

Whiteness in American Life:
Communication and Race in the Era of Donald Trump

Devon Geary

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Committee:

David Domke

Carmen Gonzalez

Jack Turner III

Terry Scott

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Devon Geary

University of Washington

Abstract

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Devon Geary

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor David Domke

Department of Communication

This thesis explored how a collection of individuals self-identifying as white liberals communicated about race in a challenging U.S. cultural moment. Within a few weeks of the white nationalist protests in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, I interviewed 18 liberal whites. The objective of this study was to determine if these individuals communicated in ways which support racialized patterns, or conversely, if they communicated in ways which challenge political whiteness. Overall, I found that these individuals (a) said they lacked the ability to fully understand the experiences of people of color, and thus, needed to listen and learn from this populace; (b) advocated for talking about race and taking steps to overcome racial inequality, such as educating fellow whites about racial inequalities and white privilege; and (c) yet still communicated white fragility by expressing hesitance to actualize the steps that they identified as imperative for racial progress. This research has implications for how scholars and engaged citizens think about the necessary work of white liberals, including the degree of alignment between their asserted objectives for communication and actions for racial progress and what they actually put into practice.

Keywords: whiteness, political whiteness, communication, Donald Trump

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Chapter One

Introduction

On Election Day in November 2016, when the prospect of Donald Trump's election to President of the United States became increasingly probable, news sources sought to offer explanations. A number of media outlets marked the win with public disbelief; for example, *USA Today* headlined, "President Trump: In stunning upset, billionaire candidate scores White House victory," and a *Washington Post* article was headed "A traumatic campaign produces a shocking ending, with Trump victorious." According to CNN/ORC polls, Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton swept all three presidential debates — with voters saying she had a better understanding of the issues and was more prepared to handle the presidency (Agiesta, 2016). Political pundits from most major news outlets declared that Clinton would win comfortably. Prior to the election, polling aggregation website Fivethirtyeight.com forecast Clinton's chance of winning at 71 percent, a CNBC associate producer claimed Clinton had the presidential election "in the bag," and an MSNBC guest — the founder of the Princeton Election Consortium — declared Clinton's chance of winning at 99 percent, saying that it would take "a very large weather event" impeding voters from reaching the polls to change the expected outcome (Silver, 2016; Skoczek, 2016; Pei, 2016; Wang, 2016). In short, many believed that in 2016, America would elect Clinton as its 45th — and first female — President.

For some citizens and news commentators, however, Trump's election was not a shock nor unexpected, but rather aligned with long-standing racial patterns in America. Trump's win, in this view, was a twenty-first-century manifestation of white America's fear of lost supremacy and privilege. On election evening CNN commentator Van Jones put it this way:

We've talked about everything but race tonight. We've talked about income, we've

talked about class, we've talked about region. We haven't talked about race. This was a *whitelash*. This was a whitelash against a changing country. It was a whitelash against a black president, in part. And that's the part where the pain comes...we don't want to feel that someone has been elected by throwing away some of us to appeal more deeply to others. This is a deeply painful moment tonight.

Such a "whitelash" has precedence in U.S. history. For example, the implementation of Radical Reconstruction by Republicans led to the 14th and 15th amendments, the ability for black men to serve on juries and as judges, to be witnesses in trial, and to be elected as politicians, but this black power was met with increasing animosity from whites, the enactment of laws criminalizing African Americans, the leasing of black prisoners to work for private parties such as plantation owners and corporations, lynching, and Jim Crow segregation. Similarly, the Great Migration of American blacks from the South to the North was met with race riots, burnings, and bombings; the Civil Rights Movement was followed by the rise of the religious right, the rollback of affirmative action, a racialized "war on drugs" under President Ronald Reagan, and eventually a system of mass incarceration (Dickerson, 2003; Anderson, 2016; Blake, 2016). In the United States, steps toward black advancement and interracial democracy have been regularly met by aggressive white reactions, what Anderson (2016) calls "white rage." I believe that we should view the election of Donald Trump, in significant part, as a wave of white resentment responding to the presidency of Barack Obama, increasing immigration, and a rapidly diversifying nation. Communication is at the heart of this dynamic, and with this in mind, this thesis focuses on the communication practices about race and racial identity among white Americans.

How politicians, parties, voters, and news media communicate shapes how Americans understand and engage in the public arena. Reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed through the sharing of symbols in communication (Carey, 1992). Words are used to represent, map, and cultivate our very social settings. In the words of Carey (1989), "We produce

the world by symbolic work, and then take up residence in the world we have produced” (p. 30). Through communication, all people, and especially those with prominent societal platforms, have a significant hand in forming their own environments. Communication transmits ideas across space and between people, promoting tradition, participation, and attachment. For Dewey (1916), communication was foundational to human fellowship: “There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community and communication...communication is the way in which [we] come to possess things in common” (p. 5). As there is no singular vantage point to view the complex, multifaceted human world, people must communicate to establish connection and mutual understanding. Politicians employ communication as a tool to shape society, but communities of autonomous citizens — in solidarity or dissidence with their political leaders — are always able at least to some degree to produce their own identities, actions, beliefs, and movements. Communication, in this environment, is both an instrument of politicians’ influence and a means for citizens to coalesce and enact response to that authority.

In the following sections of this thesis, I outline the basis, purpose, and design of a study examining the perspective of American whites about the state of race in the nation. I begin by discussing how the political landscape in the United States has structurally supported white supremacy and privilege. Second, I explore the concept of the historically recurring white backlash and its presence in U.S. politics. Next, building from scholarship on white privilege and white supremacy, I examine three distinctions that are key in how whites in America think and communicate about race: color-blindness vs. color-consciousness, certainty vs. deference, and fragility vs. responsibility. These discourses, I argue, both reflect and shape citizens’ racial understandings, contributing to their impressions about and commitments to what we might call political pluralization — the diversification, empowerment, and engagement of a more diverse

national politic. Fourth, I detail the research design, including a rationale for my focus on white people who identify as politically liberal and my employment of interviews as the methodology. Through this work, I seek to gain insight into how at least some white Americans communicate about race in an era defined by the election of Donald Trump as president and raw racial sentiments, actions, and reactions.

Chapter Two

Conceptual Argument

The political landscape in the United States has long supported a racial hierarchy favoring whites, but there have been consistent currents of resistance and political pluralism in motion. Truly democratic decision-making, scholars posit, emphasizes multiple perspectives, worldviews, and knowledge of all citizens — including encouraging and pursuing the voices of those most impacted by practices and policies. American democracy, however, has been comprised of hierarchical social groups organized with lines of domination and oppression. Governing positions of authority are usually occupied by members of privileged groups, most notably white Anglo heterosexual abled men whose perspectives largely claim universality (Alexander, 2001). As a result, intergroup difference is commonly stereotyped, silenced, and marginalized: “It is the *qualities* of being woman, of being nonwhite, of being homosexual or lesbian, of being [disabled] that [many] struggle to understand” (Alexander, p. 246, italics in original). The institutions of a just society, Young and Allen (2011) assert, should not perceive difference as virulent, to be feared, eliminated, transcended, or oppressed, but instead should seek to uplift group and individual distinctions as desirable and origins of vitality and cultural creativity. A diverse, pluralistic polity enables differing groups to equally, fully, and publicly communicate interests and experiences, whether disparate or alike, to reshape the white-dominated mainstream culture.

Scholars situate social movements and community conversations as efforts to inspire the creation of new realities for publics, seeking to innovate in ways that transcend the nation’s immediate existence to create a more just and egalitarian society. Both “constitution-making and

sometimes *revolution* have reshaped the conditions of collective life” (Calhoun, 2007, p. 163, italics added). The rehabilitation of politics, Gilroy (2000) explains, requires bold and expansive gestures if we are to address the pathologies of genomic racism, “the glamour of sameness and the eugenic projects currently nurtured by their confluence” (p. 41). The country’s contemporary evolving demographics, scholars agree, is an opportunity to move closer to making good on its unrealized claims of egalitarianism. A truly connected and engaged society, Allen (2016) states, does not require individuals to shed cultural specificity. Instead, social institutions — a key part of the nation’s opportunity structures — must be reshaped to stimulate bridging ties across lines of difference, a latticework of pathways advancing the full spectrum of communities (Allen, 2016; Anderson, 2010). Strong ties, Anderson (2010) avers, are characterized by high emotional intensity, investment of time, intimacy, and reciprocity, and often require proximities of geography as well as of relation and understanding. Yet, in 2010, the average white individual lived in a homogenous neighborhood that was three-quarters white (Sugrue, 2016). In these silos, Anderson (2010) writes, whites continue to share and build interpretations of the social world that work to their advantage while excluding and minimizing the experiences and challenges faced by people of color. Rather than institutionalizing separation and white backlashes when people of color make progress, U.S. social structures and societies must transform to become a fusion of networks that advances all, creating “social and behavioral dynamics of effective inclusion, full participation, and intergroup interaction” (Appiah, 2016; Lewis & Cantor, 2016, p. 14). In this time of President Trump and white reactivity, it becomes all the more important to envision political equality, participation, and empowerment. Examining how people community about race is one vital avenue to explore.

Political Whiteness

Racial dimensions are especially interwoven with U.S. political dynamics, influencing both the engagement and equality of the nation's populace. In particular, attitudes of white prejudice are often linked to political choices about rights, resources, privileges, and personhoods (Bobo & Tuan, 2006). Especially notable is that black progress has been met consistently by vigorous white resistance. Throughout and after the years of Reconstruction, for example, whites responded, Hale (1995) states, "with fear, violent reprisals, and state legislation" to "stop the rising" (p. 21). Firmly implemented social segregation, via the "one drop" rule of racial demarcation (i.e. one ancestor of sub-Saharan-African descent distinguished an individual as black), provided white supremacy's rationality for separation, and drove a racial wedge between African Americans and poor whites (Alexander, 2012). Markedly, even cases of black tolerance of segregation provided no safety. As a black, successful upper-class became more involved in the political realm — establishing businesses, social networks, and communities — news media peddled stories of rising crime and alleged assaults on white women by black men (Godshalk, 2005; Hale, 1995). In response, white men initiated brutal attacks against African Americans, most notably in Louisiana in 1873, Atlanta in 1906, and Tulsa in 1921. Black men and women were killed, hundreds seriously injured, and businesses vandalized. These actions were fully supported in most cases by government. The political and social success of elite blacks, Godshalk (2005) asserts, were marked as directly undermining whites' claims of racial superiority and ideologies connecting blacks to financial dependency and moral inferiority. Public communications underlying these actions were always important.

Similar patterns continued through the twentieth century. In 1954, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that state-mandated racially segregated schools were

unconstitutional could have been a turning point away from racial oppression. Instead, legislation was passed by white leaders in many states to withhold public funding from any school that abided by *Brown*, and white citizens responded with violence and opposition to school desegregation across the nation, including the brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till. The civil rights movement seemed to yield permanent changes, but these have been steadily challenged and overturned in courts — the Voting Rights Act “has been gutted” and affirmative action “is on its last legs” (Coates, 2014). Sixty years since *Brown*, public schools are resegregated and students of color, particularly black, Latino and Native American students, are more likely to be concentrated in separate, unequal and impoverished schools (Sugrue, 2016; Feagin, 2014). And then the 2008 election of the nation’s first black president by newly energized young and poor voters with hope for a different America was met with legal and political assaults on voting and assertions that Barack Obama was not American, was Muslim, and hated America — a line of argument led by the man who now heads the nation (Hughey, 2012). Obama’s blackness as a symbol, Anderson (2016) asserts, triggered white rage, leading millions of Americans to mark his presidency and policies as illegitimate, ultimately producing outcomes such as people who badly need healthcare insurance fighting the hardest against a government policy providing it. Voter-suppression legislation, the rise of stand-your-ground laws, and continuing police brutality were clear signs among whites of “yet another wave of fear and anger” following earlier ones (Anderson, 2016, p. 85). Today, 150 years after African Americans began gaining access to the political process after the Civil War, entrenched patterns of prejudice continue to be manifest and politically impactful. In sum, advanced by African Americans are consistently beaten back, cast as threats to white standing, countered with vigor and buttressed by the political sphere.

These longstanding patterns of racial politics are rooted in the assumption that to be “American” means to be white, unless otherwise specified. Whiteness, as defined by Croll (2011), is a cultural phenomenon in which whites do not see their own race or their positions of privilege within the racialized webbing of society (Feagin, 2014; Hartigan, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993). Whiteness is a political act, a political project, the enactment of political power (Olson, 2004; Kivel, 2011; Baldwin, 1984). Whiteness serves as the standard that furthers customary nationalist values and opportunity-hoarding along lines of difference. According to Hale (1995), whites demarcated their mass cultural identity by controlling the geographical movement and political representation of people of color, and then overtly crossing the racial boundaries they had drawn. These transgressions convened whites of all classes, genders, regions, and religions, stimulating a shared sense of white group position that has elicited collective racial responses and aggression to perceived threats from other racial groups advocating for equal rights (Bobo and Tuan, 2006). Whiteness encompasses more than individual feelings of like or dislike, bias, prejudice or personal identity — it is a political body, an invention as response to black advancement abetted by the state to maintain racial control. In the aftermath of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century, because white supremacy could no longer be posited as a natural given of nature, white control needed to be renegotiated, reasserted, and projected anew (Goldberg, 2002; Hale, 1995). And from this point forward, official authorities took the lead in orchestrating the “various instrumentalities in the definition and materialization of whiteness,” reified by the structures of society (Goldberg, 2002, p. 176). Politics, thus, was engineered to uphold white supremacy by decree, cementing white (and especially male) domination at the helm of society, halting black progress and mandating discrimination across society’s institutions.

With this in mind, we can conceive of *political whiteness* as the infiltration of whiteness

in the political arena. Political whiteness surfaces as a demand for political practices and policies to fulfill white expectations of privilege and dominance. According to HoSang (2010), political whiteness includes how “norms, settled expectations and investments shape the interpretation, boundaries of political communities, and sources of power for many political actors who understand themselves as white” (p. 20; Harris, 1993; DuBois, 1935). Any advances seeming to offset the advantages, political authority, or expectation of the dominant group incite apprehension, resentment, and anger, and are strongly resisted (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Whiteness as a political structure, Martinot (2003) states, “becomes a form of state, a mode of governance, and its dealing with black or brown people is the substance of its state concerns” (p. 190). As a contemporary example, white racialized laws have arisen anew to restrict the voting franchise with reduced hours, voter ID requisites, gerrymandering, and more (Omi & Winant, 2015; Berman, 2016; Feagin, 2014). Political whiteness is utilized as an object of law, as a resource deployed at social, political, and institutional levels to maintain control and wield power to accumulate more gratuitous privilege while occluding its access from others (Harris, 1993). Any political move, therefore, will inevitably encounter the norms and practices that undergird white supremacy and dominance. Political whiteness in America, in short, protects the interests of white people while seeking to harness and control the civic advancement of people of color.

Central to the sustenance of political whiteness is the assumption that there exists a firm line between political liberals and conservatives, with political whiteness’s endurance attributed by the former to the latter’s refusal to renounce racial inequality. Such representations, according to HoSang (2010), “mask the many ways diverse political actors and movements collaborated to racialize many critical policy debates in the postwar era” as all political parties ultimately “ran aground on the shoal of political whiteness” (p. 37). Put simply, American liberals and

conservatives alike are housed in the same cultural system, and while their respective policies and outlooks differ, both participate within an exploitative and oppressive system of interlocking structures. According to Bobo (2004), after recognizing that white candidates who strongly associated with the black community and its interests were unlikely to gain votes in majority white electoral districts, party leaders on both sides worked to exclude from national politics the agenda and claims of African Americans (Frymer, 1999; Edsall & Edsall, 1991). Political whiteness does not exist within one ideology only, and in fact its malleability is part of its enduring strength; nothing is more indicative of the capacity of whiteness to alter itself advantageously than the political realignment of white southerners from Democratic to Republican in response to the civil rights movement (Maxwell, 2014) or many white Northerners' fight for school busing designed to censure racial integration. It is a reality that, in American racial relations, "anyone faced with losing something would like to keep it" (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 171). It is imperative therefore not to see political whiteness in America, and its attendant apparatuses and behaviors, as solely the domain of white conservatives; it is a human affliction that is embedded across the ideological spectrum.

Communication and Whiteness

At the heart of this societal distribution, I believe, are communication practices that consistently uphold whites and denigrate people of color. As an example, African Americans are overrepresented as criminals in media content (Anderson, 2016; FBI.gov; Dixon and Linz, 2000), stereotyped as welfare recipients despite the higher percentage of white food stamp recipients (USDA, 2013), and demonized by politicians as drug users when they are, in fact,

among the least likely drug users or sellers in the nation (Anderson, 2016; Szalavitz, 2011; Feagin, 2014). According to 2009 statistics from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, blacks made up 13 percent of the population and 14 percent of illegal drug users — yet blacks represented 37 percent of those arrested on drug-related charges and 56 percent of those in state prisons for drug crimes (Behnke, 2017). According to Anderson (2016), few question conventional narratives about the “studies” of black fathers abandoning children, rampant drug use in black neighborhoods, of African American children’s aversion to education — all of which has been invalidated, but remain foundational in American lore. In the words of Hughey (2012):

Whereas strange, abnormal, or deviant behavior is a characteristic of various societies across space and time, it takes specialized patterns of meaning-making to turn these into ‘crime,’ ‘immorality,’ or ‘pathology.’ It takes even more specialized and repeated discourse to link these concepts to certain groups of people. Words create the world as they represent it... Many cannot imagine a world in which the face of immoral pathology... is not that of a darker hue (77).

Scholarship shows that these embedded discourses make voters susceptible to racially “coded” appeals by politicians, in which they evoke prejudices in messages that are ostensibly race-neutral (Valentino and Hutchings, 2004; Mendelberg, 2001; Gilens, 1996; Edsall and Edsall, 1991; Jamieson, 1992). According to Feagin (2014), the white-created framing of society includes “racial stereotypes, images, emotions, interpretations, and other important elements that legitimate racial discrimination” and generate a controlled overview of the social world (p. 101). The usage of coded communication perpetuates anti-black attitudes, images and emotions that circumscribe material exploitation and racial division. The impact and commonality of coded communication operates from the macro level of government to the micro level of everyday interactions, translating into discrimination and distancing in interracial relations and relationships (Faegin, 2014). Communication is vital throughout.

The election of Donald Trump shows how important communications can be, especially when adopted and echoed by political leaders. Some pundits suggest that Trump went beyond “racial dog-whistles” to offer explicit, outright racial denigrations — a “shrill megaphone” in the words of a *Rolling Stone* writer (Blades, 2016) or “an air horn” according to a *New York Times* opinion piece (Desmond-Harris, 2016). But Haney-López (2016) sees a greater historical continuity, positing that this president’s political strategy is a recognizable version of coded racial politics, in which Trump employed “language that pushes the boundaries of acceptable racial speech...carefully and strategically weav[ing] coded racial narratives that simultaneously stir racial panic, while allowing most of his supporters to believe that they are not racist.” McGhee (2017) situates the 2016 election as a culmination of a 50-year southern strategy, a prodding of white resentment at “exactly the right moment in terms of the demographic change and reaction to the Obamas being in the White House, and with exactly the right messenger of a billionaire phony populist who was able to stoke white fear of the racialized other every single time he took the podium, and to weaponize it against what was beginning to be a multiracial, cross-class consciousness that we’re all in it together.” Trump’s approach, in short, was historically grounded and effectively calibrated. Tatum (2017) describes a rising anxiety among whites that they are increasingly outnumbered in a historically white nation; and not unlike other animals, she explains, humans can withdraw into circles of safety, attacking those outside that circle who are perceived as threats. Parker (2014) cites social psychologists whom suggest that paranoia by whites may be a coping mechanism for a changing social environment that causes anxiety, manifesting as a threat to their world and social group belonging. The roots, he asserts, are feelings of victimization, powerlessness, distrust, a lack of control and competence, which incite white individuals to band together and express solidarity (p. 32). In this changing

environment, a presidential candidate and now administration flagging racial anxieties and resentments gains great potency. Trump's very political existence is indicative of the widespread white populace's desire to prolong the foothold of whiteness in American life.

However, in this racial abyss lies a potential opportunity: the response of many Americans to the election of Trump — including some number of white Americans — is to gain awareness of and to pro-actively address their participation in systems of inequality. A pivotal national moment is at hand, and it is essential for white Americans to recognize their histories and to seek new pathways. Scholars and activists are calling whites to engage, to commit to challenging political whiteness and to educe an ethic of political pluralism with inclusive, diverse political voices, participation, and leadership (Therriault, 2016; Tomasky, 2017; Hochschild, 2016). This work requires challenging the practices and ideologies upholding white supremacy, including, as a foundational matter, how whites communicate about race. Whites have reached a recurring crossroads: do they contribute to a political and personal racial backlash that steeps political whiteness deeper into the foundation of American democracy, or do they take steps to change how they think, speak and act (Anderson 2010, 2016; DiAngelo, 2016). To date, according to Sugrue (2016), the incorporation into public life of minoritized populations — via hiring and school admittances, for example — and shifts in whites' communication about race have failed at significantly altering patterns of inequality or injustice. But perhaps in this moment whites — or at least some whites — will reflect on and adjust how they talk about and address racial inequality, potentially redirecting the nation towards implementing practices meant to foster equal opportunity, challenging laws that disproportionately and negatively impact citizens of color, and establishing a greater political pluralism of diverse participation, engagement and leadership. The historical record is not hopeful on this matter, but change is at

least theoretically possible.

In this research, I focused on a series of communication practices that undergird the current American political arena. Specifically, I examined three patterns of political and everyday communication identified by scholars that help whites to safeguard their privilege and societal control: discourses of color-blindness, racial certainty, and white fragility. In exploring the presence of these, I also looked for potential aligned alternative discourses that might help to challenge political whiteness: color-consciousness, racial deference, and white responsibility. I focused specifically on self-identified white political liberals in this research, employing interviews to gauge whether and, if so how, these individuals engaged in these communication practices. That is, I was interested in determining if, amidst the current white backlash marked by Trump's election, *liberal* whites are replicating damaging historical patterns or pushing toward new norms of communication. To help conceptualize these practices, in this section I draw upon interviews in two documentaries: *Whiteness Project* from 2014 and *White People* from 2015. *White People* features journalist and undocumented immigrant Jose Antonio Vargas in his travels across the country speaking with young white adults about race. *Whiteness Project* is an interactive media initiative that explores the concept of whiteness, and how those who identify as white process their racial identity. The project features a collection of clips from interviews with white millennials from Dallas, Texas and Buffalo, New York. The creator of *Whiteness Project*, Whitney Dow, is a documentary filmmaker, producer and director whose work often addresses U.S. race relations. Dow told *The Guardian* that the project was undertaken for this reason: "If white people are going to participate in changing the racial dynamic, we need to deal with our own shit first" (Thrasher, 2014). My research aligns with this perspective.

My approach is one of a communication analysis. In this research I focused on what

people say, without drawing conclusions about their definitive thoughts and emotions. In the words of Bonilla-Silva (2017), “analysis of people’s racial accounts is not akin to an analysis of people’s character or morality” (p. 78). To be clear, an individual’s communications are likely at least modestly connected to their internal feelings and perceptions, but by no means can be treated as an x-ray of one’s “true” beliefs or values. Regardless, what people do say is vital, because communication must be recognized as residing at the center of the continuing societal patterns in the United States. What people say to one another about race provides direct support or challenge to systems and stereotypes that are often concealed and not overtly visible, and often surface explicitly in events or in specific historical moments (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Racialized patterns that recur in a nation’s history are aided by aligned discourses (Leonardo, 2005; DiAngelo, 2016). With this in mind, exploration of six communication practices of focus in this research offer insight into how white supremacy and privilege may be reinforced or potentially challenged by some whites who claim to hold generally progressive political leanings. The goal of this work ultimately was not to render judgments about specific people or specific attitudes or feelings but instead to gain deeper understanding into the communication of some whites — self-identified liberal whites — about race in an era of white backlash.

Color-blindness vs. Color-consciousness

An ideology of color-blindness is traditionally conceptualized by scholars as a repudiation to the existence of racial difference, asserting, as scholars Omi and Winant (2015) explain, that it is possible, “indeed imperative, to refuse race consciousness and simply not take account of it.” (p. 220). This perspective suggests that only through treating racial and ethnic categories as inconsequential can citizens mark difference as insignificant, and the sociopolitical work for racial equality be fully enacted (Allen, 2016). Critics, however, assert that color-

blindness co-opts civil rights language — such as meritocracy, individual rights, and equality — to destabilize the very movements they mimic (Feagin, 2014), while claiming “race neutrality” as white innocence and goodness. The end result too often is often a perpetuation of, rather than examination of, racial discrimination. For this study, I focus on the communication groundwork for color-blindness. I defined color-blindness discourse as the perspective that *in order for us to make progress on racism, people should stop communicating about race*. In this view, regardless if we notice race or skin color, we should avoid communicating about it because any focus on these impedes our broader culture’s progress towards equality. Those espousing color-blindness claim that discussion of dynamics of race and racism harmfully inject both into social settings unrelated to either, drawing unnecessary attention to racial difference (Sullivan, 2014). As an alternative, people can engage in *color-consciousness*, communicating a concrete awareness of race and its impact and influence in social spaces. Color-conscious discourse conveys the essentiality of communicating about race — including consideration of the impact of one’s own race and the race of others in any environment. Color-conscious discourses among whites does important cultural work by foregrounding the societal realities of political whiteness. Color-conscious communication in this research is conceptually defined as the perspective that *in order for us to make progress on racism, we need to both notice and communicate about race and racial difference*. To not do so, in this view, is to allow racial patterns to continue unchecked.

Color-blind discourse can have significant political and cultural consequences, and many whites proceed daily communicating this way. In the *Whiteness Project*, Leilani, 17, said, “I think I don’t think about race because I don’t talk about it. Modern society is so obsessed with preventing a problem that all they do is talk about the problem and that fuels the problem...the reason I don’t think about it is because I wasn’t raised talking about it because it didn’t matter to

us...I think that's the way we can stop talking about it, is if we stop seeing each other as objects and start seeing each other as people." Yet, refusing to talk about race distances people from the social systems in which they are embedded, and buries the racial inequality that debases the achievements of people of color. In contrast, a male student in *White People* asserts, "In an ideal world, if a person's skin color didn't impact their experience, then yeah, I don't think it would be important to talk about. But the fact is, it does, and it is something that needs to be addressed and talked about." *In this research, I was interested in the extent to which either or both of these two discourses — color-blindness or color-consciousness — appeared among self-identified white liberals.* So-called conventional wisdom would suggest that liberal whites would offer more color-conscious discourse, as a means of challenging embedded hierarchical racial patterns in society. What exactly we find will provide insight regarding how much white liberals, or at least some such individuals, have decided that how they talk about race — or not — can further or challenge embedded societal patterns of racial inequities.

Racial Certainty vs. Racial Deference

A second pattern that works to maintain societal white privilege is the discourse by whites of *racial certainty*. I defined this concept as *communication by whites of clear ways for racial progress to occur*. Racially certain claims smack of what scholars call white paternalism, defined as assumptions that whites' positions of societal dominance imbue them with specialized knowledge and understanding in regard to racial histories and relations (e.g. Haney-Lopez, 2006). In this type of communication, whites put forward a condescending leadership toward black America (Trepagnier, 2010) that articulates a necessity for control. False assertions of knowledge and authority, fed by the validation of whiteness, dissuades white citizens from having the self-awareness to acknowledge their limited racial knowledge, or cultivate the desire

for an authentic expansion of their racial consciousness. In this research, a discourse of racial certainty by whites suggested a paternalism about who knows best on matters of race. In contrast, whites could offer a discourse of *racial deference*, in which whites declare both limited understanding of the experiences of minoritized populations and the importance of foregrounding perspectives among people of color when assessing steps to be adopted. In this study, I defined racial deference as *communication by whites of a limited understanding of the experiences of people of color that necessitates much listening and learning for racial progress to occur*. Whites engaging in racial deference will be far more likely, perhaps, to voice recognition of their role in racial oppression and their limitations in speaking on behalf of the experiences of people of color. Such a discourse would be head-on challenge to political whiteness, and more broadly, white privilege.

Some whites featured in the *Whiteness Project* and in *White People* made declarations of racial certainty. Rich, for example, said, “I see a responsibility problem with people. When you don’t support your own ethnicity from within your own communities, then you can’t grow successful anyplace else. I see that in the black community. That they do not support each other. And when there’s a problem, it’s always somebody else’s fault. They’ll say, ‘the white guy still holds all the cards.’ No...there’s a lot of people holding a good hand in this country. It’s what you do with it that counts.” Similarly, another interviewee, Bryan, shared his opinions regarding police shootings of young black men. “It’s always pointed out that the white cop hurt the African American kid. He shouldn’t have been doing anything wrong...he got shot in the arm, he got tackled, don’t do anything wrong and you won’t be. I haven’t.” Rich and Bryan communicate that they know what people of color must do to achieve racial equality. At the same time, some individuals interviewed for the *Whiteness Project* or whites featured in *White People* espoused

some racial deference, but not in its entirety. That is, they said they cannot fully understand the experiences of people of color, but they did not add that this reality necessitated whites' listening and learning from the voices of people of color in order for racial progress to occur. Kim, a white respondent in *Whiteness Project* who lives with an African American, said, "Inherently, there is never going to be a time when a person with lighter skin completely understands what a person with darker skin might go through on a daily basis." Similarly, Alex, 29, said, "As a white person, sometimes I feel that there are some things that I just do not understand and could not understand no matter how much I know *what* happened." But neither explicitly added a need to listen to people of color. In my research, I was interested in whether white liberals communicated both incomplete understanding and a need for learning and listening from people of color, because these together are a significant statement. With all this in mind, *in this research I was interested in the extent to which either or both of these two discourses — racial certainty or racial deference — appeared among self-identified white liberals.* Again, what we find will provide insight regarding how much white liberals, or at least some such individuals, have decided that how they talk about race — or not — can further or challenge embedded societal patterns of racial inequities.

White Fragility vs. White Responsibility

A third communication practice that perpetuates white privilege and supremacy is *white fragility*, identified by DiAngelo (2011) from her experiences leading discussions on race, racism, and privilege with white populations. White fragility, she contends, is the inability of white Americans to address race and racism because of tension that often infuses dialogues focusing on race. Many whites, she posited, are socialized in insulated spaces of privilege and are unaccustomed to race-based anxiety; this insulation leads to little psychological stamina for

conversations about race. Racial fragility among whites can manifest in displays of fear, anger, guilt, withdrawal, desire for absolution, minimization of racism, silence, and paralyzing carefulness about what or how to communicate. Often whites, according to DiAngelo, conflate discomfort during these conversations with endangerment, “trivializing [their] brutality towards people of color and perverting the reality of that history” by complaining about safety even though they are “merely *talking* about racism” (DiAngelo, p. 61, italics in original). Further, she suggests that such fragility can occur regardless of political orientation, as liberal whites “may not respond with anger, but may still insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the need for engaging” with issues of race, making them a very challenging sub-group (p. 55). In this research, white fragility is defined as *the communication among whites of an inability or a lack of desire to engage in conversations about race, or other work to overcome racial inequality, because of the tension involved*. As an alternative to such fragility we might find a discourse of *white responsibility*, defined as *the communication among whites of feelings of personal desire or obligation to engage in conversations about race, or other work to overcome racial inequality, despite potential challenges involved*. Conversations about race can certainly be uncomfortable, challenging, and tension-filled, but whites who offer a discourse of white responsibility are saying that they are committed for the long haul — to dig deep, to change where needed, and to remain present with intentionality, reflection, and purpose. In short, white responsibility is a step toward challenging norms of political whiteness.

In the documentary *White People*, a white individual tells Vargas that he sought information about “white privilege” after learning that his son was teaching a class on the subject. This father said, “most of the stuff I saw was so slanted against white people...and you get a bad, bad feeling...I can’t listen to this person. You can’t just slam it into me and say,

‘you’re a jerk.’...I don’t want to be ashamed that I’m white.” The father communicated white fragility. His son, Lucas, sounded similar in describing conversations with his father: “[T]here are plenty of moments that I don’t agree and I’m getting upset by the conversation, but I choose to leave because I don’t want to cause conflict...it just wasn’t worth it, I didn’t want to feel like I couldn’t live in this house with my beliefs.” Yet the son also communicates white responsibility in the documentary by nonetheless inviting his parents to participate in a workshop that he created on white privilege. Lucas tells his parents, “[W]e can’t change what race we are, we can’t change our experience, all we can do is change what we do with that experience, what we do with that life.” With these latter actions, Lucas communicated white responsibility to engage in efforts to overcome racial inequality. Similarly, in the *Whiteness Project*, Nicholas asserts, “I feel the need to use these advantages, I just feel the need to use these advantages...however I can to make sure that other people of other races can have the same advantages that I have.” With all this in mind, *in this research I was interested in the extent to which either or both of these two discourses — white fragility or white responsibility — appeared among self-identified white liberals*. What we find will provide insight regarding how much white liberals, or at least such individuals, have decided that they are committed to recognizing potential tension in communications and actions as a necessary means to a worthy objective in regard to challenging racial inequality, denoting their own discomfort as insufficiently meaningful.

This research, in sum, seeks to explore the relationships among white privilege, political whiteness, and six important communication patterns. Broadly speaking, I believe that it is critical that whites — of whatever political persuasion — adopt the latter of each of these three communication practices: color-consciousness, racial deference, and white responsibility. All are needed if the nation is to have any chance of ending American racism and recurring whitelashes,

including the current one. Actions undertaken in other nations suggests that change can occur — not easily or without great pain, but change does seem possible. South Africa, Australia, Germany, Japan, and Canada have undertaken imperfect but concrete processes of public communication geared toward racial truths. In South Africa after apartheid, human rights abuses were identified, an effort to create impartial records of the past was undertaken, and reparations were made to help restore the dignity and life force of victims and their relatives (Naidu, 2013; Feagin, 2014). Public hearings brought victims' stories into the nation's public narrative. In 2013, the South African government pledged to pay reparations totaling \$85 million to more than 19,000 victims of apartheid crimes who testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Thompson, 2003). In Australia, whites are encouraged to write in a "sorry book" to apologize to indigenous people and "acknowledge responsibility for the history of colonization and continuing legacies" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 149). In Japan, students are taught to accept personal responsibility for some of Japan's imperialist past. As Leonardo (2009) asserts:

None of these students occupied the Philippines during World War II; none of them were involved in the killings during this military invasion...but they have one thing in common: an inherited sense of history that belongs to, rather than is taken from, them...they recognize that their daily taken-for-granted benefits are legacies from the decades of Japanese imperialist legacies (p. 149-150).

The moral and institutional precedent for taking responsibility for racial oppression has been established at the international level, but it has not occurred in the United States. Racial responsibility among whites, on a national scale, is critical to any potential to change current scripts of white supremacy and domination in America.

Chapter Three

Methodology

For this study, I employed interviews to examine patterns among some white Americans when discussing race, racial progress, and patterns of communication. Interviews are an opportunity to bring greater definition to our understanding of how our environments are socially constructed, and how and why individuals navigate within shared sociopolitical spheres. Interviews, Rubin and Rubin (1995) state, “uncover and explore the meanings that underpin people’s lives, routines, behaviors and feelings” (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 32). Further, individuals’ consciousness, Seidman (2013) writes, can give access to the most complicated social issues if we listen deeply to their experiences (p. 13). An interview may tap into undercurrents of social, political, and personal influences — elucidating what supports and builds patterns in wider society. With a unique capacity to symbolize their experiences through language, people can bring clarity to how they make subjective meaning of their own personal experiences, and in turn, how these meanings impact their longstanding perceptions and perspectives.

However, an effective exchange between researcher and interviewee is not inevitable or necessarily instinctive from the standpoint of either party. The ways in which social interaction unfolds in an interview is vital for how meanings are shared and constructed, as is exploring informants’ answers with them (Arksey & Knight, 1999). An engagement that empowers the responding participant, Mishler (1986) asserts, is one that allows the conveyance of thoughts and meanings of the respondents on *their* terms. In contrast to an asymmetrical, stimulus-response model of interviewing, during which the researcher fully controls the conversation, Gubrium and Holstein (2003) encourage allowing for more communicative equality and interdependence in an

interview, as interviewer and respondent engage in a “joint construction of meaning” (p. 17). This less-structured conversation can evoke the voice of the participant in greater color and detail, with disclosure of not only their publicly expressed views, but their more personal perceptions as well. To allow participants a platform on which to share without a framework of conscripted answers, I asked questions seeking to understand important dimensions of the intersection of political whiteness, race, and America.

Participants

This research explored the communications of white Americans who identify as liberals. This demographic is of particular interest because scholars assert that among white political liberals there is a marked psychological dissonance between their desire for racial justice and their willingness to accept diminished privilege or radical change (Anderson, 2016). Of particular interest is how whites’ deep aversion to addressing their own personal and collective racism produces discourses that often circumvents grappling with whiteness, white supremacy or privilege. Instead, whites may employ communication to enact distance and depersonalization from the racial inequities in society. When liberal whites attempt an honest appraisal of their own privilege and prejudices, they often fail to explicitly recognize their advantages or biases, positioning their racialized thoughts, understandings and values as unknown or passed down in an uncontrollable fashion — instead of invested in and in some cases, intentional (Leonardo, 2005). This study aims to determine if people who self-identify as white liberals nonetheless offer discourses which, at minimum, buttress racialized patterns — or if, in converse, they offer discourses which challenge political whiteness.

I collected data in several steps. First, I reached out to members of organizations using

the online platform meetup.com, which many people use to convene with other politically likeminded individuals. I invited members from *#Resist: Seattle* to participate in this study. I used the group's listserv to invite participation from their members via email. Specifically, this is the note I sent to the listserv:

Dear #ResistSeattle Member,
Hi! My name is Devon Geary, and I am a graduate student at the University of Washington in the Department of Communication. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in a research project focused on politics and race in the United States. I am interested in gaining a better understanding of what led to Trump's election, and how our country may change or move forward from here. Your participation would involve a 60-90-minute interview with me using Skype. For this study, I am looking for participants *who identify as liberal white Americans*. I can provide a \$20 Starbucks gift card for your participation. If you are open to participating, you can contact me at 206-788-54**, via email at gearyd@uw.edu, or respond to this message.

I interviewed the first 16 participants whom agreed to participate in this study. Second, I solicited participation from members of the University of Washington organization *Young Democrats at the University of Washington*. I reached out to the organization by posting on their Facebook page with the same message, and two students responded to my post and agreed to participate. In total, I interviewed 18 people for this study. When determining the appropriate number of participants, Seidman (2013) suggests "reflecting on the range of participants and sites that make up a population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it" (p. 58). With this in mind, 18 whites of a variety of ages with standpoints stemming from liberal social spaces in a liberal-leaning city were interviewed for this study.

The participants for this study were all white, but varied significantly. In terms of their age, for example, they ranged from 19 to 69 years-old with a mean age of 42 and a median age of 37. In terms of gender, 61 percent identified as male and 39 percent identified as female. In regard to religious affiliation, nearly half identified as having no religious affiliation, one-third

identified as a form of Christian, one participant identified as agnostic, one as Jewish and one as Buddhist. In terms of income, participants ranged from selections of “less than \$10,000” to between “\$100,000 and \$249,999.” Further specific demographic information about each participant can be seen in the chart below.

Name	Gender	Birth Year (Age)	Religion	Yearly Income
Stan	Male	1948 (69)	No affil.	\$25,000-\$49,999
Jarrod	Male	1971 (46)	No affil.	\$25,000-\$49,999
Ted	Male	1992 (25)	Agnostic	\$50,000-\$74,999
Brad	Male	1980 (37)	Atheist; Raised Catholic	\$50,000-\$74,999
Molly	Female	1953 (64)	No affil.; Raised Catholic	\$75,000 - \$99,999
Aaron	Male	1973 (44)	No affil.	\$100,000 - \$249,999
Donald	Male	1983 (34)	No affil.	\$75,000 - \$99,999
Alex	Male	1988 (29)	Christian	Less than \$10,000
Casey	Female	1957 (61)	Protestant	\$75,000 - \$99,999
Gal	Female	1981 (36)	Protestant	\$25,000-\$49,999
Alina	Female	1985 (32)	Atheist	\$10,000 - \$24,999
Jackson	Male	1990 (27)	No affil.	\$10,000 - \$24,999
Christina	Female	1962 (55)	Christian/Buddhist	\$25,000-\$49,999
Chad	Male	1995 (22)	No affil.	\$10,000 - \$24,999
Jacob	Male	1983 (34)	Catholic	\$25,000-\$49,999
Burt	Male	1963 (54)	Protestant	\$10,000 - \$24,999
Jamie	Female	1953 (63)	Jewish	\$100,000 - \$249,999
Lisa	Female	1998 (19)	No affil.; Raised Catholic	Less than \$10,000

Interviews

I conducted qualitative interviews to gain a glimpse into the lived experiences of the selected participants. Interviewees, scholars emphasize, are not merely vessels of answers, but people “replete with a full complement of historical, biographical, and social sensibilities” (Dunbar et al., 2003, p. 297). Participants should be engaged with, and their responses should be understood in the context of their complex lives — unsimplified and uncompartmentalized. Participant and researcher speak to each other, according to Luff (1999), not from absolutely fixed, coherent standpoints, but from multiple perspectives, “the structured and historically grounded roles and hierarchies of their society, [including their] gender, race, and class”

(Warren, 2002, p. 84). It is vital that the interviewer be self-reflexive regarding the dynamics of the exchange and how, particularly, their own subject position — in my case as a white, female, graduate student — might impact the interview process. With this in mind, I employed an approach that Burns (2000) calls “semi-structured” interviewing. In this approach the questions are predetermined, but the specific ordering in which they are asked, or, for that matter, if they are asked at all, is dependent on each interview. It is important that the participants get a chance to express the understandings and experiences of their worlds free from rigid procedural structures or restrictions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The objective was to ensure that these interviews were, in sum, reflexive, interviewee-centric, facilitating an insight into the values, politics, and communication practices of the participants.

Each interview was roughly 60-90 minutes and involved the same outline. Interviews were done individually, using an online video chat platform — Skype, Facetime or Google Hangouts — and was audio recorded with permission solicited from each participant before the initiation of the interview. During the interviews I asked the participants about the three paired communication practices: (1) *color-blindness and color-consciousness*; (2) *racial certainty and racial deference*; (3) *white fragility and white responsibility*. To engage participants in a conversation about the three pairs of communication patterns, specifically, I asked questions regarding traits of these concepts. For example, questions regarding color-blindness and color-consciousness included: “As a society, do you think we are focusing too much on racial difference? Do you think noticing and paying attention to racial difference helps or hinders us as a society?” To examine racial certainty and racial deference, I asked, for instance: “Many are trying to challenge the racial inequality in this country. What kinds of people do you think should be leaders in this work? Do you think whites understand the racial inequality in this

country as well as other groups do?” Next, to examine white fragility and white responsibility, I asked, for example: “There’s this idea that some white people have trouble talking about race because of the tension that is usually a part of these conversations — what do you think about that? Have you ever resisted having a conversation about race? If so, can you tell me about that? In our society, who do you think has a responsibility to challenge racial inequality and prejudice?” In addition, I asked participants about the election of President Trump, their feelings regarding the diversification of the country, political whiteness, and their perception of the impact of whiteness in their life (see Appendix for all questions). In total, the interview portion of this study examined if self-identified liberal whites employed the six patterns of discourse when communicating about race in the United States.

After conducting these interviews, I utilized a qualitative research transcription service to transcribe each of the 18 interviews into a separate text document. I then read each transcript closely nine times, three times for each pair of discourse patterns. Each read I looked for and marked excerpts that seemed to align with the six thematic categories of this research. Research categories, according to Dey (1993), can be drawn from the study questions and must be “created, modified, divided and extended through confrontation with the data” (p. 126). That is, categories were both informed by scholarship and refined by the words of interviewees. As I read the 18 interviews for specific discourses, I conjoined the aligned pairs into a shared separate document (e.g. “color-blindness and color-consciousness” were placed in one, combined document) in order to focus on, examine, and compare the two discourses across interviews. After all interviews were transcribed, I explored and analyzed within and across the categories to understand participants’ communications, their understanding of their role in the nations’ political whiteness, racial inequality and efforts to challenge the current white backlash. As a

product of this analysis, I identified portions of the interviewee words that aligned with the study's six discourse patterns. After each read, I had a second analyst look over all selected excerpts as a "check" on whether the discourses were valid instances on their face of the discourses of focus. Any excerpts that were questioned were re-examined, in full context in the interviews. Only ones that were considered on-target by each analyst were retained.

Chapter Four

Results

In this chapter I present patterns in the interviews regarding these six discourses. I present them within their pairs, as this is how they appeared and how they take on significance within our broader social-political environs.

Color-blindness vs. Color-consciousness

The first set of communication practices I analyzed in the interviews were color-blindness and color-consciousness. Color-blindness is conceptually defined in this study as the perspective that in order for us to make progress on racism, people should stop communicating about race. In this view, regardless if we notice race or skin color, we should avoid communicating about it because any focus on these impedes our broader culture's progress towards equality. Conversely, color-consciousness is the perspective that in order for us to make progress on racism we need to both notice *and* communicate about race and racial difference. To not do so, in this view, is to allow racial patterns to continue unchecked. Both of these perspectives emerged in the interviews. In this chapter when presenting excerpts I italicize the portions of the text that most clearly indicate the discourse of focus.

A decent number of the white liberals I interviewed said that, as a society, we need to focus on race if we want to dismantle racism. Alina, 32, asserted that in the political arena, some capitalize on citizens' lack of exposure to each other, and perpetuate division using "fear of the other." Conversely, in talking about racial difference people can perhaps effectively highlight systemic disparities.

Well, I don't think people should ignore race. Sometimes you do need to pay attention to race, like the response to the black lives matter on Twitter, "the white lives matter" or

“all lives matter.” That’s basically whitewashing the issue. You don’t want to ignore race. I think you need to say... ‘Well, sure all lives matter but right now the African American lives are the ones being persecuted, and these entrenched things in our society are affecting them, so we’re actually gonna focus on that right now. That’s what this is about, and this political movement is about.

Alina described the importance of noting race in both political and personal spaces.

I do think it’s good to talk about different races and cultures in-person, too, not to ignore them and pretend like they’re not there, but to acknowledge one another’s history and story.

Some said that there might be — and they might wish for — an ideal future in which racial difference would not need to be a societal conversation, but that we were not at that place.

Christina, 55, who moved to Seattle from Texas two years ago, put it this way: “I’d be glad for it to be an all medium washed out. We’re not white or black. I mean, that would be — where all the colors bleed into one is the U2 lyric. *That’s not gonna happen if we don’t talk about it and address it.*” Burt, 54, shared a similar desire to surmount society’s current accentuation of racial difference, and a recognition in the need to focus on race. In his comments he introduced his role as a father.

I mean, ideally, we wouldn’t have to focus on it, but it’s like...we have a 400-year history, 250 years of slavery and 150 years of institutional racism. We have a long way to go to — for the playing field to be level...So, I don’t think we talk enough about race. I mean, I guess I talk about it with my kids because I want them to understand that the world that they’ve grown up in, it’s not reality...I want them to understand that Mercer Island is not reflective of most people’s existence by any means...it’s easy to be in the majority in a country...Being white in America, you’re not affected by race.

For much of his life, Donald, 34, said he was unconscious of a need to focus on race. Donald shared that he believed throughout high school and college that America had achieved racial integration and equality. He perceived racism in America as “a thing of the past.” After Trayvon Martin was murdered, and the Black Lives Matter movement began to rise, Donald said his worldview shifted, and the need to focus on race became very apparent. He said:

There's always been that argument that if we just ignore racism, and just don't see race, then it'll just go away. *That only works if literally everybody does that.* If 60 percent of us are ignoring race, but there's still that minority out there that sees black people as criminals, then racism is still there. *As long as there's still a minority of either implicit, or explicit racism, then the subject needs to be brought up.*

Jarrold, 46, discussed the value of conversations about race. One of the biggest ways to help other people understand those different from themselves, he said, is to “get ‘em in conversation with neighbors and communities.” In trying to be a more effective ally, Jarrold has identified listening as critical, especially when talking about race.

I think that's one thing [I'm] learning about listening to people like DeRay Mckesson and other people on Twitter is that they wanna talk about it. *It's important to them so part of being a good ally but part of just being a good person is listening to them when they wanna talk about it. They're gonna tell you, “Here's what I see.” Instead of taking affront to it, listen to them. Listening to them is the least you can do.* Trying to improve from there is just something you have to continually work at, something I have to continually work at, I should say.

A few of the white liberals I interviewed offered a color-conscious perspective but also articulated some concerns that they had with such an approach. Jamie, 63, stated that what she sees as a current focus on race is perpetuating a detrimental misunderstanding.

I think we have to change the whole conversation. *I think that we're both giving too much attention and too little. We give too much to the wrong aspects, and too little to what's actually real, which is that this is socially constructed nonsense,* for the most part, and that this idea that you can look at a human being — here's the thing. I can see you. I don't know what race you are. I can make assumptions... we can't look at each other and know that. It's unknowable, because it's not actually even real.

In sum, several people expressed the perspective that communicating about race or skin color is essential for us to move forward as a society on racial matters, while some interviewees articulated that color-consciousness is necessary, but brings challenges.

In contrast, some white liberals I interviewed presented outlooks that were closer to the perspective of color-blind than color-conscious. Brad, 37, asserted the need to avoid focusing on race and racial categories. The latter, he posits, only separates us.

We should be focusing more on the fact that we are all the same genetically, as far as genetically speaking of being human. Yeah, some of us have darker pigment in our skin. Some of us have light hair, dark hair, blue eyes, brown eyes, green eyes but we're all, like I said, we're all the same. Like I said, it's just creating these racial terms is what divides us more than it helps us... I guess I feel like we should all be equal; that there shouldn't be the idea that they're white, or if they're black, or if they're brown, or they're Asian, or any of these things, these divisive labels that we put on people.

Aaron, 44, shared a view that there is a fine line between “compensating” for racial history in the U.S. and overcompensating — the country is, “swinging back and forth until it stabilizes” – and currently, he says that we are involved in the latter. When discussing gerrymandering, he shares his perception that talking about race is unhelpful, and does not provide any means to a solution.

*I don't understand how they could just redesign the boundaries. That is where the problem is, because right there they are enabling a certain race, or group [in] society to decide for the rest, and that's the key that needs to be addressed. *Not another, you know, to talk about diversity in that sense, I don't think is gonna help anything.**

Overall, during the interviews for this study, a predominance of white liberals espoused color-consciousness: a conception that, as a society, need to communicate about race if we want to dismantle racism. Some shared an ideal of an integrated society with less identified racial differences or racial categories. Others emphasized the need to focus on race only in intentional and beneficial ways — encouraging the engagement of dialogue that emphasizes more similarities than differences, and dissuades the use of stereotypes or racial assumptions. Finally, some white liberals expressed color-blindness, the idea that focusing on race and talking about racial difference harms our racial progress.

Racial Certainty vs. Racial Deference

The second set of communication practices that I analyzed in the interviews were racial certainty and racial deference. Racial deference was defined as communication by whites of a limited understanding of the experiences of people of color that necessitates much listening and learning for racial progress to occur. Conversely, racial certainty was defined as the

communication by whites of a perceived understanding of clear ways to solve racial inequality. Most of the white liberals I interviewed shared a perspective that white people cannot understand racial inequality as well as people of color, and as a result the voices of people of color must be heard in order for whites to better understand how to dismantle racial inequality. But some white liberals, conversely, expressed knowing distinct routes to be taken to challenge racial inequality. In this research, on a spectrum of white deference to white paternalism, such racial certainty hinted of white paternalism. I will start this analysis by sharing interview excerpts of racial deference, and subsequently share interview excerpts more declarative in certainty.

Lisa, 19, said that when talking to her friend, a woman of color, about issues related to race, she focuses on listening and learning.

When I'm talking to my friend about any issues, I always ask for her opinion first when it's a racial issue, because, I don't know, I'm tryin' to learn. I'm tryin' to learn about her viewpoint, 'cause obviously, she's had a different experience.

Asked who should be the leaders of work to challenge racial inequality, Lisa referenced this friendship again in her response.

I think the people who are being discriminated against should be the leaders...I ask...my African-American friend, her opinions on things before I speak mine cuz I'm tryin' to learn and change my opinion, or at least change it to reflect what people facing discrimination...they actually want instead of what I think they want. I think it's great to have white allies or whatever, and it's great to have white leaders in those movements, but I think that the majority of it should be people speaking up about — black people speaking up about what they face, or Muslims speaking up about what they face. I don't wanna speak for them.

Alina said that in conversation with people of color, she focuses more on listening than sharing her own opinions.

Then if you're having an issue about race with someone who is not white, which is completely different from all those other arguments or discussions, I'm not interested in talking that much. I want to hear what they have — think. Because they're the ones who are a minority and experiencing the racism, and I don't feel like I should be talking that much. I'm not experiencing this. You are. I want to hear what you think about it.

Chad, 22, who occupies positions of professional leadership, said that he tries to ensure a spectrum of diverse voices are represented in the leadership conversations.

I don't really think it's enough just to go talk to those groups, and then take a percentage of what they say into whatever your operating procedure is. I think you're really more effective when you bring those people to the table, so that they're making decisions, and then you have also access to their network of people, so that you could get more feedback, more stories, more experiences.

Donald said he thinks there needs to be a “diversity of views and diversity of life experiences” in elected officials.

I think a diversity of peoples is needed. You need black, and Muslims as part of the movement to really explain to people what it's like to live their life, but you also need white people, and Asians, and everyone else that knows how to work the system, and knows how to get laws changed, hire lawyers, and do everything that causes real change to happen. White people are more likely to listen to other white people, and just the mode of communication.

Similarly, Jarrod said that it is imperative for a white man, the current societal default of leadership, to be vigilant in surrounding themselves with the voices, perspectives and direction of a pluralist group.

He has to surround himself with people of different races, different colors, different sexual orientations, different genders to make sure that he hears those voices. I think part of it is that you need to have leadership from everybody, but I think part of that is the people that are in leadership positions need to make sure they're encouraging other voices to come through because you can't get everybody leading if you don't encourage those other voices to run for...the Democratic Party.

This status quo of white males in positions of power, Jarrod asserted, must lead in relinquishing leadership to make space for the empowerment of people of color.

Right now, the forefront needs to be white men because they're the ones that need to step aside and they're the ones that need to allow other people into their party. After that, the more people that are involved there, then need to start giving up that power more equitably to other voices so that, as time goes, those other voices, it will be their responsibility to get up into those positions of powers.

Jarrod and Chad, like most liberal whites I interviewed, said that whites cannot understand racial

inequality as well as other groups do. Chad said, “I think you can definitely try to understand, *you can talk with those groups and hear what they experience, but it’s always gonna be different hearing about an experience than it is actually experiencing it.*” Gal, 36, offered a similar assertion. She said,

I don’t know if they all have the same experience, but I think they’re at a much better place to understand than we are. Everything in society comes from a white place...I will never truly understand racism ‘cause I will never experience it. I don’t know what it’s like. I can read about it and listen to other people talk about it, but that’s it.

Because of this disparity in understanding, whites, Gal said, should not lead in the creation of the many policies impacting people of color.

How can you have people creating policies in this country for things if they’re not experiencing it? We, as white people, have no business creating policies that affect people of color because we don’t know what the impacts are. You would just have, I think, a stronger government that would consider more people’s experience when running things.

Similarly, Chad said, due to this void in understanding, whites should not dictate how racial inequality should be challenged.

I don’t think the group that’s doing the oppressing should be at the forefront of that fight, so I would not be a good Black Lives Matter leader, I would not wanna be in charge of that organization ‘cause that’s not the voice that should be coming from that organization.

Alina asserted the importance of leaders having similar experiences to those they represent, so that they can understand and express the desires and needs of the people.

With any political movement, I think that the person representing everyone should be someone who’s also experiencing it. I would want someone representing a movement that was discussing racial inequality to be a minority. I don’t want to hear some older white guy talking about it... you want leaders from those groups to be representing them who are also experiencing it, and really know what they’re talking about, and they represent a true representative of those people.

Later, she also said:

I think it’s so important for leaders from the groups that are being persecuted or

discriminated against to speak for them, and be included...having minorities actually in the government representing their own issues...I feel like you just want the government to show all the groups that it's representing, not just have a whole bunch of old white guys... You want to hear — you want someone with that direct life experience and exposure to be representing those issues in the government.

Stan, who participates in Black Lives Matter and other movements, offered a similar sentiment. He said, “Well, I think, obviously, the people [who] are most oppressed will usually step to the fore and be leaders in whatever the struggle is.” Similarly, Gal said, “People of color should be leading, but white people should be doing the work because we’re the ones causing the problems.” She said she seeks to expand her awareness of societal racial inequality and prejudice by reading the posts of people of color online: “Any time I see a black man or a black woman and I click on their bio just to see what they — who they are, and it’s like they’re a writer or a professor or something like that. *I follow them ‘cause I want to hear their point of view. I feel like I’ve learned a lot.*” Jarrod also reads the online posts of people of color. When asked about his level of understanding regarding racial experiences in America, he said, “I’m still learning, I guess is the best way to put it.” He said that social media has helped.

What I love about Twitter is that it exposes me to all these different voices I can go see, voices of people that are black, voices of Native Americans are indigenous Americans...I think it's...a constant learning experience...I can listen to all the folks I listen to on Twitter and still on have less than a 0.0001 percent of the viewpoints and so, therefore, just the more viewpoints you listen to, the more conversations you have, the more exposure you have to different voices, and the more you find different communities that you can interact with that you can, then, learn more each and every day.

After listening and learning, Jarrod said he tries to support those voices by sharing the message.

I think it's listening and being aware of it and just trying to, then, make others aware of it. Re-tweeting might not do much and, shoot, I don't have any followers but amplify voices and speak up when you can.

Jackson, 27, similarly asserted that whites should “take a back seat to giving voices,” and instead use their own to elevate the ideas, interests and concerns of people of color. Asked how he

approaches racial difference in his everyday experiences, Jackson said,

I also try and not assume...just because I'm aware of the struggle of, the plight of black Americans doesn't mean I know—that doesn't mean I know anything about a specific black individual. I try to just be mindful of it. Also, understand that everybody has their own individual experience and their own individual experience with that specific identity, as well. It's not my place to assume I know anything. *To come from a place of tryin' to understand more.*

In sum, most interviewees articulated that whites had a limited understanding regarding the experiences of people of color and, consequently, that there is a need for whites to step aside for more empowered, diverse leadership.

However, some whites also articulated there are specific ways to solve racial inequality.

Stan, who said that those who are most oppressed will step to the fore to be leaders of the struggle, said that he believes society's focus needs to shift.

I think it can be shifted, and I think it's part of the more general class struggle. The more people organize against the system as a whole for human needs, and against profit, and for all the various things we need. Healthcare, and education, and jobs, and all that, environmental protection. People can come to see the need to unite across racial lines. That'll help us take on racism directly... The level of struggle picks up, and the fight against racism will pick up, as well. Both as part of those other struggles, but also separately.

Asked how he approaches racial difference in his daily experiences, Stan said,

When it's appropriate, and when people wanna have it, I'll have a political discussion with people about race. Not just about race, but about all sorts of other things. *I just try to explain my attitude and what I think needs to be done. It doesn't matter to me whether the person is white or black, or whatever their race is. It's a political project.*

Ted, 25, averred that, as a society, we are focusing too much on race and not enough on class.

We can do better, he said.

Again, I really think that we need to realize that basing something only on race is way too simple...I think that if we single out groups on race, that's going to create racial tension by definition. Yes, if we group more based on class, you do get some class tension from that, but it's not the same. Because class can change... *When you divide programs just based on [race], I think we can do better... We need to find ways that bring people more together and are focused on building a better and more whole country than almost, in a*

way, picking winners and losers and being like, “Oh, your group has been losing for too long,” so just pulling people in by things that they have no way to change. We can do better is all I’m saying.

Ted explained why society should focus more socioeconomics than race.

Because that should not — the color of a person’s skin should not determine their economic standing. I mean, it’s not currently determined, right? I mean, we don’t have slavery anymore, thank god. It’s clearly still impacting it very disproportionately. When we look for remedies to resolve that, let’s not do it in a way that leaves out a lot of people still trapped in the cycle of poverty. Because we can do better than that.

Donald, similarly, asserted that society needs to focus more on economic disparity instead of race.

I’m okay with it. I think a better system would’ve been to replace that tiebreaker with an economic tiebreaker, instead of racial — instead of saying you’ll get preference to this school if you’re black, say you’ll get preference to this school if you qualify for free, or reduced lunch. Then it’s not based on skin color at all. It’s just saying if you’re poor, and disadvantaged, you can go to this school, over the rich kid. I think that would be better.

Ted, in his communication of racial certainty, asserted how black America should participate in movements for racial equality.

If you’re the one being oppressed, and you’re lying on your back for it, you need to get up and fight back, and not have a victim mentality. You need to fight for it. In fact, one of the things that I love about this country is our history of deciding to fight for something. From the revolution to deciding that slavery was worth a war, to end, to deciding that the Civil Rights Act was worth losing the South for the democratic party.

Overall, during the 18 interviews for this study, a predominance of white liberals expressed racial deference, the communication of limited understanding of the experiences of people of color necessitating whites to listen and learn from people of color for racial progress to occur. Conversely, some whites espoused racial certainty, the communication of a perceived understanding of clear ways to solve racial inequality.

White Fragility vs. White Responsibility

The final set of communication practices that I analyzed in the interviews were emphases

on white fragility and white responsibility. White fragility was defined in this research as communication by white people of a perceived inability or lack of desire to engage in conversations about race, or other work to overcome racial inequality *because of the tension involved*. White responsibility was defined as the communication by white people of a personal desire or obligation to engage in conversations about race, or other work to overcome racial inequality, *despite challenges involved*. Most of the white liberals I interviewed said that everyone has a responsibility to challenge the racial inequality and prejudice in society, and many specified that white people, especially, have a responsibility to use their power and privilege to dismantle racial inequality. Many of these same people, however, also expressed features of white fragility, describing a lack of personal efforts to undertake and fulfill their own prescribed responsibility due to the tension and challenge entailed. The following are excerpts from these interview discussions.

I begin with the discourse of white responsibility. Jackson, 27, said he strongly supported whites taking responsibility for dismantling societal racial inequality. In fact, he advocated for whites to act not merely as “allies” but as “accomplices” to people of color in the fight against injustice. He put it like this:

*It ought not just be — to not even just be allies. Really be accomplices to, even putting our bodies on the line. I’ll be the first to admit, I am not the best at that... In Charlottesville, or if you’re in f***ing Baltimore, cops wouldn’t be shooting rubber bullets at you or I, right? Our bodies are therefore more safe. Having that privilege, it’s up to us to put our bodies more on the line in that sense.*

Later, Jackson further demarcated the role of an accomplice.

*I think it’s everybody. I think white people have a more...with great power comes great responsibility... everybody needs to see themselves in the fight... Ally’s like “Hey, how can I help you?” Accomplice is like, “No, I’m picking up the f***ing gun with you and we’re gonna fight this s*** together.” That’s the difference. One’s like a medic. One’s like, “No, I’m a soldier with you.”*

To begin the embodiment of an ally or an accomplice, Jackson called for white people to start having uncomfortable conversations about race.

I think the conversation about race needs to happen between white people to make them feel they can have that conversation. They are going to feel uncomfortable. They are going to have white tears...I think a huge component of whiteness is not feeling like your foundation is ever shifting and moving. That's an experience that people of color feel every time they walk outside the door...People need to feel they can actually have that conversation...It's okay to feel vulnerable. To feel fragile. To feel your entire worldview is shifting because that's the only way you're gonna grow.

Jarrold, similarly, asserted these conversations are imperative.

There's a lot of things we can do, I can do. There's empathy to listen, to try to understand, to put yourself in shoes other than your own and to feel that uncomfortableness...Uncomfortable would probably be another one is that it should be a little bit uncomfortable that if I'm having discussions on race and I'm not feeling a bit uncomfortable, then it's probably not getting to the depths of what's in me.

Whites, Jarrold averred, should confront the uncomfortable truth about racism and history.

I have to be able to look at these things and say what was happening from the other side to truly understand it...If I start thinking that way, it should make me uncomfortable because I have to question what I've learned in history books as being incomplete.

Further, Jarrold emphasized the responsibility for whites to focus on listening and reading.

Twitter, he said, “exposes me to all different voices, I can go see voices that are black, voices of Native Americans...”

Part of being a good ally but part of just being a good person is listening to them when they wanna talk about it. They're gonna tell you, “Here's what I see.” Instead of taking affront to it, listen to them. Listening to them is the least you can do. Trying to improve from there is just something you have to continually work at, something I have to continually work at, I should say... I think it's listening and being aware of it and just trying to, then, make others aware of it.

If he missteps when talking about race, “if somebody tells me I'm wrong” Jarrold said, it's important that whites do not become defensive, but instead “*acknowledge it and correct it.*”

Asked who has a responsibility to challenge racial inequality and prejudice, Jarrold said:

The pat answer is everyone. Who should be at the forefront would be the people in

power. That would be white men starting first and then white women after that...Right now, the forefront needs to be white men because they're the ones that need to step aside...to start giving up that power more equitably to other voices...Right now, because the positions are mostly all white men, those are people that are at the responsibility.

Christina, 55, similarly, stated the need for whites, and specifically white women, to step up. She said she views white women as having this particular duty because they are the “least controversial” group with the “most power.” To address racial issues, she stated, we need to “go to the white women,” to wrestle the power from white men.

White women. It's what it's gonna take. I mean, it's up to me...Maybe that's because I view it on my shoulders. I view it on your shoulders...Our poor black women and our Latino women, they're under attack now. This is up to us...We're gonna have to fix it. We're gonna have to take control over these white male assholes who think they run our country...let's talk about children...I do not want our children seeing neo-Nazis as living in this country...We need to make this clear...If we want somethin' to change, that's who we need to talk to is white women.

Christina later reemphasized white womens' role to challenge any discrimination or prejudice propagated by white men: “Now, I know they feel like they're under attack. Good God. They had the run of the mill for 200 plus years...*Women especially, we need to — yeah, we need to hush that up. They need to stop. We need to make them.*” Liberal whites, she asserted, “*like myself...can't sit by and let that keep.*” A dialogue of reckoning, she said, must be initiated, specifically, among whites.

The education and the truth tellin' has to come among white people. It's not gonna work for it to come from black people telling us. It's an inside job...I know white people have to let go of the idea that we're somehow superior. I don't know where that came from. It's simple and wrong. It's so counterproductive to our country. We have to fix that from the inside.

And bigotry, Christina said, must be stopped regardless of where you are or whom you're with.

Part of that just is to speak out against it. Be the one person in the white group that goes, “Yo, no. Nuh-uh. That is not okay with me.” I mean, I'm still gonna be that one no matter where I am even if it does torch Christmas. I mean, if there's babies around, I would rather them remember that — Aunt Lolla is my name in the family, is the one who won't put up with that word.

Gal said that whites who don't speak up and challenge racial inequality are complicit in white supremacy. She said, "*We're white supremacists, because if you're not actively dismantling white privilege, you're upholding a structure that keeps white supremacy in place, and people really pushed back to that.*" Asked who has a responsibility to challenge racial inequality, Gal didn't hesitate: "*White people. Because we're the one [laughter] — we're the cause of the problem.*"

Lisa, 19, said she talks about race and politics when she visits relatives in Iowa. When asked how much she talks about race, Lisa said, "*Not enough, I think I will definitely be talking about stuff more,*" and she plans to join clubs such as Young Democrats at the University of Washington. Like Christina and Gal, Lisa was one of many to say that everyone, but particularly white people, have a responsibility to challenge racial inequality.

I think all of us. I think there should be more a focus on white people doing that right now because I feel like it's our duty to be allies, because black people have been criticizing police brutality for years...it would fix itself a lot faster, simply because our government is so white, and the more allies you have around the general population, the more allies you'll have in the government. Yeah, I would say everyone's duty.

Alina, 32, also placed a particular onus on white people: "*I think the majority and the privileged have a responsibility to do something.* If, sadly, they're the only voices that are being really heard, or that have the ability to have an agency, or do actually have action, *then I think they have a responsibility to do that.*" Molly, as well, said:

I think that whatever we would do would affect everybody so that everybody should be represented in trying to resolve this, make up the solution...white people have more power and more ability to do something, and possibly, at least in some circumstances, more credibility, so there's a lot of responsibility in that regard, too.

Donald said,

It's [white people's] responsibility to change the society, because they've got the power to. It's their responsibility to change their inner bias, because that's the root of the

problem, right there. It's their responsibility to pressure their peers to get rid of their racial bias. I think that — with the neo-Nazi events last weekend, I was thinking that's really the only solution — if their friends, and family [don't] sort of pressure them, to say, "You're a racist, and you need to change." They won't change otherwise.

Burt, 54, said, *"I think that it is important for white people to take the — to fight along with them because we're not the ones with something to gain. We're the ones with something to lose."*

Jacob, 34, also said challenging racism by whites is essential: *"I do believe that white people that have some idea about what we have been talking about. If they have the information and they see situations where — well, I mean, what I'm trying to say is it's kind of up to white people to stand up against white people, sort of thing."* Alex said,

Even if they're not the people being challenged, because we're [whites] in a place of power and privilege, we should lend our hand to the minorities so we can shift it to make things more balanced across all of the different like spectrum of the US population. I mean since we already have privilege, use that privilege for good, you know? We have that power in front of us, use it responsibly.

Brad articulated too the responsibility of whites, who, he said, "have to share."

There is a finite amount of resources here and there's only so much that can go around... We've gotta understand that we're all in this together and none of us are getting out of this alive... We should be here to help people and make sure that everybody has the same rights as everyone else... I think it's definitely something that everyone should stand up to, and against, and speak out about it.

Ted, 25, said that everyone is responsible, but pointed out whites' distinct capacity from their social location.

You are in the best position to try to essentially change things from the inside... To ignore it is to just increase how long it lasts. I mean, if you believe in having a society that is just, you have an obligation to do this... Assuming you're not a selfish prick, then you should probably be, do something... *calling it out when you see it in front of you. Or, if it's writing to your representative...* Don't just stand there.

Ted stressed the need for society to address implicit bias, and said he tries to be more aware of his own.

It's a conversation that needs to be had. Especially with the police shootings and why are

people...quicker on the draw if the person is black as opposed to white? Why is that...*We have to take into account our own biases, and that means being aware of them. If we can't do that, then it's not good.*

Chad, 22, said he believes the voices of people of color, who better understand racial inequality, should be at the forefront of the fight against racism, but white people should not be on the sidelines.

Everyone, it cannot just be those groups affected. I think it also needs to come from the group that's doing the oppressing, or I don't think the group that's doing the oppressing should be at the forefront of that fight...but is it my responsibility to address racism when I see it and to stick up for people that might not be able to stick up for themselves, or that have overwhelmingly a difficult time? Yes, I should definitely stand up and say something.

Jamie, when asked what kinds of people should be the leaders in challenging racial inequality, responded,

White people...I'm not saying there's no role for people of color. There certainly, certainly is. There are wonderful voices out there, but if white people don't challenge white people, it's always going to look like the self-interest of blacks...I think it's up to white people to convince other white people that we can share this world in a more equitable way, and that it will benefit all of us to do that. White people I would say have to take the lead...I think the people who benefit the most are the people who have to challenge it the loudest.

In sum, a large number of the interviewees said that white people have a distinct and essential responsibility to engage in efforts to dismantle racial inequality.

Yet at the same time, many of these individuals also manifested white fragility, defined as an inability or difficulty to engage in these prescribed actions because of the tension or challenges involved. When discussing her own initiative to have conversations about race, Jamie said,

I actually have decided right now that I can't do that. I understand the need to do it, and I support it, and I want people to do it, and I know I'm not a good person to do it right now. I have too much anger to do it right now.... I feel partly that it has to do with my Jewish background, that I feel too vulnerable myself, and that relates to the whole thing around race. I don't know. I'm not feeling safe enough to be engaged in that

conversation right now. Too angry. Too vulnerable.

Jamie explained the personal challenges she perceives in participating in conversations related to race.

I don't wanna say the wrong thing, and I know that I'm a generally sensitive person, but boy is it fraught. I'm so aware how fraught it is...Even with as much thought and desire to do the right thing, I'm aware how difficult it is, and I don't know. We have to just be open to making mistakes, and hoping that we can...What is that thing that we can say to each other? I don't know. I'm workin' on it.

Jacob, 34, expressed similar sentiments regarding these conversations.

I don't want to put myself in a position to offend someone without knowing, for instance. There's a lot of kind of uneasiness of how to approach certain situations. It's because of that tension.

Alina spoke about perceived stakes when talking about race, especially with those with diverging views, like her father.

There's some people who I just don't want to—I can't talk to them about things because it becomes this very tense thing, because there's all these other issues interconnected... it's gonna lead down to this, and this, and this, and these huge divides we have between each other. With certain people, I can talk, [but] I definitely think there's a tension and people feel like they maybe can't talk about race in some situations.

Burt said that he is intentional about talking with his sons about race and racial inequality, but he largely does not bring it up outside of his family circle. “Does it come up a lot when we're out to dinner with friends? No.” He added, “*It's uncomfortable to talk about because you don't wanna say something that's gonna come across as being offensive or racist. You're scared to death of using the wrong word or saying something that appears insensitive. Yeah, I think it's something that people are more reluctant to talk about other than with their family or close friends...I don't think we talk enough about race.*”

Gal, who earlier asserted that whites who are not actively contesting racism are sustaining white supremacy, noted her own inaction.

A lot of the stuff I read on white privilege, it's like confronting the people in your life about racism and separating those relationships. That's saying you're not going to support racism. *I haven't found the courage to do that.* I know my grandparents voted for Trump, and I'm sure my aunt did too.

Gal grapples with her silence.

That's where I've been having a huge struggle is saying, am I willing to challenge my white privilege? I don't really feel like I've lived up to that... what am I willing to sacrifice...I've gone to a couple marches, but that isn't anything. Am I willing to put myself on the front line with the possibility of getting pepper sprayed or beat by the police, which probably wouldn't even happen? I haven't been so then I'm like, I'm probably the worst kind of liberal where I acknowledge my white privilege, but then I don't really do anything about it to dismantle it.

Donald said that he has not ventured beyond his white liberal friends to have conversations about race.

I engage in them with my other liberal white friends, especially considering that pretty much most of my friends are all liberal white — *I would feel uncomfortable discussing it with black people, because I think I would probably make assumptions about the way they live, or try and, not mansplain, but whitesplain their life, and so I would be a lot more reserved about opening up to someone who's actually lived this. I'd probably just sit back, and listen to what they have to say.*

Jarrold, who earlier positioned discomfort as a necessary component of conversations about race, said that he finds it difficult to overcome his own.

One of my things that I feel guilt about is that I am not strong enough to confront some of the people that I work with about things they say that are not enlightened whether it's about transgender, whether it's about indigenous Americans. I work with older, white people...It's tough for me to confront them because if I confront them, then work will become uncomfortable for me but it is uncomfortable for, probably, people to hear them say that. I have to overcome my uncomfortability and my fear.

Molly, 64, noted missed chances to talk to friends of color about issues of race. She said,

I think I've probably had opportunities that I've passed by. I had a black friend, and we never really talked very much about race...I think there were times when I could have asked her something about things and I didn't...Part of it was just the nature of that particular relationship, that that seemed like an intimate thing, and I wasn't really ready to go to that level with the friendship. *Another part of it is it's just a sensitive thing to talk about.*

And some whites who strongly advocated for addressing racial inequality, such as Christina and Jackson, expressed a need for a break from the work, a distancing from its weight and tension. Jackson, who stressed the need to be not an ally but an accomplice, said, *“I think sometimes maybe it’s — sometimes you just can’t do it anymore. You need to f***ing disconnect and watch a comedy or something like that. But I’m pretty open to having that conversation.”* Christina, who talked about torching Christmas in order to stop outbursts of racial intolerance, said that after her move from West Texas to Seattle four years ago,

I’ve almost shut myself from things. I worked on a campaign here. The only thing I would do for them was hang door things. Hang things on the door and put up posters ‘cause I told them I don’t wanna do any interaction. I am so fried over it. So fried over the eight years we went through with President Obama. It was so exhausting. It was just so exhausting. It did feel like every day was a battle.

Overall, during the 18 interviews for this study, a predominance of white liberals expressed racial responsibility, a personal obligation to engage in explicit, specific efforts to overcome racial inequality despite potential challenges. Some saw the contesting of racial inequality to fall on the shoulders of all citizens, but most saw this work as especially designated for white people due to their privileges in society. Significantly, however, many of these individuals also communicated white fragility, a perceived inability or lack of desire to engage in conversations about race, or other work to overcome racial inequality, because of the tension involved.

I will discuss all these findings in the next, final chapter.

Chapter Five

Discussion

The objective of this study was to identify if people who self-identify as white liberals nonetheless communicate in ways which, at minimum, buttress racialized patterns — or if, in converse, they offer discourses which challenge political whiteness. Through this research, I tried to identify whether self-identified liberal whites are taking steps toward communicating in ways that facilitate the respect, recognition, and advancement of disadvantaged groups. This research endeavored to determine if in this challenging U.S. cultural moment liberal whites' discourses, following historic trends of white backlashes against the advancement of people of color, continue to perpetuate societally embedded patterns of inequality. Specifically, in this study, I examined the extent to which a collection of white liberals employed three pairs of discourse: color-blindness and color-consciousness, racial certainty and racial deference, and white fragility and white responsibility. Popular notions about this population suggest that these individuals would espouse more color-consciousness, racial deference, and white responsibility and less color-blindness, racial certainty, and white fragility. If even supposedly progressive whites are continuing to utilize harmful patterns of discourse — color-blindness, racial certainty, and white fragility — that, at minimum, do not advance the wellbeing and standing of people of color in this country, this would be important to know and highlight. In this chapter, I first summarize the data, discuss limitations, and offer some suggestions for future research.

Key Findings

The first set of communication practices I analyzed in the interviews were color-

blindness and color-consciousness. Color-blindness was defined as the perspective that people should stop communicating about race in order for society to make progress on dismantling racism. Conversely, color-consciousness advocated for communicating about race in order to make racial progress. Most whites communicated color-consciousness. Recognizing that racial biases are pervasive and historic injustices remain unaddressed, the white participants in this study asserted the need to talk about race. While some asserted that it was important to recognize and appreciate cultural and racial difference, and to seek noticing these differences and similarities, most whites interviewed advocated for an ideal future in which race would not need to be a societal conversation or focus. Essentially, many communicated a desire to cease noticing and communicating about racial difference if racial prejudice was nonexistent. In other words, color-blindness was the ideal if it was not contextualized within an environment of oppressive political whiteness; whites in this study recognized society's inability to have one without the other, and thus color-blindness was marked as desirable but unachievable. Christina asserted that she wished racial markers would become unnecessary. Burt, similarly, espoused that, ideally we wouldn't have to focus on race. Donald cited the argument made by a portion of the public that ignoring race and racism would make both go away, but, as not everyone is capable of this, he said, we must communicate about race. Only two participants, Aaron and Brad, claimed that by talking about race and racial difference, we are hurting our chances of overcoming racial inequality. Markedly, both those who advocated for communicating about race and those who did not seemed to share a similar desired outcome. This body of whites, essentially, seemed to hope that instead of insidious whiteness gaining visibility, different races should, instead, become as normative as whiteness. Future research could explore this desire by whites for color-blindness without prejudice, especially if analyzed in comparison to the desired racial outcomes

by people of color. Whites may advocate for color-blindness because it seems imperative for racial equality. But as Allen (2016) asserts, a connected society does not require individuals to shed their cultural differences; rather, their neighbors and one's environment must be reconstituted to support connections across these differences (Anderson, 2010). Conversations across recognized and valued difference — among whites but also between ethnicities, genders, sexualities, abilities, ages — are central to building these links, a challenge in our largely segregated society.

Next, I examined the communication practices of racial deference and racial certainty. A majority of the liberal whites in this study expressed racial deference, an articulation of a recognized personal lack of ability to fully understand the experiences of people of color and, consequently, the need to listen and learn from this populace for racial progress to occur. Few communicated racial certainty, defined in this study as claiming to know distinct routes to be taken in order to challenge racial inequality. Ted, specifically, made a statement that aligned closely with paternalism when he said, “if you're the one being oppressed, and you're lying on your back for it, you need to get up and fight back, and not have a victim mentality. You need to fight for it.” Ted's remark, bespoke an assumption that whites' position of societal dominance imbues them with a specialized knowledge regarding how all people, including people of color, must act in order to overcome racial inequality (Haney-Lopez, 2006). Ted, in this communication, asserted a condescending leadership toward black America fed by the pseudo-authority of whiteness (Trepagnier, 2010). Stan, Ted and Donald were the only three to clearly communicate racial certainty. The trio advocated for the societal focus to shift from racial inequality to socioeconomic disparity. Although the claim of knowledge in the racial sphere, and not the content of the shift, is of primary importance, Coates (2017) writes about this

transference of focus in his article “Our First White President.” Coates asserts that whites’ positioning of the crux of the current societal ills as predominantly economic disparity instead of racial resentment suggests a motive of escapism. Refocusing on a different issue sidesteps confronting a clear problem. As Coates writes, “To accept that whiteness brought us Trump is to accept whiteness as an existential danger to the country and the world.” Future research could further unpack this transference of energy by whites from race to socioeconomic disparity. That said, most white liberals in this study communicated that racial inequality should be a primary societal focus, and people of color should be listened to and learned from. When asked who should lead the fight against racial inequality, Jackson quoted Audre Lorde, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Liberal whites in this study shared utilizing social media platforms to follow the posts of people of color, and reading books such as “White Rage” by Carol Anderson to better understand the experiences of people of color, and the sociopolitical realities and potential ways forward amidst the Trump turmoil. The deference communicated by whites and their undertaken efforts to listen and learn are important potential approaches made by this group toward racial progress. Whites’ assumptions of expert knowledge due to their current societal standing must cease or be conceptualized anew if extensive space is to be made for the empowerment and advancement of people of color.

It is important to note, though, that a potential concern of deference among whites is that it may also manifest as passivity, an expectation that people of color will lead and direct efforts to combat racial inequality while whites standby on the sidelines. However, most liberal whites in this study communicated responsibility, a personal obligation to engage in explicit, specific efforts to overcome racial inequality despite challenges involved. When asked who in society has a responsibility to challenge racial inequality, most stated “everyone” or, specifically, “white

people.” For example, Donald said that white people have the responsibility to change society, “because they’ve got the power to. It’s their responsibility to change their inner bias, because that’s the root of the problem, right there. It’s their responsibility to pressure their peers to get rid of their racial bias.” Using their power and privilege, whites must educate whites (“it’s an inside job”) and challenge and uproot unequal sociopolitical systems. Yet, few shared that they had actualized these responsibilities. As Gal said, “Am I willing to put myself on the front line with the possibility of getting pepper sprayed or beat by the police...I haven’t been, so then I’m like, I’m probably the worst kind of liberal where I acknowledge my white privilege, but then I don’t really do anything about it to dismantle it.” Many identified their own shortcomings in acting on their perceived responsibilities. Jamie said that it was white people’s responsibility to educate other white people on how they must share the world in a more equitable way. But, then, when sharing her own experiences with conversations about race, she said that she understands the necessity to have these dialogues, but feels too angry to engage in them right now. Jarrod, too, asserted that white men, especially, have a responsibility to challenge racial inequality, but shared feelings of guilt for being unable to confront individuals espousing prejudicial beliefs at work. Overall, it is promising that some of the liberal white participants in this study recognized their own shortfalls in engaging in conversations and other efforts to challenge racial inequality. And few, but some, shared acts of responsibility, such as Chad’s effort to elect a diversity of individuals to positions of leadership in order to have a spectrum of voices at the table. In sum, this study suggests that these liberal white participants recognize necessary steps to challenge racial inequality — talking about race, listening and learning from people of color, owning a deep sense of responsibility to act and engage to dismantle white supremacy. Yet, these individuals are stagnated by the tension, the race-based anxieties often infused in conversations

or actions around race. Some of the symptoms of white fragility identified by DiAngelo (2011) are fear, anger, guilt, withdrawal, desire for absolution, minimization of racism, silence, and paralyzing carefulness about what or how to communicate — and white liberals in this study communicated several of these indicators. If whites cannot overcome their anxiety and passivity regarding race, the progress in society will move slower, the advancement of people of color will take longer, and political whiteness will remain intact to the detriment of everyone.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on the communication of liberal whites. A limitation of this study is the inability for this research to access the internal feelings and perceptions of the 18 white individuals I spoke with. While at the very least, an individual's communications are modestly connected to these inherent feelings, the excerpts of this research cannot be treated as the "true" beliefs or values of the speaker. As this study shows, race and racial inequality are challenging topics of conversation for whites, and further, studies of implicit bias have indicated that whites are unaware of their own true feelings — therefore it is hard to know what individuals truly think (Pérez, 2013). Nonetheless, the method used for this study, semi-structured interviews, allowed conversations to be modestly molded to each study participant, creating an open space for sharing, occasional tangents, and free expression. The interviews took place over online video chat platforms — with both myself, the interviewer, and the interviewee in closed, empty rooms for the duration of the interview. This privacy, along with the relaxed structure of the interview, allowed for free-flowing conversation that, I believe, effectively captured the thoughts and communication approaches of the study participants.

A second limitation of this study is the potential of my own personal identity to influence

the findings. I am a young white woman identifying as liberal, and my identities may have encouraged study participants to employ discourses that suggest a solidarity of whiteness or liberalism. I recruited, specifically, white liberals for this study. This solicitation may have led participants to align their communications closer to what they believed I expected. However, my identities also hint at automatic implicitly shared understanding and trust. Research shows that trusting behavior is significantly higher within race categories than across race categories (Simpson & Irwin, 2007). My racial identity, thus, may have also affected participants positively, leading to greater disclosure due to both the researcher and interviewee constituting the same in-group. And in fact, the objective while undertaking this research was to utilize my race to delve as close to the inner-workings of whiteness — as a political act, project, and power — as possible. In addition to our shared whiteness, our similar political leanings implied additional connection. In the beginning of each conversation with a new study participant, I briefly introduced myself, making my liberal alignment transparent. Seattle is known to be a liberal bubble, and sharing this environment as the same race and assumed similar liberal views likely promoted feelings of mutual understanding and, thus, more trust and disclosure.

Looking ahead, there are many possibilities for future research. For example, research has been done that utilizes saliva samples to measure an individual's cortisol levels to determine how much stress they are experiencing during a study (Harris, Cook et al., 1988). Obtaining a saliva sample from white liberal participants before and after asking them questions about race may reveal more about the fragility many whites seem to experience when issues of race and racial inequality are discussed. Better recognizing the physical and emotional reactions these social issues elicit in whites may encourage whites to acknowledge and finally address these reactions so that they may cease avoiding and eluding action and conversation and, instead,

confront the racial inequality that surrounds them and that they are implicated in. Scientific evidence of fear and anxiety may be necessary in order for whites to concede their inner biases and tendency of avoidance. Liberal whites can fall under the false presumption that there is a firm line between political liberals and conservatives, with the latter experiencing a greater proclivity towards explicit bias that makes it less essential for progressive, liberal whites to reckon with their own internal biases. This research indicates that liberal whites must grapple with what is impeding them from actualizing the steps they identify as critical for racial progress. A few of the participants in this study shared that they had participated in implicit bias or white privilege workshops. If white liberals' reactions to issues of race became more tangible and evident — such as via a physical indication of higher anxiety when race is discussed — whites may make addressing these internal prejudices more of a priority. Scientific proof of feelings of tension and stress regarding racial difference may incite white liberals to reconsider the personal work they must undertake in order to better engage in efforts for racial equality.

Secondly, research may further investigate the effect of “racially coded” communication. Researchers may show white study participants clips from FOX news, MSNBC, CNN in which political or public leaders engage in subtly racialized communications before capturing their reactions and analysis of these segments. It is important to recognize how whites of all political leanings perceive what is broadcast by the media, and if they recognize implicit and explicit coded-appeals. Many white liberals may consider themselves as fully cognizant of or impervious to influence by coded appeals, but a remark by one study participant stood out. When discussing the election of Donald Trump, Jarrod said that he did not understand the “dog whistle” messages employed by the President until women and people of color on social media explained why his language was offensive and acted as a coded rallying cry. It is important to determine if liberal

whites can recognize this method of political communication, and further, to understand what impact these messages have on this white population. If liberal whites identify that they struggle to detect coded-communication on any part of the spectrum of racially laden political discourse — ranging from ostensibly race-neutral messages to Trump’s “shrill megaphone” — whites may seek to both become more conscious of these messages, and further, to adopt a stronger position in stopping the sources from generating harmful coded statements (Blades, 2016). The internalized messages of coded communications can pervade into everyday interactions, translating into discrimination and distancing in interracial relations and relationships (Feagin, 2014). If, indeed, liberal whites are more susceptible to or less cognizant of these messages than they believe, this populace must take steps to gain a greater awareness of the potential impact of their message intake and media consumption.

In seeking to understand how racial groups in this country are differentially perceived and treated, scholarship has often focused on people of color, instead of examining and analyzing the words and actions of the people who hold most of societal power: white people. How white people communicate about race has direct implications for which racial groups become societally advantaged or disadvantaged; most notably, the degree to which white citizens recognize themselves as central in the social, political and economic structures perpetuating unequal racial hierarchies influences their willingness to undertake responsibility to modify these systems and level the societal plane for groups that have received the greatest discrimination: black Americans, Latinxs, Native Americans, and others. As this research shows, most of the white liberals I spoke with communicated that they perceive themselves as implicated in the systems scaffolding and maintaining of racial inequality. Largely, this collective of liberal whites communicated the need for society to talk about race, to listen and learn from people of color, to

step aside and make space for these groups in positions of power in order to actualize a true political pluralism. But intention and communication of these objectives are not enough, there must be action. And many in this group of liberal whites shared an inactivity and inability to engage in uncomfortable conversations about race, or other efforts they identified as essential for racial progress. Liberal white citizens, thus, must continue to critically examine their privileges, their attitudes, their communication patterns, and as this research avers, most critically, their actual racialized engagement in order for genuine, equitable social change to occur. Only then will traditionally disadvantaged racial groups receive closer to their full measure of respect, dignity, opportunity, and, I hope, advancement and empowerment. In this critical sociopolitical climate, liberal whites must truly reckon with and dismantle their racial underpinnings for the wellbeing of all citizens.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

PART I. SOCIETY AND TRUMP

I'm doing some research on where we are as a society. Let's talk about President Trump.

Q. What do you think are the main factors that led to Trump being elected?

Q. Do you think that race played a role in Trump's election?

Q. How do you feel about the increasing diversification of the country?

Q. It's predicted that whites will be the minority by 2045, what do you think about that?

PART II. COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

Next, I'm going to ask you some more general questions about race.

Color-blindness and color-consciousness

Q. As a society, do you think we are focusing too much on racial difference?

Q. Do you think noticing and paying attention to racial difference helps or hinders us as a society?

Q. How about you personally? How do you approach racial differences in your daily experiences?

Q. How often do you think about racial difference? When?

Q. When did you first start thinking about racial difference and racial disparities?

Reverse racism and racial realism

Q. Right now, what racial groups do you think are the most disadvantaged and which racial groups do you think have the most advantages in this country?

Q. Do you think that whites experience racism — or racial prejudice and discrimination?

a. If so, how and when? (can you give me some examples?)

Q. How about you personally? Do you experience racial prejudice and discrimination?

White deterrence and and white humility

Q. Many are trying to challenge the racial inequality in this country. What kinds of people should be the leaders in this work, do you think?

Q. Do you think whites understand the racial inequality in this country as well as other racial groups?

Q. How about you personally? How would you describe your own understanding of racial experiences in America?

White fragility and racial resiliency

Q. There's this idea that some white people have trouble talking about race because of the tension that is usually a part of these conversations — what do you think about that?

Q. How about you personally? Are there specific emotions you often feel when you are involved in discussions about race relations in America today?

Q. Have you ever resisted having a conversation about race? Can you tell me about that experience?

PART III. POLITICAL WHITENESS, POLITICAL PLURALISM AND RESPONSIBILITY

I'd like to introduce a new term that people who research race in America sometimes use, the idea of "political whiteness." This idea is that the state and our society protect the interests of white people to the detriment of others, affording whites with privileges and advantages.

Q. What do you think of this idea?

Q. Do you think this concept of whiteness impacts your life?

Q. There's also this idea of "political pluralism," the idea of a very diverse government and political structure — what do you think about that?

Q. What do you think political pluralism in this country would look like?

Q. Do you think political pluralism would be harmful or beneficial for our country? Why?

Q. Finally, in our society, who do you think has a responsibility to challenge racial inequality and prejudice?