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Privileged and Complicit: Education and Understanding of White Privilege at a Predominately White Institution

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Privileged and Complicit:
Education and Understanding of White Privilege at a Predominately White Institution

Chase Rourke Dolan

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

At predominately-white institutions (PWI), students commonly come from racially homogenous backgrounds and may have never had to think about their racial identity or racial issues. The purpose of this study was to examine white students' understandings of the concept of privilege, the effectiveness of their education at this institution about privilege, and their comfort with racial dialogue. Without an understanding of privilege and oppression, and their complicity in this system, students cannot be expected to engage meaningfully in any discussion about racial injustice. Helms' white racial identity development model, Watt's privileged identity exploration model, and critical race theory were used as the theoretical frameworks to guide this study. Seven participants were included in the study. Criterion for participation included the following self-identifications, (1) white, (2) current undergraduate student, (3) been attending the institution for at least one year. Students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire and participate in a 60-minute semi-structured interview. Line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted using open coding, followed by axial coding to identify themes. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) Understandings of privilege, (2) Coping Mechanisms, (3) Factors that influenced understandings. Findings provide insights about the racial experiences of white students, how their background played a role in their thought processes, and what factors have either helped or hindered their racial identity development.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

White students commonly come to higher education from racially homogenous backgrounds and may have never had to think about their racial identity, or the concept of race as a whole (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2004; Perry, 2007; Perry & Shotwell, 2009). These students, who arrive at institutions of higher education unaware of their white privilege or the racial oppression that results from this privilege, cannot be expected to engage meaningfully in any discussion about racial injustice or anti-racist work (Ambrosio, 2014; Helms, 1990; Leonardo, 2004). Such ignorance is especially challenging at predominantly-white institutions where practices may simply reinforce the status quo and provide few opportunities for exposure to diversity or positive racial identity development (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Saleh, Anngela-Cole, & Boateng, 2011).

When white students are first made aware of their privilege and the idea that racial injustice exists, some may deny the existence of racism (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000), others may feel attacked and try to defend their position in society (Watt, 2007), and yet others may manifest feelings of guilt and shame towards their white identity (Ambrosio, 2014). These reactions hinder the development of a positive white racial identity, which is necessary for whites to acknowledge their place in the system of oppression and allow for the advancement of anti-racist work in our society (Helms, 1990).

A review of the literature reveals that past studies on the topic of white privilege have primarily been quantitative in nature (Boatright-Horowitz, Frazier, Harps-Logan, & Crockett, 2013; Loya & Cuevas, 2010; Spanierman, Poteat, Beer, & Armstrong, 2006; Todd, Spanierman, & Aber, 2010), have either focused on the development of a positive white racial identity

(Ambrosio, 2014; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Helms, 1990; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994), or have examined white privilege pedagogy from the faculty point-of-view (Applebaum, 2010; Quaye, 2012). There is a lack of qualitative research that investigates undergraduate students' levels of understanding of privilege, examines the factors that led to this understanding, and how the institution has impacted these beliefs. By addressing this gap in the literature, this study will inform higher education professionals at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) who seek to assist white students' understanding of racial issues. This understanding is critical for the racial identity development of white students who can then move forward as more knowledgeable citizens, and potentially advocates for social change. Educating white students on their privilege represents a crucial first-step in dismantling the underlying systems of oppression.

Rationale

Race is a social construct that has developed over the course of American history to separate and marginalize certain groups of people. Systems of privilege and oppression based on race still exist today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). White privilege is the inherent advantage that white people have over people of color, due to the color of their skin (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2004; Perry, 2007). For students who identify as white, the idea of their privilege can be difficult to understand, and higher education could be their first exposure to the issue (Perry, 2007). In an environment centered around learning, white privilege should be taught and discussed, but is all too often ignored or glossed over.

American society is becoming increasingly polarized and educating racially privileged students about issues of race and privilege can enable them to move forward with the ability to discuss, understand, and advocate for those who are marginalized by the systems of privilege (Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994). Students who identify as white have grown up as part of a

system of that has awarded them certain privileges, even if they were unaware of these privileges (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2004). The confrontation of their privilege is critical to their development as individuals. By educating privileged students about their unearned advantages, and about the systems behind those advantages, these students will have the opportunity to discuss the topic and be better equipped to tackle the systemic issues that perpetuate racism. If the systems of privilege and oppression continue to exist, the development of students of color will continue to be hindered, and our society will continue to perpetuate racism.

Background of Problem

White Privilege

Although white students are commonly taught to believe that we live in a *post-racial* society, in reality, systems of privilege and oppression still exist today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These systems provide white people with an inherent advantage over people of color due to the color of their skin (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2004; Perry, 2007); this advantage is referred to as *white privilege* (McIntosh, 1992).

White privilege is not a new issue, and has gained awareness since the 1960s, when America shifted from overt forms of racism, to more subtle forms (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003; Helms, 1990; Leonardo, 2004). White students grow up learning that racism looks like violent acts, such as lynching, being carried out by groups such as the KKK. This emphasis on blatant forms of racism allows whites to distance themselves from the idea of racism, because it allows them to focus on individual acts of racism, rather than acknowledge the underlying systemic racism that pervades our society (Watt, 2007).

Today, white privilege oppresses people of color, and it is important for whites to understand their complicity in the system of oppression. Just as racism can take many forms,

white supremacy means more than just the extremist groups such as Neo-Nazis or the KKK. Leonardo (2004) described the concept of white supremacy as the “direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it” (p. 137). He argued that by existing in and benefitting from systems of privilege and oppression, whites are complicit in the racial supremacy that oppresses people of color in our country. He argued that, as educators, we should shift our focus from focusing on the issue of unearned privileges, and start to focus on the everyday actions that perpetuate the underlying white racial domination.

White Racial Identity

There are multiple models of White Racial Identity Development (WRID) (Ambrosio, 2014; Helms, 1990; Rowe, et al., 1994) that analyze how white individuals develop attitudes regarding their racial identity. The confrontation of a White individual’s privilege is only a part of developing a positive racial identity, but represents a crucial step in the process. If a white individual has a negative confrontation with their privilege, they will move down the path of denial and other defense mechanisms that slows the progress of racial justice work in our country. On the other hand, the development of a positive white racial identity will allow white students to acknowledge their privilege, and move toward an understanding of racial injustice at a societal level.

Statement of Purpose

This qualitative study was conducted at a large, predominately-white, Midwestern institution, to determine white students’ level of education and understanding of white privilege. The purpose of this study was to examine the students’ perception of their own level of understanding about the concept of privilege, the effectiveness of education at this institution about power and privilege, and their comfort with dialogue about race. There is a crossroads that

students come to after they are confronted with their privilege. First, they can feel attacked or blamed, which may lead to ignorance or even hate in extreme cases. Alternatively, students can begin to understand the issue, their place in the societal system of oppression, and move towards dialogue, advocacy, and acceptance. The study provides educators with strategies to improve white privilege education after white students are confronted with the idea.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study include:

1. What are white undergraduate students' understandings of the concept of white privilege?
2. What are white students' responses when confronted with the idea of privilege?
3. What factors influence their understanding of privilege?
4. What practices, if any, could institutions implement to impact the education of white students about privilege?

Design, Data Collection and Analysis

The subjects of this qualitative study were white, undergraduate students at a large predominately-white institution in the Midwestern United States, who had completed at least one year at the institution. To recruit participants, an email describing the study was sent out by the Office of Institutional Research to a random sample of 100 students who met the criterion. This email included a brief description of the study, along with contact information for interested students. The first 15 students who responded with interest to participate in the study were to be selected. With less than 15 students responding, a second email was sent to another random sample of 100 students. After the second round, there were still less than 15 participants, so "snowball sampling" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) was used to recruit the remaining participants

until data saturation was achieved. Students were provided with a consent form and a link to select an interview time.

Prior to the interview, the researcher provided participants with a questionnaire that included questions about the participants' age, major, and areas of involvement on campus. This background information allowed the interviewer to identify courses or areas of involvement that may have increased the participant's potential exposure to the difficult topics of racism and privilege.

Data was collected through one-on-one interviews. All data collection occurred on-campus, and the interviews took place in a reserved room to ensure confidentiality and encourage honesty when discussing difficult issues. The role of the researcher was to conduct the interviews and compile and analyze the data. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and conducted in a semi-structured format; the researcher took observational notes during the interviews.

The interview questions and those included on the questionnaire were approved by the institution's review board (HRRC). The interview questions acted as a guide to structure the interview, but the semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions as needed. Each interview was scheduled for one hour, but times varied based on each conversation. Each student was asked to provide a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality, and all identifying information was seen only by the researcher and was not published in the results. To remain neutral in each interview, the researcher avoided discussing their own experiences or points of view. After each interview, a third-party transcription service transcribed each audio recording. Interview recordings and transcriptions were stored on a password-protected computer, and hard copies of transcriptions were kept in a locked cabinet in an office on campus.

After the data were collected, transcriptions were analyzed using *open coding* to identify segments that may be useful to the study (Merriam, 2009). Next, *axial coding* was used to group these segments into categories (Merriam, 2009). This allowed the researcher to identify themes that emerged from the data, which was then used to determine participants' understandings of privilege.

Operational Definitions

Critical Race Theory (CRT): Theoretical framework “that emphasizes the centrality of race and racism and challenges white supremacy in the law, education, politics and other social systems” (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 26).

Difficult Dialogue: “Verbal or written exchange of ideas or opinions between citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views or beliefs or values about social justice issues” (Watt, 2007, p. 116).

Dysconscious: The “uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King, 1991, p. 135).

Identity: A socially distinguishing feature that a person takes special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (Fearon, 1999).

Race: Social construct that identifies, and sorts, members of society into groups based on the color of their skin (Leonardo, 2013).

Systemic racism: Societal-level systems that perpetuate racism, such as laws and education (Leonardo, 2013).

White Privilege: Unearned advantages given to an individual who identifies as white, regardless of whether an individual realizes or accepts the privilege (Leonardo, 2013).

White Supremacy: Direct processes that secure the privileges of those who identify as white (Leonardo, 2004).

Delimitations of the Study

The population chosen for this study was current undergraduate students at a Midwestern university who self-identified as white. This study focused on the perceptions of white students regarding their educational experience and their white privilege, which warranted the selection of white students as subjects. To keep the focus of the findings on the impact of racial identity on racial privilege, a student's race was the only demographic variable used for recruitment. First-year students were not included in this study to ensure that the participants had attended the institution for at least a year, a time period that allowed for potential exposure to the topics of race and privilege on campus.

The location of the study was on the campus of a large, predominately-white institution. This decision was made to be accommodating to students who wished to participate but were primarily on one of the two campuses. This accommodation was made to ensure that interview location was not a limiting factor for participation.

Limitations of the Study

The experiences that participants had at this particular PWI may not be the same as white students at other PWIs around the country. The participants who volunteered for the study were all associated with one particular department, which may have influenced their responses. Finally, the participants' ability to reflect on their experiences may have affected the accuracy of their recollections and responses.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter one provided an introduction, including a detailed description of the problem that guided the study. Chapter two discusses white racial identity development, privileged identity exploration, and critical race theory as the guiding theoretical frameworks for the study and also provides an analysis of the relevant literature surrounding the topic. Chapter three details the research design, participants involved in the study, data collection, and data analysis methodology. Chapter four provides the results that emerged from the data analysis. Finally, the conclusions that can be drawn from the study and recommendations for future practice and research are presented in chapter five.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review begins by introducing the theoretical frameworks of the study, white racial identity development, privileged identity exploration, and critical race theory (CRT). White racial identity development theory allowed this study to consider how the current status of the participants' racial identity development may have impacted their understandings of privilege, as well as the complex nature of coming to terms with one's whiteness. The privileged identity exploration model allowed the study to identify potential defense mechanisms that participants may have used when they were confronted with the concepts of privilege and racism. CRT allowed the researcher to analyze the education of white privilege by centering the theoretical framework around the systemic racism and oppression that continues to provide white individuals with unearned privilege.

In the realm of education, CRT examines the influence of these systems of oppression and how they impact the educational inequity in higher education. The research literature that is reviewed in this chapter discusses the concept of white privilege, and the reactions of white students when confronted with their personal privilege. Next, the concept of the "other", the difference between privilege and supremacy, and student defense mechanisms are then discussed to highlight the difficulty in addressing privilege in society, and one's complicity in the system. Further literature on the development of a positive white racial identity is then discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the literature surrounding higher education pedagogical practices for white students learning about either privilege or racism.

Theoretical Framework

White Racial Identity Development Model

Helms (1990) argued that to develop a positive white racial identity, white people need to overcome these aspects of racism, accept their whiteness and the cultural implications of being white, and figure out a way to view their racial identity without depending on the superiority of one race over another. To construct a positive white racial identity, students must undergo two processes, the abandonment of racism and the development of a non-racist white identity.

In her White Racial Identity Development (WRID) Model, Helms (1990) identified six stages of white racial identity development: *Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independence, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy*. The stages are split into two phases: abandonment of racism and the construction of a non-racist identity. Contact, disintegration, and reintegration stages compose the abandonment phase, while pseudo-independence, immersion, and autonomy comprise the construction phase.

When white students in the first stage, *Contact*, encounter people of color they typically have a lack of awareness regarding racial issues, and deny that they have benefited from white privilege (Helms, 1990). Whites in this stage commonly employ the “color-blind” strategy because they are not aware of racial prejudice. Students in this stage are unable to form a positive racial identity because they are not aware of the issues regarding race, which can lead to denial of their white privilege.

The next stage, *Disintegration*, triggers the “acknowledgement of one’s whiteness” (Helms, 1990, p. 58). Whites in this stage are made aware of the moral dilemmas surrounding race, and begin to question the racial realities they have been taught. Students in this stage will

be better situated to discuss the issues of race and privilege, while undergoing internal conflict surrounding their racial identity. This stage represents a crucial point in the formation of a racial identity, because their development in this stage with either push them forward toward pseudo-independence, or back into the reintegration stage.

Whites who enter the *Reintegration* stage may regress back to their beliefs of white superiority. Students in this stage will commonly revert to stereotypes to explain racial injustice, instead of acknowledging the underlying issues such as privilege. Students in this stage will also struggle to develop a positive racial identity because they have been made aware of the issues and are now trying to defend their privilege and position.

The *Pseudo-Independence* stage included the “commitment to unlearn racist beliefs and attitudes” (Ambrosio, 2014, p. 1379). Whites in this stage are beginning to search for a new white identity, and often want to escape their whiteness. They start to become aware of racial injustices, and how it affects people of color. Despite the new awareness around issues of race, whites in this stage will continue to deny their personal responsibility, and only accept that whites were responsible in the past (Helms, 1990). Students in this stage may begin to acknowledge the idea of privilege but may also deny their own complicity in the system of oppression.

The next stage, *Immersion/Emmersion*, reflects active questioning regarding racial issues. Whites in this stage search for more information on race and become more aware of their white privilege. Individuals in this stage begin to construct a positive White identity, and commonly use white role models as guides when navigating their journey (Helms, 1990). Students in this stage are more aware of their privilege and can begin to develop their racial identity, which can allow them to attack racism and oppression.

The final stage of Helms' WRID (1990) is *Autonomy*. In this stage, whites begin to enjoy positive feeling about being white, and a capacity to address white privilege has been established. The concept of diversity is valued and is actively pursued to learn more about other cultures. Whites no longer feel the need to oppress people of color, because race is no longer a threat to their position of superiority.

Privileged Identity Exploration Model

White students have grown up in a society that awards them privileges, and they have become accustomed to these privileges whether they are aware of them or not. As a result, when confronted with the idea that they are complicit in the oppression of others, it is reasonable for white students to defend their status as the dominant racial group. Such confrontation can happen when engaging in difficult dialogues, which is an “exchange of ideas or opinions between citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views about social justice issues” (Watt, 2007, p. 116). Watt identified eight potential defenses in her Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model. These defenses were *denial*, *deflection*, *rationalization*, *intellectualization*, *principium*, *false envy*, *benevolence*, and *minimization* (Watt, 2007). She categorized the eight defenses into recognizing, contemplating, or addressing a privileged identity.

The first defense, *denial*, included acknowledging the injustice, but making contradictory statements to show that understanding was merely surface level. *Deflection* occurred when a student made a comment that allowed them to accept the realities of racism by focusing their anger on a less threatening target such as parents or a school that failed to educate them on the issue. *Rationalization* was identified as supplying a logical response to why racism happens, which allowed them to address the issue without getting to the roots of the injustice. Next,

intellectualization, was identified when a student focused on the intellectual aspects of racial injustice. An example of this was “I realize that racism exists and that Latinos experience racism. But it is just a matter of numbers and jobs...and that will make it so that there are less opportunities for Americans and enough of our own are unemployed and homeless” (Watt, 2007, p. 121). *Principium* was where a student avoided exploring the topic based on a religious or personal principle. Students who exhibited *false envy* displayed surface level affection for a person of color in order to deny the complexity of the social and political context behind racial issues. By focusing on an individual, it was easier for the student to conceptualize injustice because there was a singular victim. Enacting the *benevolence* defense allowed a student to avoid the issue by focusing on how they could “help” those who were affected by racism. Even though they believe that they understood the issue, this response avoided the “power of the giver” (p. 122) which implied superiority. Finally, *minimization* was identified when students reduced the issue down to simple facts. These defenses were common for the students Watt studied and showed the difference between the perceived and actual understanding of privilege. Managing the defensive reactions of white students results in better discussions because defenses have the potential to halt or destroy a conversation.

Fear and Entitlement. Before she expanded on her PIE model, Watt (2007) discussed the concepts of fear and entitlement as they related to the threat of change. White students’ confrontation of the reality of privilege threatens not only their privileges as white people, but it also attacks their way of seeing the world. In America, white students are socialized to believe various constructs and myths such as the American dream, and the realization of privilege and oppression can threaten this socialization. Fear was identified as “the reason one may avoid and ultimately defend against going deeper in exploring their privileged identity” (Watt, 2007, p.

119). Entitlement referred to the “attitude of ownership and power based on social/political contracts” (p. 119). This could also explain why white students get defensive during difficult dialogues; they believe their participation in this dialogue is optional. They do not have to analyze their privileged identity, and therefore try to avoid it using one of the defenses.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began to appear in the mid-1970s as people started to notice that advances made during the civil rights era were being dismantled or ignored (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT began as a movement to address these concerns, but developed into the study of “the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). CRT proposes three general propositions. First, racism is ordinary and affects the everyday lives of people of color. Second, racism is difficult to address because of color-blind conceptions of equality which only address blatant forms of racism. It is also difficult to address because “racism advances the interests of both white elites and the white working-class” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7), which leaves little incentive to address it. The third proposition is that race is a social construct. People have created race as a way of sorting groups of people due to the color of their skin, although skin color is only a small part of their genetic makeup. Due to these beliefs, critical race theorists began to study how societal structures and practices perpetuate a system of oppression in our country.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied CRT to education, to demonstrate how race can be used as a tool for analysis when looking at educational inequity. They too argue that race, racism, and power are interwoven within the fabric of our society, including our education system. The authors discussed three central propositions (p. 48):

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.

2. U.S. society is based on property rights.
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social inequity.

These propositions were like those of the original CRT, but implemented a focus on property rights. The authors discussed how CRT applied to educational inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). First, they described how racism is deeply ingrained into American life. The systematic and structural racism that exists in our society provides the problem that Whites need to find a way to contend with the demands of all, without institutional change or reorganization that may affect the status and privilege of white people. Next, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) discussed how civil rights law needs to be reinterpreted due to its ineffectiveness. Civil rights legislation was ambiguous, and allowed for the accommodation of both conservative and liberal views of racism. Legislation aimed toward educational equity has failed, as school districts are still inequitable. Whites commonly live in more affluent neighborhoods, and therefore have increased levels of funding. Black students are more commonly found in urban districts, which have a disproportionate disparity in funding. Finally, the authors described how society needs to challenge neutrality, color-blindness, and the idea of meritocracy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These are common myths that individuals are taught as children, and they perpetuate the socialization that supports White privilege. Along with these propositions, CRT has five tenets: *normalcy of racism, whiteness as property, storytelling, intersectionality, and interest convergence* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Normalcy of racism. CRT asserts that racism exists in society and is a rather normal experience for people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Systems of oppression exist due to the historical nature of racism in the United States. These systems of oppression are the

underlying support structure for the privilege white people have in everyday life. Racism has shifted from the overt acts of the civil rights era and now manifests in subtle ways that position white people as the superior race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Leonardo, 2004).

Whiteness as property. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that American society is centered around property rights instead of human rights, with “whiteness as the ultimate property” (p. 58). Starting with the invasion of Native American lands in the 1600s, whites have objectified people of color as property. Native Americans were seen to only have a “natural right” to their land, which held no legal standing. This evolved with the use of African Americans as slaves, when people of color were thought of as literal property. The focus on property rights over human rights created an inherent power dynamic since the property owner has all of the power. Throughout history, whites have been the property owners, and this system has positioned Whiteness as the dominant culture and ultimate property.

Storytelling. Storytelling has played an important role in CRT studies as it allows for the use of stories or first-person accounts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), where naming one’s reality with stories can affect the oppressor (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The practice of using stories has usually been used to give a voice to people of color who are silenced by the dominant group. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) suggested a few reasons for using stories to name one’s reality: First, much of reality is socially constructed; Second, stories provide the outgroup with a way to preserve their sense of self; Third, they can help overcome the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world a certain way. Even though stories are usually used by people of color, the practice of storytelling represents an intriguing avenue to educate white students about concepts of privilege and oppression.

Intersectionality. Even though CRT is centered on the role of race in society, the notion of intersectionality discusses how the combination of an individual's identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, etc.) impact the role of race in their interactions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Every individual represents multiple identities and an intersectional lens allows for the complex nature of combining these identities when analyzing an individual's experience. Crenshaw (1989) explains that intersectionality does not only appear in the various identities of individuals, but also that multiple systems of oppression are experienced at the same time.

Interest convergence. This tenet of CRT focused on the factors that motivate advocacy of minoritized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These groups are labeled *minoritized* because of the systemic oppression and superiority of whiteness in U.S. society. White supremacy actively upholds the systems that allow for white privilege, and therefore this tenet points out that white people will not dismantle systems of power and privilege unless there is something in it for them.

Guided by these frameworks, this study seeks to analyze the racial identity development of white students and their understanding of privilege, with the hope that such an understanding could contribute to their personal growth and the dismantling of racial inequity in society. CRT is used as a lens because it provides the assumptions that racism is real in U.S. society, white people have an inherent interest in upholding current systems of privilege, and that storytelling will allow for critical self-reflection and may challenge the dysconscious conviction to see the world in a certain way.

Synthesis of Research Literature

White Privilege

The attitudes surrounding race have developed over the course of American history and have been used to separate and marginalize groups of people based on the color of their skin. Individuals are commonly taught to believe that we live in a *post-racial* society, but systems of privilege and oppression still exist today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These systems provide white people with an inherent advantage over people of color due to the color of their skin (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2004; Perry, 2007); this advantage is referred to as *white privilege* (McIntosh, 1992).

White privilege does not represent a ground-breaking concept in the literature today, but it has gained awareness over the past few decades as America has shifted from overt racism to more subtle forms (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003; Helms, 1990; Leonardo, 2004). White students that come to PWIs may have grown up learning about racism as the violent acts perpetuated by groups such as the KKK. By placing the emphasis on blatant forms of racism, whites are able to distance themselves from the idea that racism could be more subtle and regular. This allows them to avoid acknowledging the underlying systems that perpetuate systemic racism in our society (Watt, 2007).

White privilege oppresses people of color, and whites are complicit in this system of oppression. White supremacy represents more than extremist groups as Leonardo (2004) described the concept as the “direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it” (p. 137). He argued that whites are complicit in the racial supremacy that oppresses people of color by existing in and benefiting from the systems of privilege and oppression in society. He also discussed how educators should shift their focus from the

unearned privileges associated with white privilege, to the everyday actions that secure the underlying white racial domination.

Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) conducted a study to identify whether the findings from survey-based research provided an honest depiction of white racial attitudes in our country. The authors used both survey and interview data to analyze white students' views on racism. The findings showed that surveys do not tell the whole story when it comes to white student attitudes about racism. Bonilla-Silva and Forman found that “whites seem more tolerant in survey research than they do in interviews” (p. 54). When conducting interviews, the authors saw that it was more difficult for white students to use semantics to avoid being seen as racist; being in an interview setting also allowed the authors to ask direct and indirect questions to hinder the ability of whites to “say the right things”. The authors identified four points that emerged from the interviews. First, whites were more prejudiced in interviews than on surveys. Second, whites used semantic moves to save face and not be seen as racist. Third, a discursive approach was helpful for finding the true views of whites. Fourth, white students do not base their defense of white supremacy on Jim Crow overt racism but base it on a more modern racist ideology.

Otherness. A common theme that appeared throughout the literature was the concept of the “other” (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003; Perry, 2007). This concept is derived from the thought that white is “normal”, which makes non-white races the “other”. White culture dominates our society, even to the extent that it is not considered to have a particular culture. Individuals rarely described themselves as white when referring to their identity, because they are “simply normal” (Ambrosio, 2014, p. 1378). This normalization of the dominant racial group naturally positions a set of people as “normal”, which inherently

positions everyone else as the “other”. This positioning allows for white people to have a feeling of superiority over other races, and helps maintain the white privilege in our society.

Perry (2007) conducted a qualitative ethnographic study at two different high schools, one predominately-white and one multiracial school. She conducted over 60 interviews between the two schools and shadowed 10 students from each school to develop a case study. She then used coding techniques to analyze the interview and shadowing data. Her findings supported the idea of the “other” when thinking about white culture as “universalistic” and normal (p. 382). This study used interviews to discuss the idea of racism with high school students, but the main finding was that student views were different at each school.

Privilege v. Supremacy. An important aspect to white privilege is the fact that there are societal structures in place to secure the privileges that come with being the dominant group. Leonardo (2004) proposed the idea of confronting privilege from the standpoint of white supremacy. White supremacy is a necessary component for privilege, because it creates and protects the systems that award unearned privileges. White supremacy is often associated with Nazis, the KKK, or other violent hate groups. By separating supremacy from privilege, white people can separate their unconscious forms of racism with those that are more apparent. Leonardo (2004) stated that “despite the fact that white racial domination precedes us, whites daily recreate it on both the individual and institutional level” (p. 139). Due to the fear of being called a racist, white people tend to blame issues on the past, thus allowing them to avoid the possibility that they are complicit in perpetuating the system that oppresses people of color in our country. This guilt blocks the critical reflection needed, because it puts the focus on individual racism, rather than structural racism.

Costs v. Benefits. Past studies on white student reflection on their whiteness have discussed the idea of costs that go along with the privileges associated with racism (Spanierman & Armstrong, 2006; Todd, Spanierman, & Aber, 2010). Most research related to white privilege focused on the unearned advantages that white students receive based on the color of their skin, but there were also negative emotional responses that were associated with a critical reflection about one's whiteness. Spanierman and Aber (2006) analyzed 230 white college students responses on the Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites (PCRW) Scale. They found the following costs of White Empathy, White Guilt, and White Fear (Spanierman & Aber, 2006).

In a similar study regarding the costs associated with reflection on whiteness, Todd et al. (2010) discussed how white student emotional responses could be expected when participating in a semi-structured interview or in a written reflection. The researchers studied more than 250 students and did not tell the participants whether they would be using an interview or written reflection. The researchers then used quantitative methods to analyze the data but were able to identify themes that appeared through the use of semi-structured interviews. The authors stated a limitation of the study as not being able to differentiate between "superficial or authentic engagement" (Todd, et al., 2010, p. 108) in racial reflection.

Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) conducted a study using quantitative methods to analyze survey and interview data to identify how participants respond to each research method. The study allowed the authors to compare two different methods, but a structured interview may have limited the depth of conversations for each participant. The use of qualitative semi-structured interviews would have allowed the authors to inquire about certain questions for participants who may have differing experiences. Similarly, Spanierman & Aber (2006) conducted a quantitative study which used cluster analysis to place participants on a scale, but it

limited the ability of the researchers to identify the nuances that arose when discussing difficult issues such as racism. The implementation of an interview would have allowed the researchers to identify why a respondent might have differentiated between a 3 and 4 on their Likert scale.

With qualitative measures and semi-structured interviews, a study about white student reflection on their whiteness could have been able to differentiate this. Expanding Perry's (2007) study to college undergraduate students would have enabled the identification of the views of students from various high schools, and how their understanding of racism and privilege developed over time.

White Racial Identity

There are multiple models of White Racial Identity Development (WRID) (Ambrosio, 2014; Helms, 1990; Jones, 1972; Jones, 1981; Rowe, et al., 1994) that analyze how white individuals develop attitudes regarding their racial identity. The confrontation of a white individual's privilege is only a part of developing a positive racial identity, but it represents a crucial step in the process. If a white individual has a negative confrontation with their privilege, they will move down the path of denial and other defense mechanisms that will slow the progress of racial justice work in our country. On the other hand, the development of a positive white racial identity will allow white students to acknowledge their privilege and move toward an understanding of racial injustice at a societal level.

The development of a white racial identity needs to occur for white students to be aware of their whiteness in America. Racism exists in America, but the denial that surrounds the concept of racism hinders the ability of positive white identity development. Jones (1972; 1981) identified three types of racism: individual, institutional, and cultural. Individual racism included the personal attitudes and beliefs that are designed to convince oneself of white superiority.

Institutional racism referred to the social policies, laws, and regulations that maintain the economic and social advantages of white people. Cultural racism represents the societal beliefs and customs that promote the thought that white culture is superior. These three types of racism are entrenched in society to the point that they have become a part of the white racial identity.

Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) proposed a white racial identity model (WRID) that described individuals and their level of white racial consciousness as achieved or unachieved. This model built off Helms' WRID (1990), by focusing more on the attitudes of white identified groups and being composed of "types" rather than "stages". The model proposed that individuals could move between types of consciousness due to events in their life, or the political climate (Rowe, et al., 1994). These findings relate to the current political climate in the United States, and provides a lens to study potential student dissonance about the topic of white racial identity and privilege.

Ambrosio (2014) further expanded on the WRID model by analyzing how it interacted with appeals to racial themes and narratives, and the need for white students to defend their identity against being perceived as racists. The study found that white students used racialized concepts to protect their whiteness without appearing racist. These racial narratives were grouped into four categories: "appeals to self, progress, authenticity, and extremes" (p. 1384). These narratives allowed the students to speak out against racial issues, without being forced to acknowledge their complicity in the system of white privilege.

White Privilege Pedagogy

Given that many white students come to higher education institutions from racially homogenous backgrounds, the responsibility for exposing white students to issues of race and

privilege falls to educators. Teaching concepts of racial injustice represents a difficult challenge, whether the teaching occurs in the classroom, or in a student's experience out of the classroom.

The research on white privilege pedagogy revolves around the main themes of white racial ignorance, innocence, and the universal/particular dynamic (Applebaum, 2010; Perry, 2007; Perry & Shotwell, 2009). Students who are confronted with their privilege try to defend their whiteness by denying the existence of racism, or by denying complicity (Applebaum, 2010). Educators have the opportunity to counteract white racial ignorance before it begins if they facilitate discussions with white students about their privilege. Perry (2007) conducted a study that included students from two high schools: one predominately white, and one where white students were the minority. She found that white students felt attacked when they were no longer part of the *normal* group and were considered the *other*. By changing the dynamic of group positioning, Perry found that our society sees white as the *normal* group, whereas people of color are the *other* group. This is a critical finding in regard to teaching white privilege because it can illustrate to students the everyday effects of white privilege.

Quaye (2012) conducted a study to understand how white educators should facilitate discussions about racial realities. It found that a common challenge that educators face when discussing the topics of privilege and oppression, was finding ways to help students understand the structural and systemic factors that perpetuate racism. This is a critical component, as it illuminates the hidden factors that contribute to the problem through everyday practices and norms.

Quaye (2012) studied two educators, both of whom were white, who facilitated race discussions with white students. One educator, Corrine, used case studies in an effort to personalize racial issues and counter the idea that racism no longer exists. She knew that most

white students come to college without much knowledge about racial issues, which could lead to a skepticism about the need for racial dialogue. By using case studies written by white authors, about white experiences, Corrine hoped to gain the students' buy-in on racial issues. The second participant, Dalton, used small groups and service learning projects to facilitate the discussion. Service learning was found to not be an effective tool, because it created the notion that white people needed to help people of color, which perpetuated the idea of white superiority. While facilitating racial discussions, Dalton was extremely honest and open about his race and privilege and acknowledged how it affected his ability to facilitate. This was important because it showed that white people could, and should, be involved in racial dialogue.

White students tend to resist learning about their privilege, and this can have a negative impact on course dynamics and evaluations (Boatright-Horowitz, Marraccini, & Harps-Logan, 2012). This can also lead to a hostile learning environment, and can dissuade educators from engaging in white privilege discussion due to the fear of receiving poor evaluations which could, in turn, affect their career. White students' resistance represents an issue because "understanding and accepting white privilege is an important step in the effort to facilitate antiracism teaching and reduce societal racism" (p. 896).

In their mixed methods study, Boatright-Horowitz et al. (2012) analyzed the emotional and cognitive reactions of white students when learning about their privilege. The qualitative data was analyzed to identify what type of emotion white students mentioned, whether they agreed with the concept of white privilege, and whether they actually understood the concept. Quantitative data was analyzed to rate the level of agreement by white students on 12 reasons for potential negative reactions. This study included students who were enrolled in a general psychology course, with the majority of participants being white. The findings suggested that

white students who acknowledged the existence of privilege responded defensively by discussing their personal experiences, which distracted from the discussion about institutional racism and the experiences of people of color.

In the Classroom. Learning about racism in courses represents a key opportunity for educators at higher education institutions. Students have differing views on getting involved outside of the classroom, but they all take courses which presents guaranteed time that educators have to facilitate discussion around racial issues. Various methods can be employed when discussing racism in class, including experiential learning techniques (Loya & Cuevas, 2010). Loya and Cuevas had 11 students participate in a pretest-posttest survey to analyze racial attitudes and the effect of a hybrid course. The course utilized in-class activities, written assignments, and online discussions. The authors found that their class facilitated honest discussion and increased awareness for students regarding racism. Some of the more effective practices in the class included using guest lecturers, which allowed the instructors to stay in a supportive role, self-reflection to encourage increased self-awareness, and the use of hands-on activities. This course allowed students to critically self-reflect and learn about the issues of racism and privilege in a unique way.

Educating white students on the existence of white privilege is important, but a review of the literature did not uncover a single best practice. A crucial step that did emerge was the acceptance of unearned advantages by white students. Boatright-Horowitz et al. (2013) conducted a study that analyzed white students and their level of agreement with McIntosh's (1992) list of privileges. Boatright-Horowitz et al. analyzed the attitudes of 274 students who were enrolled in a general psychology course, with most participants identifying as white. The authors used pre-test and post-test questions to track any changes in the attitudes of the

participants with regards to racism and white privilege. Simply acknowledging that privilege exists was an important step, but white students could use this as an excuse for not digging deeper and to avoid acknowledging their own complicity in the system (Ambrosio, 2013; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Leonardo, 2004; Watt, 2007).

Influential Experiences. Robbins (2016) focused on how white women graduate students learned about concepts such as racism and privilege during their master's degree. She interviewed 11 women from various master's programs. The interviews produced "16 graduate coursework and pre-professional experiences that deepened participants' understanding of racism and white privilege" (Robbins, 2016, p. 258). Students reported that these experiences contributed to their understanding of racism and privilege by "opening their eyes" and creating a "hunger" for increased knowledge surrounding the issues (p. 258). Using Watt's PIE model (2007), Robbins (2016) identified themes of defensiveness and resistance about white privilege, which contradicted the participant responses.

Boatright-Horowitz et al. (2013) and Loya and Cuevas (2010) conducted their respective studies using survey data that was analyzed with quantitative scores. This limited the possibility of uncovering the reasons behind a student's answer. As seen in other studies surrounding the topic of privilege and race, qualitative studies allow researchers to uncover more than survey research.

By using a mixed methods approach, Boatright-Horowitz et al. (2012) were able to identify why White students may feel attacked when being confronted with their privilege, and how the focus of White privilege pedagogy should be focused on the modern institutional form of racism. This study relied on undergraduate participants enrolled in one specific course, at one specific university, which greatly narrows the generalizability of the results. Also, by including

students of color, the results were skewed due to the vastly different experience with systems of privilege.

Robbins (2016) utilized qualitative measures in the two-stage interviews that she conducted with her participants. This allowed her to discuss racism and privilege with participants, but also allowed her to identify defense mannerisms that would not have been identified through a survey or written response. These defenses are also difficult to study using purely quantitative measures. One of Robbins' recommendations for future research was to "examine undergraduate experiences that contribute to white women's learning about racism and white privilege" (Robbins, 2016, p. 266). The goal of Robbins' study was to identify the growth of master's level white women in their understanding of racism and privilege, but this sample did not identify potential influential experiences that could aid undergraduate white students who may never enroll in a graduate HESA program. The use of qualitative interviews was essential to the findings, but a broader sample would have allowed the results to be more generalizable.

Quaye (2012) conducted his qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to understand the facilitation approaches of each of the educators. Quaye was able to identify the approaches each educator used, but was unable to see the approaches in action. An observational component would have greatly improved this study. The participants were also selected after attending the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), which implies that the participants studied and were passionate about racial issues. This is a critical component for racial education, but newer educators may not have the same level of education to use the results. Finally, while this study described approaches for facilitating racial discussion from a faculty point of view, an inquiry involving students would have provided findings on how to meet students where they were.

Summary

Educating students on the difficult topics of racism and privilege requires an understanding that racism still exists today at the societal level, which emphasizes the importance of Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) CRT as the theoretical framework for this study. The application of CRT to education provides a lens to analyze the modern forms of racism, which is essential when analyzing the interview data about white student understanding of their place in the system. The literature discussed how white privilege and whiteness were formed, and how white students reacted to the fact that they were complicit in an unjust society. The discussion of white supremacy was also conducted using the CRT lens, with the focus on the institutional forms of racism in modern America (Leonardo, 2004).

Being white affords many privileges, but the confrontation of this privilege can also have costs for students as they become aware of the systems of oppression (Spanierman & Armstrong, 2006; Todd, Spanierman, & Aber, 2010). These costs include feelings of guilt, shame, and the employment of defense mechanisms. Watt (2007) identified eight defenses: *denial*, *deflection*, *rationalization*, *intellectualization*, *principium*, *false envy*, *benevolence*, and *minimization*. None of these costs outweigh the importance of confronting and challenging white student views on racism and privilege but acknowledging them allows for educators to move forward more effectively.

As white students begin to understand their privilege, they are also undergoing their own personal racial identity development, which was introduced through Helms' (1990) WRID model. She discussed how white students need to be able to come to terms with their whiteness before they can begin any sort of dialogue or anti-racist work. Helms' six-stage model analyzed how white students may react or think about their whiteness. Critiques of Helms' WRID model

followed on how to better analyze white student racial development (Ambrosio, 2014; Rowe, et al., 1994).

There were various recommendations about how exactly to teach white students about their privilege (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012; Loya & Cuevas, 2010; Perry, 2007; Quaye, 2012; Robbins, 2016), but discussion about racial topics, engaging facilitation techniques, and the anticipation of student defense mechanisms were common themes. Educating white students about their privilege signifies a crucial step towards demolishing the systems of oppression in our country but working with these students through this process is crucial for their journey.

Conclusion

The purpose of the literature reviewed in this chapter was to provide background into the topics of privilege and racism, and to show how they remain prevalent in modern America. By acknowledging racial injustice at the societal level, white people will be better equipped to become advocates for social change. Identifying how white students are educated about racial issues in higher education and analyzing the effect of education on their level of understanding, will allow educators to form best practices that exist for the higher education field, but are missing for privilege pedagogy.

Much of the current research has been quantitative in nature; this limits the researcher from analyzing reasons behind a student's view due to the "complex life histories" that influence each individual's racial understanding (Robbins, 2016, p. 267). Qualitative measures were used in the current study to try and identify the unique perspective behind an individual's understanding; this process is guided by the storytelling component of CRT. This tenet of CRT also guided the interview structure of this study, as a semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to adapt each interview to the individual participant. Semi-structured interviews were

used instead of written questionnaires or surveys because they have been identified as “a way of obtaining more valid data on whites’ racial attitudes” (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000, p. 54). The focus on the unique perspectives of each participant allowed this study to identify how students were educated about privilege, and where they are in their development. In the next chapter, I discussed the design of this study, the participants, and the process of data collection and analysis.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

This study explored white undergraduate students' understanding of the concept of white privilege. By focusing on the concept of racial identity, and including various intersecting identities, this study also aimed to understand the factors that influence white students' understandings of their privilege. A qualitative phenomenological study was used to gain insight to the varied levels of understanding that are present, and to learn what factors may have led to these understandings. A phenomenological study "seeks understanding about the essence and underlying structure of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). In phenomenology, the focus is on "how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness" (p. 24). The phenomenological approach is compatible with the theoretical framework of CRT, because it considers the underlying systemic racism that perpetuates privilege, and the impact a student's experience has on their way of seeing the world. This type of qualitative research aligned with the goals of this study, and was chosen due to its ability to uncover the nuances that cannot be ascertained in a quantitative study. Understanding privilege, and one's place in society, is a dynamic process which can be better investigated through discussion. The research questions that guided this study include:

1. What are white undergraduate students' understandings of the concept of white privilege?
2. What are white students' responses when confronted with the idea of privilege?
3. What factors influence their understanding of privilege?

4. What practices, if any, could institutions implement to impact the education of white students about privilege?

In this chapter, I will describe how participants were selected, how the instruments were created, how data was collected, and how that data was analyzed.

Participants

The subjects of this qualitative phenomenological study were undergraduate students at a large, Midwestern institution who self-identified as white, were at least 18 years old at the time of the study, and who had completed at least one year at the institution. Only students who self-identified as white were included in this study in order to try and identify how their racial identity impacted their education about white privilege. Since one of the goals of this study was to identify practices that influence understanding, participants needed to have been attending the institution for at least one-year to have had adequate exposure to practices at the institution.

To recruit participants, I composed an email (See Appendix C) describing the study, and worked with the Office of Institutional Research to send an email to a random sample of 100 students who met the criterion and would be willing to participate in this study. This email included a brief description of the study, along with my contact information for interested students. The plan was that the first 15 students who responded with interest would be selected to participate in the study. If less than 15 students responded, a second email was to be sent to another random sample of 100 students. After the second round, since the desired number of participants had not been reached, I used “snowball sampling” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) to recruit the remaining participants needed to achieve data saturation. These students were sent the same recruitment email as the random sample and provided with the same questionnaire. Students were then provided with a consent form and a link to a form to select an interview time.

Instrumentation

In this qualitative study, I served as the interviewer and instrument of the study. As a white, straight, male, I have a personal background with the concepts of privilege in our society. These subjectivities fueled my passion for this study, but to remain neutral, I did not discuss my point of view with participants. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, all data was included in the results and data analysis. A strategy that was used to ensure credibility were *member checks*, which included the soliciting of feedback on emerging findings from participants to eliminate the possibility of misinterpreting data (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). To increase the trustworthiness of the study, a detailed *audit trail*, or “detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229) was kept, which allows for the potential replication of the study. An important aspect of this study was the varied perspectives of the participants; therefore, I used verbatim transcriptions, and only excluded irrelevant data after the *open coding* process (Merriam, 2009).

Prior to the interview, the researcher provided participants with a questionnaire (See Appendix A) that included questions about the participants’ class standing, major, and areas of involvement on campus. This background information allowed the interviewer to identify courses or areas of involvement that may increase the participant’s potential exposure to the difficult topics of racism and privilege. Face-to-face interviews were used for the collection of data in this study. The interviewer asked the same guiding questions (Appendix B) in each interview to remain consistent, but the semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions tailored to each participant’s experience. The storytelling tenet of CRT (Ladson-Billings, 1998) guided the structure of the interview questions which target the racial experiences and perceptions of white students.

Data Collection

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews. All data collection occurred on campus, and the interviews took place in a reserved room to ensure the confidentiality of each participant, as well as encourage honesty while discussing difficult issues. The role of the researcher was to conduct the interviews, and compile and analyze the data. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and conducted in a semi-structured format. The researcher also took observational notes during the interviews, focusing on body language and non-verbal communication.

The interview questions and those included on the questionnaire were approved by the institution's review board (See Appendix E) The interview questions acted as a guide to structure the interview, but the semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions as needed (See Appendix B). Each interview was scheduled for one hour, but times differed based on each conversation. Each student was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality, and all identifying information was seen only by the researcher and will not be published in the results. To remain neutral in each interview, I avoided discussing my own experience or point of view through the use of *bracketing*. Bracketing is a process in which a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon (Gearing, 2004). After each interview, a third-party transcription service transcribed each audio recording. Interview recordings and transcriptions were stored on a password-protected computer, and hard copies of transcriptions were kept in a locked cabinet in my office

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, transcriptions were analyzed using *open coding* to identify segments that may have been useful to the study (Merriam, 2009). A line-by-line analysis of the transcriptions allowed me to highlight phrases, statements, and context from the interview process. While coding, I cross-referenced the transcriptions with observational notes to integrate statements with body language and non-verbal communications. This coding process allowed me to analyze the interviews and identify key components that arose. Then, I used *axial coding* to group the codes into categories (Merriam, 2009). Constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used between each interview transcription to begin to identify themes from one interview to the next. The themes arose directly from the data, following the goal that they be *responsive* to the research questions, as *sensitive* as possible, *exhaustive*, *mutually exclusive*, and *conceptually congruent* (Merriam, 2009, p. 186). These themes were then used to ascertain participants' understandings of privilege and guide the findings and conclusions of this study (See Appendix E).

Summary

White undergraduate students were identified and interviewed about their understanding of white privilege. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews gave the participants the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about their experience, which allowed the interviewer to analyze their responses, body language, and level of comfort. By sending a questionnaire prior to the interview, the interviewer had the opportunity to identify potential areas of exposure to topics such as racism or privilege. Interviews were audio-recorded, and then transcribed by a third-party service. The transcriptions and notes from the interview were coded during data analysis.

The coding process illuminated themes, which were then used to shape the findings of the study.

The next chapter provides a detailed account of the findings that emerged from the data.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, the findings of the study are presented. First, I describe the institutional setting in which the study occurred, then I outline the demographic characteristics of the participants. Next, I revisit the research questions of the study and provide detailed discussion of the participants' points of view regarding their race and privilege and the factors that may have contributed to their perspectives.

Context

This study was conducted at a large, predominately-white institution (PWI) in the Midwestern United States. An email invitation was sent out to a random sample of 200 undergraduate students who had completed at least one year at the institution. Since only one student responded to this recruitment method, I then used snowball sampling to recruit additional students. Prior to the interview, each of the seven students who agreed to participate in the study were sent a questionnaire that asked them to select a pseudonym and provide information about their class standing, field of study, and involvement on campus prior to the interview through a questionnaire.

The participants (See Table 1) comprised of two men and five women, who ranged from sophomore to senior standing. Participants' fields of study included finance, statistics, psychology, nursing, political science, health communication, and secondary education. This range of majors provided a breadth of perspectives from students attending the same institution. All participants were highly-involved on campus and had participated in activities that ranged from student government, fraternity and sorority life, leadership programs, honor societies, student employment, or other student and academic organizations. To ensure anonymity, certain aspects of participant involvement, which might have made it possible for readers to infer their

identity, have been excluded from the demographic information. The demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Class Standing</i>	<i>Major/Minor</i>	<i>Involvement</i>
Angelo	White	Man	Sophomore	Finance, Business Economics	Greek Life, Student Government, Student Organizations
Jill	White	Woman	Sophomore	Statistics, Psychology	Campus Programming, Student Government, Research Assistant, Leadership Programs
Beth	White	Woman	Junior	Political Science, Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies	Student Organizations, Leadership Programs
Brooke	White	Woman	Senior	Health Communication, Advertising and Public Relations	Leadership Programs, Student Media, Student Government, Student Organizations
Adam	White	Man	Junior	Political Science, History	Student Government, Leadership Programs
Mickie	White	Woman	Junior	Secondary Education, Psychology	Student Life, Athletics
Anna	White	Woman	Junior	Nursing	Resident Assistant, Leadership Programs, Student Organizations

Findings

Three themes emerged from the data, and provide a general overview of the participants' understanding of racial issues and the experiences that might have contributed to these understandings. Themes were developed by grouping specific categories, which, in turn, were based on a larger set of codes that had emerged from a close reading of the interview transcripts. Codes from each interview were grouped together to form the categories, and then themes were

developed from the categories to tell the story of the participant experiences. These categories and themes are summarized in Table 2. The three themes that emerged from the data were: (1) Understandings of privilege, (2) Coping mechanisms, and (3) Factors that influenced understandings. An example of process from code to theme is summarized in Appendix E.

Table 2

Themes and Categories

Theme	Category
Understanding	Discrimination v. Racism Being White The Non-White Experience Awareness of Privilege Oversimplification
Coping Mechanisms	Guilt Avoidance Justification Denial
Factors	Hometown Family Stereotypes Institutional Opportunities

Understanding

Participants’ levels of understanding about the concepts of privilege and racism were uncovered through the interviews. At times, their responses hinted at deep levels of understanding at times but then were contradicted at other times with statements that indicated no understanding or even denial of the existence of white privilege. Participants’ understandings of privilege included the categories of (1) Discrimination v. Racism, (2) Being White, (3) The Non-White Experience, (4) Awareness of Privilege, and (5) Oversimplification.

Discrimination v. racism. In each interview participants were asked about their definition of discrimination and racism. Some participants saw them as two separate concepts,

some saw them as the exact same concept, while others saw them as two concepts that were connected in certain ways.

Discrimination was described by Anna as “picking or not picking someone based on who they are.” Angelo believed that “discrimination and racism go hand-in-hand.” Mickie described discrimination as “the time when differences become important.” Jill and Adam both described discrimination as being “subtle and from a structural level,” and Anna similarly thought “discrimination becomes more subconscious as you grow up.” Beth noted that “discrimination is different than oppression.” These responses highlight the various personal definitions that the participants had regarding discrimination, but they all centered around making assumptions about someone and the subconscious form these assumptions could take. This variety in definition was also evident when participants discussed their beliefs about racism.

Adam discussed racism as being “more subtle than it used to be...covert forms at a systematic level.” This awareness of racism existing at an institutional level was recognized by Adam, Beth, Jill, Anna, Mickie, and Brooke. All of the participants acknowledged the “historical implications” of racism. Beth discussed how racial discrimination dated back to imperialism and slavery because “in North America white people have always prevailed and always had control.” Mickie believed that in order for an action to be deemed racist it needed to have “a malicious intent.” Beth viewed racism in a dichotomous fashion, stating, “you either are, or you’re not [a racist].” Beth also stated the belief that white people can be “non-racist.” She argued that white people are not inherently racist, which led her to believe that white people could avoid racist thoughts. With this being said, Beth recognized that there was “no easy fix” for racism.

Anna compared discrimination and racism by explaining that racism was when “you don’t say it, but you still think it.” This sentiment came from her belief that discrimination was

often seen as a symptom of racism, with racism being the underlying thoughts. An individual could be racist whether they act on their thought or not. Mickie echoed a differing distinction by describing “actions as racist, but thoughts as something less.” She went on to clarify that even if words were not uttered, “people of color still see the thoughts.” Even though a difference between the concepts of racism and discrimination was noted, the distinction seemed to center around the intent, even though the result would have the same impact on people of color. Participants’ identified their definitions and beliefs about discrimination and racism. Even though no two definitions were identical, they usually focused on the intent of the white individual and separated subconscious thoughts with verbalizing or acting in a racist manner.

Being white. When participants were asked about their understanding of systems of privilege, and what their own place was within the system they expressed awareness of certain advantages that whites had due to their whiteness. Beth discussed the advantage of “growing up and not having to get a job when I was 14 years old...” and having the privilege of being able to “...do whatever I wanted, and just have a leisurely life.” Adam reiterated this advantage when he talked about his “only disadvantage growing up was going to a good, not great school.” Overall, most of the participants came from an affluent background, which was highlighted when they described the advantages they held. Most advantages were centered on family income, socioeconomic status, and their ability to afford nice things.

Mickie cited the advantage of “never feeling like a minority...I’ve never been in a classroom where white people are the minority.” Jill also referenced this advantage by discussing “that as a white person I don’t really have to like ever speak for my own race. Like, oh what do white people think?” Growing up in predominately-white areas, participants were able to “blend

in” and were never put on the spot to speak on behalf of their entire race, which is common for students of color at predominately-white institutions.

Participants also referred to the privilege of never having to think about their race. Beth said, “race is not a part of my identity. Like I never consider it a part of my identity, and then when I learn about anyone who isn’t white, like race is one of the biggest parts of their lives...race is not something I carry...it’s not a weighted identity that I have.” Anna too discussed this idea by saying, “I never am concerned that I am doing, or not doing, something because of my race. It doesn’t bug me to check those boxes.” When asked how her life would be different if she was not white, Anna elaborated,

I think I would definitely be more conscious of my race. That would definitely be a bigger factor than it is now...so I feel like if I wasn’t white, perhaps my culture would be like a bigger influencing factor on my life.

This connection to white culture being “normal” was also referenced by Jill, who stated that, “being white...I guess it’s something I don’t really have to think about because a lot of times we think about our identities when it’s like in a situation where it’s like you’re different from everyone else.” Being similar to everyone around them, being a part of the normal culture, and therefore not having to think about race were advantages of being white that the participants referenced throughout their interviews.

The non-white experience. Although the focus of the interviews was to identify the levels of understanding about white privilege, some discussion regarding the experiences of people of color was inevitable. For example, when discussing potential disadvantages based on an individual’s race, Beth described how people of color may “not feel valued...like they don’t belong” or that they may “feel like an imposter.” Both Beth and Jill discussed a “lack of

opportunity” for advancement and resources as being a potential disadvantage for people of color. Mickie discussed how “race is the first impression for people of color when they walk in a room...which is not the case for me as a white person.” She discussed the disadvantage as having to “deal with the negative stereotypes that people have about you based on what you look like.” When discussing how race may be an advantage or disadvantage for others, Anna brought up the process of checking a box to indicate one’s racial identity on a form, saying, “the fact that they’re thinking about it...they don’t want that to be a determining factor of their identity.” She was alluding to the fact that people of color may be more hesitant to check the box identifying their race because of the worry that people might have a negative perception of their racial identity. This was in contrast to the fact that white people did not need to worry about their racial identity being a disadvantage. These responses hinted at a level of awareness that the participants had of some of the negative experiences people of color have because of their skin tone.

Awareness of privilege. Participants articulated various perspectives on their whiteness and other racial issues. Even though none of the participants had a complete understanding of privilege, there were some elements of the concept that had been understood by some of the participants.

An important aspect of developing a positive white racial identity is the acknowledgement of one’s own biases. Anna referred to her own racist thoughts in the following situation:

I know this is terrible but, I’m walking home, and I see, god it sounds so awful. I see a group of people that might not be white. I think that there’s definitely an instinct. But I think that the biggest thing is what comes after that instinct.

Because again you're carrying around these biases, and like you have them, and everybody has them.

She acknowledged her personal bias and racist thoughts when encountering people of color, even though she was socialized to think in a certain way. Similarly, Jill stated, "I know I have biases and I know that it's because like the way I was raised, and I think it's really easy for me to just like try to not think about it." Similarly, the concept of inherent biases was referenced by Jill, and the relationship to how she was socialized. Brooke also acknowledged the concept of internal biases that might emerge when conducting job interviews:

I think it depends on who is interviewing the person. So, depending on if it was me, I would like people that are similar to me. And that's internally and I don't realize it, but I want to hire someone that I see like myself. Maybe that's not racism.

Similar to Anna, Brooke referred to the internalized nature of bias, but failed to connect these biases to being racist. Instead, Brooke rationalized her bias based on her past experiences with people with whom she had worked.

The concept of "shedding" the privileges associated with being white was discussed with the participants, and Beth responded by stating, "Do I think you can shed your privilege? No, you still have those. Just because you're aware of them...they're still there." Similarly, Adam discussed, "Whiteness is, it's privilege, it's being better than other people...you don't choose to be better than other people, society chooses you to be better." These statements show that Adam and Beth are aware that acknowledging privilege only does so much, due to the fact that society is structured to privilege whiteness.

Adam stated, “white supremacy is the foundation of American society...your natural character is racist. People don’t want to do that. White people don’t want to do that.” This response hinted at an awareness of the notion of white supremacy that perpetuates the system of racial privilege, and how those in power do not want the system to change. The willingness for Adam to discuss white supremacy, and how white individuals perpetuate systems of privilege was a rare occurrence among the participants.

In general, participants struggled to acknowledge their complicity in systems of privilege, but they demonstrated understandings of certain concepts through a discussion of their biases, of the fact that being aware of privilege is not enough, and of the systems that uphold privilege.

Oversimplification. As white students become aware of systems of privilege in society, the natural instinct seems to be to defend their position as a good person in society. By doing this, students tend to overlook and oversimplify aspects of racism and claim to *not see color*. Participants in this study used colorblind statements which allowed them to create distance between themselves and systems of privilege. Angelo did this throughout his interview when describing himself as “open-minded when meeting people different than me.” He went on to discuss how he believed in “listening to others before you make up your mind.” These responses were meant to protect himself from any potential accusation of being discriminatory or racist, but they were also used in an effort to shift the discussion away from the impact race has on a person of color.

When asked how his life would differ if he were no longer white, Angelo responded by saying, “I feel like nothing would’ve been different. Um, I would just be a minority instead of the majority.” This emphasis put on *just* being a minority, coupled with his other responses, highlighted his belief that race is irrelevant. This lack of awareness of the societal oppression and

struggle that accompanies an individual's race was common in the interviews. Beth responded similarly when asked the same question when she stated, "If only my skin color changed..." which hinted at the same lack of awareness to what race means for people of color. Participants commonly answered this question as a hypothetical but ignored the ripple effect that their non-white identity would have. Concepts such as having parents of color, and the effect this could have on their socioeconomic standing and education, were ignored. Participants chose to oversimplify the change as just a change in skin color. The simplistic concept of "everyone is human" was brought up in a similar manner by Angelo, Brooke, and Beth. Mickie too acknowledged a similar concept when she responded with "people are people."

Brooke answered the question with an apparent sense of envy toward people of color:

I'd be so happy...I see white as beautiful, yes, but I see like...I don't know what the color is, but it's mixed, so between black and white and it's like very...it's just so beautiful to me. So, like Zendaya. That actress, oh, she is so beautiful, I wish I looked like her.

This response highlighted Brooke's attempt to avoid acknowledging the cultural and social disadvantage of Zendaya's skin color and focus instead on a positive attribute. Such an avoidance allowed Brooke to sidestep thinking about how the loss of her white identity would actually affect her life.

Brooke also used colorblind responses to justify stereotypes about black people by attributing their discrimination to social class rather than racial identity. For example she noted that black people did not wear "the same [quality of] clothes" as their white counterparts. This hinted at the tendency of the white students at her school to exclude black students based on material possessions. She believed that people of color were "judged on their level of income,

not on their race.” This response came during a discussion of why people of color tend to be more prevalent in low-income, urban areas, than white people. This judgement allowed Brooke to justify the fact that her thoughts about people of color were based on their income, without acknowledging the impact that their race may have had on that income level. When asked what her definition of racism was, Brooke stated, “Well, I don’t think it’s segmented to one social identity [race].” Brooke’s attempt to shift her definition away from race was indicative of her attempts to deflect the conversation away from her lack of comfort discussing racial issues. This hesitation to confront race was indicative of the colorblind responses throughout the study.

During a discussion about what white privilege meant to him, Angelo stated, I see like where people could label that as white privilege. But like I honestly hate the label, because I feel like the best way to get past all this racial inequality, racial tension, is like just stop talking about it. Put everybody on the same playing field, and quit labeling each group.

This response highlighted the lack of importance placed on an individual’s race by white students, which allowed them to justify other reasons why systems of privilege and oppression exist.

Participants showed the tendency to oversimplify what race means for individuals in society. This oversimplification was apparent through their colorblind statements and attempts to downplay race as a whole.

Coping

Participants in this study were questioned about their knowledge and understanding about privilege. Their responses revealed the following coping mechanisms: (1) Guilt, (2) Avoidance, (3) Justification, and (4) Denial.

Guilt. Adam, Brooke, and Anna all expressed feelings of guilt and shame. Adam stated how he “does not want to be white” due to the historical oppression of people of color by white people. When asked about the opportunities he has had to discuss race on campus he stated that, “talking about race is shameful.” Brooke stated, “I hate my skin color,” and Anna described feelings of “guilt” when she became aware of privilege. This acknowledgement of their own views about being white, and how they reacted when learning of their own complicity in systems of privilege, signaled a lack of comfort with this part of their identity. Participants exhibited feelings of guilt and shame around their racial identity when discussing privilege and when challenged to think about how privilege played a part in their life. These feelings led to attempts to avoid and deflect the discussion, which is discussed in the next category.

Avoidance. At different points in each interview, participants avoided acknowledgment of their connection to privilege. This deflection allowed them to avoid acknowledging their complicity in systems of privilege and allowed them to protect their sense of self. Each interview began with a discussion of the participant’s identity. Some participants, such as Adam, acknowledged their whiteness automatically, but it was much more common for the participant’s response to focus on any other aspect of their identity. Brooke discussed her gender, height, sports background, the fact that she was the daughter of an immigrant, and her level of “prettiness,” but avoided mentioning her race. Other participants too deflected away from discussing race directly, such as Angelo who attributed the lack of representation in positions of power to “a lot of people who are very uneducated about like who represents them in the government sense, or the government setting.” Instead of connecting the lack of representation of people of color in positions of power to their identities, Angelo tried to deflect the conversation to another issue like media literacy.

Such attempts to deflect the conversation was not uncommon, as most of the participants responded in this manner, but the unwillingness to acknowledge their whiteness extended to the conversation surrounding how race has influenced their lives. Beth discussed, “I’m thinking in my own realm and like social barriers, like feeling included and feeling valued...” She acknowledged some of the disadvantages people of color may face due to their racial identity, but she consistently deflected her responses away from her own personal racial identity. Some participants acknowledged that race might negatively affect others, but in each instance the participant struggled to see the advantages their whiteness afforded them in the same situation.

When asked how their lives might differ if they were not white, Beth hid behind “empathy” as a deflection. She stated that:

I can’t empathize...I feel like I can’t really accurately answer that...I feel I still would’ve had the opportunities to be where I am today, pursue higher education, things like that.

This response was indicative of her ability to acknowledge the differences between herself and a person of color, but when asked to acknowledge how that would have affected her, she deflected by saying she would have the same opportunities. By utilizing her definition of empathy, Beth contested the conversation about how her life would have changed. This allowed her to protect her sense of self as an advocate, while actually avoiding the conversation altogether.

Finally, it was common for the participants to admit to their lack of knowledge when asked about their personal thoughts on oppressive situations in the real world. Participants were asked whether they believed that some races were better set up to succeed than others.

Depending on the concepts discussed in the interview, the researcher constructed a hypothetical situation. When asked to confront these situations, Brooke answered “I hope not,” and Beth

answered, “It gets me all worked up,” which allowed for each individual to avoid having to confront the issue head-on.

By deflecting the topics of the conversation away from race and racism, participants were able to have a more comfortable conversation about privilege. Participants who had an awareness of the disadvantages associated with being a person of color tended to use their surface level knowledge to avoid diving deeper, and avoid applying their awareness to themselves. This avoidance was common throughout the interviews, but some of the participants were able to confront ideas of privilege and how it affects their lives. Their reactions are discussed in the next category.

Fear. Participants’ cited fear as one of the reasons why they avoided both people of color and difficult dialogues around race. This fear was centered around “not wanting to offend someone” as Mickie stated. Brooke also stated how she “did not want to say anything offensive,” and throughout her interview Beth responded with the phrase, “I do not want to offend anyone, but...”. Likewise, Anna stated how “[students of color] could have seen me as standoffish.” These responses about not wanting to offend people of color were focused on the belief that people of color judge white people for asking questions about racial differences.

Angelo articulated this perspective when he explained why it was difficult for white men to talk about social inequality:

I feel, being a white male, automatically you get labeled as ‘white privilege’ ...some people like when you talk to them, they already have the preconceived notion of, oh he’s a racist, he doesn’t understand...[people of color] just feel like you’re going to judge them and demean them.

This fear of being judged by people of color was common amongst the respondents and provides some clues regarding why they chose to avoid interactions with them.

Justification. When confronted with the concept of white privilege and racism in society, participants displayed the tendency to justify why these systems exist by espousing the ideals of meritocracy and placing the blame on people of color.

Meritocracy. Several participants cited meritocratic ideals when justifying the experiences of people of color and the existence of racial privilege. One question that was asked in each interview was about whether the participant thought they would be in the same place if they were no longer white. Adam, Angelo, Beth, Brooke, and Mickie all answered yes to this question. Beth specified that “life would be harder, but I would still be here.” This tendency to think their life would have had similar results regardless of their race was centered around their belief that their success was earned through hard work and merit. Angelo alluded to this idea throughout his interview, and highlighted this belief in the following excerpt:

Like I feel like I’m not owed anything in life, I feel like I have to work for everything I do, and everything that I receive...I’ll just have to work hard...I want to base my life off of what I can do for myself.

Angelo’s view on the importance of hard work and how anyone could succeed if they worked hard enough came from his perception of his father’s life:

He always busted his ass, everything had to be perfect. So, I feel like, if I was black, he would’ve done everything in his power to put our family in the best position possible. I feel like life wouldn’t be much different.

Angelo saw his father's incredible work ethic and believed that this would have resulted in the same outcome regardless of race. When asked whether race influences an individual's odds of success, Angelo continued to discuss his belief in a system of merit, saying:

Honestly, no. Because I feel like when you're born and start school, you have the ability to do whatever you like, whatever you set your mind to...if you want to do something and really have the passion to do it, you will go out and do it...I feel like if someone wants to be really great or successful, they have every opportunity in the world to do that.

This belief in a merit-based system allowed for Angelo to attribute his odds of success to his parents. Since his parents were successful, he stated how that "definitely makes it an easier path," but when asked whether having unsuccessful parents would set one up for a harder path, he stated:

I won't say necessarily set you up for failure. I feel like you're only set up for failure when you take that mindset...I feel like a lot of people who feel like they're discriminated against, they already have like that mindset that they're set up for failure.

This emphasis on the mindset, and its connection to failure, hinted at the belief that anyone could succeed if they believed they could. Brooke echoed a similar sentiment when she stated, "you just have to believe in yourself, and then you get out, but I don't think they have the belief that they can get out." This idea that people of color did not have the belief in their own capabilities or that they did not expend the effort necessary to succeed in the world was highlighted further when Angelo discussed how "they think everything should be handed to them," and when Brooke stated that "black kids do not want to use resources available to help them."

The concepts of working hard and having the mindset for success was brought up frequently in the interviews as a justification for why people are successful, or why they may not succeed. Thus, white participants used a belief in meritocracy to justify their own successes, while also using this belief to justify why people of color struggle.

Blame. A defense mechanism that participants exhibited when confronted with the idea of privilege was to blame people of color for their own marginalization. This blame appeared in either the “othering” of people of color, or by discussing various barriers that prohibit white people from interacting with people of color. In both cases it absolved white people of any blame.

The tendency for the participants to think of people of color as the “other” was common and was highlighted when they were asked how race affected other people. The majority of the participants immediately classified people of color as the other in this scenario. This separation of people of color as the other, or a *different kind* appeared frequently. Angelo discussed how people of color tend to “help their own” and also stated that a person of color “would feel more comfortable around his own kind. That sounds really racist.” Mickie echoed this comment, “I’ve noticed that people are sometimes more comfortable talking to people that are more like them.” Angelo expanded on the idea that people of color “flock” together when he described that “there is one spot where all the blacks sit, all the arabs sit” in the student union. These responses suggest a perception of people of color being the “other,” or “them.” These concepts allowed the students to shift blame to someone else.

The participants began to reference this “us vs. them” concept as a barrier that hindered their ability to build “cross-cultural” relationships. Angelo stated that the ability “to branch out and get to know others, kind of like open up to others” did not happen because of the tendency of

people of color to group together. Brooke described her relationships with people of color and how she saw a:

Distance between us because there seems to be a barrier that I don't understand, but I always try to go over that barrier, but it never really is full because they would rather hang out with their black friends than me.

Responses such as this hinted at the barrier being created by people of color, and as something white people needed to fight through in order to get to know other people.

Brooke also described how being white would be a disadvantage in situations due to the different experiences of whites and people of color. She stated,

I honestly think it's based on differentiation, because if you see someone that's different, then you're intimidated or vulnerable to even talk to them. I think that aspect, you're not going to want to learn more. You just want to stay in your little cubby.

This separation was used as the basis for placing blame on people of color for not wanting to interact with white people and learn about each other's culture. Angelo attributed this to being "labeled automatically as racist," while Brooke discussed how people of color "put up walls and do not trust white people...they feel uncomfortable." When the participants were unable to justify the existence of privilege, they reverted to placing blame on people of color for their own struggles.

Denial. A denial of privilege was evident in the responses of several of the participants. Angelo was incredibly certain in his denial of white privilege. He asserted that "white privilege is not real" and that "it [white privilege] means nothing to me." When asked to describe what he thought white privilege looked like, he responded "being connected with like people who had

like, a little bit more power in the world.” Even when he admitted to the existence of white privilege, he still quantified the amount of power that exists for those with white privilege. When asked what white privilege meant to people of color, he responded,

That I won't see eye to eye to them on multiple issues that like, that relate to them. Like I won't see eye to eye on like the difficulties or struggles they've had in life, and how they've like had to overcome those challenges.

This response focused on the inability of white people to connect with people of color, from the point of view of a person of color. It allowed Angelo to deflect from acknowledging the advantages that come with being white.

When challenged to connect white privilege with systemic racism, Beth stated:
I've never thought of it that way before. I don't think one automatically brings the other...I think being able to feel secure in yourself because of your race, like a white person practicing white supremacy, like that privilege of feeling superior and then seeing people of color as lesser, I feel that is a privilege of being white...so I think there is a connection, but I don't think one equals the other.

Beth began to describe how privilege and racism are intertwined, and even hinted at the supremacy that perpetuates the systems of privilege but reverted away from connecting her white privilege to racism. She later responded to the question of whether white individuals are inherently racist with “no I do not...because I feel like I know individuals who see human beings as equal...they are not racist individuals.”

Participants exhibited denial when confronted with the idea of privilege. Some denied the existence of privilege as a whole, while others began to deny privilege when it was applied to themselves.

Entitlement. Participants justified acts of racism and systems of privilege through the concept of meritocracy, and then by looking past racial identities using colorblind responses. They also tended to respond to privilege with a sense of entitlement. Participants were able to identify the disadvantages people of color may experience but were unable to attribute any of their success to privilege. Instead, participants felt threatened by people of color in regard to the job search and believed that they were entitled to the privileges they receive. These references to entitlement diverted attention away from the disadvantages experienced by people of color and framed them as advantages. Participants then tried to position white people as the affected, which hinted at their sense of entitlement and expectation of being in power.

Brooke's response epitomizes this category because when she was asked about her definition of racism, she responded, "Racism tends to be more negative than positive." This was followed up with a question about whether she thought there was positive racism, and she responded,

I think it's possible because if you think about it, there's institutions that are institutionalized racism. They allow diverse people in their company. So that's a positive racism. They know they're different, they know they're judging them... make themselves look better.

This response started with an acknowledgment of the institutionalized nature of racism, but Brooke appropriated the concepts by portraying institutional racism as an unearned advantage to people of color. Likewise, Brooke discussed the concept of "black privilege" she described in the following manner: "black privilege means that you believe they're privileged more than whites and they get positions because they're black or diverse or whatever." This concept was used as a

deflection away from her ideas of white privilege and highlighted the threat people of color posed to existing systems of power.

The thought of people of color receiving special, and allegedly unearned, preferential treatment for the sake of promoting diversity was frequently discussed by the participants. Angelo discussed how he “may be discriminated in the job search” due to his identities. Brooke discussed how she believed that some black people may “get positions because they’re black or diverse.” Mickie too discussed how “they may be treated more carefully in interviews...have to like tip-toe almost.” Angelo summed this up when asked if he had ever been discriminated against, to which he responded, “Not yet.” This tendency to assume that people of color would gain an advantage in career situations highlighted the sense of entitlement white students feel when they are not the ones getting an advantage.

This sense of entitlement also appeared when Brooke stated “I value my education...I work harder” when discussing a black female student in one of her classes. Their only interaction was in class, but Brooke felt the need to justify why she was “more qualified” than the other student. This response suggests that people of color gaining power is a threat to the existing white system of power.

Participants struggled to attribute any aspect of their success to systems of privilege. Instead, participants felt threatened as though they were giving something up if people of color succeeded in the job search. This mindset highlighted the sense of entitlement for them as white people, and their belief that they belong in power.

Factors

Not only was uncovering participants’ level of understanding about privilege one of the main goals of this study but identifying the factors that led to this understanding was crucial.

Participants commonly referred to where and how they grew up, and the effect that upbringing had on their point of view. Within this theme, four categories emerged as having had an impact on their perspectives about race and privilege: (1) Hometown, (2) Family, (3) Stereotypes, and (4) Institutional Opportunities.

Hometown. Each interview began with a discussion about who the participant was, and where they came from. This naturally led to each participant to discuss where they had grown up, and to share their perceptions of their hometowns. Angelo's description of his hometown as "Hickville" aptly captures the response of most participants. Several discussed growing up in small, rural, towns that were conservative in nature. Mickie stated that "we had literally one African American person in my grade." This lack of diversity was a common theme among the experiences of the participants. Adam discussed this lack of diversity in his education:

The grade school I went to had maybe one or two black individuals...then the high school I went to had one or two black individuals...I haven't had a ton of exposure to people of color.

Angelo discussed his upbringing as one of the factors that influenced his worldview because he was used to being "surrounded by people just like me."

Even though a lack of exposure to diversity was common with the participants, there were responses that hinted at some diversity in their experience. Brooke discussed going to a relatively more diverse high school:

Just being with new students, that was hard. They didn't know how our school worked because we were preppy, we had TVs in every cafeteria...We had more fights. So just living with mostly black females and males, you just interpret them as fighting, as aggressive.

These limited interactions with people of color clearly influenced the participants' perceptions of people color.

Family. Along with the influence the participants' hometowns had on their worldview, parental and family figures were brought up frequently as factors that affected each participant's thoughts about race and privilege. For example, Jill stated, "my family is all very conservative, very Christian." Likewise, Mickie discussed how she felt she grew up "in a very conservative, white, Christian household...the stereotypical sexist, racist household." Growing up in a conservative household was a common experience for the participants, and all of them brought this up in relation to their parents' beliefs.

Mickie referred to her "racist grandma," and how some of her grandmother's racist ideals had "been passed down to my dad...kind of like a hint." When asked why she had certain stereotypes or thoughts about people of color, Jill responded by saying, "for me it was a lot of just like my family and like my grandparents." Similarly, Anna stated "one of my biggest factors are my parents...parents shape you." Anna even expanded on how her father's career influenced her:

My dad is a police officer. And like as I get older, I realize more and more, how that like shapes how I see things. And like kind shapes my identity. Especially with like stuff going on recently. Like that's kind of something that I always keep in the back of my mind.

Mickie's father was also a police officer, and she described how this impacted his views:

I think that his original reactions are because of his parents. And, also this is something that I didn't mention with him, but he was in law enforcement for 10

years. And so, he does have this stereotype with certain races, based on the people that he's met in jail...he still thinks of them as inmates.

This acknowledgement of why her father views people of color as criminals was a theme in Mickie's interview, and she even discussed how "he had this ingrained racism growing up" and how that connected to "law enforcement where you still have that superiority." Mickie stated,

He would be very prone to disliking an African American person dressed like that as opposed to a white person dressed exactly the same way. He would just think that the white person's a punk, but he would be like nervous around the black guy.

All of the participants reflected on the effect their family had on their views growing up. These views impacted the perspectives of the participants in regard to people of color and resulted in the stereotypes that are discussed next.

Stereotypes. Through the discussions surrounding where participants had grown up and how their families had influenced them, some examples of stereotypes about people of color were evident in participant responses. These stereotypes were not only brought up as a result of how they viewed the world, but they were also rationalized in the participant's mind due to the influence of their upbringing. When asked her opinion on whether race may be an advantage or disadvantage for others, Brooke discussed a few negative stereotypes, starting with how people of color misuse resources:

Maybe I made this up in my head, but I've heard that people of color use food stamps to buy like chips and things that aren't necessary for their health and they abuse that privilege. So, I internally have that, and I do not know who's actually using those resources correctly, but if they are, yes, I'm totally for it. But if they

are abusing that from the government, it kind of makes me uncomfortable because my tax dollars go into that.

Brooke acknowledged the fact that she was discussing a stereotype, but as she articulated her views, she began to rationalize why there might be some truth to the stereotype. She also began to buy into the stereotype more as she realized how it may affect her.

Anna also discussed a negative stereotype, black-on-black crime, when discussing how she valued her ability to think about all sides of an issue. This was in response to a follow-up question after she discussed the impact being a police officer had on her father's views. When asked to apply her ability to the Black Lives Matter movement, she responded by saying:

Obviously police brutality. That's not disputable. Like that's a thing. Um, but I also see um, one of the things that I've actually done a little bit of research on with my dad. Was like, the I mean again, not disputing police brutality. Not okay, definitely happens. Like all that. Um, but my dad and I have also looked. And there's a lot of ... What is it called? It's like black on black crime that happens, and like the rate of that, far like exceeds the rate of like, and again not okay, but like police on, on uh, African Americans. Like brutality. And so, I was talking with my dad, and I was like, I get what the movement is for. And I think that, that's you know awesome. And I think that, that's a great movement. But I also think that there are areas of prevention (black on black crime) that also need to get touched on that just aren't.

This sort of response was very common in the participants' responses. Anna began by discussing her point of view, but then began to rationalize a stereotype due to her father's views and her

own socialization. Stammering was a common response when participants were pushed to challenge their thoughts about a difficult topic.

Participants were aware of the influence their upbringing had on the way they saw the world, and acknowledged this socialization, but this awareness did not always connect to a deeper understanding of the concepts of privilege and oppression.

Institutional opportunities. In addition to the influence of participants' hometowns and family members, participants also referenced some opportunities at the institution that furthered their understanding of racism or privilege. Anna and Adam both discussed a Resident Assistant (RA) in-service session that was focused on power and privilege. Anna stated,

We did an activity in our last in-service where we put up a bunch of different. We were talking about intersectionality, put up a bunch of different determining factors on the wall. And we did a thing, where it was like, okay go to your factor that you were most um, subconscious about. And then you'd go to the factor that you yourself are most subconscious about. And you can kind of see um, like go to the one that you think about the most. And a lot of our black RAs went to the race one. And it was just like, and after that we would ask people like, 'Why'd you come to this one? Why'd you go to that one?' ... a couple white guys who went in the middle for one of them. And they're like, 'Why are you in the middle?' And we're like, 'Well, we don't think about any of these. Like I don't really have on that I feel like I can say that I'm very subconscious about. Like I just don't.'

The opportunity for the RAs to not only discuss the concept of privilege, but to participate in an activity that demonstrated intersectionality afforded them an opportunity that most participants

did not have. This opportunity allowed participants to reflect on their own privileges and how everyone holds a different level of privilege.

Other events were mentioned by the participants but were discussed as potential areas of exposure. Jill discussed that MLK day events created an awareness about systems of oppression. Beth, Brooke, Jill, and Adam acknowledged various leadership programs and the effect these had on their views. With all of these events, participants commonly shared their opinion on why some interventions were unsuccessful. Jill stated,

It's just a group of white people in this class and the professors were like trying to like I guess they were like, 'Do you want to talk about this?', you know, 'Should we have like ...' They were like, 'I think it's really important to talk about.', so they kind of said some stuff about it. Um, we talked about like, 'Oh, this is horrible.', but we didn't really go in-depth with it very much...like it was just I felt very awkward, because like everyone in the class just sat there looking at each other, like no one's going to say anything.

She described how she believed that having a room full of white people influenced the lack of discussion, which is a very common scene at a predominately white institution. As a whole, participants made hardly any reference to in-the-classroom experiences around the topic of race or white privilege.

Anna stated, "who is gonna want, like you have to think of like your audience, like who is gonna come to this," when discussing the uncomfortable nature of attending an event about privilege. Adam suggested a similar concept,

You gotta make them talk about it. People aren't gonna choose...racism is not gonna be your choice topic, because one, it's awkward...it's gonna be difficult conversation. Gonna get people that are angry.

Jill stated that “you want people to go, but you don't want it to be like, people are dreading going.” This feeling that students need to want to attend discussions about privilege, but that they will not choose to attend, provided an intriguing dilemma.

Even though they were quick to point out how difficult it could be to have these discussions, the participants were cognizant of the potential benefits. Mickie reflected on one of her class projects that required her to identify a person she felt nervous talking to, and have a conversation with them:

But, it was- it was scary a little bit because you're like, ‘Wow, like I'm an awful person for being afraid of another person.’ You know? And not afraid of, but like just definitely nervous about. And then you're nervous in the- like in the conversation. And then the person that you're interviewing, like you don't want to offend them either 'cause they're gonna be like, ‘Why are you nervous?’ You know, and it's like, ‘Ahh, cause you scare me.’ And they shouldn't. That's ... I think that was like our teacher's point. It's like you need to meet someone. And then all of us were like, ‘Wow, these people were awesome. Like why were scared of them?’ You know, and it was just because of something that we had already been told or believed or came up with our self.

Even though she was forced to feel uncomfortable, Mickie recognized the intention of the assignment and how it positively affected her point of view. Jill concisely stated that “interacting with people from like different backgrounds has definitely opened my eyes a lot.”

Participants highlighted some of the institutional opportunities they had to discuss the concepts of racism and privilege. Other than being an RA, participants had more to say about why an opportunity may not have succeeded than what they had gained from the opportunity.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented participants' and their understandings of and experiences with systems of privilege and racism. Participants were able to articulate various levels of understanding about privilege, and their place in society. Many participants had a surface level understanding, but also provided contradictory remarks throughout their interviews. A couple of participants had relatively deeper understandings than of privilege, supremacy, and their complicity, but struggled to fully accept how their whiteness influenced their world and that of others. This variation of perspectives was indicative of the various stages in the development of a positive white racial identity.

Participants also defended their understanding using defense mechanisms. Some participants tried to distance themselves from being complicit in systems of privilege, and from racist individuals and ideals. To do this, they provided justifications for why people of color struggle, why white people have advantages, and why they had not formed relationships with people of color. In the next chapter, I will discuss how these findings relate to the existing literature and how they could be used to inform practice and further research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this chapter, I first provide a summary of the study including the problem, design, and findings. Next, I discuss the findings in relation to the original research questions, and then I discuss the relation between the findings and current literature on the topic. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practice and for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the level of understanding about white privilege and racism for white students at a predominately white institution. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as white individuals in society, and how these experiences might have contributed to their knowledge about the concepts of race and privilege. The theoretical frameworks of this study (white racial identity development, privileged identity exploration, and CRT) highlighted key concepts in the development of an individual's white racial identity and how they respond to their privilege. These frameworks were used to guide the research questions, research design, and interpretation of the findings. Utilizing these frameworks, I was able to highlight aspects of the existing literature such as CRT's tenets of *normalcy of racism*, *intersectionality*, and *interest convergence*. The privileged identity exploration model allowed me to analyze participant responses as coping mechanisms, which the study sought to uncover. The focus of this study was on participants' understandings of privilege and the factors that influenced these understandings; the white racial identity development model used in this study sought to understand where the participants were in their racial identity development.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What are white undergraduate students' understandings of the concept of white privilege?

2. What are white students' responses when confronted with the idea of privilege?
3. What factors influence their understandings of privilege?
4. What practices, if any, could institutions implement to impact the education of white students about privilege?

The qualitative design of this study consisted of the data collection of 7 individual semi-structured interviews conducted over the course of two weeks. The interviews ranged from 27 minutes to 60 minutes. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for the researcher to maintain consistency between participants but allowed follow-up questions to be catered to each unique participant. Participants were recruited through a series of recruitment emails outlining the study and how to participate. Participants self-identified as white, current undergraduate students of the institution, and had been attending the institution for at least one year. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Line-by-line coding was utilized for data analysis to identify 13 categories which were then grouped into three major themes. The three themes that emerged from the data were: (1) Understandings of privilege, (2) Coping Mechanisms, and (3) Factors that influenced understandings.

Conclusion

The findings provided answers to the research questions that guided this study. Through the sharing of their experience, participants were able to articulate their understandings of white privilege and reflect on the factors that influenced this understanding. When discussing their understanding, participants defended their level of understanding with deflections away from the issue at hand, their personal views, and overall sense of complicity. No participant was an expert on the topics power and privilege, and no participant had a fully developed non-racist identity.

At the same time, no participant had zero knowledge about white privilege or an overtly racist ideology. The spectrum of understandings that resulted from the findings showed the complex nature of understanding privilege and one's own experience within the systems that perpetuate those privileges.

The storytelling tenet of CRT guided the use of a semi-structured format for data collection. Within this format, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences through the articulation of their story. This allowed participants to challenge their dysconscious thoughts about how they see the world and challenge their own place in systems of privilege. When challenged, participants exhibited coping mechanisms that included feelings of guilt or shame with being white, avoidance maneuvers to deflect privilege and racism away from themselves, justifications as to why these systems exist, and blatant denial that privilege exists.

When discussing the factors that influenced their understandings participants referenced where they grew up, the views of their parents and extended family, and the internalized stereotypes that were ingrained at a young age. Participants discussed the interactions of their parents with people of color and recognized the socialization effect this had on their current views. In general, participants grew up in conservative households in small towns. This resulted in a frequent feeling of surprise when they arrived at college. Participants also discussed the opportunities for exposure to the concepts of privilege and racism at their institution. These opportunities were sparse and were usually seen as the most beneficial when they were done in groups of students who were motivated to discuss the issues.

Overall, through a reflection on their experiences, participants were able to articulate their suggestions for their institution to encourage education around privilege and other racial issues. These suggestions included: making the discussions a part of academic coursework,

having an increased focus on reflection activities, taking notes from the RA in-service program, and a shift to a more visible priority for white faculty and staff to discuss these concepts.

Participants also discussed that even though students may not want to be challenged, requiring them to attend co-curricular events may not facilitate the intended learning outcome due to a resistance stemming from being forced to attend.

Discussion

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a framework to inform the study and interpret the findings. Two of the tenets can be used to interpret the findings. The *normalcy of racism* tenet explained how racism exists in society today and is a rather normal experience for people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This acceptance of racism still existing in modern society was discussed by multiple participants, but there was a hesitation to acknowledge the frequency and intensity with which racism occurs for people of color. Participants described racism as being “subtle” and “behind the scenes on an institutional level.” Although participants acknowledged the existence of racism, when asked about their privilege or complicity in these structures of inequality they shied away from admitting how often people of color are disadvantaged. Utilizing responses centered on a denial of racism and their own entitlement to privilege allowed participants to deny the everyday nature of racism for people of color.

This highlighted the second tenet of *interest convergence* that appeared frequently in the participant responses. CRT described *interest convergence* as the inherent conflict of interest for white people to dismantle systems of power and privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The notion of white supremacy actively upholds the systems that allow for white privilege (Leonardo, 2004), and therefore this tenet highlights the fact that white people will not voluntarily dismantle systems of power and privilege unless there is something in it for them. Participants in this study

were eager to discuss systems of privilege and how they should not exist but were less eager to acknowledge how they personally benefited as privileged individuals. A notion brought up by most of the participants was the role of race in the job selection process. A sense of resentment was apparent for most of the participants as they discussed how there may be “positive racism” or “black privilege” in our society. Instead of acknowledging the increased struggle that people of color have, participants reverted to the threat against their own interests. These responses reflect Helms’ (1990) argument that even if one has personal struggles, or low resources, if their skin is white there is a sense of entitlement to feel superior.

The awareness of white supremacy, and how it upholds the systems of privilege that advantage white individuals, was only acknowledged in a couple of the interviews. Leonardo (2004) discussed shifting the education of white students away from a focus on the privileges themselves, to more of a focus on how these privileges are a symptom of white supremacy. Such an awareness was not apparent for participants in this study. Some participants were aware of privilege and the systemic nature of racism but failed to connect these two concepts; they were able to acknowledge the existence of individual acts of racism but were not able to fully grasp the institutionalized forms of racism. This allowed them to believe that acknowledging their privilege and racist thoughts was enough, but not to enable them to come to a realization that there are still systems that actively perpetuate the privileges they experience.

Helms’ (1990) model of white racial identity development (WRID) discussed the process through which white individuals come to terms with their whiteness. This occurs over the span of a lifetime, but college represents a crucial time for this development. Helms (1990) argued that white students need to accept their whiteness and form a positive racial identity before they can engage in any discussion or anti-racist work. Participants in this study exhibited a lack of

acceptance of their white racial identity, which became apparent in their responses. Helms (1990) laid out two phases of white racial identity development: the abandonment of racism and the development of a non-racist white identity. The participants who had a deeper understanding of privilege and racism still responded by saying “I hate my skin color” and “being white is shameful.” Contrary to the deeper understanding and feelings of shame articulated by one participant, other participants exhibited a resistance to acknowledging the effect their whiteness had on others, with one participant stating “there is nothing to be ashamed of” when discussing her feelings about being white. This may not indicate an acceptance of their identity, but instead hint at an underdeveloped understanding of what it means to be white. Participants in this study were not situated firmly in one of the stages in Helms’ model, but they were all within the first phase of abandoning their racism.

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently referred to the various costs for white individuals for confronting their privilege. Todd, et al. (2010) discussed guilt and shame as a couple of these costs, and Watt (2007) further discussed the defense mechanisms that white individuals use when they feel emotional costs. Using Watt’s (2007) privilege identity exploration model as a lens, the theme of *coping* highlighted how participants in this study were able to defend their sense of self when their understanding of privilege was challenged. Throughout the interviews, participants exhibited coping mechanisms of avoidance, denial, fear, justification, and blame. The process of deflecting the concepts of privilege and racism away from themselves, allowed participants to continue to be the *good white person* (Ambrosio, 2014). This allowed them to see racism as a problem, but avoid feeling complicit.

This deflection and avoidance was no more evident than during the recruitment phase of this study. The recruitment email was sent to a random sample of 200 students who met the

criteria for participation. *Only one* student responded to volunteer for the study. The unwillingness of students to participate in a study on white privilege represented the ultimate avoidance mechanism. Participants who did volunteer, via snowball sampling, commonly discussed how white students may not want to attend programs about racism, which, when coupled with the lack of initial volunteers for this study, highlights the importance of finding a balance between mandating discussion with facilitating buy-in with student participants. The sample that resulted was comprised of seven student leaders who were highly involved on campus. Despite their active involvement, the participants struggled to identify areas of exposure to racial dialogue on campus.

Participants mentioned how this hesitation to participate needs to be expected in discussions about privilege on campus. Participants in Robbins' (2016) study discussed how participation in the study "opened their eyes" and created a "hunger" for increased knowledge (p. 258). Robbins found this contradictory to their defensive responses and resistance to learn about white privilege; similarly, contradictory views were expressed by individuals in this study. Participants in this study exhibited understandings of the advantages they receive due to being white, but when asked how their life would differ if they were not white, they reverted to describing race as "nothing more than a skin color" and that changing skin color would not have an effect on their life. This contradiction hinted at a surface level understanding of racial injustice, and an unwillingness to acknowledge their complicity in the system.

Helms' (1990) presented the stages of *disintegration* and *reintegration* that participants in this study may have been moving between. Helms portrayed the stage of *disintegration* as the hunger and a desire for more information. Participants in the current study were eager to give recommendations for how the institution could provide better opportunities, and even stated that

they “craved” more opportunities. This was interesting because they also expressed hesitation to attend current events at the institution and were defensive regarding their own privilege. These responses hinted at Helms’ *reintegration* stage where students regressed back to their beliefs of white superiority. Students in this stage will commonly revert to stereotypes to explain racial injustice, instead of acknowledging the underlying issues such as privilege.

Participants also pointed out the importance of having good facilitators for conversations about power and privilege. They discussed the importance of having a faculty or staff member facilitate the conversation in an engaging way, while keeping the focus on internal reflection instead of “pointing fingers” when telling students about their own privilege. Boatright-Horowitz et al. (2012) discussed how the resistance to accepting privilege can lead to hostile learning environments. In the responses of the current study, it was difficult to decipher if the suggestion for a focus on reflection would actually be beneficial or was recommended because it was a safer environment for white students.

Recommendations for Practice

Participants suggested that interactions with and exposure to people of color “opened [their] eyes” to the different backgrounds individuals have and why they have different experiences. A few of the participants discussed the service component of MLK week activities on their campus, which included a service project in the local community. Participant responses suggest that service activities such as these would allow students to interact with people who are different than them, but it would be important to avoid the helper/helped power dynamic. By coupling such experiences with an educational session or speaker, students could learn about systems of privilege by seeing them in action.

A few of the reasons that the participants discussed regarding why students may not participate in events were the fact that students will not choose to be challenged, which makes optional programming a struggle. On the other hand, participants also discussed how mandatory programming may run the risk of having participants dreading the program, and therefore being unwilling to participate. From this dilemma, participants recommended bringing discussions of power and privilege into the classroom through a general education “issues” course. This would allow students to dive deeper into the history of systems of privilege and racism and allow the students to reflect on their place in this system through reflection assignments. Universities commonly include some sort of ethics or issues course in their general education curriculum, so offering a section on the systems of power and privilege in America could be a choice for students. This would strike a balance between mandatory (attendance for class) and choosing to be there (selecting the course from the options).

A recommendation for how to strike this balance is to include the concept of privilege in the institution’s orientation or welcome week activities. This would provide an opportunity for the entire incoming class by forcing some discussion, which would set a higher baseline level of exposure for students at the institution. Institutional values would be portrayed, and the opportunity for values around racism and privilege could be taught to students who may have had very little exposure. This session could be done in large group sessions with a guest speaker or could be done using activities in small group environments. This would provide the incoming students and the student leaders working with orientation an opportunity for increased learning and discussion. Participants commonly praised the in-service program for RAs, which could serve as a template or model for larger orientations.

By including the concepts of privilege and racism in the orientation at the beginning of the student's journey, this would demonstrate an institutional priority to discussing these issues. Participants' responses hinted at wanting faculty and staff to discuss these concepts more often and treat these discussions as a priority instead of as an afterthought. Along with the institutional commitment that this would demonstrate, I believe increased participation by faculty and staff in racial dialogue would *model* to students how they should be engaging. This *modeling* would be crucial to the success of any initiative or program as the students can sense when faculty or staff are not engaged themselves.

Including discussions about racial injustice at various points in the student's undergraduate career would symbolize an institutional commitment to the issue, and it would also allow for an increased depth of understanding of the students' personal complicity in the system of privilege. Even though the understandings exhibited by the participants were not surprising, the fact that these students are highly-involved student leaders is troubling since these students are influential figures in mentoring younger students, creating policy in student government, and more. By discussing the concepts at orientation, attending service programs in the community, and reflecting in the classroom through an issues course, students would have a greater understanding and more well-rounded point of view on the systems of privilege and oppression that exist in the real world after graduation, and currently at their institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on white undergraduate students. The fact that participants in this study were in the middle of their undergraduate experience might have inhibited their self-reflection. Conducting a study with graduate students and asking them to reflect upon their undergraduate experiences might reveal interesting insights.

Similarly, conducting a similar study with a sample comprised of faculty and staff may provide useful insight into their understandings of privilege, and whether they believe the institution does enough to encourage discussion. Identifying the level of understanding by faculty and staff may illuminate how they are modeling for their students.

This study aimed to identify participants' understandings of their racial identity but did not dive too deep into how intersecting identities acted as factors of this understanding. The *intersectionality* tenet of CRT described the importance of how intersecting identities impacted the role of race in their interactions. In this study participants had varying ages, socioeconomic statuses, sexual identities, religious ideologies, and so much more. A study that used questions to probe how these identities influenced their understanding would provide further context to best practices literature.

This study was conducted solely through the use of one-on-one interviews. Utilizing either group interviews or observational techniques, such as in the classroom or at a service event, may allow the researcher to identify various levels of understanding being actively applied.

Finally, this study was conducted with seven participants who were all highly involved on campus. By increasing the sample size, and recruiting a truly random sample, further research may be able to increase the generalizability of the study.

This study provided interesting insights on white undergraduate students' understandings of white privilege, but also provided disturbing revelations about the lack of awareness of their own complicity in the systems of privilege. The study also uncovered the limited impact that institutional efforts regarding racial justice had on the participants. Just as the institution and

society has work to do in advocating for racial equality, increased research around the education of white privilege will assist current and future generations in this pursuit.

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Class Standing:

Major/Minor:

Involvement at GVSU (Student organizations, employment, any extracurricular activity outside of class):

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Tell me about some of your background characteristics that have made you who you are today?
 - a. Identities... (Race, gender, social class, family situation, etc.)
3. What advantages/disadvantages do you think you have had because of your background characteristics?
 - a. Race characteristics...
 - b. Other characteristics such as social class, gender, etc. that could hint at privilege other than race...
4. Have you ever been discriminated against?
 - a. Direct v. Indirect...
 - b. If so, can you give me an example?
 - c. If not, what do you believe discrimination looks like?
5. What are some ways in which your race has affected your experiences in life?
 - a. Privileges/advantages both earned and unearned...
 - b. Perceived disadvantages...
 - i. Reverse discrimination...
6. How might race be an advantage/disadvantage for others?
 - a. Awareness of racism, individual or systemic...
 - b. Thinking of others as non-white...
7. How would your life be different if you were not white?

- a. Privileges brought up...
8. Tell me a little bit about your definition of racism?
9. Does race influence an individual's odds of success?
- a. If yes, how so?
 - b. If no, why not?
10. Tell me about some of the opportunities you have had at GVSU to think or talk about race?
- *
- a. Courses...
 - b. Speakers...
 - c. Extracurricular activities...
 - d. Personal relationships...
11. Tell me about some of the opportunities you have had at GVSU to think or talk about privilege? *
- a. Courses...
 - b. Speakers...
 - c. Extracurricular activities...
 - d. Personal relationships...
12. In your opinion, what changes, if any, could GVSU make to educate students about racism and privilege?

*Follow up questions may be derived from participant's answers on questionnaire sent prior to the interview to identify potential courses or areas of involvement with potential for exposure.

Appendix C

Email Invitation

Dear Student:

My name is Chase Dolan, and I am a graduate student completing a research study about the educational experience of White undergraduate students in relation to the concepts of race and privilege.

I am currently searching for volunteers to participate in this study. To meet the requirements for this study, you must identify as White, and have been attending Grand Valley State University for at least one year. Your participation would consist of completing one interview that will last no more than 60 minutes.

If you are interested and willing to participate in the study, please email me with your interest. I would like to forward you the informed consent document, which will explain your involvement and the study in further detail. I would also like to speak with you about scheduling a time to meet for the interview.

You may contact me at dolanacha@gvsu.edu or (720) 884-6373 if you need any additional information. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Chase Dolan
Graduate Student, Higher Education
Grand Valley State University

Appendix D

Consent Form

Title of Study: **Privileged and Complicit: Education and Understanding of White Privilege at a Predominately White Institution**

Principal Investigator: **Chase Dolan, Graduate Student, GVSU**

Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Mary Bair, Educational Foundations, GVSU**

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore level of racial education and understanding White students acquire during their undergraduate career at a large Midwest liberal arts institution. Participants will be asked to reflect on their experience as a White individual in society, and their experiences at their institution that have contributed to their knowledge about the concepts of race and privilege. This is in the hope that higher education researchers, practitioners, and I may learn more about how to better educate students about racial issues.

REASON FOR INVITATION

You are being invited to take part in this study because you have been identified as a current undergraduate student who self-identifies as White, has been attending the institution for at least one year, and is at least 18 years of age.

PURPOSE OF CONSENT FORM

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in this study or not. If you choose to participate, I will need verbal consent.

PROCEDURES

I will meet with you one time during the Winter semester. I will meet at an on-campus location that is convenient for you and allows for privacy during the interview. The interview will last a maximum of 60 minutes.

RISKS

There is minimal risk that this study will result in emotional discomfort. Interviews will be conducted in a way that should not inflict any harm. However, the interview questions will ask you to reflect on your experiences, and that may be uncomfortable. In the case that you experience emotional discomfort, I will stop the interview. If you feel that additional assistance is necessary, I strongly encourage you to contact:

GVSU University Counseling Center

616-331-3266

gvsucouns1@gvsu.edu

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU

I do not know if participating in this study will benefit you, however I hope that you will learn about yourself in the process and will benefit from reflecting on your experiences. If you are interested in the results of the study, I will be happy to share them with you.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

This study seeks to address a current gap in the literature surrounding the education of White students about race and privilege at institutions of higher education. Because of this, there is the potential that the field of higher education will benefit from this study. The information may benefit comparable institutions, and may lead to further research developments in the field. If successful, there is the potential for identifying effective strategies to increase the level of understanding about concepts of racial injustice, which could lead to a change in our society.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate. You may quit at any time without any penalty to you. You also have the option of skipping any question you do not want to answer. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, I may keep information about you and this information may be included in study reports, or you can elect to withdraw your information from the study.

PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Your personal information, including all responses to research questions, will not be linked in any way to your identity as a study participant, nor will your identity be included in the study results. You will be asked to select a pseudonym for purposes of the study. All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet or saved on a password-protected computer, although federal government regulatory agencies and the Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee (a committee that reviews and approves research studies involving human subjects) may inspect and copy research records.

Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. These recordings will only be used for analysis by myself as the researcher. After each interview, I will have the data transcribed, double check the transcription against the audio recording, and erase the recording. The transcriber and I will be the only ones who will have access to the recordings. However, the transcriber will not know your identity and will be bound by a nondisclosure agreement. Anything you say to me, or that I have on record, is between you and me and completely confidential.

COMPENSATION

To show appreciation for participating in the study, you will be entered in a drawing for the chance to win a \$20.00 Amazon gift card.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact:

Chase Dolan, Graduate Student

(720) 884-6373

dolanca@gvsu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact:

GVSU Office of Research Compliance and Integrity (616) 331-3197

rci@gvsu.edu

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your record

Appendix E

Example of Theme Creation

Themes	Categories	Codes
Factors	Hometown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Hickville" - Lack of Diversity - Conservative Upbringing
	Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family impact on views/biases/stereotypes - Dad was cop, his interactions influenced daughter view - "They're funny, but they are still inmates" - Stereotypical racist/sexist household - Nose pierced... oh no! First expression - Racist ideals passed down through family tree - "That is your parents' expression" - Family advantages, money - "Racist Grandma" - Ingrained racism - "Socialized as kids" - Generational Shift
	Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to solve black-on-black crime - "Need to monitor how we help POC" - Social stability, POC do not want to get out - POC misuse food stamps - "What are they telling their children?"
	Institutional Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - RA in-service - Interactions and exposure opened eyes - MLK Week/Day - "People aren't going to choose" - Need curiosity, willingness - Forced to talk to someone - Academic courses, "issues"

Appendix F

IRB Determination Letter

DATE: December 14, 2017

TO: Mary Bair

FROM: HRRC

STUDY TITLE: Privileged and Complicit: Education and Understanding of White Privilege at a Predominantly White Institution

REFERENCE #: 18-126-H

SUBMISSION TYPE: HRRC Initial Submission

ACTION: Exempt Determination

EFFECTIVE DATE: December 14, 2017

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of materials for your planned scholarly activity. It has been determined that this project is human subjects research* according to current federal regulations and MEETS eligibility for exempt determination under Exempt Category 2, 45 CFR 46.101. You may now proceed with your research.

Exempt protocols do not require formal approval, renewal or closure by the Human Research Review Committee (HRRC). Any revision to exempt research that alters the risk/benefit ratio or affects eligibility for exempt review must be submitted to the HRRC using the Change in Approved Protocol form before changes are implemented.

Any research-related problem or event resulting in a fatality or hospitalization requires immediate notification to the Office of Research Compliance and Integrity (rci@gvsu.edu or 616-331-3197) and the Research Integrity Officer Jeffrey Potteiger at 616-331-7207. (See HRRC policy 1020, Unanticipated problems and adverse events.)

Exempt research studies are eligible for audits.

If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance and Integrity at 616-331-3197 or rci@gvsu.edu. Please include your study title and protocol number in all correspondence with our office.

Sincerely,

Office of Research Compliance and Integrity

*Research is a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge (45 CFR 46.102 (d)).

Human subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or identifiable private information (45 CFR 46.102 (f)).

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