

**NEGOTIATING RACE TALK:  
HOW WHITES HIDE RACIAL PRIVILEGE AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY**

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In this descriptive and explanatory study, I analyze interactions among whites to determine if and how their discussions of race shape the contemporary racial ideology underpinning white privilege. In eight two-hour self-moderated focus groups, participants routinely attempted to build a coherent theory to explain why some whites are more racist than others. I demonstrate how participants used their stories about other whites' racist remarks to assess competing explanations for racism. Participants also built theories of intersectionality that emphasize racist whites' lack of nonracial forms of privilege, such as education or life experience. This process reinforced a depiction of racism void of any consideration of white privilege. This process also enabled participants to dismiss their own overwhelming evidence of the prevalence of racist beliefs and actions. In addition to discussing white racists, participants routinely compared stories about people of color whom they personally knew or had observed. As they negotiated the implications of these stories, participants linked racial status to behavior in ways that portrayed white privilege as an earned status. By combining their stories about people of color participants also hid the extent to which they were socially segregated from and ignorant about the lives of people of color. Through talk, they reinforced a depiction of racial inequality void of any consideration of structural forces. Although all groups demonstrated these dominant patterns, participants occasionally introduced and maintained a structural analysis of

white racial privilege and racial inequality. I analyze these deviations and conclude with a discussion of how this study can inform community based antiracism work, social policy, and the teaching of structural, critical, and antiracist interpretations of race/racism.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

What people say about race and how they say it reflects more than just individual racial attitudes: the way people talk about race constructs and deconstructs the racial status quo. Through talk we negotiate what is expected, acceptable, meaningful, and good when it comes to the definitions and treatment of different racial groups. This is particularly true of whites, whose race gives their talk a privileged place in American society. In this descriptive and explanatory study, I analyze interactions among whites as they discuss race in order to determine how and if their interactions shape the contemporary racial ideology underpinning white privilege.

Previous studies have shown that whites' way of talking about race is highly patterned, shared (unevenly) across gender and socioeconomic groups, resistant to most formal education, and even used by people of color to some extent (Ansell 1997; Barr 2010; 2003; Carr 1997). When discussing race, whites can explicitly tie the problems or inferiority of groups to their racial status. Alternately, race talk can be coded and inexplicit, focusing on seemingly race neutral arguments to defend the racial status quo. This way of talking, often called "colorblind racism," is a more recent historical development which some argue is the dominant form of public race talk in the US today (Frankenberg 1993; Zamudio and Rios 2006). Whether explicit or coded, race related utterances can be usefully conceptualized as both reflecting and reinforcing dominant racial ideology.

Yet race talk, like all social phenomena, must continuously be reconstructed and so it retains an unfinished and even vulnerable character. When we analyze race related claims only as individual utterances, we fail to examine the ways claims get accepted, rejected, or adjusted throughout a conversation. We can best understand the dynamic nature of racial ideology if we examine the processes through which people work together to build descriptions of race, racial groups, racial inequality and colorblindness. Toward that end, I conceptualize race talk as an interactive process of negotiation that people engage in during conversations about race. I move away from interview based studies of race talk and adapt the traditional focus group design to maximize my ability to observe interaction among whites. This conceptualization and methodology allow me to more fully examine *how* ways of talking support but also potentially undermine racial ideology.

## **1.1 FROM OVERT TO COVERT RACISM**

For much of U.S. history dominant racial ideology was apparent in overtly racist rhetoric and actions. From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, whites justified slavery by developing a belief in their own biological fitness and intellectual superiority relative to other darker-skinned groups. Such biological determinism enabled the continuation of a system of racial inequality in a nation increasingly committed to equal rights for all citizens (Fredrickson 2002; Winant 2001). Without undermining their sense of religious, moral, and political integrity, whites could exploit people of color as free labor and exclude them from participation in civil society. After Emancipation, this exclusion took the form of legalized and violently enforced social segregation and discrimination that stood as undeniable evidence of the explicit white

supremacist racial ideology that dominated the first half of the twentieth century (Blee 1991; Fredrickson 2002; Winant 2001).

This overtly racist regime was difficult to sustain in the post-WWII era. The WWII era European Holocaust had made more obvious the moral repugnancy of extreme racism. Also growing anti-colonial struggles and the start of the Cold War increased the political need for America to appear committed to egalitarian ideals (Fredrickson 2002). As these global pressures increased, the U.S. experienced “massive migration, intense mobilization of racially subordinate subjects demanding their political and social rights, and widespread reform of state institutions where racial matters were at stake” (Winant 2001:33). Shifting post-war sentiments and increasing resistance to white supremacy in the U.S. culminated in the Civil Rights Movement, which accomplished increased legal rights for people of color and delegitimized overt claims of white superiority (Morris 1984; Winant 2001).

Did the gains of the Civil Rights Movement make race irrelevant in US society? Certainly survey research has found a marked improvement in whites’ racial attitudes (Sniderman and Piazza 1993). Yet researchers argue that hopeful survey findings signal a need for better methods as much as the reality of better race relations (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). Traditional survey methods cannot capture the full meaning of whites’ racial attitudes because these attitudes are now embedded in “new forms of racism that are moral in character” (Lamont 2000:71). That is, whites use seemingly nonracial moral frameworks to reject racially progressive policies, such as Affirmative Action, without using explicit public expressions of white supremacy (Berry and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Kaplan 2011; Lamont 2000; Milner 2011). Alternately called “symbolic racism” (Kinder and Sears 1981), “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo and Smith 1994), “new racism” (Ansell 1997), and “colorblind racism”

(Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carr 1997), this contemporary racial ideology allows whites to support the racial status quo and contribute to the continuation of race-base stratification in the U.S. (Kinder and Sears 1981).

## **1.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY RACE TALK**

Since surveys often underestimate whites' support for racial inequality, researchers have turned to more qualitative methods, such as interviews, to measure contemporary racial ideology. By examining the nature of talk about race researchers have uncovered many mechanisms that support contemporary racism. In this section, I discuss these mechanisms, focusing on the connections between the "color-evasive" and "power-evasive" nature of race talk (Frankenberg 1993), the moral frameworks rationalizing this talk (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Lamont 2000), and the particular discursive strategies that make up its key expressions (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004; Frankenberg 1993; Trepagnier 2006). Then I discuss how the nature of contemporary race talk, as culturally situated yet elastic, requires continuous negotiation by whites in conversations about race.

In her seminal study of white women's identity construction, Ruth Frankenberg (1993:150) explains that most race talk is a "polite or public language," which is "color-evasive" in that it refuses to admit recognition of race difference and the importance of race in determining social and economic outcomes. Whites' refusal or inability to acknowledge racial inequality most directly underpins two of the "central frames of colorblind racism"<sup>1</sup> discussed by

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<sup>1</sup> Frankenberg (1993:272-273) argues that the "colorblind" terminology "is misleading in that this discursive repertoire is organized around evading difference or acknowledging it selectively rather than not 'seeing' differences



Bonilla-Silva (2003:25): abstract liberalism and minimization of racism. Colorblind racism frames are “set paths for interpreting information” that provide “intellectual roadmaps” for whites and help them state “racial views without appearing irrational or rabidly racist” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:26, 48). Of the four frames identified by Bonilla-Silva, abstract liberalism is the most ideological and important one employed by whites. Abstract liberalism refers to a belief in abstract notions of equality that are not specifically backed by support for liberal policy changes.

Abstract liberalism gives whites a way to claim adherence to the Civil Rights Movement’s assertion of equal opportunity while refusing to support practical social, political, and economic attempts to change the racial status quo. This frame is color-evasive because it “necessitates ignoring the fact that people of color are *severely* underrepresented in most good jobs, schools, and universities” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:28). Instead of acknowledging group experiences of oppression or privilege, which requires acknowledging race (Wu 2002), whites profess a lack of racial bias and emphasize the individuality of people, the ability to improve oneself through hard work, and free competition in economic markets (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

This emphasis requires utilization of another frame of colorblind racism: the minimization of racism. The only way to argue that individual effort determines social and economic outcomes is to first argue that such effort is not inhibited by racial bias, legacies of past discrimination, or other race related barriers. To do this, whites must underestimate the amount of racial inequality still present in the U.S. In his analysis of the Detroit Area Survey, Bonilla-Silva (2003:43) found that only 32.9 percent of whites “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement “Blacks are in the position that they are today as a group because of present day discrimination.” Overall, whites believe race does not impact life chances.

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of race, culture and color.” I agree with her assessment but still have chosen to use the term “colorblind” because it is commonly accepted by race scholars and it is the language whites use to describe their own views of race.

When whites fail to realize the impact of discrimination on people of color and emphasize individualism instead of group membership in their evaluation of life chances, they are being color-evasive. Specifically, this color-evasiveness allows them to affiliate themselves with the tenets of the Civil Rights Movement, overstate the amount of racial progress seen over the last 50 years, and justify the continuation of a system that privileges them (Blinder 2007; Frankenberg 1993; Tynes and Markoe 2010). Color-evasive frames go largely uncontested in dominant society.

In addition to being color-evasive, race talk is also “power-evasive”: it denies the existence of a system of inequality that creates dominant and subordinate groups (Frankenberg 1993). While color-evasiveness results in an inaccurate assessment of how much inequality exists, power-evasiveness results in an inaccurate assessment of where inequality comes from. When being power-evasive whites are paying “selective attention to difference,” focusing on perceived cultural and moral differences between racialized groups (Frankenberg 1993:156). This tendency to racialize perceived cultural difference and express perceived racial difference in terms of culture has been called “cultural racism” (Ryan 1976) and is one of the frames of colorblind racism discussed by Bonilla-Silva (2003). Because this study examines how groups focus race related conversations on or away from an investigation of racial privilege, it improves our understanding of how cultural racism operates.

Michèle Lamont’s study of the moral codes of working class men helps explain why cultural racism is an important ideological framework. Lamont argues that moral frameworks are an essential part of “boundary work” through which groups “construct similarities and differences between themselves and other groups” (2000:3). In the U.S., these moral frameworks are imbued with racialized cultural repertoires and language that help whites make sense of their

social world and encourage them to blame blacks for their own inability to succeed (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004; Lamont 2000). These moral and cultural frameworks coupled with the tendency to naturalize difference, give whites a worldview that explains racial inequality as the result of black cultural inadequacies and natural forces beyond anyone's control (Bonilla-Silva 2003). This worldview is power-evasive because it fails to acknowledge white privilege or institutional discrimination as sources of inequality.

“White privilege” refers to the unearned benefits whites receive because of their social location within a system of racial stratification. White privilege is a central aspect of race and racial inequality yet it is not often mentioned in color- and power-evasive conversations about race. When whites are unwilling or unable to identify white privilege during discussions of racial difference and racial inequality, they obscure the causes of the differences and inequalities they observe and support the dominant racial ideology that privileges them.

Studies of contemporary race talk have revealed an array of discursive strategies that whites use when discussing race. For instance, Bonilla-Silva (2003) lists strategies such as claiming not to be racist, claiming to have black friends, claiming not to see color, expressions of ambivalence (“yes and no, but...”), use of diminutives (“just a little bit against it”), uncommon incoherence, and confessing to have a racist relative/friend. Houts (2004) confirms many of these strategies and draws our attention to other strategies such as whispering, eye rolling, mentioning attempts to avoid mixed race encounters, and telling jokes. These discursive strategies are subtle ways whites indicate their views on race without directly addressing inequality or the ways race impacts life chances.

Manifested as abstract liberalism, minimization of racism, cultural racism, and naturalization, color- and power-evasiveness characterize some of the logic that motivates

contemporary race talk. This logic is used with remarkable consistency by different populations, including white men and women, despite different class and educational backgrounds (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Mazzocco, Cooper, and Flint In Press). Researchers also have established the persistence of similar ways of talking among younger whites (Blinder 2007; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000), in non-American populations (Ansell 2006; Steyn and Foster 2007), and even by people of color to some extent (Barr 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carr 1997). Contemporary race talk reflects and reinforces the logic of a color- and power-evasive racial ideology.

### **1.3 CONVERSATION AS SITUATED SPEECH**

Talk is a crucial form of social action through which individuals construct, organize, legitimize, and justify their social world (Wetherell 2003). Moreover, talk is a form of interaction. This interaction is situated in a conversation or series of conversations and embedded in a broader historical context that limits and shapes the ways talk can be used. In order to analyze race talk, we must take seriously the interactive nature of talk and examine talk outside of the traditional researcher-directed interview setting.

Previous studies that measure race talk tend to ignore importance of interaction, often by ignoring the role of the interviewer in constructing the race talk observed in interview based studies (for instance see Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993). Interestingly, even studies that observe race talk within groups tend to analyze individual utterances for patterns of individual self-expression rather than focusing on interactional patterns within groups (for instance see

Trepagnier 2006). Analyzing race talk as an interactive process requires examining the conversational context in which race talk utterances appear.

Paying attention to the conversational context of talk does not require disregarding the racialized social system in which these conversations are inevitably imbedded. Indeed, understanding these broader systems can help identify race-related utterances as Katherine Walsh (2007) noted in her work on community dialogue. Walsh was a participant observer at “community dialogues” where community members from different racial backgrounds came together to discuss racial inequality. She found that community dialogue did not automatically create a unified discourse in which agreement and similarities were prioritized over an acknowledgment of difference and dissent. Instead these groups attempted to balance claims about difference/multiculturalism and claims about similarity/unity. Walsh’s groups told stories both to legitimize and challenge claims. Their stories were linked to the world outside of the immediate conversational context Walsh was measuring. They reflected broader understandings of race that participants had heard, used, and discussed in other settings. The community dialogue setting was the immediate conversational context but it reflected and existed firmly within the racialized social system of the U.S. at the time.

By analyzing the discourses used by community dialogue groups, Walsh revealed how people of color pulled whites away from a focus on similarities across group and pushed them toward an acknowledgment of the ways race differentially impacts different groups. Whether similar dynamics are present among white groups is not clear. Whites must determine which ways of talking will “work” within the conversational context and the broader context of dominant racial ideology. By analyzing the process through which they do this, we can better understand the interactive nature of race talk and how it supports racial ideology.

### **1.3.1 Race talk under negotiation**

Despite having constant exposure to and everyday practice using the flexible arguments and discursive strategies of dominant contemporary race talk (see section 2.2), whites seem uncertain about how their race related claims will be perceived by others. In fact, many of the “frames, styles, and stories” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:26) of colorblind race talk are devices used to avoid direct expression of belief, ward off critique, and otherwise negotiate the uneasy terrain of race related conversations (Trepagnier 2006). Moreover, whites worry about being called racist for racializing situations and people in ways deemed inappropriate by real and imagined audiences (Goff, Steele, and Davies 2008). This suggests that whites doubt their ability to explain their understandings of racial groups, race-based inequality, and racism especially to strangers or mixed race groups. As a normative way of talking, contemporary race talk is surprisingly incapable of giving whites confidence in their discourse.

The uneasy character of contemporary conversations about race suggests that dominant racial ideology is not impervious to challenge. White Americans seem very aware of the fact that there are many approaches to discussions about race even though alternate approaches may be tentative, highly contested, or incompletely held (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Doane 2006). The work of people of color and progressive whites have reached other whites in small ways through editorials, provocative comedy bits, debates among political pundits, racially charged movie scenes, etc. For many whites, the college classroom is one place where they first heard new explanations of racial inequality. Despite this progress, whites continue to use and to hear more traditional ways of talking about race. Whites must negotiate these different ways of talking about race and the ideologies they represent as they work to express their own beliefs about racial difference and inequality.

Whites do not reconcile conflicting ways of talking about race in isolation. Instead, they talk to each other and must address the concerns and contributions of other whites while attempting to establish and express their own views. Although whites may also discuss race related issues with people of color, the high levels of residential and social segregation in the U.S. means that most whites have few conversations in mixed-race settings. Therefore, how whites handle the uneasy task of discussing race with other whites impacts the credibility and power of the racial ideology they personally support.

Whites' collective negotiation process is an important and understudied dynamic of race talk. Particularly unknown is how whites question and/or challenge race related claims, whether these claims are overtly racist remarks indicative of more traditional biological racism or claims that are more "race cognizant" (Frankenberg 1993), "racially progressive" (Bonilla-Silva 2003), and "antiracist" (Thompson 2001; Trepagnier 2006). It is also unclear what happens when claims go uncontested or when race related claims are followed by requests for justification, supporting evidence, or other challenges and supporting comments or confirmations. We know little, in other words, about how different claims about race and racial inequality are negotiated during discursive interaction.

#### **1.4 SUMMARY**

How we talk about race matters. Through talk we make meaning of race related claims, draw conclusions about the nature of racial groups, and reveal or hide the reality of racial inequality. Through talk we recreate or undermine the racial status quo.

Studies of whites' attempts to discuss race suggest they use highly patterned ways to talk about race, especially in public spaces. Yet despite the availability of such patterned ways of talking, whites are unsure how race related claims will be received by others. Evidence of this is in the talk itself. Common phrases reveal whites' pervasive desire to avoid being on the wrong side of debates about racial inequality. For instance, contemporary race talk is laden with fleeting acknowledgments that one's views could be construed as racist and with strategies to quickly exit a conversation about race (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). White students report using strategies such as "acting extra polite" or "proving they are not racist" by mentioning people of color with whom they have interacted without problems in the past (Houts 2004:67). Whites use these strategies even when talking to agreeable interviewers who aren't challenging their claims, suggesting that whites are consistently aware of and concerned about the existence of racial ideologies and race talk that differ from their own.

Sometimes whites avoid mentioning race at all. Nina Eliasoph (1999) finds that whites sometimes use more progressive race talk in private spaces but then fail to say anything when others make racist comments in public. Also whites have a tendency to whisper when mentioning race, even when the mention is not intended to imply anything other than a physical description (Houts 2004:114). Goff et al (2008) argue that whites' insecurity about their participation in discussions about race or in discussions with black people is so intense that it acts as a "stereotype threat" affecting cognition and task performance. These studies show that whites are either uncertain about what they think about race or they lack the confidence needed to express their race related views openly and clearly.

Despite the pervasiveness of colorblind race talk and whites' "hypersegregation" from communities of color (Wu 2002), whites don't and can't that assume they can predict which type



of talk will be most appropriate in a new situation. Instead, the appropriateness/inappropriateness of words, phrases, logics, comparisons, premises, etc must be negotiated among all participants. Eliasoph (1999) suggests that this negotiation is ruled by the normative “structures of expression,” a kind of conversational etiquette, in which group members are invested. Yet how do whites come to know the etiquette of any given group? How is this etiquette developed, enforced, or altered? In this study, I analyze the ways whites negotiate conversations about race and explain how these negotiations result in the recreation and/or destabilization of colorblind race talk.

The unpredictable and interactive nature of talk makes it hard to capture with traditional research methods. Ethnographic research on race talk is difficult because sustained conversations about race are unplanned and infrequent and spontaneous discussion can't be recorded. Yet interview designs depend too much on researcher directed talk and lack interaction among participants. Traditional focus groups capture lots of group talk about race but are researcher directed in ways that interrupt the flow of the conversation. My adapted focus group design addresses these problems by limiting and standardizing my participation in group interaction. Specifically, I provided each focus group a list of discussion questions loosely related to race. I then left the group so that participants could initiate and sustain talk among themselves. This ensured that participants maintained complete control over the specific content and direction of their conversations. In Chapter 2, I explain the focus group design in more detail along with my sampling technique, focus group composition, and my use of discourse analysis to analyze the microsociological elements of interaction as expressed through talk.

In their focus groups, white participants frequently told stories about white friends or family members who have said racist things or who hold racist beliefs. In Chapter 3, I discuss

this pattern and the ways participants routinely attempted to build a coherent theory to explain why some whites are more racist than others. I demonstrate how participants used their stories about whites' racist remarks to assess competing explanations for racism and build theories of intersectionality that emphasize racist whites' lack of nonracial forms of privilege, such as education or life experience. I examine how this process reinforced a depiction of racism void of any consideration of white privilege. Finally, I demonstrate how this process enabled participants to dismiss their own overwhelming evidence of the prevalence of racist beliefs and actions.

In Chapter 4, I examine the ways white participants frequently mentioned people of color whom they had known or observed. Although some of these references were made to support a claim of not being racist, most descriptions of specific people of color were used to support broader claims about race. To negotiate these claims, participants compared stories about people of color, from television personalities and strangers on the bus to coworkers, neighbors, and in-laws. I show how this negotiation process hid the extent to which participants were actually socially segregated from and/or ignorant about the lives of people of color. I also demonstrate how the negotiation linked racial status to behavior in ways that enabled participants to portray white privilege as an earned status. Their process reinforced a depiction of racial inequality void of any consideration of structural forces.

Not every interaction followed the dominant patterns that I describe in Chapters 3 and 4. Participants occasionally introduced and maintained a structural analysis of white racial privilege and racial inequality. Participants broke from the patter of dominant race talk by explicitly linking privilege to racism, race to life chances, and historical racism to contemporary race relations. In Chapter 5, I analyze these strategies and discuss the unfinished character of race talk.

In their focus groups, many participants shared that they had thought about race issues but usually do not discuss them or never had discussed them before. Since many whites continue to avoid conversations about race, this study provides important insight into what conversations about race would look like if white Americans were asked to grapple more directly with racial inequality. This has immediate implications for the college classroom because whites' negotiations of conversations about race relate to how they process information about the causes and consequences of inequality. Therefore, I conclude Chapter 6 with a discussion of how this study can inform the teaching of structural, critical, and antiracist interpretations of race/racism. I also discuss ways in which this study design can be adapted for future research to further expand our understanding of the negotiation of race talk among groups.

## **2.0 METHODS**

### **2.1 GENERAL STUDY DESIGN**

This is a qualitative focus group study that measures the ways whites negotiate group conversations about race and racism. The unit of analysis is the interaction so I focus on interactions among participants instead of participants' individual intentions, utterances, or meaning making. This study is descriptive, revealing instances of race talk usage in groups, and explanatory, examining the interactions that lead up to and follow these instances of talk in order to establish how racial ideology is created, transmitted, enforced, and/or altered through interaction.

My study is conceptually informed by research linking micro-sociological measurements of individual racial attitudes and intentions to macro-sociological considerations of cultural frameworks (Lamont 2000) and racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Methodologically, my study is situated between these two levels of social phenomena as I focus my analytical gaze on the conversational space in which groups create racial ideology through talk. Here I follow Eliasoph's recommendation to take seriously "everyday speech contexts" as crucial sites of investigation (1999:480).

### 2.1.1 Focus group as speech context

In order to observe a wide range of the mechanisms that whites can employ in these discussions, I needed extensive recorded data of whites' discussions about race within a cohesive conversational context. Interviews are one common way of collecting detailed recorded data on race talk. Wetherell (2003:13) explains that interviews can capture the use of "routine and highly consensual (cultural/normative) resources that carry beyond the immediate local context, connecting local talk with discursive history." In fact, interview based studies have been crucial to our understanding of race talk because they have effectively mapped many important race talk utterances.

Still, there are limits to relying too heavily on this methodology. Interviews are sites of negotiation between the respondent and the researcher. Therefore,

the research interview has to be understood as a specific social context (defined and redefined during the interaction between interviewer and interviewee) within which answers are locally constructed...Interviews typically articulate opinions that do not necessarily correspond with those articulated in other conversational situations (van den Berg, Wetherell, and Houtkoop-Steenstra 2003b:4-5).

We need to take seriously the constructed nature of the interview and the limitations of examining race talk using only researcher directed interactions. Usefully, ethnographies on race talk have provided a different perspective on racial ideology construction and maintenance. Here it is useful to briefly examine the ways situated speech is understood in the ethnographic work of Nina Eliasoph (1999), Monica McDermott (2006), and Katherine Walsh (2007).

Eliasoph studied talk about race among members of voluntary organizations. She found that group norms influence what is considered acceptable and unacceptable race talk, often encouraging people to publicly accept or explain away racist remarks that they consider offensive. Eliasoph's focus on the organizational context within which her participants interact

enabled her to make sense of differences in race related utterances among whites from group to group.

Eliasoph's focus on group context differs from McDermott's (2006) focus on the conversational and neighborhood context. McDermott's study of working class whites involved extensive observation of interactions among customers at a neighborhood convenience store. The conversations she observed did not get their meaning from the fact that they took place within a convenience store – instead she focused on the more immediate context of the conversation itself (such as the characteristics of the participants) and the broader social context of the neighborhood. This neighborhood context made sense of whites' self-conceptualization as white and views of themselves as failures or successes relative to race-based expectations of socioeconomic achievement. Because McDermott was trying to measure the viewpoints of whites, she benefitted from such a focus on the neighborhood context and meaning making.

Walsh's (2007) work, as discussed above, does not include as much analysis of neighborhood context. She relied on data collected at planned community dialogues about race, guided by predetermined discussion topics and questions. Walsh was not particularly interested in the hidden feelings of group participants. Instead, she focused on the nature of the group conversation itself and how interactions shape these conversations. Therefore, Walsh did not need to engage as explicitly with broader understandings of context and could rely on data collected in settings less intimately linked to everyday life. Because Walsh did not participate in the planning of these conversations, the community dialogues count as a natural setting despite the fact that they are less spontaneous than the types of talk recorded by Eliasoph and McDermott. As opposed to Eliasoph and McDermott, Walsh chose a design that enabled the

recording of relevant data and a very detailed analysis of interaction, two methodological components of particular relevance to my study.

My study is much like Walsh's in that I record the interaction of individuals meeting in a group to discuss race related themes. Although I was responsible for the planning of these groups, most of the factors shaping my focus group discussions were no more contrived or unnatural than those shaping discussion in Walsh's community dialogue groups. Like Walsh's groups, my groups were given broad discussion questions which they could interpret and address however they saw fit. By using focus groups, I could record the entire conversation had by the group thereby increasing my ability to take seriously the conversational context.

Importantly, my analysis does not ignore the larger social and historical context in which my participants normally live. In addition to operating like Walsh's community dialogues, my focus groups operate somewhat like McDermott's groups of strangers chatting at a convenience store or, as in the famous study *Street Corner Society* (Foote Whyte 1943), like another street corner with a new group of people engaging in similar social interaction. In these studies, the way individuals go about talking is influenced by their assessment of the conversational context and by the cultural, historical, and discursive resources at their disposal. In my study, participants were no less tied to cultural, historical, and discursive resources and no less responsible for assessing the conversational context for clues as to which resources to employ in which ways.

Here William Gamson's (1992) concept of "sociable public discourse" is useful. Gamson points out that public discourse is the "sense of speaking to a gallery" (9). The gallery includes the other individuals in the conversational setting and a broader audience. In the case of focus group research, participants know that they are speaking to the participants in their group and also to the researcher and whatever audiences will read the researcher's reports. Therefore,

participants may avoid remarks that they would make in private conversations because those remarks “violate the norms of public discourse.” Even though the research setting is contrived, participants must use their understanding of broader historical and cultural context to determine the norms of public discourse and the expectations of the “gallery.” Therefore, the race talk observed in focus groups is not unique to the research setting but follows many of the norms of public discourse in other settings.

Public discourse in a focus group setting is also sociable. Participants use the “practical knowledge” that they have gained from talking with family and friends in other settings. They use this knowledge as they engage in a “sociable conversation that is jointly maintained by the participants and an implicit awareness of the norms governing such conversations.” In this way, participants find the “conversational techniques and resources that they use in these other settings” work in the focus group (Gamson 1992:20). Their general savvy maintaining “sociable public discourse” explains why participants are “collectively quite competent” when it comes to participating in focus group research.

I manipulated focus group composition in order to expose me to a range of sociable public discourse strategies. That is, I made analytical use out of group composition by arranging groups of friends, groups of strangers, same gender and mixed gender groups, and groups of participants older and younger than age 60. This enabled me to observe a wide range of interactions and, consequently, a wide range of data on a phenomenon that is not usefully conceptualized in completely place-specific terms.



### **2.1.2 Adapted focus group design**

Focus groups encourage interaction among participants, ensure lots of talk on the given topic, and can be easily recorded (Fern 2001; Morgan 1988). Traditionally, focus groups have been used for marketing research and exploratory sociological research, where participant interaction is valued only in so far as it quickly generates their “true” opinions about a topic, a product, potential survey questions, or initial data analysis (Morgan 1988:11). In that usage, participants’ feedback in terms of opinions and perspectives is what matters. In this study, however, I was less interested in perspective and more interested in interaction. In fact, I avoided “speculating about individual speakers’ intentions” (Talja 1999:470). I did not claim to know why speakers choose certain phrases or become more/less involved in the conversation at certain points. Rather I analyzed how these actions/inactions contributed to a group’s ways of discussing race related issues. To do this I deviated from traditional focus group applications. Specifically, I used the focus group to evoke interaction instead of opinions and manipulated group composition to increase the types of interaction I could observe.

In most focus group studies, group composition is determined with the goal of maximizing participant comfort to encourage the sharing of lots of opinions (Fern 2001). With the hope of standardizing and minimizing the influence of group composition, methods texts advise the researcher to watch out for groups with too much individualism, divergent values, or participants from friendship groups and different social statuses (Fern 2001; Krueger 1998). Because I wanted group composition to have some influence, these cautions were not relevant to my study. Instead, I arranged group composition in ways that brought into the research setting more of the possible kinds of interactions occurring in everyday conversations.

### **2.1.2.1 Focus group composition**

Although I use individuals' personal characteristics to create the groups, it is the resulting group composition that is important here. Group composition did not mimic representative sampling and I cannot generalize my findings to other groups similar to those I arranged in my study. Instead, I arranged group composition in order to increase my exposure to different ways whites negotiate race related conversations. Specifically, I manipulated friendship status, gender, and age composition to form groups that were likely to interact in different ways and create potentially different conversational contexts.

This study included four groups of friends and one group in which two participants were married and another two participants were friends but did not know each other or the one other group member. I became interested in including friendship groups after pretest participants reported being concerned about expressing some views on race around their friends. They reported "dropping the subject," "not contradicting," and "smiling" as strategies used to maintain good rapport when their friends expressed objectionable views on race. In the pretest, I also observed people bringing up past experiences to challenge their friends' claims and asking for clarification on statements that didn't seem to match other things they knew about their friends. Based on these pretest findings, I hypothesized that the presence of friends in the group shifted the interactional dynamic because individuals interact differently with friends than with strangers. Friendship groups also have different shared resources to draw upon during discussion including some mechanisms that recreate or destabilize race talk but are not available to groups of strangers. By including both groups of friends and groups of strangers, I got a more complete view of the phenomena under study.

For my second conversational context, gender composition, I brought together two groups of women, two groups of men, and four mixed gender groups. There were friends present in one group of women, one group of men, and two mixed gender groups. The literature suggests that, individually, women discuss race differently than men discuss race and that women are more open than men are to counter-ideological claims (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993). Women and men also may have different interactional styles in general. Surprisingly, I found very little difference in how groups of women, groups of men, and mixed gender groups approached discussion about race. The men's groups were not completely gender segregated because I stayed in the room. My presence may have impacted their group dynamic. Additional research including many more same-gender groups is needed to determine how gender composition impacts race talk, if at all.

Finally, I included two groups of participants who were over age 60 to ensure I observed interactions among individuals who shared lived experience of a more explicitly racist time in American history. Both of these groups were mixed gender and contained at least some friends. Like with gender, I found age had little impact on the way the groups negotiated race talk. To the contrary, including an age difference proved useful because of the similarities it revealed. For instance, all groups brought up age as a factor that might explain why some whites are racist (see Chapter 3). By manipulating age composition, I revealed that this pattern does not reflect any actual differences in white Americans by generation but rather is a common form of race talk that anyone can use to talk about any age group other than their own.

### **2.1.2.2 Self-moderated focus groups**

The focus group pulls interaction out of natural context, a frequently emphasized limitation of the focus group method (Morgan 1988). In the case of this study, there are some benefits to examining talk among newly formed groups and among friendship groups discussing race in a new way. As noted above, Eliasoph's (1999) study linked race talk usage and the avoidance of race talk to group interactional norms. My study examines the mechanisms through which whites determine such interactional norms, signal their expectations regarding conversational etiquette, and respond to the signals of others. The temporary and informal nature of the focus group required individuals to newly get their bearings in a race related conversation. As such, it proved an excellent place to examine how whites use verbal cues to negotiate race related talk.

Because the unit of analysis is the interaction, I would lose all benefits of the focus group design if my presence dominated group discussion. While I could not eliminate the effect of the researcher completely, I used a "self-managed" focus group design (Morgan and Spanish 1984) in order to maximize natural interaction and standardize and limit the effect of my presence across groups. Specifically, I did not probe, question, or otherwise redirect participants during the focus group discussion. Instead, after giving conversational prompts in the form of a few written guiding questions (see Appendix A), I left the group. I remained able to observe their interaction from across the room. Late in the discussion, I gave the group a second set of discussion questions but I did not join the group discussion for these questions either. By leaving the group to start and maintain discussion without my contribution, I decreased and standardized my influence over the direction and nature of the conversation.

For both set of discussion prompts, I chose guiding questions that directly asked about race and its relevancy to politics. I did not otherwise lead participants to focus on any particular race related issue. This left participants free to interpret the questions and direct the conversation as they saw fit. Self-managed groups interact in a situation in which the researcher holds little authority and provides no guidance or feedback, making it more like “ordinary talk” (Van Den Berg 2003:120). In this way, I minimized my presence as part of the “situational context” and enabled the participants to produce an “interpretive repertoire” together (Van Den Berg 2003:121).

Previous focus group studies show that self-managed groups can produce up to two hours of detailed discussion of the presented topic if given compelling guiding questions (Morgan and Spanish 1984). I found that my groups easily sustained talk for the entire two hour focus group meeting, never veering off topic for very long. Because participants were managing the conversation without my guidance, they generated few single word or one line answers to the discussion prompt questions. When a participant did provide short or vague responses, other participants often asked follow-up and probing questions. Twice, when participants had been quiet for a long stretch of the conversation, other participants specifically asked if they had anything they’d like to add. In this way, the participants proved themselves to be excellent researchers! The resulting transcripts contain both large chunks of text from individual contributions and rich give-and-take among respondents as they grapple with contested claims. My self-managed focus group design successfully yielded substantial detailed recordings of interactions during race related conversations that are not continuously researcher directed.

Losing the ability to immediately and unobtrusively intervene when participants go on tangents, avoid uncomfortable topics, or decrease their participation would be a serious problem

in an interview, but this study is intended to measure participants' use of these very actions. Therefore, by leaving the group discussion, I guaranteed that I did not interrupt the flow of conversation, give direct or subtle cues as to the acceptability or unacceptability of participant comments, or otherwise influence the interaction I was trying to measure.

Even having minimized my interaction with participants, it is difficult to be certain the extent to which the conversations I observed are like those that spontaneously occur in nonresearch settings. Without immediate researcher feedback, participants may still have aimed to give what they felt was the more socially desirable responses throughout their group's discussion. While this tendency in participants is often a limitation in research, I believe bias for the sake of real and perceived audiences was an essential part of the phenomena under study here. That is, individuals consider the standards and expectations of real and imagined audiences when deciding what's appropriate to say or do when discussing race in any setting. My research design captured that phenomenon.

## **2.2 DATA COLLECTION**

Having outlined a general explanation of and justification for my methodology, I use the following section to describe my approach in detail. Specifically, I discuss my data collection techniques, including sampling and recruitment, participant consent and confidentiality, and the focus group schedule.

### **2.2.1 Recruitment**

To recruit participants for this study, I did a mix of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling at different locations where I was most likely to access meaningfully different social groups. Specifically, I recruited participants by posting fliers at local churches, public libraries, community centers, and stores in different neighborhoods around Pittsburgh. Also I asked friends to email out the recruitment announcement to their contacts in local community groups and I posted a recruitment flier on Craigslist.com. Craigslist, used frequently by UPMC health study recruiters, yielded the most responses from individuals of various socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, I contacted individuals who had not been chosen for my pretest and who had been asked to be notified when recruitment for the main study had begun.

Pretest participants suggested that \$25 was an attractive value for an incentive and that a grocery store gift certificate was most appreciated. During recruitment, I offered a \$25 gift certificate to all participants. I chose gift certificates to Pittsburgh's main grocery chain, Giant Eagle, because Giant Eagle is located throughout the area and Giant Eagle customers get money off Get-Go gasoline.

When an interested person contacted me, I used an eligibility questionnaire to determine if he/she was a good fit for one of the focus groups. The questionnaire asked for age, gender, and race so that I could sort participants into the appropriate group and eliminate anyone who was not white or age 18 or over. In addition to collecting basic demographic information, I asked if participants would be willing to recruit friends to participate in the study with them. Those who were willing to recruit friends set up a group of four to five individuals and contacted me with their preferred time and place to hold the focus group. The eligibility questionnaire took only a few minutes and was administered during my first contact with participants.

In addition to using the eligibility questionnaire to determine group composition, I used it to gather demographic information on my participants:

**Table 1: Number of participants by age**

20-29	8
30-39	10
40-49	5
50-59	2
60-69	7
Unknown	2

**Table 2: Number of participants by socioeconomic status**

Working class	15
Middle class	12
Upper-middle class	5
Upper class	1
Unknown	1

**Table 3: Number of participants by gender**

Women	17
Men	17



**Table 4: Number of participants by occupation**

Business executives	3
Teachers	2
Researchers	2
Arts	3 Writers/ Journalists 2 Musician 1 Producer
Retail	3
Secretary	1
Municipal workers	4
Not working	2 Unemployed 4 Retired 4 Students
Unknown	3

### **2.2.2 Sample size**

Focus groups included four to five participants each for a total of 34 participants. I chose to keep the group size small to encourage rapport among group members and ensure there was enough time for all group members to participate in the discussion if they so chose. I also avoided large group sizes because it seemed unlikely that whites were used to having long discussions about race with more than just a few people at a time given the general reluctance of whites to bring up race related topics at all. In order to make the focus group experience feel like something participants might experience outside the research setting, I ensured that group size stayed below six people per group.

My final sample size was hard to determine because my unit of analysis was the discursive exchange, of which there were many within each two hour discussion. The boundaries of these exchanges were unclear because one exchange contained many actions and reactions and no exchange happened in complete isolation from the ones that occurred before and after it. In just a few minutes of talk, participants “do” many things such as making, challenging, supporting, and clarifying claims. Each of these actions needed to be examined as reactions to what was said before and precursors to the actions that followed. In my analysis, I bound exchanges as participants themselves seemed to, by using a change of topic as the starting and end points of a given exchange.

Because each discussion included multiple discursive exchanges, I limited the study to eight focus groups. Wood and Kroger (2000:81) argue that discourse analysis which focuses on “sequential features” such as an exchange requires much less data than analysis that identifies

“some of the ways people use language and working through these in detail.” As a general reference point, I refer to Martin Warren’s (2006) discussion of sample size within discourse analysis. Warren bemoans the lack of discourse analytical studies that rely on large data sets, noting that many discourse analysis studies focus on as little as one conversation. Warren then boasts that his own data set, which includes 15 hours of group conversations, is a nice correction of this tendency. Given my analytical focus on small elements of interaction, I found that my 16 hours of focus group discussion provided a large amount of data for analysis.

### **2.2.3 Consent and confidentiality**

The University Institutional Review Board suggested I avoid collecting signed consent and instead maintain anonymity by relying on the presentation of an introductory script that informed participants of their rights as research subjects and any possible risk involved in their participation. I recorded no last names and no contact information was linked to any data on the eligibility questionnaires or audio tapes. Also I encouraged participants to use only first names during the focus group meetings. All data has been kept in a locked file in my personal office. Because my unit of analysis was the discursive exchange, I did not need to link comments to individuals by name.

Focus groups provide a unique challenge to maintaining participant confidentiality. Although I did not reveal participants’ names or other personal information to other participants, by necessity they met each other in their focus group. Anything a participant revealed during the group discussion could be repeated by another participant outside of the research setting. In my consent form, I informed participants of this possibility. Before the focus group began, I urged participants to maintain each other’s confidentiality and avoid sharing the details of our

discussion with anyone outside of the group. I also reminded them that I cannot control the extent to which their anonymity would be protected by other members of the group so they should be thoughtful about which personally identifying information they choose to share. Participants maintained complete control over what they revealed to each other and so could protect their own personal information as desired.

#### **2.2.4 The focus group schedule**

When participants arrived at the focus group venue, they had an opportunity to greet each other and help themselves to the snacks and beverages I provided. Once all participants had arrived, I reminded them that the session would be recorded then I turned on the recording devices, introduced myself, reviewed the confidentiality information, and broadly introduced the topic of discussion. Also, using the guidelines suggested by Morgan and Spanish (1984), I explained how the group would be self-managed. In each group, I followed a prepared script for these introductory remarks in order to standardize the influence of my introduction across groups.

##### **2.2.4.1 Discussion prompts**

After this introduction, I handed out copies of the discussion prompt, which provided questions to encourage group discussion (see Appendix). The questions asked first about the relevancy of race to the 2008 Presidential campaign season and election and then to American society in general. During the group discussion, I sat at an unobtrusive distance from the group and took notes on group interaction to supplement the audio recordings. Participants' nonverbal interactions were somewhat limited because they were sitting in a circle throughout the interview

but I recorded basic elements of nonverbal interaction when possible. I time stamped my notes so that I could link nonverbal exchanges to the audio recording during analysis.

I used prompts that started with general questions such as “What have you heard people say about race and presidential politics?” I chose to tie the discussion prompt questions to the 2008 Presidential election season and the election of Barack Obama because 1) these topics were at the center of the national dialogue about race at the time, 2) I was sure all participants would have at least some working knowledge of these topics, and 3) these topics enabled me to start with nonthreatening questions about how race had played out “in general” for “most people” before asking more personal questions about participants own views about race. This question sequence worked well to build rapport and familiarity among group members and to encourage lots of rich discussion. In a post-discussion survey of their experience, participants consistently reported that the discussion prompts were “comfortable” and “interesting.” This positive feedback and the fact that the prompts evoked two hours of relevant talk showed that the prompts were an effective way to start a nonthreatening focus group conversation.

My prompts clearly directed participants to think about politics, political figures, and government interventions in race relations. I had worried that this narrow focus would make participants feel obligated to discuss a small set of race related topics, even topics they felt held little interest or importance. Instead, I found that participants felt free to talk about a wide range of race-related topics. For instance, while some groups discussed the extent to which the black community voted for Barack Obama because of his race, other groups did not raise this issue. Similarly, some groups devoted time to a consideration of mixed race identity but others did not. Since black voting habits and mixed race identity are topics closely tied to the topic of Obama’s election, one might expect all groups to feel obligated to discuss them. That only some of the

groups raised these issues suggests that the prompts were vague enough to allow for interpretation. Still, in my analysis, I note when the prompts seemed to influence the participants' choice of topics and tone in meaningful ways.

By initially turning the group's attention to Barack Obama, I emphasized an individual who had achieved great success. This likely led to a more positive take about American race-relations. Had I turned participants' attention to negative issues, such as the incarceration rates of young black men, they may have had an entirely different conversation. Yet even with the prompt's bias toward the positive, all groups devoted time to consideration of the more negative side of American race relations. They mentioned ways people of color are wrongly targeted for racism as well as ways they felt people of color cause problems for themselves and for white Americans. Consequently, I'm confident that my discussion prompts were vague enough to give participants control over the discussion content.

In addition to the first list of discussion questions, I presented each group with a second discussion prompt after about 60-75 minutes of talk. This discussion prompt asked participants to explain their sources of information about race. It also asked participants if they ever feared they'd sound racist. These questions encouraged talk that revealed the extent to which they could articulate the way race talk works, the nature of their imagined audiences, and their sense of authority and accountability. I chose these questions based on feedback I received from my pretest study. During the focus group discussion and the debriefing, pretest participants frequently mentioned that they feared they might sound racist. When I followed up on this concern, pretest participants seemed relieved to have the chance to discuss the issue. In order to ensure the focus group experience wasn't too stressful, I wanted to provide all participants with an opportunity to work through any anxiety related to fearing they sounded racist. Helpfully,

asking participants to reflect on whether they might sound racist also enabled me to collect useful data on how participants assessed potential audiences and their own authority to discuss race related matters. To get the best of both worlds, I showed participants these questions only after they'd spent over an hour talking about race so that I would have lots of data unaffected by these questions.

#### **2.2.4.2 Preventing stress in group interaction**

As I took notes during the focus group discussion, I continuously monitored the group for potential conflict or unacceptable stress, excessive pauses in discussion, or tangents that could permanently derail group discussion. Because I was attempting to measure the ways people talk, I considered tangents, pauses, and other conversational devices to be part of the phenomena under study. That said, I was prepared to intervene should excessive pauses or conversation topics seem very uncomfortable for participants or should very long tangents come to dominate group discussion too much of the time.

Surprisingly, I did not have to intervene in six of the eight focus groups because participants talked comfortably for at least 60 minutes after receiving the first prompt. One of the two groups that required my assistance spent approximately 15 minutes briefly covering the first discussion prompt and then turned to me for guidance. I asked them to talk some more about any of the discussion prompt questions that interested them. This was enough to encourage the group to continue talking about race-related topics for another 55 minutes. Although their discussion remained more stilted than other groups' discussions, they did not seem uncomfortable participating in the full two hour focus group session.

The second group that required intervention had no trouble sustaining relevant conversation but was dominated by one participant, Evelyn, who struggled with mental health

problems and whose racist comments risked making other members unacceptably uncomfortable. Evelyn was a 54 year old woman from a working class background. She arrived a few minutes early and told me that she lived in a group home and participated in many research studies at the University of Pittsburgh in order to earn the money she needed to supplement her disability benefits. In our brief discussion before the focus group began, she shared detailed personal information about her relationships, medical needs, and employment history despite my efforts to change the subject to something less personally revealing. Perhaps because of her previous experience as a research participant, she seemed very comfortable with the focus group setting and consistently talked more than other participants. Although Evelyn seemed at ease during the discussion, I worried that she would make other participants uncomfortable because she made explicitly racist comments, jumped unexpectedly between disconnected topics, and was often incoherent.

Evelyn said racist and incoherent things from the moment the group's discussion began until I ended it after one hour. Immediately after another participant read the first discussion question, Evelyn shared that she was "shocked" to discover Barack Obama was black. When another participant asked for clarification ("Had you not seen him?"), she said she had seen him but thought he was white. Then she said

Then I saw his wife and I was upset that she was black. Then I found out he's not American. These people are around me, see? It's like making...Who is that man from Russia? Putin! It's like making Putin President of the United States. I don't call him by his name. The Bushs have a black relative. Maybe I do too. I don't know. I thought they might impeach him.

This comment is a good illustration of Evelyn's contributions throughout the discussion. She revealed explicitly racist beliefs ("I was upset that she was black") but was generally difficult to follow ("These are people around me, see?"). Her tone was not confrontational and she did not



seem self-conscious or otherwise concerned that the others might object to her claims. Because she shared these beliefs before any other participants had indicated their views on race and she had been certain other Americans would impeach Obama due to his race, she clearly felt her views on race mirrored those of mainstream white America. I worried that this assumption and Evelyn's racist comments would offend the three other women in the group and prepared to intervene should the discussion become hostile.

The other participants did not seem stressed by Evelyn's comments but they did seem confused. Consistently, they responded by contradicting her racist claims and asking clarifying questions. Eventually, they began changing the subject after Evelyn shared. I discuss how they negotiated these exchanges in detail in Chapter 5. Because the participants handled the interaction in a respectful calm manner, I did not feel compelled to immediately intervene on their behalf. As they began to ignore Evelyn, however, I worried that the dynamic of the conversation was shifting in ways that might be stressful for Evelyn. I also feared that Evelyn's comments could begin to stress the other participants overtime. Consequently, I ended the group discussion after one hour and debriefed Evelyn separately in a room across the hall before returning to debrief the other participants.

I felt that this separate debriefing gave Evelyn a chance to be heard without the stress of managing the group's response to her. It also gave the other three participants time to work through the experience of negotiating such blatant racist remarks before I ended the study and sent them home. Before leaving, each participant, including Evelyn, reported that they had a positive experience. The three I debriefed separately from Evelyn said that they thought she might have been planted in the group to test their reaction or that she might be mentally ill. All three women said that her comments were "confusing" but "not upsetting" and two of the three

reassured me that they hear people say racist things “all the time” and so were not bothered by Evelyn’s comments.

### **2.2.4.3 Debriefing the experience**

After each group discussed the first and second discussion question sets, I ended the self-managed group discussion and joined the discussion to begin the debriefing. Debriefing a group took between 20 and 40 minutes. All groups seemed to enjoy this opportunity to revisit topics they’d raised during their group discussion or to ask me questions about race, racism, and racial groups. During the debriefing, I asked participants to reflect on their conversation by noting moments of discomfort, surprise, frustration, agreement, or disagreement. I gave them an opportunity to share any thoughts they didn’t get a chance to share during the group discussion. I also asked participants to explain how this conversation was similar to or different from conversations about race they’ve had in other settings. Most participants reported that they did not feel they behaved differently here than they would behave in any other conversation and that they did not feel they were particularly influenced by the research setting. Because participants had their own questions and thoughts to share, this part of the focus group discussion was different from group to group.

Since the purpose of the debriefing was to ensure that participants left feeling comfortable with the research experience, I did not analyze this section of the transcripts. However, during the debriefing I specifically asked participants to share the extent to which they interacted with people of color and I did use that information in my analysis in Chapter 4. At the end of the debriefing, I passed out an anonymous survey that measured participants political affiliation, occupation, level of education, years lived in the Pittsburgh area, gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

## 2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

For this study, I inductively and deductively coded the data and took a discourse analysis approach to the examination of focus group interaction. In this section, I discuss issues of reflexivity and ethical concerns, reliability and validity, and data coding and analysis.

### 2.3.1 Reflexivity and ethical concerns

As observers of the world [researchers] also participate in it; therefore, they make their observations within a mediated framework, that is, a framework of symbols and cultural meanings given to them by those aspects of their life histories that they bring to the observational setting. Lurking behind each method of research is the personal equation supplied to the settings by the individual observer. (Vidich and Lyman 2003:58)

Certainly my own life history has informed my choice of research topics. I am a white woman who was raised in Levittown, NY, a white middle class suburb still racially isolated in the 80s and early 90s. With such an inauspicious start, I might have never become professionally interested in questions of race. At the very least, like so many whites, I may never have seen myself as personally connected to questions of racial inequality. But my views on race were not structured by the overall demographic of my town. Instead, I was greatly influenced by my family's experience providing foster care to over 50 foster children, most of whom were African American and/or Hispanic. In addition to foster care, my parents adopted my youngest brother, a dark skinned African American who joined our family when I was 13 and he was 2. In such a white town, we stood out. The impact this has had on my interest in race scholarship is hard to isolate but it is surely no accident that I've decided not only to study race but to study how white

people handle race, how they talk about race related things, and how they respond to the controversial and unexpected (by them) sides of American race relations. I do believe that my uncommon upbringing, simultaneously located both in the thick of whiteness and on its interracial margins, has made me uniquely positioned to ask the research questions outlined above and to pursue their answers.

Importantly, buried within my research questions is a belief that whites sincerely grapple with issues of racial identity, racial inequality, and racism (at least sometimes). They do not seem to just accept the racial status quo with ease and joy. This always struck me as odd – why do whites, especially of my generation, worry about race no matter how insulated they are from the pain of racial inequality? I come to this question through personal experience, later confirmed by the academic literature on race relations. For instance, many of my white high school and college classmates would come to me with questions about race – it seems I was white enough to approach about the subject but affiliated enough with blackness to make me an ‘expert’. Years later, my own family began to ask me questions, jumping on the fact that I studied race in school. In the peculiar racialized landscape of America, they had no one else to ask. They wanted information and perspective but the taboos against talking about race and an obvious lack of the tools needed to accomplish such a conversation were real barriers. For all their asking and all my answering, something continued to stop the conversation from moving forward.

My personal investment in the problem of racial inequality and in this study makes me both suspicious of my participants (who are the beneficiaries and perpetrators of racial privilege) and sympathetic to them (because I too benefit and perpetuate racial privilege). After all, despite our privilege, I know that whites face an incredibly hard task when trying to make sense of race in the U.S. Analytically, I made the best of this personal investment. I listened to the focus group

discussions with an ear tuned to moments of struggle, when participants grappled however briefly with their own and each others' views of racial inequality. Instead of trying to be an emotionless observer, I attempted to observe my own emotional response to the groups' discussions for clues to what strikes me as interruptions to the common patterns of contemporary race talk. Such deviations disgusted or excited me so I could use my own emotional responses as clues to when the group discussion followed the map of contemporary race talk most directly.

Since I did not participate in the focus group discussion, I had time to take notes on my own responses to participants' talk, a distinctive luxury of this methodology. My notes are marked with stars, explanation marks, smiley faces, and double underlining. The elements of interaction occurring around these comments were rich places to begin data analysis. Because I took notes on my responses without acting on them with probing questions (as one might do during a traditional interview), I could record my own reactions for later analysis without interrupting participants' discursive process.

My data collection was also influenced by my race in other ways. I have the face and privileges of whiteness, which gave me access to potential research participants who might not be so available to a researcher of color. This possibility was confirmed by many participants who speculated about how uncomfortable they all would have been had the group included a person of color. My whiteness ensured that the groups were same-race and enabled a glimpse into the dynamics of race related discussions in all white settings.

I struggled with the ethics of this: my whiteness allowed me to easily host conversations that reaffirmed dominant racial ideology most of the time. For instance, in one focus group, an adamant participant explained that "any thinking person" could clearly see that "the black community has more problems than anyone else has so there must be something wrong with

black people.” Because I was not a participant in the discussion, there was no way to object to this claim. This means that I gave this participant a captive audience and paid him \$25 to share beliefs I personally found objectionable. Although in each group I provided some factual corrections during the debrief, I could do little to counter the ways participants taught each other new racist beliefs or supported the racial status quo through talk.

In small measure, I attempted to address this ethical concern with my second set of discussion questions. I asked participants to talk about where they get their information on race related issues and to consider how their talk might seem racist. Gamson (1992) found that groups work to combine “media discourse” with “experiential knowledge” and “popular wisdom” when building a “collective action frame” around social issues. I’d hoped the second discussion prompt would increase the likelihood of participants holding each other accountable for how they weighed evidence from these sources and built their own frames. To some extent this worked: when discussing these questions, participants did reflect on their lack of reliable sources of knowledge and admitted to a reliance on speculation about race matters.

The second discussion question questions also had the unexpected benefit of getting participant confirmation of my impressions of their talk. That is, while listening to the groups talk about the first discussion prompts, I frequently noted that groups hesitated to accept claims without negotiation of their value and relevance. When discussing the second discussion prompt, participants mentioned that they couldn’t always know what information to trust, especially when they had to rely on media sources. By encouraging conversation about sources, I didn’t resolve my ethical dilemma but I did provide an opening in the conversation for resolution to be sought. Finally, by hosting conversations about racial inequality, I believe I interrupted whites’ tendencies to avoid acknowledging the importance of race problems in the U.S. By remaining

willing to breach the subject, I avoided “colluding to evade” a social problem that seems to thrive under invisibility (Kitzinger and Farquhar 1999:170).

Another ethical concern I carried into this research involves my decision to include only white participants. There is much to be learned from focus group discussions among individuals of different racial backgrounds and one should always think twice before excluding historically marginalized groups from research studies. As Walsh’s (2007) work establishes, people of color play a crucial role in shaping race talk and in moving whites through discussions about race. My study was not designed to measure how whites negotiate race related claims in mixed race conversational contexts and such measurement is truly needed to complete our understanding of this social phenomenon.

However, I chose not to include people of color in my study for two reasons: First, the risk of emotional and psychological harm to participants of color was too great. Participating in this study, a person of color would have been exposed to racist comments, to unfair requests to speak for all people of color, and to ostracism. These conversations ran the risk of burdening participants of color with the task of educating whites, often through the use of their own personal stories of struggle and pain. Because people of color are already burdened with the weight of racism and enter these conversations with less political power, they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in this way. Second, “whites only” discussions about race represent a substantial part of race talk in the U.S. because, to a large extent, whites remain socially segregated from people of color. Even when whites have meaningful social contact with people of color, they are not likely to engage in conversations about race in mixed race groups. I could not comfortably solve the problem of risk of harm to people of color, I decided to focus this study on the process engaged in by whites when discussing race with whites.

### 2.3.2 Validity

Accounting for validity is an essential aspect of any research study. To start, I chose focus groups for this study to ensure a descriptive validity not possible with traditional ethnographic research. That is, using focus groups, I ensured a very accurate recording of what I observe and I prevented the distortions that might happen if I relied solely on my notes and memory (Maxwell 2002). I maintained this descriptive validity during analysis by directly coding audio files instead of textual transcriptions. This process worked much like coding from transcripts: I used ATLAS.ti software to link segments of audio tape to codes and then listened to the coded segments together during analysis. Then I transcribed these segments for inclusion here. My decision to code directly from the audio files is important because the type of transcription needed for detailed conversational analysis “takes four times as long as simple transcription in readable prose,” runs the risk of making “participants seem inarticulate,” and may “overemphasize the effect interjections have on the participants” (Myers and Macnaghten 1999:184). By avoiding transcription before analysis, I ensured more descriptive validity than is possible using traditional transcription processes. After an initial coding, I then transcribed those pieces of transcript to use in the write up of my findings.

This study posed fewer challenges of interpretive validity (accurately capturing participants’ perspectives) because I was less concerned about the meanings participants give to their interactions and more concerned with the consequences of a given discursive move within a conversation. To be sure my understanding of what happens in these focus groups constitutes a valid explanation of the social phenomena under study (Maxwell 2002), I focused on the validity of the concepts I use to label occurrences (construct validity) and the validity of the links between concepts that I suggest (internal validity).



Questions of external validity or generalizability are difficult to answer in discursive analytical studies. Discursive analysis does not take for granted an external reality or truth. Instead, a discursive analytical approach argues that reality is constructed through discursive acts, acts which can be and are interpreted differently in different situations. Consequently, writing my research findings is itself a discursive act that gets meaning from the process through which it is constructed (Gee 1999; Wood and Kroger 2000). Linda Wood and Rolf Kroger's (2000) emphasize the importance of checking researcher interpretations of the data against participants' own interpretations. To do this, I traced the impact of utterances on the conversation and looked at the ways participants responded to each other. I also ensured my claims were valid by accounting for exceptions: this improved the coherence of my findings.

Finally, I improved my theoretical validity by analyzing my data deductively, using the concepts developed and empirically tested by other researchers and informed by my own theoretical approach to this study. Then, as I coded/analyzed, I looked for ways that my data did not seem to fit preexisting conceptual frameworks and/or my preconceived ideas about possible ways race talk works. In this way, I analyzed my data inductively, building new conceptual frameworks that best accounted for the interaction I observed.

Despite my overall confidence in my ability to achieve validity in this study, I continue to grapple with the fact that whites avoid conversations about race in everyday talk. One strategy of avoidance is to never enter race related conversations at all. Because of this avoidance, eliciting any race talk in any setting creates race talk that might not otherwise occur. Research on "sensitive topics" often has this effect. Jenny Kitzinger and Clare Farquhar (1999:97) note that

Focus group participants themselves sometimes identify the focus group as a special occasion and take the opportunity to discuss issues that are unconsciously censored or simply awkward to raise in more routine settings. In this sense, the

research session serves as liminal time and space where the new and unexpected may occur and where novel communication can be achieved.

In each of my groups at least one participant reported that he/she had thought a lot about the issues discussed by the group but spent very little time actually discussing the issues with others. Therefore, my focus groups generated much more direct talk about race than I'd find in many other settings. At first, this seemed like a methodological problem – how can I validly analyze how whites talk about race if asking them to talk about race increases the presence and, as a result, the nature of that talk? But this problem turned out to be an analytical opportunity. As noted above, by observing whites as they negotiate potentially sensitive conversations about race, I measured which interactions are possible during such negotiations. Establishing the availability of interactional patterns gives us insight into contemporary racial ideology. By asking whites to discuss race more than they usually would but then allowing them to discuss the topic however they see fit, I revealed which aspects of race talk are most negotiated or most taken for granted. This fine-tunes our understanding of the boundaries of race talk and identifies places where weak boundaries make race talk vulnerable to change (see Chapter 5). In this way, my findings hint at what might happen if whites are asked to discuss race more directly more often. This has significant implications for antiracist policy and education efforts.

The focus group setting (imperfectly) both replicated everyday interaction and provided an opportunity for new interaction around issues of race. By embracing this contradiction, I used this methodology to observe a range of possible ways whites negotiate race talk.

### 2.3.3 Reliability, coding, and analysis

In this study, I used discourse analysis techniques because I was interested in “how talk works, as an arena of activity” (Edwards 2003:33). Discourse analysis considers participants’ intentions (“minds”) and dominant ideology (“worlds”) as their “basis for talking” not as the true reality lurking underneath talk (Edwards 2003:33). This is in line with my research questions, which focus on interaction not intention. Research has shown that discourse analysis can reveal how racial ideology is constructed through talk. Here, Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter’s (1992) study of white New Zealanders treatment of the Maori minority has proven especially edifying.

Wetherell and Potter (1992:200) studied “the ways particular constructions of social groups, processes of conflict and influence, histories, and so on were drawn on as a practical resource for blaming minority groups for their own disadvantaged social position.” Their examination of the ways racial ideology and social structures are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through interaction provided a methodological guide for this study. My analytic approach was also informed by a provocative reconsideration of Wetherell and Potter’s data as described in the book *Analyzing Race Talk: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Interview* (Van Den Berg, Wetherell, and Houtkoop-Steenstra 2003a). Harry Van den Berg and colleagues asked researchers with little to no expertise in race studies to analyze some of the Wetherell and Potter’s interview transcripts to reveal ways knowledge and interaction are constructed in the interview. For example, Tom Koole’s (2003) contribution in this volume explored the ways the interviewer’s minimal responses such as “yeah” or “mm hmm” signaled levels of affiliation with or detachment from the participant and unwittingly influenced the participants’ talk. Such a fine-grained analysis revealed important features of interaction that moved a conversation toward a

certain construction of race, racial inequality, and racism. In this section, I briefly define how I conducted such a fine-grained discourse analysis of my data.

Discourse analysis operates on different premises than most other qualitative methods. Discourse analysis considers talk to be a social practice not a mere indicator of “internal or external events or entities,” like attitudes or identities (Wood and Kroger 2000:4). Therefore, discursive analysis “rejects the aim of explaining action by reference to underlying cognitive states” (Potter 1997:207). That is, talk doesn’t reveal things about a preexisting and external reality. Rather it constructs reality. Talk accomplishes something for the speaker, the hearer, and for the communities in which actors are embedded. The discursive analysis of talk reveals how social phenomena are constructed through interaction and is, therefore, the best approach for this study.

Because my sample size was relatively large for discourse analysis, I started with a deductive approach to reading my data. In order to focus my analysis on the most suitable segments of talk, I used sensitizing concepts from the race talk literature (mostly utterances) as an initial set of codes. For specific list of these concepts, see Appendix B. I focused my final analysis on two types of utterances that dominated group discussions; references to white racists and references to people of color. I call these utterances Initiating Actions because they were starting points for group negotiations.

When counting instances of a code, reliability is always a concern. Using the topic of the utterance (i.e. whether it referred to a white racist or a person of color) instead of more subjective qualities like the meaning of the utterance, the speaker’s intention, or the role of the utterance in the conversation helped facilitate reliability. In the few instances when the topic of an utterance was implied but not made explicit by the speaker, I provided a detailed description of why I

included the utterance (see Chapter 4 and 5.) This process ensured my coding and analysis process was reliable and provides a framework that could be replicated in future studies.

Once I identified the location of important segments of talk (Initiating Actions), I listened to these segments over and over again. At this phase of analysis, I relied heavily on inductive analysis to make sense of what participants were doing. For instance, during the deductive phase of my analysis, I knew to look out for mention of racist relatives because this discursive move has been recorded in the race talk literature. During the inductive phase, I was surprised to see how often participants mentioned racist white people and how much time they devoted to discussing the origins of racist beliefs and actions. My initial code (“blaming others for one’s own racially illiberal beliefs”) matched the literature on colorblind race talk but did not seem to fully capture what participants were doing with this Initiating Action. I created a new more nuanced code (“determining the origins of racially illiberal beliefs”) that better captured the role that the Initiating Action seemed to play in group discussions. To analyze this new code, I looked at what happened before, during, and after the Initiating Action. This process revealed that the Initiating Actions I’d identified were routinely followed by a Negotiation. The Negotiation phase was patterned and had similar Outcomes (i.e. versions of racial ideology) for every group. This demonstrates the benefits of using “recursive or iterative” discourse analysis techniques (Wood and Kroger 2000:96).

My analysis process was perfectly suited for focus group data. In a traditional interview, the mention of a racist relative must be analyzed in terms of what it does for the speaker first and for dominant racial ideology second. In the focus group, that same mention is the starting point of a group negotiation that cannot be accessed in the interview setting. Moving between deductive and inductive coding, I isolated patterns of interaction that occurred throughout the

groups' discussions revealed how ideology is created, reinforced, or challenged. I demonstrate how groups achieve outcomes through certain types of negotiation regardless of the personal belief systems or attitudes of individual participants.

Although participants occasionally discussed other things, the discussion prompts ensured most of their talk was directly race-related. Because I am interested in racial ideology, I focused my analysis on this race-related talk. Analyzing focus group discussions that did not include directly race-related claims might reveal ways other forms of talk support racial ideology and obscure the analysis of white privilege but it would be difficult to achieve reliability and validity in an analysis of something never explicitly mentioned. Since racial difference and racial inequality are inherently linked to questions of privilege and structural inequality in the U.S., analyzing the negotiation of race-related claims enabled me to pinpoint moments when structural inequality and white privilege were explicitly included in, hinted at during, or absent from discussion.

### **3.0 RACISTS WITHOUT RACIAL PRIVILEGE**

White participants frequently talked about other white people, groups of whites, or institutions that seemed racist. In one common Initiating Action, participants told stories about times when these other whites said or did potentially racist things such as declare they would never vote for a black man or complain that racial integration would ruin their all-white neighborhood. In under 16 hours of talk, my 34 research participants made explicit references to 87 different potentially racist people, groups, and institutions including close friends and family, celebrities and historical figures, the media, neighborhoods and regions, and even themselves. That participants mentioned so many types of racists with such frequency suggests that pointing out and accounting for racist actions and beliefs is an important part of race talk.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how participants brought up conversations about potentially racist whites during their focus group discussions (the Initiating Action). Then I examine how they negotiated the relevance and implications of these references (the Negotiation). I establish that participants build theories of intersectionality (McCall 2005) by analyzing a racist white person, group, or institution to determine what nonracial demographic characteristics, such as age or educational status, might explain the origin of the racist belief or action. When this negotiation failed to achieve a consensus, participants applied broad and vague axioms (rules of thumb about how the world works such as “people are always uncomfortable with difference” or “you can’t change people”) to draw conclusions about the implications of the belief or action.

After explaining the groups' negotiation processes, I discuss the implications of these interactions (the Outcomes). Specifically, I establish that participants 1) discouraged consideration of privilege as a factor causing racist beliefs/comments; 2) established alternative origins for racist beliefs and actions; 3) minimized claims that racist beliefs and actions might have influence; and 4) determined the boundaries of what can be considered relevant and important when analyzing racial inequality. This process detracts attention away from white privilege and racial hierarchy by explaining racist beliefs and actions as the result of less privileged and nonracial factors.

### **3.1 INITIATING ACTION: IDENTIFYING WHITE RACISTS**

All white focus groups talked about past encounters with or observations of other whites who might be racist. I focus on this element of talk as an important Initiating Action because 1) it occurred across all white focus groups, 2) many different types of white people and groups were considered racist, 3) so many white racists were identified, and 4) a large amount of group discussion was devoted to discussing the whites they identified.

I coded for manifest and latent references when analyzing this Initiating Action. For instance, participants frequently used explicit labels ("My father was a racist" or "I don't know if he was racist but he said...") or mentioned a clearly racist act ("My grandmother says the N word all the time"). I counted the first reference to an explicitly labeled person or group as one instance of this Initiating Action.

Other times, participants did not use explicit labels and mentioned more ambiguous racist actions and beliefs. In determining whether these comments counted as an instance of



“identifying white racists,” I analyzed the location of their comment in relation to other claims about racism (was the participant responding to a statement about the extent to which race matters to whites?), what the participant said about their own discomfort with the situation (“I was mortified!”), and participants’ reports about the discomfort they assumed a person of color must have felt (“There was a black man right there when he said it!”). For instance, one participant told the group about a time when her father was about to say something about President Obama but she told him not to because he’d have to leave her house. Although her father never actually said the racist thing and she never spelled out what she feared he was about to say, she indirectly indicated her concern that his beliefs were racist by describing her discomfort with their interaction. Because this story was told in response to the question “To what extent do you think race mattered in the Presidential election?” I confidently coded this as an instance of Identifying White Racists.

In all, I observed 87 instances of this Initiating Action, including nine stories about times when participants personally said or believed racist things. Participants mentioned eight racist parents, three racist grandparents, one racist son, and eight other racist family members such as cousins, aunts, and uncles. They also shared three stories about times they’d worried that the comments of their small children made them seem racist. For instance, one participant mentioned a time his young son pointed to man in a waiting room and said “He’s really black, Dad.” Participants also mentioned four racist friends, eight racist neighbors, and four interactions with racists at work. In addition to these personal contacts, participants mentioned 15 specific racist individuals they’d heard about such as the comedian Michael Richardson, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the conservative television host Bill O’Reilly, and “the guy who founded the National Association for the Advancement of White People” (presumably former

Klu Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke). With less specificity, groups made 18 unique references to the racist views of white subpopulations like “southerners,” people living in western “Pennsylv-Tucky,” and “kids in suburbs out by the airport.” Also, they mentioned six institutions as being racist, including two references to “the media,” two references to “Fox News,” one reference to “movies,” and one reference to American leadership “throughout all history.” These counts demonstrate that groups frequently identified white racists during their discussions of race.

In coding for this Initiating Action, I did not include people, groups, or institutions that must exist but went unmentioned. For instance, one participant explained that he went to college in the South and “they wouldn’t rent to black people or let them around the apartments.” This implies the existence of one or more individual racist white landlords with whom the participant surely interacted. However, the participant did not mention any individuals or landlords in general and instead focused his comments on “people in the South” so I counted this as one reference to Southerners as a white racist group. By excluding secondary unstated references, I risked understating the frequency of this Initiating Action but ensured I didn’t overstate participants’ attentiveness to the existence of white racists.

All white focus groups identified white racists regardless of how well group members knew each other, the political leanings of the group, the age of participants, or the group’s gender composition. There is some variation in total number of references seen across groups, which can be partially explained by a closer look at the groups’ composition and dynamics.

**Table 4: Number of stories about racism by groups**

	Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four
# of stories told	10	3	11	3
Political affiliation of group members	4 Liberal	3 Conservative 1 Moderate	4 Liberal 1 Unknown	2 Liberal 1 Unknown 1 Conservative
Preexisting relationships?	Friends	Friends	Friends	Strangers
Gender	Women	Men	Mixed	Women
Age	<60	Mixed	<60	<60

	Group Five	Group Six	Group Seven	Group Eight
# of stories told	18	6	25	10
Political affiliation of group members	2 Liberal 1 Moderate 1 Socialist	2 Conservative 1 Moderate 1 Unknown	4 Liberal 1 Conservative	1 Moderate 3 Conservative
Preexisting relationships?	Strangers	Strangers	Some Friends Some Strangers	Friends
Gender	Men	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
Age	<60	<60	>60	>60

Group dynamics seemed to have influenced the overall number of references but not the type of references. The three groups that told the highest number of stories contained the highest numbers of self-identified liberals but, once other variation is considered, political affiliation seems less important. For instance, in one group, a self-identified Socialist made one third of the group's references to racists in one quick rundown of world history that included mention of Barack Obama's "political advisors," De Beers diamond company founder Cecil Rhodes, the "founders of Yale," "the Dutch," Fox News, and the "CIA agents at Jonestown." After another group member asked for more detail about Obama's advisor and questioned whether the CIA was involved in Jonestown, there was no further discussion of any of these people or groups. Without these references, the group's tendency to identify white racists is similar to the other groups.

Groups with better rapport made more references. For instance, one group made five unique references to Fox News or its employees and 2 references to groups of Republicans along with 14 more personal stories about family and friends. Even collapsing the Fox News related references, this group still had a higher frequency of this Initiating Action. This may partly reflect the dynamic of this group, which talked intimately and enthusiastically from the start of the session and stayed mostly on topic for over two hours. In contrast, the group with the fewest references to white racists had the most difficulty sustaining conversation for two hours, often switched to discussing gender and the educational system, and seemed to develop the least rapport among participants. Despite having fewer instances of this Initiating Action, however, this group told stories that were very similar to those told in other groups. They made detailed mention of one racist grandmother, one racist coworker, two racist neighborhoods, and more vague references to the media and "some people who are just like that."

The two groups that told the fewest stories about racists were unique because these groups were dominated by a participant who made what group members came to identify as racist comments during the focus group discussion. For instance, one participant made many comments to support her claim that “Now that the blacks have taken over the White House, it will take a revolution to regain white supremacy.” In another group, a participant repeatedly stated that “One black person is alright but when you get two or three of them together, then you have to watch out” because “they turn into a different person. A street person” who has “no respect for human life.” In both groups, such racist claims were directly confronted by at least one other group member and labeled as at least “sort of leaning toward a racist way of saying something.” Although these groups did not mention as many white racists over all, they went through a similar Negotiation process as other groups when white racists were mentioned.

Taken together, white participants’ many references to potentially racist white individuals and groups suggest that acknowledging personal encounters with racism plays an important part in groups’ negotiations of conversations about race. In this chapter, I examine how groups work to analyze and explain these instances of racism and how this negotiation process impacts their construction of shared depictions of racial inequality.

### **3.2 NEGOTIATION**

Whenever a participant mentioned a racist person, group, or incident, other group members had to determine the importance of this information and decide whether and how to respond. Despite having different group dynamics, uneven levels of sensitivity to racial issues, and (somewhat) varied exposure to racists, all groups employed similar strategies to negotiate this aspect of race

talk. The two most prevalent strategies for explaining the origins of racist beliefs and actions were 1) linking the origins of racist remarks and beliefs to nonracial underprivileged characteristics and 2) employing vague axioms about how the world works. Both the nonracial characteristics and the axioms focused on the ways whites lacked privilege and/or fell victim to limiting life circumstances.

### **3.2.1 Building theories of intersectionality**

After hearing about a white racist individual or group, participants frequently elicited and provided information about racists' nonracial characteristics. All groups assumed that older people were more racist, as were Southerners, those from rural Pennsylvania, and those with less education. Although age, education, and region were the most commonly cited explanations negotiated by groups, participants also discussed other characteristics when trying to sort out why different whites acted in different ways. Because groups routinely used nonracial demographic information to explain the origins of racist beliefs and actions, I expected groups to spend little time discussing these characteristics. On the contrary, groups repeatedly debated the relevance of different aspects of a racist white's demographic profile before coming to any conclusions about which characteristics could best explain his/her racist tendencies.

Groups negotiated the relevance of each characteristic by weighing multiple pieces of evidence, testing alternative theories, and amending original claims before making conclusions about the cause of a given racist belief or action. Groups engaged in this negotiation process when dealing with ambiguous or obvious racial incidences. For instance, in one group, a participant told a story about the time her toddler saw a black cashier at Walmart and said "Look, Mom! It's Bill Cosby!" After some laughter, the mother explained that she was afraid they

seemed racist. She explained that they weren't racist but they had been living in an all white rural area where the child "just didn't know any black people." Another participant reassured the mom that the child was "only two!" The group agreed that the child hadn't had an opportunity to learn more appropriate ways to act in a mixed race setting. After this brief discussion, the group seemed satisfied that a combination of region, life experience, and age was the source of the child's racial outburst.

Another group tried to explain an explicitly racist woman who had dominated their group discussions. This woman left the group early, leaving the other participants time to process their experience. As they attempted to explain why she had said so many explicitly racist things, each participant contributed a possible explanation. The group debated whether the woman lacked formal education, had life experience limited to one poor neighborhood, was overexposed to "bad news sources," suffered from mental illness, was blind (because she wore big sunglasses throughout the conversation), or was a plant that I had placed in the group to test their ability to handle an awkward situation. Whether discussing an extremely racist adult or an innocently insensitive child, every focus group in this study tried to determine the source of racist actions and beliefs by negotiating the meanings of nonracial social characteristics of whites.

Importantly, the characteristics considered by groups were usually characteristics associated with a lack of access to opportunities and resources. In the examples above, participants talked about a lack of education, limited life experiences, and manipulation by media sources as reasons why the child and the racist participant said racially insensitive things. Perhaps because the racist participant's comments were so egregious (see Chapter 5), her group was willing to believe that she was not even a real person! By focusing on ways white racists

lack advantages, participants implied they were insignificant. This helped them avoid consideration of white racial privilege as a relevant and problematic social structure.

In their negotiations, participants recognized that whiteness does not exist in isolation from other key aspects of social organization. Participants recognized that not all whites have equal access to material and nonmaterial resources. Like budding sociologists, participants brought some awareness of intersectionality and reconciled their understanding of race with their understanding of other social locations and axes of oppression. Here I define intersectionality as “an analytic approach that simultaneously considers the effects of multiple categories of social group membership” (Cole 2008). Although my participants did not use the term intersectionality to describe their approach to group discussions, they did consistently include a negotiation of other forms of structural inequality or group difference as they built collective depictions of racial groups. Overall participants seemed uncomfortable drawing conclusions about groups without buffering them with an acknowledgment of individual diversity within groups. Taking seriously the fact that we all have multiple social locations, participants consistently emphasized that not all members of a racial group are the same. The frequency with which participants employed the concept of intersectionality suggests that they do not think race, gender, or class operate independently from education, social experience, age, or any number of other individual traits.

Participants’ use of intersectionality was generally additive (Shields 2008). They discussed how each lower status social location might add to whites’ inability to be racially sensitive. Their use of intersectionality also tended to be anticategorical (McCall 2005). That is, they emphasized how the existence of so many social locations makes racial categories meaningless. Their additive and anticategorical approach had the positive effect of encouraging



empathy and debunking racial determinism but participants' approach to intersectionality also had negative effects. Generally, participants used intersectionality as a discursive tool to reinforce contemporary racial ideology. Intersectionality was a concept that detracted attention from the details of racial oppression and masked how racial oppression operates differently than other forms of oppression.

Usually, the groups' negotiations included a comparison of multiple racist individuals and groups. When comparing multiple racist incidences, participants had to handle contradictory evidence, defending or adapting their theories of intersectionality to account for a new white racist. The negotiation process enabled participants to handle contradictions and to create a shared depiction of racist whites, the way race works in relationship to other social forces, and the origins and implications of racist actions and beliefs.

### **3.2.1.1 Handling contradictory evidence**

Participants often focused on just one characteristic when first trying to explain why an individual white person said or believed a racist thing. For instance, one participant, Kim, shared that her grandfather was "your classic stuck-in-his-ways asshole racist" who can be dismissed due to his age. When, in the past, Kim considered "standing up to him and going toe to toe and saying 'You know, you're so freaking retarded!'" she decided it wasn't worth the trouble. "I realized, you know, just forget it. He's a crotchety old man who's going to die of the gout or something." Another participant, Ellen, agreed that "there is a big difference between our parents and our grandparents. Our parents don't think that way at all. They're actually pretty open-minded when compared to how their parents raised them." By focusing on the age of their grandparents, this group identified age as the first part of a theory of intersectionality.

Frequently, the relevance of any one characteristic was called into question when another participant told a story about a white racist with a contradictory demographic profile. For instance, the group that determined their grandparents' racism was associated with older age had to adjust their theory when they started discussing the racist remarks made by uncles and brothers. One participant, Hattie, shared that she was the most liberal member of her family.

God love them but my uncles say racist things. My uncle was sending around this email and at the bottom, in his signature underneath his name, he had 'Obama' and it was an acronym and it said "One Big Ass Mistake American" and I was like 'Oh My God.' That's what my uncles are like. So against anything different.

Hattie presented her uncle as an example of how whites can be racist ("my uncles say racist things"). Because her uncles were from a younger generation than their grandparents, age lost some of its initial explanatory power. The group handled the contradiction by discussing their family members' political leanings and media exposure. Kim asked "But do they watch Fox News?" and another participant, Dan, argued that "The Republicans send that message over and over and people can't know what is real and what is not real. Fox is brainwashing everyone." After comparing two groups of racists (grandparents and uncles), the group adjusted their age-based theory to include media exposure as another potentially relevant social characteristic.

Sometimes a racist is compared to a nonracist with a similar demographic profile in order to challenge a theory of intersectionality. In one group, a participant attempted to explain why his brother-in-law's family was racist. "My sister married an Italian and what I found with his family, I mean, it wasn't just my imagination, they were very racist against two groups: blacks and gays. And I don't know if that is an Italian thing or what." Another group member quickly responded "No. No it isn't. I don't think it is." She went on to explain that her mother grew up with a gay man who became an important part of the family. "He was a very dear friend. We called him our uncle and he was gay and I don't remember my [Italian] dad every being negative

toward him unless out of jealousy.” She concluded that such prejudice may be a “western PA [Pennsylvania] thing.” By expanding their discussion to include a prejudiced and nonprejudiced Italian, the group challenged the ethnicity-based explanation for racism.

Often groups grappled repeatedly with multiple demographic characteristics before coming to any satisfactory theory of intersectionality. Even simple explanations for racism, like ones linking racism and the pre-Civil Rights era generation, were not easily accepted by groups when other possible explanations were taken into consideration. For instance, one participant, Nathan, pointed out that his focus group was very willing to let go of race (by seeing Obama as “just a man not a black man,” for instance). He explained that, according to the media, people of their generation were supposed to be particularly racist (all participants were in their 60s). Nathan argued that racism was actually more prevalent in the older generation. To support his claim about age, he said “I was raised where you heard the N word all the time in my house.” This Initiating Action, coming after his claim about generational tendencies toward racism, started a flurry of conversation about older white racists as other participants nodded enthusiastically in agreement and said “Oh yes!,” “In my house too!,” and “Oh yeah! I can still hear my dad say ‘The only good N is a dead N!’” They laughed at the absurdity of such a thing and voiced overlapping exclamations of shared experience (“Yeah right! So you know!” and “That’s how it was!”). With the addition of another Initiation Action (the racist father) and many enthusiastic exclamations, the group immediately supported the idea that being from an older generation increased one’s likelihood of being racist

Yet this quick supportive response was followed by a more complicated process of negotiation as two participants, Ian and Annie, offered up experiences that differed from those of the other group members. Ian claimed he “never heard the [N-word] until I went to school and

lived in the south and then I was told, you know, that they only rent to white people and they don't want to see any around the apartment." Annie suggested that she also never heard racist comments from her parents. Now the group had to explain the parents who were not racist and the claim that open racism was "how it was" in the south. Left with multiple competing explanations for racist actions and beliefs, the group proceeded to develop new theories of intersectionality that prioritized different nonracial characteristics.

As these examples show, building theories of intersectionality using anecdotal evidence was difficult. Characteristics that seemed to explain a single white racist fell short of describing another. Groups often all agreed on the importance of one characteristic only to reconsider their conclusions when a new Initiating Action presented contradictory evidence. In one group's first Initiating Action, a participant, Ellen, explained that many racist whites live in her hometown.

I'm from Johnstown and, I don't know how much you follow politics but, the Congressmen from that district made the comment about people from his district being racist and people flipped out and said 'No, we're not. That's a horrible thing to say. It just shows you're out of touch!' But I actually think he's right. I'm from there and there is racism there.

Ellen's claim that there is racism in her rural hometown ("I'm from there and there is racism there") was met with approval from the group. One participant, Anthony, said "Oh yeah, it's there" and another nodded in agreement. But twenty minutes later, another participant, Dawn, argued that racism is really just a problem of older generations. "I feel like there is not much racism in my high school, my group of friends, my classes. I haven't come on many people who are racist. I think it's our parents' generation and generations before." Ellen agreed that "You don't see prejudice today." Her claim was politely but quickly challenged by Anthony who reminded her that "We're in an urban community but, like you said, out in Johnstown or out in Kentucky or Tennessee or Appalachia, well, I don't know." Ellen responded

Yeah but even in Johnstown it's subtle. It's still offensive but it's subtle. It's not like you hear 'He's black so forget him.' It's generally not that bad. You hear the N word, I hear the N word at family gatherings and stuff like that, but it's not that blatant. I mean it is sometimes but not always. It's more insidious. It's harder to stamp out. Racism isn't so blatant anymore.

This comment ("Racism isn't so blatant anymore") turned the group's attention to a discussion of whether people feel more racism than they are willing to express. Dawn argued that "People in our generation aren't racist. Or at least they keep it to themselves....as long as you don't bring it into your life and do actions about it, then whatever." This weak endorsement of an age-based theory ("people in our generation aren't racist") lost its explanatory power when Dawn told a story about hearing "a couple of kids I used to work with say black people can't swim. And there was a black lifeguard! It made her feel alienated. She didn't work there the following year." With this new Initiating Action, the group became even less able to settle on whether racism was a thing of the past or a product of rural living. Moving away from anecdotal evidence, Ellen concluded that "if you're an educated voter, you vote on the important issues and racism doesn't matter at all." Perhaps because a lack of education could explain both the ignorance of the rural areas and the ignorance of youth, the group uneasily settled on education/ignorance as the most satisfactory explanation for racism.

By comparing multiple racist individuals and groups and focusing on multiple demographic characteristics, participants could handle contradictory examples of white racism. The negotiation process enabled participants to create a shared depiction of the way race works in relationship to other social forces to create racist actions and beliefs.

### **3.2.1.2 Holding on to favored theories**

Instead of always creating new theories based on the details of an Initiating Action, participants sometimes stuck to favored theories about what makes some white people racist. These favored theories fit the story of at least one white person under consideration but could not explain the racism of others. Although participants negotiated favored theories using similar strategies to the ones used to negotiate other theories of intersectionality, their favored theories were unique in that they stayed viable even when challenged by contradictory evidence. That is, groups often returned again and again to one way of understanding nonracial causes of racist actions and beliefs even when that understanding did not fit every case of racism under investigation. In these cases, the Negotiation process gave them a way to strengthen their favored theories by including mitigating factors that account for variation.

Like other theories of intersectionality, favored theories were introduced to explain personal stories about white racists. For instance, one participant, Beth, told a story about trying to find out what her “hard-nosed Republican” father thought about the two Presidential candidates. Beth’s father said “something like...it was very ambiguous but the point was just like ‘Well, you know, ah, I don’t want to be offensive but.’ And like I’m sitting there looking at him, like, you know, my eyes are bugging out.” She explained that her father never actually said the offensive thing because she told him “Dad, if you say it you’re going to have to leave.” Beth then told the group that her father’s family “is quite racist and my mom’s family is from the South. They say the N word like all the time.” Another participant, Lynne, clarified that “He was claiming but not saying that he wouldn’t vote for Obama because he was black? Interesting.” Beth tried to explain why her father might have said that:

My dad is a decent guy. I mean, he's a smart decent guy. But his family, like his brothers, like his older brothers and stuff are very... I don't know if they're specifically racist but they have their ideas that they've kinda just let go. It's how they are for years and years and years and they've never been challenged.

Beth explained that her father was a “smart decent guy” who had similar ideas as his older brothers and that these ideas have “never been challenged.” Her overall description of her father included lots of potentially relevant nonracial information, such as his political affiliation, level of decency, overall intelligence, and relationship to Southerners, to explain the origin of his racist beliefs.

Other group members had to assess the suggestion that ignorance or indecency couldn't explain Beth's father's remarks but that being Southern was linked to racist tendencies. In the subsequent Negotiation, Lynne suggested that “This is how it goes now. I don't think there are many people outside of certain circles who are openly racist anymore.” Beth said “Probably not” even though she had just mentioned that her mother's side of the family says “the N word all the time.” In response, Lynne shared that her father had been influenced by racist relatives too:

It's so funny that you're telling this story about your dad because it reminds me of my dad so much because he also grew up in a very racist family and I think he struggled with that because...he's not the kind of person who would talk about struggling with anything.

Lynne and Beth concluded that their dads were similarly conflicted about race and similarly unable to voice their internal struggles. This led another participant, Claire, to suggest that age might explain the fathers' racist tendencies. As seen in other Negotiations, the group then tested their age-based theory of intersectionality against the information presented in the Initiating Actions.

The group had to overcome a barrier to building an age-based theory of intersectionality when they discovered that there was a 15 year age difference between the two fathers and one

was only five years older than a participant in the group. Consequently, age alone could not account for the discrepancy between the group's views and the views of their fathers. Yet despite these problems, the group did not give up the idea that age could explain racist actions. Lynne concluded "I was going to say that it's a generational thing but it is still to some extent a generational thing depending on what part of the country you're from. You know?" The participants expanded their theory of intersectionality to emphasize the relevance of region. When later the group added conservative political leanings to their age-based theory of intersectionality, they had enough caveats to enable age to remain a viable explanatory factor despite evidence that it didn't have consistent explanatory power. In their final newly reconfigured theory of intersectionality older age mitigated by a poor rural Southern or Appalachian upbringing and conservatism explained racist tendencies.

New Initiating Actions sometimes debunked working theories of intersectionality by showing that one nonracial characteristic could not usefully explain multiple instances of racism. Yet Initiating Actions that increased the number of nonracial characteristics under consideration could also *strengthen* the place of any one characteristic as a possible explanatory factor by enabling it to remain in the group's analysis despite the fact that it didn't really account for the situations mentioned. By negotiating the meaning of multiple stories of racism and combining multiple nonracial characteristics into one multifaceted theory of intersectionality, participants held on to favored theories as viable explanations for racism.



### 3.2.2 Universal truths and changing the subject

Often when faced with competing theories of intersectionality and little evidence to support any one understanding of the cause of racism in whites, groups would interrupt their own deliberation and change subjects. For instance, one group worked to build an age and political affiliation based theory of intersectionality but could never quite account for all of the white racists they had mentioned. When their theory of intersectionality had been reconfigured to assert that whites in integrated neighborhoods were not racist, a group member pointed out that one of their Initiating Actions referenced a teenager who lived in an integrated area. At this, another participant declared “I guess it’s a mystery! What’s the next question?” Similarly, another group tried to explain racism as stemming from a lack of education even though one participant mentioned she knew college educated whites who were much more racist than she was (“I only went to high school but I’m not as racist as them”). Another participant said “but maybe you know more things about the world anyway, like, you know? Maybe you are more educated really. I mean, I lost my train of thought. I guess it just depends.” A third participant jumped in to ask “What’s our next question?” and the interaction ended. The discussion question sheet proved to be a handy escape route when a given theory of intersectionality didn’t work out.

Declaring universal truths was another strategy groups used when negotiating problematic theories of intersectionality. These universal truths acted as “rules of thumb” that “transcend the specific issue” and bring participants together under some “popular belief” they all share (Gamson 1992:123). For instance, groups sometimes ended discussions about white racists with statements like “People can’t change” or “Society is always improving.” These claims existed outside any specific case of white racist action or belief and seemed to serve the same purpose as changing the subject.

After a universal truth was proclaimed, groups usually stopped talking about their Initiating Actions and theories of intersectionality and moved on to another topic. For instance, one group was discussing whether racist actions and beliefs were confined to the South when a participant mentioned her racist relatives who lived in western Pennsylvania. This led to many more Initiating Actions including reference to a racist grandfather, a racist neighborhood, and the audience, producers, and newscasters of Fox News. With so many white racists under consideration, the group struggled to come to any useful conclusion about the role of region in increasing racist tendencies. Finally, one participant declared that “There are idiots everywhere!” and another agreed that “Some people just don’t think for themselves.” These axioms removed the group’s need to account for any individual person/idiot who said or believed racist things and was followed by a brief pause and a complete change of topic.

Although groups did occasionally abandon lines of reasoning that could not be satisfactorily resolved, they would often return to previously abandoned theories of intersectionality and try again. This demonstrated a notable commitment to the development of nonracial explanations for racist actions and beliefs even when an axiom or change of subject had given them an easy way out of the negotiation. For instance, one group had trouble building a theory of intersectionality around education because they considered themselves to be nonracist but each had very different levels of education. They had similar trouble when negotiating an age-based theory of intersectionality. Finally one participant said “You can be book smart but not street smart,” an axiom that effectively shut down deliberation of the subject. Yet this axiom proved too vague to end their negotiations. The group returned to their discussion of education later at which point they redefined their terms so that ‘education’ explicitly included ‘travel

experience.’ This transition happened when there was a new Initiating Action, the introduction of a white racist grandmother who had no travel experience.

By returning to the discussion of education and examining new cases of white racism, the group was able to flesh out the implication of their declaration that “you can be book smart but not street smart.” Responding to a question about whether racism is passed down through families, one participant, Sully, said “I think a lot of it is. Because for me personally, my grandmother was *very racist*.” Sully whispered the words “very racist” and then clarified that he didn’t realize she was racist until he was much older because “we didn’t get to see her that much because she lived in Ohio.” He explained that his family “moved all over” but the grandmother’s racism was clear when they did see her.

When we did see her, there would be that N word coming out of her mouth. ‘They moved in over here and now I can’t live there...’ I realized when I was older, and, you know. That’s my mother’s side and my parents, my father especially, always made sure not to judge anyone by the color of their skin. You get to know someone before you judge them.

Sully clearly indicated his grandmother was racist and attempted to distance himself from her beliefs by aligning himself with his father who “made sure not to judge anyone by the color of their skin.” Sully went on to explain that his father was in the Air Force and exposed the family to travel and different types of people. This presentation of a racist grandmother, as someone who lives in a mixed race neighborhood in Ohio, supported one of the group’s theories of intersectionality (that region may explain racist tendencies) but contradicted another (that racially isolated neighborhoods are to blame). Only by reconsidering education, redefined using the Air Force example as having travel experience, could the group restart their attempts to make sense of the racism they’d mentioned.

The Initiating Action that introduced a nonracist and worldly father supported the group's theory that travel and social integration prevent racist beliefs. In response to this, another participant, Mike, shared that his father also had life experience that made him more racially tolerant:

He grew up in a white environment, joined the Air Force also. It was in the Air Force he came in touch with Black people that he'd never been exposed to and, when I was a kid, he would always say 'Some of the best people I have known in the Air Force were Black people'. So he always stood strong and did that. So that informed me and my open-mindedness. Because I grew up in an all white environment too and he set that example and that filters through.

Taken together the two stories about military fathers provided uneven support for the group's theory that certain neighborhoods, lack of travel, and social segregation are a likely source of racist beliefs and tendencies. Their negotiation of these stories gave them a way to add meaning to their axiom about "street smarts" by including informal educational experiences into their understanding of education. By reconsidering instances of racism, adding new stories about racist whites, and fleshing out the implications of axioms, all white groups built intricate nonracial explanations for the origins of racist actions and beliefs.

### **3.3 OUTCOMES**

Every focus group in this study used similar strategies to initiate a discussion about the causes of racist actions and beliefs, to build theories of intersectionality, negotiate conflicting evidence, and handle moments of impasse. Even though these interactions were patterned, suggesting participants had experienced similar interactions in non-research settings, they did not seem routine or insincere. To the contrary, participants' engagement in this process, investment in

coming to credible conclusions, and concern about inconsistencies and contradictions suggested that they were actively and sincerely participating in each exchange. Regardless of whatever personal views participants brought to the group discussion, the negotiation process accomplished similar things in each group. Specifically, through their stories about white racists, each group set boundaries around what could be considered relevant to the workings of race/racism today. Importantly, these boundaries hid the relevance of white privilege by focusing attention on ways whites lack forms of nonracial privilege (education, economic resources, etc).

### **3.3.1 Ignoring white privilege**

Importantly, participants' informal theories of intersectionality did not lead to an analysis of white racial privilege. Instead, participants focused their discussions on nonracial and underprivileged social locations. With few exceptions (see the Chapter 5), groups generally did not tie whites' racist actions or beliefs to wealth, high levels of education, or access to elite social networks. Instead, white racists were seen as lacking social status in one or more essential way. Perhaps the clearest example was when groups pinned racist tendencies on a lack of educational opportunity. By citing some whites' inability to go to college, inadequate public school education, or lack of travel opportunities, groups connected racism to a lack of resources and opportunity. Similarly, they interpreted older age as a social handicap that deprived certain whites of access to the more racially egalitarian views available to the younger generation.

Participants made similar meaning of rural or southern social locations. They associated being rural with being out of touch, undereducated, and disconnected from the realities of modern life. Although no group explicitly spelled out why a southern upbringing would explain racism, the implication was that the South was a generally racist place where older, less

respectable worldviews flourished. As current residents of a northern city (Pittsburgh, PA), participants spoke of rural and southern locations as different from and less desirable than their own spatial location. This enabled them to cast racist whites as lacking the resources needed to experience, understand, and accept racial diversity. While participants were not necessarily wrong to identify the South as uniquely associated with America's racist past, the connection enabled them to consider racism and white privilege as inconsequential because they saw these social problems as being associated with lower status social locations.

Even characteristics that are inexorably linked to race, like social and physical segregation, were interpreted as a hardship for whites. Participants concluded that whites who lacked exposure to communities of color couldn't be expected to understand race, racism, or the racial groups with whom they had no contact. In this way, segregated whites were cast as victims of a racialized society over which they had no control.

By delinking racist tendencies from white racial privilege, groups could portray racist whites as lacking the power needed to impact society in any meaningful way. For instance, one group decided that racists were uneducated but also that uneducated people don't vote so the views of racists don't impact American politics. Many participants mentioned a plan to wait for racist ideas to die off with the already ailing older generation. They saw segregated whites as having little impact because their beliefs and comments could not reach people of color. To the extent that participants could tie racist beliefs and actions to marginal subpopulations of whites, they could trivialize the impact of these beliefs and actions. Through their negotiation process, participants determined that the many, many white racists they knew were harmless and that their beliefs and actions were insignificant and should be overlooked.

### 3.4 SUMMARY

Because participants mentioned so many white racists, tried so hard to account for racist actions and beliefs, and grappled so extensively with the limitations of their explanations, I conclude that these patterns of interaction are an important part of race talk. These negotiations are also important because they establish nonracial origins for racist beliefs and actions. Importantly, participants made discussion of white privilege impossible because their nonracial explanations focused on group memberships that lacked privilege (such as being uneducated, being socially isolated, or being old). By removing white privilege from consideration and by denying the way everyday white racist actions and beliefs perpetuate racism, participants provided discursive support for dominant racial ideology. In this way, negotiating theories of intersectionality can be understood as a central mechanism through which participants rationalize the continued existence of racism.

#### 4.0 RACISM WITHOUT RACE

Studies of race talk have noted that whites tend to back up their claims about race by referencing their past interactions with people of color. Phrases like “some of my best friends are black” can act like “verbal parachutes” that help whites “to avoid dangerous discussions or to save face” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:54). Alternately, stories about past interactions with or observations of people of color can be forms of passivity through which whites cast themselves as bystanders in a version of American race relations in which only racists and people of color are relevant (Feagin 2001; Trepagnier 2006). Consequently, researchers have critiqued whites’ references to interactions with people of color as disingenuous and misleading. Convincingly, they’ve argued that whites are either trying to hide the extent to which their own lives are shaped by racial inequality or buffer themselves from criticism before voicing or condoning racist views (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Trepagnier 2006).

Because I analyzed group interaction instead of individual motivation, I found that whites’ discussions of previous cross-race interactions do more than just bolster their image or protect them from critique. By eliciting, acknowledging, and making meaning of each other’s cross-race interactions, whites work to set the boundaries for the types of race talk allowed within their conversations. These boundaries are created, tested, altered, and policed as whites share additional stories about people of color. In this chapter, I examine how white participants used stories about people of color to maintain negative stereotypes about African Americans and



hide the structural mechanisms of racial segregation and white privilege. They accomplished these Outcomes by referencing lots of people of color with whom they had interacted or observed. These references act as Initiating Actions for Negotiations that defined their own relationship to racism and that defined blackness as a meaningful social category.

Perhaps because of their racial isolation, participants relied heavily on stories about people of color whom they didn't know very well or whom they had merely observed in public, heard about, or seen on TV. By mixing stories of meaningful cross-race relationships with less personal accounts, the group gained access to more stories about people of color than they had access to as individuals. Because these stories acted as a starting point for discussion, I treat them as Initiating Actions.

Often, after a participant told a story about a person of color, the group discussed the implications of the story (the Negotiation). Participants chose which stories to discuss and how to use these stories to make meaning of race relations and racial inequality. They used their stories about people of color to establish what people of color are like, what they believe, and why people of color are sometimes different from whites. That is, through their negotiations of these stories, the groups built shared depictions of the needs, interests, and behaviors of communities of color. In the Negotiations section, I focus on two ways that whites negotiated their references to people of color. First, participants used references to people of color to establish their own race neutrality. This process is not as simple as mentioning having friends of color. Instead, groups challenge and reconstruct each other's claims of racial neutrality by negotiating the meaning and implication of references to people of color they have interacted with or observed. Second, participants negotiate conversations about successful people of color by alternately denying the relevance of race and differentiating between good and bad types of

black people. Although participants negotiate references to people of color in other ways, I focus on these two forms of negotiation because participants devoted lots of time to these negotiations and the Outcomes of these negotiations tell us important things about the maintenance of racial ideology.

This negotiation process had three important Outcomes. First, it obscured the reality of race-based segregation. By referencing so many people of color, participants gave the impression that they were immersed in a racially diverse social world. This hid the extent to which they were each personally socially and spatially isolated from other racial groups. It also masked the extent to which isolation left them uninformed about the lives, beliefs, and needs of communities of color. Second, the negotiation process enabled participants to indirectly reinforce negative racial stereotypes without saying anything explicitly negative about people of color. While maintaining these stereotypes, participants also hid the extent to which racial privilege impacted life chances. Third, by linking their conclusions about race to their interpretations of the actions and beliefs of individual people of color, participants portrayed race as an individual and earned status, not an ascribed group location within a hierarchical system. In particular, they constructed whiteness as a status that can be achieved through action and so is equally available to all. Because of these ways of talking, groups had difficulty depicting race-based privilege as a structural phenomenon.

#### **4.1 INITIATING ACTION: DESCRIBING PEOPLE OF COLOR**

Throughout their conversations, white focus group participants described individual people of color whom they had known or observed. In my analysis, I treated each mention of an individual of color as an Initiating Action. I focused on this element of talk as an important

Initiating Action because participants referenced a wide range of people of color and then used these references to make, support, or contest claims about racial groups and racial inequality. In this section, I describe these Initiating Actions and discuss how they operated differently in group talk than in the one-on-one conversations captured by race talk literature. Specifically, I establish that participants did not need to rely on an exaggeration of their relationships to people of color in order to justify their claims about race. Instead they mixed together their stories about interactions with and observations of people of color. In this way, they produced many stories about specific people of color which they could use to support their claims about race and racial inequality.

A note about method: overall participants made 239 references to people of color. The large number of references is to be expected. The discussion prompt explicitly asked participants to talk about President Obama and implied that they should also talk about racial groups and race relations. In general, groups made similar numbers and types of references. (Seven of the focus groups made between 22 and 32 references over the course of their two hour focus group discussion. One made 46 references.) In order to determine whether different types of references to people of color moved group conversation in different ways, I coded this Initiating Action based on the types of interactions that participants had with the individuals and groups they mentioned. These coding categories sorted the references based on whether they referred to broad vague groups (“Generalized Other”), people of color with whom participants had interacted, or people of color whom participants had observed. While coding, I found that groups also discussed hypothetical people of color. Because these hypothetical cases were negotiated differently than other references to people of color, I analyzed them separately (see Chapter 5). The other three categories are discussed in the following sections.

#### 4.1.1 Generalized other

I coded a statement as a reference to a “Generalized Other” if the reference lacked specific information that would indicate the participant had personal interactions or direct observations of the people of color being described. For instance, when a participant referenced “African Americans working in the downtown McDonalds” and pointed out that he sees this group “down there all the time,” I coded the statement as a reference to “Strangers in Public.” When a participant in another group referenced how the “black community doesn’t make their kids go to school so they end up working at McDonalds,” I coded the statement as a reference to a “Generalized Other” because the participant did not indicate that he had any personal interaction with or observation of this population. Importantly, this does not mean that the participant lacked such personal interaction or observations. Rather, my coding reflects that the participant himself framed his story in a generalized way that did not indicate his comments were linked to actual people of color with whom he had interacted. I made this distinction in coding so I could analyze whether groups treated statements grounded in observation and experience differently than general statements framed as beliefs.

Many references to people of color, 54 in all, were references to large somewhat vague groups. An additional three references were too vague for me to identify the closeness of the relationships. Although I can’t be sure of participants’ motivations for making references to a “Generalized Other,” I assume they were somewhat influenced by the discussion prompts that I provided for each group. The discussion prompts encouraged references to people of color by focusing the group discussion on “race relations,” what “people say about race,” and whether participants fear they’ll sound racist when talking about race-related issues. Participants may have felt that these topics required at least some reference to a racialized other even if they

couldn't base their comments on any personal experiences with communities of color. Similarly, the generality of the discussion prompt questions may have signaled that general references to people of color were useful and appropriate. Therefore, the large number of references to generalized groups of color was in part prompted by the study design.

Although the frequency of these references may have been impacted by the study design, their content reflected participants' own strategies for constructing depictions of race relations, communities of color, and racial inequality. Throughout group discussions, participants determined who to reference, when to make these references, and what to say about the people of color whom they brought up. They also decided when to reference a generalized group instead of more intimate relationships. Consequently, no single approach dominated discussion: some references were to the distant past while others were to more recent experiences/observations and some references were highly detailed while others were vague.

Participants used statements about the Generalized Other to make claims about race and racism but, importantly, these claims rarely became the center of a group negotiation. This might explain why participants don't rely more heavily on these claims: general references to nonspecific people of color didn't engage other group members in a discussion, or interaction, about the validity and meaning of these claims. Instead, references to a Generalized Other tended to either be accepted by the group or paired with reference to people of color who participants had personally interacted with or observed. Consequently, I did not analyze these references separately but instead analyzed the negotiation processes initiated by more specific references to people of color in which different types of references were woven together as participants tried to build a shared depiction of race and racism. In all, participants referenced 239 people of color and only 54 of these were broad generalized statements. This suggests that, when discussing race

matters, participants are comfortable referencing the Generalized Other but they preferred statements grounded in observation and experience.

#### **4.1.2 Interactions with people of color**

The interactive nature of my data helped me fine-tune how whites frame references to their own cross-race interaction. Because the race talk literature (Bonilla-Silva 2003) suggests that whites exaggerate the extent to which they are socially integrated by inflating the closeness of their personal relationships with people of color, I examined these references carefully for signs of exaggeration. In this section, I will describe the kinds of relationships participants talked about and how they framed these relationships in ways that emphasized or deemphasized the closeness of their interactions with people of color.

Participants made 67 references to specific people of color with whom they had interacted (see Table 5). These references were specific in that participants included 1) a description of how they were related to the person of color, 2) information about their interactions with the person of color, and 3) details about the person of color's characteristics and/or worldview. When describing a cross-race interaction, participants used labels that described the closeness of their relationship. Based on their labels, I coded these references into four categories: close family and friends, individuals connected to their family and friends, acquaintances, and strangers who were directly interacted with. Most groups made multiple references to relationships in each of these four categories.

**Table 5: References to cross-race interactions by groups**

Types of people of color mentioned	FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	FG6	FG7	FG8	Total
Own friend/family member	0	2	1	2	4	1	5	2	17
Connected to friend or family member	4	6	0	2	1	0	3	0	16
Acquaintances	7	3	4	3	1	3	1	9	31
Strangers interacted with	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Total	13	11	5	7	7	4	9	11	67

In the following section, I describe the kinds of references that fell into these four categories. Then, in Section 4.1.1.2, I discuss the extent to which these participants inflated or understated the nature of their relationships to people of color.

#### **4.1.2.1 With whom do participants claim to interact?**

Participants made 17 unique references to their own close friends or family members. I coded a statement as a reference to a participant’s own family or friends if the participant used the label “friend” or provided specific family relationship information. This included references to two “friends from the military,” one brother-in-law, two friends they “played ball with,” exchange students who lived in a participant’s house, one college roommate, one best friend from childhood, two ex-girlfriends, one set of grandchildren and their father, “friends from the

gospel church who I've had over for dinner," three "friends from college," and two friends that participants claimed they "know very well."

It is difficult to establish exactly how close participants actually were to the 17 people of color they claimed as friends or family or how these 17 people of color would define their relationships with the participants. I could, however, estimate whether these relationships were meaningful based on the information provided by the participant during discussion. For instance, four references were to intimate relationships or long term family members (two girlfriends, a brother-in-law, and the grandkids/son-in-law) whom participants spoke about at length. Four references were to people of color with whom participants had lived (including in the military) and one referred to friends a participant had entertained in her home. Five of the references to "friends" included detailed retelling of conversations participants had had with these friends, often about race, suggesting they spent at least some meaningful time together. Only two references to "friends" were vague enough to leave open the possibility that the closeness of these relationships was exaggerated. In both case, the participants said they had "very close friends" who were African American but these participants did not use the names of these friends or provide any information about their conversations or interactions with these friends.

Sometimes participants chose not to mention their experiences within meaningful cross-race relationships. During the debriefing, I directly asked participants how often they interact with people of color. At that time, two participants mentioned that they were currently in intimate interracial relationships, one provided details about her relationship to many close black friends, one mentioned working fulltime in a small minority-owned business, and one mentioned having an African American sponsor in a recovery support group. Since participants did not



bring up these individuals without my prompting, I did not include these references in the count of all references provided in Table 4 or in my analysis of group negotiations.

Participants referenced 16 individual people of color whom they knew through family members or friends. These included five individuals who were married to participants' own friends or family members, one participant's friend's fiancé, two participants' siblings' significant others, and four friends' or family members' friends. I also used this code for references to individuals whom participants knew about through their friends and family members' stories. This included a daughter's ex-boyfriend, a Mexican man who offered to sell his daughter to a participant's friend, a "wife's pastor," and some "black guys" who made one participant's friend take down his Confederate flag. Because participants labeled these relationships as belonging to their friends and family members not to themselves directly, I coded these references as "Connected to friends of family members."

I included an Initiating Action as an "Acquaintance" if a participant did not use the label of "friend" when mentioning a coworker, neighbor, or student of color with whom they had interacted or observed. With 31 references, this type of interaction made up the largest category of people of color with whom participants claimed they had interacted. This is not surprising given the fact that many whites work in businesses or attend schools where they experience greater racial diversity than they experience in their families. Also, whites can control the extent to which they interact with people of color in more social settings but may have no choice but to interact with people of color who are coworkers, students, or clients in their workplace.

Overall, participants referenced six people of color they taught in classroom settings and ten they interacted with at work. In this category, I included all coworkers, bosses, and clients so long as these individuals were 1) seen regularly and 2) not claimed as friends. Participants also

referenced eight neighbors. Because neighbors continuously share a physical space, I included these references as “Acquaintances” instead of “Strangers.” That said, not every reference included enough information for me to determine just how neighborly participants acted toward these individuals. Because participants chose to identify these individuals as “neighbors” instead of “people” or “strangers” they’d seen in the neighborhood, I distinguished them in my coding.

The most difficult references to code were seven references to individuals with whom participants had personally interacted but did not claim as a friend, coworker, neighbor, or student. For example, one participant mentioned “a couple of Arab guys” that he “played ball with a few times.” Because he identified that they had had multiple interactions but he did not call these men his “friends,” I coded this as a reference to an “Acquaintance.” Other acquaintances included black classmates that had been bussed into one participant’s school, black individuals who “hated” one participant because of the “things” she “said to them about race,” a Taiwanese classmate, a “black man who worked for my father on our farm for years,” and black high school classmates who “went crazy after MLK was shot.” Because these references each included specific information about times when the participant had personally interacted with the person of color mentioned, I coded them as “Acquaintances.”

Participants told very few stories about interacting with strangers who were people of color. The three references they made to strangers all involved interactions they had in stores with a cashier or fellow customer. For instance, one participant described a black cashier’s reaction when her daughter mistakenly called him “Bill Cosby.” That same participant told another story about loudly calling her husband a “renigger” (sic) after he reneged on a promise to buy her something as an “enormous black guy” walked into the store aisle and overheard her. In another group, a participant shared a conversation he’d had with an “older African American

gentlemen” in line at the grocery store. The man had explained that TV news reporters choose smart-sounding well dressed whites but only poorly dressed, uneducated blacks when doing street interviews for a story. The participant shared that the man in the grocery store had personally experienced being overlooked by TV news reporters and used the man’s story to support for his own claim that racism continues to be a problem in the U.S.

Participants’ references to people of color with whom they had interacted ranged from the most intimate to the most impersonal and included long term relationships and fleeting moments of contact. Because participants mentioned so many interactions with people of color and spoke at length about many of their experiences, I could analyze the extent to which participants exaggerated or understated the closeness of their cross-race relationships.

#### **4.1.2.2 Why does talk about cross-race interaction matter?**

Theorists as early as the 1940s posited that prejudice would decrease as individuals experienced more cross-race interaction. Early versions of this “social contact theory” suggested that any increased interaction would reveal similarities among groups and expose the limitations of prejudiced views of a racialized “other” (Collins 1951; Williams 1947; Wilner, Walkley, and Cook 1952; Works 1961) Social psychologists tested this idea and found that cross-race interaction often reaffirmed preexisting beliefs and so had no cumulative positive effect on racial ideology. Therefore they theorized that cross-race interaction could only decrease prejudice if certain supporting conditions were met. Gordon Allport (1954) specified that group members must have equal status in the interaction, common goals, opportunity for cooperation not competition, and the support of authorities who sanction intergroup interaction.

As new forms of racial integration became possible in the late 1960s and 1970s, researchers repeatedly tested the role of these four features of the contact situation. Summing up

a growing consensus in the literature, Nick Hopkins (1997) argued that cross-race interaction had a limited impact on overall levels of prejudice in the US in part because whites continued to be meaningfully socially segregated and in part because Allport's four ideal conditions were rarely met outside the research setting. More recent work by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) challenges Hopkins' conclusions and found that cross-race contact can and does shape prejudice but more research is needed to determine the factors that prevent a positive outcome of cross-race interaction.

Although there is much we don't know about the influence of cross-race social contact on prejudice, the core idea, that cross-race interaction matters, continues to be useful. One essential finding from the social contact theory research was that cross-race friendships influence more than just the participants in the relationship. Friends of individuals who are in cross-race relationships experience an indirect social contact, also called vicarious (Gomez and Huici 2008) or extended (Halualani 2008) social contact, that has the potential to alter their perceptions of race for better or worse. Social psychologists used surveys and experiments to measure prejudice before and after indirect contact and determined the correlation between rates of indirect social contact and prejudice (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, and Paolini 2005; Liebkind and McAlister 1999; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, and Voci 2004; Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, and Stellmacher 2007; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin Volpe, and Ropp 1997). These studies generally found support for the hypothesis that indirect contact influences attitudes and they suggested the interesting possibility that indirect contact can transform the views of in-group members resistant to or unavailable for direct cross-race interaction (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin Volpe, and Ropp 1997).

Studies of indirect social contact have provided insight into the psychological mechanisms at work during moments of indirect cross-race social contact. However the social

psychological approach leaves unanswered important questions about the interactional mechanisms through which indirect contact may be created and negotiated. Through a social psychological lens, we see a social actor who is changed by her exposure to a friend's cross-race encounters but we learn little about how this person seeks out or avoids such exposure. We also only have a limited view of how individuals make sense of cross-race relationships that they don't personally observe, i.e. ones they are told about through other friends or family members.

Conversations about race are one site in which these negotiations are carried out and indirect social contact is accomplished through interaction. By using a sociological lens focused on interaction, I found that whites actively work to create depictions of their own and other people's cross-race interactions. In their focus groups, participants disclosed many cross-race interactions and often talked through what these contacts might mean for themselves and others. Awareness of a group member's previous cross-race interactions shaped conversation by providing a new source of information about racial out-groups. Participants actively negotiated the inevitable mix of positive and negative features of social contact and actively accepted or rejected new information about out-groups and out-group members. Alternately, participants avoided creating indirect contact by hiding information about their cross-race interactions and interrupting conversations when cross-race interaction is mentioned. Through talk, participants negotiated indirect social contact in ways that supported or undermined dominant racial ideology.

Expanding on the current indirect social contact theory literature, I argue that whites actively (if unintentionally) use indirect social contact as a mechanism to create meaning and to influence others. Understood in this way, indirect social contact is more than just an unanticipated outcome of direct cross-race interaction, which may or may not yield indirect

reductions in prejudice. Rather, indirect social contact is an accomplishment of same-race interaction that helps set the boundaries of collective depictions of race and racial inequality.

#### **4.1.2.3 Do participants exaggerate their cross-race interactions?**

Research has shown that whites tend to claim as their friends people of color whom they don't actually know well or interact with frequently. They then use the existence of these "friends" as proof that they are racially integrated and that their lives have not been meaningfully structured by race difference (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993). Because I observed interaction among whites, I was able to measure the extent to which participants make similar discursive moves during group interaction.

I found that participants did not inflate the closeness of their relationships to people of color as much as we might expect given the available interview data. Notably, only 17 people of color were claimed as friends by 34 focus group participants over eight hours of talk. Participants did not claim as friends or family the 16 people of color who they introduced as being connected to their family and friends even when they had the language to do so. For instance, one participant mentioned that his niece is married to a person of color but did not refer to the man as his nephew. Similarly indirect labels were used for individuals who could have been called brother-in-laws, sister-in-laws, friends, and cousins. Instead of using these cross-race interactions as proof of their own racial tolerance, participants used relationship labels that provided emphasized their social distance from people of color. Participants also did not claim as friends the 31 people of color with whom they interacted regularly as coworkers, neighbors, and students even though interview research suggests whites routinely inflate these relationships to "friend" status. Finally, participants left out references to at least five close relationships with people of

color. I have no way of knowing what other cross-race relationships participants chose not to share but these five cases provide important evidence that white participants leave out references to people of color in their discussions with other whites.

These patterns suggest that whites use the flexibility of language to alternately inflate or understate their relationships to people of color in ways that ‘work’ for the conversations they are having. Therefore, the ways they frame their cross-race interactions may be more an artifact of the interaction than of their personal beliefs about these relationships in particular and race in general. Some public settings, like the research interview, may compel whites to claim acquaintances of color as their close friends while other settings may discourage this practice. This has implications for the extent to which whites will be influenced by the cross-race interaction they observe and hear about. Therefore, studies of cross-race interaction must take the interactional conversational context into consideration.

Why didn’t participants tell more stories about interactions with strangers? Because participants made nine references to their observations of strangers and 15 references to hypothetical people of color, we know that the shallow nature of interactions with strangers is not the reason they were featured so rarely in conversation. Also, because of Pittsburgh’s demographic makeup, we know that participants didn’t lack experience in integrated social spaces like buses, city streets, stores, and restaurants. Most likely, participants did not generally interact with people of color in these public spaces unless they were in a relationship that required and directed such interaction. Alternately, participants may have failed to mention interactions with strangers because they don’t see such experiences as memorable or relevant. In either case, participants made only three references to nonwhite strangers and instead relied heavily on their more distant observations of people of color in public or in the media. Next, I

briefly describe the types of observations participants referenced. Then, I analyze how participants wove references to observations of and interactions with people of color together as they negotiated claims about their own race neutrality and the meaning of blackness.

#### **4.1.3 Observations of people of color**

Participants made 100 references to people of color they had observed in person or through the media. This included nine references to strangers they observed in public, 25 references to people of color they saw in the media, 46 references to President Obama and his family, and 20 references to other political figures (see Table 6). Although in a few cases, participants had shared physical space with the people they referenced, participants did not mention having any interactions with these individuals. Before discussing how participants use references to observing people of color in negotiations, I briefly describe the types of references they used.



**Table 6: References to observations of people of color by groups**

People of color mentioned	FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	FG6	FG7	FG8	Total
Strangers directly observed:	0	1	0	3	0	0	4	1	9
Political Figures									
Obama and family:	8	2	6	6	5	4	6	9	46
Other:	1	0	5	4	4	0	2	4	20
Seen or heard in the media:	5	1	5	0	5	3	1	5	25
Total	14	4	16	13	14	7	13	19	100

Participants referenced nine strangers they observed in public including two references to people of color they had observed in the city (“I’ve seen lots of interracial couples in Pittsburgh” and “There are a lot of Asian Americans living near campus that I’ve seen”); three references to people of color they had observed on the bus; two references to people of color they had observed while passing through black neighborhoods (“I do some work in McKeesport and I always see the kids running around outside. Where are their parents?” and “Black people in the Lower Hill still have Obama signs up. I’ve seen that”); and two references to people of color they had seen going into or working at furniture rental stores or fast food restaurants. These references were all worded in ways that made clear the participants had personally observed the behavior of people of color but had not actually interacted with them.

Participants discussed 25 people of color they had seen on TV and internet or heard on the radio. Sixteen of these media references were to celebrities or other nationally recognizable individuals or groups including the comedians Bill Cosby (3), Chris Rock (3), and Whoopi

Goldberg (1); musicians (2); TV show/movie cast references (4); and sports figures including Tiger Woods (1) and unnamed ‘athletes’ (2). Participants also discussed four instances in which they’d heard African Americans interviewed on TV news programs and one group of African Americans in a real estate advertisement. Finally, they referenced the people of color killed in Jonestown, African children who live in slums, the students who first integrated the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the audience members who heckled comedian Michael Richardson before his 2006 racist outburst.

Participants made 20 references to political figures from U.S. history, contemporary U.S. politics, and the global political scene. I included in this category two references to “black leadership” and one mention of “world leaders” from African and Asian countries. Participants also referenced the Black Panthers (2), Martin Luther King Jr. (2), Malcolm X (1), and “black leaders during the Civil Rights Movement” (1). The more contemporary political figures they mentioned including Bobby Jindal, Ray Nagin, Cynthia McKinney, Condoleezza Rice, Jesse Jackson (2), and Bill Richardson (2). Participants generally did not discuss race outside of the U.S. context but one group briefly mentioned how Obama had a “Ghandi-like effect on people.” In this category I also included one participant’s reference to Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his impact on the Obama campaign because he clearly identified Rev. Wright as a politically influential figure. Finally, I included the (peculiar and unexplained) reference to “George Bush’s black relative.”

References to these political figures often overlapped with discussions of President Obama. This is not surprising. The discussion prompts encouraged participants to talk about politics and how race relations are publically discussed in the context of the Obama campaign. This forced discussion of President Obama and likely triggered discussion of other political

figures in the black community. Therefore, I regard the 46 references to President Obama<sup>2</sup> and his family and the 20 references to other political figures partly as artifacts of the study design. Of course this does not mean that participants only discuss these topics in research settings. Given the historic importance of the Civil Rights movement, the recent election of President Obama, and America's long history of tense race relations, group discussion of the political work of people of color is common. Although the frequency of references to the Obama family and other political figures was shaped by the study design, how these references were made and negotiated remained under the participants' full control and therefore tells us something about how whites discuss successful people of color they observe in the political sphere.

In the analysis below, I examine two ways participants wove together stories about their observations of and interactions with people of color as they negotiated the meaning of race related claims. Specifically, I focus on 1) how participants negotiated suggestions of racial tolerance and 2) how participants negotiated definitions of blackness. Then in my discussion of the Outcomes of this process, I demonstrate how this negotiation process hid the extent to which participants are racially isolated and therefore ignorant about the details of life in the black community, reinforced negative conceptualizations of subordinate racial groups, and hid structural inequality and white privilege.

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<sup>2</sup> I counted a mention of any member of the Obama family as a new reference whenever participants 1) brought up a yet unmentioned aspect of their lives or politics and 2) switched to another topic before returning to their discussion of President Obama, Michelle, or their daughters.

## 4.2 NEGOTIATION

In this section, I examine how participants used references to their past interactions with or observations of people of color as they negotiated the claims of racial tolerance and claims about the meaning of blackness.

### 4.2.1 Mentioning cross-race interaction as proof of racial tolerance

Race scholars have found that whites mention past cross-race interaction as a way to prove they are not racist and that racism doesn't shape whites' lives in the U.S. today (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Trepagnier 2006). As an act of self-presentation, whites talk about "good experiences" they have had with people of color in the past to "cover up for a present that blacks are not a part of" and to "signal nonracialism" or racial tolerance (Bonilla-Silva 2003:98). In this study, I found that participants did sometimes use stories of personal experiences with integration to establish their racial tolerance. Because I focused on interaction as the unit of analysis, however, I found that these claims of racial tolerance were not always immediately accepted by the group. Instead, participants engaged with each other's stories about race neutrality and worked together to determine if these stories amounted to reasonable evidence in support of individual claims.

Generally, participants didn't wait for someone to finish telling a story about cross-race interaction before engaging with it. Instead, they joined in the initial telling of the story, asking questions and making comments that encouraged one version of a story over others. As each story was constructed by the group, participants negotiated the story's implications so that the act of completing the story and the interaction needed to make meaning of the story happened

simultaneously. For instance, one participant, Grace, wanted to establish that she doesn't "have a racist bone in her body" by telling the group about her interracial grandchildren. At first, Grace established the strength of her cross-race relationships ("I'm proud of my grandkids. I'll defend them to the death"), which another participant, Betsy, validated.

Grace: You could say something innocent and some knuckle head thinks its racist. Well, I've had that here [in the housing complex]. People think I'm racist and then they see my grandkids and my son-in-law and I'll tell them...

Betsy: He's black, is he?

Grace: I'm proud of my grandkids. I'll defend them to the death.

Betsy: Good

Grace: You know that. You know I love the kids

Betsy: I know you do

After establishing that she had a positive relationship with her biracial grandchildren, Grace linked that relationship to a broader claim of racial tolerance by adding "So then they find that out and I say I don't have a racist bone in my body." But this claim was immediately challenged by another participant, Susan, who suggested that Grace did have racist sentiments toward her son-in-law:

Susan: Except maybe for your son-in-law.

Grace: That's not his race. That's because he's mean and stupid.

Susan: Mean and stupid. Right.

Grace immediately clarified that her feelings toward her son-in-law were not racially motivated ("That's not race. That's because he's mean and stupid"). When Susan responded with an

unconvincing “Mean and stupid. Right,” another participant, Larry, stepped in to help construct the grandmother’s nonracist status with her:

Larry: That’s a personality problem.

Grace: Right. Oh and it will be in the [housing complex newsletter]. He started work yesterday.

Betsy: It’s about time.

Grace: He *said* he was starting a job.

Larry: See? He gives the black people a bad name.

Grace: He does.

Larry: Because of his actions. People look at him.

Betsy: Right.

This discussion involved multiple participants working together to establish the existence and meaning of one participant’s cross-race interaction. Although Grace originally only wanted to talk about her grandchildren, Susan brought up her African American son-in-law as evidence of a negative cross-race interaction (“Except maybe for your son-in-law”). This directly challenged Grace’s claim of racial tolerance. The other participants jumped in to help shape the implications of this negative interaction, however, and successfully refocused the conversation on Grace’s acceptance of black people (“That’s a personality problem”). Importantly, Susan did not participate in this shoring up of Grace’s claim. In this way, despite Susan’s interpretation of Grace’s negative views of her son-in-law, the group linked Grace’s positive cross-race interaction with her grandchildren to a more general claim about her acceptance of people of color.

Not all groups maintained the norm of claiming racial tolerance. In some cases the link between positive cross-race interaction and general tolerance was made but then undermined by stories of negative cross-race interaction. For example, after one focus group read the first discussion question, a participant Sam led his father Frank through the following exchange:

- Sam:           How about you? You work with...
- Frank:         With the blacks.
- Sam:           ...with a lot of black people all the time.
- Frank:         No problem.

Here Sam specifically asked his father Frank about his cross-race experiences (“How about you? You work with...”) and Frank jumped in to acknowledge that he worked “with the blacks.” Frank also confirmed that he had “no problem” with his working arraignment. At this point, Sam attempted to establish his own racial tolerance by telling the group he “comes across black people every day”:

- Sam:           Like I run into..you know. When I do jobs in people’s houses and things like that. I come across black people every day.
- Frank:         I have no issues with them at all.
- Sam:           But I have nobody that I spend time with, you know.

While Sam explained that he has regular interactions with people of color but no close cross-race interactions (“I have nobody that I spend time with, you know”), Frank repeated that he had “no issues” with the African Americans at work. He repeated this claim a third time before mentioning that he also “stood side-by-side” with black men in the Air Force.

- Frank:         I have no problems at all. My boss is black and me and him we probably get along better than anybody in the whole store. It’s just I never...and I was in the service for four years, Air Force. And so they stood side-by-side with me, you know.

Sam:            So the fact that...

Frank:           They watched my back and I watched their back.

Sam :            So the fact that Obama is black doesn't bother you at all.

Frank:           Doesn't affect me at all.

Sam:            Ok.

Frank:           Not at all.

Throughout their negotiation, Sam helped shape the Frank's comments. Sam suggested his father mention his black coworkers ("How about you? You work with...") and he linked his father's positive interactions with these coworkers to assumptions about his father's acceptance of Obama ("so the fact that Obama is black doesn't bother you at all"). In this way, he encouraged Frank to claim racial tolerance ("Doesn't affect me at all") and link that claim to specific evidence of positive experiences with cross-race interaction ("I was in the service for years, Air Force. And so they stood side-by-side with me"). This is a twist on the face saving strategy reported in the race talk literature. Here, instead of sharing a positive cross-race interaction to maintain his own appearance of racial neutrality, Sam evoked a story of such interaction from his father. During the debriefing, Sam confessed that he'd worried the group might "come off as not saying the right stuff about race." This insecurity might explain why he began the group's discussion by ensuring Frank represented himself as race neutral in this way.

Although there is no way to know what Frank would have said without Sam's prompting, Frank's use of short vague sentences with few pronouns ("No problem," "Doesn't affect me at all," and "Not at all") and his slight hesitance ("It's just I never...") suggested that his comments did not fully express what he had to say about this subject. Although he initially stayed within



the boundaries of discourse Sam had established for the group (i.e. claiming racial tolerance), Frank quickly agreed when another participant, Rich, challenged these boundaries. Rich shared that he didn't trust "black men when they get together in groups" because he was "beat up" by an African American man and his friends. After hearing Rich's story, Frank quickly and enthusiastically agreed that black men couldn't be trusted ("Yes! That's right"). Then Frank shared a detailed story about black men in the military threatening a buddy of his:

I had a good buddy from South Carolina and he had on his wall a rebel flag. And you could see it from outside the barracks, looking in the window. And, ah, we didn't think nothing of it. You know. It was there for months at a time. Then we hear a knock on the door and we open the door and here's three black guys with knives saying "Take that flag down. Take that flag down or we're gonna kill you." You know. That moment, they took the flag down.

This new reference to earlier negative interactions with people of color seemed to represent Frank's stance on racial tolerance better than his initial comments about his Air Force experience. Frank was animated as he talked, used long detailed sentences, and switched to present tense even though the event happened over 30 years ago. Even though he told this story just minutes after mentioning a positive relationship he'd had with black coworkers, Frank's new story endorsed the idea that black men are unreasonably prone to violence. This broke with Sam's use of references to positive cross-race interaction as the norm for group discussion and undermined Frank's original claim of racial tolerance. In sharing this new story, the father allied himself with another group member's stories about negative cross-race interaction and established a new norm of using personal experience as evidence for stereotypes about people of color.

As the race talk literature predicted, I saw participants refer to positive interactions with people of color in ways that seemed designed to deflect any critique of their views on race like

when Sam and Frank worked together to establish Frank's acceptance of his black coworkers and President Obama's election. But even in these cases, participants' references also signaled the beginning of a discursive exchange that established the boundaries of discussions about race. As when Rich and Frank used stories of cross-race interaction to reinforce a stereotype about black men, the boundaries of race talk were not always built in ways that allowed uninterrupted self-presentation or that excluded racially illiberal views. Participants in my focus groups had to accomplish the act of self-presentation through interaction so they couldn't count on brief, dated, or impersonal cross-race interaction to be accepted by the group. Even sharing intimate relationships, like Grace's love of her biracial grandchildren, didn't ensure their claims to racial tolerance would go unchallenged.

Whites may use this face saving strategy more often in individual self-presentation moments such as in formal public settings like the research or news interview than in less formal settings. In group conversation and in "sociable public discourse" (Gamson 1992), whites may find less need and opportunity to present themselves as race neutral by sharing stories about positive cross-race interaction. Instead, they may mention interactions with and observations of people of color in order to accomplish other goals. Because I examined these references (what I call Initiating Actions) in the context of group conversations, I could analyze how participants helped each other build stories about their cross-race interactions and weave these stories with stories about less personal observations of people of color (the Negotiation). In particular, participants used stories about cross-race interactions and observations to define blackness and to link racial inequality to individual action in ways that hid the ways race impacts life chances (the Outcome).

#### **4.2.2 Establishing what it means to be black**

Throughout their focus group discussions, participants mentioned people of color as they attempted to define race and to make sense out of American racism. In particular, they grappled with two connected issues: 1) the fact that not all African Americans fit the negative stereotypes they associated with blackness and 2) the inconsistent ways race, class, and culture are tangled together. Similar to how they mentioned white friends and family members while trying to explain why some whites are more racist than others, participants mentioned people of color while trying to explain why some people of color succeed while others fail.

My use of President Obama in the discussion prompts helped raise these issues because he is a spectacularly successful person of color who doesn't fit the negative stereotypes that whites associate with blackness. In order to account for Obama's success, participants needed to explain why he doesn't fit the common white expectations of black men. In fact, in order to talk coherently about any positive cross-race interactions/observations or the existence of any successful people of color, participants needed to delink blackness from the negative characteristics with which it is commonly associated. How they did that had implications for the construction of racial ideology. In the next section, I discuss how participants explained Obama's success and show how these strategies worked together to reinforce dominant racial ideology.

#### 4.2.2.1 Ignoring and subdividing blackness

Participants commonly used two strategies<sup>3</sup> when accounting for why some people of color succeed while others don't. First, they redefined people of color as having no race or no blackness. That is, they either removed race from consideration entirely or recast people of color as individuals who are "like whites." Second, they split blackness into subcategories so that they could differentiate between bad and good people of color. Participants usually used these two strategies together, subdividing blackness whenever they couldn't avoid dealing with race directly. Since President Obama has a strong claim to representing all Americans and has a biracial status that makes him "half-white" and is considered an "educated" and "decent" person, these ways of talking were quickly and consistently used by groups whenever they discussed Obama's racial categorization and success.

When asked to reflect on the extent to which race mattered to "most people" during the campaign, participants devoted large segments of talk to the question of whether Obama was "black enough" to count as an example of racial progress or African American success. Some groups argued that he was the "right" kind of black person for the job. For instance, after establishing that black voters voted for President Obama "just because he was black" but white voters overlooked race because "they were fed up with the economy and Iraq," one participant Anthony, explained President Obama was different than most African Americans because he "isn't the guy you see in the newspaper:"

Anyone can see that Obama isn't the guy you see arrested in the newspaper, not the trouble maker. He's a decent guy. An educated decent guy. So his race didn't

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'strategy' implies some intentionality. Although many of the Outcomes discussed in Chapter 3 and 4 are unintentional and this study did not focus on motivations for utterances, I use the term 'strategy' here because participants were explicitly making claims that deemphasized or subdivided blackness. Although I have no way of knowing what they intended to achieve by doing this, I do assume they were aware of what they were saying and so were intentionally using these ways of talking to negotiate race related claims.

matter. It didn't matter in the election. I see the distinction between the Average Joe hanging out on the street corner and Obama. Anyone can see that so [his race] wasn't an issue.

Anthony distinguished the case of Obama as a black Presidential candidate from the case of an “average” black man running for President. While Obama was “educated” and “a decent guy,” the “average” black man was a “trouble maker,” “hanging out on the street corner,” and getting arrested. This implied that had the average black man run for President his race would have been a problem.

Anthony defined Obama as an outlier in a definition of blackness that emphasized inferior social characteristics and blamed African Americans for any ways the black community struggled to succeed. This is an example of subdividing blackness into a good and bad category in order to account for African American success. In this way, race was associated with individual actions because the “average” black man was described in terms of the negative things he did.

Subdividing blackness was often paired with the other strategy of removing race from consideration altogether. For instance, a few minutes after comparing President Obama to the “average” black man, Anthony blamed African American high school dropout rates on the “average black kid” who “would rather be on the corner chasing boy or girls and smoking instead of going to the library.”

Anthony: Look at the high school dropout rate. Just the statistics. I mean, if you have that drive, there are a million ways to drive forward. One of the problems in the African American community is that it's all now, in the moment. The average black kid would rather be on the corner chasing boys or girls and smoking instead of going to the library.

Ellen: But how are you going to get to college? You need resources to get resources. If it seems way out of reach, why even try? Scholarships wouldn't pay for everything. You have to take care of transportation, books, everything.

After hearing Anthony blame the high school dropout rate on African American youth, another participant, Ellen, objected to his definition of the "average" black person. She asked how kids were supposed to go to college when "you need resources to get resources. If it seems there is no way out, why even try?" Ellen didn't refer to race directly. Instead, she used the pronoun "you" to refer to either a universal race-less group of youth or whites like themselves. Anthony attempted to refocus the negotiation on the black community by saying "there is no leadership in the black community telling young people what to do" but another group member, Dawn, objected:

Anthony: But there is no leadership in the black community telling young people what to do. I'm not saying it's fun but it needs to be done.

Dawn: You have to start early in the educational system. You have to do well in school. Everyone knows that so it's not a black thing.

Anthony: But we do have to look at the dropout rate

After Anthony tried to blame the "leadership in the black community," Dawn explained that it is "not a black thing" because "you" have to do well in school from the start if "you" are going to succeed. Here Dawn used explicitly denied the relevance of race and used the racially nonspecific "you" introduced by Ellen. In response, Anthony mentioned the dropout rate once again but this time he did not directly mention race. When Ellen rejoined the conversation to sum up what high school is like for the high school dropouts, the "average guy" has lost all racial modifiers.

Ellen: Why should kids have to bend over backwards to make it? All groups should have to work hard but some schools are harder

because they aren't giving anyone the chance to make it. I don't think we understand how bad it is for the average guy who drops out. He tries to make it but it's hard.

Anthony: Do you watch [the TV show, set in Baltimore] *The Wire*? It shows the schools. I know it's not true but it's crazy. There are stabbings, addicts at home. These problems are real. We can't imagine that. Western Pennsylvania isn't like Detroit.

Ellen: No, it's not.

Although Anthony began this interaction insisting that the “average black kid” and the “leadership in the black community” were to blame for the high school dropout rates of African Americans, he eventually stopped mentioning race. Dawn and Ellen's use of the pronoun “you” and their insistence that some high schools “aren't giving anyone the chance to make it,” were race neutral. Although the television show *The Wire* tended to depict dysfunctional African American schools, the group did not use it to compare the black and white experience. Even Anthony makes his final comparison between Western Pennsylvania and Detroit without specifying race. In this way, the problem of high African American dropout rates was redefined as a problem of inadequate educational opportunities for all. The lazy criminal black person was recast as a rational racially nonspecific person doing the best he could in a bad situation. He was no longer black at all but a person without race facing hardships that have nothing to do with racial inequality. In this way, the group challenged one participant's claims that laziness and criminality were the cause of African American dropout rates by moving the conversation away from a focus on African Americans. By removing the blackness of the “average” African American high school student, the group could address his economic situation without dealing with broader definitions of race.

Obama's status as a biracial person was a perfect fit for these two strategies. For instance, one group removed Obama's blackness from consideration by first casting him as white and then subdividing blackness to differentiate him from other African Americans:

Bob: But Obama, culturally speaking, skin color aside, he is as much a white man. I mean, he's not a black man. He has no attributes or aspects that you would identify with the culture of a black man. He's as white as the four of us. I forget it. I mean I have to look at the color of his skin and say 'Oh yeah! He's a black man!' because he's as white as anyone else. When you say people have to give things up to go into politics...I think has to give that up. He can't be a black man and come off as stereotypically black in anyway. He had to walk away from anything associated with being black.

Mike: It's important to note that his apparent blackness is Kenyan, he isn't from the...the traditional African American background.

Bob: His wife is. She has completely embraced the...

Sully: Oh yeah. Her background is from slavery somewhere along the way.

After Obama's blackness is dismissed ("he has no attribute or aspects that you would identify with...a black man"), he is fit into a subcategory of blackness ("his apparent blackness is Kenyan") that falls outside of the dominant conceptualization of blackness in the U.S. His wife Michelle's race (which comes "from slavery somewhere along the way") is seen as a different form of blackness, one that doesn't fit as well with political success. Perhaps because her political status comes from marital status, the group didn't feel the need to explain away her race. Instead, she was cited as an example of blackness that better fits traditional conceptualizations of race as opposed to Obama whose "apparent blackness" was repeatedly questioned.



Another group also employed the two strategies of removing race from consideration and parsing blackness when they tried to establish whether Obama's campaign raised, avoided, or settled the question of race in U.S. politics:

- Hattie: Barack Obama's race was important because he's not just black.
- Dan: Yeah!
- Hattie: He's of mixed heritage
- Dan: and *international* mixed heritage. He's like the...*The American*...
- Kim: He's the hotdog of Presidential candidates
- Hattie: Exactly. He *is* America. He is the personification of what it means to be American. And I think, at this point, race is going to almost be a nonissue. The wild card has been thrown and it has been dealt with.

The group quickly turned my question about how much Obama's race mattered into a new question about how Obama's race should be meaningfully defined in the first place. They enthusiastically agreed that President Obama is not "just black" and that his "mixed heritage" makes him the "personification of America." Declaring Obama to be squarely American ("*The American*"), they suggested his race was of little importance to American voters. By removing his race as a central component of his identity, the group removed the problem of reconciling his race with his (unlikely) success.

Yet, this strategy of removing his race wasn't enough. After deciding that an individual's race doesn't matter, groups often still had to struggle with the fact that race continued to matter in the U.S. For instance, after deciding Obama was the quintessential American, the group had to admit that his success didn't mean no one cares about race:

Ellen: Well, I don't know about [race being a nonissue]. I think it's been dealt with where we live but south of the Mason Dixon line...? Race continues to be a real issue.

Hattie: Not just in the south. Go out to State College [in central Pennsylvania].

Kim: You mean to Pennsylv-tucky?

Dan: Or go to [the Pittsburgh suburbs] where I'm from and you'll see it.

Ellen: Come to my Thanksgiving table and you'll see it!

By mentioning that racism continues to matter in the South, in central Pennsylvania, and even in their own families, the group established that race is still relevant to white voters. Their statements about the importance of race revived the question about how to define racial groups. After all, if Obama was just "American" no white person would care about his race at all. So after discussing the views of racist whites for some time (see Chapter 3), the group employed the second strategy, subdividing blackness:

Kim: But I think because he wasn't decidedly, like, southern black or New York black or you know. He was like

Hattie: Yeah

Kim: His mom was from Kansas.

Hattie: He was from Hawaii.

Kim: He was born in Hawaii! He lived in Indonesia! and da da da da!

Dan. It's the same reason you'll see rednecks who play golf wearing Tiger Woods stuff. It's acceptable. He's not 100% black. He's...

Hattie: He's a golfer.

Dan: Right. If he was 100% black he wouldn't be allowed in Augusta [golf course].

Here the group decided that being biracial is different than being “100% black” but this wasn’t the only distinction they made. They also suggested that even without a biracial background, Obama wouldn’t have embodied the type of blackness that matters in America. He wasn’t “decidedly southern black” or “New York black.” Later in this exchange, participants would also specify that he wasn’t “from the wrong side of the tracks,” “from Harlem,” or “fifth generation.” That so many different categories were listed (including ones that seemingly overlap like New York and Harlem) suggests that participants were comfortable with the task of parsing blackness in a variety of ways. This skill came in handy when denying the relevance of race failed to account for the dynamics in American race relations they had noticed.

After the group had begun to subdivide blackness, one participant, Ellen, explicitly deemphasized the role race played in America. She summarized the group’s main point (“I think we are minimizing race, saying it’s not a matter of black and white”) and turned the group’s attention toward economic issues:

Ellen: I think we are minimizing race, saying it’s not a matter of black and white. There’s a ruling class and until time goes by and there’s time for it to integrate a little more, it just happens that the ruling class is all white still.

Kim: So then here’s the question: Obama is a melting pot in terms of his heritage. But he is also incredibly rich.

Dan: Oh yeah.

Kim: He’s not from the wrong side of the tracks, coming up...

Dan: He literally is from the elitist class.

Kim: So it’s almost like Tiger Woods became President. I wonder if that diluted the whole race question because it’s not like he came from Harlem and he’s fifth generation...

Hattie: Right.

By emphasizing the issue of class (“he literally is from the elitist class”) and continuing to subdivide blackness, participants explained President Obama’s success as something unrelated to the common black experience. By mentioning Tiger Woods, another successful person of color with uncommon wealth and an unusually mixed racial heritage, Kim summed up the group’s general consensus that the “race question” was not relevant to their analysis of President Obama’s success. In this way, the group subdivided blackness and ignored its relevance.

Participants seemed aware that other whites commonly ignore and subdivide blackness when considering Obama’s success. In the example above, for instance, no one provided or asked for a definition of any of the types of blackness mentioned. This suggests that even if they didn’t think those particular subdivisions made sense, they fully accepted the act of subdividing blackness as a familiar, reasonable, and useful discursive move. Participants even mentioned ways other whites subdivided blackness. For instance, in another group, one participant, Beth, mentioned that white voters didn’t turn against Obama because

Barack Obama is a middle or upper middle class guy, highly educated, Ivy League. He’s not black. He’s ‘one of us.’ He’s not one of ‘those people.’

Beth used air quotes when saying “one of us” and “those people” to indicate that those were not her own words but the words of other whites who had decided to ignore Obama’s blackness by parsing blackness into good and bad types. Another participant, Lynne, suggested that African Americans also subdivide blackness by saying “That’s why Michelle Obama gives him street [credibility]. She had the struggle.”

Participants did not always seem comfortable with the process of subdividing blackness. Beth seemed dismayed by the distinctions she knew other whites made. She said “Now there’s going to be ‘these blacks’ or ‘those blacks.’ A whole other, you know what I mean, a whole

other category of people to have feelings about!” Her comment and tone indicated that she felt subdividing blackness would contribute to racial problems but the group did not respond to her comment. Instead they began discussing economic disparities (“so when the poor people, the low class people become president, then we’re overcoming...”). Although their negotiation of Obama’s race started as a condemnation of whites’ tendency to explain away his blackness, Lynne ended the negotiation by doing just that. She summed up her views on Obama’s success by removing his race from consideration:

Maybe it has nothing to do with race. Maybe Barack Obama just happens to have this other thing. That’s what I’m saying. I think young people don’t think of things in these terms. Like Barack Obama comes from Hawaii, has a white mother, a black father from Kenya, and whatever. He’s just a guy. You know? I mean young people, their friends are people of all colors, nationalities, whatever. I mean my brother lives in Brooklyn and when I think of the people he knows...it’s just this range of whatevers and nobody cares.

Instead of being a black man or even a ‘good’ black man, Obama is cast as a one of the raceless “whatevers” who can easily access white social circles. In response to Lynne’s comment, Beth said “I find that’s true, but, like what you were saying before. It depends on where people live.” This started a conversation about racist whites in which the group decided again that race doesn’t matter as much as other nonracial factors (see Chapter 3). Although they use slightly different mechanisms to dismiss the relevance of blackness and whiteness, the group easily moved between these negotiations in a way that obscured the relevance of race.

Importantly, participants didn’t only use these strategies when discussing Obama. They used the same strategies when talking about people of color in general. In one simple example, a participant pointed out that the bad experience he’d had with “Niggers” (whispered) doesn’t mean all black people are bad. He said “I’ve met people who are black but they’re white in my eyes.” Another participant enthusiastically agreed “Yeah, oh yeah! They are great people. Family people. Right? They don’t have to be white they just...” The first participant jumped back in to

finish the idea “Yeah, you know what I mean. They’re just like me.” Together the two participants parsed blackness and denied it by separating out “family people” from “Niggers” and then claiming some black people are really “white.”

Other groups also differentiated between “good” African Americans and the African Americans they’d associate with racial slurs. For instance, one participant, Nathan, shared that he could always “separate the N’s from the regular black people.” He explained that he had a lot of black friends when he worked in “show business” and that these friends “know who the N’s are. I used to feel guilty about it till Chris Rock did a bit. He said ‘I’ve never been ripped off by a black man but nigga has.’ I was rolling on the floor laughing.” This comment sparked a discussion about the difference between the “middle class blacks” and poorer African Americans:

Ian:           The general voter doesn’t see...If you go on the busses...the normal people who ride busses and shop downtown. The black people they see, every other word is F this and the N word. So when Obama was running for President they thought ‘What is going to happen?’ They don’t see the middle class blacks so they didn’t know what he would be like.

Paul:           They don’t see that.

John:          So it goes to what we were saying. That it’s economic inequality. The ghetto verses everything else.

Annie:         Your economic status will cause more suffering than your race

In this example, we see participants subdividing blackness by distinguishing between “N’s” and “regular black people” and between President Obama and the black people one might hear cursing on a city bus. We also see the group removing race from consideration by focusing on economic difference and declaring that “your economic status will cause more suffering than your race.” These two strategies (ignoring and subdividing blackness) gave participants a way to

keep blackness as a meaningful and causative factor when it ‘worked’ to explain difference without tying their discussions to any one definition of blackness.

Participants had to negotiate the implications of references to people of color. Whether these references were made as part of a claim about racial tolerance or as part of a claim about the definition of blackness, their negotiations had implications for the maintenance of racial ideology. Specifically, these negotiations resulted in the three important outcomes. First, by incorporating so many references to people of color into their discussions, participants hid the extent to which they were racially isolated. Second, by defining racial group membership in terms of behaviors, participants reinforced negative stereotypes and ignored the way racial stratification impacts life chances. Third, participants depicted whiteness as an achieved status that is equally available to all. In the following section, I discuss these three outcomes in greater detail.

## **4.3 OUTCOMES**

### **4.3.1 Hiding racial segregation**

Most of my participants were socially isolated from people of color. Although Pittsburgh, is only 64.8% non-Hispanic white (Census Bureau 2012), only eight participants had multiple cross-race relationships that they described as meaningful and ongoing. (This included three who have been in intimate interracial relationships.) Two other participants reported having only one ongoing and meaningful relationship with a person of color. Most participants, 18 in all, reported having regular contact with people of color at work or in their neighborhoods but did not

describe these relationships as meaningful or close. These 18 participants were not spatially segregated from communities of color but they were not socially integrated either. Six said they had no contact with people of color at all. Participants may have exaggerated or understated the depth of relationships they've had with people of color but, if we take them at their word, approximately 70% were meaningfully socially segregated from people of color. They simply did not have many significant relationships or positive interactions with people of color to talk about.

One might think such racial isolation would limit participants' ability to talk about race. Shouldn't they seem uncomfortable talking about communities of color when they've had so little personal experience interacting with these communities? Shouldn't they hesitate to claim they know something about groups with whom they never interact? The race talk literature suggests that whites get around this problem by exaggerating the quantity and quality of their cross-race relationships. Their exaggerations hide the extent of their racial segregation and enable whites to claim they know about race because they personally know people of color. My data suggests that whites have access to another solution in group conversation because the dynamic nature of collective discourse provides them with resources they don't have as individuals.

Specifically, participants in a group conversation use each other's stories about cross-race interactions/observations, along with their own, to hide the implications of their social segregation from communities of color. As noted above, participants did not exaggerate the nature of many of their relationships with people of color even when they easily could have. Instead, each participant claimed only a few if any close cross-race relationships and made only a few references to less intimate relationships and observations. By sharing their few stories of



cross-race interaction, adding stories about people of color they had observed, and negotiating the implications of these stories, each group built a shared information bank from which all could draw when trying to ground, illustrate, or contest claims about people of color.

As long as they had access to each other's references, participants' own lack of meaningful cross-race interaction remained obscured. In this way, their references had a cumulative effect: as they negotiated the implications of each new reference added to the discussion, they also strengthened the appearance of their own racial integration.

#### **4.3.2 Sustaining negative stereotypes and hiding racial inequality**

Although participants frequently mentioned their objection to racial stereotypes, the ways they negotiated claims about blackness often reinforced these stereotypes. Specifically, by parsing blackness into 'good' and 'bad' subcategories and by suggesting that one can lose blackness by gaining economic, educational, or political success, participants left room for blackness to stay at least partially defined by negative characteristics. In addition to reinforcing negative stereotypes, how they talked about people of color hid the existence of racial inequality by suggesting that race itself plays no part in life chances.

Many of the examples listed above demonstrate this Outcome. For instance, consider the earlier example of Grace, the grandmother who claimed that her love for her grandchildren demonstrated her racial tolerance. In that exchange, the group challenged Grace to make sense of her negative feelings for her black son-in-law. She argued that she was against his personality not his race ("he's mean and stupid"). But the group linked the son-in-law's individual behavior back to his race by saying "He gives the black people a bad name." It follows that if African Americans acted better, they would achieve both a better reputation and more success. By stating

that stereotypes about African American men are the fault of African Americans themselves, the participants reinforced a negative stereotype of African American men as mean and stupid despite the Grace's objection. By indicating that individual behaviors defined life chances, the group suggested that racial inequality is not a structural constraint.

We saw similar constructions whenever groups parsed blackness into good and bad subdivisions. When groups denied President Obama had a claim to blackness ("He has no attributes or aspects that you would identify with the culture of a black man. He's as white as the four of us."), they left in place the idea that those *with* a claim to blackness may not be as acceptable. Similarly, the group that decided Obama's success was partly due to the fact that whites didn't see him as "decidedly southern black" or "New York black" left in place the idea that there was something less acceptable about those groups. By talking about blackness as being on "average" a negative thing and talking about successful people of color as being exceptions to blackness, participants reinforced negative definitions of blackness.

Interestingly, participants often hid racial inequality even while they were explicitly condemning racism. Instead of arguing that racism is bad practice because it unfairly limits the life chance of certain groups, participants argued that racism is nonsensical thinking because no group's life chances are limited due to race. For instance, participants would attempt to demonstrate that racial stereotypes don't hold by arguing that the real differences between successful and unsuccessful groups are economic. Participants repeatedly returned to ideas such as "That it's economic inequality. The ghetto verses everything else," "Your economic status will cause more suffering than your race," or "race doesn't matter at all. It's your class that matters." Although a focus on economic and educational inequality has merits, this approach demanded that racial inequality be seen only in nonracial terms and so prevented any analysis of

racism as a structural problem with real consequences for people of color. In this way their talk about people of color operated like their talk about racist whites: it enabled them to dodge consideration of race by turning their analysis to nonracial factors.

### **4.3.3 Turning whiteness into an achieved status**

Participants didn't only link negative individual characteristics to blackness. They also linked positive characteristics to whiteness *regardless of the race of the actor*. That is, people of color who acted certain ways were labeled white (ex. "he is as white as the four of us" or "they are white in my eyes") and their status as representatives of the black community was questioned. By talking this way, participants depicted whiteness as an achieved status that anyone could attain through certain actions. They also placed blame (explicitly or implicitly) on people of color who failed to secure the benefits of white privilege. Consequently, talking about people of color as being "like whites" hid the role of systematic and structural racial inequality in limiting life chances<sup>4</sup>.

When participants gave the impression that whiteness is earned through individual effort, they depicted whiteness as a status anyone could achieve. Certain people of color were explicitly praised for having achieved whiteness despite their original racial classification. Perhaps the most telling and frequent example was how groups challenged Obama's categorization as a black man based on how he acted, his education, and his political success. Importantly, they could have simply used Obama's biracial status to challenge his blackness. That they spent so much

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<sup>4</sup> Linking certain behaviors to whiteness regardless of the race of the actor is seen also in some African American groups (Tyson 2011). Further study is needed to determine how the accusation of "acting white" operates differently among whites than African Americans.

time negotiating the meaning of other behavioral characteristics suggests that linking definitions of whiteness to individual actions is an important part of how whites hide the role of racial privilege.

Participants realized that they are not the only ones who link whiteness to class and behavior. One participant, Lynne, shared that she teaches at a high school where the students treat the low-income black kids differently than anyone else. In her school,

Most of the black kids are from group homes. There are four or five group homes. They hide them so you don't know where they are but the kids come from all over the state. There are lots of kids from Philly. The other kids call them Group Home Kids. 'Oh, he's a group home kid'.

The other group members were surprised to hear about these group homes and decided "it must be hell" for those students to have to come to high school with all the upper middle class white students. Lynne explained that she has one African American student, Jackie, who is "upper middle class, totally assimilated in every way, nothing like the other [black] kids." Unlike the Group Home Kids, this student achieved whiteness through her economic status.

The kids made t-shirts for the science club. And one kid...They did cheesy designs just for fun and one kid made a picture of little stick figures with all different skin pigmentations holding hands, just to be funny. So one student looked at the shirt and joked 'Ah, yeah. That might be accurate if we had any black people in the club' and then she went 'Oops!' Someone said 'We do!' and she went 'Oh my god.' Jackie was like right next to her or something and Jackie just cracked up.

The group laughed at this story and concluded it is "totally classist" because the students were thinking "'black people aren't like you, you're like me.'" They determined that class matters more than race. Lynne summed up the group's comments:

The kids are totally colorblind by race but class? I think they are totally classist. The wealthy African American kids? No one even notices that they might have any kind of perspective as a black person. Because many of my students think of black kids as poor kids. You know, cuz that's what they see in the media. So Jackie is not black because she's not poor.

The group acknowledged that other white people, in this case the students at a predominantly white upper-middle class high school, see race differently when economic and educational success is part of an individual's profile. Their exchange also suggested that they think racial status is determined by class status. Some participants regarded it as potentially problematic because it still defined blackness in negative terms (“Black people aren't like me. You're like me”) and dismissed black identity. Even the high school students in the story realized that Jackie's feelings may have been hurt by her classmate's mistake. Still they saw this as progress. For instance, Lynne mentioned that “Jackie just cracked up,” suggesting that she was glad the student didn't mind being seen as white by her classmates. Participants agreed that class was what really made the “Group Home Kids” different and this conversation led them into a conversation about how President Obama isn't really black because he is educated and successful. In the end, they seemed comfortable concluding that race matters less than class in determining life chances and that there are no race-specific barriers to success in place for people of color.

When participants talked about racial privilege as if it is earned and not ascribed, they reinforced the idea that racial oppression is also earned. This made it easier to blame unequal social outcomes on either the personal failings of people of color or on issues other than race. As long as this mechanism dominated group discussion, there was little room for an analysis of racial inequality or white privilege.

#### 4.4 SUMMARY

References to people of color provided source material upon which participants could base their claims about racial groups and racism. By mixing their stories together, participants gained access to a larger amount of this source material and hid the extent to which they were racially isolated. Importantly, participants could exaggerate the extent to which they were familiar with the lives of people of color even without exaggerating the exact nature of their cross-race experiences. Because this is only possible when participants have access to each other's stories, this aspect of race talk operates very differently in group conversation than in one-to-one conversation.

Having access to so many stories strengthened participants' ability to negotiate their claims and draw conclusions about what people of color think, do, and experience. These negotiations resulted in a reinforcement of dominant negative racial stereotypes. This reinforcement was sometimes subtle. By parsing blackness into 'good' and 'bad' subcategories, participants could acknowledge and even praise the existence of successful people of color while blaming African Americans for race-related social problems. Casting racial inequality as the outcome of troublesome African American behavior, participants implied that whiteness is an achieved status that can be earned through good behavior. Because of these ways of talking, groups had difficulty discussing race-based privilege as a structural phenomenon.

## **5.0 BREAKING THE PATTERN**

Although participants' conversations about race consistently followed the patterns I analyzed in Chapters 3 and 4, they occasionally interrupted their group's negotiations and attempted alternative ways to negotiate race related claims. These interruptions didn't directly challenge dominant racial ideology in most cases. Also, they didn't represent fully formed alternative ways of talking. Instead, they impeded one of the patterns analyzed above and opened space for a different form of negotiation. By analyzing moments when participants interrupted dominant negotiation patterns, I found that participants highlighted white privilege or structural inequality by 1) insisting that celebrity status comes with an obligation to be racially sensitive; 2) emphasizing the racial privilege of whites who say racist things; 3) identifying how minority racial status impacts life chances; 4) linking contemporary race relations to historical racial injustices; 5) acknowledging the ways white privilege limits whites' ability to understand racism; and 6) questioning racist remarks and claims. In this chapter, I discuss these deviations from the dominant patterns.

### **5.1 "CELEBRITIES SHOULD KNOW BETTER"**

As discussed in Chapter 3, participants commonly hid the role of structural inequality when discussing racist whites by focusing on how these whites lack (nonracial) privilege, like

education or wealth. This pattern was interrupted, however, when participants discussed white celebrities who said racist things. This did not happen often. Two groups spoke indirectly about the obligations of people in the media to say race neutral things<sup>5</sup>. Another two groups discussed specific cases when white celebrities got in trouble for saying racist remarks. In each of these groups, participants discussed celebrity racist remarks differently than how they discussed the racism of other whites. Perhaps because celebrity status is generally associated with more privileged lifestyles, participants didn't disregard privilege in their analysis of white celebrities. Instead, they explicitly grappled with celebrities' privileged social location. These negotiations linked privilege to a social obligation to be racially sensitive in public.

Participants discussed two infamous instances of celebrity racist outbursts: when the actor/comedian Michael Richardson used racist slurs to criticize African American hecklers in a comedy club and when the radio talk show host Don Imus made racist comments about African American athletes on the Rutgers University women's basketball team. In both cases, participants explicitly labeled the celebrities' actions as racist before negotiating the implications of their remarks. Unlike when discussing other white racists, they did not excuse Richardson's and Imus' racist remarks. Instead they concluded that these white men should take responsibility for their words because they had an ethical obligation to appear race neutral and treat all racial groups with respect when speaking in public.

When discussing Michael Richardson, who group members called "Kramer" after his famous role on the hit television sitcom *Seinfeld*, one participant Larry brought up the night that Richardson said "'nigger this, nigger that'" to his audience at a comedy show. Larry said that

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<sup>5</sup> Specifically, one group critiqued Rush Limbaugh for influencing uneducated whites with his racist remarks and one participant made a general claim that "celebrities should know better than to say that stuff" after her group had discussed the extent to which the media focused on race during Obama's campaign.



“everyone” thought Richardson’s use of racial slurs were “a part of his comedy routine not his true feelings” until the night in question. “At this show, there were a few black guys in the audience and he just lost his shit.” The other participants joined in describing Richardson’s outburst:

Susan: Yeah he got into a lot of trouble because of it.

Grace: He called them Niggers right on stage. A couple of black people were heckling him on stage and he said something like “Why don’t you Niggers just go home!” and they had paid to see his show!

Larry: He got into a world of trouble.

Grace: But the white people were heckling him too so he targeted those people.

The group established the exact nature of Richardson’s racist remarks just like they had described other whites who had said racist things (“He called them Niggers right on stage”). But unlike when discussing those other whites, the group did not go on to discuss how Richardson’s comments were due to a lack of privilege. Instead, they negotiated the implications of Richardson’s remarks by discussing how his position as a public figure placed extra obligations on him:

Larry: The thing is, when you are in the public eye, you have to watch everything you say. The average person doesn’t worry about that sort of thing.

Susan: But these kinds of people need to watch what they’re saying.

Grace: You know people of all colors help them make a living. That’s job security for them, when they come to their shows.

Susan: Kramer lost his contract out there. His commercials.

Grace: Right

Larry: He lost a lot of money for that.

Grace:           And rightly so he should have!

Here we see the group negotiate the implications of Richardson's outburst and the penalty he paid for it. While they all agreed that his racist slurs cost him ("his contract," "his commercials," and "a lot of money"), Grace seemed certain this penalty was well deserved. In this exchange, the group established that Richardson's position "in the public eye" required that he "watch everything" he said. As their interaction continued, it became clear that all participants did not agree that Richardson should have been penalized for his outburst.

Larry:           Well, I can't...

Grace:           He should have contained himself!

Larry:           I don't know. Well, I don't know what kind of situation was out there. I wasn't...

Grace:           No. I heard it over and over again. All they was doing was heckling him. And they had been drinking but a lot of other people who go there have too. He just went off on them.

Susan:           He lost his temper big time.

Larry:           Sometimes those things just come out...

Grace:           He should have just walked off the stage if he couldn't take it!

Susan:           He was in the wrong business if he couldn't take the heckling. He's probably thought about that a thousand and one times since them

Larry:           He definitely regrets the situation. He's come out and apologized.

Here Larry tried to disagree with the claim that Richardson deserved the many financial penalties he faced for making racist comments. First, Larry tried to argue that he didn't know enough about the situation to judge Richardson, ("Well, I don't know what kind of situation was out there") but Grace insisted the situation was exactly as it appeared ("No. I heard it over and

over again”). Larry then tried to minimize the racist outbursts (“sometimes those things just come out...”), but this too was rejected by the group. The other participants argued that Richardson had an obligation to “contain himself” and the freedom to make other choices (“he should have just walked off the stage if he couldn’t take it,” and “he was in the wrong business if he couldn’t take the heckling”) and so was responsible for his actions. This is a very different Outcome than this group had achieved when discussing other whites. Instead of dismissing the racism of racist whites as an unfortunate side effect of various nonprivileged statuses, this time the group kept a focus on the racism and the privileges behind it.

In another example, a group discussed Don Imus’ racist remarks about the Rutgers University Women’s Basketball team. After establishing that he was “running his mouth. Calling female athletes nappy headed hoes because they were black,” the group negotiated the implications of his racist remarks.

Steve: Wrong move. He had the right, I guess, but there are consequences.

Sully: I think he got off easy. Way too easy.

Mike: He’s going to get reactions for the rest of his life. It will never stop.

Sully: He didn’t have to say that stuff. He could have talked about the team without it.

Steve: And he’s on the radio so there is no excuse. People listen to that stuff and what do they think?

Sully: He should have to pay for that.

Steve: A lot of racists get off easy. Winston Churchill. Mark Fuhman from the O.J. [Simpson] trial. He was shown to be a racist and now he is a Fox News analyst.

Sully: Wow. I did not know that. Oh my God.

Steve: Yeah. He was proven to be racist in court, using derogatory phrases. And Winston Churchill? I just learned he was so racist against Native Americans. I can't believe he holds up [is honored] in the history books.

Just like the group that discussed Richardson's racist outburst, these participants identified how Imus was wrong and then negotiated whether he had the obligation to do better. Also, like the other group, they concluded that he had options ("He could have talked about the team without it") and influence ("People listen to that stuff"). Because they focused on his relative privilege, the Outcome of this interaction was different from when they discussed other white racists. Instead of dismissing his racism, they held him accountable for it. They even brought up other famous racist whites who "got off easy."

Importantly, the groups' focus on privilege did not result in a critical analysis of privilege in general or of white privilege specifically. The appropriateness of giving celebrities' access to a stage from which they could influence public opinion was never questioned. The ways in which these celebrities, their stage, and their access to their stage were shaped by whiteness were also never discussed. Instead, participants questioned what celebrities did with their nonracial privilege. Participants portrayed celebrity privilege as a socially desirable status that comes with certain obligations when it comes to race talk. In particular, privileged white celebrities were expected to maintain a public discourse of racial tolerance. Their failure to do so was declared as a misuse of privilege. Participants' refusal to dismiss the seriousness of racist claims in these cases stands in stark contrast to how they handled other stories of whites' racism.

Celebrity people of color were not held to this same standard. In fact, participants seemed to prefer black celebrities who critiqued the African American community and made sweeping generalizations about what black people are like. Participants mentioned agreeing with famous African Americans who differentiated between regular black people and "niggers" (Chris Rock),

critiqued African American parents (Bill Cosby), or insisted on being called African American when they had no relationship to Africa (Whoopi Goldberg). Unlike white celebrities who were criticized for publicly critiquing people of color, these black celebrities were appreciated for their willingness to discuss what participants labeled as weaknesses within the black community.

## 5.2 “HE SAID IT BECAUSE HE’S RACIST”

Other than the two instances when focus groups discussed racist white celebrities, there was only one instance when a participant interrupted his group’s efforts to create theories of intersectionality that explain away racism. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions based on one case, this interaction provides an interesting glimpse into how whites can identify efforts to dodge an acknowledgement of racism. It also suggests that an insistence on taking racism seriously may not lead to much negotiation but also may not always be fully rejected by whites.

In this Initiating Action, Paul told a story about standing up to a white customer who had said something racist to another customer in his restaurant 16 years ago. That day, the owner of a big local manufacturing plant brought the president of the Coca-Cola European division into Paul’s restaurant.

I was busy that day. I had his table set up, he was bringing a party of eight, all from Europe, and I had another party of eight celebrating a guy’s 85<sup>th</sup> birthday. My restaurant was in this little town. So he walked in with the President of Coca-cola. They were dressed in a couple thousand dollar suits, you know, fifteen hundred dollar pairs of shoes. There was all this class about them. The President was a really good looking tall, tall big black man dressed to the hilt. So I’m being introduced and at the same time I’m walking up to shake his hand, this man who was celebrating his 85 birthday stands up and says “Who let that big black Nigger in here?” Loud as could be. Everyone stopped. It was lunch, every table’s taken. Everyone stops.

This compelling story about clearly unjustified and blatant racism held the group's attention. After a brief pause, one member said "You were mortified" and Paul agreed:

I was mortified. I was so embarrassed. I apologized to the Coke President. I apologized to him, I apologized to my friend who owned the [local manufacturing] company. And then I went to the table and said to the 85 year old man "You have to leave now." They said "Well, we haven't had dessert yet" and I said "You aren't getting dessert. I don't even want your money. Just get out of here."

When Paul finished his story about telling the racist customer to leave, another participant, Ian, immediately asked "Now, were they drunk?" This question attempted to explain racism as merely the side effect of drunkenness. This fit how the group had handled other stories about white racists (see Chapter 3). But Paul would not allow the racist comment to be dismissed. He quickly responded in a clear slightly raised voice: "No. They weren't drunk. They were racist, very racist." He then went back to telling his story. He shared that his wife had worried that rejecting the 85 year old man would hurt their business. Before Paul could explain that it had hurt his business, Ian interrupted him again:

Ian: But did he do that because he was an older gentleman, you know, with age...

Paul: He did that because he was racist.

Ian: But did he think that nobody would...

Paul: He was a racist and he was big in the town. The wait staff lived in this town and they were horrified that I would speak up to this guy. But it was so offensive. In the end, it did affect my business.

This exchange is like no other moment of interaction I observed. Paul explicitly, repeatedly, and unequivocally insisted that the white man's racism and his privilege ("he was big in the town") were the cause of his racist remarks. He refused to allow any theories of intersectionality

(drunkenness, age, etc) to be negotiated by the group. This interrupted the group's tendency to downplay racism and emphasize the lower status social locations whites can occupy.

After offering some supportive words (“You had no choice” and “It sounded like what you had to do”), the group moved on to discuss other things. Because I only had this one instance to analyze, I have no way of knowing how groups would typically handle this deviation from their dominant pattern. Compared to other focus groups, this group was generally sensitive to race issues and well informed about the role of racism in American history. A less racially liberal group may have objected more strenuously to the focus on racism and privilege or changed the subject more quickly. Similarly, groups may respond differently to a focus on racism and privilege when the Initiating Action contains a less clear cut example of blatant racism. More research is needed to determine how whites negotiate an insistence on seeing racism and privilege as directly causative.

### **5.3 “HE STILL HAD TO FACE MAJOR CHALLENGES”**

In Chapter 4, I explained how participants removed race from consideration when discussing successful people of color and how they linked racial status to good/bad behavior. These patterns of interaction made it difficult for participants to address structural inequality. Occasionally, however, participants interrupted this dominant way of talking about race and pushed to keep their interactions focused on how racism targets individuals regardless of how they act. In these rare cases they used the Initiating Action to start a Negotiation of how particular people of color experienced racism despite their good behavior. For instance, one participant, Rachel, shared about how black families in her gentrified neighborhood face racism:

There is a middle class black family on my street and I just want to go up to them and apologize because they can't be comfortable. It doesn't matter what they do. They are treated bad because of being black. In Pittsburgh, neighborhoods are very racially divided. I live in a neighborhood that was mostly black and now it's more white and there are coffee shops and art galleries. It's really changing. There is such anger towards people who are not the same as everyone else moving into their neighborhoods. Pittsburgh is old city, an old county in the U.S.

By pointing out that racism is embedded in the city and in the greater Pittsburgh area, Rachel pushed the group to see racism as structural not based on individual behavior ("It doesn't matter what they do"). The group then began negotiating the implications of this claim by discussing inequality within major institutions. First, they discussed the educational system ("Education is something the government can do. I was an education major and we can start in elementary school giving everyone an equal chance.") This led to a brief discussion of residential segregation ("Some neighborhood schools are underfunded and then it ends up meaning you see race problems with dropping out and not becoming part of society. But it is not the race it is the segregation"). Then, after mentioning that there are similar problems with the health care system ("Also health care. There is inequality in that." "Right. Don't African American children still have lower birth weights?"), the group concluded that "there are still systematic problems that stop people from being equal."

This exchange was unique in that it focused on multiple overlapping institutions and acknowledged the role of race in determining access to and treatment within these systems. Unlike other times that groups discussed black neighbors, this group did not ignore race or subdivide blackness into good and bad categories. Instead, they acknowledged the role of race in general and blackness in particular. They clearly identified how being African American can limit the life chances of even successful middle class families.



Participants' references to structural forces were infrequent and fleeting. When a reference to a person of color was linked to a more structural analysis, participants usually did not negotiate the implications of the claims. For instance, during one group discussion of Obama's race, a participant interrupted their efforts to ignore the relevance of blackness. She hurriedly said, "He still had to face major challenges just being how dark as he is. I mean, whether he's black enough for you or not, he still had to. Because people do...he received it! The bad treatment!" Her comments insisted that race made more sense if seen as a fixed status linked to physical traits and unequal forms of treatment. As such, it was a break from the pattern of seeing race as fluid and tied to personal behaviors. Her group did not embrace this alternative approach, however. Another participant immediately argued, "I think that's true but I think that ultimately this election transcended that and made all people, I mean, all people are inspired by it anyway." This led the group back to a discussion of Obama's success in which they parsed blackness into good and bad categories (see Chapter 4). Despite the fact that the overall pattern was not changed by the participants' insistence that Obama experienced racism, it was briefly interrupted, providing an opportunity for alternative views to be expressed and for the direction of the negotiation to be reconsidered.

#### **5.4 "THERE'S HISTORY AROUND THIS STUFF"**

Occasionally, participants attempted to identify how America's racist past continues to impact race relations today. This required them to see race as a structural phenomena that impacts people in ways over which they have no control. Usually, statements about the role of history were incorporated into group discussion but not actually negotiated by the group.

However, one group did negotiate the implications of a historically important form of racialization: the “one drop rule” which prevented mixed race Americans from claiming whiteness (Fredrickson 2002). In their discussion, they broke the pattern of parsing or ignoring blackness. Although it is hard to draw many conclusions from one case, this interaction suggests ways that providing accurate information about American history may interrupt dominant race talk patterns.

During their discussion of Obama’s racial status, one group stopped parsing blackness in order to negotiate the implications of the one-drop rule:

Mike: If Barack is really representing his roots, I mean, he also has Caucasian in his makeup.

Sully: Right, he’s both.

Mike: And more than that. There’s not just two things going on in his background.

Sully: He’s not fully black. He’s mulatto, actually.

Mike: He’s all types of...

Sully: Right, which is why he...

Steve: But in American, you’re black.

Bob: Yeah, if he has one tenth blood line, you’re bla...you’re a minority. But I think everyone, if you go back far enough, everyone has some kind of race in them.

Mike: Well, they say we all come from Africa, if you go back far enough. That is where all humanity is from. I really subscribe to that.

Steve: It’s called the ‘one-drop rule.’ The origin of that is the slave trade. Where if you had any noticeable blackness you were considered black so you could be a slave. So when they say Obama is a black man they are referencing the slave trade and how he would have been treated as a slave.

Sully: Yeah, yeah, that’s true. So he is all black no matter what he comes from.

Mike and Sully followed the dominant pattern of ignoring Obama's blackness by emphasizing his white ancestry. Steve and Bob interrupted this negotiation to mention the relevance of the one-drop rule. By stating "But in American, you're black" and clarifying that "one tenth blood line" was all Obama needed to be labeled black, these participants suggested that Obama's status as a black man should not so easily be disregarded. Although Bob brought up the issue of blood quantum, his conclusion that "everyone has some kind of race in them" suggested that racial differentiation doesn't matter and that whites don't have race. Another participant affirmed this sentiment by arguing we all have the same ancestry. This required more negotiation. Steve was not willing to go along with this dominant way of talking about race. Instead, he refocused group discussion on the one drop rule and made it clear that Obama's status as a black man is fixed because it is determined by history, not the unique circumstances of his upbringing. This was enough to interrupt the group's negotiation and lead to a different Outcome – the acknowledgement that Obama is in fact "all black."

Generally, participants avoided discussing historical racial oppression. Some evidence suggests that they lacked confidence in their knowledge and understanding of American history of race relations. For instance, groups frequently stumbled over historical facts and stopped to ask each other clarifying questions like "Was there even slavery in the North? I thought that was something the British did in the South before we were even a country," "Did the Black Panthers kill as many people as the KKK [Klu Klux Klan]?" and "Weren't race relations fine until MLK [Martin Luther King] got assassinated? That's when the trouble started." Groups also stumbled over definitions of race related terms, asking each other questions like "Are Hispanics a race?," "Can you still say 'colored people'?", or "What are Middle Eastern people? Can't they be black or white?" Such ignorance and uncertainty surely helps shape dominant race talk. If whites had a

more complete and accurate understanding of historical and contemporary race relations, they might negotiate race related conversations very differently.

### **5.5 “I’M NOT BLACK SO I DON’T KNOW”**

Although their negotiations of race talk usually excluded a discussion of white privilege, participants sometimes acknowledged that their own viewpoint was limited by race. They also occasionally interrupted the pattern of ignoring blackness by telling stories about individual people of color who had been negatively impacted by racism.

The acknowledgement of white privilege was largely implicit; only three times did participants explicitly claim that their race prevented them from accessing accurate information about race. In one group, a participant used the phrase “I’m not black so I don’t know” to interrupt another participant’s claims about how people of color think. Another group also identified that whiteness limited their ability to fully understand race issues. When discussing whether people should talk about race issues more often, one participant pointed out that “four white guys sitting around talking about racism” may not be the best way to get to use talk to improve race relations:

Tom: People are so protective of racism and maybe even if people talked about it more

Frank: Yeah like we’re doing today

Tom: Yeah but I don’t know if four white guys sitting around talking about racism....Cuz that’s not like...

Sam: It depends too on how you want to define racism.

Rich: Yeah.

Sam: It's kind of like an overused word.

Frank: I think it would be nice to have a black guy here with us.

Tom: I don't know a black guy

(Laughter)

Rich: You're right. A black guy. Not a guy that gets changed around [becomes aggressive against whites when with] two or three other people. A black person. An African American

Frank: And see how he feels

Rich: I would like that too. But not one who turns into someone different [who begins to behave differently]. A street person.

Frank: Cuz there's two sides to racism

In this exchange, the idea of having a person of color join the group was so compelling it was raised twice. One participant explained that he'd like to see how a black person "feels" about race "because there's two sides to racism." Rich kept interrupting to insist that only certain types of African Americans would be useful in that context (see Chapter 4 for more on subdividing blackness). No one objected to the claim that a person of color would have a unique perspective that "four white guys" would not be able to access on their own.

In another group, a participant pointed out that being white means never having to think about race. She mentioned that her African American coworkers paid attention to the race of the quarterback when evaluating sports teams but she didn't have to think about that:

I know that as a white person I don't have to think about [race]. I mean, when there were two teams in Super Bowl and one had a black quarterback...I was talking to a coworker and said I'd pick one team and she was like 'Oh.' I didn't realize it but she was saying that she was rooting for the black quarterback. And I just didn't get it.

This participant linked her race to her failure to see the significance of a black quarterback. This was an interruption of the group's tendency to ignore the role of white privilege by focusing on nonracial issues.

This group also interrupted another race talk pattern as they continued to negotiate the claim that people of color think about race differently than whites. One participant countered that assuming African Americans prefer black people may be more problematic than failing to see that they might. She said "When whites see a black person and think 'Of course you'll be voting for Obama,' that's not fair." The group briefly negotiated the implications of the dual pressure of having to think about race and having people assume you are always thinking about race:

Mary: It must be frustrating for African Americans

Claire: To have people assume or not assume?

Mary: Both

Beth: You can't have it both ways!

Mary: Yes, you can! It's frustrating both ways.

In this exchange, participants grappled with the burden racism places on African Americans who must think about race more than whites and also defend themselves against the assumption that they think only about race. This emphasized the way racism impacts people of color regardless of other nonracial factors like individual behavior or class status. As such, it interrupted the group's tendency to subdivide blackness so that it includes a category of 'good' black people who aren't impacted by race.

Interestingly, participants often used stories about hypothetical people of color<sup>6</sup> to establish that people of color experience discrimination. For example, one group discussed a recent incident in which a white militia member killed a police officer and imagined how the media would have handled it had the white militia member been a black man instead. They established that it “would have been totally different” because “he would have been crucified” by the media. This group also discussed what might happen if a black family moved to the more rural county outside of Pittsburgh. They decided that the family “wouldn’t stand a chance” because “white people out there don’t like different groups.” Another group discussed how a hypothetical black man in an all-white town would have to “personally shake hands with” white people and get to know them so they could “find out what makes you more similar to people who are different.” They briefly discussed what a burden this would be for that hypothetical black man but that it may be the only way to ensure whites saw “it’s not that ‘he’s black - he’s scary.’ It’s that he’s a musician, he’s this, he’s that.” In each of these negotiations, participants used the hypothetical person of color to demonstrate the existence of racism and how it impacts subordinate racial groups.

Why did participants use hypothetical people of color to make these claims? Possibly, their racial isolation meant they had witnessed or heard about few instances of real racism. Certainly, stories about racial discrimination are often ignored or understated in the media and in history books. Without personal experience, participants might not have had many real stories of racism to use. But even if they had access to real stories, participants may have preferred to use hypothetical cases. Because hypothetical people were designed by the speaker, other participants couldn’t mine these stories for nonracial characteristics that would divert the group’s attention

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<sup>6</sup> I considered a reference to be hypothetical if the person of color referenced was explicitly nonexistent and detailed enough to have defining social characteristics and/or a worldview.

away from race. Therefore, hypothetical cases couldn't be negotiated using the same patterns of talk that participants used to ignore or subdivide blackness. Also, the hypothetical cases were presented as illustrations of social patterns, so the individuals used in these stories represented groups. This interrupted participants' tendency to talk about race as an individual level phenomena. Hypothetical cases effectively interrupted dominant patterns of talk.

## **5.6 "LEANING TOWARD A RACIST WAY OF SAYING SOMETHING"**

The most direct way that participants interrupted race talk was by confronting racist remarks. Two focus groups included participants who said explicitly racist things. Although participants initially overlooked these remarks, both groups eventually directly confronted the offensive comments. These confrontations were polite and did not require the racist remarks be retracted. Still these moments showed that participants were willing to directly interrupt problematic race talk even when talking with strangers.

In one group, Tom had tried to challenge potentially racist claims throughout the group discussion. For instance, when another participant, Rich, mentioned being afraid of black churches because of how the congregation was "screaming and yelling at each other and [hands] slapping," Tom made a somewhat vague comment about "openness and change" and how "change doesn't always come natural. Sometimes you have to endure a few things maybe the wrong way in order to really embrace it." Tom was trying to link the church comment to an earlier story Rich had told about being attacked by a few black men one night years ago. But instead of making that connection directly, Tom said:



If we boring white guys go to church and stand there with our heads bowed and sing and you know some of these black guys are jumping up and down. Maybe that's not, maybe that's not comfortable for the average white guy. While the average black guy thinks 'You people are boring!' You know? You know what I mean?

By comparing stereotypical black and white worship styles, Tom argued that the group shouldn't judge the African American congregation because their style of worship is no more inherently wrong than the "boring" style he associated with whiteness. Rich hesitatingly agreed with this point ("Yeah, right, I...me too.") but mentioned again his previous experience getting beat up by African American men:

Yeah, right. I...me, too. But when there's ten or twelve of them and I'm like 'Oh man, I'm out of here'. You know what I mean? But that was then. That was what 16, 17 years ago. Since then I've matured with Christ. You know what I mean? I'm different. But I'm just saying at one time, I would have had an issue but not now. It's just hard to be around things that are different.

In this exchange, Tom confronted the negative view of African Americans by emphasizing the value of "openness and change" and encouraging him to reconsider how he looks at racial difference. Rich attempted to respond positively to Tom's comments but would not give up his instance that African Americans are potentially dangerous. Neither seemed terribly content with how they left things at this point in the conversation. At the end of the conversation, Tom tried again to confront Rich's way of talking about race:

Tom: I'll make one point and it's risky but I'm going to make it. Sometimes you hear some verbiage or chatter that is going on with no bad intent. It's just the way it came off that could be bothersome. Do you remember when you were talking about, um, the guy that you were really close friends with that was black and then he got around, um, he got around three others...to me, if I'm sitting around a table full of black people and, and they tell a story about a white friend that they had and then they made the comment 'and then he went around three others...' I mean, to me, potentially that's a sort of....

Rich:           It sounded racist.

Tom clearly wanted to confront Rich's way of talking about African Americans. He hesitated, suggesting he was nervous about how the group would take his comments, and before he could directly label the story as racist, Rich interrupted him and said "it sounded racist." This seemed to surprise Tom who went on to repeat the label in a softer way by saying:

Well, it seems like leaning toward a racist way of saying something. I mean, stuff comes out of our mouth and there's some tension talking about it. There's no real bad... You can tell all of us in this room... It's sort of an uncomfortable topic but really we're trying to learn. We're trying to embrace this thing and discuss it in the right manner but that tone would definitely offend somebody who's black.

Having labeled the story as "leaning toward a racist way of saying something," Tom reassured the group that he knows they are all "trying to learn" and "embrace this thing." Still he stuck to his claim that Rich's comments "would definitely offend somebody who's black." Tom's comments were well received by Rich who immediately and enthusiastically commented:

And I agree with you totally. Because when I heard you say that I got chills running and I thought 'Dang I did say that!' And I didn't mean it that way. You know what I mean? Because I teach my children that we are all equal but yeah, I'm glad you said that because that made me think and realize something. Because I don't...I'm not...I don't view myself racist at all. But yeah I guess I did say that. I didn't mean it as that but I could see where someone could get offended at that. Yeah, Yeah, it's good. I'm glad you...Yeah, this dude's alright, man! (laughter) Yeah, I never thought of that! But it's true. I guess the reason I say that is the night ended up bad! I was on the ground. You know what I mean. But that was 18, 19 years ago and I'm fine with it now. I guess until they, no dang! 'They'!

After hearing Rich admit to saying something potentially racist without meaning to be offensive, the group laughed as he caught himself in another potentially racist phrase. The group then moved into a conversation about interracial marriage and their hope that they would accept an African American man into their daughter's lives. In this way, the direct confrontation of one potentially racist story became a broader conversation about their struggle to be as racially

inclusive in practice as they liked to think they were in principle. It interrupted the pattern of dominant race talk by challenging the white speaker instead of using the speaker's depiction of people of color to make race related claims.

Another group also grappled with the racist remarks of a participant. Evelyn shared frequently, talked at length, and was often incoherent but her overall views on racial matters were clear. She stated that she preferred white people and objected to having black people "take over" the White House. Evelyn started the group discussion by stating she was "shocked" when Obama became President and explaining that his race made her uncomfortable. At first, the other participants let her talk. Then they shared views that conflicted with Evelyn's. For instance, when Evelyn mentioned that she assumed whites would impeach Obama, Rachel, said "I'm glad he's president because I wanted something different than a white male. I'm happy, as a general statement." She then turned to Evelyn and asked "Did you vote for McCain because he was white?" Although Evelyn admitted that she had voted for him because he was white, she picked up on Rachel's suggestion of racial tolerance and added "I have black friends and probably some black relatives, I don't know." The other three participants ignored her comment about black relatives and discussed Bill Richardson's campaign, McCain's age, and the limits of bipartisan politics before returning to the question of race. This pattern of contradicting the racist statement, asking a clarifying question, getting some concession from the person who voiced racist beliefs, and then changing the subject continued throughout the group's discussion.

The process of pairing clarifying questions with racially liberal claims had the effect of interrupting racist claims but not deterring them. Although the group consistently responded to Evelyn in this way, she never stopped saying racist things. About 16 minutes into their conversation, Evelyn laid out her concern that "we'll never get the White House back from the

blacks” and mentioned the need for a “strong movement” to take the country back from African Americans and “foreigners.” Given the incoherence of some of her claims and the fact that the participants did not know each other, others in this group could have ignored Evelyn at this point. Instead, they challenged her by asking “Can I ask why you are afraid that there will be more black presidents?” and “What do you mean by ‘take over America’?” After Evelyn provided a little more information about her thinking, one participant directly disagreed with her by saying “I’m not afraid in any way of black people taking over. I don’t care if the president is black for the rest of my life.” Evelyn was not deterred. She pushed back against this by asking “What if you were put on the slave market?” implying that having black leadership meant the inevitable introduction of white slavery. To this, another participant said “That’s not possible! We are past slavery. And the rest of our government isn’t black. It’s not possible that blacks will enslave whites. We’re evolved from that.” Here Evelyn conceded the point (“You are right”) but she continued to share similar beliefs throughout the rest of the discussion.

Despite the fact that Evelyn never seemed to be learning anything new about race, changing her views on racial groups, or even adjusting her sense of what was acceptable to share in group conversation, the other participants continued to directly confront her racist claims. This consistency suggests that they had some experience negotiating this form of race talk. They handled her comments in a patterned way that explicitly rejected negative stereotypes about African Americans and challenged a conceptualization of racism in which whites were cast as the victim. During the debriefing, two of the three participants who had confronted Evelyn admitted that they came from towns in which Evelyn’s worldview was common. Because they had negotiated this type of race talk in the past, they had the skills to negotiate racist claims

using direct confrontation. This discursive skill could be used to confront other types of race talk if participants came to understand these as problematic.

## **5.7 SUMMARY**

Although participants used patterned forms of race talk in their focus groups, they sometimes interrupted these patterns in ways that drew attention to the importance of white privilege and structural inequality. By focusing on the privilege and responsibilities of white celebrities, participants acknowledged the relationship between privilege and racism. By demanding that racist comments get taken seriously as a sign of privilege, they prevented the group from dismissing racist remarks as inconsequential. By examining ways that successful people of color face discrimination and linking current race issues to historical oppression, they acknowledged racial inequality as a structural phenomenon that impacts all people of color. By examining how whiteness makes it less important and more difficult for white people to understand discrimination, they prevented the group from ignoring blackness and hiding white privilege. Finally, by directly confronting racist remarks, they demonstrated the skills needed to address racist remarks should they choose to do so.

These interruptions suggest that contemporary race talk has embedded within it the tools that whites need to expose and examine racial privilege and structural inequality. These mechanisms were not frequently used by participants and did not evoke as much negotiation as other ways of talking. Still, every group included at least one participant who interrupted dominant race talk patterns and some groups negotiated many of these interruptions throughout their discussion. In this way, participants created conversational contexts in which they could

practice examining racial privilege and structural inequality. If given more exposure to such conversational contexts such as in political debates or dialogues in community groups, participants could strengthen these skills. This would increase their ability to undermine dominant race talk in all conversational contexts.

Yet even if skilled in alternative ways of talking, whites may struggle to change the shape of dominant race talk. When breaks occurred, participants continued to appear comfortable, engaged in discussion, and willing to discuss race-related issues in part because they were able to skillfully move discussion away from interruptions and back into dominant race talk patterns. In the next chapter, I discuss one setting where a focus on structural inequality may be met with such resistance: the college classroom.

## 6.0 CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

This study has particularly useful implications for how we facilitate race related conversations in the college classroom. In many ways, the college classroom is like the focus group context measured in this study. Students meet together and discuss a topic provided by someone with more authority. Some students know each other while others do not. Although some tangents are allowed, conversation is consistently brought back to the issue of race with the addition of new questions. In this chapter, I review the ways that talk can reinforce dominant ideology and encourage instructors to consider the talk in their classrooms. Then I grapple briefly with the question of whether we can hope to achieve change through talk.

### 6.1 RECONSIDERING CLASSROOM RACETALK

In this section, I pose four questions to help instructors reconsider the race talk they evoke in their classrooms. This is particularly relevant to instructors who are teaching structural interpretations of racial inequality and working to help students understand white privilege.

**Are we using intersectionality in ways that avoid issues of racial privilege?** By presenting theories of intersectionality to students during our discussions of underprivileged groups, are we encouraging the race talk pattern discussed in Chapter 3? Participants seemed very comfortable focusing on the ways white racists lacked nonracial forms of privilege. They

talked at length about how white friends' and family members' racist comments could be explained by factors such as a lack of education, youth, or poverty. This tendency to focus on a lack of privilege made it hard for participants to acknowledge and discuss how white people are the beneficiaries of racial privilege and how racism is institutionalized. Instead, racism was depicted as an individual level problem experienced by those whites who lack authority in the U.S. As such, it was easily dismissed as insignificant.

When white students are introduced to the concept of intersectionality in the college classroom, it is often focused on the compounded negative impact of multiple oppressed social locations. For instance, intersectionality is an essential concept to use in a discussion of how race, class, and gender combine to impact poor minority women differently than other groups. Yet as long as theories of intersectionality are focused on underprivileged groups, white students may be encouraged to see only how the *lack* of privilege explains social behavior and life chances. This study suggests that whites already are comfortable using intersectionality in this way.

If discussions of intersectionality instead are focused on the ways that privilege coexists with forms of oppression, we may interrupt the race talk patterns that hide racial privilege. Although instructors may think this is obvious, participants in this study used multiple theories of intersectionality without ever acknowledging the role of white privilege. Students likely enter our classrooms similarly unfamiliar with this application of intersectionality and so would benefit from more explicit discussion of how to turn their analytical lens toward privilege.

**Are we parsing blackness in ways that enable negative stereotypes to stay racialized and that depict whiteness as an achieved status?** Do we discuss the experiences of minority groups in ways that encourage the patterns described in Chapter 4? Participants frequently



subdivided blackness into good and bad categories when discussing successful people of color. They emphasized that some African Americans behaved in ways similar to whites and so were exceptions to their preconceived notions about people of color. In this way, they acknowledged and accepted successful individual people of color without challenging or undermining the negative stereotypes they held about minority racial groups. They also depicted whiteness as an achieved status earned through ‘good’ behavior.

When white students are introduced to information about the rates of social problems in communities of color, they are exposed to an inherent comparison between successful and unsuccessful people of color. This fits with my participants’ tendency to subdivide blackness into good and bad categories. If the rate of a social problem is particularly high among one racial group, students may be quick to see successful members of that group as an exception to the norms of their race. This enables them to acknowledge the successes of people of color while keeping negative stereotypes in place. This study suggests that students will account for the more successful members of the racial group by assuming they made better individual choices and acted more like whites.

Instructors may interrupt this pattern by pairing discussions of successful people of color with discussions of discrimination. This delinks the concept of success from talk of individual behaviors and emphasizes the institutionalized nature of racial discrimination at all levels of society. This strategy was employed rarely but with some success in the focus groups (see Chapter 5). Knowing that students may be likely to emphasize individual decision making and retain stereotypes about certain subgroups within racial categories, instructors must watch how students respond to storytelling or case study approaches to teaching about racial inequality. These approaches may encourage an emphasis on individual level factors already prevalent in

race talk. Instructors have to watch conversations for turns away from the examination of institutionalized racial inequality and actively interrupt the forms of race talk that subdivide blackness and construct white privilege as an achieved status.

**Are we encouraging white students to think they know more about race and racial groups than they actually do?** Do our classes compile students' anecdotal evidence, personal experience, and classroom learning in ways that make students feel more connected to communities of color than they actually are? As discussed in Chapter 4, participants shared many stories about people of color with whom they had interacted or whom they had observed. By compiling these stories, participants gave the impression that their lives are more racially integrated than they actually are. They also appeared to have more information about the viewpoints, behaviors, and life experiences of people of color than they could have gained through their own life experiences. Consequently, participants did not have to explain why race shaped their social interactions. They also did not have to grapple with their collective lack of information about the realities of life as a person of color in this country.

Classroom discussions of race can replicate this process by giving students access to each others' cross-race experiences and adding academic observations about people of color. This might prevent students from acknowledging their own racial isolation or analyzing how racial segregation impacts whites' views on race. Instructors can interrupt this pattern of race talk by explicitly addressing the extent to which whites are racially isolated. Instructors can then lead students through a discussion of how whites' racial isolation 1) proves that race structures our lives even if we feel "colorblind," 2) limits whites' ability to see the process and outcomes of inequality, and 3) limits whites' ability to understand the experiences of communities of color. This dialogue is a good fit for courses that include concepts like W. E. B. Du Bois' double veil or

standpoint theory but could be used to challenge white students' sense of authority when it comes to discussion race in any classroom setting.

**Are we helping students hear their own ways of talking about race and develop skills to interrupt patterns that reinforce the racial status quo?** It can be difficult getting students to discuss racism, structural inequality, and privilege. When we finally do get them talking, we risk discouraging their participation every time we interrupt their talk to identify patterns that reinforce the racial status quo. Therefore, it is useful to teach students how to spot patterns in their own race talk and interrupt these patterns without our direct intervention.

Luckily, students come to our classrooms with many of the skills they need to interrupt race talk. Participants in this study acted very much like researchers at times. They used evidence gathered from their experiences observing their social world, analyzed them for patterns, and drew conclusions which were then “peer reviewed” through group discussion. Their theories about how the world works were continuously shaped by this process. Even participants whose beliefs struck me as problematic and racially illiberal showed a willingness to engage in this iterative process in group discussion. Without any instruction, participants demonstrated many skills that could be used to analyze and interrupt dominant forms of race talk if only they were showed how to use those skills in different ways.

Students can be taught to identify race talk patterns, analyze their consequences for the construction of racial ideology, and interrupt these patterns in ways that move group conversation forward. For instance, we can ask students to analyze transcripts of group conversations about race. We can work them through levels of analysis until they can spot the patterns outlined in Chapter 3 and 4 and in other race talk studies. This process teaches critical thinking and research skills as well as many concepts related to the study of race (colorblindness,

segregation, etc). It also empowers students to control their own talk and to interrupt group negotiation of race related claims. We can easily measure their mastery of these skills as they negotiate race talk during class discussion.

## **6.2 AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY**

Since most whites are racially isolated, they are likely to have a white audience for their race talk. Also, they are likely to negotiate their race related claims exclusively with other whites. Because they are the racially dominant group in the U.S., their talk is given a privileged space in public discourse. Consequently, race talk among whites has a great influence on the creation, negotiation, and alteration of racial ideology. By including only whites in this study, I was able to analyze their negotiation process and reveal important interactional dynamics underpinning the racial utterances of this influential group.

Despite whites' tendency to avoid discussions of race, especially in mixed-race groups, they do sometimes discuss race with people of color. How people negotiate mixed-race conversations about race is an important area for future research. Self-managed focus groups of differing racial compositions would reveal additional strategies whites employ to negotiate race related claims. Mixed-race groups that are majority white may operate very differently than mixed-race groups with only one or two white participants. Comparing race talk in these different groups would reveal new discursive strategies and establish which forms of race talk are flexible enough to 'work' in less familiar, less comfortable, or less homogeneous conversational contexts.

Similarly, additional research is needed to establish how whites' negotiations of race talk differ from negotiations among other racial groups. People of color may negotiate race talk in similar ways as whites, emphasizing colorblindness and hiding structural inequality and white privilege. Alternately, they might use strategies that interrupting dominant discourse and challenge dominant ideology. As whites become a numerical minority in many U.S. cities, dominant race talk and racial ideology may be increasingly influenced by the discursive strategies used in communities of color. Mapping and analyzing these strategies would help us understand the flexibility and evolution of race talk and the ideology it supports.

Participants in this study focused almost exclusively on African Americans when discussing people of color. This reflects the history of black/white racial tensions in the Pittsburgh area and the racial landscape of the city where nonblack communities of color are small. Their focus on African Americans is also an artifact of the research setting because the discussion prompts referenced Barack Obama and no other people of color. But participants did occasionally reference other racial and ethnic groups and these references suggest that whites may use very different discursive strategies when discussing nonblack groups. For instance, when participants mentioned Arab or Muslim Americans or Hispanics, they focused almost exclusively on issues of terrorism and immigration. These issues and the rhetorical frames associated with them did not come up in discussions of African Americans or of unspecified "people of color." My use of Barack Obama as a starting point for conversation may have discouraged some kinds of race talk because of his unique life story and public prominence. Additional research is needed to determine how whites negotiate race talk when their talk is focused on nonblack groups, on less successful and famous people of color, and on specific race related issues like immigration.

Finally, the focus group setting provides insight into just one form of “sociable public discourse” (Gamson 1992). I have shown that whites use different negotiation strategies in group conversations than they use in one-on-one research interviews. Because race talk is flexible, continuously under construction, and influenced by conversational context, additional research is needed to establish how race talk is negotiated in other group settings.

### **6.3 CAN TALK CHANGE ANYTHING?**

During their discussions of racial inequality, participants often said nothing could be done about racial inequality. They expressed concern that the government can’t usefully intervene in race-related matters and that nothing can be done to change how people think and feel about race. Although most participants worried about the extent to which race continues to shape the life chances of people of color, no one shared an idea about how this problem could be solved.

Understanding race talk as interaction raises some possibilities for change. In small ways, we are changed and change ourselves within each conversation, reshaping our beliefs, and making new meaning of our experiences. Through talk, we create and alter each others’ depictions of racial groups, racial inequality, and the possibilities for new race relations. By paying closer attention to how we negotiate talk in groups, we can crack open dominant race talk patterns and introduce new ways to identify, analyze, and address white privilege and structural inequality.

Many participants in this study admitted to rarely discussing race matters outside of this focus group. Aside from hearing/telling a few racial jokes or making passing comments about a briefly newsworthy race related topic, they reported spending little time negotiating with others

about what they think, feel, and do about racial inequality. Instead, they picked up race related information from sources they can't specifically recall and had notions about race they hadn't tested against the beliefs of others. Since the Civil Rights era taught whites to try not to talk about race, not to "see color," race talk has had very little opportunity to evolve. Even when President Obama called for a national dialogue about race, the people in my study did not personally engage in much race talk. When I asked them how often they talked about race, they reported that mostly they observed talk filtered through media sources they did not trust, avoided conversations about race lest they get stuck talking about objectionable race related claims, and set aside their questions about the meaning of race related terms, racial group membership, and equality. Even those with more traditional views of race who seemed comfortable blaming racial inequality on the behaviors of individual people of color expressed concern that they didn't know enough about how race works or who to ask when they had race related questions.

Given that people have had little experience sustaining conversations about race in groups, it is hard to know if talk can change anything. Certainly some forms of talk can make matters worse. As I have shown, many dominant forms of race talk reinforce negative stereotypes about people of color, hide the role of white privilege, and obscure the structural and systematic character of racial inequality. But participants themselves interrupted many of these race talk patterns and demonstrated that race talk continues to be a malleable and iterative process. In some groups, whites even offered stories of their own personal journey away from racist ideology and toward an active commitment to racial justice. One group even spent time sharing stories of how they respond to racist jokes, helping more timid group members develop strategies for objecting to these jokes when they hear them at work or amongst friends and family. In this way, groups hooked into each other's potential to and desire for change and

negotiated strategies to achieve this change. Engaging whites in race talk may reveal more mechanisms through which talk can change dominant ideology for the better and help whites access these mechanisms. Efforts to achieve racial justice cannot end with talk. But talk may be the best place for them to begin.



## **APPENDIX A**

### **DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

In order to guide participants toward a discussion of race, I provided two discussion prompts. The first set of questions focused on President Obama's 2008 election campaign. I gave this prompt to each group at the beginning of their discussion. The second prompt asked more general questions about U.S. race relations. I gave this prompt to each group after about 60-75 minutes of talk.

#### **A.1 PRIMARY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Presidential Election 2008

Barack Obama                      Vs.                      John McCain

Some people say that race has been very important in the recent Presidential election season. Others think race has not been important.

Thinking about the Presidential campaign season and the election of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the U.S., please discuss the following questions:

- What have you heard people say about race and presidential politics?
- In what ways, if any, do you think Barack Obama's race matters to most people?
- In what ways, if any, does it matter to you?
- In what ways, if any, do you think that race relations or racial inequality continue to be problems in the U.S.?
- What, if anything, should our government do about race relations or racial inequality?

## **A.2 SECONDARY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Thank you for all of your wonderful comments! In the time remaining, please discuss the following:

- Where do you get your information regarding the topics the group has been discussing?
- In general, how do you judge whether information you hear about race or racial inequality is accurate?
- When talking about race or racial inequality, many people express concern that they'll sound racist. Why do you think many people worry about this?
- Do you ever worry that you'll sound racist? Why or why not?

Feel free to refer back to the initial discussion questions if that would be useful.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **SENSITIZING CONCEPTS FOR CODING**

#### **B.1 COLORBLIND RACE TALK UTTERANCES**

I used aspects of colorblind race talk taken from the literature to guide my coding. These are listed in no particular order.

- Activation of racial stereotypes
- Establishment of white identity - as nonracial or national identity and as privileged
- Claiming not to be racist and claiming to be racist
- Claiming to be colorblind and claiming not to be colorblind
- Expressions of ambivalence (“yes and no, but”) before making race related claims
- Elevation of the status of black acquaintances (“Some of my best friends are black...”) and acknowledgement of racial segregation within personal relationships
- Referencing Obama
- Referencing black culture during explanations for racial inequality
- Dismissing and minimizing the extent of racial inequality or emphasizing racial inequality
- Blaming people of color for racial inequality and absolving them from responsibility for the racial status quo
- Blaming others for their own racially illiberal beliefs (“interracial marriage doesn’t bother me but I worry about the kids because some other people have a problem with it”) and claiming responsibility for their own beliefs
- Relegating racial inequality to the irrelevant past or emphasizing its continued relevancy
- Mentioning reverse racism
- Rejection/acceptance of racially liberal policy
- Changes in intonation and volume when labeling racial groups or otherwise explicitly mentioning race

- Mentioning attempts to avoid racially integrated spaces and situations or mentioning attempts to seek these out
- Telling jokes about race

## **B.2 MOMENTS OF NEGOTIATION**

I coded for the following moments of negotiation because both the race talk literature and discourse analysis texts suggest they are crucial to the construction and potential deconstruction of racial ideology. Specifically, I coded for moments when groups:

- actively establish agreement about the usefulness and/or truthfulness of a race related claim
- express disagreement about the usefulness and/or truthfulness of a race related claim
- determine the extent to which a topic should be linked to race
- have trouble understanding each other's claims
- ignore race related claims

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