When Whites Flock Together: The Social Psychology of White Habitus

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ABSTRACT

Residential and social hypersegregation of whites from blacks furthers a socialization process we refer to as “white habitus.” “White habitus” geographically and psychologically limits whites’ chances of developing meaningful relationships with blacks and other minorities. Using data from the 1997 Survey of College Students’ Social Attitudes and the 1998 Detroit Area Study on White Racial Ideology to make our case, we show that geographically, whites’ segregated lifestyles psychologically leads them to develop positive views about themselves and negative views about racial others. First, we document the high levels of whites’ residential and social segregation. Next, we examine how whites interpret their own self-segregation. Finally, we examine how whites’ segregation shapes racial expressions, attitudes, cognitions, and even a sense of aesthetics as illustrated by whites’ views on the subject of interracial marriage.

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KEY WORDS: inter-marriage, social identity, social closure, white habitus, prejudice, residential segregation, whiteness.

Introduction

In this article we attempt to explain the group psychology of whites by relying on a rather simple proposition: a group that lives in a residential and social milieu that maximizes in-group interaction and minimizes interaction with members of out-groups tends to develop similar views about out-groups and strengthens the in-group sense of "solidarity-groupness." Traditionally, this argument has been used to explain the subcultures of poor and minority groups living in segregated communities. Examples of this include the "culture of poverty" argument prevalent in the 1960s (Harrington 1962; Lewis 1966; Moynihan 1969) and its multiple descendents in the 1970s through the 1990s, articulated by conservative commentators such as Murray (1984) and Mead (1986), liberals such as Wilson (1987) and Auletta (1999), and even by radicals such as West (1993). This argument views ghettoized blacks as culturally pathological (Dickerson 2004; Henry 1994; Steele 1998; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003), developing a unique (problematic) cultural style (Majors and Billson 1993), an oppositional identity (Ogbu 1978; Valenzuela 1999), or even a "code of the street" to guide their public interactions (Anderson 1990).

While these pathological depictions of minorities' cultures have severe limitations (Bonilla-Silva 1993:25-48; Gans 1995), most sociologists agree that social and spatial isolation of groups leads to the development of group cohesion and identity formation. Moreover, because whites experience even greater levels of social and spatial isolation than blacks and other minorities (Massey and Denton 1993) the "racial problems" related to their isolation must be at least as consequential as those produced by that of minorities.

Current research focuses almost entirely on the way segregation has resulted in black sub-culture and collective identity. However, relatively little has been written about the active processes involved in the production and maintenance of white identities and white culture. In fact, except for discussions of whites' racial attitudes, the bulk of the sociological and social psychological literature has remained curiously silent on race matters pertaining to whites (Hunt et al. 2000). Hence, because of their silence about whites' racialization (Omi and Winant 1994), most social scientists have perpetuated the mythology that minorities are "raced" and experience "race problems" while ignoring white identity and culture.
Recently, a number of researchers have argued that whiteness is a social identity that serves to define individuals, determine behavior, and evaluate status (Carter 1997; Doane 1997; Ferber 1998, 1999; Mills 2003; Myers 2003; Patterson 1998). Frankenburg (1993), for example, argues that, “whiteness does have content in as much as it generates norms, ways of understanding history, ways of thinking about self and other, and even ways of thinking about the notion of culture itself” (1993:231). Nevertheless, once ethnic groups gain admittance into the white community, the ideology of whiteness and its privilege become normalized to the point of imperceptibility (Anderson 2003; McIntosh 1992; Perry 2001; Lipsitz 1998). Whiteness quietly becomes second nature or habitual. Simply put, whiteness constitutes normality and acceptance without stipulating that to be white is to be normal and right.

Using theoretical ideas from the social identity literature and Bourdieu’s work, we argue that whites form a social group with a distinct social-psychological experience shaped by their “white habitus.” To explore how the “white habitus” shapes whites’ cognitions, we examine data from the 1997 Survey of College Students’ Social Attitudes and the 1998 Detroit Area Study on White Racial Ideology. Specifically, we examine whites’ levels of social isolation and residential segregation from blacks; how whites interpret their isolation and segregation; and, finally, how whites’ segregation and isolation affects their racial views on the subject of interracial marriage.

**Literature Review**

Social identity theory (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1979) examines the effect that social forces have on individual identity processes and, reciprocally, how these processes impact larger social structures. Because the social world is complex, individuals classify themselves and others into distinct categories in order to simplify the number of social stimuli that they encounter daily (Tajfel 1978). Social identity theory contends that individuals’ identities are partially based on membership in significant social categories.

Individuals possess a set of social identities (e.g., male/female, conservative/liberal, etc.) and use these identities to help determine their positions and those of others in the social structure (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For excellent studies that document the struggles of non-yet-white groups such as Irish, Jews, and Italians, to gain the privileges of whiteness, see Allen 1994 and 1997; Brodkin 1988; Guglielmo 2003; Ignatiev 1995; and Roediger 1991.
It is not surprising that recent studies confirm that racial identity — a significant form of identity — serves as a mechanism by which strong categorization occurs (Goar and Sell 2005). This categorization creates in-group and out-group dichotomies. Because there is a tendency to treat individual members of an out-group as a unified social category (“All blacks are . . .” “All women are . . .”), interactions may be based on group membership rather than individual identity (Brewer and Miller 1984).

While reactions based on in-group identity can include negativity toward out-groups, it is not a necessary condition of such identity (Brewer 1999; Feshbach 1994). Nevertheless, as discussed by Brewer (1999:438), social differentiation and the subsequent in-group/out-group designation often provide an arena for conflict and negativity: “Ultimately, many forms of discrimination and bias may develop not because out-groups are hated, but because positive emotions such as admiration, sympathy and trust are reserved for the in-group and withheld from the out-group.” Indeed, Blumer (2000:184) notes that racial prejudice between groups is not a direct result of the interactions between those groups, but of a “collective or shared attitude” directed from one group to another. He places importance on the group’s collective experiences that work together to sustain and reproduce race prejudice.

Though whites hardly think of themselves as possessing a racial identity, current research suggests that white identity becomes salient when white dominance is challenged (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Myers 2003; Taylor 1995). Weis and Lombardo (2002) recently showed that white, working-class males in Buffalo, NY, commonly expressed frustration toward other racial groups when competition for area jobs increased. The authors found that for these men, white identity was designed around the creation and maintenance of a “dark other” and a positive sense of the practices of whites (7) (see also Fine and Weis 1997; Nakayama and Martin 1999). This suggests that white identity may be more than just a categorization tool used to determine group membership. White identity is a significant social category by which individuals are given preferential treatment in reward allocation and benefit of the doubt in drawing inferences about traits and actions over out-group members. It becomes a set of deliberate practices used to coordinate and advance the interests and positions of whites.

Categorization refers to the tendency for individuals to form alliances with others who share common social identities (Brewer 1999).
These deliberate practices may be forms of social closure, the "process of subordination whereby one group monopolizes advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it determines as inferior and ineligible" (Murphy 1988:8). This is accomplished through the construction of symbolic boundaries that simultaneously admit/favor privileged groups while excluding/impeding devalued groups. Though constructed boundaries may only serve the interests of one group, they have implications that affect both.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus provides insight into the nature of these practices and boundaries. For Bourdieu, "habitus" refers to socially acquired tendencies or predispositions that serve as a "matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions," causing individuals to view the world in a particular way (83). Habitus does not point to individual character or morality, but to the deep cultural conditioning that reproduces and legitimates social formations. Although individuals possess unique ideas and experiences, they tend to act predictably because they reside in the same social niche with others who are affected by similar rituals, belief systems, and interests. While the habitus does not determine action, it orients action. Thus, people observe and participate in social closure but tend not to see it as problematic as it resonates with their habitus. The habitus helps normalize and legitimate social closure.

Bonilla-Silva (2003) expands Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, emphasizing its racialized character. He defines white habitus as a "racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters" (Bonilla-Silva 2003:104). This socialization guides whites’ identity and sense of group membership through overt (e.g., parental and teachers’ guidance) as well as subtle mechanisms (e.g., messages conveyed on TV, etc.). White habitus promotes in-group solidarity and negative views about non-whites. For example, because racial segregation (which whites view as normal and unproblematic) creates a situation that severely limits close personal relationships between blacks and whites, whites’ collective experiences with blacks are extremely limited and based on racial stereotypes and generalizations perpetuated by the media or through other second-hand sources. By appearing objective, white habitus creates

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1 This socialization is comprehensive and begins early in life. Researchers have documented that children as young as four years of age understand race, treat others in race-specific ways, and know to keep such disparate treatment a secret (see Holmes 1995; Katz 1982; Lewis 2004; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001).

an atmosphere in which white hypersegregation seems proper, thereby justifying inequality and maintaining the existing racial hierarchy.

Data Sources

The data for this article come from two sources: the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students and the 1998 Detroit Area Study on White Racial Ideology. The Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students is based on a convenient sample of 627 students (including 451 white students) from large universities in the South and Midwest and a mid-size university on the West Coast. Of the white students who provided contact information (about 90%), 10% of them were randomly selected for interviews (41 students altogether, of whom 17 were men and 24 women and of whom 31 were from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds and 10 were from working-class backgrounds).

The 1998 Detroit Area Study on White Racial Ideology is a probabilistic survey based on a representative sample of 400 black and white Detroit metropolitan-area residents (323 white residents and 67 black residents). The response rate to the survey was 67.5%. In addition, 84 respondents (67 whites and 17 blacks) were randomly selected for in-depth interviews. The hour-long interviews were race-matched, followed a structured protocol, and were conducted in the subjects' home.

Findings

Whites' Racial Segregation and Isolation

Table 1 shows that when asked their proclivity for interracial contact, white individuals in both the College Survey and the DAS indicated their preference for widespread integration. Similarly, white respondents responded favorably to traditional questions of social distance (i.e., whether they might object to a family member establishing a friendship with a black person or approve of marriage between blacks and whites). The respondents agreed with the racially tolerant response (92% of students and 87% of DAS respondent had no objection to the former scenario; 80% of students and 58% of DAS respondents approved of the latter).
### Table 1. White Students' Views on Social Distance Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Distance Questions</th>
<th>Survey Sample (N of whites = 451)</th>
<th>Interview Sample (N = 41)</th>
<th>DAS Sample (N of whites = 323)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Items</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>B2. If a Black family with about the same income and education as you moved next door, would you mind it a lot, a little, or not at all?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Not at all(^1)</td>
<td>92.40%</td>
<td>95.10%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B12. Do you approve or disapprove of marriage between Whites and Blacks?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Approve</td>
<td>80.40</td>
<td>90.20</td>
<td>57.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Not sure</td>
<td>12.90</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Disapprove</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>42.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B7. How strongly would you object if a member of your family had a friendship with a Black person?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No objection(^2)</td>
<td>92.40</td>
<td>92.70</td>
<td>87.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nontraditional Items

A13. Think of the five people with whom you interact the most on an almost daily basis. Of these five, how many of them are Black?

1. None | 67.70 | 68.30 | N.A.
2. One | 20.00 | 24.40 |
3. Two or more | 12.30 | 7.30 |

A15. Have you invited a Black person for lunch or dinner recently?

1. No | 68.50 | 75.00 | N.A.
2. Yes | 31.50 | 25.00 |

A6. Think of your three closest friends, other than relatives. How often do you engage in social activities with them:

1. More than once a week | 21.70 |
2. Once a week | 29.50 |
3. Once a month | 28.90 |
Table 1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Distance Questions</th>
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<th>DAS Sample (N of whites = 323)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Less than once a month</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>17.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Never</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A7. How many of these (three) friends are FILL (white/black)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Interview Sample (N = 41)</th>
<th>DAS Sample (N of whites = 323)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0. None</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>87.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Three</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H10. Does your spouse consider (himself/herself) primarily White or Caucasian, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, or something else?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>DAS Sample (N of whites = 323)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>94.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Native</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Have you ever had a romantic relationship with a FILL (black/white) person?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey Sample (N of whites = 451)</th>
<th>Interview Sample (N = 41)</th>
<th>DAS Sample (N of whites = 323)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>89.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Percentages in other categories were insignificant and thus are not reported here.
2. The option of “not sure” was not included in the survey.

When responding to questions about their individual behavior, there seemed to be discrepancies between what individuals said and what they actually did. When students were asked about the five people with whom they interacted with most on a daily basis, 68% of them replied that none of the five people were black. To the social distance question, “Have you invited a black person to lunch or dinner recently” 69% replied that they had not. In the DAS sample of white respondents, 87% admitted that none of their closest friends was black and 89% reported never having a romantic relationship with a black person. It is this disconnect between individuals’ commitments to the principle of integration and their mostly white pattern of association that we examine in the following section.
Interview data indicate that, though the majority of whites in the samples espoused an integrated lifestyle, few actually lived in such a way. Only 4 of the 41 students reported having resided in a neighborhood with a significant black or minority presence. Out of the 66 DAS respondents, 8 reported residing in such a place. Given whites’ levels of racial isolation, it is not surprising that few reported having black or minority friends. Most researchers agree that close friends exhibit high degrees of interaction, interdependence, and closeness (Argyle and Henderson 1985; Fehr 1996). This is difficult to obtain given the high incidence of residential separation reported by white respondents. Of the students, 34 of the 41 did not have black friends while growing up. Sixty of the 66 DAS respondents did not have black friends while growing up (3 students did report that they had a black friend as a child, 3 DAS respondents also reported having a black friend).

One interesting case is Pauline, a retired woman in her seventies. She grew up in a Michigan neighborhood where “there were a few [black families], but not many.” When asked about close childhood friends, Pauline said: “the majority were white.” When asked, “Do you remember having any black friends growing up?” Pauline’s reply was:

I always had black friends, even when I worked I had black friends. In fact, I had a couple of my best friends.

Pauline claimed many black friends in schools because “I had lots of friends” and “I was popular at school.” In both cases, Pauline seems to be referring to being “friendly” toward blacks rather than developing a meaningful personal interaction with blacks. This follows from her claim that she was trained to “respect everybody.”

Tony is a carpet installer in his twenties. He grew up in Wayne, Michigan, in a neighborhood that he described as having “a little bit of everything . . . Blacks, Whites, Mexicans, Indians.” Tony described his closest three friends as white. Nevertheless, when asked “Did you have any black friends at the time?” he said that he had and that he saw them “everyday.” He also claimed that he interacted with blacks in his neighborhood, but all his answers were either short or in monosyllables (e.g., “Sure do!” “Yeah,” and “Yep”). Similarly, he claimed he had a black friend in school, but answered the questions about what kind of activities he did with his black friend with a “Yeah” and an “Everyday.” As in Pauline’s case, Tony interprets being in places with blacks (neighborhoods, schools, or jobs) as being friends with blacks – a clear case of inflating acquaintances to friends.

These data are consistent with research that suggests that fewer than 10% of whites have black friends (Halliman and Williams 1987). Because white subjects reported that they had not been successful in developing
inter racial friendships in primary/secondary school settings (for discussion see Bonilla-Silva 2003), they were asked about the interracial contacts they made while in college. In both studies, however, this pattern of detachment was maintained during the college years. Of the 41 students in the study, only 3 developed relationships with black friends; of the DAS respondents, 7 had black friends.

The data in this study also indicate that a high proportion of the respondents inflated black acquaintances to “good” or even “best friends.” Among college students, close to 50% stated they had black “friends” or that they “hung out” with blacks. After analyzing their claims, however, only 3 truly had black friends by the criteria discussed above. Among DAS respondents, a little more than a third (24 of the 66 respondents) made such claims even though only 10 interacted with blacks in a serious fashion. The following cases exemplify respondents who promoted black acquaintances to friends. The first case is Emily, a student at MU, who described her college friends as, “almost, well, mostly white.” Then quickly added, “I have a few black friends.”

Interviewer: Okay, and so, other than Jessica [her best white friend], who else? Are there other people that you really spend a lot of time with? Or . . .
Emily: No. Just here and there, but I am really busy . . .
Interviewer: So who, if you can give me a run-down of some of these other people that you mentioned, like a bigger crowd of people that you might hang out with? Maybe your roommate is one of them. Um, who are those people?
Emily: Well, my roommate is—I’m friends with some girls in my hall. And they are all black and they are really nice. And I hang out with them and my roommate, sometimes we do stuff together like go to the mall or—it’s not like I’m really good friends with them but we do stuff together.

At the end, Emily recognized that “it’s not like I’m really good friends with them” but the claim of friendship with blacks helped her maintain a progressive, color-blind outlook.

The second case is Mark, another student at MU, who resided in an all-white fraternity and who complained about blacks segregating themselves in dorms and at the student union. After Mark pointed out that he had taken some courses with a high proportion of minority students, he was asked if he had developed any friendships with the minority students in those courses. The following exchange reveals the superficiality of Mark’s interactions with blacks.
Interviewer: Did you meet any minority students through your classes and then hang out with them afterwards?

Mark: Yeah, I mean, freshman year, I mean, in Markley [a dormitory]. There were two African Americans on the hall, and we had a football team and other teams and they played with us and everything. That was good and we definitely hung out a lot freshman year and stuff [brief exchange about segregation in dorms here].

Interviewer: Did you hang out, spend a lot of time with the two Black students on your hall, or . . . ?

Mark: Yeah, well. We’d watch basketball together, or we played, you know, we just – he was an engineer, I mean, classes, we didn’t really discuss. But we’d hang out in people’s rooms and drink on a couple of nights or whatever and do whatever. We had a whole hall intramurals, we were really involved in all that stuff. Yeah, we really, ya’ know, they are so cool, so we hung out, so and like, ya’ know?

Interviewer: Are you still close with them now?

Mark: No, actually, no, not now. I mean, if I see ’em on campus, ya’ know, what’s up how ya’ doin’, but nothing really, not more so.

Both Emily and Mark’s self-reports are telling in that descriptions of friendships with blacks are often sparse and superficial. These subjects seem to inflate their casual acquaintances into close friendships. In addition, individuals used superficial contact such as taking a class or working in the same company as evidence of deeper friendship. However, these relationships dissipated when the formal interaction ends. (For example, Mark provides much detail about freshman year to establish himself as a boundary-crosser, but his current social networks are white. This leads to skepticism about the effectiveness and endurance of his cross-boundary forays.)

Whites’ Interpretation of White Segregation and Isolation

The previous section suggests that whites have little contact with black people in neighborhoods, schools, colleges, and jobs. This highlights the discrepancy between their integration ideals and their actual interactive behaviors. When asked about this disconnect, white respondents did not find their self-segregation troubling because they did not define the situation as a racial phenomenon. Instead, this was normalized and viewed as “just the way things are.” Most respondents stated that their neighborhoods
were “all white,” “predominantly white,” or “primarily white,” but failed to see this as problematic. Students described their feelings about their neighborhoods’ racial makeup as: “I liked it, it was fine to me” (Kim, SU), “When I was growing up, I didn’t think about it much. I mean, it was fine for me, it doesn’t really bother me that much” (Brian, SU), “I really didn’t think about it” (Mary, MU), “I didn’t care, which is pretty standard, I think, for the kids. It’s taken for granted” (Bill, WU). DAS respondents’ answers to a similar question produced responses such as: “I loved it! Everybody was one big happy family” (Jill) and, “Oh, it was great. They were all basically the same kind of people” (Don).

When a few of the respondents realized that the racial composition of their childhood neighborhoods could be interpreted as problematic, many acted in a defensive manner and emphasized that the neighborhood’s homogeneity was not due to racism. Ray, MU student, offered:

I don’t think there was any type of prejudice involved, I just think that we really didn’t know these kids. Ya’ know what I mean? They lived in different neighborhoods, they went to different schools. And there was never any effort made to exclude, and if anything, there was effort made to cultivate these kids. Any type of discrimination in terms of anything was really just taboo at East Lansing. It wasn’t like people were trying to exclude them, it’s just that they didn’t know them. It’s just the way things were.

Andy, another student, offers this about segregation:

I would agree that we don’t, or Caucasian people, or the majority does not make things necessarily comfortable for them, but not like intentionally, so I think it just sort of comes up that way [laughs].

Sue, a student at SU, commented on her neighborhood:

I lived there since I was two, I don’t really have much of an opinion on it. I just sort of, that’s how it was.

Some DAS respondents seemed to notice that their limited interaction with blacks could be interpreted as problematic, and they quickly explained the issue away. For example, Kim, a housewife in her late twenties, had a racial life typical of DAS respondents. As a child, her neighborhood had few blacks around and she did not interact with them. She now lives in a neighborhood she describes as “mostly white.” When asked if she had black friends in school, Kim said: “I never had close black friends.” When discussing with whom she interacts as a homemaker, Kim said:

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5 Among college students, 5 found their neighborhood composition problematic. Among DAS respondents, 8 found it troubling.
Yep, yep, my husband has some black friends in, you know. You just don’t see ’em [Blacks]. They move or whatever, we don’t see ’em. It’s just – I wished I did so I could just say, you know, “I do” [have black friends]. They are just not around, they don’t live in our area.

Here, Kim implies that she would have interracial relationships if there were any of “’em” around. She asserts that she simply lacks the proper opportunity.

Trudy, a salesperson at a large retail store in her late twenties, echoes Kim’s sentiments. Trudy grew up in a “pretty much white” neighborhood and attended schools that she described as “mostly white.” At the time of the interview, however, she was working in a company where 20% of her co-workers were black. She reported that her friends were “mostly white” and, when asked if she had any black friends at work, replied: “Yeah, mostly like acquaintances, not like real good friends.” When pressed, she stated: “I mean, I don’t get a lot of opportunity because there are not a whole lot of black people that I work with.” Like Kim, Trudy blames that structure of opportunity for her white social network.

Rita, who is in her twenties, is an underemployed worker at a cookie company. She explained her lack of black friends while attending racially mixed schools in Detroit as follows:

No, but it wasn’t because I didn’t want to. It’s not, it’s not because – I didn’t have a problem with them. It just, I never socialized with them. Yeah more like they actually never socialized with me. Yeah more like they actually never socialized with me.

Rita’s comments move beyond blaming the opportunity structure for her racial segregation, suggesting that she was available and interested in establishing relationships with blacks who did not wish to reciprocate.

The data presented in this section indicate that whites do not interpret their own racial segregation and isolation as a racial issue at all, using demographic excuses and justifying their lack of connection as natural or “just the way things are.” This blindness is central to understanding their views of racial matters. Whites’ lack of realization that race matters in their lives, combined with their limited interracial socialization, illuminates the contradiction between their stated preference for a color-blind approach to life (which corresponds to their perception of how they live their own lives) and the white reality of their lives. This contradiction becomes more glaring when examining the sensitive matter of interracial marriage.
Whites' Views on Interracial Marriage

Of the forms of interracial associations, whites are least likely to support interracial marriage. In our samples, only 57.5% of DAS respondents and 80% of college students supported it (for students, the support was lower than for other social distance questions). For both groups, most of the concerns about interracial marriage centered on concern for children produced from those unions. Most DAS respondents and college students who admitted they had problems with interracial marriage in the interviews subscribed to a color-blind view on love, where love was described as a matter of personal choice between two people and was no one else's concern. However, most respondents qualified their support in such a way, or live such segregated lifestyles that their laissez faire position on this subject seems empty.

As Table 2 indicates, the modal response for college students was category 4, respondents who qualified their support with expressions of concern for the children, family reactions, location, or with rhetorical maneuvers indicative of little personal commitment to these unions. (“They can have all the fun they want, it doesn’t bother me at all.”) Eight students supported interracial marriage even though they had all-white associations. Two admitted directly that they would not do it themselves. Among DAS respondents, the typical response was also category 4 (32%), followed closely by respondents who opposed interracial marriage (22%). A similar proportion of DAS respondents and college students stated their support for interracial marriage in the interviews (32.5 to 33%).

Table 2. Respondent’s Views on Interracial Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>DAS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Support Marriage/Interracial Lifestyle</td>
<td>5 (12.5)</td>
<td>7 (11.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Support Marriage/Primary White Networks</td>
<td>8 (20.0)</td>
<td>14 (22.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Reservations toward Marriage/Interracial Lifestyle</td>
<td>4 (10.0)</td>
<td>2 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Reservations toward Marriage/Primary White Networks</td>
<td>21 (52.5)</td>
<td>21 (32.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Opposes Interracial Marriage/Interracial Lifestyle</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>7 (11.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Opposes Interracial Marriage/Primary White Networks</td>
<td>2 (5.0)</td>
<td>14 (22.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of Respondents</td>
<td>40*</td>
<td>60*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The question was not asked to one of the students and one of the DAS respondents.

Respondents' answers are recorded in Table 2. These classifications are not mutually exclusive (for example, responses classified as II could have been classified as IV) and cannot be read as an ordinal scale moving from racial progressives to racial reactionaries. The purpose of this classification is to organize answers rather than provide analysis.
Various examples from each category are presented, beginning with examples of respondents’ answers in category I – those who approved of interracial marriage and had an interracial lifestyle. For example, Kay, a student at MU, answered the interracial question in the following manner: “I don’t see anything wrong with it [laughs].” Similarly, Franci, a homemaker in her twenties, answered the question as follows: “As long as they’re happy, go for it!” Although other respondents used expressions such as these, they immediately added long-winded statements qualifying their support. In contrast, respondents in this category answered without hesitation and had an interracial lifestyle. Nonetheless, in this category, which was the most internally consistent, there was some variance. Scott, a mechanical drafter in his twenties, answered the interracial question as follows:

If you are comfortable with it, do it. You know, I mean, I’m looking for a Vietnamese – half-Vietnamese, half-Chinese right now. That’s my dream woman right there. I love Asian woman.

Here, Scott seems to favor Asian women, especially if they live up to a particular exotic ideal. His habitus can accommodate this racial other.

After Scott stated that he would have “no problem” marrying someone of a different race, the interviewer asked him, “So what do you think about people who are absolutely against it, you know, who want to keep the races pure or whatever?” He offered this:

I mean, I kind of, I feel that way also because I kind of, I don’t know, I kinda wanna stay with my nationality in a way, you know. I think once, once you start breaking away, you start losing your own like deep home family values and in a way, you get mixed emotions, you know. But then again, it’s just like the old times are gone, you know it’s all modern day now. So really you nationality really don’t, shouldn’t count. But then again some people don’t want to have so much blood within their family, within their name, you know. I know people that will not marry unless they’re a hundred percent Italian. I got a couple of people who will not date anyone unless they’re hundred percent Italian so . . .

Respondents in category II, those who approved of interracial marriage but associated primarily with whites, responded more diversely. Sam, a warehouse laborer in his twenties, gave this response to the intermarriage question: “I have no problems with it. I just did it.” Sam was married to a Mexican-American woman and stated he had been “attracted [to black women] but I’ve really never dated anyone like that.” Ray’s description of black women as “anyone like that” suggests clear boundary maintenance.

Others were supportive of interracial marriage, but had a racial preference for white mates. For example, Ray, a MU student cited above, answered the interracial marriage question as follows:
I think that there's, I think that interracial marriage is totally legitimate. I think if two people love each other and they want to spend the rest of their lives together, I think they should definitely get married. And race should in no way be an inhibitive factor.

Ray, who had been extremely articulate throughout the interview, stuttered remarkably in the question (asked before the question on inter-marriage) dealing with whether or not he had ever been attracted to blacks. Ray's hesitation was apparently due to the fact he was not attracted to black women. This fact clashes with his self-proclaimed color-blind approach to love and interracial marriages.

The third and fourth categories include respondents who had reservations about interracial marriage. We discuss them together because there are no meaningful variations in the two categories. Most of the respondents in categories III and IV stated that they have no problem with interracial marriage, but quickly cited reasons why these marriages were difficult. Olga, a software salesperson for an insurance company in her forties, stated:

Well, I guess my only concern is always if there's children and how those children will be accepted or not accepted. And it would be nice to think that the world would be lovely and wonderful but, you know, I think people should be allowed to do whatever they want to do. I don't think you should look at people's skin color or their origin or anything to determine what it is you want to do. However, what are you putting those kids through when they're a mixed that neither culture would accept because the cultures are sometimes just as bad about sticking together as they are about claiming that no one will let them in and out of each other's areas. So sometimes that really affects the kids and neither culture will accept the child as being their culture or the other. So that concerns me, but in general, I don't have any problem with any of that.

Olga defines mixed-race marriages as ideal, but her concerns over the struggles that interracial children may face is a form of boundary maintenance. John, a vice president of a pest control company in his forties, claimed:

I don't have a problem with marrying out of the race. I just – the reality of the situation is, I don't think it's an easy life. I know some people are – have interracial marriages, they have very good relationships with each other and I think they have to have very good relationships with each other because I think there's a lot of pressure outside of the relationship that makes it very difficult for them. I mean, if they're willing to put up with the crap that goes on, you know, I think it's great. You know, it's not, it's not that they shouldn't be together. It's just that they're a different [people]? And there is a whole lot of people that each person brings to the table behind them, that
have different opinions and it creates a lot of trouble. It’s hard enough when you’re coming from white backgrounds, and its similar interests. It magnifies the problems.

After Ian, the manager of information security, stated “I don’t have a problem with it at all,” he quickly added:

There’s gonna be problems. White and Chinese, White and even Italian, there’s gonna be problems, White and Black. I have no problems with it, but they better face the facts of life, they’re gonna have a lot of problems. And they’re not gonna be accepted, I don’t, at least, I don’t think very well by either side.

Both John and Ian recognize the lived realities of boundary maintenance, even while claiming to condemn the boundary.

College students in these categories answered in similar fashion. For instance, Sally, a MU student, stated her view on interracial marriage as follows:

I certainly don’t oppose the marriage, not at all, depending on where I am, if I had to have a concern, yes, it would be for the children. Ya’ know, it can be nasty and then other kids wouldn’t even notice. I think I could care less what anyone else does with their lives, as long as they are really happy. And if the parents can set a really strong foundation at home, it can be conquered, but I’m sure, in some places, it could cause a problem.

Sally’s apprehension matched the nature of her life, which was composed almost entirely of white interactions, relationships, and residences. When asked about her romantic life, Sally said that she had never dated a person of color and recognized that, “I’ve never been attracted to a black person” and that, “I never look at what they look like, it just hasn’t occurred in my life.”

Carol, a SU student previously cited, said the following about interracial marriage:

I have no problem with interracial marriage. I mean, if you are gonna, if you love someone, then you love someone, and I don’t think – I think the only possible consequences it could have for children is maybe their own friends and how people would possibly look at them, I mean, I don’t look at children of interracial marriages any different than other children. You know, I mean, I know that some kids can be cruel, but I don’t really think that should be a big factor in determining whether to marry someone from another race. I mean, it should be about whether or not you love the person.

When asked about dating preferences, Carol replied:

Interviewer: OK. Now we want to talk briefly about your romantic life. Can you briefly review for me your pre-college romantic life?
Carol: My romantic life is kind of dry [laughs]. I mean, as far as guys go, I mean, I know you're looking for white versus minority and I can, I don't want to look like a prejudice thing or anything ...

Interviewer: No!

Carol: It's just I kinda, I don't know, I mean, there have been black guys that have been interested in me, but I just didn't, I wasn't interested in them. I mean, I guess, I guess as far as a preference thing, I kind of look at it as maybe a particular hair color or a particular eye color, I mean, if a guy comes along and he's black and like I love him, it's not gonna, I mean, I, it's not, I don't think the white-black issue's gonna make a difference, you know what I mean? There are guys that I prefer with a certain hair color or you know... I guess beggars can't be [choosers], but [laughs], you know what I mean, you have a certain ideal type in your mind but, I don't know, there haven't been any minority people.

Some of the respondents in these two categories could have been classified as people who opposed interracial marriage even though they did not say it in so many words. For example, Dina, who is in her twenties and is an employment manager for an advertising agency, answered the interracial question as follows:

I don't have an issue with it at all. You know, I personally, I don't [date people] of another race so it's very difficult for me to say, but I don't think [sighs] I can't see myself ever doing that, marrying someone of another race. But we have friends in interracial (sic) - interracial relationships and...

Finally, answers in categories V and VI were given by respondents who opposed interracial marriage. The first example is Janet, a student at SU, who accused people in interracial relationships of being selfish:

I would feel that in most situations they're not really thinking of, of the child. I mean, they might not really think anything of it, but in reality I think most of the time the child is growing up, he's going to be picked on because he has parents from different races, and it's gonna, and it's gonna ultimately affect the child and, and the end result is they're only thinking of them - of their own happiness, not the happiness of the kid.

The interviewer followed up by asking, "How do you think your family would deal with it if you or someone else in your family became involved with someone of another race?" Janet's answer was "They would not like it at all [laughs]!"
Most older respondents expressed their disapproval of interracial marriage without hesitation and relied on Jim Crow tenets to justify their position. For example, Jim, a retired man in his seventies, stated:

Well, I'm against it. I think scripture says that we should be very careful how we should choose our mates. I may love the girl I want to marry and she's black, but I just can't look at that situation. I have to look at what's going to happen afterwards, what's going to happen to our kids. They're the ones who take a beating. You're not white, you're not black.

Other older respondents expressed their opposition in a more refined manner, relying on cultural allusions to legitimate their concerns. For instance, Rhonda (of Jewish background), a part-time salesperson in a golf store, used the movie "Fiddler on the Roof" to state her view on this matter. "A bird and a fish can fall in love but where do they go to nest?" She then commented:

The children are the ones that are — they're the ones that are not going to be, they're the ones that don't [know] where they belong. They don't know if they are white, they don't know if they're black.

Several patterns emerge from the data surrounding respondents' answers to questions about interracial marriages. First, it is clear that, though people use color-blind language when talking about such unions and take great pains to not sound racist, respondents exhibit deep reservations about such relationships. Second, many whites express a clear preference for white mates that is in direct contrast to their professed color-blindness. Third, white individuals reject interracial marriages because of potential problems that may arise in the marriages.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we argued that whites live a white habitus that creates and conditions their views, cognitions, and even sense of beauty. More importantly, the white habitus creates a sense of racial solidarity ("We Whites"). This racial solidarity, or sense of "whiteness," in turn adds to whites' perceptions that their white lifestyle is the correct and "normal" way of doing things. As a result of this conditioning, whites' racialized attitudes and prejudice toward blacks are continuously recycled and legitimated.

We documented three things related to white habitus. First, we illustrated that whites experience tremendous levels of racial segregation and isolation while growing up in neighborhoods and schools. Moreover, early segregation and isolation continue in colleges and in the workplace even when blacks are present in these environments. Social identity theory
suggests that individuals tend to respond based on group membership, treat members of out-groups as a unified whole, and reserve feelings of empathy and trust for in-group members. Traditionally, analyses of racial isolation in the USA have applied this notion to explain so-called "pathologies" of the minority experience while neglecting white experiences with racial isolation. Social closure theory argues that certain groups create advantage by closing off opportunities to other groups, using boundary maintenance as a way to sustain their interests. We argue that "white habitus" – racialized socialization processes that facilitate a white culture of solidarity – emerge because of the social and spatial boundaries and isolation of whites.

Second, we documented how whites, for the most part, do not interpret their racial isolation and segregation from blacks as something racial. Instead, whites do not see any need to explain these things at all, or they have a tendency to try to explain segregation away (i.e., "Race has nothing to do with it" or "That's the way things are"). Yet, in the color-blind era of race relations (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003), when whites are asked about their social interactions with minorities, they present a view of their social world that contradicts this isolationist reality. Furthermore, when looking at whites' interpretation of interracial friendships, most of the interview data revealed that the friendships whites claim to have are inflated, cursory, and based on participation in formal activities such as team sports or classroom work groups. When the activity ceases, the relationship dissolves.

Finally, we examined whites' answers to the interracial marriage question and suggested that those answers indicate that these whites are very unlikely to engage in interracial unions with blacks. Though white individuals cling to ideals of integration and color-blindness, many respondents express great doubt and uneasiness when it comes to issues concerning marriage. In fact, whites' answers to the relationship questions in the surveys suggest that they struggle with interracial relationships. From a social psychological perspective, this is not a mystery. Individuals seldom find opportunities to develop lasting, significant relationships if they do not share consistent, meaningful activities and interests. People who do not significantly interact in school, on the job, or in their neighborhood with members of out-groups come to believe that such lack of interaction is normal. This is the linchpin of white habitus: when everyday whites reproduce a racist habitus, they help legitimate social closure that discriminates by race.

Because the white habitus creates a space in which whites' extreme isolation is normalized, whites do not experience troubling doubts or second thoughts as to their lack of interaction with blacks. This affords
whites the luxury of non-reflexivity, enabling them to proudly espouse the virtues of color-blindness and unity. However, their responses to questions concerning their interracial lives (or lack thereof) betray them, suggesting that whiteness is accompanied by a particular lifestyle that allows individuals to simultaneously cling to a color-blind ideology while retaining a vigilant distance from black others.

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