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### The (dis)similarities of white racial identities: the conceptual framework of 'hegemonic whiteness'

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# The (dis)similarities of white racial identities: the conceptual framework of ‘hegemonic whiteness’

Matthew W. Hughey

*(First submission September 2008; First published August 2009)*

## Abstract

This article examines the processes of white racial identity formation in the United States via an examination of a white nationalist organization and a white antiracist organization. Findings indicate that the construction of white racial identity in both groups is based on the reproduction of various racist and essentialist ideologies. The realization that there is a shared ‘groupness’ to outwardly different white identities has the potential to destabilize the recent trend that over-emphasizes white heterogeneity at the expense of discussion of power, racism and discrimination. As a resolution to this analytic dilemma, this article advances a conceptual framework entitled ‘hegemonic whiteness’. White identity formation is thereby understood as a cultural process in which (1) racist, reactionary and essentialist ideologies are used to demarcate inter-racial boundaries, and (2) performances of white racial identity that fail to meet those ideals are marginalized and stigmatized, thereby creating intra-racial distinctions within the category ‘white’.

**Keywords:** White racial identity; ideology; white supremacy; antiracism; hegemony; racism.

... race can be simultaneously Janus-faced and multifac(et)ed – and [can] also produce a singular dominant social hierarchy.

Troy Duster, ‘The “morphing” properties of whiteness’, 2001, p. 115

Navigating between the long-term staying power of white privilege and the multifarious manifestations of the experience of whiteness remains the task of the next era of research on white racial and ethnic identity.

Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson,  
*Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 31, 2005, p. 256

This discussion of hegemonic whiteness itself could take up the space of an entire manuscript.

Amanda Lewis, *Sociological Theory*,  
vol. 22, no. 4, 2004, p. 634

In recent years an overwhelming litany of scholarship concerned with 'whiteness', especially in a US context, has burgeoned. After approximately two decades of research, arguments about whiteness as a formation of invisible privileges and norms are well rehearsed (McIntosh 1988; Frankenburg 1993; Delgado and Stefancic 1997). Contemporary research programmes now consider various white identity formations that run the spectrum of ideological orientations: whether progressive and neo-conservative, impoverished and economically prosperous, or racist and antiracist. While important, this recent trend threatens the conceptualization of whiteness as a 'group' (Lewis 2004), or how differing processes of white identity formation across varying US contexts are intimately connected with, and coalesced through, a reliance on similar racist ideologies, reactionary cultural repertoires and scripts, and material practices of domination (Doane 1997; Coates 2003). Failure to synthesize how seemingly disparate white identity formations are constituted by, and help to reinforce, strategies of social control and domination threatens to rob the study of white identity of critical, conceptual and explanatory purchase.

Through year-long examinations of two groups thought to occupy distant and distinct political and racial poles – a white nationalist organization and a white antiracist organization – I provide evidence of surprising racial solidarity. Based on these findings, this article advances an analytic framework for the study of US-based white identity that can account for both white homogeneity and heterogeneity. Birthed from gender scholar R.W. Connell's (1987) work on 'hegemonic masculinity', as well as the preliminary work of Amanda Lewis (2004), this approach conceptualizes whiteness as a configuration of meanings and practices that simultaneously produce and maintain racial cohesion and difference in two main ways: (1) through positioning those marked as 'white' as essentially different from and superior to those marked as 'non-white', and (2) through marginalizing practices of 'being white' that fail to exemplify dominant ideals. Hence, the findings I outline herein suggest that various frame repertoires such as white innocence, injury, rationality, and

appropriation help structure at least one form of hegemonic whiteness.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of this approach afford an understanding of whiteness as a group, while remaining sensitive to identity as complex, situated and heterogeneous.

## **Background**

Since the advent of the civil rights movement, a considerable scholastic corpus maps the racialization process in the US (Gossett 1963; Jordan 1968; Horsman 1981). However, few sociological studies of whiteness exist in comparison to other academic disciplines. An early deviation from this trend was the claim that white racial identity was akin to a 'knapsack of invisible privilege' (McIntosh 1988). This approach was furthered by Frankenburg's (1993) study of whiteness as invisibility, as well as Delgado and Stefancic's (1997) understanding of whiteness as functionally equivalent to racial normativity. However, with the declining size of white demographics in the US, coupled with increasing birth-rates and immigration of non-whites into North America (Vickerman 2007), not to mention the increased prominence of non-whites in various public spheres, whiteness renders itself more visible and less of a synonym for invisible normality. Indeed, the current study of whiteness is moving away from its initial coupling with 'privilege and power' (Andersen 2003).

Today, the dominant trend in studies of whiteness focuses on the meanings imparted by the particular context in which white actors are located (McDermott and Samson 2005, p. 249). Whether in historical context (Allen 1994; Brodtkin 1998; Jacobson 1998), various environmental situations (Hartigan 1997), socio-economic circumstances (Giroux 1997; Hartigan 1999; Buck 2001), or sexual orientation (Berube 2001), it is now agreed that whiteness is a constantly morphing identity refracted by context. The recent work of Howard Winant is emblematic of this approach. Winant argues that whiteness is best understood as a series of 'white racial projects' (Winant 2004b, pp. 5–11) that resemble a bifurcated political spectrum (Winant 2004a, 2004b). In this vein, Winant 'fills in' various white identity 'projects' between the Scylla and Charybdis of the political left and right. In 'Behind blue eyes' (2004b, p. 12), Winant distils white identity into five categories, 'along a political spectrum, according to explicit criteria drawn from the meaning each project attaches to "whiteness." ... far right, new right, neoconservative, neoliberal, and new abolitionist.' From this perspective, some forms of whiteness are characterized as post-civil rights identities that 'backlash' against recent legal and policy advancements toward equality, while the other side of the spectrum locates forms of whiteness that actively resist racism and which are considered 'antiracist'. Despite the supposed fracturing and

'crisis' of white identity, I posit and illuminate how there is a lot more in common with 'white racists' and 'white antiracists' than previously imagined.

### **The Janus-face of hegemonic whiteness**

Rather than focusing on individually produced attitudes on race, much can be gained from shifting attention toward racial ideology and performances (Forman 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2003). Accordingly, I examine how whites (mostly white males)<sup>2</sup> in a white nationalist organization I call 'National Equality for All' [NEA] and a white antiracist organization I call 'Whites for Racial Justice' [WRJ] enact in practice the ideologies they take for granted and understand as 'common sense'.<sup>3</sup> Such ingrained ideologies and practices intimately involve the construction of the meaning of whiteness and the legitimization of certain social arrangements. How well such a process occurs for differently positioned whites (e.g. white nationalists and white antiracists) is an empirical question. As Amanda Lewis writes:

Whiteness works in distinct ways for and is embodied quite differently by homeless white men, golf-club-membership-owning executives, suburban soccer moms, urban hillbillies, antiracist skin-heads, and/or union-card-carrying factory workers . . . . In any particular historical moment, however, certain forms of whiteness become dominant. We can think of this form as something similar to what Connell (1987) calls 'hegemonic masculinity.'

(2004, p. 624)

Over the past two decades, Connell's term has experienced wide appropriation by various theorists (e.g. Dyer 1997, p. 13; Dyson 2002, p. 109; Birt 2004, p. 62). Yet, there exists little explanation as to its definition or operation.

By building upon the concept of 'hegemonic whiteness', I argue that meaningful racial identity for whites is produced *vis-à-vis* the reproduction of, and appeal to, racist, essentialist, and reactionary *inter-* and *intra-*racial distinctions: (1) through positioning those marked as 'white' as essentially different from and superior to those marked as 'non-white', and (2) through marginalizing practices of being white that fail to exemplify dominant ideals. Within the context and setting of both field-sites, these different hegemonic ideals are collectively shared by members, and function as seemingly neutral yardsticks against which cultural behaviour, norms and values are measured.

**Table 1.** *Repertoires of hegemonic whiteness*

	Inter-racial difference and superiority			Intra-racial distinction and marginalization			
	White victimology	Black and brown pathology	White debt/epidermal capital	Affective whiteness	Conscious whiteness	Simplistic whiteness	
Derek (NEA)	3	2	4	3	2	2	<b>16</b>
Erik (NEA)	3	2	2	2	1	4	<b>14</b>
John (NEA)	3	1	3	0	0	4	<b>11</b>
Nick (NEA)	8	6	6	4	3	6	<b>33</b>
Laurence (NEA)	5	2	5	0	2	5	<b>19</b>
Paul (NEA)	1	12	2	2	2	3	<b>22</b>
Josh (NEA)	0	1	5	3	6	7	<b>22</b>
Joey (NEA)	0	5	6	1	3	9	<b>24</b>
Chris (NEA)	2	5	3	2	1	1	<b>14</b>
George (NEA)	2	5	9	0	3	1	<b>20</b>
Richard (NEA)	5	3	0	1	1	2	<b>12</b>
Albert (NEA)	2	5	1	2	0	0	<b>10</b>
Harry (NEA)	5	8	16	8	2	1	<b>40</b>
Adam (NEA)	1	4	2	6	5	14	<b>32</b>
Column sub-totals	<b>40</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>289</b>
Malcolm (WRJ)	2	4	5	3	2	3	<b>19</b>
Cassandra (WRJ)	5	0	0	8	4	2	<b>19</b>
Bret (WRJ)	0	12	1	7	0	10	<b>30</b>
Mark (NEA)	2	7	9	9	4	12	<b>43</b>
Michael (WRJ)	5	14	12	5	8	7	<b>51</b>
Horace (WRJ)	2	6	2	5	0	15	<b>30</b>
James (WRJ)	4	5	11	7	3	3	<b>33</b>

**Table 1** (*Continued*)

	Inter-racial difference and superiority			Intra-racial distinction and marginalization			
	White victimology	Black and brown pathology	White debt/ epidermal capital	Affective whiteness	Conscious whiteness	Simplistic whiteness	
Philip (WRJ)	4	3	1	9	1	11	<b>29</b>
Duncan (WRJ)	3	0	0	6	16	7	<b>32</b>
Jerry (WRJ)	4	12	1	5	5	9	<b>36</b>
Sherrill (WRJ)	1	5	2	2	6	2	<b>18</b>
Frederick (WRJ)	6	7	3	4	0	8	<b>28</b>
Column sub-totals	<b>38</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>368</b>
Column totals	<b>78</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>657</b>
Column %	<b>11.87</b>	<b>20.7</b>	<b>16.89</b>	<b>15.83</b>	<b>12.18</b>	<b>22.53</b>	<b>100</b>

## Inter-racial difference and superiority

There are no white people, only people who think they are white.  
James Baldwin, 'On being "white"  
... and other lies', 1998, p. 180

### *White victimology*

I found that both NEA and WRJ construct and perform their racial selves as victimized and culturally stigmatized largely because of their whiteness. Members of the white nationalist organization NEA understand themselves in relation to a politically correct culture that is increasingly becoming anti-white. As one member I call 'Daniel' (Registered nurse, age 32, 4 years in NEA) said in an interview:

This politically correct nation has become so hostile toward any expression of white pride or even any subtle attempts at whites claiming their rights, that it is a distinctly racist society toward whites. While there is surely prejudice toward all people, that is nothing new, that's what happens when races mix: there's trouble. But now, things have changed so that it's just not accepted for whites to stick up for themselves. [...] *It's like we are the new black people of a couple hundred years ago* [my emphasis]. Except that now blacks and Mexicans are the ones that get to say whatever they want.

Another NEA member I call 'George' (Accountant, age 38, 2 years in NEA) stated:

... poor whites, white trash, whatever you want to call it, they have been corrupted by all the undue excitement of multiculturalism. [...] Whites are clearly victims of this social order. There is always an underclass, you need it, it's functional [...] but whites are getting sucked in. It's important to provide a model for reclaiming our white nationhood and showing that whites can be more than victims.

While one should remember that both groups have vastly different political agendas and worldviews of their place as white men in the racial 'culture wars', of equal import is the illumination of how different political orientations fail to negate similar racial meaning-making processes. In an interview with WRJ member 'Duncan' (Corporate salesperson, age 30, 2.5 years in WRJ), it was apparent that he felt whites were stigmatized in a way analogous to NEA's worldview:



Being in [WRJ] is a commitment that I love. I get a lot out of it, but you know [...] at the same time it gets old real quick. Whenever I bring up how I feel [about racial issues] it seems that I'm attacked. I mean [long sigh] it just doesn't just seem that way, *I am attacked* [said with emphasis]. Being white with these beliefs puts me on center stage, right in the line of fire. People of color think I'm crazy and wonder what my ulterior motives are and other white people, well they think I'm crazy too and that I'm a communist or something or other [long pause]. It's like being white with these beliefs, like I said, makes you a target *just like black people* [my emphasis].

Duncan's supposition that white identity is 'in the line of fire' and a 'target just like black people' is parallel to NEA's ideas that whites are being 'corrupted' and are 'the new black people'. Another WRJ member I call 'Sean' (Gardener, age 62, 6 years in WRJ) stated:

Being white in today's climate means not being able to speak one's mind openly. I believe that not all things should be said, some things should be kept quiet because it hurts the public good, but today's politically correct climate is engineered in such a way that I can't say what I feel about racism, even though I am critiquing it! If black people want to critique racism then that seems all fine and well, but watch out if I do! [said with a sarcastic tone]. That's why I'm a part of [WRJ] – I can express my opinions freely. [...] In the end I guess you can attribute all this to the effects of racism, we all end up being oppressed equally. It does seem unfair [long pause] [...] that people of color can stand for antiracism and people think that's normal, but when I do, or we do, it's seen as deviant behavior.

Both Duncan and Sean understand whites as equally victimized as blacks, which contradicts much of WRJ's overt statements concerning how society is a racialized hierarchy in which whites benefit unjustly in every arena of life. Indeed, much of WRJ's official literature proclaims that members abide by a fundamental principle that, as the beneficiaries of unequal power, they feel morally obliged to share power by equalizing society. However, Sean refutes this principle when he indicates that whites are *more* repressed than blacks. The idea that whites have to 'pay' for their comments with the stigma of 'deviance' while blacks get to 'stand up for antiracism' with little or no repercussion because it is 'normal', is an odd reversal of WRJ's overt antiracist politics. Further, it is disturbingly predicated on a reversal of racial power dynamics that reinstalls whites, not people of colour, as victims of the racial order and thus deserving of redress.

As evidenced by the remarks of both groups, the understanding of white identity as victimized by a racial double-standard justifies the actions of people of colour while simultaneously demonizing whites. This worldview is a powerful tool in the maintenance of white self-marginalization. It is especially prevalent because of the racist belief that people of colour are exploiting the ‘social system’ *en masse*, thereby unfairly displacing whites. Moreover, one should bear in mind that such discourse is not due simply to the ‘obsession’ with race of their nationalist or antiracist politics. Rather, strikingly similar findings among ‘mainstream’ whites are echoed by Bonilla-Silva (2003), Bush (2004), Ferber (1998), and Twine and Gallagher (2008), p. 6) who find that contemporary ‘race politics transform whiteness into a “victimized” marked identity’.

### *Black and brown pathology*

The evocation of a powerful anti-black rhetoric of ‘bad values’ and ‘pathological behavior’ reigns as a powerful tool for whites to ‘talk nasty about blacks without sounding “racist”’ (Bonilla-Silva 2002, p. 41). Members of both NEA and WRJ commonly use such a discourse of black pathologies to relationally construct a sense of the white self. The subtle difference between the two groups is that members of NEA advance an understanding of people of colour (especially blacks and Latin@s) as biologically – thus essentially – inferior. Conversely, members of WRJ promote a worldview in which non-whites are culturally inferior. While it might be tempting to rank one as ‘not as bad’ as the other, I resist such a move and instead concentrate on how the repercussions of such beliefs, regardless of reason, affect constructions of white identity as both normative and superior. Due to the relational construction of race in the Western order, understandings of the racial ‘other’ impact what whiteness ‘is’. One member of NEA I call ‘Joey’ (Salesperson, age 36, 3 years in NEA) stated:

Like on education, look at what happened in California after we got rid of affirmative action. Standards rose, quality of education went up. When you put different races together, conflicts rise, standards fall. That’s the way it is. Now we have to suffer through this mess even though we all know the truth. It hurts whites the most. We are the ones that pay for it.

While members of WRJ reject the aforementioned argument wholesale, they still express similar understandings that black and brown populations drive standards down, which in turn negatively affects

whites. During one conversation with a WRJ member named 'Michael' (Banker, age 36, 4.5 years in WRJ), he mentioned how anxious he was that his child's school was becoming 'less white', which in turn would bring an array of 'dysfunctional behavior' to the school. So also 'Andre' (Graduate student, age 24, 1 year in WRJ) spoke of his experiences in graduate school:

I believe in diversity, but I'm tired of having to pick up the slack for the black students in all my group work. I mean, it's not their fault, I know they are oppressed by racism and that their behavior is all a product of it, but I suffer too.

When WRJ members spoke, comments of this kind were not uncommon. There was an overarching belief in the cultural inferiority of blacks (which will be expanded on in the following section) which was effectively and unfairly burdening whites through decreased standards – from education to job performance to morality. Such belief in the essentialized low standards of black and brown populations is laced with racist ideologies that only work to reassert the 'normality' of whiteness and (in this specific case) frame whites as oppressed by black and brown 'dysfunctions'. As an NEA member I call 'Chris' (Business manager, age 44, 4 years in NEA) stated to me in an interview:

It's simply not fair. What do you want me to say? The reality of it is: black people steal, cheat, lie [...] they have corrupt values [...] they are killing each other [...] their culture is dysfunctional and damn near demonic. [...] Why won't anyone in the mainstream say it? [said rhetorically] Because it's not P.C. [politically correct] and then that person, if they're white, would be burned at the stake. [...] Being white means dealing with this time after time.

In similar fashion, a WRJ member, 'Philip' (Grocery store owner, age 53, 5 years in WRJ), stated:

Racism is a fundamentally corrupt and wasteful action. [...] For example let's take slavery. It's important to examine the methods that were used to enslave Africans and bring them here. Look at what was done to the family structure, destroying homes, taking their religion, corrupting their values, the violence in black urban areas. Now fast-forward to today, look at the problems with being black, the crime rates, lack of education, et cetera. These things are engrained in black culture now, and it's important for me to stand up and fix these things [...] being a white antiracist means I'm under assault for wanting to fix that. That's what I mean by duty. Black people are in a screwed up predicament; they've been crippled because of racism.

Pathology discourses are widespread among whites (Bonilla-Silva 2003, pp. 40–1). In a world dominated by white supremacist discourse that has become ‘natural’ and ‘common-sensed’, varied beliefs in the cultural or biological inferiority of non-whites work as powerful catalysts in constructing the meanings of white identities.

*White debt and epidermal capital: perceptions of empty whiteness*

Across both contexts – NEA and WRJ – whiteness was often understood as ‘normal’, ‘dull’, ‘plain’, ‘boring’, ‘empty’ or even ‘inauthentic’. As a ‘remedy’ to a negative and empty whiteness, members often (1) use social relationships with people of colour and/or (2) claim ownership or knowledge of objects and traditions symbolically coded as ‘non-white’. While members of both groups hold various negative views of non-white racial formations (as illuminated by the previous section), they also possess many critiques of whiteness that fit within the scope of stereotypical racial distinctions: whites are overly logical/intellectual, lacking in physical prowess, emotional passion, sexual potency, are overly boring, and – as one WRJ member constantly stated – ‘stale’.

I call this dynamic ‘white debt’ and ‘epidermal capital’ because NEA and WRJ members work to fill in this perceived white debt by converting relationships with people and objects symbolically coded non-white (especially black and Latin@) into a kind of credentialing form of capital. The possession of epidermal capital temporarily allows the white actor to recreate the meaning of whiteness as legitimate and valorized. As an NEA member I call ‘Will’ (Real estate agent, age 37, 6 years in NEA) said:

I often try to hang out at a bar around the corner from my house. [...] It generally has a lot of race mixing in it, [...] now you know I don’t agree with that or think that’s the best for anyone, but it gives me an advantage. [Author: ‘How so?’] Because I have lots of black friends, I learn a lot about things I wouldn’t otherwise know about, [...] in the end it shakes up what people think of white nationalists as ‘bigots’ and whatnot. I know all the latest [black] music, sayings, and what their community is thinking about. I’m far from a dull white guy. [...] and I can use that information if anyone wants to equate white nationalism with racism. Ha, it’s like a get out of jail free card [laughing].

A WRJ member I call ‘Samuel’ (Music store employee, age 26, 2 years in WRJ) stated:

I came to this organization because, I mean, I don’t know if you feel this way, but I often wanted to be less white, like it’s empty or has a

hole in it or something [...] I mean, being in WRJ brings me in contact with lots of history about African Americans, music, styles, [...] I learned about Cesar Chavez in our ed [educational] session a few weeks ago. And now I get to use that information, it's a part of me, I feel more 'real' somehow, [...] I know it sounds crazy [laughing], [...] no one can say I'm racist or boring.

For members of WRJ, objects, styles and knowledge symbolically coded as non-white were a common fixture in weekly 'ed sessions'. Topics included why black women's hair is 'different' from white women's hair and the 'process' by which black hair is made straight, why 'black people wear baggy clothes', and how the genre of 'hip-hop' could be used as a window into the 'soul' of black people. For NEA, there was also a subsequent push to learn about non-white history, styles and political attitudes so that members could evade any claims that they were, as one member put it, 'racially myopic', or being put in a position in which their white nationalist beliefs could be blamed for ignorance and hostility toward non-whites. For members of both organizations, whiteness was sometimes configured as a lack of positive authenticity. 'Sean' (Gardener, age 62, 6 years in WRJ) stated:

It is difficult being in WRJ. Our decision has stigmatized us to a certain extent. Just because we are all white and that other whites are not flocking here means we are somehow different. It's an intense feeling of realness. To many of us, being white is a part of the problem . . . Becoming less white is losing something, but also about gaining something real. [Author: 'How do you become "less white"? What does that actually look like?'] Well [...] there is something more real, I think because of oppression and racism [...] that has made people of color more human. So, if I had to spell it out, being less white is being more like them.

Sean's comment established a connection between the social constructivist nature of whiteness and the authenticity of 'others'. WRJ's construction of whiteness was nearly identical among NEA members. As one NEA member named 'Harry' (Lawyer, age 39, 6 years in NEA) told me:

Black people have their bright colors and their music or whatever. [...] We have civilization that has lasted, it is unique and strong in that right. But because of many whites' approaches to white civility, they have made it dull, sold out its character, made it plain. In many ways that style transferred to blacks hundred of years ago, [...] they stole many white styles and passed it off as 'African.' Now we're in a situation that needs to reclaim our passion. Look at jazz, I love

Miles Davis [. . .] so what if he's black, I'm filling in what was taken from me. The creativity of jazz is because of white people thousands of years ago. Now we are at a point where white nationalism has to be more open to the authenticity of others [. . .].

As Harry makes clear, the authenticity (that was once white but has since been lost or stolen) is now manifested in the epidermal capital of black cultures that are usable by whites so as to 'fill in what was taken from me'.

On a certain level, such inter-racial connectivity and tolerance appear to be a step toward racial progress and inclusivity. Yet, as cultural sociologist Bethany Bryson (1996, p. 895) writes, 'Cultural tolerance should not be conceptualized as an indiscriminate tendency to be non-exclusive, but as a reordering of group boundaries.' Instead of labouring to transform social arrangements, both groups co-opt 'otherness' so as to supposedly facilitate a white transformation and remedy to racial 'debt'.

### **Intra-racial distinction and marginalization**

The ideal white man was one who knew how to use his head, who knew how to manage and control things and get things done. Those whites who were not in a position to perform these functions nevertheless aspired to them.

Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 1989, p. 80

While the aforementioned findings demonstrate one side of the proverbial 'Janus-face' of 'hegemonic whiteness' (positioning whites as essentially different from and superior to non-whites), there is a second side to hegemonic whiteness: those performances and practices of being white that fail to exemplify dominant ideals. That is, the racialized power structures in NEA and WRJ did not construct a sense of white identity based only on the stratification between white and non-white, but also between different types of whites. The hegemonic ideal of whiteness is differentiated from other 'subordinated' and 'complicit' white identity formations in that it requires all whites to position themselves in relation to it (thus working in concert with the other half of hegemonic whiteness), in order to ideologically legitimate the subordination and/or inferiority of non-whites to whites. This finding, which distinguishes positions of whiteness not so much in terms of colour, bodily features, or even political views, but in terms of culturally hegemonic ideals and power, resonates with an understanding of 'hegemonic whiteness' that Lewis (2004) proposed. Specifically, I outline three shared alignments of ideals thought

fundamental to the performance of a ‘proper’ white identity: (1) affectation, (2) consciousness, and (3) simplicity.

### *Affective whiteness*

Bourdieu (1984) suggested that possessing the appropriate sort of ‘emotional capital’ assists in distinguishing between groups and helping to solidify identity. That is, emotional consciousness frames particular symbolic features of life in ways that continue to represent the depth of emotion of that feature of life, as well as the relation of the feature to established cultural contexts. Ideals of ‘affective whiteness’ were found to direct both the expression of specific emotions and the construction of *whitenesses* in both groups. Specifically, the ideal of white emotional expression in WRJ was that of a regular display of sadness in regard to the pain of racism, whereas NEA members were expected to exhibit anger over ‘reverse racism’. Those members who did not exhibit these dominant emotional performances were not simply seen as abnormal, but rather their racial identity was understood as inferior and deficient.

For example, after one particularly charged WRJ meeting in which several people cried, one member named ‘Malcolm’ (Consultant/counsellor, age 44, 5 years in WRJ) admitted that living an antiracist life was incredibly difficult. After the meeting, another member named ‘Cassandra’ (Marketing agent, age 31, 3 years in WRJ) spoke with me about her feelings about the meeting. She stated,

I guess I just don’t see what the big deal is, I mean, not that I want to be insensitive, but what does he [Malcolm] expect? Yes, it’s hard sometimes, but I just don’t see what good the crying is for all the time. I get that it’s a positive release, but what does it *actually do* [said with emphasis]?

Overhearing Cassandra’s comment, a member named ‘Patrick’ (Writer, age 28, 2 years in WRJ) immediately stepped toward us and said in a harsh tone:

You just don’t get it do you? Racism hurts. It hurts. It just hurts. Get it? And it’s not easy to talk about in that way. Anyone can step back and analyze it scientifically [turning to look directly at me as he spoke], but understanding how it affects you [...] better yet, how it forms you, or misshapes you that is, is hard to do. Until you try to see it that way, I’m not sure you’ll get it. [...] Until then, you have no idea what your whiteness is and what it does to you. [Malcolm] does [know what whiteness ‘is’].

The dominant ideal that adequate emotions of sadness and hurt should be overtly expressed was used as a marker for the idealized form of 'affective whiteness'. If a member did not express such emotion (or at least agree with the ideal), then they were understood (paraphrasing Patrick) as having little or no idea what their whiteness is or what it does to them.

Among NEA members, the dominant ideal of 'affective whiteness' both constrained and enabled members' social construction of white identity. At NEA meetings, there were frequent emotional displays of anger encapsulated within, and aroused by, the understanding of 'reverse racism' against whites. In this sense, those who failed to regularly express 'righteous anger' were often devalued, not on the level of their behaviour (axiology) but on the level of their racial identity (ontology). That is, the expression of anger framed the *racialized value* of members. Indeed, as I entered into the second half of the fourteen-month-long ethnography with the white nationalist organization NEA, my perceived lack of anger and consciousness that I was a victim of 'reverse racism' led several members to confront me: 'I'm not even sure you're really white. If you were, you would have to get angry sooner or later.' Conversely, in WRJ, I relayed a sad story of an early childhood experience in which I became cognizant of racial inequality. Upon the completion of my story, one WRJ member took me aside and, wrapping his arm around me in a supportive manner, stated, 'I think you're starting to understand whiteness.'

This reading of members' affectations is not definitive. Yet, the task of such an ethnographic study does not pause with the recovery of basic situational knowledge, but seeks to aggregate the situational knowledge to reveal social process. Moreover, each of these statements bears the imprint of a dominant perspective that we can view in racialized terms in order to describe the emotions that frame some whites as essentially 'less-than'. While such affective folkways are contextually specific, they are also used to create a cohesively bound white racial identity via the chase of hegemonic whiteness.

### *Conscious whiteness*

Another shared cultural ideal was that of 'conscious whiteness', or whites able to see through the 'propaganda' and 'disinformation' of society in order to adopt, willingly and without coercion, the NEA or WRJ racial *weltanschauung*. In this ideal, the principles of individualism, equality, freedom, rationality and objectivity were most prized. While the operation of such ideals is often understood as a US-specific dynamic, Essed and Trienekens (2008, p. 68) find that Dutch racial discourse is understood as overly politically correct and taboo, but issues of an individually rational, civilized and objective national



belonging function as an ‘instrument of racism [yet while] everyday racism, is being denied . . . white skin colour is one of the criteria of inclusion in the community of ‘real’ European nationals. Also, Steyn and Foster (2008, p. 28) find that the system of South African whiteness maintains both inter-racial advantage and intra-racial distinctions by avoiding race and instead stressing ‘the importance of such values as democracy, social development, non-racialism and non-sexism, reconciliation, equality and freedom’. Hence, operations of supposedly non-racial ideals are used to draw internal boundaries within whiteness across an array of contexts, from the US, to the Netherlands, to South Africa.

In relation to NEA and WRJ, whites who were brought by friends or who had joined the organization recently were often viewed as weaker and susceptible to ‘mainstream’ thought. My field-notes are full of observations I made regarding ‘gossip and backbiting’ about such members – as their ability to make decisions and their commitment to the ‘movement’ were not trusted, due to an overall perception that such members did not ‘understand their own whiteness’ sufficiently. For example, one afternoon in the headquarters of NEA, a senior member I call ‘Derek’ (Marketing agent, age 34, 6 years in NEA) and a younger member named ‘Charles’ (Graduate student, age 25, 3 years in NEA) were both discussing an upcoming event for which press packs had to be designed. Such a job was viewed as vital to the growth and continued existence of NEA. In discussing who could be assigned to oversee the work, the following exchange took place:

*Charles:* [Robert] is nice, he’ll get it done quick, at least I think so.

*Derek:* Well, I would say that we hand it over to uhhh [‘Paul’], but he, ummm, you know [. . .] he’s not the strongest at wading through all the uhhh information out there. [Laughing] I wonder if he knows who he is. He just seems confused sometimes [. . .] like you know, autopilot.

*Author:* What do you mean by ‘autopilot’?

*Derek:* I mean he buys into the mainstream view of race too much. He has no idea what it means to be white in this day and age. That brother is lost, lost right now anyway. It depends, I think he can make it, but he’s got a long way to go.

*Charles:* OK, well, I’ll be in early tomorrow. I’ll see what else he can do.

*Derek:* Yeah [muttering under his breath, but just loud enough to hear], he can make the coffee.

By framing ‘Paul’ (Police officer, age 49, 5 years in NEA) as too easily swayed, his ‘white consciousness’ was called into question, and his low status in the organization made explicit. Although there were whites in

both NEA and WRJ who were marginalized and subordinated due to their lack of ability to act out various aspects of the idealized (hegemonic) forms of whiteness, they still tried to accomplish the hegemonic white ideal. That is, rather than rebelling against these hegemonic ideals, members accept them via their consent and continual attempts toward status ascendancy.

### *Simplistic whiteness*

The third pattern by which both groups created intra-racial distinctions was observed through their valorization of simplicity. Specifically, the ideal white member understood both race and race relations as simple, material observations, to be clouded neither by overly theoretical paradigms nor by lengthy explanations. In everyday practice, this principle was often translated as ‘the simplest explanation is always the best explanation’. For example, in one of my first WRJ meetings, the member I call ‘Michael’ explicitly told me:

We don’t engage in theory here. Our basic approach is that racism is an irrational behavior that causes negative feelings and interferes with cooperation between the races. Instead of working through these feelings, we tend to bottle them up which exacerbates the situation. We work to get through this, it’s simple. No grand designs of society or sociology or whatever. It’s simple and effective. [...] No overblown abstract theorizing.

Accordingly, one member named ‘Frederick’ (Federal employee, age 55, 6 years in WRJ), who earned his doctorate in philosophy and was previously employed as a collegiate professor, told me that a WRJ member’s understanding of the simplicity of racism can be used as a marker for how clearly they understand their own role as an antiracist white person:

Look, I get it, I was once where you are. Theory’s sexy isn’t it? Tempting [...] it’s sexy. Yeah [...] Marx almost got me, but I realized that all these ideas made things more complicated . . . . Racism is about hurting people and exploiting them. That’s the basis of it. No more. I know you want to probably say some very complicated things in your research, but really, it’s just simple. [...] I’ve gotten to the point that I couldn’t do what you do. I mean if I was studying [WRJ] I’d be bored, there’s nothing to find. It is what it is. [...] Any good member [of WRJ] will tell you that. If they don’t then they’re not quite getting it, you know? They’re still hurting and confused about racism, confused about themselves really, and what whites

need to be doing. Make it plain. You know Malcolm X used to say that? 'Make it plain.'

As evidenced, those failing to adopt the 'racism is simple' paradigm are constructed as 'confused' and ignorant as to what they 'need to be doing'. In almost the exact same manner, 'Derek' of NEA stated:

People call it 'racial realism'. It's simple. Blacks are more likely to steal, more likely to commit violent crimes, whites have higher IQs. It's not rocket science. People try to explain these realities away with statistics that adjust and skew the numbers, at least that's what many of your colleagues do in the universities. Then they apply all kinds of ridiculous theory to it. Take Stokely Carmichael, the thug, you know he invented 'structural racism' in order to shift the blame for black violence and no education to whites?

Another member of NEA I call 'Lisa' (Executive secretary, age 36, 2 years in NEA) told me, 'Just look at the realities and don't rearrange things to fit your political leanings. That's the problem with recruiting, most whites don't want to look at the realities of things, they've been brainwashed.'

## **Conclusion**

The implications of this study suggest that white male anxiety over changing race relations and expectations is widespread and resonates strongly in diverse, even supposedly antithetical, locations. White racial identities cannot be distilled into static political formations that are distinct and separable; rather they share a common allegiance to dominant racial (and often racist) ideologies that transcend differing belief systems. Specifically, I advance an understanding of the processes of white identity formation that is sensitized to both white homogeneity and heterogeneity. By conceptualizing whiteness as a configuration of ideological meanings and actual practices, white racial cohesion and difference is seen as a two-pronged process: (1) through positioning those marked as 'white' as essentially different from and superior to those marked as 'non-white', and (2) through marginalizing practices of 'being white' that fail to exemplify dominant ideals.

These findings gesture toward several implications and future directions for research. First, more empirical, firsthand study is required in order to validate the reach of hegemonic whiteness in cross-national settings. Second, more work must be done to tease out the junction of hegemonic whiteness, class, gender, sexuality, and age. That is, do such intersections with the ideals of whiteness temper or

add to the robustness of the hegemonic whiteness model? Third, the data herein point to only one kind of hegemonic whiteness. In this vein, other ideals are certainly possible if not probable, and examining how these various ideals cohere around certain projects to maintain white supremacy is valuable for both theoretical and pragmatic concerns. Fourth and last, the practice of hegemonic whiteness is not static or ahistorical, but rather operates within the regime of 'colour-blindness' and 'post-racialism' that is becoming a defining hallmark of not just the US, but the 'global village'. Examining the processes by which hegemonic whiteness is mutually constitutive of this dominant logic (via education, religion, the media, military, etc.) is certainly germane for those concerned with its ability to obfuscate the material realities of racial inequality.

## Notes

1. These claims are advanced with the awareness that the ethnographic case studies are atypical in relation to 'mainstream' performances of US white racial identity. Yet, outlined herein, the predominant use of similar scripts and schema by 'mainstream' whites certainly gestures toward a generalizable applicability of this framework. For more on how larger networks of frame repertoires elevate individual guilt over collective responsibility and how claims to victimized status become the basis for moral and political movements, see Young (1990) and Brown (1995).

2. The two groups studied were male-dominated (I was able to interview forty-five members of both organizations combined, forty-two of whom were men – 93 per cent). By analysing white men's discourse and behaviours, I am afforded access to the 'seat of power' within whiteness. This highlights the historically shared claims to power between men and whites. By focusing on reconstructions of white masculinity in a white nationalist and a white antiracist organization in our contemporary era, it was painfully obvious that the three female members within these two organizations were constantly marginalized and were disallowed leadership responsibilities. The intersection between hegemonic ideals of whiteness and patriarchy was illuminated by such practices.

3. From May 2006 to June 2007 I spent at least one day a week with members of either NEA or WRJ, or both. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval dictated that all potentially identifying information had to be changed and replaced with pseudonyms. In order to illuminate cultural processes at work, I triangulated both the data and methods via: (1) ethnographic fieldwork (I attended their meetings: 58 meetings in total;  $n=31$  with NEA,  $n=27$  with WRJ), (2) semi-structured in-depth interviews with members ( $n=45$ ), and (3) content analysis inclusive of newsletter issues ( $n=7$ ), flyers ( $n=22$ ) and any textual information such as emails and office memos ( $n=467$ ). My relationship with the group was that of a known participant researcher and all members consented to my presence.

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