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#WhiteAndWoke: Racial Consciousness in White Undergraduate Students

Alechia Abioye
University of Houston
Pietro A. Sasso
Stephen F. Austin State University

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study used White racial consciousness theory to conceptualize racial attitude orientation and a novel asynchronous semi-structured interview protocol to explore how White undergraduate students contextualize their experiences with diversity on campus and institutional inclusion efforts. Findings indicate that White students feel marginalized by current White privilege pedagogy approaches to diversity and inclusion and struggle to differentiate their own racial locations within Whiteness. They expressed superficial concepts about White privilege which they conflated with their own racial identity. Implications for practice and future research are provided for higher education diversity and inclusion practitioners to better engage White undergraduate students in campus diversity efforts to achieve institutional goals of inclusivity.

Keywords: diversity, inclusion, White racial consciousness, racial awareness, Whiteness, White supremacy

Racial diversity in the United States is continuously blurring White hegemonies in which Students of Color now comprise a significant proportion of undergraduate and graduate students. This causes sentiments of dispossession for many White students, who feel their positionalities have been disrupted or displaced in favor of affirmative action or other educational equity programs (Ashlee et al., 2020). Additionally, increases in racial diversity on college campuses can cause irrational fears of losing

the societal privileges and power that many White students are accustomed to as members of the majority population (Karkouti, 2016; Spanierman et al., 2012).

Moreover, existing P-20 pipelines isolate and stratify students along racial and social class lines which limits the exposure of White students to racial diversity. This lack of exposure leaves White students inexperienced at navigating the diverse environments across their P-20 educational experiences in which they are expected to participate. This has implications for the ways in which they interact with diverse Persons of Color after they graduate and assume a professional career (Ashlee et al., 2020; Carr & Caskie, 2010; Clark et al., 2012). Historical systems of White supremacy inoculate and reinforce White privilege, immunity, and comfort (Sasso, 2019). White supremacy seeks to reproduce itself and reinforce power or dominance (Cabrera, 2018; Leonardo, 2009). Higher education contains many elements of White supremacy culture such as a sense of urgency, defensiveness, productivity, perfectionism, and fear of open conflict (Jones & Okun, 2001; Sasso et al., 2022). Identifying these constructs of Whiteness and White supremacy is challenging because this is the dominant constructed culture and epistemology in which there is little incentive for individuals with privilege to deconstruct systems from which they benefit (Cabrera et al., 2016; Kezar et al., 2008).

The current structure of the education system in America does not adequately prepare White students to engage in diverse environments (Ashlee et al., 2020). Yet, it is an expectation that they do so successfully in college and later in the workplace and society (Sasso, 2019). College leaders identify educational preparation for successful engagement in a diverse society to be an important goal of higher education (Carr & Caskie, 2010; Clark et al., 2012; Tevis et al., 2022). There are some institutional efforts to develop students culturally to help prepare them to engage in a diverse society, but they come at the expense of Students of Color (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013; Sasso et al., 2022, 2023). The current paradigm of White privilege pedagogy allows White students to facilitate an enlightenment narrative and engage in virtue signaling (Foste, 2020a). This is often applied with the term *woke* or "invested in addressing social justice" (Sobande, 2019, p. 1). White students self-label as *woke* as a branding process, often positioning themselves using social media hashtags such as *#WhiteAndWoke*, which allows them to appear supportive of Persons of Color or other social movements (Ashlee et al, 2020; Sobande, 2019).

Accapadi (2007) noted additional context making about power systems and identity for our students and their relationships with student affairs professionals is needed: "it is our job to understand not only context for survival, but also the circumstance" (p. 208). Thus, it is critical for higher education leaders and practitioners to understand how White students are developing as culturally competent students and to understand the institutional factors immunizing or obstructing them (Harris et al., 2019). Little extant research explores the cognitive structural ways in which White undergraduate students form racial attitudes.

Therefore, to address this research gap and inform practice, the researchers for this phenomenological qualitative study sought to explore the complexities and nuances of how White undergraduate students describe their development of White racial consciousness. A greater understanding of the individual construction of White racial consciousness may inform new ways to disrupt White supremacy and provide

additional context for student affairs professionals to unpack Whiteness and identity with their students. The researchers used Rowe et al.'s (1994) White racial consciousness (WRC) theoretical model to conceptualize how White students explore and understand Whiteness and to inform the methodology of the current study.

Conceptual Framework

White racial consciousness (WRC) theory by Rowe et al. (1994) was integrated into the study to help conceptualize the interview guide and axial coding during data analysis. This theory supported the design of questions used in the semi-structured interview guide to explore how students engage with their racial locations and forms of Whiteness. In the current study, racial consciousness is also integrated into the study as a conceptual framework to examine Whiteness and White racial consciousness. Whiteness is defined as an epistemology of ignorance in which White persons lack an understanding about their own Whiteness and positionality or racial locations in this system (Mills, 1997). They perpetuate unconscious or conscious forms of Whiteness which may reproduce White supremacy (Harris et al., 2019).

White racial consciousness theory is not an identity theory, but rather one that classifies the racial attitudes that White people hold towards People of Color (Rowe et al., 1994). Within WRC, two primary constructs of racial attitude types, *racial acceptance* and *racial justice*, describe one's racial attitude orientation (LaFleur et al., 2002). Racial acceptance is a bimodal construct consisting of two attitude types, integrative and dominative, which exist at opposite ends of the construct. The integrative attitude type is expressed as comfort with minorities and the dominative attitude type focuses on the negative attitudes that White persons hold against racial/ethnic minorities. According to LaFleur et al. (2002) these two types "should be viewed as opposite sides of the same coin" (p. 30).

The racial justice construct is also comprised of two attitude types, reactive and conflictive. Individuals with reactive attitudes reflect that White persons benefit from unearned advantages characteristic of the status quo. Alternatively, those with a conflictive attitude type do not support overt discrimination of Persons of Color, but they believe that efforts to support racial minorities are discriminatory against White persons. Perspectives on racial acceptance and racial justice comprise one's racial attitude orientation (LaFleur et al., 2002; Rowe et al., 1994).

Racial attitude orientation is developed similarly to other attitudes through observational learning and, like other attitudes, is subject to change due to situational influences (LaFleur et al., 2002; Rowe et al., 1994). The ability for racial attitude orientation to change because of situational influences supports the use of this model for this study, which describes how students explore racial consciousness in their university setting through sharing their lived experiences of navigating diverse environments and situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researchers center extant research in this brief literature review to better describe White undergraduate identity development and Whiteness. We distinguish Whiteness

from White racial identity because they are two distinct concepts. Whiteness is a racial discourse and system (Cabrera, 2018, 2019; Leonardo, 2009). White racial identity is associated with *White persons* in which their inoculation in the system of Whiteness obscures their individual identity (Leonardo, 2009; Sasso et al., 2023). The researchers in this study approach Whiteness as a racial identity and systems concept.

Whiteness

Whiteness is a cultural discourse and system that lacks intersectionality and immunizes White undergraduates within privileged actions and forms of social class (Cabrera, 2018, 2019). Cabrera (2018) argues that Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality is absent from Whiteness since it lacks marginalization or oppression. Student affairs professionals often mistake intersectionality from a system of interconnected domains of oppression with an identity construct, as distinguished by Cabrera (2018) and Harris and Patton (2018). These more complicated nuances of understanding race are also uncommon for White persons who participate in Whiteness because this allows them to engage in White agility. This is when White people change to an individual identity in an effort to deflect talks about race and racism because it makes them uncomfortable (Cabrera, 2019). There are some other White people who distinguish themselves with a *good and evil* dichotomy in their attempts to avoid discussions about race (Foste, 2020a).

Further discourses about Whiteness often lack context about White immunity, which explains how White identities are immune to differential racial treatment (Cabrera et al., 2017a; 2017b). This concept of White immunity evolved from thinking about White privilege (McIntosh, 1989) and incorporates colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Edwards, 2017). Colorblind racism, also known as color-evasiveness is a kind of racism in which White individuals profess not to see race and avoid discussing racial problems (Applebaum, 2010; Annamma et al., 2017; Edwards, 2017). These are built into White supremacy which is the system of racial oppression that favors institutional involvement and engagement with White students and is often reinforced on college campuses (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2015).

Centering White student formation of a positive White racial identity sustains Whiteness at the cost of subverting racist systems, especially when they do not feel obligated to educate their White peers (Foste, 2020b). Any challenges to this hegemony foster feelings of disenfranchisement among White students, who believe they are unable to assert their privilege and, as a result, externalize responsibility (Harris et al., 2019; Sasso, 2019). White students are typically unable to identify their racial position within the system of White supremacy and engaged in behind-the-scenes racism (Foste & Jones, 2020).

White Undergraduates

White students with White immunity dismiss racism, see racist activities as harmless, underestimate levels of racism and racial tensions, and are socialized in racially homogeneous communities in which they encounter little racial conflicts (Cabrera,

2012; 2014b; 2014c; Chesler et al., 2003; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reason & Evans, 2007). This affords White students the opportunity to dwell in a condition of relative ignorance known as racial arrested development (Cabrera et al., 2016).

Many White students perceive themselves to be "good Whites" who distinguish themselves from other students by asserting that their university is inclusive and supports ideas of racial harmony which is known as the enlightenment narrative (Foste, 2019, p. 245). They participated in racial narcissism in order to feel they had better racial exposure and a deeper grasp of racial issues owing to their leadership positions (Foste, 2020a). White student leaders also often exhibit "White knight" attitudes in which they see other Students of Color as immature and have paternalistic notions about wanting to *rescue* them (Trepagnier, 2006). It is possible for White student leaders to assert ownership over Students of Color, which is a manifestation of Whiteness as property (Cabrera, 2011; Gusa, 2010; Harris et al., 2019).

Because they have received particular inclusion instruction or claim to have varied acquaintances, *good White* students consider themselves to be more racially conscious than other White peers (Foste, 2020a). In order to escape the accusation of racism, they often claim that they are *woke* (Foste & Jones, 2020). However, they consistently contradict their own knowledge with racially insensitive remarks (Foste & Jones, 2020).

This enlightenment narrative has been propagated by student affairs professionals who have mostly employed McIntosh's (1989) White privilege pedagogy to educate about identity and advise White students about race (Ashlee et al., 2020). White privilege pedagogy aims to help students see their particular advantages within a wider system of Whiteness yet allows them to think they are achieving a shift (Margolin, 2014). This is inadequate for student socialization and may boost White immunity such that Whiteness continues to proliferate in higher education (Ashlee et al., 2020).

White students also engage in public and private displays of bigotry (Ashlee et al., 2020). The idea of frontstage and backstage racism relates to the behavior of White people in the presence of People of Color (Picca & Feagin, 2007). When Students of Color are present, White student leaders will avoid discussing race or claim post-racial attitudes, yet when they are away, they will discuss race and use racial epithets (Picca & Feagin, 2007). White students participate in racial humor as the most prevalent manifestation of backstage racism, but do not describe these activities as racist (Cabrera, 2014a; Joyce & Cawthon, 2017). In mostly White environments, White students might often portray themselves as victims of racial diversity on campus (Cabrera, 2014b; 2014c). This justifies anti-racial minority ideas and postracial logics (Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017). These campus environments continue to accommodate White racial comfort, which inoculates White student advantages (Cabrera et al., 2016; Gusa, 2010). Indulging or accommodating these types of privilege fosters racial stagnation (Cabrera et al., 2016).

METHOD

This was a descriptive phenomenological qualitative study which followed the research design of similar previous studies which included the use of a 10-phase coding process (Cabrera, 2012; 2016; Hatch, 2002; Foste, 2019, 2020; Sasso et al., 2022). Descriptive phenomenology centers participants experiences and voices, which allow the researcher(s) to understand how these perceptions and experiences relate to the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi, 2009). This method allows for exploration of a small group of participants' lived experiences to search for patterns and identify the essence of their experiences to place emphasis on the words expressed by the participants and not their own interpretations (Giorgi, 2009). This study was guided by one primary research question: How do White undergraduate students describe their exploration of racial consciousness?

Research Site and Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants through email to construct a homogenous sample of White undergraduate students (n = 8). No gatekeepers were used to reduce sampling bias (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria for this study were for students to identify as White, full-time undergraduate students with active college enrollment, and within the ages of 18 to 22.

Using White racial consciousness theory as the conceptual framework, participants needed no prior experiences with race, class, or diversity as the researchers sought to understand the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences as a consequence of privileged and marginalized social constructions of Whiteness (Cabrera, 2016). All the participants were given individual pseudonyms to protect confidentiality (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Year in School	Hometown Type	Campus Housing	Major
William	Male	First Year	Suburban	Off-campus	Art
Victoria	Female	Sophomore	Suburban	On-campus	Business
Mary	Female	Sophomore	Urban	On-campus	Business
Jessica	Female	Sophomore	Rural	Off-campus	Health Science
Henry	Male	Sophomore	Rural	Off-campus	Business
Justin	Male	Sophomore	Rural	Off-campus	Criminal Justice
Rebecca	Female	Sophomore	Rural	On-campus	Health Science
Samantha	Female	Junior	Rural	Off-campus	Music

In congruence with phenomenology, participants must have experience with the phenomenon being studied (Jones et al., 2014). Thus, a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwest was selected as the research site. This selected research site is classified as a Doctoral/Professional institution of more than 10,000 undergraduate students and more than 73 percent White. The largest diverse populations include Black and Asian with represented by less than ten percent for each identity. Most of the White students originate from small rural communities or a large suburban area.

Positionality

Foste (2020b) suggested a process of reflexivity when engaging in research examining systems of Whiteness and identities. Therefore, the primary researcher engaged in a process of considering their own positionality in relation to the participants in this study to avoid complicity, invalidate racist beliefs, and avoid cultivating White comfort as suggested by Foste (2020b). A constructivist stance was employed to explore how participants made meaning of their lived experiences (Stage & Manning, 2016). The researchers consider Whiteness through intersecting identities of race, gender, and social class. The researchers also acknowledge the privilege and power held due to their identities and the responsibility to advocate for social justice.

The researchers identify as cisgender and heterosexual with different racial identities. The lead researcher is an African-American female and works in the field of diversity and inclusion within higher education, and the second researcher identities as mixed-heritage Latino male. Given that systems of Whiteness constantly reinforce dehumanization of Persons of Color, we acknowledge our respective positionalities which inform our perspectives to require us to continually deconstruct internalized hegemonies and reconstruct new ways of being that promote justice and liberation for college students.

Data Collection

This study used a researcher-designed semi-structured interview guide which was informed by previous research including the Oklahoma racial attitudes scale (ORAS) (LaFleur et al., 2002; Rowe et al., 1994) and the psychosocial cost of racism to Whites scale (PCRW; Spanierman & Heppner, 2004). Interview questions inquired about the students' thoughts on racial awareness, cultural experiences, privilege, and exploration of Whiteness in college such as "In what ways do you feel that being White gives you advantages and privileges in society, if any" or "In what ways do you feel that being White gives you advantages and privileges in society, if any."

Due to the sensitive nature and racial context of this study, the researchers used an asynchronous interview protocol to allow unedited or unfiltered participant responses which allowed participants the opportunity to honestly reflect and respond thoughtfully to the interview questions (Nehls, 2013; Sasso & Phelps, 2021). Interview questions were distributed to participants in the first email communication and instructed them to submit a minimum of a one paragraph response to each

question. Participants exceeded this expectation and responses were mostly around 250-500 words for each question. There were typically 3-5 extended exchanges between the researchers and the participants in which they added additional expanded responses to questions.

Each interview lasted approximately one week. Multiple emails were also exchanged during each interview for clarification of meaning of responses and complexity for in-depth answers. A specific number of interviews was not established, rather an emergent approach was facilitated, and interviews continued until a point of saturation was reached which was determined by data satisfaction or redundancy (Jones et al., 2014). An informed consent agreement and a demographic sheet were distributed to participants. All interview transcripts automatically were transcribed and compiled through an asynchronous interview protocol and prepared for data analysis (Nehls, 2013).

Data Analysis

In congruence with descriptive phenomenology, interpretive relativist ontology paradigm was used for data analysis. The interpretive paradigm posits that reality cannot be separate from previous and existing knowledge, and the researchers' positionalities are inherent across all phases of the research process (Angen, 2000). Relativist ontology holds that reality as we know it is subjectively constructed through socially and experientially developed understandings and meanings such as through Whiteness (Angen, 2000). Interpretive approaches rely on naturalistic methods such as interviewing in which data is negotiated through dialogue of the interview process (Patton, 2015).

The researchers followed Hatch's (2002) outline for inductive analysis in phenomenological research which outlines ten phases for analyzing data and identifying themes. Using White racial consciousness theory, the researchers identified domains through each of the racial attitudes (Phase 1), and axial codes assigned through these domains to describe various cognitive constructs of the theory (Phase 2). Then, the researchers reread the data to identify and code relationships between the axial codes (Phase 3). Framing the data within White racial consciousness theory classified the experiences of the participants within the context of the racial attitude orientation they revealed.

Deviant (non-examples) were located to determine those data that did not fit within previously identified relationships (Phase 4). This process of searching for non-examples allowed the researchers to identify new themes in the data (Hatch, 2002). Once the theoretical domains were established, the researchers analyzed the domains and ensured they were named appropriately (Phase 5). Patterns were then identified for potential themes within the participant stories (Phase 6; Hatch, 2002; Saldaña, 2021). Coding mapping was used to develop a master outline of relationships among the theoretical domains (Phase 7) and selected excerpts from data to support the elements of the outline (Phase 8) (Hatch, 2002; Saldaña, 2021).

The researchers interpreted the themes that emerged from the participants' stories and examined whether or not the identified themes fit within the context of WRC (Phase 9). While reviewing the data, the researchers discovered that even though the

individual themes did not fit within the model domains, the stories of the participants may fit within the various attitudinal categories identified by the model. The researcher then assessed the stories of the participants according to the theoretical model (WRC) and interwove the previously identified themes (Phase 10). The researchers continuously reflected on their subjectivities to remain aware of how they influence data analysis through several trustworthiness strategies.

Trustworthiness

To meet trustworthiness criteria in this research, the researchers addressed the standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as defined by Jones et al. (2014). Credibility involves the "use of others to confirm findings" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). During the first phase data analysis, the researchers employed member checking and presented participants with their interview transcripts and early review. Participants examined statements for flaws but did not request clarification. Second, transferability was achieved by supplying lengthy and detailed quotations, allowing readers to participate in their own interpretation of their interactions.

Third, dependability was met by keeping an audit log of research activities and documents (Jones et al., 2014). Lastly, confirmability was used to "tie findings with data and analysis" through keeping a reflexive journal and using a student affairs/higher education researcher as an external auditor to validate the themes (Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). The external auditor examined the veracity of the themes, and the researchers accepted necessary feedback. The auditor and journal allowed noting of any inconsistencies between what was said and the effect on the participant which was used during phase four (Foste, 2020b).

FINDINGS

Only one of the participants lived in an urban environment, but they all expressed that the college experience is one of the first environments in which they actively engaged with a diverse population as many of their pre-college and living environments lacked racial diversity or were segregated. Participants possessed similar backgrounds and varied in their perceptions of the need for racial exploration, the impact of racial experiences, and their value of campus inclusion efforts. Some participants appreciated and were excited about their new opportunity to learn and live differently than before attending college, while others expressed frustration and internal conflict as they attempted to navigate through diverse experiences.

Diversity Is Good for Me

Racial acceptance was the degree to which participants were aware of and accepted their racial status. Many of the students described living and learning in a diverse environment with a strong focus on inclusion as a new experience, and racial exploration was explained within the context of exposure to other racial identities. For these students, the lack of diverse experiences prior to college helped increase

curiosity and engagement once on campus as expressed by Victoria. "I was excited to learn more about the culture when I arrived… I am also hoping to attend more events for cultural groups around campus."

Some students noted the new environment enriched their college experience and cultural competence. Mary shared how experiences in college supported her exploration of her White racial identity, "my work-study environment has also been an encouragement to my exploration of being a member of the White race simply by getting to know people who are not White." and facilitated dialogues to further explore concepts of identity and inclusivity. Samantha reflected on the impact of entering into a diverse collegiate environment "Being in college has provided opportunities for me to reach out and make friends with those of Asian race/ethnicity and learn about their cultures."

Despite coming from different residential backgrounds, Mary and Rebecca both shared that their experiences prior to college had been homogenous in nature, with limited interaction with diverse populations. Rebecca reflected positively about her experience acclimating to her new college environment, "I learned a lot in that first semester about different races but the biggest thing I gained that semester was the ability to be comfortable in asking questions about other races and cultures." Some participants expressed feelings of comfort with other Students of Color which can be described as an integrative racial attituded, but they were still concerned about institutional foci on diversity efforts. They felt that institutional diversity efforts often reduced their access or capacity to interact with other Students of Color.

White students with integrative racial attitudes discussed race as a process of extracting cultural competence from Students of Color. Their perspectives were not shared within a context of the ways in which it increased their own White racial conscious, but rather how they owned this cultural competence as property. Conversely, only Jessica noted this by suggesting, "the biggest thing that I have picked up on is that before anyone should try to learn or understand other people, they need to learn and understand things that [make] them who they are."

Conflating Whiteness

Many of the participants in this study expressed a lack of support in exploring their Whiteness. Thus, they positioned themselves within the conflictive and reactive domains of White racial consciousness. Complicated by notions of racial justice on their campus, the students struggled to see how their lived experiences fit within the institution because of the focus on diversity or inclusion. However, the students struggled to differentiate their own White identity and Whiteness from concepts about privilege. Mary shared her perspective, "To me recognizing [W]hiteness is just another way of recognizing privilege. You are recognizing that you are [W]hite and because of that you are able to have and do things that those who are not [W]hite cannot have or do."

Students recognized that racial awareness is necessary to understand the systematic advantages and disadvantages experienced by members of society which would position them with reactive attitudes. They offered awareness of unearned privileges and benefits of Whiteness as a characteristic of their status quo. However,

many of the participants in this study expressed a lack of support in exploring their racial identity and were only able to express an understanding of White privilege, rather than White identities. Mary shared her understanding of privilege, and the impact she believes it has on her life:

> Being [W]hite gives me so many advantages and privileges in society, there are so many that I am aware of as well as many that I am probably not aware of. One of the largest ways being [W]hite gives me advantages and privileges is in Americas *[sic]* legal system, and particularly our criminal [justice] system. One example is that being [W]hite in most cases means I am able to be pulled over by a police officer because a light was out[,] or I forgot to use my turn signal and get away with a warning.

While Mary expressed a level of understanding of privilege, she continued to share that she did not feel the college environment helped her explore her White identity. Justin shared that several diversity town-halls and in-class workshops assisted him with his understanding of privilege stating, "Since I am a White male[,] I realize that I have certain privileges granted to me by society by my race and for my gender." He further shared a desire to be seen as something more than his privileged status. Like Mary, Justin also felt there was little support for him to explore his White identity. While they conflated concepts of identity versus privilege, they were also troubled by institutional diversity efforts. Rather, they felt more comfortable limiting conversations to privilege as exemplified by Mary:

> Because I am aware of my privilege, I am able to speak from that perspective, but feel more uncomfortable having conversations with other races that are more in depth about how my race makes me more privileged, as opposed to just acknowledging my privilege and moving on with the conversation. Around other White people, I feel a lot more comfortable speaking about how our race makes us more privileged.

Participants often felt and expressed discomfort and feelings of shame when discussing their White privilege in large groups. They were more comfortable externalizing privilege to concepts of social class that Whiteness provides them, but not discussing how their individual White identities contribute to White supremacy.

Response to programs that attempt to facilitate understanding of privilege differed for each participant. No participants expressed interest in challenging White supremacy, nor did any participant share ideas that were attitudinally representative of a reactive attitude type. However, many participants were aware of their White privilege and understood, to varying degrees, the agency it provided in society. Participants expressed colorblind perspectives when discussing concepts of privilege. They engaged in complete avoidance and lack of openness to discussing White supremacy or Whiteness which are inherent forms or racial hyperprivileged and White immunity.

Dispossession

Participants felt diversity efforts dispossessed them from opportunities and status on campus. All male participants felt as if their needs were neglected for the sake of institutional messaging. Henry shared this sentiment by saying, "I think they are

supportive for the right reasons, but it takes a good bit of focus from the other students that may not be a part of a minority race." Henry's statement highlights a need and desire of majority students for institutional efforts that allow White students to feel included in the mission of inclusivity on campus. Jessica shared her thoughts and expressed concern of being left out of scholarship opportunities:

> Where I feel that there is a disadvantage is with things such as scholarships for college. There are so many out there that cater to the minorities, which is great that they have that option to get the furthered education. But I feel that people of the Caucasian race are a little left out; college is not cheap and there are not any scholarships for being a [W]hite person.

None of the participants expressed disagreement about the necessity of institutional efforts to support diverse students, but many struggled to fully accept them due to feeling left out. However, White men tended to have a different perspective and again expressed nuanced ways in which they felt institutional diversity efforts were oppressive such as Henry:

> [Private U] hasn't provided the tools for me to explore my race, while they provide the tools for others… There is an office of diversity on campus, but it feels like the [W]hite community doesn't even have a place within that office as well…I shouldn't be ashamed for being [W]hite, but at [Private U], that's the feeling I unfortunately receive…Being [W]hite at [Private U] makes me feel like I can['t] express myself for who I am. It feels as if the [W]hite community at [Private U] is being silenced in favor of promoting cultural diversity, which is not a bad thing, there just shouldn't be oppression to achieve this goal.

Yet, some students were in the dominative domain and they expressed attitudinal statements that were covert in nature and in many ways reflected a lack of awareness about diversity or inclusion. For example, Henry expressed that "...at some point, there is a fine line where typical people may be able to tolerate the dialogue," when discussing diversity activities occurring on campus. Henry's use of "typical people" as reference to White students implies a sense of majority regarding White students and othering of Students of Color which aligned with a sentiment expressed by Justin. In this perspective, Justin reflected on the focus of campus inclusion activities:

> White students have no outlet, they are almost expected to tolerate this back-seat approach that they are having to take due to current social issues or universities looking to be more diverse… All I ask is that they don't forget the students that have helped them be at the point they are currently at. Administrators can aspire for a better future; issues arise when those aspirations blur the vision of the current [university] community.

Justin was frustrated with how White students are viewed and treated by campus administrators and covertly referenced White students as being solely responsible for the institution's success. These reflective statements shared by Henry and Justin reveal there is a frustration among some White male students of being left behind and marginalized in favor of pursing diversity and inclusion efforts.

William expressed ideas within his interview which made it complicated to examine his racial attitude orientation. William believed his race has had no impact on his college experience and described his sexual orientation as a more salient identity in shaping his experiences. William felt that institutions should not force

intercultural interactions, and if they do, practitioners run the risk of being perceived as indoctrinating students:

> The university is already naturally a place which encourages people to meet new people, explore themselves, think and question. There's no reason to create a mock up seminar on racial exploration and self-examination when everyday of life should naturally be that way. If it's not, then something's broken, and it's much bigger than the university itself.

William expressed that he believed race should not impact the ways in which individuals are viewed by society because it is meaningless, and he believes there is much more to individuals than race. William believed there is more value to be found in organic interactions between students with minimal institutional influence. Similarly, Henry, supported this by sharing:

> At some points when the campus focuses heavily on inclusiveness, it seems constricting to me and this is where I see it as discouraging. There is nothing that forces me to go to these events, but campus activities directors or other organizations on campus push the attendance so strongly that it almost makes me feel bad or regretful about not attending an event about inclusiveness.

Moreover, these participants remarked that they were continually reminded by campus administrators that these events were necessary, but they had power to not attend. This perspective provides context to the veiled forms of racism that were expressed by these participants in not supporting inclusion because it made them feel White guilt. Students with this more dominative racial attitude highlighted the experiences and attitudes of other White men.

Again, they expressed these perspectives as forms of racial hyperprivilege and White immunity. These expressions of discomfort between intragroup and intergroup conversations were not echoed by a desire for additional support for White students' racial exploration beyond developing an understanding of privilege. White students with dominative attitudes are not interested in learning about themselves as well as others unless it is beneficial to begin a performative process within White groups.

DISCUSSION

This study identified the racial attitudes and perspectives of White undergraduate students framed by White racial consciousness theory which suggests that White students are performative in their responses to discussions about race. Participants responded to campus programming with an openness that diversity was positive and helped them understand other racial identities as a form of property. However, participants seemed frustrated by these institutional diversity efforts which they felt were overemphasized to an extent that they felt ignored and dispossessed from opportunity. As a result, participants were able to describe White privilege, but were unable to differentiate how this concept was separate from Whiteness as a system or their own White identities. These findings contribute to existing research and directly addressed the research questions which asked how White undergraduate students describe their exploration of racial consciousness.

These study findings align with similar results found by Ford (2012) surrounding the importance of White students engaging in intragroup dialogue to aid each other in understanding Whiteness. Participants in this study had limited understanding of the root causes of racism in higher education which stems from both individual and systemic forces working to maintain White supremacy (Cabrera et al., 2017). They held integrative and dominative racial attitudes in which they struggled with racial acceptance and did not even move towards racial justice (LaFleur et al., 2002; Rowe et al., 1994).

The White undergraduate students in this study explored racial consciousness through White privilege pedagogy or through unintentional exposure to other races through their student involvement. They described diversity training based in White privilege pedagogy, which is a pedagogical method that has become a seminal approach for addressing individual racism (Cabrera, 2012; Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017). Participants elucidated these White privilege pedagogy-based trainings helped them to recognize their privilege which they believed was associated with their White identity as they conflated Whiteness as a system and White identity as an individual construct. White privilege pedagogy does not allow students to fully conceptualize how Whiteness operates as a socially constructed system of interlocking oppressions through laws and policies and creates an individual student behavior understanding of privilege, but one that is disconnected from the systemic influence of White supremacy (Cabrera, 2012, 2018; Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017). This approach allows students to *check off boxes* and if they hold enough marginalities, they often will assume a minority identity or identify as oppressed (Sasso et al., 2023).

Participants perpetuated an enlightenment narrative in which they positioned themselves as the *good Whites* who purportedly support and welcome diversity which is inclusion (Robbins & Jones, 2016; Foste, 2019, 2020b). These White students also perceived social justice and inclusion as performative, which they saw as an achievable endpoint that can be evaluated (Foste, 2020a). The students in this study did not see their White racial consciousness as a continual process of self-work (Ashlee et al. 2020). They perpetuated a racial harmony narrative because their institution offered diversity programming and racial representation, and students may be prone to a punitive, self-righteous orientation toward other White students or others (Ashlee et al., 2020; Foste, 2020a).

Some participants in this study, particularly White men, felt disrupted from White hegemony on campus and assumed a victimization identity because they felt their institution overly centered diversity or inclusion. These sentiments of dispossession were rationalized as acceptable because they expressed an undertone that they suggested everyone *hates* or blames them which made them feel guilty about their own Whiteness and infantilized by diversity training. This supports previous research about responses to diversity and inclusion trainings by White undergraduate men (Ashlee et al., 2020; Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013; Cabrera, 2018, 2019; Sasso, 2015; Sasso et al., 2022).

From this phenomenological study, the intent was to understand how White students explore race in a predominantly White college environment. The study sought to uncover the ways in which the college environment, diversity programming,

and cultural interactions facilitate or hinder White students' development and understanding of Whiteness. The findings in this study demonstrate that multicultural programming, and intercultural interactions increase students' awareness of White privilege (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013; Garriott et al., 2016; Linder, 2015; Robbins & Jones, 2016). However, these experiences and multicultural education do not help them critically work through their own Whiteness. Thus, they were unable to process their own feelings of shame and guilt, leading to discourse and rhetoric of dispossession (Ashlee et al., 2020; Sasso et al., 2022, 2023; Sasso, 2019).

Limitations

There are still acknowledged limitations to this study although the researchers adhered to four standards of trustworthiness relates to the transferability of this study. Although this study used a novel asynchronous interview protocol to garner authenticity, there still could have been demand characteristics presented by the researchers who have professional *a priori* knowledge about campus inclusion practices, but not with the individual participants. Social desirability may have influenced some filtering of self-disclosure by participants and influenced participants to engage in frontstage performances. This study also did not account for the individual differences in the purpose and meaning of the racialized narratives and perspectives. The small sample size may not be fully representative or conceptualize the racial consciousness or racial attitude formation of all White undergraduate students. Despite these limitations, it is the anticipation of the researchers that the data collected can be used to provide insight into the nuanced limitations of White racial consciousness. The researchers also recognize that this research may perpetuate focus on Whiteness and the importance of voice for historically marginalized communities.

Implications for Practice

White students in this study learned through White privilege pedagogy which was originally developed by McIntosh (1989) and featured exercises such as the invisible knapsack. The intention is for students to become aware about their individual privileges, but these curricula fail to contextualize systems of Whiteness and continually proliferate White supremacy (Ashlee et al., 2020). White privilege pedagogy often recenters trauma and others learn about from the expense of others, leading some to identify with class minority or other oppressed identities (Sasso et al., 2022, 2023).

White privilege pedagogy reduces conversations about race or racism and limits opportunity to engage in critical examinations of Whiteness (Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013). Its programmatic efficaciousness has been rooted in allowing for students to engage in a critical examination of their social class identities rather than racial locations within systems of oppression (Lensmire et al., 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000). However, in higher education White privilege pedagogy has been linked to frontstage performances of inclusion programs and diversity education in single events such as *privilege walks* or *tunnels of oppression* (Ashlee et

al., 2020). White students learn at the expense of working-class or Students of Color who they use to check a box of *understanding* to absolve themselves from participation in systems of oppression (Ashlee et al., 2020). However, these programs can facilitate a deeper *angry White man* syndrome which can make White supremacy even more recalcitrant (Ashlee et al., 2020; Sasso, 2019).

Participants also expressed feelings of disdain and frustration with campus diversity and inclusion initiatives they perceived as excluding them (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Cabrera, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). The students' experiences reveal there is a need for practitioners find nuanced ways to ensure White students are not left out or left behind as institutions progress towards developing diverse and inclusive campus environments. There is a present challenge to develop practices that are inclusive of the identity and attitudinal growth and development needs of all students, without recentering Whiteness. These should include educational programs that utilize socially responsible or culturally inclusive leadership development approaches which facilitate intercultural understanding to humanize the experiences of other racial identities across religion, gender, social class, and ability (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2018). Such approaches may position White undergraduates beyond systems of Whiteness that reduce their racial consciousness. Developing these practices may improve experiences of White students with diversity and inclusion but will also aid achieving the goals of inclusivity for Students of Color and reduce the potential for negative interactions (Boatwright-Hororwitz, 2013).

When White students perceive institutional messaging about diversity and inclusion as communicating that they are part of *the problem*, they begin to resist engaging in diversity and inclusion efforts due to feeling obligated to do so (Robbins & Jones, 2016; Sasso et al., 2023). White students are less likely to engage in or support diversity and inclusion efforts when presented as an obligation (Cabrera, 2014; Does et al., 2011; Wolff & Munley, 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2018). There are powerful opportunities during first-year transition or in foundational seminar courses to provide diversity or inclusion engagement opportunities (Sears & Tu, 2017).

Diversity practitioners should reconsider the manner in which dialogues are facilitated around topics of race and provide opportunities for smaller groups students to engage in the dialogue to reduce fear and shame of appearing racist for White students (Ashlee et al., 2020; Carr & Caskie, 2010; Ford, 2012; Linder, 2015; Zuniga et al., 2002). Structured opportunities for racial caucusing can potentially reinforce White supremacy, but if properly facilitated and supervised, can help other White students critically engage in understanding about their own Whiteness (Ashlee et al., 2020; Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015).

Intentional efforts and immersive experiences continue to assist White students as they learn about power, privilege, and oppression (Carr & Caskie, 2010; Karkouti, 2016; Linder, 2015; Rowe et al., 1994, Yea-Wen & Simmons, 2015), but practitioners must find ways to both challenge and support White students as they navigate through the cognitive dissonance they experience with diversity.

Conclusion

This research does not adequately account for the subtleties and complexities of how Whiteness pervades White undergraduate student culture. Moreover, the findings of this study reveal a desire among some White students to engage with diversity and inclusion programming initiatives in more ways than discussing their privilege. White students need to hear that while they have privilege, they are not at fault for creating a system of disadvantage. It is important to recognize that when we approach the dialogue solely from the standpoint of privilege and do not assist White students in understanding how their culture, identity, and attitudes have been shaped by Whiteness, we leave students frustrated, full of guilt and shame, and resistant to change. This will perpetuate dispossession and White immunity which results in the continuation of White supremacy.

White students need to recognize that though they have been shaped by their Whiteness, they do not have to be defined by it. Leonardo (2009) noted that, "Whiteness is a social idea, not a culture" (p. 170). There is a present need to support the racial exploration, growth, and development of White undergraduate students. Moreover, since many student involvement professionals are White, it is important to support and guide them in unpacking and questioning their own experiences in order to avoid reproducing problematic practices such as White privilege pedagogy. This practice also reinforces racial attitudes of dispossession or behaviors of backstage racism. Future research should consider the limitations of this research study and replicate the novel research protocol used in this study as it demonstrates promise in capturing authentic perspectives to identify White racial consciousness in undergraduates and engage them in a longitudinal study. This would allow a more in-depth examination of the individual student experiences that impact racial attitude formation. Whiteness is insidious and complex and the participants in this study did not have full opportunity to understand the racial identities of others or even themselves as White undergraduates, especially their social locations within the system of Whiteness.

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Alechia Abioye, EdD, is the Director of Student Affairs at the Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine at the University of Houston. Her research focuses on diversity, inclusion, and belonging across undergraduate student experiences centering the identities of historically marginalized students.

Pietro A. Sasso, PhD, is Director of the RAISE Research Center and a graduate faculty member in Educational Leadership at Stephen F. Austin State University. His research focuses on the college experience, student success, and educational equity.