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Investigating the Intersection of Whiteness and Racial Allies

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INVESTIGATING THE INTERSECTION OF WHITENESS AND RACIAL ALLIES

A Thesis Presented to
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Master of Arts

By
Tyler S. Rife

May 2016

INVESTIGATING THE INTERSECTION OF WHITENESS AND RACIAL ALLIES

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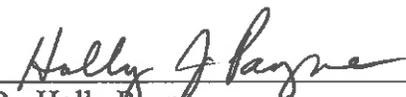
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INVESTIGATING THE INTERSECTION OF WHITENESS AND RACIAL ALLIES

Tyler S. Rife   May 2016   67 Pages

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Through a critical qualitative approach, four focus groups of exclusively white or non-white participants were conducted in order to discover the ways in which individuals enact and navigate whiteness in discussions of racial allies. Further, this study attempted to capture how white and non-white individuals may differ in their approach to this subject matter and in their recommendations for racial allies. Findings revealed that eight themes defined these interactions: "Whiteness", "Experience & Voice", "Whitewashing Advocacy", "Polite Protest", "(Dis)Comfort", "White Fragility", and "The Complexity of Allyship". The study finds that while whiteness is frequently perpetuated throughout this dialogue and white and non-white individuals often differ in their perceptions of privilege and racial allyship, discussions of this complex tension resulted in a dialogic nature *across* focus groups, heightening the need for these types of discussions in advocacy movements and future scholarship.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The neighborhood I grew up in was affectionately referred to as "The Dome" by many of its inhabitants. The analogy is fitting. Oakwood is a small suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio and it is absurdly quaint: 100-year-old Tudor, Swiss and Colonial homes rest inside of its lush forest, the historical home of the Wright Brothers sits in the center of town, one could presumably walk from one end of the city to the other in under twenty minutes, visitors frequently remark that the city's single high school looks like Hogwarts from *Harry Potter*, and the cops are known to pull over any driver racing at about 4 miles above the speed limit. Quaint. Its demographic breakdown is: Asian (0.98%); Native American (0.70%); African-American (0.48%); Caucasian (97.41%). Needless to say, there was limited exposure to any semblance of racial or ethnic diversity in my hometown and only through direct engagement with others outside The Dome could one learn *from*, rather than *about* the cultural experiences of others. Luckily, I managed to take part in a number of activities, which allowed me to widen my concept of what constitutes citizenship in the United States.

One such activity managed to shake my racial identity to the core, Forensics. As a member of two diverse collegiate teams whose primary aim was to service the voices of muted groups, I learned about otherness. Initially, I felt an extreme sense of white guilt, thinking to myself "How did I not see functions of systemic oppression sooner? How long has my silence served as another cog in the machine of hegemony? How do I conceivably confront the issue that my great-great-great grandparents could have potentially enslaved the great-great-great grandparents of my friend?" In that time, I

hated being white. I became, as Warren and Hytten (2004) put it, The Torpefied.

However, despite the naïve nature of my reaction, this was a crucial moment

unobtainable through textbooks or film. For the first time, I was able to step outside of

myself and acknowledge the unmarked nature of my skin and the unjust advantages this

afforded me.

During my sophomore year I proceeded to research and perform events in

Forensics, which spoke to these internalizations. First was a poetry program centering

upon the institutional racism inherent in suburban development. This chapter will

periodically include excerpts from these performances to assist you in contextually

understanding the language and images dealt with when constructing these performances.

In a way, these should help guide you through my process discovering issues of power,

privilege, and normalcy. A short clip from the "Suburbia" program can be read below:

> "Everybody needs a safe place to go to get away
> Maybe that's why people move to where the lawns grow their children seeds tall
> To where everyone gets a car when they turn 15 and a half
> To where the public schools have more money coming in from the PTA
> fundraisers than they do from the state
> The last time somebody committed murder in the town that I grew up in
> The murderer felt so guilty that he turned himself in"
> - Kevin Holmes (1999), *Blueprint #44 (Letter to Myself)*

In this program, I directly pulled from reflections of my hometown and upbringing;

feeling almost betrayed by the way the environment I grew up in manipulated my

perceptions of culture. In the same year, a friend and I performed a duo interpretation of

Melvin Van Peebles' 1970 film *Watermelon Man*, a surreal narrative of a racist

suburbanite who awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a black man.

However, while aiming to entertain for a majority of the performance, the argument

paralleled the narrative of Kafka's (1915) *The Metamorphosis*, framing the black experience as hideous and one to be feared. In the end, the marriage at the center of the narrative disintegrates as neither spouse could capably see past the visibility of race in their marriage. The performance received 3rd place in the country.

> Jeffrey: Oh lord I've never been a religious man, I don't go to church, and I only pray when I'm feeling scared or rotten. I want you to know I am a true believer; there are no atheists in this bathroom! Can you hear me? If you can, don't say or do anything.
> Althea: AHHHHHHH!! There's a Negro in our bathroom!
> Jeffrey: It's not a Negro!
> Althea: Yes there is! I just saw him! Oh my god he's gonna kill us.
> Jeffrey: Oh for Christ's sake Althea, it's just me!
> Althea: You look just like a Negro! And…a dark one! Wow your teeth look so white!
> Jeffrey: It's just the contrast!
>
> - Melvin Van Peebles, *Watermelon Man*

The following year I performed a poetry program on the oppressive nature of manifest destiny. This concept stemmed from a conversation with friends about liminality and the western desire to fill and own space despite repercussions. This speech won me a national championship title and my track record began to indicate that I was being awarded as the white guy speaking on behalf of minority groups. Relative to my other speech topics, the racially infused ones received the most competitive reception. During the time in which I competed with these racially fueled topics, I certainly believed in them, but at no point did I necessarily question my position as the speaker. At no point did my success suggest or prompt the question: If a person of color performed these topics, would they have been received in the same way? Or, would judges have viewed that performer as another black student performing another black topic? Was my success attributed to the contrast?

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In my senior year I performed a poetry program centering upon white privilege and whitewashing issues of racial oppression. This program served as a culmination of previous efforts I had taken in forensics. As opposed to dancing around the subject matter, this confronted the issue head-on.

> "Paint that fence white as eyes rolling back into a head
> Paint that fence white as our father's necks their laughing throats bulging, choking from the meat swaying like Mississippi oak branches on a windless night"
>
> - Ken Arkind (2013), *Tom Sawyer Goes To College*

While the above metaphor deals with the whitewashing of minority issues, it also laid bare my experience of being exposed to these concepts throughout college. It encapsulated my journey from member of the oblivious center to a critical and self-reflexive one. I felt that I could not only speak about race without discomfort or guilt, but encourage others to do the same. In essence, the lens afforded to me by forensics suggested I had adopted the position of a racial ally.

However, one judge's criticism at a tournament in Arizona shook my arguably self-righteous stance of racial dialogue: "Aren't you using your privilege to talk about this topic for the benefit of furthering your competitive success?" I had never considered this aspect of the argument. I became so wrapped up in engaging in the conversation that I did not think to acknowledge my racial position in the movement toward social justice and equality. While several judges took issues with the speech, this particular critique stood out. In a single note, my authenticity, perspective, and intentions were called into question, all while suggesting that my argument was counterintuitive as I was simply creating yet another white space by co-opting the struggles of marginalized others. Some readers may even argue that I am doing the same through this research.

Upon more recent reflections of these performances and my internal motivations, it remains somewhat unclear why I decided to travel this route. Did I simply take off with this subject matter at the first whiff of success, or did I feel there was an intrinsic need for these arguments and topics to be presented? And what role does my positionality and intent play in these movements?

These core concepts and criticisms, stemming from an intersection of whiteness and ally intent, are frequently reflected in social movements and entertainment today. Consider any number of films employing the problematic trope of the white savior complex, (*The Blind Side*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Avatar*, *Half Nelson*, *Captive*). Now consider the sentence, "I can't breathe," the presumed last words spoken by Eric Garner, one of several men unjustly murdered by the hands of law enforcement to become a symbol of the unjust and uneven racial treatment of people of color in the United States. While an individual of color may wear an "I can't breathe" shirt to raise awareness of the atrocities invoked upon fellow members of the black community, what does it mean when a white person adorns the same phrase across their chest? Is it a way to offer support or does it problematically whitewash a movement that is not meant for them? This research aims to delve into an analysis of this subject matter, specifically, the murky and divisive intersection of whiteness and the role of racial allies in social justice movements.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter will review relevant literature in relation to Whiteness and the multitude of ways in which it is enacted and perpetuated before ultimately examining literature on the intersection of this concept and racial allies. This literature review will be divided into three sections: "Whiteness" (containing the subsections: the invisible center, the body and its representations as a rhetorical construct, and the carving of a space), "Overt Enactments of Whiteness", and "Allies."

Whiteness

The invisible center. First, it is necessary to confront aspects of language utilized throughout this paper to best understand the context or positioning of concepts of the invisible center, as there is a possibility that some may find certain phrases or words problematic. First, discussions of subject matter from which me and many researchers in this literature review are culturally and socially removed are inevitable and while I will not attempt to take a position of authority on this subject matter, my position as the researcher inherently affords me power that at least requires acknowledgement. Further, some may find the use of words and phrases such as "racism" or "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" as heavy. These, however, are utilized to best illustrate societal structures or engrained views that permeate western culture and discourse, and while they do not often reflect aggressive positions of hate, it is important to avoid "watering down" these concepts as that tactic is likely to contribute to the invisibility of structures of privilege and power.

This concept of invisibility, according to Ferguson (1990), suggests that whites achieve and exert power by acting as the uninterrogated status quo. While unassumedly shaping culture and public reason through this invisible power, control is simultaneously exerted upon those outside of the sphere manifesting in the oppression of marginalized groups. In essence, whiteness "defines the tacit standards from which specific others can then be declared to deviate, and while that myth is perpetuated by those whose interests it serves, it can also be internalized by those who are oppressed by it" (Ferguson, p. 9). McIntosh (1990) famously referred to this bundle of privileges as an "invisible knapsack" from which a privileged individual might draw from in any given context or environment, regardless of whether or not this knapsack is acknowledged (p. 31). In this way, whiteness is rarely recognized by those who revel in its structure, but rather, by those glimpsing it from the outside.

In their groundbreaking work, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) lay a foundation for scholars in this area of study, claiming that exertions of white supremacy do not manifest through happenstance, but rather, are negotiated and strategically reinforced. While many whites may outright reject the notion that their actions and inactions aid the process of systemic racism, engrained societal structures, culture, and perceived benefits to the system ensure that concepts of one's own privilege ultimately go unquestioned. Because whiteness is exercised in engrained ways, Nakayama and Krizek were intent to explore the "everydayness" of the rhetoric (p. 296). Six primary strategies were uncovered: an overt tying of the word "white" to concepts of power, "negative definitions of white as opposed to a positive definition", a "[naturalization of] 'white' with a scientific definition", "[a confusion of] whiteness with nationality (a legal status conferred by

social institutions)", a refusal by individuals to label themselves whatsoever, and a framing of whiteness as linked to European ancestry (pp. 298-302). Through this strategic rhetoric, whites shifted focus away from their role as occupiers of a culture linked with historical domination to aspects of their race that ultimately leave whites unmarked, and thus, invisible. The article finally proposes that *reflexivity* may serve as a guide toward cultural enlightenment and self-awareness with three justifications: "First, reflexivity encourages consideration of that which has been silenced or invisible in academic discussions", and "Second, reflexivity encourages consideration of the presentation of research and the articulation of the researcher's position vis-à-vis social and academic structures", and "reflexivity encourages an examination of the institutions and politics that produce 'knowledge'" (pp. 303-304). Essentially, by continuously questioning perceived aphoristic notions, scholars will approach future research utilizing a whiteness framework – one that recognizes institutionalized and culturally engrained privilege.

Crenshaw (1997) built upon Nakayama and Krizek's call for race consciousness in scholarship through the application of rhetorical silence to a legal debate between Jesse Helms and Moseley Braun regarding a patent extension for the Confederate flag by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Crenshaw argues that it is through rhetorical silence that those in support of the patent extension were able to avoid concepts of whiteness, regardless of what the Confederate flag may symbolize in a racial context. Silence, in this case, was utilized actively and strategically in sidestepping relevant issues of race in service of issues concerning gender. Three implications were gathered. First, "the ideology of white privilege maintains its invisibility through rhetorical silence" (p. 268). By refusing to confront systems of privilege, rhetorical silence allows whiteness to

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maintain a position of normality and invisibility. Second, "gender- and class-based discourse can intersect racial discourse to maintain the silence of whiteness" (p. 269). In this case, Helms positioned herself as a woman incapable of racist intent due to her disadvantaged womanhood. While issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and classism may intersect meaningfully, they may also give way to a hierarchical ranking of oppression wherein a group may perceive their disadvantage as more meaningful or worthy of attention than another. Third, "some anti-racism strategies can be complicit with the way in which whiteness operates rhetorically, but enactment is one powerful reflexive and personal form of resistance to racism" (p. 270). By arguing that a patent extension of the Confederate flag symbolizes white supremacy and reframing Helms' rhetoric to unveil its unspoken underlying argument, "that patriotic Americans are white" (p. 270), Moseley Braun managed to persuasively confront and combat the power of rhetorical silence. This article provides a unique case in which the power of rhetorical silence is uncovered through an overt acknowledgement of whiteness, while simultaneously revealing strategies utilized by those who may perceivably represent marginalized others.

In their meta-analysis, Jackson, Shin, and Wilson (2000) discuss the dichotomous nature of whiteness literature and the implications of the researcher's viewpoint. These scholars argue that the massive theoretical scope of whiteness concepts stem from the ideology that the field is "socially constructed and understood to be non-definitive, yet universal" (p. 69). While aspects and issues of whiteness are continuously negotiated, de-constructed and re-constructed, they simultaneously encapsulate and define much of our world. Additionally, this research argues that much of whiteness literature once again

places a great deal of attention upon white individuals while only marking non-whites as others. Jackson, Shin, and Wilson (2000) argue, "The significance of the social meaning of whiteness rests on the fact that people of color internalize the status of inferiority, as opposed to the superiority and privilege of being white" (p. 72). Essentially, non-whites must continuously negotiate their identity in relation to the dominant center. Similarly, Shome (2000) illustrates contrasting perceptions of racism, arguing, "whites are taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage but not taught to see its flip side – white privilege, which is socially maintained and constructed, and which, through various interlocking systems of communication, produces whites as 'raced' subjects" (p. 366). Manifestations of racism then, are often distanced from whites, as they are incapable of or unwilling to recognize their role in the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2013, p. 17).

The notion that white individuals do not recognize whiteness is backed by empirical evidence thanks to the Being White in America Scale (BWAS) developed by Bahk and Jandt (2004). This 25-item Likert-type scale specifically measures "the extent to which a person perceives White people to be distinct, dominant, privileged, legitimate, superior, and unsociable, compared to other racial groups" (p. 61). This study's results indicate that while many non-white individuals recognize the inherent nature of white supremacy, whites themselves did not acknowledge their own racial privilege. While a great deal of research on whiteness relies heavily upon qualitative methodology, the BWAS offers that differences in perceptions of privilege between racial groups are a measurable phenomenon.

While this research maintains that the invisible center dominates social and political structures while perpetuating racial and cultural exclusion and insensitivity, it also frames manifestations of whiteness as elusive – operating through strategic silence and avoidance techniques rather than overt acknowledgements or preservations of its structure. An acknowledgement and understanding of one's own societal position when taking on the role of an ally may appear intrinsic to the process, however, this project seeks to investigate a potential contradiction in these values, actions, and intent. Essentially, do allies recognize structures of whiteness and actively combat them, or are these actions performed with only a cursory glance of the minority experience and limited self-reflection?

The body and its representations as a rhetorical construct. While recurring enactments of inequality may range from overt to discreet, an underlying theme of supremacy in the United States remains glaring: white. Regardless of continual reminders that the very concept of race is mythological (Sussman, 2014), skin color maintains an unshakable ability to mark or mask cultural perception as an echo of past injustices in the United States. From the ownership of slaves until 1865**,** to exclusionary barriers in voting rights and integration in schools, to more recent and prevalent macro-aggressions in the form of police shootings of innocent black men and boys, to more subtle forms of exclusion, marked bodies in the United States appear born with an invisible knapsack of disadvantages. As Kenneth Burke notes, the negative, only recognized when challenging the normative culture and environment, defines individuals (1966). Essentially, those who exist in the affirmed segment of culture, one functioning as the cultural ideal and dominating media, politics, and positions of power go unmarked, while "the negative"

defines those outside or on the periphery of the dominant segment. Thus, the body may be perceived as a rhetorical construct, one that informs its inhabitor's treatment by simply existing.

Next, Richard Dyer's *White* analyzes Western media representations of white bodies, offering that if white representations go unexplored in academia, they will continue to function as the societal norm whilst all "others" become raced individuals, further servicing white supremacy. Through case studies and essays analyzing depictions of whiteness in Christianity to films such as *Tarzan*, *Alien*, and *Blade Runner*, Dyer attempts to unveil the multitude of ways whiteness pervades Western culture, acting as a persistent and malleable force. White functions as both everything and nothing at all times, while the forces creating and promoting these images bend toward a white ideal, servicing only the white standard. In discussing this act of servicing prevalent in Western media, Dyer asserts, "white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others are bound to fail" (p. 9).

Gordon Alley-Young (2008) frames the body "as a text by which to read, theorize, and critique systems of oppression and privilege" (p. 307), and therefore argues that a cross-discipline analysis of these concepts is necessary in order to better understand the rhetorical construct of marked and unmarked bodies. Through a juxtaposition of postcolonial studies and whiteness, Alley-Young examines the gaps of three primary constructs: "The Mind-Body Dichotomy", "The Performative", and "The Gaze" (pp. 309-318). In this analysis, Alley-Young focuses upon not only the white "obsession with the native body," while the white body remains unarticulated (p. 311), but the ways in which issues of racial oppression directly intersect with a multitude of identity factors. Alley-

Young's cross-discipline analysis ultimately argues, "We must find more sophisticated ways to talk about privilege and oppression. New ways of communicating must recognize that skin color, while perhaps the predominant mediator of privilege, is not a singular factor in determining the extent of racial privilege" (p. 319). This rhetoric simultaneously underlines the importance of examining surface aspects of identity in racial discourse while making note of more complex intersections.

To simply draw a white and non-white binary when framing the body as a rhetorical construct or argue that it is only from the marking of bodies that privilege and oppression occurs would be both reductive and essentialist. An individual's body may also be marked by its negation to the culture's idealized sex, gender, age, origin, physique, ableness, and race. However, basic freedoms in relation to skin color occupy a harrowing space in our culture. When people of color and racial allies become distressed by their treatment in the criminal justice system, it is not simply due to the countless instances in which a white cop has avoided repercussions for murdering an innocent black child, it is because that child was afforded less freedoms than white mass shooters. For example, Dylann Roof, a white supremacist suspected of shooting nine people in a historical black church was taken into custody while Black 12-year-old Tamir Rice was gunned down after playing with a toy gun. These instances communicate that if you have marked skin in the United States, you carry less individual rights and are less safe than those who go unmarked.

The carving of a space. Whiteness also serves as an area of inquiry concerned with concepts of both physical and metaphorical space. McAlister's (2010) study investigates the literal terrain of whiteness through an application of Burke's concept of

covenantal rhetoric to suburban neighborhoods, or, residential covenants. The author argues that by creating imposed upon covenants that outwardly portray the space as one with aesthetic ambitions that must be met by all neighboring participants, the space is exclusionary, "gain[ing] distance from their historical role as tools of racial and ethnic exclusion and embrace a communitarian and "colorblind" rhetoric that reinscribes White affluent privilege" (p. 273). These social pacts, manifesting in the form covenantal restrictions from suburban realtor offices, ultimately create boundaries to the outside world and give rise to an "us versus them" mentality (p. 275-276). In this case, whiteness is not only covenantal amongst residents, but literally inscribed in the requirements of suburban rental agreements, shifting space from that of metaphor to that of place.

Jackson II (1999) explores metaphorical spaces in his study investigating enactments of white privilege among focus group participants. He defines the spatialization facet of whiteness as "…a metaphorical construct that reminds us that social beings occupy certain life-spaces" (p. 38). Essentially, social expectations of privileges, positions, or media portrayals ultimately allow the construct to occupy a "space" in the eye of the culture. His study indicates that five primary strategies define and characterize whiteness, "(1) incompletion, (2) uninterrogatable space, (3) metaphor for the universal insider, (4) guilty and fair space, and (5) situationally immutable" with each "occupy[ing] its own territory" (p. 45). Ultimately, this view of whiteness as a cultural terrain suggests that while discussions of white privilege with white individuals may stir sensitivities (i.e., "white fragility"), it is crucial to human communication to question and critique this space and not simply observe or inhabit it without question.

Shome (2003) also suggests that concepts of power be considered in terms of space, offering, "space constitutes a site and a medium for the enactment of cultural power that has important implications for rethinking some key concepts in cultural theory, such as identity and agency" (p. 40). As an example, Shome analyzes exertions of power on the U.S.-Mexico border as it unquestionably embodies territoriality and issues of identity politics. Through the protection of a space and an outward push against those potentially invading it, the center is able to maintain its identity and power. Interestingly, Shome argues, "What matters are the material relations of empowerment and disempowerment that are enabled through the production of mobility" (p. 52). Essentially, the ability of a group or individual to enter into or occupy multiple geographic, cultural, or metaphorical spaces serves as a privilege to that individual or group, revealing their relative power.

By understanding space as a necessary component of power structures, both whiteness and racial allies can be viewed through this lens. From a metaphorical angle, whiteness functions as exertions of power from the invisible center, occupying a great amount of space while pressing outward against all those on its margins. While marked individuals may occupy a separate space entirely, this research suggests that the ability to enter and exit non-white spaces functions as a privilege for racial allies. Further, spaces at the edges of whiteness such as the U.S.-Mexican border and Ferguson, Missouri may serve as prime examples of areas in which mounting tension functions as a direct reaction to the invasion of white space, wherein state-sanctioned violence ensures the maintenance of divisions. Essentially, space, both physically and metaphorically understood,

constitutes a powerful means to understand identity and the implications of metaphorical border crossing and the potential push-back that may accompany it.

Enactments of Whiteness

Scholars have explored both overt and discreet enactments of whiteness through an examination and analysis of college students, professors, and organizational contexts. While blatant statements of hateful or fearful white supremacy rarely surface in these articles, many individuals unsurprisingly revealed more deeply engrained performances of whiteness in the form of reinforcing notions of a societal hierarchy. The most prevalent body of research details enactment of whiteness by college students, oftentimes in the classroom. Warren's (2001) study explores a single incident in which a student refers to a Japanese manufactured vehicle as a 'rice burner', which Warren argues, "was a unique piece of violence not only through the objectification of a cultural group to a singular derogatory reduction of a poor automobile, but also through the correlation of perceived cultural primitivism and defensive fears of cultural domination in technology" (p. 192). Ultimately through an analysis of the event and aftermath, the "performer" was revealed to exhibit whiteness by not only making an insensitive remark, but utilizing the mask of an underprivileged outsider to overshadow her intentions, placing herself as the victim rather than the oppressor.

Endres and Gould (2009) provide an analysis of discreet exhibits of whiteness in the classroom, offering that through a service learning activity, students were likely to view their participation as an act of charity rather than a learning experience. By reframing the activity in this way, students conflated their role of whiteness in the situation by either confusing the concept with "being white" or arguing that they could

use their whiteness for the purposes of charity (p. 420), rather than as a means to critically reflect.

Displays of whiteness in the classroom have also taken the form of a white perspective that "We're all the same" (Miller & Harris, 2005, p. 229) and "masked silence sequences" (Covarrubias, 2008, p. 242), in which the voice of non-whites are squelched but perceived to be "shrugged off" reactions to overt discrimination. In each case, white students reinforced the social hierarchy by either overtly or discreetly placing their position as one of dominance over other cultural groups, only making remarks perceived to level the playing field as a convenient defense mechanism. Johnson, Rich, and Cargile (2008) offer that white students will confront issues of race or reject them in several ways: "Acknowledgement," "white self-preservation," "diversion," and "investment" (pp. 118-130). Again, responsibility is continuously removed from the white perspective and placed upon either the "other" or other white individuals.

In focus groups, whiteness has been revealed to show a great deal of exhibition, despite the formal setting. In particularly controversial discussions of hate crime legislation, immigration policies, and grants and scholarships for minority students (Moss & Faux, 2006), whiteness either manifested in the form of overt otherization or through a focus on one aspect of cultural identity as deserving recognition over another, which, as the researchers argue, "establishes a hierarchy of normative standards" (p. 34). Similar to the "performer" in Warren's (2001) case, white students often combat efforts to balance privilege by shifting a focus toward personal disprivileges. Foster (2015) explores this concept further, offering that discussions of race among white individuals are often filled with total contradictions. While a white student may position herself or himself as a non-

racist, they may also make discreet efforts to "rationalize racial order" (p. 685). In this way, white students rely upon the socially adopted notion that we exist in a post-racial society explicitly due to their understanding of racism at an interpersonal level, rather than one that incorporates an understanding of systems of oppression.

However, while this problematic structure of racial dialogue among whites indicates a deeply engrained systemic attitude, a possible avoidance strategy of these pitfalls has been explored: diverse friendship circles (Martin, Trego, & Nakayama, 2010). Essentially, students with a more diverse set of friends are much less likely to overlook or downplay concepts of race as a social construct or reduce concepts of race explicitly to skin-color (p. 101). While a seemingly obvious notion, this particular study goes beyond encouraging self-reflexivity and asks individuals to develop empathy by befriending individuals with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ethnicities.

A difficulty engaging in productive racial discussion extends beyond that of college students and is experienced by college professors as well. According to Jackson, Warren, Pitts, and Wilson (2007), confrontations of racial issues are predetermined by cultural contracts, which essentially deal with the degree to which an individual is willing to negotiate their stance on racial issues upon conversing. By viewing race-talk in this way, three primary strategies among graduate teaching assistants emerged: "Avoid integrating diversity in class," "I try to teach diversity," and "Developing an inclusive classroom" (p. 77). While one of these strategies actively integrates concepts of diversity, the remaining strategies either sidestep or avoid it. Herakova, Jelaca, Sibii, and Cooks (2011) expand upon this issue by examining instances in which whiteness *was* explicitly discussed in a classroom or semi-formal setting, ultimately revealing that, regardless of

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the facilitator's comfort level in speaking on such issues, discussions of whiteness are nuanced and oftentimes difficult to confront.

In an organizational context, race is similarly a taboo or problematically dealt with subject, inevitably leading to enactments of overt or covert racism. Simpson's (2008) article expands upon an "(im)possibility of dialogue" by arguing that when individuals attempt to disregard race as an irrelevant issue or topic (noted as the "colorblind" stance), they only further service white supremacy (p. 142). In an analysis of student perceptions of diversity at the University of Colorado at Boulder, it is revealed that many students of color felt that the university attempted to promote their diverse campus, but ultimately failed, a student of color stating, "In 5 years I have not had one minority teacher. This is part of the problem" (p. 149). However, white students and administrative leaders remained oblivious to the failure of the university to successfully promote diversity by positioning complaints as a reaction by individuals unable to meet university standards, a white student stating, "CU puts so much emphasis on ethnicity these days that I'm beginning to feel like a minority" (p. 149). This act of redirecting at a university-wide level, despite frequent complaints allows the system of whiteness to remain invisible, and antagonizes those who question it. Macalpine and Marsh (2005) further explore the "taken-for-grantedness" tendency of whiteness in organizational settings. By working with public sector managers, a dual nature of silence and invisibility of whiteness is revealed: "People were silent because they didn't want to talk due to embarrassment, fear or resistance" and "People could not talk because they didn't have the words about whiteness, except through its contrast with blackness" (p. 445). These studies provide the notion that organizational manifestations of whiteness are fostered

because leaders and members are often unaware of how to handle or confront the concept.

Finally, while the previously cited articles attempt to analyze manifestations of whiteness in order to uncover the variety of ways it is performed, Warren and Hytten (2004) literally categorize individuals who confront whiteness into five main "faces": "The Torpefied," "The Missionary," "The Cynic," "The Intellectualizer," and "The Critical Democrat" (pp. 325-333). Each "face" varies in its investment of self and willingness to develop viewpoints, with the critical democrat serving as the self-reflexive center, encompassing the strengths of each face while refusing to commit to one stance in favor of a holistic perspective. While this research only examines individuals who have accepted whiteness as an active and problematic process, it suggests that even these individuals struggle to maintain a balanced perspective.

While overt enactments of whiteness surface in a variety of contexts, from positions ranging from pupils to authority figures, and through a wide-range of methods, this research suggests that discussions of power and privilege in the context of race in and outside of the classroom can clearly be a difficult terrain to navigate. However, while this dialogue may result in uncomfortable or awkward moments, born out of earnest ignorance, it is necessary to *start* the conversation if individuals hope to grasp concepts of privilege and oppression and their inherent role in them. For allies, this terrain may carry even deeper complexities as allies take a more active role in the movement toward greater social justice, or, "the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities" (National Association of Social Workers, 2016).

Allies

First, the concepts of ally, alliance, and intercultural alliances can be defined as follows: "*Ally* connotes partner, advocate, collaborator, and supporter, and alliance most often means to be associated, connected, and joined in a united front; an *alliance* is a relationship in which parties are interdependent and responsible for and to each other. Intercultural allies recognize their cultural differences as well as their interdependence, and often seek similar goals, but they are not necessarily friends" (Collier, 2002, p. 2). Collier offers that there are a variety of "conditions to be met" and "barriers to overcome" in order to play a role in the fight for equality as an ally. Those who desire to serve as racial allies must consciously consider a variety of relevant issues such as "historical context," the potential for "questioned authenticity," the role of positionality, and of course, "whiteness," while simultaneously acknowledging that entering the dialogue of injustice from a position of privilege does not mean that you suddenly understand the perspective of an oppressed group (pp. 9-18). An advocate, however, may be viewed as an individual actively attempting to incite change for a cause, being either a member of the disenfranchised group or a racial ally.

A surprisingly scarce amount of communication research has investigated this position. However, DeTurk's (2011) article, *Allies in Action: The Communicative Experiences of People Who Challenge Social Injustice on Behalf of Others*, stemming from a qualitative interview approach, offers that an individual may serve as an ally "(a) out of identity concerns that emphasize moral obligations, (b) largely through authoritative and dialogic strategies that draw on their symbolic capital, and (c) in ways that reflect ideologies of culturally dominant groups" (p. 569), implying that allies act out

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of persuasive means with a variety of complex motives. Beyond these reasonings, DeTurk suggests, "Allies' power is more complicated than membership in dominant social groups" (p. 584), urging scholars to expand their concept of what constitutes as an ally and increasingly engage in scholarship that does not menially investigate the topic area, but rather, faces the complexities of the political nature of allied individuals and groups.

Cerecer (2010) directly juxtaposes allies (which he terms *coalition building*) and Whiteness through a critical discourse analysis of a single White male's efforts to build a Community Learning Center (CLC) in a low-income community housing project. While the CLC was dismantled only six months after its implementation, Cerecer argues, "…Tom's Whiteness problematically affirms CLC's *failure* while it simultaneously highlights the *success* of his coalition-building efforts" (p. 174). Failure of the project is attributed to Tom's position of privilege. When framing the project, Tom controls how the CLC will function and be viewed, and when navigating interactions, Tom distances himself from fellow members of the coalition, asserting that only he understands the correct way of employing activism. However, success of the project is attributed to its very function, as it "relied upon bonds of friendship to generate collective efforts" (p. 184). Cerecer asserts that activist efforts do not fall into a strict binary of success or failure, but rather, have the potential to provide highly educative moments of coalition-building by acknowledging the presence and role of whiteness in this process.

Breede (2012), however, approaches the complexities of boundary-crossing collaboration and activism through a narrative ethnographic approach centering on the Eastern Carolina Coalition against Human Trafficking's efforts. Breede employs a

framework of relational dialectics, as it "recognizes the interactive building, through language, of relational negotiations of conflict and power" (p. 410). This case provides a significantly more overt display of Whiteness in activist efforts as those affiliated and unaffiliated with the ECCAHT frequently display power in the form of undisguised nationalism. Breede's research suggests that activist or ally efforts operating within a highly conservative area provide deeper complexities to the process of coalition building, while Whiteness pervades to an even greater degree.

For many in the field of intercultural communication, the matter of alliances and voice in service of social justice for "the other" is a hotly contested topic. In her article, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Alcoff (1991) provides the multitude of potentially problematic aspects of speaking or acting for the other, "arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate," or the way in which one's viewpoint serves as a roadblock in discussing intercultural topics, "it is common to find articles and letters in which the author states she can only speak for herself" (p. 6). Alcoff ultimately argues that racial allies should not attempt to speak for the other as this may only further service the kyriarchy, or the social system built around and upon oppression (Fiorenza, 2007) and leave those "spoken for" in a worse position as their voice is no longer their own.

While boundary crossing carries with it a great deal of complexity, factors of authenticity and motivation only further complicate perceptions, roles, and potential duties of racial allies. This research seeks to introduce a new conception of allies frequently employed in a modern context through online forums, comment sections, and social media, termed, "Social Justice Warrior." This pejorative is often used to criticize those who passionately engage in discussions concerning social justice and connotes that

these "Warriors" argue about social justice issues shallowly and as a means to bolster status and reputation. While certainly not an academic term, this pejorative aims to undermine the intent of racial allies by criticizing their core motivations. If one is called an "SJW" they are essentially being told that their argument is trivial and their intent for social change goes no further than their browser window. While only Cerecer (2010) directly links the role of Whiteness to racial allies, this research argues that these concepts are intrinsically linked and that if an individual considers himself or herself an ally, they must first acknowledge their societal position and frequently challenge what is perceived as the norm. The intersection of whiteness and the role and responsibility of the ally prompt crucial and complex lines of thinking which are vital to both the field of communication scholarship and to the progression of greater societal equality and justice. This collaboration of concepts beg the following research questions:

> *RQ1: How do individuals navigate discussions of racial allies when confronted with issues of whiteness?*

> *RQ2: (How) Is whiteness produced and reinforced in discussions of racial allies?*

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

A qualitative approach was vital to this research area as the exploration of the mythology of race is a socially constructed one and is therefore necessarily viewed subjectively. Further, as historical trends and cultural habits concerning race continuously build and rebuild themselves, to capture the essence of these concepts and issues requires both an overt recognition of the researcher's viewpoint and an acknowledgement of these pieces serving as components of a grand narrative. This research took an *emic* approach, as I have attempted to view and describe behavior of participants from their point of view while considering the context of the dialogue. Through *verstehen*, I attempted to empathically understand participant viewpoints from a "first-person perspective that [they] have on their personal experience as well as on their society, culture, and history" (Tracy, 2013, p. 41) in order to retrieve a deeper meaning or motivation behind the content of participant's messages. Simultaneously, this research adopted a critical paradigm to interpret participant's negotiation of the role and positionality of racial allies, as well as to view enactments and recognition of whiteness. Further, because this research area promotes continuous self-reflexivity, as the researcher, I have done my best to acknowledge the position from which I confront these concepts.

Specifically, focus groups served as the primary research method. Focus groups were appropriate and perceivably integral for this research as group interaction allows participants to "show less inhibition, especially when they interact with similar others" (Tracy, p. 167). In this way, discussions of the sensitive, controversial, and intricate

concepts of race were able to flow and unfold because participants likely felt less restrained by the dialogic nature of the experiment. Further, the racial make-up of each focus group ensures that specific life experiences are shared, thus, potentially allowing for a greater feeling of support in opinions and viewpoints. Focus groups have also allowed participants to adapt to one another's engagement with the subject matter, enabling opinions to change over the course of the focus group ultimately simulating the "everydayness" of whiteness while simultaneously taking part in philosophical whiteness critique. Beyond responding to questions posed by the moderator, participants questioned fellow group members and themselves, offering new insights to concepts of whiteness and racial allies.

Participants

Upon gaining IRB approval, four focus groups were conducted. These focus groups were categorized by racial makeup as the study deals with concepts regarding racial perception and in-group dialogue. I, a white male, facilitated the "White" focus group, and a fellow graduate student of color facilitated the focus group made up of individuals of color. Focus groups lasted between 1 hour to 1 hour and a half and took place at a time that was convenient for the participants. Focus groups occurred in two-way-mirror rooms located on the university's campus and were video recorded from multiple angles. While one investigator served as the facilitator, the other observed the focus groups from the other side of the mirror and took notes. A two-way-mirror allowed each focus group to be actively observed by both facilitators while maintaining the impression of in-group dialogue to participants.

Participants were selected through purposeful convenience sampling at a large midwestern university as they were recruited from undergraduate communication courses and had to fit specific racial-identification criteria. Two focus groups consisted entirely of self-identified White participants, while two focus groups consisted entirely of self-identified individuals of color (African-American, Middle Eastern, Asian, and Hispanic). Focus group 1 consisted of 5 white participants (3 female and 2 male), focus group 2 consisted of 5 non-white participants (5 female), focus group 3 consisted of 3 white participants (3 female), and focus group 4 consisted of 4 non-white participants (1 female and 3 male). To encourage participation, individuals were offered extra credit by their professor for taking part in a focus group. While the facilitators attempted to approach each focus group identically, questions and discussions of "the other" and how skin color has informed the lives of participants garnered important differences. Further, because this study directly deals with issues of race, and particularly, the often-insulated nature of these conversations, it was important to create a simulation of an in-group discussion as diversity within focus groups may have forced individuals to carefully construct responses as to not offend members of another race.

Procedures

Questions guiding the focus groups were divided into 4 sections: the first dealt with perceptions of racial allies, the second with perceptions of social justice warriors, the third was an activity in which participants wrote out what they believed to be the guidelines to being a good racial ally, and the fourth was a conclusive section in which individuals could explain whether or not they believed they themselves were racial allies, while also discussing the role of white individuals in social justice reform.

Throughout the focus groups, facilitators took a neutral stance and primarily used responsive interviewing behavior (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), which allowed participants to build upon concepts and, if necessary, for the number of questions to expand.

Following each focus group, an inter-coder conversation occurred, ensuring that both investigators agreed upon primary takeaways of the discussions. Later, video recordings of the focus group were reviewed and precisely transcribed by the researcher while maintaining confidentiality of the participants. The length of focus group recordings totaled 4 hours and 46 minutes (FG1: 48 minutes and 21 seconds; FG2: 1 hour, 40 minutes, and 28 seconds; FG3: 48 minutes and 21 seconds; FG4: 1 hour, 16 minutes, and 51 seconds), which provided a total of 44 pages of single-spaced transcriptions. Next, a primary and secondary coding cycle were conducted through both a personal recognition of particularly salient, emotional, or repetitive actions, quotations, or methods. Specifically, axial coding guided the process as open codes were later "put back together in new ways […] by making connections between categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). One hundred and thirteen first-level codes were produced, before ultimately being translated into eight second-level codes. This translation process included grouping conceptually similar first-level codes together and removing codes that served as clear outliers, perhaps occurring only once or having no relevance to this particular study. All of this occurred on a color-coded spreadsheet. Secondary codes were discussed in a second inter-coder conversation with my co-facilitator wherein code titles and interpretation of codes were discussed. As a result of this conversation, code titles were altered, the grouping of codes was slightly reorganized, and a general outline for the

organization of the analysis section was produced. Finally, these secondary codes were

analyzed and interpreted.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Conducting and observing focus groups was a fascinating process and took significantly greater effort than my previous experiences with this methodology. For example, many participants were unfamiliar with much of the core terminology, such as "racial allies" and "social justice warriors." Further, these focus groups seemed much more timid in their discussion of racially charged subject matter to the point that I occasionally had to explain that it was appropriate to open up about these topics. Perhaps this climate blossomed from the recent success of polarizing presidential nominees Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, participants often citing the nominees and recent controversial events, or perhaps it is due to our location in a highly conservative red state along the Bible belt. Regardless, this analysis attempts to capture all intended and unintended communication within the focus groups.

This analysis will explore eight themes, all of which address both research questions, at times, simultaneously. The eight themes are "Whiteness", "Experience & Voice", "Whitewashing Advocacy", "Polite Protest", "(Dis)Comfort", "White Fragility", and "The Complexity of Allyship", before ultimately analyzing guidelines developed by focus group participants for being a good and productive racial ally. These sections will often attempt to capture the dialogic nature present *between* focus groups, because while individuals were grouped by their racial identification, the nature of the questions allowed participants to directly or indirectly relate to and converse with one another through the topic. Further, this subject matter receives a great deal of media attention and

is already a part of an ongoing national discussion, thus focus groups are interacting with

a universal artifact and discussion.

Whiteness

White participants and occasionally non-white participants frequently exhibited

whiteness. In these cases, as thoroughly illustrated in the literature review, whiteness took

the form of normalizing the center and drawing attention away from issues of race. For

example, participants would promote "colorblindness" or treat issues of race as overly

emphasized in modern culture. This is exemplified by several examples below:

> *Focus Group 1 (White), Participant 4*
> …I guess the ultimate goal would be to not see race […] I think in culture today
> we put too much emphasis on what race you are and that drives so much tension
> in society today. That's the reason we're having this discussion is that our culture
> focuses so much on race over personality traits or cultural backgrounds.
>
> *Focus Group 3 (White), Participant 1*
> That's the problem with race being so much in the spotlight right now, I don't
> know when, but it'll be a while before that stops, in my personal opinion.
> Everything is just so   based on race, and nothing is based on, "oh, that person
> sucks." People just need to look more at personality traits. Things like that.
>
> *Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 2*
> I think we need to get past the whole race thing. I don't care what you are […] I
> think it depends on the person, not their race.

In each case, an individual's "race", viewed as their ethnic group identifiable through

physical features like skin color, is seen as less important than personal traits and in one

instance is deemed as a driver of societal tension. Whiteness pervades this notion as de-

emphasizing race leaves individuals oblivious to engrained systems of oppression directly

tied to ethnicity, offering only that "personality traits" are more valuable.

Further, white focus groups went as far as to directly refute notions of systematic

oppression and supremacy, one participant stating, "I think that there's a stigma placed

on different races and different oppressed groups. Like, women are always seen as oppressed, even if they're the CEO of a company." In relation to oppression experienced by African Americans, a participant stated, "Some can be lawyers, but then some can be doing drugs and all that" to which another member responded, "I think it's like white people, or like anything else. There are people who are successful, and then there are people who do the bad things." In both cases, participants were responding to my question as to whether or not these groups are systemically disadvantaged. Near the end of one of the white focus groups, participants began to explain that oppression swings from one group to another depending upon recent events, so I asked the group if oppression would eventually swing toward white people, marginalizing Caucasians:

> *Focus Group 3 (White)*
> Participant 1: I think it could happen, but it's not very likely just cause I guess they consider us, like we started it, so I guess we make the rules in some people's point of view, but I feel like it could happen.
> Facilitator: Do you feel like we make the rules in your point of view?
> Participant 1: No, but I know in a lot of people's point of view it's the white people who make the rules.
> Participant 3: I was kind of going to say the same thing. Like, white people don't make the rules but people feel like we do.

In this case, the system of white supremacy is acknowledged as a popular viewpoint, but one ultimately rejected by the participants. In another instance, a participant from a white focus group stated, "You're always taught from, not necessarily the white perspective, that's just how history happened." While overtly recognizing societal manifestations of white supremacy, this participant maintained that the western conception of history is "how it happened." Each of these examples function as displays of whiteness as they

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reject engrained systems of oppression, pull focus away from the center's responsibility

in combating, and ultimately free whites from all responsibility.

In contrast, non-white participants directly addressed the minimization of racial

dialogue and concepts that white participants enacted. One participant provides her

perspective on the role of racial dialogue:

> *Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 4*
> It just seems so hopeless to talk about this because it's so easy to say don't look at
> race. I don't want to judge people by that, but race is everything in America, it's
> so significant   because we've made it that way, so it's not even worth that
> conversation because it's not an option. Race will always be a factor.

This participant's viewpoint argues that race should be considered a part of relevant

dialogue as oppression against individuals of color draws upon historical actions taken by

the majority. While progress has been made, "race" maintains significance because our

societal structure was initially built upon the division of ethnic groups – white people

being afforded more rights than black people. In this particular case, the term and

dialogue surrounding "race" alludes not only to skin color or ethnicity, but encompasses

treatment of these groups throughout history. Other non-white focus group participants

have explained how even their friends have attempted to squelch these issues, one noting,

"Actually, from my personal experience, I have some friends that have tried to suppress

the idea of racism. Like they say racism is no longer here in America, mostly Caucasian

friends." While the suggestion that "racism is no longer here" may not be the most

popular opinion, these types of opinions and comments perpetuate the notion that not

only does overt and hate-fueled racism not exist, but neither does systemic oppression,

maintaining the power and influence of the center.

Next, when participants were asked whether or not racial allies received any sort

of reward for their advocacy, white and non-white groups held opposing views. White

focus group participants stated that racial allies were not rewarded or that they could not

think of a potential reward a racial ally might receive. One individual went as far to say

that having the presence of a white ally at a Black Lives Matter rally was more of a

reward for people of color at the rally, a "confidence booster." However, several non-

white participants were able to immediately interpret the question, one explaining, "They

get recognition. People notice them more. I wouldn't say a lot of people, because then

you have those others that don't necessarily agree with what they're doing. They might

not get good praise, but they definitely are getting noticed." This participant explains that

when an ally co-opts a movement, they are praised for it by many, not including those

opposed to the movement. Essentially, white focus group participants were unable to

come up with how an ally might be rewarded, while non-white participants could readily

identify the recognition culled from addressing issues of social injustice.

Finally, privilege was handled in a variety of ways by all focus groups. On one

end of the spectrum, several white participants outright rejected the notion that they had

inherited privilege strictly due to their ascribed race. The following dialogue exemplifies

this perception:

> *Focus Group 3 (White)*
> Participant 2: I feel like other races think we don't know because we haven't had
> the experience and so since we don't have that experience, we're just privileged
> and everything. But I know some people who are poor and everything and have
> grown up in the same areas and so they're white they have better privileges still
> compared to black people or whatever? They're both in the same situation, but
> it's just what black people think, well not all black people, but some black people.
> Facilitator: Well, privilege is a really good talking point as well. How did you all
> hear that term, "white privilege"?

Participant 1: Well, again, it's not an actual law or rule. It's just that everyone assumes that because we're white we get better treatment or we might get things first or get the better thing in a lot of situations. People might believe us first over someone else even if it's a mental privilege.

Participant 2: It'd be like, this pizza. Like if I got a piece then a black person got a piece or whatever they would be like, oh they got the bigger piece or you got a better piece even though they're the same size.

In this excerpt, "experience" is considered situational or directly linked to poverty, the participant arguing that if an individual is poor, they have essentially lived through the black experience. Similar to the student in Warren's (2001) article who buried their problematic "rice burner" comment in a shroud of personal disadvantages they experienced, these individuals attempted to mask their potential role in the system by speaking on disprivileges experienced by whites. Further, privilege is viewed as an imaginary concept thrust upon white individuals, and, given the pizza metaphor, a means of inducing guilt despite no perceived difference in societal treatment. Privilege, in the eyes of Participant 1, is a view in which white people automatically receive better treatment and more trust from others, this being a viewpoint the participant does not share.

However, this was not the only treatment of privilege as a talking point by white focus group participants. In the other focus group made up of white participants, following a question concerning the role of whites in social justice reform, one participant immediately stated, "I think white people's role is just to recognize that in some ways we have it better in our culture and there's nothing wrong with advocating for someone else that doesn't have the same advantages that we do." At another point, a white participant expressed frustration with how privilege is often viewed, "The majority of the time you hear about white privilege it's being used in a negative sense, and yes we

have it better, but it's not necessarily our fault…When people use it, they say it in negative terms, and then it's like, I can't do anything about how I am." This participant feels as though they are viewed as at fault for the privilege they have inherited and attempt to reject this notion, this sensation expanded upon in the theme "White Fragility." When the participant states, "I can't do anything about how I am," we can infer that this inheritance bothers them; perhaps to the point that they wish they could change their race so as not to face this type of criticism. In non-white focus groups, privilege was discussed as a means of inciting change; "It would be really cool for people who are in positions where they have more privilege use that to help other people have a voice." In contrast, this participant argues that white voices can help spread advocacy, while the previous participant believes their ascribed race is incapacitating. While the individual fears an acknowledgement of their race and its affordances, the individual on the outside can only hope that those in privileged positions *do something* with their voice that services others. These viewpoints position the concept of privilege as a debatable talking point as it is either nonexistent, acknowledged, or utilized to bolster advocacy altogether.

The influence of whiteness pervaded all focus groups. Despite a shared understanding of the general focus group topic, many white participants still pushed back against the notion that systems of racial oppression and privilege are at play, likely affecting their perception of whether or not a racial ally must exist in the first place, while non-white groups acknowledged systems of whiteness and occasionally argued that it could be used to service the plights of non-white groups. This research offers that perceptions of experience and situational factors often make an understanding of systemic advantages very difficult for white individuals to grasp. Further, this research

expands upon the notion that whiteness carries such a strong hold on cultural perception that it is often made invisible by members of the center, while primarily being acknowledged by those on the exterior, and occasionally seen as an advantageous component of advocacy.

Experience & Face

Throughout the non-white focus groups, experience and face were regularly considered major factors in determining how messages of advocacy, from either an ally or an advocate fighting for their own cause, should be interpreted. While "experience" serves as the component from which an individual is able to develop exigence for their advocacy, "face" can be understood as the identity of the individual advocating a cause and the relevance of their particular societal position. "Face" is a particularly complex piece of advocacy as a racial ally might be viewed as an individual attempting to further the rights and voices of marginalized groups, or, a white person co-opting a movement that is not theirs. First, experience was often determined as a prerequisite to taking stances on issues of social justice. When discussing experiences of racial aggression, a non-white participant stated, "I feel like every person of color, whether they've known it or not has had that firsthand experience" and when discussing how a white politician was incapable of reaching a minority audience, "…but she hasn't lived through it and she hasn't experienced it. She tries to make it seem like she's a friend to us, almost." In these ways, participants suggested that those with specific experiences should be provided more credence to speak on issues related to that group. Two participants summarize this concept by stating:

Participant 4: We all have our own personal experiences with how we've been treated or how we feel about our status or whatever, so being not of a minority group, you might not be able to exactly understand it. You might be able to, I guess, sympathize with it rather than really knowing how it feels to be treated a certain way. So I feel like for that extent for a racial ally to grasp what it's like to be in the shoes of a minority group.

Participant 2: Experience definitely goes into it, you can't believe in something until you have lived through whatever made you want to believe in it.

Sympathy is offered as a means to help bridge the gap for racial allies, to acknowledge the differences of lived experiences in order to create motivations. Tensions and frustrations concerning in-group and out-group boundaries were also discussed. One non-white participant relayed a story in which her family members argued that her minority status as an individual from Middle Eastern descent should take precedent over all other minority issues, to which she replied, "It's a little frustrating. Especially when I've figured it out within my own family, and if you know what it feels like to be a minority, shouldn't you be supporting every other minority? If you're really getting it first hand, then you should be more open-minded with everyone else." This participant goes beyond internalizing and acting upon her own struggle, suggesting that one's experiences might help create empathy for marginalized others, even those outside of one's own ethnicity.

Next, non-white participants frequently discussed the face of a message. Participants stated, "When someone is in a position to speak and spread a positive message, I think, personally, depending on the face the words are coming from if it's going to be taken as seriously as it should be, or not" and "I think it goes back to certain platforms and the face that it's coming from" to express the importance of who is relaying messages of advocacy. However, the complexity of the issue was also acknowledged, "Like we said before, there are white people who do want to see change

because they think it's wrong. If they could help be the voice… But that's still problematic, because it should be the actual person's voice that's heard because that doesn't fix [the problem], like, how we don't listen to people of color…" Here, the participant offered that using privilege has the potential to bridge racial dialogue and plights across groups but will still allow the majority culture to dominate these discussions. Further, frustration with this particular issue was brought up among non-white individuals, "People were like, you're so awesome that you're supporting them, but it really wasn't about him. So I'm wondering, is it because it's this white guy who decided, 'Hey, I'm gonna rally'. What if it was a person of color, would they have gotten as much media attention for this? Or reward for that? I don't think so." Identity politics played a large role in the focus groups made up of non-white participants as individuals made a concerted effort to draw attention toward the individual behind the message.

In white focus groups, save for participants occasionally stating that they are seen as privileged because they have not experienced life as a minority, participants did not discuss voice or experience. Considering that these factors were heavily emphasized in the non-white focus groups, this de-emphasis may suggest that white individuals either do not find these factors important, or more likely, have not considered how these concepts may be integral to advocacy.

Whitewashing Advocacy

Next, both white and nonwhite focus groups frequently discussed how advocacy and progression is often whitewashed as well as perceived as a fashionable trend of the moment. For example, when discussing social justice warriors, participants were able to

easily pinpoint these types of individuals in their lives and provide brief narratives and

opinions on the "SJWs",

> *Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 4*
> I mean, it's all over Facebook, that's all it is anymore. You have someone who finds an article that's trending and they're like, 'Oh, I want to be a trendy thing. Let me say something about this so everyone can know I'm trending and give me likes.' And it's so obvious the people that do it versus the genuine people. And I hate it so much. I feel like social media has completely ruined these conversations because everything is a trend now, that's all it is. There is no deeper level to it. So when a person gets killed or something happens, that trends, and then something else happens and, oh, let's forget about that. Nothing gets done from it.

Uniquely, this participant suggests that the trending nature of social justice issues

diminishes them, removing all seriousness from the need for reform. Further, the

participant offers that an ally is someone who goes beyond arguing about these issues on

social media, and takes literal action, whereas a social justice warrior merely postures in

an online space. These social justice warriors were frequently referred to as "bandwagon

activists", which led some participants to discuss the problematic nature of whitewashing

in activism as whites may co-opt the struggles of others, diluting the intended messages

of the movement. While one non-white focus group member likened social justice

warriors to Sandra Bullock's character from The Blind Side (a staple example of the

White Savior Complex), another related the performance of social justice warriors to the

gentrification of poor communities:

> *Focus Group 4 (Non-White), Participant 4*
> It's not just what they post online, the example I can think of is there are a lot of cities that claim to be very progressive and very liberal and the people who live in them are very outspoken, but they're predominantly white. They're reaching out to minorities so that they can look nicer. Yeah they're speaking up and they're progressive, but by going to live out there, they're pushing out people who have lived there for years because of gentrification.

This participant explains that, similar to a progressive white individual taking part in a social movement that does not service them, well intentioned whites may thoughtlessly move into a particular community, taking over what was previously a historically majority minority neighborhood and de-authenticating the area. Both white and non-white focus groups discussed the trending nature of advocacy. However, it is notable that non-white focus groups seemingly focused on *why* the "trend" of advocacy is problematic, while white focus group participants simply argued that advocacy itself is a fad. Upon being asked why someone might become a racial ally, one participant explicitly stated, "A lot of people could be protesting because it's kind of a fad these days. Like a trend." While a seemingly minute difference between white and non-white focus groups, this implies that intent behind why one might advocate a certain cause, what is best for that cause, and the weight of these issues registers differently between groups. Essentially, differences often rested as much on what *is not* explicitly said as what *is*. The management of protest, however, was a bit more similar across focus groups.

Polite Protest

In discussions of Black Lives Matter rallies and modes of protest, participants outlined how advocacy could best be carried out, frequently suggesting that movements or rallies maintain peace. This theme is termed "polite protest" as focus group participants had a tendency to confront the combative nature of protest or societal unrest, suggesting that they merely want change to occur politely, or "tastefully" as opposed to with emotions like anger and pain. Further, participants would urge racial allies to be

positive and non-combative when taking any action. A few statements below exemplify

this framing of advocacy:

> *Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 2*
> If you're passionate about something, obviously you're going to advocate for it, but you're gonna have to do it in a tasteful manner.
>
> *Focus Group 1 (White), Participant 5*
> Be positive. Yeah, and don't hate on people because of their individuality. Yeah, pretty much just be positive as a general basis.
>
> *Focus Group 3 (White), Participant 1*
> So I guess just, like, staying calm and doing what needs to be done, but not in a negative or destructive way.

These suggestions ask that protesters and advocates stay peaceful, avoid conflict with

opposing viewpoints, and maintain positivity. One focus group participant even related a

story in which she was faced with "negative" protesting while at her job:

> *Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 3*
> To me, when it becomes negative then that's when you kind of fall off the path. So when people are rallying Black Lives Matter, at home I work at the mall and they were going in people's stores chanting "Black Lives Matter." At the time I was the only black worker in [Claire's] and my manager was like, "I'm sorry if they come in here, I can't let them come in here, there are kids in here." To me, that was a negative. You came to a place where there are families. You don't really come to the mall for the hype, to see something like that. It was something that should have been positive, but wasn't to me because, like my manager was saying "I don't want people to think" – and she's white – "that because I'm not letting them in the store, that I'm not supportive or I don't feel a certain way about it, but there are children in this store and it isn't coming off as them being subtle about it." You seem hyped up, like she said. You seem angry. When you take that approach, it takes away from being an ally – or you don't look too nice about it.

This participant could not engage with the sentiment of Black Lives Matter in the case

that anger and emotion were involved, as this was not in the best interest of either the

store or those to whom the message was being communicated. Polite protest asks that

those who engage in advocacy movements do so in public spaces where rallies are perhaps seen as more acceptable. Many participants ask that advocacy follow a set of rules that do not drive tension, but rather, politely and calmly whittle away at corrupt systems of power.

(Dis)Comfort

Comfortability played a sizable role in participants' attitudes toward advocacy. Whether participants felt a need to feel comfortable in order to take part in a rally, felt discomfort when discussing issues of race, provided narratives about the discomfort of racial dialogues in their life, or simply explained that there is no comfort in advocacy, this concept served as a unique staple across all focus groups. First, while many white participants explicitly stated that they do not like confrontation, as a means to explain why they might not attend a rally or stick up for a person of color (i.e., "I just don't like confrontation"; "I guess I would consider myself one under the right circumstances"; "Like they said, I'm not big on confronting people"), one participant developed this position as thoroughly as she could. This quotation directly followed the question asking whether or not focus group members considered themselves racial allies:

> *Focus Group 1 (White), Participant 5*
> Going off of everyone else's answers, I would say that I am. But when you first asked the question I would say that I wasn't. I would say I'm more on the side of being a supporter. I'm not active, I don't like confronting people. That is one of my least favorite things to do. I don't want to, not that I don't want to go to the rallies, I just haven't. I've been around when there have been some, but that was during the really bad time. It was right after Ferguson and it was really bad and there were cops all over and it was not something I was comfortable going to because, I respect the people going to these rallies and for standing up for something, but for me, I can't. For me, it's something I don't feel comfortable with. But now that everything's died down, I think it's something I might go to and it's definitely something I'd be more supportive of.

While this participant still considers herself an ally, she admits that she has not been active and would only directly involve herself in the movement when it "dies down." Other participants in this particular group provided similar answers, which suggests that those who consider themselves racial allies are still plagued by a great deal of timidity, where taking part in social justice movements is only possible when space is free of risks of escalation either in emotions or violence. Or, perhaps this discussion framed racial allies in such a way that individuals felt obliged to consider themselves one, despite having done nothing to take on this role and showing insecurity when confronted with discussions of race. In other instances, white participants acknowledged their general discomfort about the subject of race, exemplified by the brief interaction below:

> *Focus Group 3 (White)*
> Facilitator: So when people are attending a rally, whose voice are they servicing?
> Participant 2: I guess the people who are going through the struggles, like with the whole, I don't know, I feel weird about this…

In this instance, the participant is attempting to articulate that racial allies service minority groups when attending rallies. Her discomfort with the terminology suggests that even talking about racial issues is awkward and likely rarely engaged in. Many participants showed a great deal of discomfort discussing the plight of African American's in the United States, or, in some cases even saying the word "black," as shown in the case above.

Several narratives provided by non-white focus group participants directly acknowledged this quandary. One participant explained how a former professor felt discomfort about racially charged language in a text the class was to read:

> *Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 3*

I had to read a book and the "n" word was all in the story. So in the class there are maybe three or four African Americans and I just happen to be one and my English teacher was like, "Should I not share this story? Do you think people will get offended?" It threw me for a loop, it really did. I haven't had anyone say that in a long time – "Are you offended by what I'm saying?" and I was like, "no." I mean, I'm in college so I've been reading books, I've heard the word before, I'm not blind to it. I'm not saying I was like, "Oh my gosh! Why would you ask?" If anything, it was more so a laughing matter to me. I'm fine. But kind of like what she (Participant 4) was saying, it's the white people. I'm sorry but it is. What I said was that it's not directed towards me. I get it, I'm African American, but am I supposed to be offended by it? It was weird. She didn't ask the white person who had to read the word out loud to the class if he felt weird.

While other students relayed similar stories (i.e., friends asking questions with the prerequisite that the subject is not offended; a teacher constantly apologizing for asking about the customs of Muslim students), participants typically acknowledged, "It doesn't come from a bad place." Further, on multiple occasions non-white participants explained how they actually wish that white people would ask questions more often, without the timidity:

Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 1
A lot of people try to avoid asking uncomfortable questions to get to know other races and cultures. Even a lot of my closest friends are like, I want to ask you something, but don't get offended. Don't get hurt at what I'm about to ask. It's a really simple question and I don't mind explaining my religion or culture to you. I'm actually really happy that you want to know more about it. But they're just like, 'I don't want to come off bad.' They're really uncomfortable asking these questions. If you want me to tell you something, I'll tell you.

Essentially, discomfort is attributed to a lack of communication or preconceived notions about what might occur when that dialogue begins.

While the discussion of comfort and discomfort in Focus Group 2, a non-white group, centered upon interpersonal interactions, the other non-white group, Focus Group 4, directly addressed how the role of a racial ally is uncomfortable and occasionally even

dangerous. Participants discussed the tribulations faced by racial allies when defending their position to family members or white friends that do not understand the issue. Two participants even provided narratives about white friends who had attended rallies or protested events and were put in danger as a result. In one case, a racial ally had been stabbed by a member of the Ku Klux Klan when the hate organization rallied in Orange County. This instance was acknowledged as an extreme circumstance, though the participant's sentiment remained: "Danger [or discomfort] is a major factor and is a big risk and you are showing dedication." As Shome (2003) expressed, the territorial nature of whiteness may create tension as space is invaded by another entity, threatening the equilibrium of the center. This narrative, however, reverses this conceptualization, as the KKK, representing extreme white supremacy, invades a progressive center and is met with derision and tension. Regardless, these discussions of comfort, discomfort, and risk also communicate the difference between action and inaction.

White Fragility

In several instances, white participants went beyond slight discomfort and became defensive and even emotional when the discussion turned toward their intrinsic role in white supremacy. This reaction has been termed "White Fragility" and can be defined as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). At one point when discussing privilege, a participant exclaimed the prototypical phrase, "It's not our fault that we were born white." Which notably could be exclaimed in the reverse by anyone who has experienced marginalization specifically due to his or her skin color. In another, a

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participant relayed a story in which she was directly confronted during a racially charged

discussion in a high school class:

Focus Group 3 (White), Participant 3
A lot of times growing up I heard, don't insert yourself into other people's opinions on Black Lives Matter or other races because they're just going to tell you you're wrong. So just keep your mouth shut […] I don't know if y'all read the book Henrietta Lacks? It's about a black woman who had ovarian cancer and her cells were used to make chemotherapy and her family didn't get compensated for it because it was years later. And I was in a discussion group for an English class and we were talking about it and there was a black student who was super nice, but he was saying, 'Oh, white people who have had chemotherapy don't know what black people have done for them'. And I said, 'Oh, we realize.' Because I've had cancer and I've had chemo. And he was like, 'Well, you don't really realize…' and I went off on him and he said 'You don't know. And I just shut my mouth.

The participant likely exclaimed that she understood where her classmate was coming

from because she felt as though she had a strong grasp on the sacrifices made for her

treatment. Yet, when the classmate argued that it would essentially be impossible for her

to ever truly understand, the conversation quickly spiraled as the two abruptly ended the

dialogue with anger and then silence. This story exemplifies white fragility, as the

individual claims to have, following the altercation, entirely removed herself from topics

of race for fear that she will be antagonized.

In other instances, white fragility took on the form of participants asking that

those advocating for change not argue or judge those on the opposing side, stating,

"Yeah, and don't hate on people because of their individuality" or "I guess stand up for

what you believe in, but don't judge people for what they believe in either. So it's like,

support my ideas but don't bash theirs." As opposed to perceiving the combative nature

of protest as one that attempts to upend a societal structure, participants took these as

personal attacks. These displays of fragility frame issues of social justice as differences of

opinion diffused by polite negotiation, for fear that harsher, more emotional advocacy

might upset the "individuality" of whites.

The Complexity of Allyship

Entrancing advocacy movements and the majority's role in the fight for equality

was often described as a complex process by all focus group participants. While initially

firm, individual's reflection on advocacy after considering that white people co-opting a

social movement may not be the best for that movement forced participants to reconsider

the role and face of an advocate or ally. Several participants described their perplexity

upon discovering that old friends from high school now posted about issues of racial

injustice on social media, despite having never shown sympathy before:

> *Focus Group 1 (White), Participant 5*
> There's a girl that I knew in high school and I don't talk to her anymore, but she is on my Facebook feed and she'll post about Black Lives Matter and all this stuff and black people and the issues with cops, but I'm like, I knew you two years ago and you never would mention anything about being proud of your race or wanting to speak out for people of other races. And once this happened, a lot of people on my newsfeed are now like, 'I support it'. And I feel like, well, I wish I had known that when I met you.

This participant and several others had a difficult time comprehending how one might

become a racial ally if it is not somehow a part of their intrinsically empathetic nature, or

rather, how they decide to fight for a cause if they did not have the fire in them before.

However, in other cases, participants explained that authentic racial allies exist in a state

of perpetual improvement and must continue to learn and grow:

> *Focus Group 1 (White), Participant 3*
> I think everyone can always do better at something. Especially with stuff like this. I don't think that it's a solid, "I am a *that*"… I think it's something to strive for.
>
> *Focus Group 2 (Non-White), Participant 4*

I don't think being a racial ally is always being perfect or saying the right thing. Even within my own race there are stereotypes I think about people and I have to say, wait a minute, who put that in my head. Let me evaluate the situation and see if it's something the media told me or if it's me. And that's good. As long as you make an effort to recognize it and say, okay, now lets rethink that.

Focus Group 4 (Non-White), Participant 4
It's about being aware of it and just sitting down and talking to someone, that takes a pretty concerned person because this day and age, everyone's very busy, everything's quick, everything's fast so for you to sit down and concern yourself with someone else's issues or understanding of something, I think is a big deal.

This positions racial allies as an objective, one that must be actively worked towards, as opposed to a role to step in and out of. It also likely explains why many participants could not easily state whether or not they considered themselves a racial ally. They had achieved the goal on certain occasions, but not all. They were sympathetic, but inactive. They would like to help, but were consumed by fear. When discussing the role of racial allies while being confronted with concepts related to whiteness, several participants readily acknowledged how taking action might be counterintuitive:

Focus Group 1 (White)
Participant 1: I think it's a double-edged sword.
Participant 5: I think a lot of people wouldn't want your help because they would think that you're only helping because you have this (privilege). It's not helping because you care.
Participant 1: I also think that it's contextual. It shouldn't be a cut and dry answer. Like if you acknowledge it, I think that will shape your worldview and opinions. You might have situations where you say, "Well I'm white so that's why I might say this" but there are plenty of times where you may not need to do that.

Focus Group 4 (Non-White), Participant 2
I think, given today's climate, it's really touchy as a white racial ally because there are so many people that don't think that they are authentic. I think it goes back to perspective. There are some people that don't think white people could ever be racial allies just because of deep-seated beliefs…I don't even know how to finish my thought because it's so complicated. I think everybody is treading a thin line just on both sides, but in terms of being a member of the majority and a racial ally, you really have to, in a sense, prove yourself so you don't come off as

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inauthentic. And like I said, I can't really finish the thought because…it's double sided.

In both cases, participants touch upon the liminal space of allyship, where occupants must take literal action against individuals who look like them in order to combat systems of whiteness while being sure not to co-opt a movement, feeding into the very structure they are trying to oppose. This, in essence, captures the complexity of the paper you are reading: How is racial equality best articulated to the masses? How does one help the center to recognize its privilege and domination over those outside of it? How can racial allies best influence the center while strengthening the voices of the silenced? Clearly, an answer to these questions is far from simplistic and it seems nearly impossible to develop encompassing guidelines for how individuals should best practice their "role" as a racial ally. But I asked focus groups to do it anyway.

Guidelines

Table 1 provides the guidelines developed by each focus group upon being asked the question, "What are some guidelines to being a racial ally?" These answers were each individually discussed among focus group participants and then written on a poster in order for participants to put a stamp on what they believe constitutes "a good racial ally."

Each focus group approached the guidelines quite differently. However, several similarities and differences between white and non-white focus groups are notable. First, three of four focus groups included physical action as an integral piece of taking on the role of a racial ally, while Focus Group 2 focused more upon internal changes in perception. Further, "Passion" was listed as a major factor by both white and non-white

Table 1
Guidelines to being a "Good Racial Ally"

Focus Group 1 (White)	Focus Group 2 (Non-White)
- Be active online and in person - Be factual - Support ALL races - Learn about other cultures - Be positive to others	- Accepting you will make mistakes and being willing to check yourself - Embracing differences instead of making a joke from it - Putting your feet into someone else's shoes and realize the different perspectives - Asking the tough questions and the right ones - Being willing to answer questions - Don't assume - Ask for understanding, not entertainment
Focus Group 3 (White)	**Focus Group 4 (Non-White)**
- Good morals - Good intentions - Need to have passion - Participate in a physical activity - Stand up for what you believe in - Educate yourself from both sides - Don't follow a trend - Shouldn't be judgmental of other groups	- Open-minded - Passionate - Firsthand experience - Dedicated - Reaching out - Listen to racial stories and experiences - Speaking out - Courage - Need to believe in what they are protesting - Stand up for others - Firm in his/her convictions - Actions reflect their words

focus groups. And learning from those outside of your race or ethnicity was encouraged by all focus groups, but was approached quite differently between non-white and white groups. Non-white groups would frame learning as listening, asking questions, and answering questions, implying that direct interaction with individuals outside of your particular culture must take place. For white focus groups, this obtainment of knowledge was worded, "Learn about other cultures," which does not allow direct engagement or unfiltered recognition of experience to take place.

Differences between groups were difficult to determine as each group framed racial allies in their own way, though white focus groups seemed to have a much more positive take on the role, with guidelines such as "Support everybody", "Positivity", while explaining that individuals should have "Good morals [and] intent". In contrast,

non-white focus groups asked for "Courage", "Experience", "Dedication", and "Firmness." A non-white focus group also acknowledged that mistakes will happen – building upon the notion that racial allyship is a process that one must continually work toward. Ultimately, these guidelines showcase the ambiguous nature of the racial ally, each group attempting to balance and consider internal and external change, intent, and character traits.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Even in discussions of social justice and advocacy, whiteness assumes a major role through both performance and acknowledgement. From this analysis, four main points of discussion both support and add to previous literature on whiteness and racial allies while responding to this study's research questions. These discussion points deal with cultural relevance, the implications of comfortable advocacy, the integration of racially charged topics in everyday discourse, and identity,

First, in response to research question 1, participants navigated discussions of racial allies and whiteness by reflecting modern politics, therefore it is important to consider the state of politics when analyzing performances of whiteness or views on advocacy. In the case of these focus groups, Donald Trump, Hilary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders each occupied a unique space in the discourse, each exemplifying a portion of the social justice advocacy spectrum. Donald Trump was cited as a blatantly racist and untrustworthy face of white male privilege, Hilary Clinton was cited as an example of a Social Justice Warrior, one who only takes part in race discourse to further personal gain, and Bernie Sanders was cited as an authentic racial ally. It may seem obvious to suggest that individuals will converse in a way that is reflective of the current state of media and politics, but this occurred to a noticeable degree within all focus groups. Participants likely felt emotional about these issues, regardless of their stance, because our current state as a country, wherein Donald Trump is the Republican frontrunner in the presidential polls while #BlackLivesMatter has garnered international attention, has *made* this matter. If our media intake is riddled with performances of whiteness, so too will

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much of the dialogue surrounding this subject, and if our media intake suggests that media riddled with whiteness is corrupt, then the dialogue will be very different. The simultaneous widening and thinning of the racial empathy gap in the United States has led to glaring tensions. In relation to the second research question, when navigating discussions of racial allies upon being confronted with issues of whiteness, participants occasionally utilized a lens provided to them by the media. At the very end of the final focus group conducted for this study, my non-white co-facilitator asked his non-white participants if there was anything they would like to add or expand upon, after a few seconds of silence one participant simply stated, "Fuck Donald Trump." That basically says it all. The amplification of these concepts through media and culture likely directly informed the next discussion point.

Next, in response to research question 2, desires for comfort when discussing issues of racial intolerance and for advocacy to be made more polite, one of the more glaring displays of reinforced whiteness, suggest that the greater the necessity for these movements, the more intimidated individuals of the majority become. Whites, unable to see an easy entrance to racial allyship, are able to overlook systemic oppression due to their privileged position, while needing only to explain how they do not like confrontation when their inaction is questioned. Privilege allows white individuals to reject the emotions of anger and despair in advocacy movements while refusing to realize that it is these emotions that birthed advocacy in the first place. It seems as though the push back against race as a major occupier of cultural space has expanded the limits of whiteness, or at the very least, made it a much more glaring part of our everyday lives. When Black Lives Matter protests are at the forefront of a national conversation about

race, white individuals merely see anger. Sure, #notallwhites, but even those who consider themselves progressive racial allies fear the emotions of those outside of the center. It is important for scholars of whiteness to consider this fear of emotion and to investigate perceptions of cultural change.

Additionally, discussions and dialogue about race are far from being integrated into the lives of the majority, at least in a way that makes race a relevant topic and not a bygone historical artifact. Simpson (2008) similarly explored the (im)possibility of dialogue, explaining that a sheer avoidance of racial discussions only further services white supremacy. As previously mentioned, focus group participants often took a colorblind stance to racial dialogue and rejected race as a relevant issue. Whether this strategy stemmed from a feeling of discomfort or a lack of understanding and empathy for those with different lived experiences, white participants seemed to have little footing when tackling these topics. Yet, these students, at the very least, were the ones who signed up to take part in a focus group specifically centering on race. I would imagine that these discussions would have been far more difficult for those entirely disinterested in or avoidant of the topic. When discussions of race exist outside of an academic setting, which often frames individuals of color strictly through a lens of severe hardship, the conversation becomes much more complex, difficult to navigate, unsure, and real. Suddenly, these conversations ask that those of the majority *listen* to those of the minority. They ask that those with privileged status recognize their role in the system in order to adjust their sociological perceptions. They ask that white people learn about history, art, science, and human achievement more inclusively, to acknowledge and revise the white lens through which much of our learning is created. White supremacy

asks that minority groups adjust their lived experiences and emotions to meet the designated comfort level of the majority, rather than the majority face the fact that these conversations are not easy, at least in the year 2016. This study adds to the depth of research on whiteness as a near impenetrable topic and asks that this be recognized as a learning curve. If the discussion seems comfortable, you are probably not doing it right.

Finally, this study indicates that the face of a message, or the race, gender, sex, and past of an individual, should always be considered in the communication process – especially in racial advocacy movements. While some white participants opined that it does not matter who a message derives from, as long as it is in service of the group in question, participants of color frequently stated that racial identity is an integral aspect of understanding a message holistically. While critical scholars will urge individuals to take this rhetorical approach to all communication, this study literally holds up the treatments of this notion next to each other. White participants often argue that we should look beyond race, while non-white participants argue that race can reveal a lot about a message and the intent behind it. If these conversations continue to occur in a vacuum, as was the case with these focus groups, a transcendent understanding of rhetoric will never be reached as individuals are simply incapable of truly understanding the entirety of another's viewpoint. When considering whether or not allies recognize these specific structures of whiteness when advocating causes, it is hard to say. The strange contradiction (whites spreading whiteness through allyship) was acknowledged by focus groups with varying degrees of depth, yet no group or individual took the initiative in defining exactly how a racial ally should perceive their role. This statically ambiguous nature of allyship only further underlines and expands upon DeTurk's (2011) suggestion

that what constitutes as an ally must be further investigated by researchers due to its

unending complexity, going beyond identity politics by considering the ways in which

both the ally and the marginalized group can agree upon the role of empathetic members

of the center.

CHAPTER 6

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several factors of this research limited its findings to varying degrees. First, while not hugely problematic, only a total of 17 participants took part in the study. A greater number of participants would have likely offered greater insight into the topic area due to a wider range of experiences and perspectives. Next, in hindsight, two approaches to this research could have increased the depth of findings. First, rather than simply recruiting students from general education courses, those who already consider themselves to be racial allies could have been recruited from university organizations that lend themselves to this topic. The input and dialogue provided by these students could have more accurately assessed the intentions and motivations of racial allies, while findings provided through the application of whiteness may have been more unique. Further, these students would likely be more immediately capable of delving into the subject matter, requiring less clarification of topic matter and more deeply analyzing their personal positions and narratives. Second, while four focus groups explored white and non-white perceptions of racial allies and social justice warriors, racially diverse focus groups may have offered even more insight into the topic. It is likely that participants would have more strategically navigated their discussion in order to not offend fellow participants, however, this very process may have offered a unique lens through which to view racial dialogue and tensions. Essentially, facilitating a discussion of race in the context of a communication study may have actually allowed a productive dialogue on racial advocacy to take place. For some individuals, this type of discussion could have been the first of its kind in their lives, and may have had the potential to alter their perspective on

these issues. Examining this process would surely provide deeper insights into how racially charged subject matter is negotiated among individuals with entirely different perspectives.

Critical cultural and whiteness scholars should consider taking this approach with focus groups in the future. Further, future research should continue to apply whiteness in challenging ways, especially within systems that attempt to directly address systems of oppression. While whiteness manifests in a number of obvious locations, it is in these inclusive spaces that voice and intent may go unexplored. Where whiteness is at its most secretive. As an all too frequently unchallenged system, whiteness pervades many unexplored areas of sociological and communication research. In this context, whiteness was explored through a lens of allyship and advocacy, but should also be explored in progressive spaces, where leaders and branding might suggest that whiteness could not possibly exist. It is only through critical examination that it be increasingly unearthed.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

As critical cultural scholars, it is our responsibility to attempt to find truth and implications in too frequently unquestioned spaces. At the start of this research study, I had a vague sense that this would be a complex research area to tackle, but I did not necessarily know how much the process would unearth about whiteness in reference to the progressive space of allyship. Throughout the process, and especially while reviewing the recordings of focus groups, I could not help but constantly re-evaluate my position as the researcher. Clearly, this thesis, one centering on topics of race and voice is being presented through a privileged gaze. Does this mean that I am going to dump these pages in the shredder? No, it doesn't. As the reader, it is up to you to decide whether or not my position devalues this work or if it merely be taken into consideration – shred or not. Either way, it is extremely important to acknowledge the role I and many other scholars play in this dialogue. As someone who considers himself a racial ally, I would like to commit myself to confronting issues of social injustice and listen to the experiences of others, while also acknowledging that I will never fully get it. Fellow scholars should try to do the same.

Further, while this research built a wall between the dialogue of white and non-white participants in order to capture vulnerable truths, individual viewpoints, expressions, references, and goals of all groups managed to interact with one another in a remarkable way. In fact, this dialogic nature begs the question: What would have happened if these focus groups met? Would the dialogue have become restrained and uncomfortable, or would viewpoints more deeply unfold. Threads between focus groups

advance the notion that individuals do not view these issues with extreme polarity. In particular, empathy served as the thread by which many participants were able to find hope amidst the chaos of this topic. Whether participants articulated this notion as "stepping into the shoes of another" or overtly discussed empathy, participants recognized the value in attempting to understand the feelings of others. While we may be far from peaceful and empathetic communication between individuals of wholly different backgrounds, this research suggests that when groups are asked to confront topics of race, even through in-group dialogue, they consider the mindset or intentions of others. If anything, this research urges educators and scholars to initiate dialogue on race, advocacy, allyship, and whiteness between *all* individuals, *because* these conversations are difficult. Perhaps future scholarship will be able to pinpoint the most vital functions of allyship through challenging applications of whiteness – this research suggests that the first step is empathy.

I am now a coach for the Forensics program I had mentioned being a part of in the first chapter of this study. My role has shifted from that of the performer to that of the educator. It is now my duty to listen to student's stories and empower them to use their voices in ways that motivate audiences and judges to incite real world change. If anything, that position coupled with this research have taught me that our identities, our intent, and our voices matter. Acknowledge them, think about them, use them, and listen.

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APPENDIX

Below were the guiding questions for focus groups:

<u>Racial Allies</u>
- Are you familiar with the term "Racial Ally"?
"A person or organization that cooperates with or helps another in a particular activity" – Dictionary.com
      - What can you tell me about the term?
- Do you think racial allies are rewarded for advocating social justice causes?
- What kind of rewards?
- Are there other motivations other than personal rewards?
- Whose voices are allies servicing?

<u>Social Justice Warriors</u>
- Are you familiar with the term "Social Justice Warrior"? (Provide definition if not)
"A pejorative term for an individual who repeatedly and vehemently engages in arguments on social justice on the Internet, often in a shallow or not well-thought-out way, for the purpose of raising their own personal reputation. A social justice warrior, or SJW, does not necessarily strongly believe all that they say, or even care about the groups they are fighting on behalf of. They typically repeat points from whoever is the most popular blogger or commenter of the moment, hoping that they will "get SJ points" and become popular in return. They are very sure to adopt stances that are "correct" in their social circle. SJWs are primarily civil rights activists only online." – Urban Dictionary
      - What can you tell me about the term?
      - Who typically uses this phrase?
- Can there be such thing as an inauthentic racial ally?
- What are the differences between the two?

<u>Poster Activity</u>
- (Given these differences) What are some guidelines to being a racial ally?

<u>Conclusion</u>
- (Given this list) Would you consider yourself a racial ally?
- What actions have you taken in that role?
- What do you perceive to be the role of white people in social justice reform and confronting racism?