

# Color-Blind Contradictions and Black/White Binaries: White Academics Upholding Whiteness

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*This qualitative study maps ‘locally situated’ (Twine and Gallagher 2008), contours of whiteness as cultural practice and institutional discourse by examining how white college faculty, staff, and administrators respond to multiracial educational environments and multicultural ideals. Drawing on in depth interviews with thirty white administrators, faculty, and staff, this study finds that these white educators adhered to an intermittent form of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2009) that enabled them to hold fast to the fiction that race has no meaning in their lives, yet remains the single-most defining dimension of the lives of people of color. This analysis identifies five contextually-embedded manifestations of everyday racism and microconstructions of white supremacy: 1) Whites subscribe to a view of racism as an individualized phenomenon, 2) Whites take a color-blind position regarding race in their daily lives, 3) Whites claim, ‘people of color see race, but I do not,’ 4) Whites only see race as relevant when called to articulate diversity discourse, 5) Whites see race primarily as a black/white binary. Article concludes with implications of findings for critical multiculturalism.*

**Keywords: white supremacy, white faculty, white administrators, higher education**

This study maps the contours of whiteness as cultural practice and institutional discourse by examining how white college faculty, staff, and administrators respond to multiracial educational environments and multicultural ideals. As the gatekeepers of these once historically white spaces, white faculty, staff, and administrators at colleges and universities possess institutional power to perpetuate and/or to dismantle racialized inequalities. Drawing on interviews with thirty white administrators, faculty, and staff working in a multi-racial, minority-majority university prioritizing “diversity” as a key asset, this study examines how white educators make sense of their own racial identities and of the place of whiteness in a multi-racial educational institution.

This study maps the contours of whiteness “locally situated” in an institution of higher learning (Twine and Gallagher 2008) at a specific

historical juncture. Over the past decade, the United States finds itself experiencing a variety of cultural, social, and political phenomena through which race has entered the public discourse in ways not seen since the Civil Rights era. Once again, a high-profile athlete has taken a public position against racism, refusing to stand for the National Anthem as a way to bring attention to the troubling number of unarmed African-Americans who have been killed under questionable circumstances. This protest has resulted in threats against his life, but has also exposed the thinly-veiled racism that is heaved upon people of color who dare question the racial status quo in the United States: “There’s a lot of racism disguised as patriotism in this country” (Maiocco 2016).

Although the argument is repeatedly made that the U.S. is in a post-racial era due to the election of the first African-American president, within weeks of his election the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) reported an increase in

incidents of racially motivated abuse and intimidation (Bigg 2008). The SPLC, formed in response to increased Ku Klux Klan activity at the end of the Civil Rights era, conducts an annual census of hate groups in the United States. In their 2015 census, the SPLC reported a rise in chapters of the Klan, Black separatist hate groups, and “conspiracy-minded antigovernment ‘Patriot’ groups” (Potok 2016). Within the confines of this historical moment, our qualitative study critically examines how white university administrators, faculty, and staff understand themselves as racialized beings and explores the discursive mechanisms they use to sustain white supremacy.

### Theoretical Formulations

#### *Whiteness*

DiAngelo (2016) defines white supremacy as “[t]he term used to capture the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined as white, and the practices based on this assumption” (p. 146). She goes on to assert that this is not a concept dependent upon individual will or intentionality. White supremacy and whiteness reflect a system of domination and privilege that, *in effect*, elevates the position of whites as a group (DiAngelo 2016). White supremacy, in other words, exists as institutional structure-in-process, the effects of which are experienced by both victims and benefactors of that supremacy.

Critical whiteness scholars assert that in order to more fully understand interactional and institutionalized racism, careful attention must be directed not only toward those who are victimized by systemic processes, but also toward those in the dominant group who benefit from the resulting inequities (Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Feagin and O’Brien 2003; Lipsitz 2006). Whiteness refers to hegemonic racial power that privileges white groups while subordinating racialized ‘others.’ As an identity and performance, it is a position of racial

privilege, a standpoint perspective, and a set of cultural practices that often remain unmarked (Frankenberg 1993; Smith 2013). As an ideological and institutional structure, it is a complex web of discourses and processes that sustain racial domination (DiAngelo and Allen 2006).

This project on whiteness answers the call for a “third wave” of whiteness studies, “characterized by an interest in the cultural practices and discursive strategies employed by whites as they struggle to recuperate, reconstitute and restore white identities and the supremacy of whiteness in post-apartheid, post-industrial, post-imperial, post-Civil Rights” (Twine and Gallagher 2008:13). Our initial interest in studying white educators working in multi-racial institutions of higher learning was to map how whiteness is undermined and/or sustained in this particular “geography of privilege” (Twine and Gardener 2013). Previous work on white students in multi-racial educational environments suggested that without institutional and pedagogical engagement in critical multiculturalism by both educators and students, white students will continue to employ discursive strategies that protect white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva and Foreman 2000; Cabrera 2014; Chesler, Peet and Sevig 2003; Hikido and Murray 2016). Examining how white administrators, faculty, and staff come to understand and articulate their own racial locations and the place of whiteness in institutional structures, leads to the continued development of a critical multiculturalism that dismantles rather than perpetuates white supremacy (DiAngelo 2016; Wetherell and Potter 1992).

#### *Critical Multiculturalism in Higher Education*

The intent of multicultural education in a post-civil rights context was to combat racism in educational practices and institutions, yet after almost 50 years of research and practice in liberal multiculturalism, hierarchical structures and fundamental inequities persist (May and Sleeter

2010). Although many institutions have realized structural diversity through representation, those same organizations have not achieved the improvements in campus climate that result from anti-racist critical approaches to diversity. Critical cultural competency requires that individuals and the institutions they populate understand the power dynamics that promulgate and preserve the racist hegemony and aspire to achieve transformational change which “affects the institutional culture, is deep and pervasive, is intentional, and occurs over time” (Kezar and Eckel 2002: 296). Without transformational change, institutions will remain mired in cycles that reproduce racism and negligence (Harper and Hurtado 2007). Our qualitative study fills an “epistemological gap” (Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012:93) in multicultural education by exploring how “*microconstructions*”<sup>1</sup> of white supremacy are built into the everyday discourse of white academics.

## Background on Data

### *Sample and Methods*

This research is exploratory. In line with the call for a deeper understanding of the resiliency, multiplicity, and contextually embedded manifestations of white racism (Twine and Gallagher 2008), this work examines how white educators make sense of their own racial identities and of the place of whiteness in a multi-racial educational institution. Our inductive, exploratory interview study of white-identified faculty, staff, and administrators at a multi-racial minority-majority--yet predominantly white-run--university, is anti-racist praxis in action. Coming to understand how white-identified university officials understand themselves as racialized beings, utilize racist and racialized discourse in their everyday talk, and reinforce or dismantle racialized hierarchies in their decision-

making practices is crucial in understanding how white privilege operates in this setting. This “knowing” however, is not our endgame. The naming, mapping, and knowing of white racism and white privilege is, instead, our intellectual leverage to be used as a tool to dismantle that which is and replace it with “that which we cannot now know” (Smith 2013:275).

During the 2015/2016 academic year, we conducted thirty in-depth interviews with white-identified faculty, staff, and administrators at a large public university. We used a purposive sampling method to gather interviewees. We wanted to interview broadly across all departments, divisions, and colleges. In the end we were able to obtain interviews with ten administrators, 11 faculty, five administrator/faculty, and four staff. Our interviewees came from three academic divisions and five colleges.

We used a semi-structured interview format for data collection. Our interview schedule consisted of a series of open-ended questions starting with childhood reflections, friendship networks, and then moved to questions about racial identity in the workplace (see Appendix). As interviewers, we chose a formal interview style, asking questions and limiting our responses to head nods or tonal acknowledgements of the interviewee (i.e. “umhum”).

Interviews were transcribed and coded independently by the two principle investigators. The resulting codes were compared, analyzed, and then included, excluded, or modified based on these sessions. We utilized a combination of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and discourse analysis (DiAngelo and Allen 2006; Van Dijk 1993) to move from initial codes, to focused coding, to our resulting analysis.

<sup>1</sup> Here we borrow from critical race scholarship on the “microaggressions” of whites in everyday interaction (c.f.

Feagan and O’Brien 2003) to emphasize the simultaneous up-lift whites, whiteness, and white supremacy receive in these racist moments.

*Institutional Setting*

At the time of this study, the participants were employed at Pinewood University, a pseudonym for a large, public university in an urban environment in the California Bay Area.<sup>2</sup> In fall 2015, total student enrollment was 3 percent African American, 32 percent Asian American and Pacific Islander, 23 percent Hispanic, and 20 percent white. The University prides itself on both its compositional diversity and its institutional support for inclusive excellence. In addition to affirming a commitment to diversity in its mission statement, Pinewood has over 200 diversity-related courses, 18 academic departments with diversity-focused curriculum, and 33 percent of General Education course offerings are diversity-related. Pinewood also has a Committee on Diversity charged with, “assessing the current campus climate; aligning, integrating and improving current institutional policies and educational practices.” Thus,

*Cultural and Historical Setting*

Throughout the data collection phase of this project, race and racism figured prominently in the national conscience through social, print, and broadcast media. In 2015, police officers in the United States shot and killed 986 people, more than double the average annual number in over a decade (Somashkhar and Rich 2016). The killings of African-American men in Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland, and New York, as well as killings justified by “stand your ground laws” in Sanford and Jacksonville, amplified the national dialogue concerning the relationship between communities of color and the police, and brought mainstream attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. On college campuses across the country there have been numerous reports of racial epithets and hate symbols being displayed on student’s rooms or common areas in their residence halls, exhibitions of confederate flags on campus, physical and verbal assaults against

**Table 1.** Self-reported race of Pinewood Students, Faculty, and Administration

Racial/ethnic identity	Percent Students	Percent Faculty	Percent Administration
Asian or Pacific Islander	32	19	15
Black or African American	3	2	5
Hispanic or Latino	23	7	10
White	20	59	59

Pinewood is a diversity-centric multiracial campus, at least in its stated goals and in reference to its students. The compositional “diversity” of Pinewood’s faculty, staff, and administrators, however, looks very different from the student demographics. These statistics, while reflecting a greater degree of faculty and administrative diversity than in the past, still constitute a predominantly white-run university.

both students and staff, and Greek organizations hosting racially offensive events. While the National Center for Education reports that crimes on college campuses have been on the decline since 2012 (Roberts et al. 2015), it is vital to remember that such statistics only reflect reported crimes. Vandalism, intimidation, and assault, when reported, were most commonly associated with racial bias (Musu-Gillette 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The names of both individuals and institutions appearing in this text have been changed to preserve the confidentiality of participants.

As these racially charged historical and structural events were being broadcast, videotaped, virally posted, tweeted, re-tweeted, and voraciously discussed in the public discourse, we interviewed white educators about the potential impact of their racial identities on their work in higher education.

### Findings: Colorblind Contradictions

Overwhelmingly, the white administrators, faculty, and staff we studied adhered to an intermittent form of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2009) that enabled them to hold fast to the fiction that race has no meaning in their lives, yet remains the single-most laudable dimension of the lives of people of color. This contradictory and racist understanding of racial meaning arose in multiple ways in the experiences of the white people we studied. The analysis which follows examines five of these contextually-embedded manifestations of everyday racism and microconstructions of white supremacy: 1) whites subscribe to a view of racism as an individualized phenomenon, 2) whites take a color-blind position regarding race in their daily lives, 3) whites claim, ‘people of color see race, but I do not,’ 4) whites employ a diversity discourse of “helping and caring,” 5) whites see race primarily as a black/white binary.

The silent (Trepagnier 2006) and adverse (DiAngelo 2016) forms of everyday racism documented in this analysis are not to be construed as individual acts committed by individual bad actors who simply need to be replaced. These interactions instead are performed by institutionally embedded social actors who, through their participation in the racist continuum (Trepagnier 2006), recreate institutionalized racism as structure-in-process. Thus, in line with the call for a “third wave” of scholarship on whiteness, this analysis elucidates the “properties of whiteness” that constitute the routine structures of university life (Twine and Gallagher 2008:19).

### *Whites Subscribe To a View of Racism as an Individual Phenomenon*

The white administrators, staff, and faculty in our study held to a primary understanding of racism as attributable to personal prejudice. This conceptualization surfaced in multiple iterations of the racist/not racist binary (If you are racist you are bad, and if you are not racist you are good) (DiAngelo 2016). The most common discursive practice used by whites to affirm this binary was to position other white people as racist and establish themselves as not those people. Linguistically this is accomplished through the use of “I, We, or They” in discussions of other white people (I=enlightened, we=good, they=bad). For example, in discussing white people’s relations to the university’s goal of inclusive excellence, one white administrator responded:

*... to the degree that we have problems like we have and we’ve had. I would say they’re not fitting in very well because, whatever, as a group, they haven’t done enough to ensure inclusive excellence. I don’t think we’ve attained that yet, so I can’t point to where it’s falling down.*

In this instance the “we” is employed as a neutral mechanism positioning whites as people who passively acknowledge racial issues without actually taking responsibility for those problems, “*we have problems.*” The blame for not having succeeded in the goal of inclusive excellence is laid on other whites, “*...as a group, they haven’t done enough to ensure inclusive excellence.*” Meanwhile the speaker holds to his superior and knowledgeable position in being able to judge the racial progress of whites, “*I don’t think we’ve attained that yet, so I can’t point to where it’s falling down.*” Similarly, in referencing the impact her whiteness has on her classroom, a white professor discursively positions herself in the non-racist category:



*I try not to be afraid to talk about it...Um, because I have heard from students that other professors are so afraid they have no, don't have a handle on, on, on racism and how it plays out and the power, privilege and oppression stuff and, um, I mean I don't know everything, but I'm willing to talk about it where some professors are just not willing to talk about it and side step it.*

In this case, “they” do not have a handle on talking about racism, but “I” do. Their presence on the racist side upholds her not-racist position. There were additional incarnations of this same phenomenon used throughout the interviews. In all cases, the construction of racism as an individual phenomenon that a white person either embodies or does not, serves to undermine an understanding of racism as institutional. Such is the power of the binary that even race critical concepts like white privilege can be transposed into individual attributes easily discarded. For example, when a white administrator/faculty was asked about the impact of her white identity on her relationships with students of color, she responded:

*I think it could [have an impact] initially if they don't know me cause they are going to judge it on the white privilege. But then I think that once they get to know me and realize I'm much more inclusive... I'm actually really fascinated by other people's cultures and their race, and who are they. So I think initially, but once they get to know me they realize, she's cool.*

In this passage, her use of the term white privilege, though meant to signify her anti-racist stance, in reality undermines it as she positions “the white privilege” outside her own experience. Second, by conflating “the white privilege” with “not being inclusive or fascinated with other people's cultures,” she transposes it into an individual level attribute that one has the power to cast off. And finally, her

reduction of “the white privilege” to something students of color use to [incorrectly] judge her, effectively blames them for any racialized discomfort she feels.

If whites hold to the racist/not racist binary and position themselves on the not racist side, then race and racism have no relevance to their world view or actions. As DiAngelo (2016) notes, “If, as a white person, I conceptualize racism as a binary and I see myself on the ‘not racist’ side, what further action is required of me? No action is required at all, because I am not a racist. Therefore racism is not my problem; it doesn't concern me and there is nothing further I need do” (p. 194).

In addition to undermining and denying a structural analysis of white racism, adherence to the binary enables whites to move through the world as racial innocents upholding a color-blind vision of their day-to-day lived realities.

#### *Whites Take a Color-Blind Position Regarding Race in Their Daily Lives*

Color-blindness is a form of racism wherein whites, in an effort to sustain a “not racist” stance, claim to not see race in their interactions with others (Bonilla-Silva 2009). Throughout these interviews whites repeatedly claimed color-blindness in their own personal histories, in their relationships with colleagues, and in hiring decisions. The absurdity of maintaining a colorblind position became readily apparent in response to one of our initial questions asking interviewees to recount their “first memory around race.” For example, as a white administrator recounts:

*In second grade I had a black teacher, a wonderful teacher, Mrs. Jones, and I was a little bit of her pet because I was so much smarter than the other kids. So I loved her, I really loved her and she told me at the end of the year she was leaving because the school was reducing size and she had been let go because she was black. And it had never even*

*registered for me the race, because race was never spoken about in my home, ever. And that is my first memory.*

In this example, though embedded in a racist moment “...*she had been let go because she was black,*” the loving relationship this administrator describes with her black teacher was not about race because, “...*it had never even registered for me the race....*” So her formative memory about race, though readily recalled, is presented as an example of her ability to not see race. This paradoxical ability to be colorblind while recalling detailed encounters with people of color underscores much of the colorblind racism we encountered among white administrators, faculty, and staff.

Color-blind racism and its attendant contradictions were also evident in white people’s discussions of their relationships with colleagues of color. Over and over, the white people we interviewed asserted that race has no impact on their relationships with the people they work with. As one administrator explained in reference to the people she supervises, “*um, I don’t tend to ever think of it in terms of white or black or Hispanic or, you know, Asian or whatever. They are just the people that I supervise.*” Similarly, another white administrator explained:

*I try very hard to treat all people equally that I come in contact with regardless of their status in the University. I treat you like I treat the President, or a Dean, or a Vice President. You are people and I am interested in getting to know you and working with you....I try to make it a point not to engage with a focus on race as some way of differentiating how I am going to interact with somebody.*

Within this color-blind context, by, “*not engage[ing] with a focus on race,*” or not “*think[ing] in terms of white or black or Hispanic...*” these white administrators cast themselves as going about the business of

running the university by engaging with “just people.” This position is in stark contrast to the plethora of social science research in higher education arguing for the salience of race as an analytic lens (c.f. Aguirre 2000; Joseph and Hirshfield 2011; Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012). The contradictory nature of this race-blind stance was even more apparent in references to university hiring practices.

When asked if they thought their racial location as white people had an impact on them being hired, the vast majority of the white people we interviewed said “no.” The “no’s” were typically accompanied by some reference to their unique skills or qualifications: “*My skill is kind of a specific skill and it is a bit limited so I, no, I really don’t think so. No.*” (white administrator); “*No, No. I think it is the most qualified. I think I was the most qualified for this position.*” (white administrator); “*No, I don’t think so. I think the number one thing that helped me get this position was that I had done this before and that I had had a lot of [skill] background*” (white staff). These responses reflect an individualistic worldview that DiAngelo (2016) argues, “functions as neo-colorblindness and reproduces the myth of meritocracy” (p. 199). Those at the top are there as a result of superior training and skill. The fact that almost all the others “at the top” just happen to be white is mere coincidence and one that often goes unnoticed. Such was the case with a white administrator who exclaimed during the interview:

*There’s a lunch group here that gets together – we are all kind of the same level of the organization and we’re all white [surprised] I’m just realizing that, I really didn’t think of that before. And we’re not excluding anyone, it just so happened that everyone at our level – everyone in positions that would participate in that group – we are all white right now.*

The professed colorblindness of the white academics in our study is, of course, a fabrication. In their positioning as well-meaning

whites in this particular setting and in this cultural moment, colorblindness equates with the “not-racist” side of the racist binary. Upholding



colorblindness enables whites to hold fast to their position as individuals who are ‘just human’ (DiAngelo 2016:194). In other words, white people see themselves as outside of race. Their personal histories, relationships with others, and their accomplishments are devoid of racial meanings and they themselves are racial innocents. To maintain their innocence however, some explanation must be made concerning the highly charged racialized moment they find themselves in. Among the white faculty, administrators, and staff we studied, the responsibility for understanding, explaining, and responding to racism was assigned to people of color.

*Whites Claim, “People of Color See Race, but I Do Not.”*

The white educators in our study repeatedly maintained positions of both “ignorance” and “innocence” in response to all queries about the meaning and impact of their racial locations as white people. “White innocence” arose as a code for moments when white people claimed a place of non-judgment, rendering them “innocent” of the crime of racism, while “white ignorance” signified places where whites claimed spaces of not knowing about or understanding racial meaning, and therefore, abdicating responsibility for racism.

As exemplified by the white administrator above who never saw the race of her “*wonderful black teacher,*” tales of “white innocence” were told mainly through recollections of childhood and adolescent interactions with people of color. This practice of pulling distinct interactions with people of color out of biographies that are otherwise described as “*all white,*” or “*mostly white*” and using them as examples of colorblind innocence feeds the paradox of seeing and not seeing (Frankenberg 1993; Morgan 2010). In the context of a multiracial minority-majority university, where race means nothing and race is everything, whites use the tool of seeing and not seeing to place responsibility for responding to racism onto their colleagues of color. This assignment of responsibility was typically embedded in whites’ claims to racial ignorance.

Throughout our interview schedule, we asked questions about the impact of the interviewee’s racial location on their relations with colleagues, students, on work performance, career trajectories, and responsibility to respond to racist incidents on campus. In all areas, a typical response to this inquiry was a claim of ignorance in some form or another. For example, when asked, *how do you think your identity as a white person impacts your relationships with the students you come into contact with?*, the typical response followed the pattern set by this female administrator, “*Ummmm probably. But I don’t*



*know. I don't really know. Yeah I wouldn't know, unless I asked,"* or this one by a faculty member, *"I don't know, I never really thought about it. You'd have to ask them."* Even in those cases where the interviewee evidenced some level of racial awareness, the fallback position was one of ignorance and innocence. As one faculty administrator noted in response to a similar question about her relationships with her colleagues of color:

*I don't know. That is a good question. I don't know. One thing that is always there is that as a white person in America you have privilege. It's just a fact. So the fact that I don't know if it has helped me get places, it probably has. You know. Because it is just the way we operate in America. So how do I think it affects my... you know I don't really know. I'm hoping it doesn't have much of an effect. But it might. Um, I don't know. I treat all my colleagues and students as equals as best I can and um I hope that they see that.*

Here the white faculty administrator notes that whites have privilege, and that this privilege *might* have operated in her favor, but has no analysis of how it might play out in her current work situation. In the end she simply *"hopes* [her whiteness] *doesn't have much of an effect,"* and reiterates her claims to racial innocence. The fact that she names white privilege (thereby invoking popular anti-racist discourse) makes this seeing/not seeing whiteness moment even more difficult to unpack. Similarly, a male administrator notes in response to this same question:

*I ... I actually have found it comforting for me to make clear if I'm in a conversation that, "Hey, I'm ..." In fact, this might be where I actually grew to be comfortable saying, "I'm a white guy and I know that" because I probably wanted to make sure that if I were speaking to somebody, I want them to know that I know that I may have blind spots by*

*virtue of my life experience, or, um, or, that I cannot imaginably understand what a person ...whether it's gender, race, whatever difference....*

Very few white people mark their own race in conversation with others. In academic discourse, marking whiteness signifies anti-racism. By naming his growing comfort with the practice of identifying himself as, *"a white guy,"* this administrator bolsters his anti-racist position. What is troubling here is how he uses labeling to essentialize the inherent racial "blindness" of white people. *"I want them to know that I know that I may have blind spots by virtue of my life experience [decode as 'my race'], or, um, or, that I cannot imaginably understand...."* The underlying message is that white people live their lives outside of race and, therefore, cannot possibly understand how people of color experience racialization – even liberal anti-racist white people. As above, *"I don't know, you have to ask them."*

Within the context of a multi-racial minority-majority university, the "ignorance" and "innocence" of white administrators, faculty, and staff regarding racial matters stands in sharp contrast to the knowingness assigned to people of color. One key mechanism sustaining institutionalized white privilege, power, and supremacy in this educational context is to map knowledge, responsibility, and actions concerning racism onto people of color. Remaining ignorant of the myriad ways one's location as a white person shapes every interaction and decision made in academe, frees up white people to go about the business of teaching, researching, and running the university. As one white administrator explained:

*I spend a lot less time talking about race and diversity issues with my white colleagues. I spend most of the time doing that with my colleagues of color. With my white colleagues, it is more, like.... How are we going to focus on improving student success around here?*

*Whereas with some of my peers of color, I will ask them specifically, “What’s it like for an African American student coming here? What insight can you give me, being a person of color when you were a student that helps me understand what is actually happening?”*

In the context of academe, Joseph and Hirshfield (2011) identify the practice of objectifying people of color by asking them to speak and act on behalf of their group as a form of “cultural taxation.” Unlike white faculty, faculty of color must, “bear the burden of dealing with diversity related issues in ways that their white counterparts do not” (Joseph and Hirshfield 2011:126). Our analysis of white faculty, administrators, and staff revealed this “cultural taxation” being levied against people of color at all levels in the university. As above, the racial ignorance claimed by whites was typically coupled with the assignment of racial knowledge to people of color. Whether it be students, “I don’t know, you’d have to ask them,” faculty colleagues, “I hope not, at least they have never said anything,” or administrators, “What insight can you give me, being a person of color?”, the assignment of racial knowledge to people of color frees whites from the time, energy, and work necessitated by that responsibility and confines the potential contributions of people of color to those related to race and racism.

#### *Whites Employ a Diversity Discourse of “Helping and Caring”*

The color-blindness evidenced by the white people in our study was generally confined to their awareness and articulation of their own racial location. This is not to say that the white people we interviewed did not discuss race, quite the opposite. The administrators, faculty, and staff we interviewed were quite adept talking about race in the context of the dominant American discourse of “diversity” (Bell and Hartman 2007). Diversity discourse or “happy talk” “...allows Americans to engage race on the

surface but disavow and disguise its deeper structural roots and consequences” (Bell and Hartman 2007:910). This “happy talk,” in other words, “appears to engage and celebrate difference,” yet fails to grasp the social inequalities and negative consequences that accompany said “differences” (Bell and Hartman 2007: 905). One of the ways “diversity discourse” manifested in our study was in the “helping and caring” narratives used to frame interactions with students and faculty of color.

As with Bell and Hartman’s (2007), “happy talk,” the “helping and caring” discourse relies on assimilationist assumptions about white cultural norms and the necessity of “helping” racialized others meet normative expectations. A white faculty member, for example, offers the following “helpful” analysis of students of color:

*They [students of color] are often struggling with how to talk from their position so I can see that so I am, on the one hand, trying to encourage them to speak. And on the other, trying to figure out how to address the privilege that is going on right now in a way that doesn’t knock them down but recognizes what is going on in the classroom or the discussion.*

In this interview, the white faculty member assumes that all students of color are struggling with their racial location in relation to their instructor. Educators intent on rescuing students in this manner demonstrate stereotypical assumptions and/or lowered expectations related to their students of color in the form of micro invalidations (Yosso et al. 2009). This localized interpretation of the “silences” of student of color in turn obscures a deeper analysis of power differentials and structural inequalities that shape educational institutions.

In other instances, diversity discourse was employed as a mechanism for moving the interviews off of whiteness. White administrators, for example, shifted the discussion away from their own whiteness to

personal interactions with people of color as a way of demonstrating they were not racist and should not be perceived as such. As stated by one female administrator in response to a question about her white identity, *“I definitely take extra care in my communications with people of color. Definitely I do. Cause I don’t want to offend them. I want them to know, ‘hey I support you.’”* Here the language of “helping and caring” is again employed as a mechanism to assert an inclusive stance (*I...take extra care...I want them to know, ‘hey I support you.’*), without having to explore the underlying racialized tensions necessitating such care.

When asked about how often she thinks about her racial identity at work, a female staff member responded:

*Um... I’m not sure how to respond to that. I, I don’t know that I think about my identity, um, in any particular, you know...any particular time, unless it becomes a, a topic of, of, discussion, but I’m, um, I’m aware of the, uh, diversity in, in, um, on campus, I work with, uh, diverse students, um... So, um, I’m very aware of all these issues and, um, like to help students who come from diverse backgrounds and, and some who are, ah, African-American so that we can, um, encourage them to get into career where being African-American, being, you know, Mexican-American is, or Asian is important because we want them to work with, ah, populations that reflect ...you know, the same race and ethnicity and so on, so I’m, I’m aware of, of race in, in everything that I do.*

This staff member deflects attention away from her own racial location by acknowledging an acute racialized awareness of her students of color and a desire to help them. Rather than encourage self-reflection that empowers student discourse and identity constructions through critical dialogue (Giroux 1995), the help she offers involves pre-determined ideas about the type of work best suited for them based on their racial identities. The help offered, in other words,

engages with race on the surface, while maintaining hegemonic norms and attitudes about students of color and their capacity for self-determination. Although she characterizes her awareness of race including *“everything I do,”* her own racial location as a white person remains unquestioned and unexamined.

In a different incarnation of “happy talk,” a white staff member expresses an interest in working with first generation students but disqualifies himself because he is not a person of color:

*I would say because of my interest around bringing people together and working with first generation students and students of color in particular, um, I may stop myself from applying for certain jobs because I may realize that I’m not the best person because of my color or my race. Maybe because they, in my perception, may also be looking for somebody who looks like the students they will be working with.*

Here the white staffer offers a contradictory and idealized individual-level response to the structured inequalities of university hiring practices. Rather than address the normative constructions of whiteness that gives whites unfair advantages in hiring, he instead simply stops himself from, *“applying for certain jobs.”* And, while he talks about his interest in, *“bringing people together and working with first generation students and students of color in particular,”* he seems unaware of the critical role white people play in reversing racism and dismantling the power structure that preserves the racial hierarchy. His intended actions mirror the racial oppression and superiority subtleties designed into the systems of our institutions (Pyke 2010) and re-inscribe responsibility for students of color onto people of color.

By appearing to recognize difference, yet failing to appreciate white normativity and systemic inequality, current diversity discourse makes it difficult to construct a meaningful

multicultural or genuinely progressive politics of race (Bell and Hartman 2007).

To change paradigms that maintain racial inequities, white people must understand and identify the role they play in achieving a conscious institution (Kezar and Eckel 2002). In each of the examples above, diversity discourse manifesting as “helping and caring” obscures a potentially transformative moment. By employing the university’s diversity discourse of “helping and caring” to frame their relations with students and faculty of color, these white administrators, faculty, and staff forgo opportunities to explore white institutional norms and the inequalities they uphold.

#### *Whites See Race Primarily As a Black/White Binary*

Blackness looms large in the white racial imagination. One of the most compelling findings that arose from these data was the extent to which the white people we interviewed referenced blackness. While black students, faculty, and administrators compose only 3 percent, 2 percent, and 5 percent respectively of the university’s population, of the 478 references to people of color in the thirty interviews, 68 percent were made to black or African American people.

Though the numbers alone suggest a disproportionate segment of the white racial imagination is being expended on black people, the content of the references indicate even more troubling findings. In our analysis, “imagined blackness” evolved as a code signifying places where whites assumed a deep understanding of blackness as part of their responsibilities as anti-racist educators. “Imagined blackness” was constituted by three primary dimensions 1) black people need and want white attention, 2) black lives are a struggle, 3) black people are threatening and potentially violent.

<sup>3</sup> “Happy walk” like Bell and Hartman’s (2007) “happy talk,” refers to white anti-racist acts and actions that have

Both the white faculty and administrators talked about how students of color and their parents need to feel like they are being paid attention to, specifically by white people. As one faculty discussed in response to a question about his relationship with students of color:

*When I interact with black kids here, I make sure I say something to them in the hallway, you know, I’m friendly and try to be encouraging because I can’t just walk by and smile, that’s not good enough. So I try and engage them, I try and pay attention to them in my classes. If they are not showing up I try to ping them or get in touch and say “everything okay?” Because I want them to, you know, I don’t want them to get alienated. And I want them to feel like I’m paying attention and interested and I want them to succeed.*

The “happy walk<sup>3</sup>” described here was typical of the kinds of behaviors whites imagine students of color need (Bell and Hartman 2007). While hallway greetings are common in all contexts, here as above in relation to “helping and caring,” it is the marking of blackness accompanied by the assumption that black students don’t show up to class, are alienated, and in danger of not succeeding *without white attention*, that sets this interaction apart. Similarly, a white administrator talked about her relationship with parents of color:

*I am always very courteous to parents, especially, but if it is a parent of color, I want to make sure they understand that I am there to serve them. So I actually slow it down and make sure they feel they have the space. There was a parent in here and his daughter needed to take a leave. I thought we were done and he said, ‘I know you are really busy but can I take a few more minutes of your time?’ and I said sure. So I just stopped and then he told me the*

no real lasting impact beyond bolstering a white anti-racist imaginary.



*family story and I was like, oh my God. It was bad. I am really aware that I am the face of the University for these parents and these kids and it is critical that they feel that I get it on some level.*

Here again, this white administrator is very cognizant of the importance of taking time and “slowing it down” for parents of color to ensure they get the white attention and understanding they need; “it is critical that they feel that I get it on some level.” Attached to this benevolence is the assumption that the lives of people of color are especially challenging; “he told me the family story and I was like, oh my God. It was bad.” Time and time again throughout these interviews white people made statements indicating how “limited,” “challenging,” and “problematic” black lives are.

The problem with “imagined blackness” is that it creates for white people a one-dimensional lens through which to view black lives, and it simultaneously uplifts and reinforces whiteness and white supremacy. White students don’t need extra attention to be successful or to show up for classes. White parents can be dealt with efficiently as they lead less troubling lives. And white lives are free from the “constant” burden of racialization:

*Oh, I just think generally being white is easier just overall, it is not like I am walking around, I mean I just think if I were Black, you know if somebody is looking at me funny, I’d be thinking ‘why are they looking at me that way,’ right? And that the constant checking, the constant, I mean the level of awareness of your surroundings (white staff).*

On the surface, these interpretations of black life can be read as supportive, anti-racist observations. The long-term institutional structure-in-process upheld by these constructions of blackness, however, is one that renders black people as “perpetual-victims” in need of rescue (and whites as perpetual-rescuers)

and obscures the lives and educational needs of all other people of color. From this vantage point, institutional initiatives made in support of black students reinforce “perpetual victimhood” while simultaneously buttressing whiteness as desirable and white students as capable and not in need of rescue (Templeton et al. 2016).

The flip-side of the ‘blacks as victims’ trope promulgated in the white racial imagination is a construction of black people as threat. Our interviewees described people of color as potentially violent through a direct account of racist socialization or an attribution to people of color as hostile and defensive for reasons that are not intuitively understandable by white people. When asked about the conversations that occurred with family on the subject of race, one female administrator recounted the following incident:

*I went to three different places for my undergrad, they were pretty white... I never really remember feeling uncomfortable or anything, um, no one time I broke down in Chicago in my car and this really nice black guy came out and helped me and got me going again and I told my parents and they were horrified. I asked, like, ‘why are you so upset?’*

The parental response in this situation is a promotion of mistrust that warns of the potential danger inherent in interracial interactions and encourages caution and suspicion when dealing with people of color (Hughes et al. 2006). When asked to describe his first memory around the idea of race, another administrator responded that he was “beat up a couple of times by a group of African-American kids... I was probably 13 years old. But I remember that was probably my first experiences with race.” Nearly 70 years of research supports and validates that the association between African Americans and violent behavior is a consistent, frequent, and automatic response of whites (Allport and Postman 1947; Eberhardt et al. 2004).

Hughes et al. (2006) suggest that cultural socialization in preparation for preconception and suspicion increase with age, and that gender shapes how parents discuss the racialized other with their children. When asked to reflect on his own racial social location, the same male administrator describes a recent interaction with a student of color:

*I've dealt with her a couple times where she's yelled at me, she's been aggressive, and then she's been nice to me and had a conversation with me. And all I could think about being a white man is there's something that I don't understand, that I can't, part of me says, 'what the hell is this person doing being a jerk to [another administrator]' why is she being actually rude and aggressively inappropriate in my mind? Then a part of me is thinking, okay, when I have those kinds of feelings of frustration and anger, it means that there is something I don't understand. There's something that um that uh I'm at a lack of even asking the right questions about what the differences are. So for me that was a perfect example of my thoughts of being a white, not only being white but also male.*

In this passage the administrator, although taken aback and clearly offended by the insolent behavior, also seems to connect with it. The administrator suggests, however, that there is a difference and distance between himself and the student, attributable to race and gender, that precludes him from understanding her anger or initiating a dialogue with her that might balance or transition his power. This moment marks the limits of the white racial imagination, and the slide back into white innocence and ignorance. Though fertile enough to imagine black lives of struggle and threat, the white racial imagination fails in its ability to contextualize the historically situated anger, frustration, and pain of people of color.

The looming presence of the black/white binary in the consciousness of these white

educators has several deleterious effects. First, it prevents the implementation of critical multiculturalism by rendering the experiences of all other students of color invisible. Second, it holds these gatekeepers in a racialized world far removed from reality, thus rendering them impotent in efforts to facilitate institutional change. Finally, each moment of "imagined blackness" simultaneously constructs an imaginary whiteness wherein whites are held up as self-sufficient, untroubled, team players.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Circumscribed by a historical moment utterly racialized, the white administrators, faculty, and staff we interviewed engaged in a variety of discursive practices that, in their effects, upheld the place of whiteness in this multiracial educational environment. In their consistent application of a racist/not racist binary, whites were able to construct a color-blind racism that put them outside of race and racism, while simultaneously binding these responsibilities to people of color. At the same time, in an institutional context emphasizing diversity and inclusive excellence as central to the educational mission, their ability to be seen as not racist *and* able to engage in "diversity discourse" allowed these white educators to construct themselves as helpful and caring benefactors of students of color. This position of white superiority, in turn, casts students of color as deficient and faculty and administrators of color as responsible and accountable for those deficiencies. Finally, the overwhelming presence of an imagined blackness in the minds of these white educators obscures the truly diverse dimensions of this educational environment.

This analysis, in other words, maps the complex contours of whiteness and white supremacy in an institution of higher education at a particular historical juncture. As critical multiculturalists, we understand these findings to be far removed from the intentions and self-definitions of these white educators. As such, we

argue these findings are essential tools in enabling whites and others to recognize “microconstructions” of white supremacy in situ, and thus disrupt the racial hegemony of whiteness.

Supporting students of color requires that programs, resources, and discussions about race and privilege are integrated into the instructional core. Feagin’s (2002) multipronged approach, for example, includes expanding education on racism and recruiting more staff and faculty of color. Additionally, policies and procedures must be implemented that hold all members of the campus community accountable to the goals of the organization. Educational diversity must be embedded in the everyday practice of institutional leaders rather than the responsibility of one department or the work of a single plan, initiative, or committee (Birnbaum 1988; Feagin 2002; Chesler and Crowfoot 1989).

Awareness of anti-racist practices and a commitment to anti-racist pedagogy should be considered and evaluated in the hiring process. The important component of responses to inquiries such as “Describe your experience working in a diverse organization” or “Discuss the strategies and approach you’ve engaged to work successfully and effectively in a diverse environment” is the anti-bias, anti-racist education and training a candidate has participated in and how they have consciously and actively applied that knowledge to interactions with students and colleagues. It is essential that staff, faculty, and administrative candidates are able to demonstrate cultural competence and express a fundamental analysis and understanding of systemic racism if they are to properly support and promote student persistence and retention. Such knowledge should be considered an essential requirement included in the basic knowledge and skills necessary to secure employment at minority-majority institutions.

Finally, ongoing anti-bias, anti-racist education should be an employment expectation of personnel at all levels of an organization. As

demonstrated by the interview subjects involved in this study, institutions of higher education may benefit from offering opportunities for faculty, staff, students, and administrators to unremittably refine their critical competence through workshops, courses, coordinated dialogue, lectures, and funded research projects structured to foster continued development at all levels of proficiency. Campus communities, such as the subject of this study, are comprised of students and professionals who have been involved in the analysis of systemic racism and others who have not yet begun to think about their social location or how their identities factor into their daily interactions. An educational community cannot examine its structure and culture or achieve an inclusive and representative distribution of influence, authority, and control until its members are able to identify their common challenges through the same lens, using the same language.

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**Appendix – Interview Schedule**

*When asked, how do you identify yourself racially?*

*Can you describe your first memory around the idea of race?*

*Can you describe your first memory of learning about your own racial location?*

*How would you describe the racial landscape of your childhood?*

*Did your parents or other relative talk about race much while you were growing up?*

*As a child were most of your friends of the same race?*

*Currently, outside of your family, think about the top 5 people you spend time with socially – How do they identify racially?*

*Do you ever have conversations about being white?*

*Do you think about your racial identity at work?*

*Can you think of a time when your identity as a white person was valued/devalued at Pinewood U?*

*Do you think that your race played any part in you obtaining your current position?*

*How do you think your identity as a white person impacts: your relationships with your colleagues of color, white colleagues, students of color, white students?*

*Do you think your racial identity has an impact on what happens in your classroom?*

*Do you think your racial identity has an impact on your position as a \_\_\_\_\_?*

*Thinking about the [most recent] case of racial harassment, do you think there was any action that you – as a white person or other white people on campus – could have or should have done in the wake of that incident?*