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# An Empirical Assessment of Whiteness Theory: Hidden from How Many?

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*This paper employs data from a recent national survey to offer an empirical assessment of core theoretical tenets of whiteness studies. Using survey items developed explicitly for this purpose, we analyze three specific propositions relating to whites' awareness and conception of their own racial status: the invisibility of white identity; the understanding (or lack thereof) of racial privileges; and adherence to individualistic, color-blind ideals. Consistent with whiteness theories, we find that white Americans are less aware of privilege than individuals from racial minority groups and consistently adopt color-blind, individualist ideologies. However, we also find that whites are both more connected to white identity and culture as well as more aware of the advantages of their race than many theoretical discussions suggest. We then combine these results to estimate that 15 percent of white Americans exhibit what we call "categorical whiteness," a consistent and uniform adherence to the theoretical tenets that are the focus of this body of theory. We conclude by suggesting that these findings provide the basis for a more nuanced, contextualized understanding of whiteness as a social phenomenon. Keywords: whiteness studies, critical race theory, survey methods, racial attitudes, race relations.*

One of the most influential developments in the field of ethnic and racial studies over the past two decades has been the emergence of scholarship on "whiteness." Research on white culture and identity is not entirely new. Scholars of color have a long and distinguished history of writing about white Americans and their problematic position in the racial hierarchy (see the writings collected in Roediger 1998). In his seminal *Wages of Whiteness* (1991), in fact, David Roediger traces the lineage of whiteness studies all the way back to W. E. B. DuBois ([1935]1956). And mainstream social scientists have tracked the racial attitudes and opinions of whites for decades (see Schuman et al. 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 1993). But what is new about the recent generation of whiteness studies is its concentrated attention to the question of whether (or to what extent) white Americans understand their own racial identities and culture, and the privileges that go along with them.

"There isn't any negro problem," as Richard Wright once famously said in response to a question about American race relations shortly after World War II, "there is only a white problem" (quoted in Lipsitz 1998:1). At the root of Wright's critique is the fundamentally sociological insight that racial injustices and inequalities must be situated in their broader systemic and relational contexts, contexts that subjects themselves may be unwilling or unable to acknowledge. Scholars have been drawn to the study of whiteness in large part as a result

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*Social Problems*, Vol. 56, Issue 3, pp. 403–424, ISSN 0037-7791, electronic ISSN 1533-8533. © 2009 by Society for the Study of Social Problems, Inc. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website at [www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo/asp](http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo/asp). DOI: 10.1525/sp.2009.56.3.403.

of their interest in how white Americans can still see race as a “problem” that others have but which does not involve or implicate them directly. The new work on whiteness explores how white attitudes and understandings—not about racial others but about *themselves* and *their own status* in the society—factor into the perpetuation and legitimation of racial inequalities. Indeed, the key idea for most scholars in the field is that white identity and culture may in fact be most powerful and insidious when whiteness remains “the unmarked category which . . . never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations,” (quoted in Lipsitz 1998:1; see also Dyer 1997). In other words, the focus is on the identities, ideologies, and norms that are not always understood or even explicitly realized by those who benefit from them, and on the ways that these taken-for-granted assumptions can mystify, legitimate, and ultimately perpetuate systems of racial inequality (see Hartmann 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Based upon these critical-theoretical foundations, whiteness studies has swept across disciplinary boundaries in the humanities and social sciences, and into wider mainstream attention with articles in the *New York Times* (Talbot 1997) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (McMillen 1995). Major works in whiteness studies come from academic fields as diverse as history (Ignatiev 1995; Lipsitz 1998; Roediger 1991), sociology (Frankenberg 1993; Wellman 1993), legal studies (Delgado and Stefanic 1997; Fields 1982; Harris 1993), literature (Morrison 1992), women’s studies (McIntosh 1989; Wiegman 1999), and education (Giroux 1997; Maher and Tetreault 1998).<sup>2</sup>

As the work has gained visibility, however, it has also gained its share of critics (cf. Andersen 2003; Arnesen 2001; Bonnett 2008, 1996; Kolchin 2002). One of the most frequent and important criticisms involves the empirical grounding upon which the claims of whiteness scholars are based. These critiques have involved questions about both the *interpretation* of key events and documents as well the *type* and *amount* of empirical evidence that supports these analyses. This paper seeks to address the latter concern.<sup>3</sup> Most basic and important for sociologists like ourselves, is the question of how broadly applicable or generalizable are the core claims about the invisibility of whiteness. Is whiteness in America as hidden as it would seem?

With only a few exceptions (e.g., Bush 2004; Helms 1990), empirical work on whiteness in the United States has been historical, case based, and qualitative. The lack of attention to measurement and the empirical generalizability of core claims and assumptions has actually been

1. A number of useful readers and collections on whiteness studies are now available. Some notable examples include: Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003), Kincheloe and associates (1998), Delgado and Stefanic (1997), Hill (1997), Frankenberg (1997), Fine and associates (1997), and Wellman (1993). It is also worth noting that the literature on whiteness is large and quite diverse, ranging from studies of white ethnic subcultures theorized as defensive identification (e.g., “white trash”; see Goad 1997; Hartigan 2003; Newitz and Wray 1997) or ethnic revival (Jacobson 2006) to white racism to white nationalism and supremacy understood more critically as combative exclusion (Blee 1991). In this paper, we focus on work that situates white culture and identity in the context of a system of racial hierarchies and identities, what Roediger (2002) has called “critical whiteness studies.” This work fits within the larger critical-race theoretical tradition rearticulated recently in sociology by Steinberg (2007; see also Hartmann, Croll, and Guenther [2003]).

2. At least as far as sociologists have been concerned, it was key works in history and critical legal studies that launched an awareness of whiteness as both a social phenomenon and an analytical category in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In an influential article in the *Harvard Law Review*, for example, Harris (1993) highlighted the role that assumptions of, from, and about whites had in the framing of fundamental rights and statuses in American law, ultimately concluding that white identity itself was inscribed as a form of property. Arguments from historians and historical sociologists led the way in showing the changing boundaries of white status with an emphasis on how European “ethnics” became “white,” and what the costs and consequences of these transformations were (see Barrett and Roediger 1997; Brodtkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Gerteis 2002; Jacobson 1998). In a broader sense, historically oriented scholarship on whiteness sought to make the point that whiteness is in fact part and parcel of a broader field of racial formation (see, for example, Allen 1994; Fields 1982; Omi and Winant 1994; for more recent theoretical statements, see also Bonilla-Silva 2003b; Lewis 2004).

3. When it comes to questions about the interpretation of data, we tend to side with the accounts of whiteness scholars on the grounds that most of the criticisms have emanated from more traditional, mainstream social scientific perspectives that have either not understood or been willing to accept the critical theoretical foundations (cf. Calhoun 1995) of the whiteness approach.

a source of frustration to some of the strongest proponents of whiteness scholarship within the social sciences. Ashley Doane, for example, writes that one “major shortcoming of much of the existing literature on whiteness is its lack of empirical grounding” (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003:17).<sup>4</sup> Monica McDermott and Frank Samson (2005) point out that the lack of measurement has important theoretical implications: “[A]ttempts at specifying concrete ways in which the process of white racial identity formation varies or experiences of whiteness differ have been considerably lacking . . . Consequently, we have no standard way of classifying how whiteness, or any other dominant group identity, is experienced” (p. 256).

These problems cut two different and distinct ways. On the one hand, the lack of concrete supporting evidence and analysis allows whiteness scholarship to be dismissed by skeptics and remain marginalized from mainstream scholars of race and ethnic relations who expect a certain amount and type of empirical evidence to support and advance theories. At the same time, data limitations seriously impede the ability of whiteness studies as a field to clarify and extend certain theoretical claims. Thus, scholars of whiteness forgo the refinements and improvements that come when theories and facts confront each other on equal footing.

Our goal in this paper is to formalize and empirically test core theoretical propositions about whiteness in order to better assess the claims of the field, adjudicate debates, and bring the study of white identity and culture more directly to the center of the field of ethnic and racial studies. We do this using data from a recent, nationally representative survey (2003,  $N = 2081$ ) that contained items designed specifically to evaluate the generalizability and depth of three theoretical propositions we believe are core to whiteness studies: (1) the extent to which whites claim racial identities as salient and important; (2) understandings of racial privilege and the sources of racial advantage among whites; and (3) the degree of whites’ adherence to color-blind ideologies that justify racially structured inequalities.

In the sections that follow, we detail these three central claims and explain the procedures by which we operationalize and evaluate them empirically. Overall, we find substantial support for key tenets of whiteness theory: whites’ racial identities tend to be less visible than those of individuals from other racial groups, and whites are less likely to see ways that they have been actively advantaged by being white. At the same time, we find that white identities and advantages are more salient than the whiteness literature typically assumes, and that color-blind, individualist ideologies and beliefs are by no means limited to whites. Based upon these findings, we then estimate the number of white Americans that adhere uniformly and consistently to the core tenets of whiteness as theorized by scholars, a position we call “categorical whiteness.”

Before proceeding, we should note that this project is more daunting than may first meet the eye. One reason is that the richness and complexity of whiteness studies is difficult to capture for the purposes of quantitative testing and analysis. Key ideas are inevitably simplified; other nuances and subtleties must be deemphasized or dropped altogether. Extending from this, many critical race scholars are fundamentally skeptical of (if not simply opposed to) quantitative data and techniques to begin with.<sup>5</sup> On this front, we fully realize that survey data and quantitative methods are not ideal for testing all aspects of whiteness theory. For example, as discussed further below, respondent awareness and understanding is difficult to ask about when one’s orienting hypothesis is that individuals are not aware of their identities

4. The composition of the reader, edited by Doane with Bonilla-Silva, in which this statement appears, is actually illustrative of this problem: only 7 of the 18 chapters are framed as empirical contributions, and they all rely on qualitative methods to elucidate the structure and function of white identity and culture. These are all solid pieces contributing to a rich understanding of the complexity of the mechanisms of whiteness but they do not (nor are they intended to) provide a more general sense of the reach and generalizability of the phenomena they investigate.

5. Among race-critical theorists, Bonilla-Silva’s (2001) view on this subject is probably the strongest and most uncompromising. “Traditional survey research is rooted in methodological individualism and assumes that racial beliefs are pathological” and as a result, Bonilla-Silva concludes, survey-based researchers “do not connect racial beliefs to a system of domination” (pp. 60, 79; see also, Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva [2008]; Zuberi [2001]).

to begin with. Similarly, even the best survey items about beliefs and ideals cannot fully reveal what Arthur Stinchcombe (1982) once called the “deep cultural structures” that condition, constrain, and indeed define ideologies and worldviews. Nevertheless, inspired by previous generations of critically oriented survey researchers (cf. Bobo 1988, 1999; Bobo, Kluegel and Smith 1997; Jackman 1994; Jackman and Muha 1984; Sidanius, Devereux and Pratto 1992; Sidanius and Pratto 1993, 2001), we remain convinced—and will attempt to demonstrate—that our approach can offer some initial, baseline data about contemporary manifestations of whiteness against which existing theories can be assessed and upon which future research and thinking can proceed.<sup>6</sup>

### Core Theoretical Propositions and Hypotheses

According to Ruth Frankenberg, one of the pioneering sociologists in this field, the social phenomenon of whiteness consists of three linked dimensions. “First,” she argued, “whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at themselves and others, and at society. Third and most importantly, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (Frankenberg 1997:1). These claims—that whiteness relates to privilege and identity, and that both become normalized and invisible—neatly summarize the main insights and assumptions of the field. As such, they set up the three key propositions about identity, understanding (of privilege), and ideology that we believe constitute the critical theoretical core of the field.

#### *White Identity*

One of the first and most basic claims from whiteness scholars, perhaps best exemplified in Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) classic work, is that white Americans have little racial awareness of or consciousness about themselves. “To be white in America,” as Robert W. Terry (1981:120) put it, “is not to have to think about it.”<sup>7</sup> This claim is typically built either from the psychoanalytic tradition of Lacan and Fanon, or the symbolic identity theories of action formation that sociologists associate with Mead, Simmel, and Goffman. The core idea in either case is that whiteness rests on an assumed logic of racial difference (“our” whiteness is somehow different from “their” nonwhiteness), where difference is at once naturalized and yet denies the dialectical nature of this relational identity claim. Whiteness is thus a sense of self and subjectivity that is unaware of its own social foundations. As a result, it obscures the broader systemic nature of race that gives it its form (Weigman 1999; see also Wong and Cho 2005).

While this latent and unrecognized identity may be beyond fully rational language and thought, some have linked this false universalism of whiteness to deep cultural roots involving Western rationality, subjectivity, and consciousness (see Goldberg 1993). Strong versions of the claim use terms like “invisibility” to suggest that whiteness is simply unseen; this idea

6. Because these ideas are new and our measures are somewhat experimental, two additional points are important to stress for survey researchers. The first is the need to resist the temptation to fit our questions and findings to standard survey-based techniques about racial attitudes. The goal here is not to assess phenomena like prejudice or social distance with innovative new items but to get at fundamentally different and distinct phenomena, the dimensions of white culture and identity that have been theorized by whiteness scholars. The second is that our findings are not intended to be the definitive social scientific statement on whiteness but rather a step toward collecting and assessing empirical evidence pertaining to whiteness in contemporary America.

7. This claim is not universally accepted, and indeed there is some controversy about whether whites’ *ethnic* identities may stand in for white *racial* identity more broadly. Still, it is the claim about the invisibility of white identity that has been widely cited and supported as in influential arguments by Doane (1997), Waters (1990), and Alba (1990).

has also been implied in terms like “color-blindness” (Lewis 2004) or “color-blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carr 1997). In the last several years, other whiteness scholars have softened some of these formulations and claims. Already in 2001, for example, Frankenberg (2001) realized that the reality may be messier than the strong versions of the theory suggested. “The more one scrutinizes it . . . the more the notion of whiteness as an unmarked norm is revealed to be a mirage” (p. 73). Others have suggested that for some proportion of the population, white identity itself is highlighted by the salience of an “ethnic subculture.” Nevertheless, there appears to be consensus in the field that white identity is more taken-for-granted, more naturalized and normalized than other racial identities. For the purposes of operationalization and empirical assessment, this proposition can be formalized into the following hypothesis:

*H1: Compared with minorities, whites will attach less importance to their racial identity and culture.*

Research initiated by psychologists in the early 1990s provided some empirical support for this hypothesis (cf. Helms 1990). More recently, in a survey of white college students in New York, Melanie Bush (2004) found that white students reported thinking about their racial identities less than black students and that they did not believe their racial identities had impacted their lives significantly. Nevertheless, larger, more representative samples and analyses are clearly required.

### *Understanding of Privilege*

A second claim, or set of claims, has to do with whites’ awareness and understanding of the structural advantages that accompany and in fact define their racial status. Whiteness, it is posited, has “played a key rôle in inter-group relations, especially in terms of enabling the dominant group to maintain its position atop the ethnic hierarchy” (Doane 1997). Whiteness serves this function, it is further argued, by blinding whites to the status and advantage that goes along with being white. In the literature these ideas are often referred to under the heading of “white privilege.”

Theories of white privilege actually have two distinct analytical dimensions. The first and most basic is that white Americans are unaware of the structural benefits of whiteness—that they are unable to acknowledge their own privileged position. More subtle formulations take this even one step further. They suggest that white Americans may be attuned to the realities of racial inequality and even acknowledge the disadvantages faced by communities of color because of discrimination and prejudice, but they still have a hard time placing themselves in this system of race relations and seeing the ways in which the disadvantages of others are closely and directly tied to their own structural advantages. In either case, these claims about awareness of privilege—or, more precisely, the lack thereof—are extremely difficult to test with survey data for the obvious reason that it is essentially impossible to ask about a respondent’s awareness of something like white advantage without calling attention to it in the question itself.

A second, somewhat more complicated aspect of white privilege theories involves the ways in which white Americans account for or explain their structural advantages once these advantages are acknowledged (or to the extent they are acknowledged). Here the core empirical question is less about *awareness* (do whites see their advantages or not?) and more about *understanding* (how or in what ways do whites explain racial inequalities in general and their own advantages in particular?). What factors or forces, in other words, do they believe to be at the root of persistent racial inequalities and injustices?

Although this second set of questions about how whites explain white privilege is more amenable to operationalization and assessment than the first question about awareness, it is still some somewhat challenging to transform these ideas and claims into formal, empirically testable hypotheses. Fortunately, the massive body of work on attitudes about and explanations for racial inequality (cf. Schuman and associates’ *Racial Attitudes in America* [1997])

provides some guidance. Focused on explanations of minority disadvantage, these works have often analyzed how different groups of Americans compare in terms of their acceptance of individualistic and cultural explanations of racial inequality in the contemporary United States as opposed to those that tap into more structural or institutional factors, especially those that put the onus on white prejudice or discrimination. In the context of theories of white privilege, then, we would expect the following:

*H2a: Compared with racial and ethnic minorities, whites are less likely to accept structural or race-based explanations for racial inequality.*

*H2b: Compared with racial and ethnic minorities, whites are more likely to adopt individualistic or extra-racial explanations of racial inequality.*

Theories of white privilege lead us to offer one additional twist that goes a step beyond conventional racial attitudes theories (which focus exclusively on explanations of racial inequality in general or African American disadvantage in particular). It is that these attitudinal patterns will be even more pronounced or accentuated when questions about racial inequality are framed in terms of white advantage rather than minority disadvantage. Stated more formally, a third hypothesis is thus:

*H2c: Whites are even less likely to accept structural or race-based explanations for racial inequality when framed as questions about white advantage rather than in terms of African American disadvantage.*

### **Color-Blind Ideology**

A third proposition from the literature on whiteness has to do with norms and ideals about culture, incorporation, social justice, and racial equality as they relate to individual success and effort. This argument is clearly related to the previous two, but it is more general: the invisibility of white identity and white privilege is supported by an individualistic—and thus putatively fair, meritocratic, and universalistic—ideology. For John Hartigan (1997), for example, the point is that “studies of whiteness are demonstrating that whites benefit from a host of apparently neutral social arrangements and institutional operations, all of which seem—to whites at least—to have no racial basis” (p. 496). By hiding the structural relations of race, this ideology of neutrality and fairness is believed to obscure the source of both white difference and advantage. In a nutshell, the claim is that compared with others, whites should be more likely to adhere to generally universal and “color-blind” ideologies and explanations of individual success, specifically, that American society is fair, meritorious, and race neutral, that hard work and effort are the keys to success, and that any individual can succeed if she or he tries hard enough.

This argument has resonance well beyond the field of whiteness studies proper, and this ideological position has earned several different labels. Lawrence Bobo, James Kluegel, and Ryan Smith (1997) term it “laissez-faire” racism, while Paul Sniderman and associates (Sniderman and Carmine 1998; Sniderman and Piazza 1993) have more charitably termed it “principled conservatism.”<sup>8</sup> This ideology allows what Nancy DiTomaso calls “attribution error” to occur (DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post 2003). Whites may be able to see and understand the ways that blacks and others have been disadvantaged by the racial system, but they tend instead to attribute their own success to individual effort and hard work.

Following Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s (2003; 2001; see also Carr 1997) work on color-blind racism, we adopt the term “color-blind ideology.” Bonilla-Silva’s work on why racism can continue to exist as a structural force without anyone thinking of themselves as a racist shows how the points about white identity and white privilege are connected. Color-blind racism can exist when

8. Other terms are also in use. Kluegel and Smith (1986) simply term this the “dominant ideology” and the idea is substantially similar to what Kinder and Sears (1981) called “symbolic racism.”

whites disavow prejudice, but at the same time decline to support structural remedies such as affirmative action, which they may see as favoritism. From this color-blind point of view, to address racism—and sometimes to even talk about race—is to perpetuate it. The paradoxical effect is that by highlighting individual causes of inequality and by denying the structural effects of race, the outcome may in fact be a reinforced sense of the “natural” inferiority of those disproportionately nonwhite individuals who are disadvantaged.<sup>9</sup> For some, professing a belief in individual opportunity and effort may simply be a conscious attempt to justify or hide racist beliefs or to obscure advantage. But the central proposition from whiteness scholars such as Bonilla-Silva is that the belief can be genuine and heartfelt and still have the same effect. Transforming these ideas into formal theoretical terms thus yields the following two, closely related hypotheses:

*H3a: Compared with racial and ethnic minorities, whites are more likely to adhere to individualistic and color-blind ideals for American society.*

*H3b: Compared with racial and ethnic minorities, whites are more likely to adopt individualistic and color-blind explanations for individual success.*

### Data, Measures, and Methods

Our central goal, then, is to assess these three core propositions of whiteness theory using national survey data. To do so, we use data from the American Mosaic Project survey (see Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006) to test the hypotheses developed in the previous section. This is an important data source for our purposes since it provides a large, representative sample of Americans ( $N = 2,081$ ) and because several batteries of questions were explicitly designed to operationalize concepts from whiteness theory. In addition, African American and Hispanic respondents were over-sampled to allow sufficient numbers for comparison of whites and racial minorities.

Given the exploratory nature of our investigation, our analytic strategy is relatively straightforward. It revolves around simple analyses comparing white and minority responses on items relating to each of the core hypotheses. (In the case of Hypothesis 2c, we extend this to compare white responses to the same items framed in two different contexts.) In order to assess our hypotheses, we test for group differences using t-tests of mean difference (for most of our items, where we have four-category ordinal response scales) and two-proportion z-tests (for items with discrete, categorical responses).

We should state that for the purposes of formally evaluating our hypotheses we put emphasis on group comparison (i.e., do whites attach less importance than minorities to their racial identities?). However, the literature outlined above also provides broader if somewhat looser suggestions about what we should expect to see regarding the magnitude of white responses (i.e., *how much* is racial identity invisible to whites?). As a result, we also touch upon the strength and magnitude of white responses to the items we present. Some of these broader theoretical speculations are further extended in the discussion as well.

The racial/ethnic classification we use is based upon a series of questions that first asked respondents to provide a racial self-identification (based on one or more races), and then to specify ethnic identifications in the same manner. African Americans and Hispanics were over-sampled to provide adequate samples for these populations. (The survey was offered in Spanish if the respondent preferred.) Out of the 2,081 completed interviews, 1,184 respondents self-reported their race as white (non-Hispanic) and 884 respondents provided some other response. Of these latter, 416 classified themselves as African American, 263 as

9. On the cultural dynamics of the flip side of this, see Orlando Patterson's (1997) discussion of the “paradox of anti-racist racism” and the “paradox of liberal racialization” (pp. 64–77.).

Hispanic/Latino, 40 as Asian, 17 as Native American, 75 as some other race, and 73 as multiracial. Thirteen respondents refused to self identify; these cases are dropped from the analyses below. All results shown below have been weighted to be nationally representative, allowing us to generalize about the broader U.S. population. Finally, because the whiteness literature is focused specifically on non-Hispanic whites, it implicitly contrasts them with all others. Therefore we use a white/minority dichotomy in the analyses below. We should note that the results did not substantively change when we used a white/African American contrast instead.

### *White Identity*

Of the three sets of hypotheses about whiteness theory, those relating to the invisibility of white identity are the most straightforward to deal with empirically. After self-reporting their own race, respondents were asked about the salience of whatever racial category they answered, both in terms of the present (“How important is this identity to you?”) and the past (“How important was [your racial identity] growing up?”). Both items were measured on a four-point scale ranging from “very important” (4) to “not important at all” (1). Our hypothesis suggests that whites, on average, attach less cultural importance to their racial identities compared with people of color and that they will thus be less likely to answer these items affirmatively.

We also include two additional items that often appear on surveys of racial and ethnic minorities—one which asks respondents to say whether they feel their racial group “has a culture which should be preserved,” and another that asks whether they are involved in any organizations based on their race (or ethnicity, if they said this was more salient). Since these questions are not typically asked of white respondents, of course, they require somewhat more cautious interpretation. It is not clear, for example, what most whites would mean in agreeing that their “culture” is “worth preserving.” Still, these questions provide supporting evidence, as the responses should track in the same way as the other identity questions.<sup>10</sup>

### *Understanding of Privilege*

As suggested previously, claims about the degree of understanding or recognition of white privilege are somewhat more challenging to operationalize. The most fundamental challenge is how to ask about something that is presumed to be unrecognized, at least for whites, without unduly biasing the responses. While there is no perfect solution to the issue, we begin to address it by using items from standard racial attitudes surveys about inequality and making use of an experimental design built into the wording of these items in the survey.

A standard set of survey items about racial inequality begins by asserting that black Americans have been disadvantaged and then asks respondents to assess a set of items that propose explanations for why that is the case (see Hunt [2007] for a recent analysis based upon these items from the General Social Survey). The wording that we used was as follows: “On the average, African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Please say whether you think each of the following factors is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important in explaining that.” Half of our respondents got

10. We should note that other scholars, informed by the work of psychologists and social psychologists, have employed much more complex identity scales to measure racial salience (cf. Helms 1984; Helms and Carter 1990). Such models provide nuanced and multifaceted measures of identity, and Helms in particular has used them to powerful effect, albeit only with limited convenience samples (Helms 1990; Carter, Helms, and July 2004). However, such identity scales are typically so complicated and multifaceted that they ultimately (if unintentionally) become the central focus of the survey and the resulting research. More important, the scales often combine identity salience with more general attitudes about race and thereby conflate racial self-identification with attitudes about others and understandings of politics and society (see Wong and Cho 2005:703). This is a problem because, as we outlined above, whiteness scholars have suggested that the *lack* of identity salience may have important implications for whites’ views of others as well as for their political views and broader cultural orientations and ideologies.

this item. However, the Mosaic survey also used a split-ballot design that selected respondents randomly to answer a new parallel set that switched the context and framing of the items from “black disadvantage” to “white advantage.” “On average,” these items read, “white Americans have better jobs, income and housing than others. Please say whether you think . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Within each context, the Mosaic survey included items to assess acceptance of different kinds of explanatory factors. One pair of items centered on *direct racial preferences*, either interpersonal (“prejudice and discrimination [against African Americans/favoring whites]”) or systemic (“Laws and institutions work [against blacks more than other groups/favor whites more than other groups]”). Another pair measured *extra-racial* explanations for the same disparities, both individual (“[Lack of] effort and hard work”) and familial/cultural (“Differences in [whites’] family upbringing”). The remaining item, “[Lack of] access to schools and social connections,” is somewhere between the poles of race-neutral and directly race-based causes of advantage or disadvantage.

We are thus able to make use of both the different implications of the items and the difference in contexts to assess the question of white privilege. Hypotheses 2a and 2b relate to the items, suggesting that whites will be generally more likely than minorities to accept the individualistic or extra-racial explanations, and less likely to accept the ones based on structural factors or racial preference. Hypothesis 2c relates to the context or framing of the topic of inequality itself, and would be supported if whites’ answers to the race-based and race-neutral items are different when their own advantages are the focus of the question rather than the disadvantages of others.

Each of the items was measured on a four-point scale from “very important” (4) to “not important at all” (1). It is important to note that the items were posed to respondents independently. While any given respondent was presented with only one side of the split-ballot (white advantage or African American disadvantage), he or she was not forced to choose between different kinds of explanations.

### *Color-Blind Ideology*

We measure adherence to an individualist, color-blind ideology in several different ways. First, we use a set of questions designed to assess how respondents see factors such as favoritism, hard work and effort, upbringing, and access to schools and social connections as either having helped or held them back (or neither). Although the context is one’s own life rather than whites or African Americans in general, they follow the same logic as above. Agreeing that hard work and effort or upbringing helped one’s own success amounts to an affirmation of color-blind individualism, while recognizing favoritism (and to a lesser extent access to schools and connections) as either a detriment or a benefit is not.

Second, we draw upon a set of items that measure general adherence to individualist conceptions of national belonging. These questions ask about the importance of individual freedoms in “making America what it is,” attitudes about difference (“It’s a problem if people think of themselves mostly as members of groups rather than as individuals,” and “Focusing too much on different backgrounds divides people”), and opinions about government assistance and targeted affirmative action-type programs (“African Americans should receive special consideration in job hiring and school admissions” and “African Americans should get more economic

11. We should note that the “parallel” questions on white advantage and African American disadvantage are not strictly logical complements. The traditional questions on African Americans posit that African Americans are worse off than whites. A pure parallel to this would be to posit that whites are better off than African Americans. However, when developing the survey questions, it became clear that this comparison was incomplete. Many people asked about Hispanics, Asians, and other racial groups and wondered why they were excluded in the questions about white privilege. This led to our wording, “whites better off than others.” Respondents typically had no problem with either the statement about African American disadvantage or white advantage. Academic audiences have expressed more surprise, although we suspect that this is due more to the novelty of the question rather than to the empirical or logical correctness of the assertion.

assistance from the government”). Once again, all of these questions have four-point response categories, from strongly agree/very important [4] to strongly disagree/not important at all [1].

All of these questions allow us some purchase on claims about whiteness and its connection to color-blind ideals. Hypotheses 3a and 3b suggest that across the range of items, whites will be more likely to accept the race-neutral explanations for their own success and to agree with individualistic claims about the nature of American society. On the other hand, whites should be less likely than minorities to see their own success in terms of favoritism or to accept group-based claims to recognition or resources.

As a final attempt to gauge the empirical validity or applicability of whiteness theories taken as a synthetic whole, we also generate a measure of what we call “categorical whiteness.” This estimate is derived simply by seeing how many white Americans adhere consistently and intensively to each of the core propositions of whiteness studies. The specific procedures for generating this measure are presented below, following the results of our assessments of the three core propositions.

### Findings

We now examine the theoretical propositions outlined above with data from the American Mosaic survey. Our goal is to examine the claims directly and also measure their general applicability. In establishing some baseline measures (for example, *how much* do whites see white privilege) and placing them in a comparative context (*compared with whom*), we hope to provide a basis for the further development of theoretical work on whiteness as well as establish a platform for its integration into mainstream research agendas. We explore each of the claims outlined above in turn.

#### White Identity

Our first set of findings result from questions about the relative importance of racial culture and identities for white and nonwhite Americans. It thus allows us a purchase on our first hypothesis (H1) about racial identity and culture being less salient for white Americans than others.

**Table 1 • Salience of Racial Identities**

	Whites (percent)	Nonwhites (percent)
Importance of racial identity, current (N = 2,059)		
Very important (4)	37.5	72.0
Somewhat important (3)	36.9	17.7
Not very important (2)	16.6	5.4
Not important at all (1)	9.0	5.0
Total	100.0	100.0
(Mean <sup>***</sup> )	(3.03)	(3.57)
Importance of racial identity, growing up (N = 2,047)		
Very important (4)	26.0	57.3
Somewhat important (3)	26.7	19.2
Not very important (2)	30.6	12.5
Not important at all (1)	16.7	11.1
Total	100.0	100.0
(Mean <sup>***</sup> )	(2.62)	(3.23)

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

T-tests of mean difference

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

**Table 2 • Salience of Racial Culture**

	Whites (percent)	Nonwhites (percent)
Racial group has a culture that should be preserved? <sup>***</sup> ( <i>N</i> = 1,979)		
Yes	77.3	90.9
No	22.7	9.1
Total	100.0	100.0
Involved in organization based on race or ethnicity? <sup>***</sup> ( <i>N</i> = 2,068)		
Yes	4.2	13.7
No	95.8	86.3
Total	100.0	100.0

2-proportion z-tests

\**p* < .05 \*\**p* < .01 \*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed tests)

There is strong evidence in Table 1 to support this basic claim: 72 percent of respondents of color said that their racial identity was “very important,” while only 37 percent of white respondents said the same. Similarly, 57 percent of minorities said that their racial identity was “very important” while they were growing up, compared with 26 percent of whites. The differences appear less stark in terms of group means on these same questions, but in both cases the gap is statistically significant and in the expected direction.

The two questions pertaining to racial culture reported in Table 2 supplement and support these findings.

A large majority of white and nonwhite respondents alike reported that they felt their racial group had “a culture that should be preserved” (77 percent and 91 percent respectively), while a minority of both reported that they were involved in any organization based on their race or ethnicity (4 percent and 14 percent). However, white respondents were at the extremes on both items and the differences between white and nonwhite responses are statistically significant in both cases.

Clearly, then, whites attach less importance to race than do racial minorities, whether this is measured in terms of subjective importance of one’s individual racial identity (as in Table 1) or in terms of preserving or supporting group culture (Table 2). At the same time, however, a closer reading of these tables—looking not just at racial differences but also at the magnitude of these differences—suggests some limits to the stronger claims of the literature that whiteness is therefore invisible or hidden. For example, a sizeable minority of white respondents attached strong subjective importance to their racial identities on both of the salience questions (Table 1). Indeed, 74 percent of white Americans—almost three-fourths—said that their racial identity was either “very important” or “somewhat important.” Put this together with the fact that an overwhelming majority of white Americans wanted to preserve their racial culture (whatever that might be) and it would appear that the magnitude of the whiteness phenomenon is somewhat less striking than the abstract theories may have led us to believe.

### *Understandings of Privilege*

So what about awareness and understandings of white privilege? Are whites less likely than respondents of color to be drawn to structural and interpersonal explanations for white advantage and African American disadvantage (H2a), and correspondingly more drawn to individualistic ones (H2b)? Does it indeed matter whether the context is white privilege or African American disadvantage (H2c)? Tables 3 and 4 report the responses of white and nonwhite respondents on our split-ballot questions about the causes of white advantage and African American disadvantage. Table 3 reports the percentages of those who said each cause

**Table 3 • Exploring Advantage and Disadvantage**

<i>Which factors are important or very important in explaining white advantage and African American disadvantage?</i>	<i>White Advantage</i>			<i>African American Disadvantage</i>		
	<i>Whites (percent)</i>	<i>Nonwhites (percent)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>Whites (percent)</i>	<i>Nonwhites (percent)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
Prejudice and discrimination	62.0	78.4	66.0 (1003)	77.0	86.7	79.5 (917)
Laws and institutions	46.3	80.4	54.6 (998)	37.5	66.1	44.8 (898)
Access to schools and social connections	82.5	91.3	84.5 (1022)	81.8	88.1	83.4 (919)
Effort and hard work	88.2	81.6	86.6 (1019)	61.9	76.5	65.7 (892)
Differences in family upbringing	79.1	74.2	78.0 (1009)	84.2	88.5	85.3 (911)

was either “important” or “very important.” Table 4 reports the mean scores and significance tests for the same items.

The tables provide strong and consistent support for H2a. White respondents were consistently less likely than minorities to accept explanations involving direct racial preferences, either interpersonal (“prejudice and discrimination”) or institutional (“laws and institutions”). In percentage terms, the difference was most striking for the laws and institutions item where whites were far less willing than others to say that this factor was important in explaining either African American disadvantage (38 percent versus 66 percent) or white advantage (46 percent versus 80 percent). The general trend holds for both items, as well as the “access to schools and social connections” explanation. The mean differences on these items are all in the expected direction and statistically significant.

There is only partial support for H2b, however. The differences between whites and minorities on the “hard work” and “family upbringing” measures are not always large, significant, or in the expected direction. Whites are slightly more likely to say that effort and hard work explains white advantage, for example (88 percent versus 80 percent), but the difference in group means on this item is not significant. On the family upbringing item, the gap between white and minority responses was statistically significant but not large (79 percent versus 74 percent),

**Table 4 • Exploring Advantage and Disadvantage: Comparing Means between Whites and Nonwhites**

<i>Importance of factors in explaining racial inequality (means)</i>	<i>White Advantage</i>		<i>African American Disadvantage</i>		<i>Comparison of Means</i>			
	<i>(1) Whites</i>	<i>(2) Nonwhites</i>	<i>(3) Whites</i>	<i>(4) Nonwhites</i>	<i>Column 1 vs. 2</i>	<i>Column 3 vs. 4</i>	<i>Column 1 vs. 3</i>	<i>Column 2 vs. 4</i>
Prejudice and discrimination	2.63	3.02	2.95	3.27	***	***	***	**
Laws and institutions	2.32	3.07	2.22	2.81	***	***		**
Access to schools and social connections	3.27	3.52	3.18	3.46	***	***	*	
Effort and hard work	3.41	3.30	2.71	3.04		***	***	**
Differences in family upbringing	3.08	2.94	3.19	3.36	*	**	*	***

Note: Means displayed (4 = very important, 1 = not important at all)

T-tests of mean difference

\**p* < .05 \*\**p* < .01 \*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed tests)

and minorities were actually significantly more likely than whites to say that the same factors mattered in explaining African American disadvantage, and particularly so for effort and hard work.

The picture is similarly murky when it comes to assessing whether the framing of the question matters in explaining the responses of whites to racial inequalities (H2c). We can assess this hypothesis—the one in this set most unique to whiteness theory—by comparing white responses on the items framed in terms of advantage or disadvantage across both sides of our split-sample design. When the context (or framing) was white advantage, we hypothesized that whites were less likely to accept the first two measures and more likely to accept the last two (H2c). This is true for the prejudice and effort measures (Table 4, column 1 versus column 3), but not for the others. For example, there was no significant difference in white responses on the laws and institutions measure, but a surprisingly large number of whites did say that this was important in explaining both white advantage and African American disadvantage (46 percent and 38 percent, respectively).<sup>12</sup>

### *Color-Blind Ideology*

Part of the explanation for the relative lack of difference between whites and nonwhites on questions relating to effort and hard work may be due to the strong beliefs and adherence to traditional American values of individualism, independence, and hard work. By this logic, whites would like to believe they have succeeded by and large from their own hard work, maybe even due to luck (being at the right place at the right time), but not by their race. Indeed, as Table 3 showed, 88 percent of whites see effort and hard work as important in explaining white advantage. It was surprising to us, however, that 80 percent of nonwhites also agreed that effort and hard work were important in explaining whites' advantage and that racial minorities were even more likely than whites to see the same factor as important in disadvantaging African Americans. Clearly the effects of American ideals and individualism are strong for people across all racial groups in our society.

This leads us to the questions about whether whites are drawn generally to color-blind ideologies (H3a and H3b)—that is, to individualist outlooks and meritocratic ideals that may hide structural inequalities. Table 5 shows how whites and minorities responded to factors that may have influenced their individual advancement.

On the question of favoritism, white respondents and respondents of color clearly differed. As expected, whites were much more likely to say that favoritism neither helped nor held them back (78 percent versus 60 percent for nonwhites). In contrast, however, minorities were more likely to say that favoritism helped them (23 percent versus 17 percent for whites). On the other measures—hard work and effort, upbringing, and access to schools and social connections—there were no significant differences between white and minority responses.

Table 6 reports differences by race on a set of supplementary questions that tap a more general individual versus group-based orientation.

Whites and minorities show a nearly identical enthusiasm for individual freedoms and a preference for conformity ("it's fine for Americans to have different lifestyles and values so long as they all follow the same rules"). They also show similar skepticism of claims to group-based differences ("it's a problem if people think of themselves as mostly members of groups rather than individuals," "focusing too much on people's different backgrounds divides people"). The similarities end when the questions invoke a specifically racial context of inequality,

12. We did not develop formal hypotheses about the responses of minorities in relation to the contexts posed by this split-ballot design, but the findings here are worth some attention as they mirror the white responses almost exactly. Respondents of color were more likely to see prejudice/discrimination and differences in family upbringing as factors in African American disadvantage, but also more likely to see laws/institutions and effort/hard work as factors in explaining white advantage. At the very least we may conclude that if whites are blinded to white advantage, they are blinded only to the same degree and in the same ways as everyone else, a point we expand below.

**Table 5 • Adherence to Color-Blind Ideals in Personal Experiences**

<i>Factors that may have helped you to get ahead in life</i>	<i>Whites (percent)</i>	<i>Nonwhites (percent)</i>
<b>Favoritism***</b>		
<i>(N = 2,049)</i>		
Helped	16.7	23.2
Held back	5.4	16.8
Neither helped nor held back	77.8	59.7
Both equally (volunteered response)	.1	.4
Total	100.0	100.0
<b>Hard work and effort</b>		
<i>(N = 2,067)</i>		
Helped	93.0	89.6
Held back	.9	3.1
Neither helped nor held back	6.0	7.3
Both equally (volunteered response)	.1	.0
Total	100.0	100.0
<b>Upbringing</b>		
<i>(N = 2,063)</i>		
Helped	85.5	89.2
Held back	3.3	3.7
Neither helped nor held back	10.9	7.1
Both equally (volunteered response)	.3	.0
Total	100.0	100.0
<b>Access to schools and social connections</b>		
<i>(N = 2,065)</i>		
Helped	72.6	75.8
Held back	3.7	8.4
Neither helped nor held back	23.2	15.5
Both equally (volunteered response)	.6	.2
Total	100.0	100.0

*Note:* Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

2-proportion z-tests

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests)

however. On the items involving affirmative action and redistribution, large and statistically significant differences do emerge between white and minority responses.

Clearly, the majority of white respondents adhered to a basically individualist and color-blind ideology when it came to their own success. In line with the expectations of critical whiteness theory, whites were particularly likely to see their own hard work and effort as the motor behind their own success, while a similarly large majority said that their upbringing helped. By contrast, only 17 percent of whites said that favoritism helped them. The one partial exception to this is that a large majority of whites said that schools and social connections helped them. It is important to notice, however, that a large proportion of nonwhites answered in the same way, and that the difference between the white and nonwhite responses was not statistically significant. In fact, the only significant difference was that nonwhites were more likely to say that they were helped by favoritism than were whites (23 percent versus 17 percent). That in mind, the most important fact that comes across in these tables and items is that this adherence to a color-blind ideology is *nearly equally shared* by all respondents, regardless of race. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that color-blindness is a distinctive aspect of ideology and identity not only for whites but for all Americans generally.

**Table 6 • Adherence to Color-Blind Ideals**

	Whites (percent)	Nonwhites (percent)
Importance of individual freedoms in making America what it is ( <i>N</i> = 2,057)		
Very important (4)	93.6	91.7
Somewhat important (3)	6.0	7.9
Not very important (2)	.4	.4
Not important at all (1)	.0	.0
Total	100.0	100.0
( <i>Mean</i> )	(3.93)	(3.91)
It's a problem if people think of themselves mostly as members of groups rather than as individuals ( <i>N</i> = 2,017)		
Strongly agree (4)	28.4	32.0
Somewhat agree (3)	35.4	27.6
Somewhat disagree (2)	24.8	23.7
Strongly disagree (1)	11.5	16.7
Total	100.0	100.0
( <i>Mean</i> )	(2.81)	(2.75)
African Americans should receive special consideration in job hiring and school admissions ( <i>N</i> = 2,044)		
Strongly agree	3.0	12.9
Somewhat agree	17.8	31.6
Somewhat disagree	26.9	22.5
Strongly disagree	52.3	33.0
Total	100.0	100.0
( <i>Mean</i> ***)	(1.71)	(2.25)
African Americans should get more economic assistance from the government ( <i>N</i> = 2,038)		
Strongly agree	3.0	12.4
Somewhat agree	12.1	26.9
Somewhat disagree	29.7	23.1
Strongly disagree	55.2	37.6
Total	100.0	100.0
( <i>Mean</i> ***)	(1.63)	(2.14)

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

T-tests of mean difference

\**p* < .05 \*\**p* < .01 \*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed tests)

### **Categorical Whiteness**

All of these points, it should be emphasized, are derived from statistical averages, mean scores, and comparisons between racial groups. The patterns of adherence to the core propositions of whiteness studies we have charted above, in other words, are those of an average cross section of white Americans, rather than specific subgroups. In this respect, it may not be surprising that key claims about whiteness do not extend universally or uniformly to all white Americans. And we still don't have a firm sense of if (or to what extent) each of these core propositions hang together empirically for some set of whites. Equally important to consider, therefore, is if there is some group of white Americans who do consistently and even categorically adhere to the key claims about the invisibility of white identity, the understanding of white privilege and color-blindness that are at the core of whiteness theory and that

**Table 7 • Assessing Categorical Whiteness**

	<i>White Racial Identity Important (percent)</i>	<i>White Racial Identity NOT Important (percent)</i>	<i>Total (percent)</i>
Laws and institutions important in explaining white advantage	36.0	10.7	46.7
Laws and institutions NOT important in explaining white advantage	38.3	<b>15.0</b>	53.3
Total	74.3	25.7	100

we have been exploring throughout this paper. Does such a group of consistent, categorical whites exist? And if so, how large is this group?

Our final table, Table 7, presents one last set of empirical results that allows us to generate an estimate of “categorical whiteness.” In this table, we present cross-tabulations of white respondents organized by whether their racial identity was important to them or not (our primary measure of identity salience above) against whether they saw laws and institutions as important in explaining white advantage (a key white privilege indicator).<sup>13</sup>

The results of this cross-tabulation are instructive. Fifteen percent of white Americans exhibit the unqualified qualities of whiteness one might expect from the strongest proponents of the theories. While far from the pervasive invisibility of whiteness some theorists of whiteness might infer or expect, this number is not insignificant and certainly seems to warrant some additional thought and analysis.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we have presented representative, national survey data bearing on three core tenets of critical whiteness studies: specifically, those relating to the purported invisibility or taken-for-granted nature of white culture and identity; the understanding (or lack thereof) of white privilege; and adherence to color-blind, individualist ideals that may serve to obscure both identity and privilege. Overall, we find some support for each of these propositions but also evidence suggesting the need to qualify the claims of whiteness studies carefully and in some respects fairly stringently. For example, in terms of theories of white identity and culture, our findings confirm that white Americans do indeed see their racial identities and culture as less salient and significant than Americans of color; however, we have also shown that these differences are not as large as some formulations in the whiteness literature would lead us to expect. Even more challenging for theorists of invisibility: a full third of white Americans say that their white racial identity is very important, and about three-quarters agree with the proposition that their racial group has a culture that should be preserved.

Our findings on white privilege and color-blindness have a similar mix of confirmatory and complicating implications for whiteness studies. In terms of understandings of white privilege, we find whites are less likely to see and fully grasp racial inequalities in general and white advantages in particular than people of color as anticipated by theories of whiteness and white privilege, but at the same time a substantial proportion of whites actually do see the structural ways that they have been advantaged by their race, and the differences in magnitude of many of these results are far less significant than we might have anticipated previously. Our analysis of the extent to which white Americans adhere to color-blind ideologies

13. Because of the relative lack of variation across racial groups on our color-blind ideology indicators, we have not included this item in the estimates we generate here. Even when included, these items do not significantly impact the results or points here developed.

is perhaps even less decisive for whiteness scholarship—although this is not because whites do not hold to color-blind, race-neutral ideologies but rather because Americans of all races express individualistic beliefs about their own success and the fairness of American social arrangements. Whites, in other words, are not outliers or extremists in their adherence to the color-blind ideologies. (The only arena where we saw racial cleavages on color-blindness was for racialized topics such as affirmative action and welfare reform—a finding which, while important, is consistent with much previous, more conventional research and theory.<sup>14</sup>)

And then there is our estimate that 15 percent of white Americans adhere uniformly to the strongest formulations of whiteness theorists. While not an insignificant number (especially considering it results from fairly stringent measures across two different indicators), it is hard to know exactly what to make of it as it applies to whiteness theory or what to compare it to for purposes of assessment.

What to make of such findings? What can we do with empirical results that are so uneven and contradictory for the theories they were designed to assess? Given that we have framed this analysis as a test of whiteness theories, it would be easy to take these results to discredit whiteness theory and perhaps abandon whiteness studies altogether. We believe this impulse should be resisted.

Taken as a whole, whiteness studies is a notoriously multifaceted, even contradictory field, and whiteness itself a similarly complicated theoretical construct. Multifaceted in both its meanings and uses, the concept of whiteness can be rendered as visible or invisible, an identity or the absence of identity, a normative cultural ideology or a subjectivity that believes that it transcends cultural time and space. For the purposes of empirical evaluation we have been forced to simplify these notions, and in fact break them down into basic conceptual units that we called “core propositions.” Such reductions inevitably run the risk of reducing a concept—if not an entire subfield—to insignificance or incoherence, in much the way that Donald Levine (1985) has suggested that Merton’s famous deconstruction did for Durkheim’s otherwise paradigmatic concept of anomie. And we also remain well aware that survey methods may not be the best way to get at fundamental blind-spots or deep, taken-for-granted worldviews and ideologies. All that said, we are still convinced there is more than enough evidence to indicate the need to continue to assess and refine whiteness studies as an aspect of the larger field of race relations.

Looking ahead to future research, it is important to recognize that the concept of whiteness may be difficult to define, specify, and evaluate precisely because of the fluid nature of whiteness as an empirical phenomenon. On this point, some scholars have argued that as a social construct whiteness is, indeed, complicated and multifaceted, always changing and shifting depending upon its historical context and specific social location—and that its social power and durability may, in fact, derive precisely from its real world complexity, paradox, and variation (Duster 2001). This certainly fits well with the most recent work in the field that has explored the conditions and contexts under which white racial identity is heightened and varied (Gallagher 2003a, 2003b; Guglielmo 2003; Hartigan 2005; McDermott 2006; McKinney 2005; Perry 2001, 2002). The realization that whiteness is complicated, conditional, and sometimes even a bit contradictory does not set aside the theories, rather it suggests the need to further analyze and explore the conditions and factors that make whiteness most salient and significant (for an overview of other research work along these lines, see Twine and Gallagher 2008).

Figuring out for whom and in what social contexts whiteness is most salient and visible will require further refinement and measurement of concepts as well as the development of explanatory models and the collection of longer-term, longitudinal data. These are not easy tasks. Indeed, we ran a series of basic, binary logistic regressions with a battery of standard

14. See, for examples, Hunt (2007) on beliefs about black/white inequality, Johnson (2005) on hard work and wealth, and Hochschild (1995) on the American dream.

background, demographic variables in order to predict the primary determinants of key indicators of several of our core theoretical propositions. These preliminary results were far from conclusive. The main predictors for having a strong and salient white identity, for example, were education and geography: whites with higher levels of education were less likely to see themselves as white, while Southern whites were almost two times more likely to see their racial identity as important. When it came to predictors for white privilege, however, the results were much different. In this case, it was gender (being a man) and political affiliation (identifying as Republican) that made whites least likely to understand the sources of their privilege in sociological terms.

Extending from these points, it is important to think more seriously and systematically about the meaning of these concepts, indicators, and findings. What does it mean, for example, to ask a white respondent about white privilege (and how might that be different from nonwhite respondents)? What does it say, to give another illustration, when a white respondent answers that his or her racial identity or culture is important or worth preserving? This latter question is particularly intriguing. For some scholars of whiteness, the finding that some significant percentage of white Americans is aware of their racial identity may be good news, as they maintain (rightly, in our opinion) that confronting the systemic and relational nature of race is a necessary step toward overcoming it. Yet further analysis by one member of our team suggests that the salience of white racial identity can be progressive for some respondents and dangerously close to “white pride” for others (see Croll 2007). If nothing else this particular result demands a deeper analysis of what it means for majority-group members to see and claim racial identity in our current multiculturalist era (Glazer 1997). Such questions are not only about interpreting the significance of these results, but assessing the methods and indicators themselves—figuring out what these items themselves are picking up on, what they are telling us. It is also not unlikely that some of tensions between theoretical expectations about whiteness and actual survey findings could be the result of changes in identification and awareness over time, perhaps even impacted by the emergence of whiteness studies itself in the popular culture.

We could go on speculating about the significance of our findings and the next steps for scholars in the field but we wish to stop here as our goal was more to get such a conversation started rather than to provide a definitive statement on the field. So instead let us end with this point: The complexities and variations we have identified in this paper and have argued that need to be further analyzed and evaluated, in no way invalidate what we see as the central insights of whiteness scholarship—namely, that white Americans are implicated in a stratified system of race relations that benefits them and that may nevertheless remain obscured or even hidden from some substantial portion of them; and that these oversights or misunderstandings matter for the reproduction of racial inequalities in America. These are insights that we believe scholars of race, racism, and race relations ignore only at their own peril.

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