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Interpreting Whiteness: Grappling with Race and Identity

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INTERPRETING WHITENESS: GRAPPLING WITH RACE AND IDENTITY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from The College of William and Mary

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Blessed are those who can give without remembering, and take without forgetting.

I would like to thank family, friends and professors for providing years of unyielding support and setting high expectations. This work is dedicated to those who share the dream of “A More Perfect Union.”
Interpreting Whiteness: Grappling with Race and Identity

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INTRODUCTION: COMPREHENDING RACE

The significance of race permeates every corner of American society. Our country’s history of slavery and racial discrimination required the institutionalization of laws, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, to protect basic rights. Still, continued racial residential segregation (Adelman 2004, Massey and Denton 1993), differences in inherited wealth (Shapiro 2004), unequal access to quality education (Saporito and Sohoni 2007), and disparities in occupational opportunities (Royster 2003) persist.

The discussion of race’s social implications has been rooted in an ongoing dispute of how to define it. As scholars became cognizant of society’s role in shaping our perceptions of the world, they concluded that nurture, rather than nature, determines how people comprehend race. W.E.B. Du Bois, the pioneer of the sociological study of race, is credited with being the first scholar to insist upon understanding race as a social construction. In *The Conservation of Race*, Du Bois ([1897] 2004:20) exposes the failure of using biology to conceptualize race: “Color does not agree with texture of hair, for many of the dark races have straight hair; nor does color agree with the breadth of the head, for the yellow Tartar has a broader head than the German; nor, again, has the science of language as yet succeeded in clearing up the relative authority of these various and contradictory criteria.” Instead, he argues that racial categories have emerged out of a history of socio-cultural dynamics of inequality.

Despite the expanse of the study of racial dynamics during the twentieth century, scholars have directed less attention to the study of whiteness. Du Bois understood that a complete depiction of American racial dynamics requires a detailed examination of whiteness. However, his exposure of white privilege in *The Souls of White Folk* (1920) has been overshadowed in scholarly discussion by *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and his concept of double-consciousness.
Fortunately, beginning in the early 1990’s, there has been a revival of whiteness studies through the contributions of sociologists such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010), David Roediger (1991), and Ruth Frankenberg (1993).

The study of whiteness has developed into an interdisciplinary field that predominantly utilizes qualitative methods to examine social meaning, text, dialogue, and identity. Important themes include the normative/invisible nature of whiteness, its association with socioeconomic privilege, the use of colorblind racism, white racial identity development, its interactions with other social constructs, and a recent emphasis on white racial identity as context specific.

Since racial dynamics depend upon the socio-historical environment, the study of whiteness must continually respond to significant societal changes. During my four years at the College of William & Mary as an Asian-American, I have observed white individuals react to a national context of having an African-American president, and a local context of increasing numbers of students of underrepresented backgrounds. Has whiteness become more visible to these students? How does visibility affect white racial identity? How do different experiences affect how they comprehend and talk about racial dynamics? Through the use of in-depth interviews, my proposed study seeks to address these questions and capture how these white students’ diverse experiences influence the construction of their racial identity in a contemporary environment.
LITERATURE REVIEW

In my analysis, I draw from the following literature on privilege, invisibility, colorblindness, white racial identity development, whiteness as an intersectional identity, the effect of situational context, and challenges to the racial status quo. The study of whiteness begins with the socio-historical analysis of the politics of racial privilege. Introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois (1920), this scholarly perspective has been reinvigorated by the work of David Roediger (1991). In addition, a significant amount of literature on the study of whiteness has lent credibility to the concept of invisibility, calling attention to the normative nature of whiteness and how many white individuals tend not to think about race as part of their self-identity. In other words, for many white individuals, their white identity is invisible. According to scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010), this invisibility and the privileged status of white Americans often interact and manifest through in the concept of “colorblind racism.” The perspective through which scholars have analyzed white identity development has also significantly changed over the last two decades. Theories of identity development have begun to incorporate space for flexible and fluid identities. Recent literature has demonstrated the complexities of racial identity and the influence of multiple social constructs and situational contexts.

Privilege

The primary factor that makes whiteness studies unique is the association of whiteness with status and socioeconomic privilege. Whiteness, as a social construct, both represents and produces privilege for white individuals. Scholars have demonstrated this relationship by pointing to socio-historical accounts of racial relations.
W.E.B. Du Bois was far ahead of other sociologists in defining race as a social construct. He also recognized the need to address whiteness as an integral part of racial dynamics. Du Bois wrote *The Souls of White Folk* (1920), quickly laying the groundwork for the critical analysis of whiteness. In this work, he exposes the artificial association of whiteness with power and compares early twentieth century racial relations to those of the Middle Age: “The Middle Age regarded skin color with mild curiosity, and even up into the eighteenth century we were hammering our national manikins into one, great, Universal Man, with fine frenzy which ignored color and race even more than birth” (Du Bois 1920:32). His historical contextualization demonstrates how racial classifications have developed over time and been maintained through socialization and institutionalization. This pervasive process occurs, “by emphasis and omission to make children believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man's soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man's thought; that every great deed the world ever did was a white man's deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man's dream” (1920: 33). The effects of the socialization and enculturation of white dominance are seen by Du Bois on a daily basis, especially when a black individual violates cultural norms. He recounts examples of white individuals becoming enraged at innocent children wandering into “whites-only” waiting rooms and at black couples displaying their economic success by driving in cars. Du Bois captures the tensions that arise when privilege is contested and questioned.

Despite Du Bois' early insights into whiteness, a widely recognized analysis of whiteness did not occur until David R. Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* in 1991. Using a historical-Marxist analysis and focusing on American history, Roediger proposes that white indentured servants used whiteness to distinguish themselves from black slaves. Competition among working class
citizens during early industrialization further strengthened this process of racialization. It was during this time “the white working class, disciplined and made anxious by fear of dependency, began its formation to construct an image of the Black population as ‘other’ – as embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life that the white worker hated and longed for” (1991:14). The effort to maintain racial power structures because of the value it holds for those who identify as white is referred to as “possessive investment” by George Lipsitz (1998). This concept allows scholars to comprehend the relationship between personal and structural forms of white privilege.

Other scholars trace white privilege to colonialism and the efforts of Europeans to distinguish themselves from those they were conquering. Initially, these colonists responded to the good will of local inhabitants with very little hostility. Some of the earliest settlers perceived Native Americans to be “white” in complexion before designating racial definitions later on (Vaughan 1995). Gradually, European intellectuals began to interpret the findings of colonists in ways that promoted their self-interests by using pejorative labels such as “savages.” The English had a significant role in this process; the racialization of their Irish neighbors was easily transferred to Native Americans and, eventually, African slaves (Smedley 2007).

**Invisibility**

The second premise upon which whiteness studies is based is the perception of whiteness as normal or “racially unmarked” (Hartigan 2005). Scholarship on the invisibility of whiteness has not only involved qualitative interviews and participant observation, but also several self-reflective studies. After a long period during which sociologists ignored the white perspective with which they were conducting their studies (Murray 1973), the revival of whiteness studies
became marked by white sociologists who introspectively explored how they became aware of their whiteness.

The traditional paradigm of examining racial dynamics from a majority standpoint faced a major challenge from third wave feminism during the 1980’s. White feminists could no longer ignore the critiques of feminists of color that limiting the movement to one specific perspective was implicitly racist. For whiteness scholar Ruth Frankenberg (1993), this period of cultural and academic revolution was a pivotal part of her development as a sociologist. She first began to understand “the gulf of experience and meaning between individuals differentially positioned in relation to systems of domination” (4) while working with working class women of color as a student. Until then, her limited exposure to different perspectives had left Frankenberg’s racial perspectives unchallenged. In comparison, Peggy McIntosh’s (2004) awareness of whiteness resulted from her attempts to teach feminist theory to male students. She “had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts [McIntosh] at an advantage” (188).

Joe Feagin and Eileen O’Brien (2003) connect whiteness and invisibility to our nation’s structural problem of residential segregation. In 1990, in order to reach perfect residential integration, sixty-four percent of blacks would have had to be moved into different communities (Shapiro and Kenty-Drane 2005:176). Their study of economically elite white men uses the metaphor of a “white bubble” to describe the “general isolation from ongoing and meaningful interpersonal communication with people of color” (Feagin and O’Brien 2003:227). Using their personal experiences as a measure, these men often fail to acknowledge the persistence of racism and discrimination. The association of whiteness with normalcy may also invoke an othering process; encouraging some whites to interpret socioeconomic inequalities in terms of differences.
in culture or natural ability, rather than institutional and structural injustice. Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) refer to this “bubble” as “white habitus” and demonstrate its significant effects on racial expression and attitudes on topics such as interracial marriage. The concept of “white habitus” refers to both the geographical and physiological ways in which white individuals limit their chances of developing relationships with racial minorities.

**Colorblind Racism**

The ways in which invisibility and privilege interact and perpetuate each other can be analyzed at the interactive level using Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s concept of colorblind racism. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), the post-Civil Rights era has caused whites to mask their racism through carefully “rearticulated” discourses. He cites four tools by which whites frame the topic of race so they do not appear overtly racist: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism (26). Abstract liberalism is the use of a laissez-faire ideology to describe race relations so whites can claim that equal opportunity is available to all and racial inequalities are simply the result of unequal efforts or capabilities. Naturalization is the process of accepting racism as natural and that people of different races are innately wired to seek out others of the same race. Cultural racism is used to claim blacks are not necessarily genetically inferior, but many inherit a cultural predisposition that hurts their chances at social mobility. Finally, whites minimize racism by claiming that racial dynamics such as discrimination are exaggerated. By using these frames, Bonilla-Silva claims that whites simultaneously ignore, legitimize, and reinforce racial hierarchies (26).

Bonilla-Silva clarifies that colorblind racism shapes more than white racial identity because it is a dominant discourse. This means whites are more likely to adapt the frames of colorblind
racism in their descriptions of racial relations, but racial minorities are also prone to using these frames. He reminds us, “An ideology is not dominant because it affects all actors in a social system in the same way and to the same degree. Instead, an ideology is dominant if most members (dominant and subordinate) of a social system have to accommodate their views vis-á-vis that ideology” (152). Colorblind racism shows us that the effects of the privileges of whiteness and dynamics of racial inequality appear differently according to an individual’s social position.

**White Racial Identity Development**

The previous concepts of invisibility, privilege, and colorblind racism are incorporated into theories of white racial identity development in multiple ways.

In her study of the process by which women become part of the Ku Klux Klan or other white supremacist movements, Kathleen Blee (2002) challenges the theory that racist women have inherent psychological or social problems that motivate these ideologies. Many of these women were well-educated, not poor, were not raised in abusive families, and did not follow a partner into the movement. Surprisingly, socialized racist beliefs were not a prerequisite to joining white supremacist movements. Instead, most of the women had to choose between antiracist and racist networks of friends and became members of groups that demanded ideological uniformity. This socialization process is complex, leading Blee to argue, “racial conversion stories are best understood not as literal accounts of the process of ideological transformation but as learned accounts, shaped retrospectively by mainstream cultural themes as well as by the political, ideological, and even stylistic conventions dominant in racist groups”
According to Blee, the manner in which an individual develops their white racial identity is contingent upon social networks.

In comparison, Janet Helms (1990), a psychologist, has developed a six stage process of white racial identity development. The six stages are influenced by the interaction between what she calls “racial consciousness” and “racial identity.” Racial consciousness refers to a white individual’s level of awareness about racial dynamics. In comparison, racial identity refers to the “quality” and the “various forms in which awareness can occur” (11). The first three steps towards a “positive white racial identity” are: “contact” with a black person or the social construct of blackness, acknowledging the inequalities between blacks and whites during “disintegration,” and acknowledgement and acceptance of the white position within the racial hierarchy during “reintegration.” In the last three stages, the individual begins to restructure and redefine their white racial identity in a manner that rejects racism. In the “pseudo-independent” stage, the individual begins to question the accuracy and morality of the racial hierarchy. Stereotypes are replaced with facts as the individual begins to question their role in society in the “immersion/emersion” stage. Finally, the individual fully rejects cultural and institutional racism in the “autonomous” stage. In comparison to Blee’s theory of white racial identity development through association, Helms’ theory is based around personal development, self reflection, and ideology development.

Although Blee and Helms’s theories of white racial identity development may seem to contradict each other, they both appropriately fit within a broader sociological theme. In this theme, white individuals shift between awareness and unawareness of their racial position. The period in which white individuals are unaware of the social power granted to them through race closely relates to the aforementioned concepts of invisibility and colorblind racism. However,
when white individuals are aware of racial power hierarchies, they will either use it to their advantage or try to change it. This three-part system of consciously using racial dominance, being oblivious to it, and trying to change it has been articulated in different ways.

Frankenberg (1993:14) uses the term “paradigms” to refer to these parts. She calls the first paradigm “essentialist racism,” in which racial hierarchies are legitimized through a discourse of biological differences. The individual’s form of racial identity then moves to a stage of “color/power evasiveness” in which racial discrimination and inequalities are ignored, leaving differences in socioeconomic achievement to the fault of those who do not do as well. The last stage, or “race cognizance,” allows the individual to see racial power dynamics from the eyes of the oppressed and ascribes achievement gaps to social structure rather than individuals. For Frankenberg, these shifts occur in chronological order, but she stresses that the transitions do not necessarily occur “in any total sense, for elements of all three can be found in today’s literature on race and racism in the United States and in the rhetoric of activists both for and against racism” (15). She does, however, acknowledge a general trend that “color/power evasive” elements have replaced “essentialist racism” as the dominant discourse in today’s society.

Paul Croll devises a spectrum of these three parts on a graph where the importance of whiteness to an individual is charted against their racial ideology, labeled as a spectrum from “defensiveness” to progressiveness.” Individuals or social groups that are high on the “whiteness importance” spectrum are more likely to either have a defensive (white supremacy groups) or progressive (social activists) notion of white identity rather than a neutral one. The result is the u-shaped graph shown below:
The most detailed model of white racial identity development is offered by Rita Hardiman (1982). Like the previously mentioned models, Hardiman defines five stages of identity development in terms of racial consciousness. Individuals first transition from “no racial consciousness” to “acceptance,” which is defined as the internalization of racist beliefs and attitudes. At the “rejection” level, individuals first become conscious of their racial identity and attempt to reject racist beliefs and attitudes. In the final two steps, white individuals first develop a new white racial identity that transcends racism (“redefinition”) and then integrate this new racial identity into other aspects of identity, consciousness, and behavior (“internalization”). For Croll (2007), Frankenberg (1993), Hardiman (1982), and Helms (1990), greater racial consciousness is correlated to the development of a progressive white racial identity.

**Whiteness as an Intersectional Identity**

The four previous conceptual themes are unique to the field of whiteness studies. In order to fully understand the construction of whiteness, we must also address two other important bodies
of work that are applicable to other aspects of identity. First, whiteness is similar to otherracial
identities in that it interacts or “intersects” with other social constructs such as socioeconomic
class, ethnicity, and gender. Bonilla-Silva (2010), Bérubé (2001), Hartigan Jr. (2001), and
Frankenberg (1993) have all explored the intersectional quality of whiteness.

Bonilla-Silva (2010:144) notices aspects of colorblind racism in all of his interviews, but
also mentions that young, working-class women are more likely than other white social groups to
be progressive. He argues these women use their subordinated status in terms of gender and class
as a lens through which they observe the experiences of racial minorities. In addition, these
women are more likely to have grown up in racially diverse areas and developed interracial
friendships and romantic relationships. Bonilla-Silva’s findings point to what many social
scientists refer to as the “interaction effect” (147), which claims that individuals who are more
exposed to different social groups are more likely to be ideologically progressive.

Bérubé (2001), in his study on gay whiteness, discusses how his isolation from black gays
sometimes causes him to subconsciously assume, “gay issues, spaces, culture, and relationships
that are not ‘lived through’ race” (237). By associating these social dynamics with gay culture as
a whole, Bérubé is demonstrating how the invisibility of whiteness can intersect with sexual
orientation. Whiteness is a source of power that is often invisible to him and his white peers, but
obvious to those that lack its “powerful and protective… cohesive bond” (237). Ward (2008)
conducts a similar study about a predominantly white LGBT organization. She finds that even
when gay communities make efforts to address whiteness, their strategies further demonstrate the
influence of white normative culture.

Hartigan Jr. (2001) uses his study of working-class whites in Detroit to demonstrate that the
intersections between whiteness and other social constructs should not only be limited to aspects
such as socioeconomic class or gender. He finds that membership in a geographically-defined community also has significant effects on identity development and behavior. Hartigan suggests elite whites have been able to deflect accusations of racism by comparing themselves to stereotypes of blatantly racist working-class whites (defined by socioeconomic class and geographic area). McDermott (2001) has contributed to these findings by comparing working class whites in Atlanta to those in Boston. While working class whites express a defensive and privileged attitude towards their whiteness in Boston, racially integrated workplaces and neighborhoods in Atlanta cause white individuals to perceive themselves to be “damaged goods”; they believe that their whiteness is stigmatized as a result of a failure to attain superior status. Similarly, Perry (2002) compares two high schools with different levels of homogeneity and finds individuals from the school with fewer minority students had a more difficult time conceptualizing whiteness.

The study of whiteness is also complicated when considering individuals who self-identify as bi or multiracial and the tensions such individuals endure as a result of the black-white dichotomy. For example, Kerry Ann Rockquemore (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002), the leading social psychologist in the field of studying black-white biracial identity, constructs four categories for how biracial individuals may interpret their race. First, they may identify as one particular race, usually black. According to Rockquemore, this tradition is rooted in the long history in which the “one-drop rule” became a national norm and forced biracial individuals to believe this was the only viable option. Rockquemore then identifies three more categories of potential self-identification: being exclusively biracial at all times, moving between racial identities based on context, and developing a “transcendent identity,” where the subject refuses to take on a racial identity. Debbie Storrs (1999) finds some biracial women reject a white
identity and create an internal value system that stigmatizes whiteness. She finds that because of the normative nature of whiteness, these women begin to view whiteness as empty or boring. They also reject whiteness because they see it as a form of oppression.

The Effect of Situational Context

In addition to the influence of social constructs such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class, scholars have shown race is affected by various contextual factors. Whiteness is not a homogenous, unchanging social construct of consistent privilege and power. According to France Winddance Twine and Charles Gallagher (2007), this focus in how situational context interrelates with the process of socialization is the most important development in what they call the “third wave of whiteness studies.” They describe this new perspective as, “an interest in the cultural practices and discursive strategies employed by whites as they struggle to recuperate, reconstitute and restore white identities and the supremacy of whiteness in post-apartheid, post-industrial, post-imperial, post-Civil Rights” (13).

Several race scholars have already identified a correlation between white racial awareness and situations in which the status quo of white dominance is challenged. For example, many white individuals respond in a defensive or emotional manner when the issue of affirmative action is discussed (Bonilla-Silva 2001, Faithful 2007, McDermont 2001, Moss and Faux 2006, Royster 2003). However, few have tracked how a person’s self-conception of whiteness changes in response to other specific situations.

In their work on biracial identity, Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2003), argue self identity is dependent upon “receiving validation from others” (119). As a result, some biracial children may anticipate certain reactions to how they self identify and are more likely to take on older
conceptions of race at home than they do at school, where they can answer more anonymously (Harris and Sim 2002). The pressures of receiving positive feedback for the use of traditional racial views are more present in face-to-face contexts.

The field of cultural studies provides a very effective tool for analyzing the fluid character of whiteness. Cultural studies encourages a focus on how “group members actively produce and reproduce culturally appropriate ways of interacting in contexts constrained by institutions and social norms” (Moss and Faux 2006:22). In fact, many whiteness scholars have begun to change the field by incorporating theory from cultural studies. John Hartigan Jr.’s (2005) previously mentioned work on Detroit working-class whites incorporates a cultural perspective, allowing him to study intersectionality more closely by addressing how individual behavior changes depending on context. Sociologists are becoming aware that a perspective on whiteness that includes the complexities of ethnicity will provide a more accurate portrayal of white racial identity (McDermott and Samson 2005).

Cultural studies contributes to the field of whiteness studies by demonstrating how phenomenon such as invisibility and colorblind racism are products of whiteness’s dominant status. According to Ashley Doane Jr. (1997), dominant groups, whether they are defined racially or ethically, tend to be less visible and less “salient.” Race is different from ethnicity because of the role a person’s bodily image has in restricting intergroup mobility. Nevertheless, a cultural perspective of whiteness reminds us these bodily images are interpreted in multitudes of different ways based on the context. As a result, social phenomenon such as invisibility and colorblind racism may appear in different forms and at different levels.

Mary Waters (1990) argues that a cultural perspective allows for the analysis of an individual’s agency in creating their self identity with regard to race. This agency provides the
ability to quickly shift between different aspects of identity according to situational factors. Frankenberg (1993) utilizes the cultural perspective to explain that, “the cultural practices represented in these interviews were continually transformed through their interactions with other systems, institutions, and logics” (192). She finds that the Jewish women whom she studied often vacillated between their identities as Jewish and as white depending on the situational context. Karen Brodkin (1998) adds that the degree of choosing between whiteness and Jewish heritage is influenced by historical/political context. Her study finds that elder Jews who lived through anti-Semitic experiences were more likely to identify as Jewish compared to younger Jews who saw themselves as white.

Frankenberg (1993), when analyzing how interviewees’ perspectives would shift in response to different prompts or questions, refers to the concept of identity fluidity. Her interviewees became more aware of the racial dynamics of their experiences as they reflected on them, often using phrases such as, “I was so unaware of cultural differences that…” (70). She explains, “there are multiple ways in which experiences can be named, forgotten, or remember through changing conceptual schemata” (70).

**Challenges to the Racial Status Quo**

Some recent works in whiteness studies argue that the increased visibility of whiteness has influenced significant changes in how it is performed. Throughout history, our country has become increasingly progressive and the challenges to white dominance have become more visible. During Du Bois’s time, some white individuals were aggravated when successful blacks demonstrated their wealth publically. Now, the election of our first African-American president has challenged the racial status quo in a way that has never been seen before. As a result of this
progressive trend, a growing number of white individuals feel as though they are being threatened because of their race; they feel as though whiteness is in a state of “crisis.” For example, Charles Gallagher (1995) examines college-age white students and finds that more whites are beginning to perceive themselves as the subject of “reverse discrimination.”

In comparison, other studies have shown some individuals might view whiteness as a stigma or a burden (McDermott 2001, Storrs 1999). These findings occurred in situations where the privileged status of whiteness was under considerable questioning: among biracial individuals living in black communities and white individuals living in multiracial working class communities.

White individuals’ responses to challenges to the status quo may also be fluid and respond to specific situational contexts. Paul Croll (2007), whose u-shaped curve of white racial identity was used to depict white identity development, claims white racial identity has become a process of choice. He explains, “Decades ago, the power of whiteness was believed to be its invisibility. Now that the veil of invisibility is being slowly removed, the power of whiteness remains. Whiteness may be the luxury to choose when to see it and when to ignore it, an important shift from presumed unconsciousness” (635). This suggests white individuals carry the agency to utilize racist, colorblind racist, or antiracist dialogue in context-specific ways.
METHODOLOGY

Study Sample

In order to explore contemporary race, whiteness, and white racial identity, I conducted eleven in-depth interviews with students at the College of William & Mary, a prominent liberal arts college in Virginia. My decision to focus the study on college students was a result of two factors. First, it allowed me to have easy access to my respondents; we have similar schedules and live in a highly concentrated area. More importantly, college-age students represent a very specific demographic. Because of their age and education, my sample population was very racially tolerant. Of the eleven interviews that I conducted, not one respondent explicitly expressed hatred towards other races. An analysis of the ways in which college students understand whiteness provides a snapshot into a more socially progressive future.

While all respondents were college-age students, I sought to explore the manner in which our country’s progress in sociopolitical and interpersonal racial dynamics occurs by seeking out individuals who would provide unique and contrasting perspectives on whiteness. This purposive sample consisted of individuals who represented a vast array of different genders, sexual orientations, heritages, socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic backgrounds, religions, and academic interests. Of those eleven respondents, nine openly identified as “white,” one respondent preferred the term, “Hispanic” and one identified as biracial (see Appendix II).

Interview Process

This study affirms the benefits of using in-depth interviews through a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The complex and intricate ways in which whiteness is understood demand a methodology that can capture personal accounts, demonstrate how
individuals articulate their perspectives, and allows analysis and construction of theory to slowly develop in response to data. The literature on whiteness has shown that in-depth interviews are the most appropriate method for examining social meaning, text, dialogue, and identity (Blee 2002, Bonilla-Silva 2010, Frankenberg 1993, Gallagher 1995, Haritgan Jr. 2005).

A grounded theory approach is an inductive method in which the analysis and research design are continuously shaped through the study’s data and existing theory. Given this approach, the first two interviews were conducted in an unstructured manner and served the purpose of collecting exploratory data. This data informed the development of a more structured interview guide based around prominent and interesting themes from the first two interviews. The interview guide continued to adapt as themes became dominant, but maintained several important characteristics. It was divided into two sections. The first section made no explicit mention of race and consisted of questions on identity, while the second section encouraged the interviewee to directly confront their whiteness by asking questions regarding white privilege, white culture, the relationship between race and ethnicity, socioeconomic disparities between whites and blacks, and sociopolitical responsibility (see Appendix I). In consideration of the literature on biracial identity (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2003) and from the field of cultural studies (Brodkin 1998, Doane Jr. 1997, Moss and Faux 2006, Waters 1990) that emphasize the fluidity of social positioning, I consider these question topics to be situational contexts that provide opportunities for respondents to express their interpretations of race and whiteness regarding the specific conversation at hand.

The questions posed in the first section of my interview guide led interviewees to break down their identities by telling narratives, identifying key values, and demonstrating the ways in which these values were shaped by their institutional and relational experiences. These
experiences formed *interpretative lenses*, which shaped their understandings of race and whiteness. The formation of these lenses was intersectional; they were influenced by respondents’ gender, sexual orientation, religion, and geographic region.
FINDINGS

Interpretative Lenses

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that white individuals subscribe to a “dominant racial ideology” (2006:26) of colorblindness because of the normative nature of whiteness and resistance to the acknowledgement of white privilege. This ideology is articulated through the four reinforcing central frames of abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism. I identify two competing interpretative lenses for how my respondents made sense of race and whiteness. Some interviewees used individualism to interpret race through an *individual-based interpretative lens*, which closely resembled colorblindness. Others used a *social group-based interpretative lens* that demonstrated an understanding of structural inequalities and an assumption that individuals who identify according to the same social construct, such as a particular race, share similar experiences. In this findings section, I first compare the two interpretative lenses and point out significant factors that intersect to shape the formation of these lenses. I then show how each lens was used by my respondents to interpret socioeconomic racial dynamics, beliefs about proper racial behavior, and interpersonal implications of residential segregation. Finally, I argue that while interpretative lenses are useful analytical tools, recognition of the complex tensions and fluidity inherent in the social construction of race is also essential for examining my research participants’ understandings of race and whiteness.

I. The Individual-Based Interpretative Lens

The first interpretative lens involves an emphasis on the individual when describing race and whiteness. This individual-based interpretative lens includes Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) frames of
abstract liberalism and minimization of racism. Fred and Kyle, who are both straight white males, demonstrated a strong connection between their personal lives, political conservatism, and interpreting racial dynamics with an individual-based interpretative lens. Scholars have shown that modern American conservatism is closely tied to the value of individualism (Hoover and Plant 1989) and an emphasis on tradition (Stacey 1996).

When asked to talk about events that have shaped his identity, Fred pointed to his parents’ divorce as a main turning point in his life. Calling the experience “bittersweet,” he explained how the divorce forced him to take on significantly more responsibility in taking care of his siblings and made him become more academically focused. At the same time, while he also attributed the divorce to allowing his parents to become more economically successful, Fred maintained that he “always had some sort of resentment toward [the divorce].” Fred’s values of the traditional family and individual responsibility expanded into a politically conservative ideology. He explained that, “[an emphasis on tradition and family] developed across different issues and across different events, through high school and college, and I really haven’t wavered in that sort of ideology.”

In accordance with his individual-based interpretative lens, Fred understood his white racial identity by emphasizing individualism. To him, the ability to look through race is one that he prides himself on and believes he has developed over time:

My family is of Irish-Italian ancestry, so white was the only race I would interact with. Growing up, you’re mostly interacting with people of the same race and not interacting as much with people of other races, and obviously I don’t remember any of it, but I imagine that I didn’t have a good understanding of what other races were. Growing up, I think it’s continuously become less and less important to me. As I learn more about other people, other cultures, and as I interact with other people, I learn to not view people in terms of races. It’s very, very marginal.

The development of Fred’s identity involved his ability to marginalize both his own race and the races of other individuals so that they can more easily reach mutual understanding when
interacting. Whiteness studies scholars argue that overlooking race is a strategy of maintaining white privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2006, Frankenberg 1993, Croll 2007), but Fred engages in relationalism (Emerson and Smith 2000:76) and believes that overlooking race and developing relationships is socially progressive. As he explained later on, Fred has continued to develop this interpretative lens to a point at which race is “almost a non-factor” when interacting with racial minorities.

While Kyle shares a very similar individual-based interpretative lens associated with tradition, his personal narrative regarding how he developed this perspective is significantly different. Rather than a life-changing event that inspired an affinity with conservative values, Kyle’s interpretative lens has developed through his association with his hometown. When asked to briefly introduce himself, he quickly responded, “I’ve grown up on a farm. We have horses and cows. Currently, our family has goats.” When asked to talk to about his identity, he said that two of his most important attributes are his identity as a Southerner and as “Mountain Folk.” The importance of tradition to his identity is demonstrated when Kyle explains, “growing up, my Grandfather always had a bluegrass festival on our family’s land over here. We used to go up there to that and just camp up there and have good food and all that kind of stuff, so that probably helps the Mountain Folk thing.” Kyle’s explanation about why being a Southerner is important to him further demonstrates the pride that he has in the traditions he associates with his hometown and family; “As far as the Southerner, I’m from the South. I have a Southern accent and I have an ancestor who fought for the Confederacy.” Given the importance of the issue of “state’s rights” in the Civil War (Owsley: 1925), Kyle’s affinity for his family’s role in the Confederacy also demonstrates the ties between tradition and individualism within political conservatism.
The development of Fred’s individual-based interpretative lens is very different from Kyle’s. While Fred identified a single very important personal event that dramatically changed his life, Kyle’s interpretative lens has slowly developed. When asked if his identity as a Southerner and as “Mountain Folk” has changed over time, he simply replies that, “It kind of always just is [important].” Although the manner in which these interpretative lenses have developed are dramatically different, the effects of them are remarkable similar. Kyle also believes that an individual’s racial identity should have little significance in their life. When asked about whether he identifies according to any particular social constructs more strongly than others, he immediately responded, “I don’t think race is a big deal, honestly. I mean I know I’m white but I don’t think that that’s a big deal.” Kyle also explained that, “I don’t think skin color is a big deal anymore. Or as big a deal, say as it was in our past history. We’ve come a long way.” My interviews with Fred and Kyle suggest a connection between tradition, individualism, political conservatism and an individual-based interpretative lens. While their lenses where developed in very different ways, they both have very similar impacts on how they interpret racial dynamics and their societal roles as white individuals.

II. The Social Group-Based Interpretative Lens

In comparison, the social group-based interpretative lens emphasizes the implications of social constructs, such as race, on individuals’ lives. Respondents who used this lens perceived individuals with similar identities to have membership in an imagined social group based on common social constructs (such as “whites” or “African-Americans”). They assumed that people within these social groups share unique experiences. This interpretative lens resembles the final stage of race consciousness and identity development that Croll (2007), Frankenberg (1993),
Hardiman (1982), and Helms (1990) identify. Devan and Grace demonstrated that their social group-based interpretative lens is deeply influenced by their exposure to inequalities amongst members of different social groups, American political liberalism, and an awareness of structural inequality.

Like the importance of conservatism to Fred, Devan’s identity as transgender is a central part of hir overall identity. Similar to how Fred’s personal experience involving hir parents’ divorce initiated the development of hir individual-based interpretative lens, Devan’s social group-based interpretative lens is deeply rooted in hir experience of coming out to hirself. Devan grew up in a household of conservative Southern values in which hir father’s Southern Baptist faith was the family’s driving force. Hir childhood was marked by inconsistencies and tension in hir self identity because ze was well-aware of hir interest in men, but was constantly urged to oppress those feelings. In addition to being encouraged to “become” straight, Southern Baptist practice also discouraged Devan from values associated with “liberal and progressive issues, such as feminism and women’s rights.” Slowly realizing “that route… didn’t work,” Devan started to shift away from the Southern Baptist religion, allowing hir to feel comfortable studying biology (because ze was no longer had to conform to the idea of Creationism), and ze began to explore other options such as the Episcopal Church and Wicca Witchcraft before settling on Universal Unitarianism. Universal Unitarianism’s role as a “safe and open” spiritual space was especially important after Devan came out to hirself as transgender during the summer of hir junior year of high school. Once encouraged to oppose feminist thinking, Devan is now a Women’s Studies major and a very visible student activist. Ze holds leadership positions with several prominent student organizations on campus. Devan makes an effort to develop and expand hir social group-based interpretative lens so that it spans several issues:
Because of my conservative Southern Baptist upbringing, I tried very strongly to oppress [my feelings for men], since late elementary, early middle school, so that caused a lot of homophobic behavior and beliefs in myself. [My upbringing] extended to other liberal and progressive issues, such as feminism and women’s rights, not agreeing with them… So, now I feel that it has filled out. It’s kind of swing response.

Devan’s acceptance of a transgender identity and hir membership in a minority social group has shaped hir religious identity, academic interests, and political ideology. Each of these aspects intersects in a way that emphasizes the implications of social group membership.

The centrality of being transgender to Devan’s overall identity demonstrates the importance of social group membership in how ze interprets hir life. This social group-based interpretative lens was very clear when ze was asked, “what makes someone white?” Ze responded:

Whiteness, I feel, is more of an outside-in thing. If you are perceived by others as being white, then you have access to white privilege, so I don’t want to say that makes you white because I don’t like saying other people are something, but if you’re tapping into white privilege, you’re tapping into something that only white people have. So even though you may not identify as white, you may be interracial and other people perceive you as white, whereas your other racial identity is really important to you. It’s really tricky because you don’t see yourself as white, that’s not the important part for yourself, but society perceives you in a way that you’ve gained that white privilege.

Devan demonstrated hir social group-based interpretative lens, which was developed through hir identity as transgender, applies to how ze understands hir white racial identity. Rather than deeming racial identity relatively insignificant, Devan labeled white individuals as part of a social group with clear implications for all of its members. This group membership was then tied to social privilege.

A social group-based interpretative lens can also develop as a result of a series of events rather than one life-changing experience. Grace defined compassion as one of the key principles to her life. Her personal accounts as to how this principle developed demonstrate that it particularly refers to showing compassion across social groups. The earliest formative experience
that Grace recalled is her close friendship with a mentally disabled classmate in elementary school. She explained that, “we had a really close friendship, so from a really early age it felt natural to interact with people with disabilities. I didn’t realize it was uncomfortable for people until I met someone that said, ‘I’m afraid to talk to that person.’ So yeah, that led me pretty straight into constant volunteer positions and internships and jobs with people with disabilities. So I think that relationship definitely formed like, who I am, and what I like to do, and how I want to treat people.” Around the same age, Grace had another similar experience with one of her lesbian cousins:

I remember having a conversation with them about something homophobic that someone did, and I remember saying, “I don’t know why people are like that,” and I said something like, “it’s different when you love someone who’s gay,” because if you don’t know anyone who’s gay, it’s easier to hate on them, and she said, “well it shouldn’t be different.” And I was like, “oh, ok,” and it kind of, that really was one point where I stopped to think about how the way you treat people, even if their life experiences are so distant from yours, even if they don’t play into your lives in any way that you know of, that you should still try to understand them.

In these early experiences, Grace did not immediately recognize the impact of an individual’s social identity, but was forced to confront the implications of those identifiers as she became aware of that person’s experiences of inequality and stigma. For Grace, these experiences evolved into an emphasis on compassion, especially for those with membership in a minority social group. Her narrative of coming into contact with individuals of many different social groups validates the literature on the “interaction effect” (Bonilla-Silva 2010:147).

Through a continuous process of seeking out and learning from such experiences, Grace has become highly attuned to the impact of society on individuals. When applied to the topic of white racial identity, her social group-based interpretative lens has very similar results to Devan’s. When I asked Grace to describe what makes someone white, she said, “I also associate white with a lot of guilt. I went through a lot of hard conversations in high school about how you
need to understand your privilege and how that plays into everyone’s lives and I think white guilt is a healthy thing to know about or to understand.” Just like Devan, Grace’s social group-based interpretive lens led her to associate her white racial identity with whiteness as a social group and the privilege that is tied to it.

My analysis of the formation of the interpretative lenses of Fred, Kyle, Devan, and Grace has demonstrated the intersectionality of race, gender, sexual orientation, family, religion, political affiliation, and geographic background and has reinforced the works of Bonilla-Silva (2010) and Frankenberg (1993). The rest of my findings will delve deeper into how these two interpretative lenses are enacted in specific situational contexts. The individual-based interpretative lens and the social group-based interpretative lens have significantly different effects on how white individuals understand societal racial dynamics and their identities as white individuals. I will show that these interpretative lenses are very useful for understanding the role of privilege, invisibility, colorblindness, and intersectionality in how individuals understand race and whiteness. Still, they also limit the ability to completely capture how my respondents made sense of the complexities and tensions of race and whiteness.

**Activating Interpretative Lenses**

Cultural studies scholars (Moss and Faux 2006, McDermott and Samson 2005, Mary Waters 1990), scholars on biracial identity (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2003, Harris and Sim 2002), and a few leading scholars on whiteness (Frankenberg 1993, Brodkin 1998, Haritgan Jr. 2005) emphasize the importance of looking at specific situational contexts and their effects on how race and whiteness are understood. My data demonstrate that an individual’s interpretative lens has a significant impact on how they conceptualize race and whiteness across many different
I. Interpreting Sociopolitical Racial Dynamics

One section of my interviews triggered the use of interpretative lenses through the situational context of discussing affirmative action. The interpretation of sociopolitical racial dynamics such as affirmative action involves a complex process of gauging both personal interests (as an individual or as someone who is white) and societal interests (the value of equality). Usually, an interviewee who used the individual-based interpretative lens to understand affirmative action argued that treating individuals differently because of their membership in different social groups is unfair. In comparison, those with a social group-based interpretative lens usually applauded affirmative action for addressing racial disparities in access to education.

a) Sociopolitical Dynamics: Activation of the Individual-Based Interpretative Lens

Interviewees with individual-based interpretative lenses gave varying critiques of affirmative action, but they all claimed that an individual’s race has little implications for whether that person is qualified for admission. While this always meant a downplaying of racial socioeconomic inequalities, the interviewees used different specific arguments. These arguments included accusations of institutionalized reverse discrimination, suggestions that affirmative
action harms personal interactions, and an emphasis on personal experiences that are occur across categories of race.

Kyle argued that race is not important in today’s society because he believes that racial socioeconomic inequalities have been resolved. As a result, he initiated the topic of affirmative action when asked if white individuals are treated differently from blacks and argued that different treatment for a particular race is unnecessary:

Mainstream society has tried to single out treatment of minority groups through, say affirmative action. For instance, there are a lot of influential black leaders who hate the idea of black history month because that implies that the other eleven belong to someone else. And that’s not true. Does that make sense? So I would say that, yeah, that there’s some differing treatment that I don’t think is ultimately all that beneficial.

Kyle implies that African-Americans are not subject to socioeconomic inequalities and suggests that the policies that take these inequalities into account are actually a form of institutionalized reverse discrimination. This argument that affirmative action produces socioeconomic inequalities extended to Kyle’s description of what an ideal college admittance process should look like. He suggested:

For example, if someone has a story on their application that says, “I founded an afterschool club for inner-city kids to play basketball,” I don’t think that it should matter if that person is black, white, Asian, or anything else. It’s an interesting story and that’s the kind of person that you want to come to your campus. Or if you have a story of, “I founded a fishing trip,” that’s an interesting story too. I don’t think it’s important what color the person that did that is.

Kyle ignored the fact that inner-cities are predominantly made up of African-Americans because of residential segregation. These inner-cities are also significantly less economically developed, contributing to the fact that African-Americans have only ten cents of wealth to every one dollar that white Americans have (Shapiro 2004:47). As a result, a story about an inner-city black student establishing an afterschool club is much more impressive given the lack of resources. Someone with a social group-based interpretative lens might also argue that Kyle’s claim that
“the other eleven months [do not] belong to someone else,” is false because history has mainly focused on the achievements of white individuals. Kyle’s suggestion is an example of the use of the frames of abstract liberalism and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010:26).

Fred argued that affirmative action is more harmful than beneficial to race relations because, “it forces people to have to look at differences in race and I don’t like that because that’s not how I think and I don’t like any situation that forces people to feel animosity towards other races. I don’t like it when there’s animosity forced between races, with whites on one side and minorities on the other. I think that’s dangerous.” Unlike Kyle, Fred does not believe that we currently live in a post-racial society and that affirmative action is reverse discrimination. However, his individual-based interpretative lens resulted in a critique that suggests affirmative action induces bad interpersonal relationships between people of different races. When pushed further on the issue of racial socioeconomic inequality, Fred acknowledged that there are fewer opportunities for those in inner-city, predominantly African-American communities, but emphasized that he “hopes” that socioeconomic differences are not the result of racial discrimination. While Kyle believes that there are very little socioeconomic inequalities according to race, Fred argued that efforts to fix these inequalities are not worth the cost of potentially damaging interpersonal relationships between those of different races. This is another example of the role that relationism (Emerson and Smith 2000:76) has in Fred’s individual-based interpretative lens.

Julia, who also comes from a rural, Southern hometown and has an individual-based interpretative lens, suggested a different reason for why affirmative action should not be implemented. Having recently been accepted to a program for a Masters of Health Administration, she began to recount her experience and assumed that, “[affirmative action is] an attempt to even out the playing field, but I don’t think it does that well looking at race, as it could
looking at… just the hardships that people have gone through in life.” She then created a hypothetical situation in which she put two of her sorority sisters through an imaginary admittance process:

I mean [personal hardships] are harder to address and categorize but, one of the girls in my sorority, both of her parents are dead and all she has left is her stepdad. I give that girl so much [respect] for overcoming those kinds of things and she’s a white girl. She has a lot of leadership positions and she never complains. I feel like that kind of thing is a lot different from some of the Indian kids that were applying [to the M.H.A. program]. Those girls like [a very wealthy Indian girl in Julia’s sorority], who have had every opportunity in the world, they still get to put down that they’re Indian and since having more diversity is considered a better thing… I agree that diversity is good but… I’m like, “ok, we have diversity, but that still doesn’t tell you what the quality of those students are like.

Like Fred, Julia is aware of racial socioeconomic inequalities. However, while Fred used his individual-based interpretative lens to argue that affirmative action hurts interpersonal relations between individuals of opposite races, Julia argued that individual hardships are more significant than the implications of race. In an admission process that that centers on race, her sorority sister’s experience of losing both of her parents is very extraordinary, but her accomplishments would be put within the context of most other white individuals, who are better financially supported.

b) Sociopolitical Dynamics: Activation of the Social Group-Based Interpretative Lens

In comparison, individuals with a social group-based interpretative lens argued that affirmative action is a reasonable and effective policy. These interviewees emphasized the similar experiences that individuals of the same race may share. Since the situations that white individuals face are perceived to be much less challenging than those that African-Americans face, interviewees who used the social group-based interpretative lens were very supportive of affirmative action.
Devan, whose transgender identity is highly influential on how ze interprets hir white racial identity, also used a hypothetical situation, but developed a very different argument because of hir social group-based interpretative lens. Ze said that, “I really respect the idea of affirmative action; trying to empower minority populations through affirmative action, being aware that their experiences and their histories are different from white people’s.” Ze then recounted a student-organized event on the topic of affirmative action. During this event, a high-ranking college administrator explained that if two students of different races applied and had the same grades, extracurricular experience, and application, the black student would be chosen over the white student. As Devan explained, this would be because, “the person of color has to experience racism. They have to experience all the stuff in society that this white guy doesn’t, and despite all of what the guy of color has had to put up with, he’s done just as well as the white guy, and I think it’s important to recognize that.” In comparison to Julia, Devan suggested that the experiences an individual might overcome as a result of being African-American rather than white are more significant than other personal hardships that are not written about in the candidate’s application.

Eileen also has a social group-based interpretative lens, but instead of attributing it to her sexual orientation (she is lesbian), she explained that her parents’ emphasis on education and a Sociology class she took her freshmen year in college were highly influential on how she views her white racial identity. In fact, her understanding of her white racial identity and the topic of affirmative action are very closely related. When asked how her white identity has developed over time, she said that, “reading Race and the Invisible Hand by [Deirdre Royster (2003)] really brought [race] to the forefront for me. In a lot of ways, you just don’t usually consider things like [whiteness]. I went to a very conservative high school in Richmond and everyone there is very
much against affirmative action and I had never really thought about it before, but then, after coming to college, I think affirmative action is just so important.” When asked to explain the rationale behind affirmative action, Eileen referred to the book and said,

I think [affirmative action is] great because for hundreds of years, there has been an entire race of people that were completely marginalized, marginalized to the umpteenth degree and now we have this program that has the potential for giving people back some of what we took away and giving people that chance. Because they don’t have the same networks. One thing that is so easy for people to forget is that a lot of white people have the, “oh, well my uncle works for this company,” “oh, yeah my grandfather’s best friend works for this company. You can get a job from them easy.” But a lot of people who are underrepresented minorities don’t have those same networks.

Eileen’s social group-based interpretative lens is the result of an educational experience. Even though she learned about the implications of social group membership through academics rather than through the “interaction effect” (Bonilla-Silva 2010: 147), she still demonstrates a strong sense of social group membership through the use of the pronoun, “we,” to describe white Americans. Her white racial identity is directly connected to this interpretative lens.

II. Interpreting Appropriate Racial Behavior

Situational contexts that involve interpersonal behavior shed more light on this connection. In my interview, I asked individuals to recall and talk about how they would act in situations that involve racially charged situations. Two of these situational contexts involve the use of the n-word and the concept of white pride. Although it was not planned in my interview guide, many respondents brought up the topic of entering spaces of diverse populations that were not predominantly white. In comparison to the situational context of discussing sociopolitical racial dynamics, these topics push interviewees to consider how those dynamics may have had an impact on their personal use of language, values, and actions. In each of these situational contexts regarding appropriate racial behavior, those with individual-based interpretative lenses
made no distinctions between individuals who are African-American and individuals who are white. In comparison, respondents with a social group-based interpretative lens made clear distinctions between behavior that is deemed appropriate for African-Americans and behavior that is appropriate for white Americans.

a) Appropriate Racial Behavior – Use of the “N-Word”

One way in which I encouraged interviewees to explore whiteness was by asking them to compare use of the “n-word” by white and black individuals. In this situational context, those who used the social group-based interpretative lens usually pointed to our nation’s history of slavery and racial discrimination and argued that the use of the “n-word” is contingent upon the speaker’s race because of its history. When used by white Americans, it is a derogatory term that disparages African-Americans. When used by African Americans (especially in contemporary hip-hop culture), its use is an attempt to reclaim the term with positive connotations (Asim 2007). Interviewees with an individual-based interpretative lens continued to turn the focus away from social group membership and deemed “n-word” use inappropriate for all individuals.

Devan, because of his consistent use of a social group-based interpretative lens, was one of the most adamant interviewees who argued that a black individual saying the n-word is not as offensive as a white individual. Ze said,

No, I don’t think it’s inappropriate. I think it’s ok if a black person doesn’t want to use the word and is uncomfortable about it coming from another black person, but I feel that it’s also ok for a black person to use it. First off, as a white person, it’s certainly not my position to tell them that it’s inappropriate to use it. Secondly, there is, at least to some extent, a movement to reclaim that word. To try to say, “Even though it’s been used for so long to put us down, we’re going to unite around that word and around that history of oppression and try to fight back.”

The manner in which Devan used his social group-based interpretative lens to conceptualize his white identity is clear. Ze argued that the use of the n-word has different connotations according
to the individual’s membership in a certain social group. Given the history of the oppression of African-Americans by white Americans and his identity as a white American, his use of the n-word is different from a black individual’s use of the n-word.

In comparison, both Fred and Kyle’s use of the individual-based interpretative lens led to the contention that the n-word should be used by nobody, regardless of race. Fred explained, “Not only is it an offensive phrase directed at black people, it’s just generally an offensive phrase. You shouldn’t say offensive phrases and I think that same logic applies to African-Americans saying it. It’s an offensive phrase and people, in a public setting or in private setting, don’t like it. You shouldn’t say it and I think you can apply that [argument] to many different words or… anything like that.” Kyle agreed that, “It is equally degrading if a white person says it, or a black person says, or if an Asian person says it, or if a Hispanic says it. It implies an inferior position, whoever you’re saying it to.” Fred and Kyle understand the negative connotations of the n-word and the history that is associated with it, but rather than viewing this history in terms of relations between social groups, they interpret the n-word as a term that is derogatory not matter what the race of the speaker is.

b) Appropriate Racial Behavior – “White Pride”

I also encouraged interviewees to explore whiteness by asking respondents to compare the concept of “white pride” to “black pride.” Interviewees with an individual-based interpretative lens initially responded that pride should not be associated with race, but struggled to explain the rationale behind the black pride movement. In comparison, individuals with a social group-based interpretative lens easily compared the two concepts by referring to white racial privilege.
However, they were also conflicted about how to maintain pride in their overall individual identity while not taking pride in a privileged white racial identity.

In his discussion of why a person should not be proud of their whiteness, Fred’s use of the individual-based interpretative lens was explicit. He argued that, “I don’t think someone should be proud to be white, just for the sake that they’re white. I think you have to be proud for a lot of other reasons. You have to be proud for the kind of person you are. Pride, generally, as a trait, it’s not a racial thing at all. Pride is something that each individual person determines.” Here, there is a clear distinction between race and the “kind of person you are.” This suggests that Fred does not believe racial identity significantly influences a person’s overall identity. In response to this answer, I asked Fred to explain the Black Pride movement. He clarified his statement by saying, “I think in the face of adversity and if you’re facing injustice, you should have pride in who you are. So I guess my philosophy would be: it would be nice if we reached a point in society where people could be proud of other identifiers and other traits that are not based on race.” In this way, Fred argued that pride based upon race should only occur if an individual is being oppressed because of that social identifier. This opinion was closely matched by Julia and her use of the individual-based interpretative lens. After briefly talking about how the Black Pride movement is primarily a result of being oppressed, she said, “I feel like you have to be secure with who you are and be proud of who you are and that your race doesn’t really make you who you are.”

In comparison to Fred and Julia, Devan argued that there should not be white pride because of the privilege associated with whiteness. Ze explained that, “I think white people, because we should be aware of our privilege, are going to feel guilty about [white pride]. I don’t think you can have a white pride without trying to promote a kind of white superiority, so I don’t think that
there should be some form of white pride.” For Devan, there is a clear distinction between individuals who are white and individuals who are black based on the privilege of members of the white racial social group. However, when pushed to consider whether being white is negative, Devan struggled and said, “No, it’s just, I think it’s inappropriate for majority population to promote their majority status… I mean, there’s nothing you can do to change the whiteness if you are white. I think there are things you can do to promote racial equality. But just because you feel bad about being white doesn’t mean you can stop being white.”

Grace, who also uses a social group-based interpretative lens, called the association of whiteness with privilege “white guilt” throughout her interview. She admitted that even though she’s aware of racial socioeconomic inequalities, it is sometimes difficult to directly associate that privilege to herself. Even though she once told her dad that the social connections he develops for his job can be heavily race-influenced, she said that, “but it’s hard to think about what that success has gotten me… it’s hard to think that me getting something is someone else not getting something, and I don’t like to think that I’m taking something away from someone else.” Grace’s acknowledgement of white privilege threatens her sense of pride in her accomplishments.

c) Appropriate Racial Behavior – Sharing Space

Regardless of whether they had an individual-based interpretative lens or a social group-based interpretative lens, many interviewees brought up the topic of sharing physical space with a large number of racial minorities (usually African-Americans). Respondents with a social group-based interpretative lens approached carefully and said that such situations had significant impacts on their emotions and thoughts about race. Those with an individual-based interpretative
lens negated the importance of race, often by pointing out other reasons why they may have felt differently about being in those situations.

Devan first brought up the topic of entering spaces that are predominantly held by minorities in her discussion of how she searched for a new religious faith after leaving Baptism. During this search, Devan decided not to join any predominantly African-American churches because, although she shared their emphasis on social change, she, as a white individual, did not want to disrupt their “safe space.” Devan expanded upon this concept when she talked about occasions when she has considered whether to go to an event that would be mainly attended by racial minorities. She said,

I’m also really, really aware of my whiteness when I’m invited to an event or a meeting, for NAACP or something like that. I always have to question myself if I think I should go. Because even though I care about issues of race, I’m really big about people who need space, a minority space, to feel safe, to feel connected. I really believe that they should have that without feeling threatened or having a problem or anything, and so, before I attend anything sponsored by a cultural organization, I have to make sure that I’m comfortable being there because I have to believe that people who need that space are comfortable with me being there. 

Devan’s use of the concept of “safe spaces” demonstrates how strongly her social group-based interpretative lens is used to tie white privilege to her sense of white identity. Rather than viewing herself as an individual with a strong understanding of power dynamics when considering whether or not to enter these spaces, Devan first considers whether her white racial identity and the privilege tied to this identity would disturb groups of racial minorities.

Other than Devan, most interviewees talked more about their thoughts and feelings when they have already entered spaces predominantly attended by racial minorities rather than their decision of whether or not to enter it. When asked to talk about a time when she felt “very white,” Grace recounted a time when she attended a conference at which she was one of the few white individuals. She said that, “I remember it was significant for me to be in the minority, as a
white person, in a large group of people.” When asked what sort of effect it had on her, Grace said, “I don’t know [laughs]. Yeah, it was eye-opening I suppose. It was humbling, in a weird way, to feel a difference in how I felt before.” In this situational context, Grace’s reaction was still based upon a social group-based interpretative lens, but the privilege that she associates with whiteness dramatically changes. Rather than being the normative race, Grace felt a loss of that privilege. Nevertheless, this incident is still one that was experienced in terms of racial identity and demonstrates how her social group-based interpretative lens affected how she understood this situational context.

While Grace explained that this experience was unusual for her because of the racial dynamics, interviewees with an individual-based interpretative lens emphasized other factors. For example, Julia said that she prefers to go to movie theaters that are predominantly white, but explained that, “it’s not so much the races of the people there, but the types of people that go there at those times. Like, gangs hang out, that kind of thing. But the people in those groups tend to be of different races.” In this way, Julia used her individual-based interpretative lens to insist that she avoids these theaters because they are prone to be violent and made sure to frame this in terms that are not based on social groups.

Often, when placed in a situational context involving a large number of minorities and thus highlighting the person’s race, the interviewee actively tried to implement their individual-based interpretative lens to the situation. For example, Fred said that in these situational contexts, racial differences are “in the back of your head, but I do a pretty good job at removing that in any situation that I’m in. I just think it’s irrelevant. I mean, race to me is so unimportant when I’m communicating with people. Again, I love talking with people, all types of people, but [the process of not considering race] can be hard.” At other times and for different interviewees, this
process comes easier. Kyle recalled a time when he attended a funeral service at a predominantly African-American church and said, “I guess at first I felt, “oh, I’m the minority,” but then it wasn’t that big of a deal.”

III. The “White Bubble” – Interpreting Residential Segregation

The emotional impact of sharing space with racial minorities is a testament to the sociological literature on white normativity and residential segregation. These situations are unique to white individuals because many have grown up in areas where whiteness is the status quo. Some sociologists (Joe Feagin and Eileen O’Brien 2003, Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006) combine the implications of white normativity and residential segregation through the concept of the “white bubble.” Although it was a common theme throughout most of my interviews, this concept was interpreted in several different ways. Those with a social group-based interpretative lens attempted to separate themselves from the white bubble in both geographical and symbolic ways. Some interviewees with an individual-based interpretative lens were aware of the white bubble but were indifferent to its implications. Other respondents with an individual-based interpretative lens were completely oblivious to how their lives resemble a white bubble.

Hailey is a straight, white female from southern Virginia who traced her understanding of whiteness to her hometown and its relations with a neighboring, predominantly black city. In talking about her hometown, she immediately described the racial/socioeconomic history surrounding these two towns. The older city once successfully built itself around several factories, but a period of deindustrialization had brought down the local economy and encouraged those who were wealthy to escape to the surrounding areas, forming smaller towns such as the one that Hailey lives in. Now these neighboring towns have such significant
disparities in their racial demographics that her hometown is nicknamed, “Colonial Whites.” As a result of being aware of this history (which she learned through a community service trip), Hailey has developed a social group-based interpretative lens that is significantly based on how she perceives both the geographically-based racial segregation of her hometown and the racial attitudes of her family, friends, and neighbors. She said, “they’re really good people … but they’re all products of that environment and my parents still have prejudice tendencies and stuff. I see their intentions as really good, but... it’s still there.” However, while Hailey said that her hometown is a significant part of her identity, she made consistent efforts to distinguish herself from the people and ideas that she associated with “Colonial Whites.” She actively points out discriminatory remarks that her father says, recounted stories of arguing with her mother about affirmative action, and expressed the disgust she felt at some of her old friends who viewed President Obama extremely unfavorably. The manner in which she formed her white racial identity in reaction to residential segregation was best demonstrated when she talked about her experience doing volunteer work in Camden, New Jersey:

Another big part of my identity is… I started studying Sociology and what appealed to me was studying social problems and inequalities and stuff. There are tons of social problems in our world and I don’t understand why people can see those and just don’t do anything about them. So I found this program, it’s called Urban Promise in Camden, New Jersey, and Camden is the number two most impoverish city. I thought it would be right up my alley and it freaked my parents out too. It’s a really intense inner city area and it was a really great experience for me, I guess because I came from a sheltered white middle class bubble, and it put me in that environment and let me see what these kids go through.

For Hailey, her social group-based interpretative lens allowed her to develop a sense of white racial identity based upon socioeconomic inequality and, more specifically, residential segregation. Like Eileen, the formation of Hailey’s interpretative lens was influenced by an educational experience. However, while Eileen used the pronoun “we” to describe white Americans, Hailey’s white racial identity is a counter-reaction to white privilege. Her attempts to
leave her “sheltered white middle class bubble” demonstrate an effort to redefine her white racial identity into one that is socially active rather than not “doing anything.” In other words, Hailey’s social group-based interpretative lens was demonstrated in how her personal white racial identity compared to a different form of whiteness that was marked by normativity and privilege.

The social group-based interpretative lens was very important in understanding how Hailey developed her sense of white racial identity, especially when compared to how Julia perceived the “white bubble.” Like Hailey, Julia is also a straight, white female from a south Virginian, predominantly white town. However, her individual-based interpretative lens allows her to distinguish herself from discriminatory remarks made by her grandparents and she does not attribute them to societal racial dynamics. For example, she framed situations in which her grandmother used the term “picaninny” to refer to an African-American girl and when her grandfather insisted that she does not marry an African-American as examples of “just a part of how they were raised.” Unlike Hailey, Julia did not connect these statements to broader structural and socioeconomic race relations that also affect her own life. Julia acknowledged that she “grew up in my own little white bubble,” but she did not associate her experience in this “white bubble,” with racial discrimination. While Hailey develops her own sense of white racial identity in response to the negative connotations she has of the whiteness performed by those from her hometown, Julia did not associate racial discrimination with the “white bubble” and, more broadly, whiteness. Because of her individual-based interpretative lens, white racial identity is still unimportant to Julia, regardless of the racial segregation and discrimination that surrounds her. As a result, while Hailey actively sought out opportunities to break from her “white bubble,” Julia said that, “I find it interesting… [but] I don’t necessarily know that it’s important to me.”
In comparison to both Julia and Hailey, Kyle did not perceive life in his hometown in any racial terms. As mentioned earlier, Kyle believes that race has very little implications in today’s society because he believes that racial socioeconomic inequalities have been resolved. Instead of pointing out redlining policies that started during the Great Depression to explain racial segregation, Kyle argued, “I don’t think the reason that the county is practically segregated today is by the choice of the people who live there. I think it’s just… because our ancestors self-segregated in the past and our ancestors had children.” The implications of this segregation were also explained in terms that are not race-based. Kyle argued that schools in predominantly African-American inner cities do not perform well because these areas consistently vote Democratic, and that this “single party dominance breeds corruption.” As a result of his individual-based interpretative lens, Kyle argued that his race is not important and that, “race is such an issue because people continually make it an issue.” In this way, Kyle’s insistence that race does not play an important part of his life validates the literature on white normativity (Haritgan Jr. 2005). However, when asked to imagine how his life would be different if he were African-American, Kyle said that “I wouldn’t identify as being a mountain person anymore.” When pushed further and asked if this would be true even if he grew up in the same area, Kyle avoided referring to any sort of a “white bubble,” and explained this difference in ethnic, rather than racial terms. He explained, “[being a mountain person is] kind of a Scotch-Irish thing… Folk music, for instance, is a Scotch-Irish thing.” Kyle’s individual-based interpretative lens is such a strong part of how he analyzes his surroundings that even when describing a racial phenomenon (different lifestyles defined by race because of residential segregation), he explained this situational context in terms of heritage rather than race.
Beyond Interpretative Lenses

The individual-based and social group-based interpretative lens lenses are useful analytical tools for comparing how respondents understood race and whiteness. Although most respondents emphasized one interpretative lens over the other, some challenging situational contexts compelled them to talk about heritage or temporarily use the opposite interpretative lens. These practices demonstrate interpretative fluidity and give credibility to assertions made by Croll (2007) and Frankenberg (1993) about the flexibility of whiteness.

I. Using Heritage to Talk About Race

References to heritage provided flexibility when individuals faced challenging situational contexts that did not perfectly match their interpretative lens. This practice is an example of how respondents’ understandings of race and whiteness demonstrated fluidity through “changing conceptual schemata” (Frankenberg 1993:70). Kyle’s use of his heritage (Scotch-Irish) to explain differences in lifestyle among different races is one example of the many times in which the individual-based interpretative lens and a social group-based interpretative lens fail to completely capture the complexity of white racial identity. For interviewees with an individual-based interpretative lens, references to heritage were used to explain racial inequality and differences between white American and African-American culture. In comparison, references to heritage were used by those with a social group-based interpretative lens to describe differences within these social groups.

Like Hailey, who used the concept of a “white bubble” to differentiate herself from many of her friends and family from her hometown, Alex used his Irish-American heritage distinguish himself from his high school friends. When asked to explain why he perceives himself in ethnic
terms while he calls many of his friends white, Alex said, “I was using [the term “white”] in reference to the fact that [my friends from high school] grew up in an area where there were really only white people and went to schools were there were only one or two minorities in the entire school.” Alex demonstrates the use of the social group-based interpretative lens by associating his friends’ racial identities with the structural phenomenon of residential segregation. However, he also suggested that, “I think peoples’ heritage and cultural upbringing [is important]. Not race necessarily. I think that’s more of a secondary thing. I think it’s more about the way you’re brought up and your culture that defines you and not your race.” In this way, Alex’s use of heritage allows him to address the effects of societal racial dynamics while still emphasizing the importance of personal experiences that occur across races.

While Alex’s use of heritage provides flexibility in interpreting challenging contextual situations, there were also times when the use of either the individual-based interpretative lens or the social group-based interpretative lens would have served him better. For example, when asked whether there is a certain unique quality that comes with his identity as Irish-American, Alex struggled and said, “I think there was, but I think it faded by the time it got to me. It’s been a while; it’s been a hundred and twenty years. I’m not, ‘Irish pride,’ or anything.” When pushed to explain his identity, Alex says, “Well, I think I’m a well-rounded person. I grew up in a lot of places…. So I think I’ve experienced a lot of other cultures and I think it gives me more of an understanding of people and cultures.” Here, Alex completely disconnected from his emphasis on heritage and used the individual-based interpretative lens. In comparison, when introduced to the situational context of discussing appropriate racial behavior, Alex initially used the social group-based interpretative lens when he said that the n-word is inappropriate because, “it has such historical connotations. It describes a hundred and fifty years of racism and before that, two
hundred years of slavery. It’s kind of hard to say, ‘Oh, well all of that history is gone…’ It was used as a derogatory term by white people for hundreds of years.” However, after a short discussion on how the British used the term “Negro” was used to refer to the Irish, I asked Alex why he didn’t apply his Irish ethnic identity to the concept of African-Americans reclaiming the n-word. He briefly struggled with this idea and, while it was clear that in this situation Alex could have easily used the social group-based interpretative lens to point out that his white racial identity makes it inappropriate for him to use the n-word, he instead said, “I just don’t use it because it’s offensive.”

Alex’s use of heritage in challenging situational contexts provides him with the flexibility of borrowing from both the individual-based and social group-based interpretative lenses. However, contextual situations that focus entirely on either personal experiences or on sociopolitical racial inequality demonstrate the limits of using heritage to talk about race and whiteness.

II. Interpretative Substitution

Throughout their interviews, respondents strongly emphasized one interpretative lens over the other. However, there were several occasions where challenging situational contexts compelled them to substitute their preferred interpretative lens for the opposite one. Some respondents with an individual-based interpretative lens learned about the structural implications of race in classes while those with a social group-based interpretative lens interacted with individuals who didn’t want to be seen in terms of social group membership. The substitution of interpretative lenses support Croll’s (2007) assertion that whiteness is transitioning from a “presumed unconsciousness” to a “luxury to choose when to see it and when to ignore it” (635).
Julia used an individual-based interpretative lens in her analysis of affirmative action, the concept of “white pride,” and the effects of residential segregation. Julia separated the link between residential segregation and the discriminatory remarks her grandparents made by framing them as “how they were brought up.” However, she also recounted a situational context in which she was forced to adapt a social group-based interpretative lens because of a lesson in a class. She explained, “…but one thing I noticed, I think it was my Emerging Diseases class for my freshman seminar. We went into some discussion about HIV and the black population and apparently, I didn’t realize it before then, I guess just growing up in my white bubble and just not knowing, but apparently black people are really homophobic and having HIV in the black community is like a, ‘you will be shunned,’ kind of thing.” Through a class, Julia learned about the implications of the influence of the church in the black community, a tradition that can be traced to its important role in slave rebellions and protests against discrimination. She also recognized how residential segregation affects her by mentioning how the “white bubble” has limited her knowledge on important health trends. Unfortunately, Julia’s individual-based interpretative lens keeps her from taking the next step. Instead of addressing how breaking away from her “white bubble” may have a very positive effect on her future career as a health administrator, Julia dismissed such experiences and said, “I don’t necessarily know that [such experiences are] important to me.”

Grace’s social group-based interpretative lens allowed her to be very aware of racial power dynamics and encouraged her to understand people whose “life experiences are so distant from yours.” However, Grace also recalled one moment in which she was criticized for asking a classmate how they identified according to race:

There is one thing that still sticks out in my mind because I have a hard time dealing with criticism [laughs]. I ran a workshop with a bunch of my classmates in high school and a girl stood up and she was talking about something because she was bothered by the questions
people asked her, and I asked her, “well how would you like to be identified?” I meant like, “What is your preference,” like, “What are the terms that you like to use to describe yourself?” But she just had a real problem with that because in a sense, to her, I was asking, “how do you want to be identified by race, because that is all that identifies you?” when she really wanted to make the point that, “it doesn’t matter what you call my race, that’s not that important to me. I also am also a lacrosse player and a history student,” as if I implied that being black was the only important part of her life. That’s completely not what I meant or it’s not what I wanted to imply at the time, but I think that’s how it came out.”

While not intentional, Grace’s use of the social group-based interpretative lens aggravated her classmate who insisted that her membership in a particular social group is not the determining factor of her identity. Grace’s understanding of this situational context is also interesting because she relates it to her recent public disclosure of her sexual orientation, but in this context, she used the individual-based interpretative lens and downplayed the implications of her membership within a particular social group:

Now I understand the same things about sexuality, very personally, because some of my friends, now they only ask me about my sexuality and want to know all about it and it just implies, “the rest of my life doesn’t matter anymore? Is it only about like, who I’m dating?” So it seems like the judgment that I get now was the judgment that [my high school classmate] thought I was making at that time.

Grace’s account of the limits of a social group-based interpretative lens demonstrates that neither interpretative lens can completely capture the complexity of whiteness.

**Beyond Race**

The process through which many respondents shifted between the individual and social group-based interpretative lenses and used heritage depending upon situational context is captured in Ruth Frankenberg’s (1993) concept of fluidity. The inconsistencies and limitations of the interpretative lenses demonstrate the fluidity of whiteness. In addition to this, Isabella and Carl must also navigate the fluidity of racial identity. Isabella, who is Hispanic, and Carl, who is
biracial, show similar forms of racial fluidity that Frankenberg’s Jewish interviewees demonstrate (1993:215-228).

Isabella can trace her ancestry to Italy, but her immediate family hails from Argentina and she was born in Miami. Throughout the interview, she consistently used the term, “gringo,” to distinguish herself from what she associated with whiteness in a very similar way to which Hailey used the concept of a white bubble to distinguish themselves from friends and relatives and their discriminatory behavior. However, while Isabella’s use of the term “gringo” also had connotations of being sheltered and ignorant, it was also highly influenced by her experience of going to very academically competitive schools in Connecticut and Virginia. She described “gringos” as very “ethnocentric, type-A, have their priorities mixed up, all they think about is school and their future. They’re selfish and don’t care about family.” To her, “gringo” is also specific to white Americans, as compared to white Europeans.

For Isabella, the fluidity of racial identity can be most easily traced by the contextual situation of changes in physical location. She talked in detail about her daily struggles to maintain her Hispanic identity while going to school in Virginia:

Sometimes I feel like I try to adapt so much and fit in so much that I like, forget key things of who I am. For example, I was raised with school as not being my first priority. My family and my religion come way before that. Then last semester, I just completely lost it. I was type-A, freaking psycho, studying twenty-four hours a day, I wasn’t sleeping, I got really unhealthy and things like that. And then I went home and my mom was like, “you’ve changed.” And I was went, “Well, what do you mean?” She said something like, “You act like someone I don’t know.” I mean, she wasn’t that harsh on me, but we got in a fight and she’s said, “I didn’t raise you this way. You’ve become more defensive, more uptight, and think that you’re more superior to others.

Throughout our interview, it was clear that Isabella made a very conscious effort to distinguish herself from the connotations of being a “gringo” by self-identifying as Hispanic. However, since Isabella was born in the United States and has ancestors who are Italian, I pushed her to
explore whether she ever viewed herself as white and how this might conflict with her idea of who a “gringo” is. While her Hispanic identity takes priority while going to school in Virginia, she realized that,

It’s interesting because when I’m here, I try to hold onto my Argentinean side way more than I do than if I’m in Argentina. Here, I really hold onto it. In Argentina, I’m pro-[white] American. It’s really weird. It’s awful, but I guess it depends on where I am. It’s been hard for me to figure out how to mix [my whiteness and my Hispanic identity] since I’ve been raised with both cultures. I guess it’s just gone to a point where it just depends on where I am because it’s just easier. It’s better for me. When I’m here, I hold onto my [Hispanic] culture but I’ll be kind of, anti-[white] American, which is awful. But in Argentina, I’ll be, pro-[white] American, because I hold onto my other side even more when I’m in Argentina. It sounds awful. It’s weird. It’s almost like I’m viewed as more white than Argentinean there and here I’m viewed more Hispanic than white. So, I guess it’s me trying to adapt to both situations.

In comparison to her label of “gringos” as egotistic, Isabella explained that while in Argentina, she is very proud of her status as a college student. In this way, Isabella manages a very difficult transition between different racial identities (she identifies as Hispanic racially rather than in terms of heritage) by using negative terminology such as “selfish” to describe whiteness when she identifies as Hispanic and using positive terminology such as “successful” to describe whiteness when she identifies as white.

While Isabella experiences significant fluidity in her racial identity, she seems to maintain a consistent social group based-interpretative lens. Rather than viewing herself as a unique individual entirely different from those who identify as white or as Hispanic, she shifts her racial identity according to contextual situation. In comparison, for Carl, who is half African-American and half white American, racial fluidity is compounded by fluidity in his interpretative lens. For example, after reading a New York Times article about disparities in education and residential segregation in post-Obama America, Carl expressed his agreement and used a social group-based interpretative lens by saying, “I feel like there’s still an attitude of, ‘out of sight, out of mind,’ where mainstream society or the white culture, in quotation marks… doesn’t see the rest of the
country that might need help or is in poverty.” Carl even related to the concept of a white bubble through the social group-based interpretative lens by referring to the personal effects of residential segregation: “I mostly grew up in white neighborhoods, with the exception of living in DC for a year. So I probably identify with [whites] more.” However, Carl’s use of the social group-based interpretative lens stops in contextual situations that encourage him to think about racially appropriate behavior. When asked if he believes it is inappropriate for someone who is biracial to use the n-word, Carl said, “That’s tricky. I don’t use it, but I don’t really know. Although everyone says, “Oh Tim, you’re just black,” I feel like I am just as much white as I am black, and so for me to use it would still be disrespectful to African-Americans who suffered the history of that word.” Finally, when asked to define his racial identity, Carl used an individual-based interpretative lens and said, “I don’t really think about [racial identity] all that often. And it’s really interesting because my family doesn’t really discuss our own racial identity or each other’s racial identity. We just kind of think, ‘Ok, we’re people.’ And so I wouldn’t identity myself as white and I wouldn’t identify myself as black either, even though other people will usually try to put one of those labels on me.” Carl’s personal narrative and manner of analyzing societal racial dynamics demonstrates both fluidity in racial identity between white American and African American and fluidity in whether he uses an individual or a social group-based interpretative lens. This dynamic is similar to how some biracial children shift their racial identity based on positive validation (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2003).
**IMPLICATIONS**

The literature on whiteness has focused on how its privilege and normativity encourage colorblind ideology as a means of maintaining the racial status quo. The findings from my study strengthen the scholarship on how whiteness intersects with factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, family, religion, political affiliation, and geographic background (Bonilla-Silva 2010, Bérubé 2001, Hartigan Jr. 2001, Frankenberg 1993), and is fluid in certain situational contexts (Brodkin 1998, Doane Jr. 1997, Moss and Faux 2006, Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2003, Waters 1990). My use of interpretative lenses as a way to understand the complexities of whiteness developed through a grounded theory approach. This approach allowed me to continuously shape my analysis as I encountered more data and incorporated theory from whiteness studies and cultural studies. The data were unique because my interviewees all attended a prominent liberal arts college in which they are continuously challenged to develop critical analytical skills. As a result, some of my respondents were highly aware of the privilege and normativity of whiteness. Even those who were not as aware of these racial dynamics were provided opportunities to consider them in class and at campus-wide events. My data demonstrates how understandings of racial identity in terms of individuality and in terms of membership in a social group are both reinforced and challenged depending on the nature of the situational context. The literature must continue striving towards a more nuanced understanding of whiteness.

The importance of capturing the complexities of whiteness is not limited to its academic implications. As the racial status quo continues to be challenged (Gallagher 1995), further social progress demands better understandings of structural racial inequality and racial identity. In Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) latest edition of *Racism without Racists*, he expresses apprehensions that
Obama’s electoral victory strengthens colorblind ideology. These worries are legitimate; Kyle used the election as an example that we live in a post-racial society. However, my data leads me to question how Bonilla-Silva frames colorblindness. While he is correct that white individuals who ignore whiteness are allowing racial inequalities to continue, the use of the term “racism” to describe colorblindness can be detrimental to social progress, especially when used outside of academia. Some of my respondents were highly aware of the stigma of racism (Croll 2007, Storrs 1999), yet had missed many of the opportunities to learn about race on campus and were seldom given the opportunity to learn about racism from friends. For example, Bob explained that when he is accused of being racist, “I get upset and feel like I’m getting attacked… I don’t get an explanation for it. It’s just a derogatory statement and then I tell them that I’m not. I get pretty upset about it.”

Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues that social progress requires “liberals, progressives, leftists, and people of consciousness” (2010: 234) to organize through grassroots movements. I suggest that progressive political action requires cooperation and mutual understanding rather than coercion. The process of mending contemporary racial inequalities demands an understanding of structure (which many who are politically liberal and have a social group-based interpretative lens have stressed) and of individuals as complex beings who are not completely determined by social group membership (as those who are politically conservative and have an individual-based interpretative lens have emphasized). Eileen demonstrated the analytical skills that are necessary in today’s world:

I definitely think [the n-word should be avoided by African-Americans] because a lot of people say, “we’re reclaiming the term, we’re making it ours, it’s something people used to take a stab at us with and now we’re taking it back.” That’s a good argument if it were always true. But African-Americans still use the word, with negative, derogatory connotations rather than “hey, my brother.” Yeah, that’s great, but that’s not the only way that it’s used. So if [the n-word] were completely expunged of its past record, then yeah, it would be really good, but it’s not. It’s still held on to in the same ways, and that keeps [those negative connotations] alive.
While Eileen’s take on the use of the n-word uses the social group-based interpretative lens to distinguish use of the word by her, a white American, from African-Americans, it also applies an individual-based perspective to look at the specific ways in which the word can be used. As the racial status quo continues to be challenged, social progress will require the political left and right to abandon their fixations on their respective interpretative lenses. It is true that, “Analysis of the place of whiteness in the racial order can and should be, rather than an end in itself, only one part of a much broader process of social change” (Frankenberg 1993: 243). However, while understanding whiteness is not a goal in itself, it is an important requirement for progress. I encourage individuals to seek out a better understanding of the complex dynamism and fluidity of race and whiteness in today’s society. Curt accusations of colorblindness and racism with no explanation are detrimental to this process.
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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Statement:
The purpose of this interview is to explore self-identity. The information you provide me will be used for the completion of an Honors Thesis as part of a degree in Sociology. Your identity be kept confidential, you have the right to ask me to stop the interview at any time you wish, and you may choose not to answer a question. Please sign the provided consent form and keep a copy for your records. Thank you very much for your time!

Part I

Can you give a brief introduction to yourself?
What does the word “identity” mean to you?
Tell me about your identity.

In sociology, we use the term “social constructs” to describe societal identifiers such as age, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religion, and occupation. What social constructs are most important to your life?
Have any specific world events, personal incidents, relationships, media images, or environments (ex. William & Mary) had an effect on you conceptualize your identity?
So far you have mentioned [previously described self-identifiers] as important parts of your identity. Have these aspects of your identity always been important for you? [Give specific example]
Do you ever feel one particular aspects of your identity in a particularly strong way? [Give specific example]
Can you think of anything else that is an important part of who you are? How is it important?

Part II
I’m particularly interested in white racial identity. Is it ok if I ask you [some more/some] questions about race? [If yes, continue. If no, end of interview]

To begin with, are there any specific world events, personal incidents, relationships, media images, or environments (ex. William & Mary) that have had an effect on your ideas about race, ethnicity and racism?
Are you white? Why?
What makes someone “white”? Why?
What do you associate “whiteness” with? Why?
Do you think there is such a thing as a “white culture”? Why?
[If yes] Can you try to describe the culture?
Do you identify with a particular ethnicity?
What do you associate your ethnicity with?
How do you distinguish between your ethnicity and your race?

Is being white a significant part of your identity?
[If no] Why do you think your race isn’t a significant part of who you are?
[If yes] Has being white always been a central part of who you are? How?
Do you ever feel your identity as white in a particularly strong way?
[If yes] Can you tell me about such a time?
Are there times when you are not as aware about being white?
[If yes] Can you tell me about such a time?
Should someone be proud to be white?
[If no] Is it a bad thing to be white?
[If yes] How?
[If slow/struggling to respond] Is it more complicated than “yes” or “no”?
Do you think an interracial marriage is not preferable compared to one between members of the same race? Why?
Do you believe that white individuals are treated differently from black individuals? What do you base these opinions on?
Do you act differently when interacting with white people compared to when interacting with black people?
Would your life be different if you were of a different race?
[If yes] How so? Can you recall a specific example, personal or public? Is this difference consistent? Is this difference in treatment justified?
Can you describe affirmative action for me? Through what kinds of sources have you learned about affirmative action?
Do you think affirmative action is justified? How have you developed your opinion of affirmative action?
Do you believe that it is inappropriate for a white person to use the “n-word”? Why do you believe so?
Do you believe that it is inappropriate for a black person to use the “n-word”? Why do you believe so?
What is racism?
Have you ever been accused of racism?
[If yes] How did you react?
[If no] Why do you think you have never been accused of racism?
Have you ever acted in a way that can be interpreted as racist?
What would a “post-racial society” look like?
Do you believe that President Obama’s election signals that we live in a post-racial society? Why or why not?
Do you believe that racial dynamics have changed over the last decade? How?
Do you believe that past discrimination continues to have a significant effect today?
How would you describe current societal race relations?
[If yes, significant effect] How should one respond to the effects of past discrimination?
Do you think it is important to reflect on what it means to be white? How so?

Possible Prompts to Encourage Conversation

[Culture] ->I will now show you a clip from one of comedian David Chappelle’s shows…
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uvg-ug9CvE&feature
What are your thoughts?

[Marriage; William & Mary] ->A couple years ago, a “racialist” speaker was invited to campus. This speaker claimed that different races, because of biological differences, are better suited to live apart from each other. What are your thoughts?

[Racism] ->In an interview with Playboy Magazine in May 1963, Malcolm X was asked, “What motives do you impute to Playboy for providing you with this opportunity for the free discussion of your views?” He answered, "I've never seen a sincere white man, not when it comes to helping black people. Usually things like this are done by white people to benefit themselves. The white man's primary interest is not to elevate the thinking of black people, or to awaken black people, or white people either. The white man is interested in the black man only to the extent that the black man is of use to him. The white man's interest is to make money, to exploit.” What are your thoughts?

[Affirmative Action; William & Mary] ->Are you aware of the Affirmative Action Bake Sale? In 2003 and 2004, the College’s “Sons of Liberty” sold cookies with different price increments for people of different races. White students paid the most for each cookie while Native Americans paid the least. This bake sale was meant to bring attention to what the Sons of Liberty perceived to be unfair affirmative action policies. What are your thoughts?

[Affirmative Action] ->In response to a question on affirmative action, Ronald Reagan once said, “I think we've made great progress in the civil rights field. I think there are some things, however, that may not be as useful as they once were or that may even be distorted in the practice, such as some affirmative action programs becoming quota systems. And I'm old enough to remember when quotas existed in the United States for the purpose of discrimination, and I don't want to see that happen again.” What are your thoughts?

[Post-Racial] ->Women make about $.75 for every $1 that a man makes. African-Americans make around $.60 for every $1 that a white American makes. Why do you think this is so?

[Post-Racial] ->I will now have you read an article from the New York Times…
What are your thoughts?

Closing
Is there anything else that you would like to add about race, whiteness, and identity? Feel free to email me if you have any questions or comments or if you would like for me to email you a transcript of this interview. Thank you for your participation!
**APPENDIX II: TABLE OF RESPONDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Heritage</th>
<th>Biological Sex</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Academic Major(s)</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Class***</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Geographic Background</th>
<th>Age</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Global Studies - African Studies</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Urban (Childhood); Rural (Early Adulthood)</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Business; Environmental Science</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>History; Government</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Women's Studies</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Unitarian Universalist</td>
<td>Rural (Childhood); Urban (Early Adulthood)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eileen</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Sociology; Public Policy</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Irish-Italian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Finance; Public Policy</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>See Below**</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Public Policy; Women's Studies</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>Straight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
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<td>Italian-Argentine</td>
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<td>Man</td>
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<td>Lower</td>
<td>Wesleyan</td>
<td>Suburban (Childhood); Rural (Childhood)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Carl identifies as Biracial; African-American and Caucasian. Isabella, depending on situational context, either identifies racially as Caucasian or Hispanic.

** Grace is “mostly” Irish and Italian, but said she is also Polish, German, and “a million other things.” Hailey does not know what her heritage is (she originally said that her heritage is “white”), but she did recently find out that her mother’s side has some Native American ancestry.

***Originally, the majority of respondents identified as being from the middle class. These are the responses from after I defined middle class as being from a household with an income between $30,000 and $90,000.