

# Contact and the Continuum of White Women's Racial Awareness

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## ABSTRACT

*Investigation into whites' ideas about race tends to focus on attitudes regarding other racial/ethnic groups, policies, or activists with alternative ideologies. This article uses data from interviews with white women, in which I ask about privilege and oppression in general and, specifically, I investigate how their own race shapes their lives. Interracial marriage is used as an example of intimate and sustained contact through which to explore patterns of racial consciousness. Though less reliant on colorblind ideology, it is surprising to find that even with sustained contact through the intimate relationship of marriage, most whites in interracial marriages do not recognize the privileges attached to being white. Examining racial ideology in terms of the way whites think their own race shapes their lives yields a nuanced continuum that moves beyond the two categories of colorblind ideology (a complete failure to recognize one's own racial position) and antiracist ideology (recognition of racial privilege and acting to change racial inequality). This research allows for further understanding of the nuanced ways in which white people view their racial position, challenges contact hypothesis, and adds to our understanding of how racial inequality is perpetuated.*

In general, whites are not sensitive to race in that they do not recognize their own racial privilege and typically lack awareness of how race influences their lives (Bonnilla-Silva, 2003; DuBois, [1903]1999; Frankenburg, 1993; Lewis, 2004). If whites do not recognize how they benefit from whiteness they are more apt to perpetuate false ideals of meritocracy and to neglect the advantages they receive from systemic privilege and oppression. As a group, whites are in a privileged position of historically and presently controlling institutions and political power in the U.S., which allows individuals to unconsciously receive benefits. Contact hypothesis "posits" that increased contact with people of color of the same socio-economic status leads to increased racial awareness or a greater understanding of racial inequality (Sigelman, Welch, & Combs, 1993). This paper explores contact hypothesis in the context of marriage, expanding on the concept to investigate how ideas about race

and recognition of white racial privilege vary for whites in same-race versus interracial marriages. While research tends to examine what people think about racial incidents, policies, and observed racism, this paper explores white racial ideology in terms of how white people think race shapes their own lives and relationships.

Analysis of interview data provides evidence that racial ideology is more nuanced than a dichotomy between complete lack of recognition (colorblind ideology) or recognition of racial privilege and acting to change racial inequality (antiracist ideology). For the women in this sample, ideas about race exist on a continuum that spans colorblind and antiracist ideologies. White women married to black men had greater awareness of how race impacts the lives of people of color than those married to white men. Yet, having increased contact with people of color through marriage did not necessarily mean that these white women recognize their privilege or take action to change racial inequality. Findings illustrate how racial ideology not only varies by marriage type (i.e., same-race or interracial) but by situation. For example, whites may have increased awareness in a setting in which they are the only (or one of few) white people, but this recognition does not translate across situations.

#### DOMINANT CULTURE & RACIAL IDEOLOGY

Racial ideology is “the racially based framework used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001 p. 63). The framework of the dominant group becomes the overarching framework for everyone, yet this does not mean that subordinate groups do not hold or act on oppositional views (hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000). The dominant group position of whites places individual white people in a position of privilege and power compared to people of color (Frankenburg, 1993). The unspoken status of whites leads to their tendency not to recognize their race as important or as an identifier (McKinney & Feagin, 2003). Even though white people normally do not view themselves as a group, their position is used “at strategic moments, [where whites become] a self-conscious group (e.g., race riots, choosing a school for children, hiring a new employee)” (Lewis, 2004 p. 626).

Research tends to view contemporary racial ideology as two ideal types: colorblind and antiracist ideology. While colorblind ideology allows people (in this case whites) to dismiss their position in the racial system of oppression and enables people to blame inequality on individuals, antiracist ideology constantly tries to recognize the position and structural privileges attached to being white (O’Brien, 2003). To be truly antiracist, whites must not only avoid abusing their racial privilege, but use it for good. Antiracism is a step beyond recognition toward action.

Whiteness is an unmarked category that is considered normal—similar to males being the gendered norm—leading people to regard anyone who is not white, as an “other,” and thus marking them in various ways as deviant (Collins, 2004). The experience of groups varies with the overlapping and intersectionality of categories. For example, white women do not experience the same “othering” as women of color; even though white women may experience gender oppression, they enjoy racial privilege that women of color do not (Collins, 2000). Living in a white world means that whites do not have to recognize their own race, view race as part of their identity, or recognize white privilege (DuBois, [1903]1999). While all whites may not have the same experiences *per se*, recognized or not, they all experience privileges given their position in the racial hierarchy (Frankenburg, 1993; Lewis, 2004; McKinney & Feagin, 2003).

Dominant culture perpetuates a myth of meritocracy, where people believe that accomplishments and monetary success are earned due to individual efforts. Combined with a colorblind racial ideology in which people do not “see” race, the commitment to meritocracy leads to the tendency of whites believing that they have earned their position and success whether in the workplace, owning a home, or their overall position in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Frankenburg, 1993; Gallagher, 1997). Whites tend not to acknowledge how race has shaped their opportunities and accomplishments.

Colorblind ideology does not allow whites to recognize the role of race or even the existence of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Frankenburg, 1993; Gallagher, 1997). It does, however, leave room for exceptions and pliability, which allows some people of color to become successful. Successful cases are used to justify the myth of meritocracy by using individual cases as proof that anyone can “make it” regardless of race or circumstance. They are used at the same time to uphold the idea that people of color are inferior by suggesting that people of color who achieve monetary or occupational success are not deserving or qualified, but have received preferential treatment. Colorblind ideology is problematic because it denies the existence of racial privilege and structural inequities, allowing for the rationalization of inequality based on the myth of meritocracy.

By possessing individual meritocratic ideas rooted in the dominant racial ideology, whites tend to dismiss the connections between their own life and that of people of color (Ditomaso, Parks-Yancy & Post, 2003; Frankenburg, 1993). They are usually physically and socially isolated from people of color through residential and job segregation and create—whether consciously or not—homogenous white groups, including neighborhoods, schools, social clubs, and churches (Alldridge, 1999; Conley, 1999; Tomoskovic-Devey, 1993). Therefore, without much individual effort white people are able to maintain racial isolation (Bonilla-Silva,

2003; Lewis, 2004) and perpetuate a colorblind ideology rooted in meritocracy.

While everyone lives within the overarching ideas about race that stem from dominant groups, that does not mean that everyone follows it willingly or to the same degree. Contact hypotheses indicates that whites develop more accepting attitudes towards people of color when they have contact with those of the same or greater socio-economic status (Sigelman, Welch, & Combs, 1993). According to this research, white women in interracial relationships may experience temporary placement in a lower status group by association with their spouse and children (Dalmage, 2000; Frankenburg, 1993; Rosenblatt, Karis, & Powell, 1995). While whites may experience racism when they are with their spouse or children of color, placement in the lower status is temporary—or situational—because they continue to hold privilege as whites (Frankenburg, 1993). Frankenburg (1993) finds that white women who have relationships with people of color still rely on the myth of meritocracy by blaming people of color (both individuals and families) for their circumstances. However, because of their intimate relationships, the women in Frankenburg's study have some understanding of how race shapes societal and individual dynamics. They may express some understanding of larger inequities (e.g. disparities in wealth across racial groups) and individual level dynamics (e.g. examples of overt racism), but they rely on colorblind ideology to explain the circumstances of people of color. Instead of employing a structural racial analysis, these whites blame individual people of color for their circumstances.

The connection between the sustained contact of interracial marriages and racial ideology is under debate. Moran (2001) states that “far from being colorblind, [interracial] couples must confront the impact that growing up in a racially segregated and culturally distinct world has on their relationship” (p. 121). Dalmage (2000) argues that people in interracial families are closer to the colorline and therefore experience restricted interactions and opportunities to a greater degree than those in same-race relationships. Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell (1995) find that whites in interracial marriages with children think about their racial identity more, challenging assumptions about whiteness (e.g., whiteness being an un-raced category that does not have group power attached to it) when they are confronted with racism as a couple, or with regard to their spouse or their children. According to past literature, being in an interracial marriage—particularly when there are children—increases white awareness of racial inequality (Childs, 2005; Foeman & Nance, 1999; Moran, 2001).

This article builds on previous studies to explore how white women in interracial and same-race marriages understand the way race shapes their lives. Previous literature focuses on situations of overt racism instead of the recognition of race within relationships (Rosenblatt et al., 1995). It tends to examine feminists and

activists who do not necessarily represent the general white population (Frankenburg, 1993); or it observes antiracists in an effort to examine gradations of activist ideologies (Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; O'Brien, 2003). This paper fills a gap in the literature by investigating the range of recognition of race and racial privilege among whites (activist or not) and the way statements about race in their own lives display varied levels of recognition of how race shapes lives both for whites and for people of color. As a first step in increasing white racial awareness in the general population, all levels of racial recognition need to be taken into account and further understood. Comparing the ideas of whites in same-race and interracial marriages who are not activists allows for further examination of contact theories and ideas about race.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

This paper stems from a larger project focusing on how inequality of race, gender, and resources translates into marital dynamics. It analyzes data from interviews with 17 white women married to either white or black men living in the Atlanta, Georgia area. Because each racial/ethnic group has a different history in the U.S., distinguishing between them is important (Browne, 1999). Black/white marriage is the focus here because black and white people have long been perceived as occupying different ends of the racial hierarchy in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). This has shaped partner selection and the ethnic hierarchy attached to racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Spickard, 1989). Comparing ideas about race for white women in interracial and same-race relationships highlights the complexity of race within relationships.

Women were interviewed for the larger project in order to focus on marital dynamics from their particular perspective and to examine how structural inequities and privileges specifically shape the experiences and ideas of women. While gender remains entangled with race (Collins, 2000), interviewing women allows this paper to parse out covert racial dynamics of relationships from those specifically related to gender. This paper focuses on the racial ideology of white women to explore how ideas about race are more nuanced than previously thought and to suggest that sympathy is not the same as recognizing one's own racial privilege.

Nine of the women in this sample were married to white men and eight were married to black men. One of the women in a same-race marriage and one in an interracial marriage had previously been married to white men; they discussed those relationships along with their current marriage. The women ranged from

age 26 to 60 and had been married for six months to over 30 years. All but three had children; six had children who were now adults living outside the home. Five of the women had children under the age of five and two of the women were pregnant at the time of the interview. The majority of the women were in the paid workforce, with four of the women having no formal involvement in the workforce. Six of those in the paid labor market worked part-time and one was retired. The women were predominantly Christian (10/17), with two of those identifying as Catholic. Three of the women in the sample were Muslim, one was Jewish, and three did not identify with any religion. The sample was mainly college-educated and middle- to upper-income, with two people having annual household incomes below or near the national median.

**Table 1. Select Sample Demographics.**

	Marriage Type	Number of Children	Age**	Formal Education Level	Household Income**	Religion
Helen*	Interracial	2	50-59	High School	\$10,000-30,000	Muslim
First marriage	Same-race	0				
Amy	Interracial	0	30-39	Ph.D.	\$90,000-99,999	n/a
Linda	Interracial	2	60	College	\$70,000-79,999	Mennonite
Tracy	Interracial	2	30-39	College	\$80,000-89,999	Methodist
Megan	Interracial	2	30-39	College	> \$200,000	Muslim
Natalia	Interracial	3	30-39	College	\$160,000-179,999	Muslim
Rebecca	Interracial	4	50-59	Ph.D., MBA	> \$200,000	Episcopalian
Leah	Interracial	0	29	Masters	\$40,000-49,999	Christian
Amanda	Same-race	0	38	College	\$60,000-69,999	n/a
First marriage	Same-race	1				
Jennifer	Same-race	0	26	College	\$80,000-89,999	Methodist
Erin	Same-race	1	30-39	Masters	\$100,000-119,999	Methodist
Lynn	Same-race	2	41	College	\$90,000-99,999	Christian
Bonnie	Same-race	2	42	College	\$180,000-200,000	n/a
Elizabeth	Same-race	3	50-59	Masters	\$70,000-79,999	Catholic
Connie	Same-race	2	50-59	Masters	> \$200,000	Jewish
Lisa	Same-race	3	50-59	College	\$180,000-200,000	Catholic
Andrea	Same-race	8	50-59	College	\$80,000-89,999	Methodist

\*All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

\*\* Respondents filled out a questionnaire asking for a range of age and income levels. Exact numbers are used where volunteered.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Advertisements placed in several local newspapers were used to recruit respondents. Potential respondents were told that the researcher was interested in understanding how race and gender shape intimate relationships, particularly marriage. Multiple snowball sampling was used to help minimize the probability that respondents were in the same social networks. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to over two hours and took place in the women's homes or in a convenient public setting. They were one-on-one without the husband or children present when possible to promote open discussion; however, child-care issues resulted in children being present for three of the interviews. This paper draws from all of the data, but particularly from a series of questions asking whether the women considered any groups in the U.S. to be privileged or disadvantaged and how so, and how they saw race affecting their relationships with their husband, family, coworkers, and friends.

Analysis was conducted using a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).<sup>1</sup> The strength of this method is that it allows categories to emerge from the data. With this analytic approach in mind, analysis was conducted in several stages that built on the findings of the previous. This iterative process began immediately during each interview and continued throughout data collection. Systematic coding was based on theory, beginning with broad codes of colorblindness and antiracism (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Huberman & Miles, 1998). Once codes were assigned to disaggregate the data, each transcription was coded in an iterative process; in other words, each line and phrase was read and coded with multiple passes through each interview transcription (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The iterative coding facilitated the data reduction stage of analysis (Berg, 2004; Huberman & Miles, 1994).

This was followed by the data display stage where responses in overarching codes were sorted into different emerging sub-categories using visual diagramming (i.e., the network function in Atlas.ti). More specifically, codes were examined focusing

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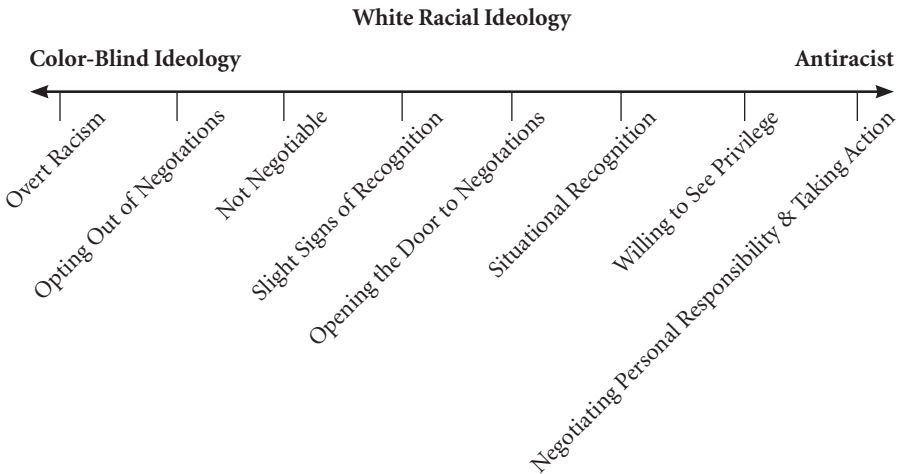
<sup>1</sup>Informed consent was obtained and the identity of individuals was protected by omitting names and any identifying information from the report. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher or paid professional and stored as hard copies and as electronic copies in a software program designed for qualitative storage and analysis (Atlas.ti). Memos written after each interview provided an opportunity for initial reflection on the responses. Early interviews helped form the semi-structured interview guide (e.g., the addition of specific follow-up questions such as: How do you typically spend holidays? Has this changed since you first got married?).

on specific groups of people or specific codes— for example, viewing responses for white women in same-race marriages separately from those in interracial marriage, or examining quotes that correspond with two codes such as those about work and racial ideology. Codes were examined according to how they overlap with one another and then quotes were arranged visually into emerging sub-categories. For example, the responses coded for colorblind racial ideology for white women were examined and sorted into different categories. Similarities, differences, and relationships were explored for white women married to white men and for those married to black men. Further analysis was completed to find out how, when, and why colorblind ideology plays out. Sample responses in the text provide evidence of various patterns identified through analysis.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data reveal that the women interviewed held a range of beliefs, which were categorized on a continuum between colorblind and antiracist ideologies ranging from women not recognizing the role of race at all to women articulating how race affects every daily event.

Figure 1. Continuum of Racial Ideology





Within this sample the women did not make overt racist remarks; racism was covert, relying on colorblind ideology with variations of awareness. As explained in detail below, some women relied fully upon colorblind racism by “opting out of negotiating” their own racial position. Further along the continuum, but still using colorblind logic, some whites viewed the world through a “non-negotiable” lens, which recognizes race only in terms of others being raced. Another outlook is identified as “slight signs of recognition,” where those in same-race marriages recognized that being in an interracial marriage would be difficult, but fell back on the myth of meritocracy and colorblind ideology.

Those who had increased recognition of the role of race and had “opened the door to negotiations” were similar to those with “slight signs of recognition.” Race was understood as important, yet their own whiteness was not taken into account and other factors were used to justify racial inequality. The difficulty of identifying recognition or its absence, as seen with these two categories, provides additional evidence that ideas about race are on a continuum. Another lens is “situational recognition,” where whites recognized their race in particular settings, but this recognition did not translate across circumstances. Finally, toward the antiracist end of the spectrum, some women expressed a willingness to recognize privilege, but did not take action to change racial inequality. Each of these racial ideologies is discussed in detail in the following sections.

Interestingly, for each type of racial ideology outlined in the continuum there were not any patterns related to whether or not women had children. Having close contact with an interracial spouse or children did not mean that women had greater racial recognition or took action to change inequities. Those that did take action were antiracists because they not only recognized their privilege, but constantly tried not to abuse their racial position. In sum, ideas about race were more nuanced than the two categories of colorblind and antiracist. Variations on the continuum are discussed throughout the remainder of the article. As expected, most of the white women in same-race relationships relied on a colorblind ideology and most women in interracial marriages had some level of racial recognition. However, it is surprising to find that sustained contact through interracial marriage did not necessarily translate into higher levels of recognition.

### *Variations of Colorblind Ideology*

Analysis supports past findings that whites who are racially isolated, in this case in same-race marriages, do not recognize the role of race in their lives and espouse a colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Those in this category did not express the same level of colorblindness; variations ranged from not recognizing race at

all, to acknowledging that race exists but thinking it is not important in their lives, and thinking that interracial relationships are more difficult than same-race marriages, but not acknowledging the direct role of race.

*Opting out of negotiations*

All of the women married to white men expressed some level of discomfort when asked how race shapes their lives. Some laughed uncomfortably or were unsure how race related to them as whites. Amanda, a part-time lab manager married to a white man, provides evidence of this opting out theme. When asked “How do you think your race and your husband’s race has impacted your relationship with each other?” she was taken aback by the question.

Excuse me, our race? Boy, I don’t know, I mean, you know that’s a hard question to answer I guess. Um . . . I mean . . . I don’t think it has an impact. . . . You know I think that close relationships like that are more closer than that. I think that race is kind of a superficial thing really, there’s cultural things that are associated with race that are less superficial. Um. . . yeah. I can say I wouldn’t see that our race has any impact on our relationship.

Amanda then said “No” to each of the follow-up questions asking how race affects relationships in her life, and did not provide further explanation when prompted. The opting out theme was evident from expressions of confusion, never thinking about being white or a white couple, and/or the women outright stated that race did not have any influence on any aspect of their lives.

Others expressed confusion along with this belief that race did not affect their life or relationships. When asked how race affects her relationship with her spouse, Erin, a part-time nurse, responded after a long pause:

My race? . . . [long pause] um, you’re saying as opposed to if we were both black or both Asian or both . . .? I don’t see that it has. I mean I guess if we were from a different nationality and that far away from our families, like if we were both Pakistani or whatever and our families were away, I think that would be a lot harder ‘cause we wouldn’t have that support group. But if we were both black and our, my [family] lives in South Georgia and his is here, I’m not sure what difference that would make.

Incoherence when asked about race has been interpreted as an illustration that race is an emotional issue (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Responses like the above from Erin are particularly striking since the women in same-race marriages were likely not completely socially isolated, but held jobs where they probably interacted with people of color on a regular basis (e.g., nursing or teaching). Even with presumed contact in the workforce, the women did not think their whiteness shaped their experiences. In contrast, *none* of the women in interracial families expressed this extreme level of colorblind ideology.

### *Not negotiable*

Along with this true colorblind ideology, others recognized race but did not indicate how race had any effect on their *own* lives. Supporting white as the normative race, respondents recognized race only as it applied to others. For example, Andrea was a retired teacher married to a white man she met in college. She was a teacher while her four boys were young before leaving the paid workforce to home-school her four younger daughters. She stated:

We're both Caucasian so, I have friends that are married that are married to . . . I don't know. I don't really know if it would. I've never thought about race, because in my family there's a lot of mixed marriages. I have a cousin married to a black man, I have cousins married to foreign women, well that they met when they were in military. So, it never was an issue. I didn't really look at him as being, that he was white and I was white and I don't know if that impacts anything.

This illustrates that even though Andrea said that she had never thought about race, she identified certain couples as interracial or raced. She did not think race was connected to the conditions or circumstances that she or others experienced. While many acknowledged race by discussing "mixed marriages," they also stated that they did not "see" their husband as white or that their whiteness related to their relationships or to life opportunities. This is in contrast to ideologies of awareness (discussed later), where whites made the connection between the experiences of people of color and their own. Lack of recognition reinforced the view that whites do not need to recognize whiteness. Those who expressed this non-negotiable level of colorblind ideology were all in same-race marriages.

Several women pointed to socioeconomic status, values and other indicators as influencing position and mobility in life, but not race. An example is when

Erin was asked if certain groups of people are privileged and disadvantaged, Erin responded that inequality stems from family values. Ideas about family values and what is considered normal, correct, and mainstream were used to discuss race without directly doing so (Bonilla-Silva, 2001); the coded language of culture relied on stereotypes and conceptions of different racial groups to covertly discuss race.

I think what you're born into, yeah, makes a difference. I know in college I helped to do the Big Brother Big Sister program and had the same little girl for like five years and she was obviously going through a much tougher situation. I was born to two parents who loved me and both had jobs and [who took care of me]. But um, it ... I think that impacts your opportunities along the way. But um, I didn't have to worry about where I was going to live or how to, I had good role models who kind of helped to go through school and to get married before I had children and to expect people to be . . . like a husband who's nice to me. Whereas I think my little girl [at Big Brother Big Sister] in particular, she got pregnant when she was younger and she was looking for someone who she felt loved her because I think she didn't get it from home. She didn't have a daddy at home and her mom was on drugs and she was looking for an outside, someone to care about her. Even if it was a temporary thing, like the little boy who was in and out of her life. She ends up being 14, 15 years old with a little one to take care of. So I think you can be born into more or less than I had and have equal. Like I had, have, role models or people that care about you and help take care of you.

Here, Erin recognized that she has had certain privileges—a home and employed parents—and credits strong role models and a stable family unit. Erin's statement is evidence of a pattern in which women stressed that success was based on family values. This includes the assumption that the perceived inability to provide certain kinds of support (e.g., a two parent family and financial resources) is equivalent to not loving one's child. This type of colorblind ideology corresponds to one of the manifestations that Bonilla-Silva (2001) identifies in which whites blame inequality on values, claiming that racial/ethnic minorities are not able to achieve success because they lack the "correct" family values. Those expressing this ideology recognized privileges and disadvantages, but did not tie them to race or explicitly acknowledge their own position.

*Slight signs of recognition*

Others expressed a mix of colorblind ideology with some recognition or awareness of race. Several in white marriages indicated some level of awareness when they noted that it would be more difficult to be in an interracial relationship than married to someone of the same race. When asked how race affects her relationship with her husband, Jennifer, a school teacher married to a white man, said:

My race? . . . um, well we relate more I would think. I don't know. I've never been in an interracial, um, relationship. I would think we would relate more. Um. . . I have no idea. Um . . . I think more so our family background [is important]. We have the same values and morals and I'm not so sure we would if we were in different races. Um. . . just because, I don't know, I have no idea, I have no, I don't know. Um. . . goodness. I'm trying to think. Um. . . you know I have no, I don't know. I mean I guess just relating more to each other, but I'm not even sure anymore, like. . . goodness.

While Jennifer thought that being in an interracial marriage would be harder than a same-race marriage, she expressed confusion at the question. Those who made these statements conveyed discomfort by turning their response away from race to socioeconomic status, values, or in this case, family background. Another trend in the data demonstrated the use of othering: respondents discussed other racial/ethnic groups instead of addressing why it was easier to be white than a person of color, or in a white marriage compared to an interracial marriage. These respondents talked about race but did not see themselves as raced. This group was on the cusp between the colorblind ideology and awareness ideology. They were not able to explain or articulate the effect of race on their lives beyond using coded language (e.g., family values) or focusing on the difficulty of being in an interracial marriage.

Others on the cusp displayed some racial awareness while relying on a colorblind ideology. This recognition was not conscious or stated outright. Tracy, married to a black man, discussed the difficulties of merging two families.

For us, the biggest challenge, we're an interracial couple, and people have asked "Is it hard, [being in an] interracial [relationship]?" And it's not interracial that's hard. It's combining two families that's so hard. Like with Ryan's family that's so completely different from mine it's so hard to get an understanding of that. And

it's not, even my sister, she's not [in] an interracial marriage. Her husband's family is always running late, they never have plans and their plans change from one second- and that's not how my family is. It's so hard for families to mix because you have set traditions and that's what you do. And another thing with my, and I know it drives Ryan nuts, once you do something you keep doing it. So every year we go to the beach, for Thanksgiving we go to Chicago to visit our friends, you know. And that's not how Ryan's family did stuff. But you know, trying to mix that and accept it. I think that's the hardest thing about marriage. Cause everybody's traditions are important to them, and trying to make sure everybody gets their way is just hard.

As Tracy discussed “traditions,” she failed to envision how these traditions might be directly tied to racial and status positions in U.S. society. She recognized that merging families was difficult, but did not connect any differences in experience to race. Her family's ability to take a beach vacation every year is related to their socioeconomic status, which is linked to life circumstances associated with race. Tracy later discussed several issues heightened by being in an interracial marriage, such as dealing with her parents and extended family. However, when asked outright, Tracy did not attribute her experiences to her whiteness or to her husband being black.

### *Increased Recognition and Awareness*

All of the women in interracial marriages expressed some level of awareness, even if some of their ideas about race relied on a colorblind ideology. None of these women were taken aback when asked specifically about race. Even when they stated that race did not affect their relationships, they later indicated how others' racism affected them and how their own privilege opened doors for their spouse and for themselves. Recognition of race in the women's lives and their family lives varied. There were patterns of awareness of the impact of race, but not articulation of the role of whiteness. Others recognized that race shaped their life or the lives of others, but questioned whether the inequality was tied to race or something else such as socioeconomic status or values. Full awareness occurred when a woman conveyed that her whiteness shaped her life and the lives of others. Even among those who displayed recognition there was variation between awareness without action and with action. Even recognizing race and having sustained contact through marriage to a black man, some saw others as racialized and penalized, yet were not

cognizant of their own privilege. Whites using this lens indicated that people of color face racism and discrimination, but they did not make a connection between the oppression of people of color and white privilege; they neglected to recognize the ways they as whites benefit from the oppression of people of color.

### *Opening the door to negotiations*

Most of the women who were aware of the ways race is linked to opportunities and experiences were married to black men, but a few women who were married to white men had some level of racial awareness. They made statements indicating that race was important, but did not recognize their role as a white person and often relied on codes—such as family values—to discuss race. The expressions at this level were similar to those on the cusp of colorblind ideology. The difficulty in placing these two groups provides further evidence that ideology is a continuum. The partially blind statements recognize race at some level, but inequality was rationalized by blaming other factors rather than explicitly linking inequities to race. Statements that were partially aware, on the other hand, displayed some recognition of the discrimination that people of color face, but did not recognize the benefits of whiteness.

Lynn provided evidence of this trend in the data when she stated that she thinks interracial marriage would be much harder than her white marriage because of reactions from family and society.

So, um, for us, I just don't, I don't think I married Bill because he was white. I think, I know I married Bill because I felt like he was the right person and he felt like I was the person for him. It has totally made our lives easier though just being the same-race. I mean there's just so many prejudices [and] I think there would have been in our family. I can't imagine really how that would have gone with my family or with his had we been of different races. So I know it's made the road a whole lot easier. Could we have done it? You know I'd like to think so if we were not [the same-race]]. . . So I think for us it's made the road a whole lot easier. I don't, it wasn't a defining factor. It was just we happened to be the same-race when we met and we fell in love and felt like it was the right thing. It would have been a whole lot harder had we not been the same-race.

*Interviewer: Why do you think it would be harder?*

Well, I think from the family standpoint. I think acceptance from family and I think living in the South. People still look at you and then you have children and it's always, and I don't want to say always, but there's still that undercurrent I think. And as far as being accepted and a circle of friends, I don't know. And maybe my perception is off, maybe I'm 10 years behind the times, but that's still what I see. I think it's still an issue, unfortunately.

Lynn expressed that society treats those in interracial marriages negatively compared to those in same-race marriages, and thus has some understanding that people of color face prejudice. While she conveyed this and mentioned that it was easier to be in a same-race family, she did not display awareness of *how* being in a white family was easier beyond dealing with less discrimination. Those that had this type of awareness recognized racial discrimination as a reality, but did not demonstrate how they as whites were connected and how they benefited from systems of oppression.

Those married to black men also displayed varied levels of recognition often not reflective of the role of whiteness. They expressed uncertainty of whether inequalities are due to race or other factors. Linda, a white woman married to a black man for over 30 years, provided an example of this when she said:

In my teaching you know I can definitely relate to the black kids I think a lot better because of my experience with my family. And they. . . they understood that I was NOT prejudiced because of that. Which some kids, will, um, I've been accused of being um prejudiced in school, ah, a few times. But normally it was, then there'd be someone who'd say crazy, she couldn't be, crazy, because she's married to a black man (laughs).

Linda and her husband were both college-educated teachers. Throughout the interview Linda stated that her life has been shaped by her interracial family, particularly in terms of where she lives, what she reads, and what she watches on television. However, other portions of the interview indicate that Linda was not conscious of her whiteness in terms of racial privilege. Even though contact hypothesis suggests that increased awareness is expected because of sustained intimate contact as part of a black/white interracial family, those with this lens often disregarded their privileged racial position or situation. This was evident in the quote above where Linda stated that she must not be racist or prejudiced because she herself was part of an interracial family—she did not recognize that her white-



ness continues to afford her certain privileges in society even while being married to a black man. This is surprising given the longevity and intimacy of her contact with people of color.

*Situational recognition*

Another trend emphasizes the complexity of racial ideology and demonstrates how one can recognize their whiteness in specific situations, particularly when they are a numerical minority. However, whites' circumstantial ability or willingness to recognize their own race did not necessarily translate across events. Jennifer provided evidence of this situational recognition. She worked as an elementary school teacher in a predominantly black school and had some racial awareness at school, but not in different areas of her life. Following up on questions about race and the family, Jennifer said the following when asked if and how her and her husband's race influences relationships at work:

Yes. Because I'm a minority where I work. So that's a big deal. Um, that's really hard when I go to work everyday. Um, it's, I mean I love my job, but everyday I'm always a minority. And sometimes I have to remember, you know you have to kind of like change, change frame of mind and change that, your focus because you're in a different race. And um, some of the people I deal with don't have the same kinds of family background or whatever so, um my issues are very minimal compared to what they go through daily. That's a big one, a big change.

*Interviewer: You said you have to change your frame of mind, your frame of reference before you go to work. What do you mean by that?*

Um . . . language. Um. . . the way I interact with the people, the way I talk to the kids, the way I talk to their parents . . . lets see, what else. It's also 90% free lunch, or reduced or free lunch so that's another piece of the puzzle. Like I said, I mean, how do I say, I mean I guess I'm very few of the whole staff that's young, married, husband works, I work, we have a house, we have a car, two cars, you know we have a dog. Sounds kind of like the little all-American lifestyle. Even though it's really not for us, but for them, coming into our environment, you know. I have to really watch

it, you know, the blond hair, you know, Caucasian girl comes into our school and thinks she can change everything. And that's not how it is. That's not what I think. That's what their frame of mind is. So I have to really work hard.

She later states:

Otherwise [outside of this work situation] I never even thought about it. I never even thought twice about being a white couple or a white girl or anything like that. It's, [talking now, is] probably the first time that it's ever really hit me.

Jennifer did not indicate how her whiteness affected her marriage, family life or friendships; she did not explicitly convey an understanding of the role of her own whiteness in the rest of her life. While she recognized her higher socio-economic status, she did not associate her privileges with race.

#### *Willing to see privilege*

Unlike the white women in same-race marriages, there were some in interracial families who recognized their own privilege. They acknowledged that their whiteness provided advantages, particularly in helping their black spouse. Amy, a professor married to a black teacher, demonstrated this "willing to see privilege" lens when she said:

I don't know, I think, I think, we can sort of notice a place where doors have opened for him that wouldn't necessarily have been opened before [if he wasn't with me]. In ways that are kind of disheartening, and at the same time I'm glad that doors are opening for him, but I'm not glad that that's the reason, [because of benefits from my being white].

Another woman, Helen evidenced this as well:

It [his being black and my being white] has profoundly affected me as far as his relationship with [the] white [world] and finding out about white. Yeah, I think it has affected him that he's seen how I can negotiate this system, how I can find my way through so easily cause it's my world [because I'm white]. And, he has learned

a lot from me about how to negotiate and learned that he can do it too if he knows the rules, but of course he's never been taught the rules [because he is black]. But if he knows how the system works he can negotiate it too. No way he could have found that out except to be around me.

This theme illustrates recognition that knowledge, advantages, and opportunities were available to the women because of their whiteness. Yet this focus remains on how white privilege has helped their spouse, not necessarily themselves.

### *Negotiating personal responsibility*

Helen took the willingness to see privilege a step further than any of the others. That Helen fits into more than one place on the continuum indicates the nuanced nature of racial ideology. Not only did racial recognition vary between the two ideal types of colorblind and antiracist as well as marriage type, but also for each person based on particular experiences. Helen was married to a black man, and along with raising her children, she explicitly made antiracism her life's work leading a non-governmental organization focused on issues of racial equity. She discussed the effect of race on her life and her family's life throughout the interview. This level of awareness involved being conscious of white privilege in every aspect of life and working towards social change.

Race is a part of everything, especially here in the United States. There's just no way around it. I think my relationship with [my black husband] has opened my eyes 100 percent with regard to racism and race being, permeating everything. I didn't have awareness when I lived in the white world [before we were married], I didn't have to. I have a lot of awareness of it now. I just know that the water is made up of it. We're swimming in the water and that's what the water is made up of. So it affects everything. It, [race] affects the reason that he grew up the way he did, the reason that he has the jobs that he has, the reason that our life doesn't fit the grid. It's the reason for everything. Everything that he experiences in his life and everything his family experiences have to do with their confrontation with racism and race [being black]. It's just everything if you're black. That's the way I see it and that's the way, if not for race and racism, what he would be doing with his life, probably something entirely different.

The awareness that race permeates everything and shapes opportunities and experiences for everyone along with consciously working to combat racial inequality makes someone an antiracist. Someone who is antiracist not only has heightened awareness, but tries daily to be conscious of their privilege and actively work to combat racism.

## CONCLUSION

Findings from this research indicate that being in sustained contact through marriage does not inevitably equate to recognition of the salience of race. This paper expands on research on colorblind ideology and white antiracists to start understanding the role of race in white people's lives instead of focusing on attitudes towards other races, policies and programs that are aimed at racial/ethnic minority groups, and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Ditomaso, Parks-Yancy & Post, 2003). This paper focuses on recognition of one's own race, comparing the racial ideology of white women in close intimate contact with people of color through marriage and those in same-race relationships.

While some findings correspond to past work that suggests most racially isolated whites hold a colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), this research provides a more nuanced view of white racial ideology. Patterns of colorblind ideology are evident for those in same-race relationships, yet analysis also reveals a continuum of racial recognition ranging from lack of recognition of the role of race to awareness that race permeates every aspect of life. The position whites hold as the dominant group in the racial/ethnic hierarchy allows most whites to ignore *how* they have received what they have (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Frankenburg, 1993; Gallagher, 1997), which is further illustrated by the findings of this article. This paper is important because it describes white ideology and alludes to how whites who choose not to acknowledge their own role in the racial hierarchy are exercising their own racial privilege.

Contact hypothesis posits that whites who have contact with people of color of the same or higher socioeconomic status have more open and accepting attitudes regarding other racial/ethnic groups (Sigelman & Welch, 1993). Evidence from this study illustrates that whites in intimate relationships with people of color had some level of racial recognition of their whiteness and some awareness of the experiences of people of color. In this sample, those married to black men were *more likely* to recognize their race and racial privilege, but just being in an interracial marriage or having children from that relationship did not mean whites were necessarily aware of their own privilege. While some women recognized that race is important, few recognized their position of privilege as a white person.

This project illustrates that those in situations where they were a racial minority (i.e. the only white person among a group of black men and women) were more aware of their race in that particular situation. But many also expressed a color-blind ideology where they did not recognize their own role in the situation. This is important because research that focuses on antiracist beliefs and experiences finds that white antiracists stress the importance of close relationships with people of color “that are not superficial and exploitative but rather respectful, sincere, and deep” and in which whites are held accountable for their racist behavior (Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004 p. 26). Findings here indicate that racial recognition was greater for those in intimate relationships with people of color, but these relationships were not always enough to move people towards trying to change or challenge inequities. This may be because white women in interracial marriages are able to maintain racial privilege and move within realms where there is no visible connection to people of color, even though they are in an interracial marriage.

This paper extends existing research by focusing on the range of ideas whites have regarding their own race. Taking steps to eradicate racial inequality and racism in society and relationships requires whites to want to change the system, which includes recognizing white privilege and the corresponding oppression of people of color. To get to the antiracist stage whites must recognize the privileges they receive from their whiteness. This research is an important first step in understanding the negotiation of race for white women and particularly in understanding the types of recognition whites have. It may influence future research focusing on how these levels of racial recognition can be changed. While husbands were not absent from this study since they influence their spouses’ attitudes, experiences, and ideology, future research should extend this analysis to focus specifically on understanding the experiences and racial ideology of men and women of various racial/ethnic groups and to further explore how one’s spouse’s ideology affects one’s racial ideology. Because whites in even a relationship as intimate as marriage do not necessarily recognize how race affects them, future research should also explore the types of relationships that foster antiracism and what types of action in particular lead to challenging and diminishing societal inequities.

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