Theme 8: Lack of cultural understanding

Category 3: White perception of liability

- Theme 9: "White" as a continuum
 - Theme 10: Racism as past tense
 - Theme 11: Displacement of responsibility
-

themselves and defining their identity. A male respondent revealed his internal conflict with having to racially categorize himself with his wish for society to recognize both his White and Native American heritage:

I have a hard time even like when I fill out those racial questionnaires, like "your race please" and you have to pick one. Sometimes I just chose "other," just because I feel like, I'm not sure how securely I fit in that White category. . . . I'm not necessarily always comfortable just being stuck in a category like that . . . So, I feel like I'm sometimes blurred as to what White is.

This comment is interesting because all of the respondents had to meet this study's criteria, which partly means they had to self-identify as White. Anyone who suggested that he or she was multiracial was declined participation in the study. So, this respondent's reluctance to immediately identify himself to the researchers as biracial is both socially and historically significant. This is understandable, according to Harris (2000), who explains that "racial ambiguity" cannot be tolerated . . . in a society obsessed with racial categorization; the 'dilemma' of biracial and bicultural identity has angered many people" (p. 185). She further explains that her Native American, European American, and African American ancestries are often submerged because of the "one-drop rule" (Davis, 1991). In keeping with McRoy and Zurcher's (1983) assertion that one needs only one sixteenth Black African ancestry to be African American, Harris explains that one's distinct physiognomic features facilitate racial categorization. Likewise, when one's corporeal zones are not so distinct, such as with a light-skinned Native American, it is easier to "pass" for being White. The principal benefit in passing for White is being able to blend

and gain immediate social approval without having to worry about inequitable treatment due to race. However, as the respondent of the present study begins to rethink his identifications with White American and Native American cultures, it becomes clear that he still feels connected to both. His ambivalence may be socially imposed, and he must figure out whether he will or will not claim or negotiate his cultural identities.

Theme 2, "race as nonconcern," describes the complete disregard of the students to define race as a significant part of their identity. When asked to describe the major factors of their identity, only 1 out of the 15 respondents mentioned their race, or being "White." The majority of the respondents focused on age, gender, what they are doing right now (e.g., student), what they aspire to be (e.g., teacher), and their interests. One respondent also mentioned her religious affiliation.

A male respondent confessed, "It didn't even cross my mind. I didn't think about it." A female respondent stated, "I mean I don't think we identify as White most of the time because it's not something that has to be salient. Like White is normal to a lot of people, so we don't really have to think about it because we're not forced to think about it." These statements reinforce McIntosh's (1992) claim that the privilege is implicit in Whiteness as a social construct and many Whites tend to remain oblivious of its presence. Martin (1996) agrees and has suggested that "White" is seen as naturalized and the standard by which others are measured.

Several respondents felt that their identity was a combination of ethnicities, hence the emergence of theme 3, "American 'mixing bowl.'" One female respondent suggested that as a member of the White race, "You really don't have like an identity—you're just all thrown into the mixing pot." Another male stated that, "I'm like a mixture of a bunch of different ethnic groups. If I would describe myself as a certain identity I'd probably have like 15 different things to say." He went on to say that, although being White did not define his identity, being American did: "I see myself as American." When asked to define American, he stated, "I would define American as an individual that lives and believes in freedom and democracy and independence." However, a different male respondent suggested that being American was more geographically than politically based. This indicates that the definition of American has become primarily individuistic and perceptual, and it is cultural only to the extent that it describes our connectedness to a land mass rather than each other. This seems to imply that our diversity as a nation has not truly manifested into a welcoming embrace of multiculturalism as a way of life, but perhaps just a visible array of difference.

Theme 4 emerged as several respondents admitted that being White comes with its *assumed privileges*. One female respondent explained that being White is, "skin but I also think that I'm happy that I'm White and probably, this is maybe going to offend some people, just because it's easy for us to be White. Like, it's harder for other people." Another female described being White as "power." Yet another female offered that, "White means not having to worry about, well most of the time, not having to worry about being prejudiced against or anything like that. Or, not doing something I want to do because something is holding me back.

Most of the time your color usually wouldn't hold you back if you're White." Another female responded that White means "not having to think about your skin color or whether it factors into anything [negatively]."

Theme 5, "nonracist," acknowledges both the guilt that Whites sometimes feel because of their race and the need to prove they are disassociated with racial oppression. A female respondent explained the guilt she felt in identifying herself as White because of the historical association of oppression by the White race. She finds it hard to define herself as White as indicated in her statement, "I feel the guilt of being a White person almost . . . White people have always been the oppressor—putting people down. And I have a hard time associating with that."

There is also a sense that White persons must prove they are not racist. A male respondent stated:

I am a member of this group that has historically been . . . has acted in ways that they should not have acted. And now whenever people meet me, I feel sometimes like they're almost under the assumption that I am going to act like other White males they may know who are discriminatory or who do act in certain ways.

The same male respondent commented that a part of being White is, "trying to break the molds or the assumptions, that you're assuming that you have the right to certain things. And also breaking the assumptions that I'm going to hold prejudices that other White people hold." There is a responsibility that comes along with White privilege and that is to limit how and when privilege limits cultural others' life possibilities (Jackson, 1999a; Jackson, Shin, & Wilson, 2000). Without that form of policing, *White solidarity* is enacted. Sleeter (1994) defines White solidarity as an implicit agreement to be silent about race when speaking directly about it as the more ethical and morally conscious alternative.

Category 2: White Identity Defined by Non-White "Other"

Category 2 encompasses the perceptions White students have of the ways in which non-White students might define White identity. In this category three themes (themes 6, 7, and 8) emerged: "privilege," "power," and "lack of cultural understanding," respectively.

Theme 6, privilege, emerged as a perception of White identity by non-Whites. When asked how they thought Blacks perceived their Whiteness, one female respondent stated, "having it easy." Another male respondent hesitated before he spoke, then predicted that Blacks may perceive a White sense of privilege through his comment. He indicated:

I think we [Whites] actually throw temper tantrums when we don't get what we want because you know, we expect that anything we do or anything we want, it's going to be given to us because of everything having been given to us.

These statements seem to suggest that Whites are acknowledging White privilege, thus making it more visible and validating these possible perceptions by non-Whites. This participant is speaking of entitlement, a mark of privilege connoting

an expectation of superior treatment. As McIntosh (1992) suggested, there are many ways that Whites experience privilege on a daily basis. She lists 46 ways she experiences privilege as a White woman, such as not being followed by security while shopping or being harassed by the police. So, when there is ordinarily a general civility and respect granted to you wherever you go and a positive valuation of your cultural difference, it makes sense that any deviation from that would be disturbing. The fact that Whites are "having it easy" compared to non-Whites only affirms what the Milton Eisenhower Foundation's "Millennium Breach" report has said: Our nation is still moving toward two societies, one Black, one White, separate, hostile, and unequal (Harris & Curtis, 1998). The authors conclude this is primarily because of White privilege being sustained.

Respondents also revealed aspects of theme seven, "power," through the idea that Blacks might see them as a threat. One female stated, "Maybe there is a threat of the possibility of them [Blacks] having a job, where we'd be the one who would take it." This comment suggests two things: one, that Whites have the power to take a job away from a non-White because of their race, and two, that there is a sense of individual and group entitlement to claim what some Whites feel are American jobs. Gresson (1982) clarifies these two points with respect to power. He asserts that Whites are the only racial group in the United States who have a stake in maintaining power. Presently, most of the high paying jobs are held by Whites (Wilson, Jackson, & Doughty, 1999), so if anyone is threatened, it would be those who fear that something may be taken from them, not those who desire to have the job. They are the threat to the dominant group [in this case, Whites], not the threatened ones.

Another perception of power is the notion that Whites could influence Blacks to negotiate their cultural identities. This is alluded to through the statement of a female respondent:

Traditionally in the African cultures, heavy women are fertile and that's why they're found attractive and that's why a lot of African American girls don't have eating disorders. But the numbers are rising because people are gaining each others cultures and like, I think it's a lot because we as White people don't have our culture and don't embrace our culture, are forcing people not to embrace their own cultures.

When discussing how some of her biracial friends have trouble identifying with either Black or White culture, a female respondent revealed an interesting perception. Making reference to White culture, she said, "Anybody can connect with our culture, just come on over and we'll let you in." Even though this statement can be interpreted as "inviting" in nature, it also emphasizes the distinct separation of races and the power of Whites to select whom they choose to "let in." This also illustrates White antiracism and the power to choose to "help" non-Whites, as noted by Marty (1999).

The final theme in this category, "lack of cultural understanding," deals with the perception of Whites that suggests non-Whites view them as lacking culture and, further, being incapable of comprehending Black culture. One female re-

spondent stated, "I think overall Black people view White people as not having as strong of a culture as they do." She qualified this statement by suggesting that Whiteness is seen as all-powerful, although, she contends, there is power in cultural variety.

One male respondent noted his frustration when people [of color] say, "You don't understand because you're White." In the context of racism he said, "I have ancestors too that were discriminated against and it's really hard to say that I'm to blame completely just because I'm White."

The suggestion is that present-day Whites should not be held liable for the pernicious behaviors of their ancestors. This is a typical claim, which does not take into account the residual benefits that White descendants have received from slavery. Not only do they collectively own more land and prime real estate as a group, but they also tend to have more financial inheritances, more family businesses, better paying jobs, and extended generations of formally educated foreparents. Each of these benefits is correlated with a greater likelihood of present-day dividends or possibilities for success (Wilson, Jackson, & Doughty, 1999). So, it is accurate to say that contemporary Whites do not share the same historical context as their ancestors, but they do benefit from that history and are socially positioned better as a result.

Category Three: White Perception of Liability

Category 3 encapsulates the perceptions that White students had concerning their position to racism, and ultimately the feelings of responsibility or liability they may or may not have about racial hate. Three final themes (themes 9, 10, and 11) surfaced in this category: "White' as a continuum," "racism as past tense," and "displacement of responsibility," respectively.

In theme 9, "White" as a continuum, respondents seem to view their Whiteness on a continuum from positive to negative. One male respondent stated, "Strictly fact for fact, it's positive. We have every advantage." Another male stated, "I definitely think it's positive . . . I view myself as being White and I'm proud of that or feel some pride in that." A female respondent said, "I can see where I get advantages from being White but because I'm White I don't look at them all the time." However, she felt the need to not seem like the "bad guy" and thus added, "I still get discriminated against sometimes where I go, it just depends on your situation." Another female respondent felt that "it [being White] doesn't really do anything for me, but it doesn't hold me back from anything." This perception of neutrality suggests that Whites have neither advantages nor disadvantages because of their race.

However, a negative perception regarding Whiteness was apparent in comments by the same male respondent who was proud to be White:

To go along with that is the admittance I can't take it for granted or I have to be mindful of my race or my Whiteness is in some way affecting somebody else, so in that way it's a negative attribute of my race. The negative attribute is that there are assumptions that can be made about me because of my race and I have to overcome those or I have to be careful because I may do something

that even though I intended it to be completely innocent would be perceived as a racist thing or something that's not being mindful of another person.

Participants also saw their Whiteness as negative when a loss of privilege or entitlement surfaced. For example, a male respondent said, "I know a lot of people that for filling out the job application will do the same thing because they feel that there is some kind of disadvantage to checking off White—when it comes to affirmative action and stuff like that." A female interviewee stated that, "There's almost like with other cultures a reverse racism. Where I guess they're trying to push their people ahead so far that it's like, forget about you." This is what is meant by White backlash as alluded to by Gresson (1982). The possibility of losing an attained position poses a threat to security, and anxiety is acted out against the threatening group sometimes via racism. Likewise, as many hate groups cogently argue, in their literature and on their websites, the best way to assuage such threats is through White pride and White solidarity. The primary concern of this study is when that pride is exhibited by committing crimes against another person.

Theme 10, "racism as past tense," emerged as respondents revealed a sense that racism was a thing of the past, denying a presence or prevalence in this generation. This notion was interesting in that it presented a contradiction. On the one hand, they felt a separation from racial oppression because it "happened a long time ago." On the other hand, they just discussed the severity of an actual incident of racial hate from only a few months ago. In addition, respondents revealed several instances of witnessing racist comments on campus. Thus, even though racism was acknowledged, there was still a sense that it is "overexaggerated."

One female respondent stated, "My parents are racist, but I'm sitting here talking about how it's not right." When discussing racial oppression, another male respondent stated, "the whole thing of your ancestors enslaved my ancestors thing. It's like we're being blamed currently for what happened a hundred years ago and like back. When it's not around anymore and you know it's like move on with life." Still another female stated:

I think that it happened a long time ago and it sucked and it was bad, but I really think that if they would just kind of let it go a little, things would be better. Like it seems like they're always, it's always about that. It isn't to me, like I don't ever focus on that. Like I think they're the same as us at this point and it seems like they still kind of focus like that it isn't the same.

The last statement illustrates the concept of "Whitespeak" suggested by Moon (1999). Subjectification of racism occurred through the use of "it," as in "it happened a long time ago." Also, the subject was disembodied through the anonymous agent, "they." The subject choices clearly communicate a distance between racism ("it"), Blacks ("they"), and the respondent. This distance can serve to excuse some Whites from confronting their own racial biases, presuppositions, and differential treatments of racial others, which is where contemplation of hate crimes begins.

Theme 11, “displacement of responsibility,” emerged as the White students, although recognizing a possible role in racism, ultimately detached themselves from liability. Several respondents did acknowledge that racism exists on a societal level, as in a female respondent’s statement:

I think that a lot of subtle racism still exists and we tend to maybe take note of that in passing and then kind of shove it under the table and not want to deal with it. And I think that manifests itself in different ways including racial hate crimes especially.

A male respondent added:

I think we all have to acknowledge our role in hate crimes, either allowing them to occur and not saying anything about it, being inactive, being passive or being active but not active enough or not active in the right way, or being active but not touching on things, I mean I think we can always do things better, there’s always room for improvement, so [we’re going to have to] work together here on this campus.

Other respondents placed responsibility for racial hate crime solely on the individual who commits the crime, describing the perpetrator as “uneducated,” “stupid,” and “small-minded.” One female respondent stated, “I don’t think I’m to blame because I can’t control what other people think and what other people feel.” A male respondent stated, “I don’t feel responsible for racial hate crimes if I’m not the one committing them.”

Another female respondent told a story of racial conflict between Black and White students at a party. She stated, “I don’t know if you guys have ever been to a fraternity party but if a Black person walks into a fraternity party, all heads turn, for the most part. Like you just don’t, it’s predominantly White.” Her comment suggested that Blacks should know better than to go there in the first place. She further stated that the Black students were “part of the football team so they think they have special privileges to just like treat whoever I guess any way they would like.” There was definitely a sense of defensiveness, territorial space, and displacement of blame for the incident.

It seems that the participants in this study did more self-reflective work during the focus group discussions than what they may have initially imagined. They interrogated themselves while grappling with what Whiteness, race, and hatred mean to themselves and others. We are curious about the Native American and White respondent who claimed a dual heritage. He was asked how he ordered and defined his identities. He spoke first of being a White American and then of being a Native American. Perhaps his ordering of identity was due to some self-perceived peer group pressure to submerge or secondarily order the Native American part of his cultural identity. Maybe it has always been ordered that way. It seems that his willingness to admit that he has a dual heritage is relieving to him and yet still troubling. In a social milieu in which the U.S. Census Bureau has just begun allowing census-takers to mark multiple cultural categories, there is still evidence of social pressure to identify with only one culture. Keep in mind, the

respondent was recruited because he self-identified as White. It was repeated during recruitment that the researcher was looking for White participants only. So, we think the White-Native American respondent may be grappling with some cultural identification issues, as many of us are. We are confident that his participation in this study triggered a shift in his consciousness about how he identified himself. Overall, there seems to have been some learning that took place during the discussions among all of the participants. We did not maintain contact with the participants afterwards, so there is no way to determine who was changed by the discussion.

Implications for Future Research

This study offers keen insight into White student identity in the emerging area of critical White studies. Unsilencing Whiteness and making it visible and salient to White students can establish a position in which both Whites and non-Whites will approach racism with a shared understanding of privilege and oppression. So, what does this study tell us about Whiteness? The various themes indicate that the extant literature is both right and wrong. Whiteness is still socially constructed as a racial descriptor. The literature is right in its suggestion that more Whites are a bit more liberal than their grandparents, and yet it seems they have inherited the same rose-colored lenses. The only difference is that many Whites these days want non-Whites to have rose-colored lenses, too, with little to no regard for how non-Whites are to acquire such lenses when their socioeconomic conditions do not always facilitate this. In that way, there is still some residual resistance to change, much of it being passive resistance. The literature is on point when it indicates that some Whites feel they are being targeted as the evil nemesis, when they feel they are not responsible for racism. Although the "Millennium Breach" (Harris & Curtis, 1998) does not offer much hope for cultural change and the alleviation of hate crimes, we sense that the open-mindedness and willingness of the present study's participants to engage in such a serious self-reflective discussion about race, racial hatred, bigotry, and being American is a beginning to genuine change, albeit on a small scale. Unfortunately, as this study indicates, the literature concerning White oblivion is still relevant. Whiteness will remain secure as a position of power and normalcy as long as it goes unacknowledged by the majority of Whites as a privileged position. The danger is that an identity based on superiority and socioeconomic power never has to develop self-consciousness (Pajaczkowska & Young, 1992).

We are optimistic that racial consciousness among Whites is changing for the better as colleges and universities are altering how they produce a climate of acceptance and community. With curricular change, personal reflection, demographic population shifts, and galvanized community responses to hate crimes of all types, Whiteness will no longer exist as an inexplicable cultural identification referent. It will gradually come to mean just another cultural difference, not polarity. The best of what we can hope for is an equal and fair valuation of each other's humanity.

An echoing query among a seemingly indefatigable legion of critical race theorists and critical White studies scholars is this: "Whose fault is it that racism exists and how do we solve the problem of race?" The key is turning racial liability into civic responsibility to one another. Our goal must not be to overcome race because race as a social episteme is insuperable. Certainly, it seems logical to avoid, dismiss, or redefine anything that is undesirable; however, race is not necessarily a pejorative term. It forces human interactants to see one another, to come to grips with cultural legacies, ancestry, and overall difference. As racial beings, we do not want people to look past our racial essences, but to acknowledge, respect, and value them. Truly, the principal question is what we can do with race as human beings, not what can we do without it!

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