UNDER SIEGE IN ANY ERA

White Threat and Victim Memories of the Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

Whites' sense of their racial vulnerability has been established as a key facet of U.S. post-civil rights racial ideology. This paper analyzes Whites' victim claims attached to a historical era, via recent in-depth interviews with elder White Southerners, and argues that, through invoking civil rights-era racial vulnerabilities—mistreatment from social changes and African Americans—White Southerners downplay institutional racism, delegitimize the Civil Rights Movement, and construct White innocence and Black pathology. In contrast, younger Whites' victim claims assert Whites as racially innocent and equitably vulnerable to racism, but these narratives of the racial past achieve similar ends. By constructing the civil rights era as dangerous and unjust, elder White Southerners lay claim to a lifelong nonracist identity and deny systemic racism. This analysis suggests that White threat and victim narratives are not products of a post-civil rights milieu, but rather are generated by Whites' use of racial framing to construct a sense of self, other, and society.

Keywords: Whiteness, Identity, Narrative, White Racial Frame, Victimhood, Civil Rights Movement

INTRODUCTION

In recent surveys, two-thirds of U.S. Whites agree that Black Americans have not achieved racial equity with Whites (Bobo 2004). There is broad awareness of persistent racial inequalities, but many people explain these as resulting from race-neutral phenomena and the presumed cultural deficiencies of people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Further, many White Americans believe that racial prejudice has actually become a bigger problem for themselves than for Blacks (Gallagher 1997; Norton and Sommers, 2011). Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers (2011) demonstrate that Whites today see racism as a "zero-sum game," perceiving a steady decrease in anti-Black bias over the past few decades that directly correlates with increased anti-White bias. Many scholars have noted that Whites' claims of racial vulnerability and victimhood are prevalent in the contemporary era and provide ideological backing for post-civil rights

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retrenchment (Esposito 2011; Ferber 1999; Gallagher 1997; Gresson 1995; Hughey 2010; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998; Lacy 2010; Omi and Winant, 1994; Twine and Gallagher, 2008). Current White victim discourse asserts that post-civil rights laws and policies that continue to proactively address racial inequality—for example, affirmative action—are unleveling the equitable playing field created in the wake of the civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Formisano 2004; Gallagher 1994, 1997; Omi and Winant, 1994).

Much research that has illuminated the contours of White victim rhetoric in the current racial landscape has investigated young White Americans—often, college students who have lived only during the contemporary racial era (e.g., Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014; Gallagher 1994, 1997, 2004; Foster 2009; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998; Mueller et al., 2007; Nakayama and Krizek, 1999; Picca and Feagin, 2007). Given the embedded assertion that White racism was eradicated in the 1960s (Lacy 2010) and research demonstrating that young Whites embrace this belief to dissociate from institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Gallagher 1994; Mueller 2013), older White Americans' perspectives warrant further attention. In particular, elder White Southerners are a population well situated for analysis, for their life experiences span racial eras—Jim Crow segregation, the Civil Rights Movement era, and the contemporary "post-racial" era.

This paper investigates how elder, White, southern interviewees employed stories of racial vulnerability and victimization in describing their experiences during the Civil Rights Movement era—via local civil rights activism and the desegregation of schools. First, this paper posits that White victim claims are not fundamentally a new phenomenon and rather are part of a long "tradition" of Whites constructing reality in ways that promote continued racial domination. Second, narrative analysis of participants' memories of racial vulnerability illustrates how White threat and victim stories can be unique and deeply personal and emotional, rather than parroted discourse. Third, I assert the functions of these narratives at two levels: 1) as linked to ideology, bolstering racial structures, and 2) as linked to identity, protecting the White sense of self.

This paper argues that a primary function of the White victim narrative is to establish White racial innocence at both the collective and individual level. White vulnerability claims are driven by Whites' perceptions of threat and motivation to assert a positive identity. Rather than viewing White victim narratives as a reaction to post-civil rights milieu, or a regurgitation of color-blind racist discourse, this analysis shows how Whites creatively author personal threat stories in ways that protect Whiteness. In the case of elder White Southerners, by softening segregation's racial oppression, devaluing and misrepresenting the Civil Rights Movement and Black Americans, and constructing the White self as never racist.

While younger Whites' racial vulnerability claims are bound up with assertions of post-civil rights equal opportunity and Whites' non-participation in racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Gresson 1995; Lacy 2010), through constructing the Black freedom movement as a time of great vulnerability for Whites, White Southerners downplay the oppressive regime of Jim Crow and White resistance to the Movement and promote negative stereotypes of African Americans. I argue that, in so doing, elder Whites give themselves access to a claim of *lifelong* racial innocence, ultimately achieving the same ends as younger Whites who distance themselves from the segregation era altogether in order to assert their racial goodness. That Whites' victim claims can interpret history differently to reach similar conclusions for Whiteness speaks to the continuity of the color line across racial eras (Blumer 1965) as well as its mechanisms of maintenance (Feagin 2006, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racism Theory

Recent efforts by critical race theorists have sought to establish conceptual links between institutional racism and ideology and between racist structure and everyday practice (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2015; Feagin 2013; Moore 2008). Because systemic racism continues to be reproduced despite the dismantling of legal discrimination, some scholars have asserted that we are in an era of "new racism" that now structures exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination in subtle ways and is justified by "color-blind" or "laissez-faire" racist ideology rather than blatant White supremacy (e.g., Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2014; van Dijk 2000). This is a racism theorized as distinct from historical racisms—one that "wants to be democratic and respectable, and hence first off denies that it is racism" (van Dijk 2000, p. 34). Much research in this vein has shown how Whites (and people of color to a lesser extent) openly acknowledge the racial injustices of previous eras, such as slavery and Jim Crow segregation, and interweave beliefs in individualism and meritocracy with culturally-based criticisms of people of color to rationalize contemporary inequalities and dismiss the legitimacy of continued racial justice efforts (e.g., Bobo 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Frankenberg 2001; Omi and Winant, 1994).

A related structural racism theory, systemic racism, also highlights the primacy of White-dominant structures, but asserts continuity in ideological framing across time (Feagin 2006, 2013). Research in this tradition shows that Whites—including White youth socialized exclusively in the post-civil rights era—continue to employ "old-fashioned" overt racism in everyday talk and interactions, especially in "back stage" White spaces (Evans 2013; Mueller et al., 2007; Picca and Feagin, 2007; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). For example, Debra Van Ausdale's ethnography of a multicultural day care center revealed how children as young as two and three creatively "play" with race by drawing heavily from racist imagery and stereotypes, to the surprise and befuddlement of their progressive parents (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001).

In conceptualizing how people reproduce systemic racism, Joe Feagin (2013) argues that Americans, especially Whites, have long interpreted everyday situations in ways that sustain White material advantage by operating from a *White racial frame*. This cognitive frame "structures the thinking process and shapes what people see, or do not see, in important societal settings" and provides a lens of racist duality—a "strong positive orientation to Whites and Whiteness . . . and a strong negative orientation to racial others" (Feagin 2013, p. 10). One aspect that sets the White racial frame apart from other concepts is its conceptualization as more than ideology, being composed of beliefs, cognitions, narratives, emotions, visual and auditory elements, and inclinations to discriminate (Feagin 2013). Thus, Americans "inherit" the White racial frame, internalizing its logics, feelings, and images to varying degrees; and they also creatively engage with the frame to produce meaning and guide experience and behavior.

The White racial frame concept overlaps with some of the more structural racial prejudice theorizing, particularly group position theory (Bobo 1999; Blumer 1958). In Herbert Blumer's (1958) view dominant groups harbor four key feelings that ground their racial orientation: superiority of their own group, inferiority of subordinate groups, "a feeling of proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage," and "fear or apprehension that the subordinate racial group is threatening, or will threaten, the position of the dominant group" (p. 4). A key distinction between these two perspectives lies in the White racial frame's link to systemic racism theory; it views racism as infused in the society at large, including institutions, and ultimately seeks to

conceptualize how racist structures are reproduced via everyday interpretation and interaction, rather than aiming to explicate the nature or levels of prejudice among dominant group members.

As Carson Byrd (2011) has argued, more detailed descriptions of the White racial frame are in need of development. Feagin (2013) has suggested that there are "big picture" narratives embedded in the White racial frame that work to establish a timeless White morality—stories about "White conquest, superiority, hard work, and achievement," such as hardscrabble "settlers" taming North American land and Indians (p. 13). This paper proposes that White victimhood is another key narrative of the frame that props up White domination and safeguards White identity. Further building on the White racial frame concept, Whites herein are conceptualized as intrinsically motivated and creative users of the frame, personalizing their victim stories in service of individual and collective identity maintenance.

Whiteness, Victim Making, and Memory

Important theoretical work has outlined the process of victim making. According to James Holstein and Gale Miller, victim making is an interactional process that manipulates meaning to establish the "fact" of unjust harm: "Descriptions . . . [of] someone as a 'victim' are not disembodied commentaries on ostensibly real states of affairs. Rather, they are reality *projects*—acts of constructing the world" (1990, p. 105). Victim making entails several maneuvers—it establishes a victim and a victimizer, exonerates the victim from blame, and calls for a remedy (Holstein and Miller, 1990).

Although White identities are complex and context-dependent (McDermott and Samson, 2005), Whites readily construct racial logics and a distinct racial identity (Hartmann et al., 2009; Hughey 2010; Leonardo 2009), often by engaging with mainstream discourse (Gallagher 1994, 1997; Gresson 1995). Whiteness is both an ideology and practice that constructs the meaning(s) of Whiteness and rationalizes White domination (Hughey 2010). A key way that Whiteness has taken on meaning in recent decades is through the notion that the contemporary "post-racial" era has made it possible, and increasingly likely, for Whites to face injustice and discrimination. A White victim narrative justifies backlash to social changes and policies that Whites perceive as disadvantageous to them in the post-civil rights era (Esposito 2011; Ferber 1999; Gallagher 1997; Gresson 1995; Hughey 2010; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998; Lacy 2010; McKinney 2005; Norton and Sommers, 2011; Omi and Winant, 1994; Pride 2002; Twine and Gallagher, 2008; Wise 2005). As Zeus Leonardo (2009) puts it, "Whites are comfortable constructing racial knowledge when they feel threatened" (p. 116).

Research has found articulations of White victimhood in myriad contemporary contexts, including among White supremacists (Berbrier 2000; Daniels 1997; Ferber 1999; Hughey 2010), in conservatives' rejection of President Barack Obama (Esposito 2011), in football fans' rhetoric (Sanderson 2010), among urban, working-class Whites who live and work near African Americans (Hartigan 1999; Kefalas 2003; MacLeod 2008; McDermott 2006), and even among White antiracists (Hughey 2010). The White victim narrative proliferates in the post-civil rights era, but White Americans' perceptions of racial vulnerability are evident historically as well. In the mid-1800s, many White northerners argued that the abolition movement threatened White racial purity and warranted vigilante violence (Fredrickson 1981, p. 153). During Reconstruction, White laborers feared the loss of their higher wages and status and supported the re-institution of the racial caste system (Du Bois 1995[1935]). In the controversy over how to remember the Civil War, the "reconciliation" narrative—emphasizing

the losses faced by the North and South alike—won out, effectively redirecting the nation's sympathies away from formerly-enslaved African Americans and toward Whites (Blight 2001). Throughout the twentieth century, the notion that Blacks were an inherent threat to Whites—epitomized most poignantly by the warped stereotype of Black male rapists of White women—was crucial to Ku Klux Klan ideology (Wade 1987) and permeated the culture, helping to justify Jim Crow segregation, lynchings, and other forms of White terrorism. The Civil Rights Movement era saw extensive use of White victim claims, and analysts highlighted how these responses were implicated in the revival of White ethnic identity (e.g., Formisano 2004; Patterson 1977; Steinberg 2001). A White victim narrative was especially prominent in responses to school desegregation busing programs (Chafe 1981; Formisano 2004; Lacy 2010; Pride 2002).

The data analyzed herein are contemporary autobiographical narratives of elder White Southerners who lived through the civil rights era. This analysis is concerned with how White victim stories are articulated through the process of memory—commentary on one's experience within a historical context. Social scientists theorize memory as a dynamic process that links the present to the past, as it determines which parts of the past are worth remembering and how they will be remembered (Brundage 2000; Olick 2005; Schwartz 2000). Memory simultaneously constructs historical and contemporary meanings. All memory is socially-mediated (Halbwachs 1980), but is also deeply personal and actively maintained by individuals (Cunningham et al., 2010; Portelli 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Much research on White discourse and White identity in the United States studies newer generations—people born and raised in the post-civil rights era (e.g., Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Gallagher 1994, 1997, 2004; Foster 2009; Mueller et al., 2007; Nakayama and Krizek, 1999; Picca and Feagin, 2007). There is a dearth of research on White memory, considering that millions of people who are still living witnessed the racial justice movements and policy changes of the 1960s–70s. Surprisingly little qualitative research investigates how White Southerners remember the segregation or civil rights eras (Gill 2012; Lavelle 2014; Roy 1999; Smith et al., 2001), although some studies have analyzed non-southern Whites (e.g., Blee 1991; Hartigan 1999; Kefalas 2003), and historians have outlined how Whites experienced twentieth-century racial transitions (e.g., Hale 1999; Ritterhouse 2006; Sokol 2006).

The forty-four interview respondents in this study were lifelong residents of Greensboro, North Carolina, interviewed between 2007 and 2009. Born between the years 1912 and 1954, all the participants were old enough at the time of the interview to have experienced legal segregation and Greensboro's well-known early-1960s civil rights activism (median birth date: mid-1930s; median age when interviewed: seventy-four years old). In fact, most participants were adults at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s. Snowball sampling was utilized to identify prospective participants who were lifelong residents of Greensboro so that they could comment on local racial dynamics from personal knowledge. The qualitative interviews lasted 1.5 hours on average and were conducted one-on-one, except for four married couples interviewed jointly. I conducted most of the interviews; a few were conducted by research assistants—each of us was a young southern White woman. In the interviews, participants were asked to share their perspectives and experiences of race throughout their lives—what segregation was like, how they recalled both specific

events and generalities of the civil rights era, and their views of more contemporary racial dynamics.

A focus on narrative guided the data collection and analysis. Narratives do not reflect the past accurately; rather, they are valued for "their tendency to go beyond the simple facts: They tap into realms of meaning, subjectivity, imagination, and emotion" (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 148). In the narrative analysis tradition, interviewees are conceived as—and encouraged to be—storytellers with agency who are making sense of their experience and constructing identity (Bauman 1986; Chase 1995; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Riessman 1993). Although similar to how discourse analysis focuses on meaning-making through talk, narrative analysis emphasizes that self-narrations are both ideological constructions and claims of identity (Linde 1993). In the analysis, I coded for themes and their with attention to the whats of statements and the hows of process (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Lofland et al., 2006).

This paper analyzes a key theme in which numerous interview participants told vivid stories of having faced danger and victimization during the civil rights era. It was during recollections of this era that racial vulnerability narratives were by far most prevalent. After a brief background of the research site, I first analyze stories of threat and victimization tied to local segregation protests (which began in 1960 in Greensboro) and then school desegregation (1963 to early 1970s).

BACKGROUND: GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

Greensboro, North Carolina is a mid-sized southern city with a noteworthy racial history. For over a century, its population has been comprised of approximately one-third African Americans and two-thirds Whites. As in the South generally, White elites have always dominated the local political and economic spheres, with some minimal changes occurring after the dismantling of legal segregation. Greensboro was a major site of civil rights activism in the early 1960s. The city is well known for its sit-in protests of segregated five-and-dime lunch counters that inspired the sit-in movement that rapidly spread to dozens of other U.S. cities in 1960 (Jovanovic 2012). Greensboro's lunch counter protests, initiated by four African American college students in February 1960, quickly gained widespread support among the local Black community (Jovanovic 2012). White political officials and business owners, who had long regarded themselves as neighbors of racial goodwill, responded with promises to negotiate toward a mutually agreeable arrangement (Chafe 1981; Jovanovic 2012). But, after six months of no negotiated desegregation agreement, protests resumed; drugstore owners reluctantly integrated their lunch counters to stay afloat economically (Jovanovic 2012). Protests spread to other types of businesses in the city, including restaurants and movie theaters; at the protest peak in 1963, thousands of residents had participated and been arrested (Jovanovic 2012).

The segregated public school system was the last major vestige of Jim Crow to fall in Greensboro. The self-proclaimed "progressive" city took nearly two decades to desegregate its schools (Chafe 1981). The Greensboro school board was one of the first in the South to publicly announce its readiness to comply with the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision that deemed segregated schools unconstitutional, but over the next decade no significant changes were made (Chafe 1981; Jovanovic 2012). In 1963, the school board implemented a "freedom of choice" program (typical throughout the South), allowing minimal integration of some Black students into White schools (Chafe 1981). Another eight years later, in 1971, the Greensboro school board, facing massive federal penalties for refusing to desegregate fully, finally

designed a comprehensive school reassignment and busing program that was hurriedly executed (Chafe 1981; Jovanovic 2012). The city's full-scale school integration program—implemented seventeen years after the school board expressed readiness to desegregate—was widely criticized by residents (Chafe 1981). The first large-scale organized protest by White residents in the civil rights era occurred at this time, as angry parents vowed to oppose busing, or integration itself, to protect their families from inconvenient and unfair mandates (Chafe 1981). Whites' opposition died down as they acquiesced to the transition or enrolled children in the rapidly expanding private school sector to avoid integrated schools (Chafe 1981). Soon the city was proudly contrasting their "harmonious" school desegregation process against other cities' (e.g., Stoesen 1980).

Despite being a city that consistently demonstrated a propensity toward racist paternalism and gradualism (Jovanovic 2012), Greensboro's White elite long considered the city a major site of racial tolerance and progressivism (Chafe 1981). Historian William Chafe (1981) termed the contrast between Greensboro's progressive identity and its actions the "progressive mystique" and has argued that, for this reason, the city is a key place to study the intricacies of race in the South.

ANALYSIS

Whites Under Threat During Nonviolent Civil Rights Protests

During the nonviolent protests of White segregated businesses in the early 1960s in Greensboro, the interview participants ranged in age from youths to middle-aged, and many were married with children. Interview questions asked for general perceptions of the protests and for recollections of local events that were well publicized at the time. Overall, respondents' recall of racialized events was limited and not chronological; they remembered the time period spanning several years in broad terms through a few scattered personal experiences. It was most common for participants to portray the 1960s milieu as tense and dangerous and the Jim Crow era as a time of safety and pleasant race relations. While typically acknowledging that local protests were nonviolent, many remembered having believed and felt that there was a real potential for them to be physically harmed. While most participants legitimized protest goals in some way—for example, stating that segregated spaces warranted integration—they portrayed themselves as innocent bystanders who were subject to inconvenience, uncertainty, and fear due to protestors' actions.

Numerous participants indicated that nonviolent civil rights protests disrupted their sense of personal safety. When we were discussing the segregation era, I asked Trudie, a working-class woman in her sixties, if she had ever known of "any sort of violence that happened between Blacks and Whites"—a prompt that had the potential to cue images of White aggression during Jim Crow, such as lynchings.[1] Trudie responded by recalling the fear she felt working near where protests against segregated businesses had taken place:

> Trudie: I had [an] incident that scared me half to death. It was scarin' me when they would lock the doors of [my workplace] and tell us to go home. I thought, 'You still puttin' us in danger, 'cause they could still be outside.'. . .
>
> Interviewer: So have you *seen* any violence?
>
> Trudie: Um (pause) well, I can remember goin' [on business errands] by myself all the time. But the minute the riots started and everything started bein' stirred up by the colleges and whatever here, then I could not go . . . alone. I had to have a supervisor or someone to go with me and *that* used to really scare me.[2]

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Trudie recalled her palpable fear to travel the streets, whether alone or with an escort; she saw herself as a potential target of protestors' aggressions. As this exchange occurred early in the interview, before I asked any questions about the civil rights era, it is evident that Trudie associated "racial violence" with civil rights protesters and her own fear of victimization. Trudie's account was typical of the majority of participants, who also located interracial animosity and racial violence not in the Jim Crow era, but in the civil rights era "when the riots started and everything started bein' stirred up by the colleges."

Stephen Steinberg (2001) has noted that historically it has been common for Whites to assume that "racial harmony" exists if people of color are not protesting, and to perceive "racial turbulence" when Blacks challenge oppression. Many interviewees implicitly constructed the Civil Rights Movement as having ended the racial harmony of segregation. But, some drew this conclusion explicitly, including Kenneth and Florence, an upper-middle class couple who, throughout the interview, explained that during Jim Crow, Whites and Blacks had pleasant, respectful relations:

> Kenneth: So as far as our family was concerned, we were very close to 'em. . . . we were told you treat 'em just like you'd want to be treated.
>
> Florence: Absolutely. Yeah, that's the way we were raised, to treat people how we want them to treat us. . . . So here again this shows the respect that we had for them, and *how we've gotten along*. . . .
>
> Kenneth: Now it wasn't all roses. Every now and then there'd be somebody stir up something. Back in– when was it? In the '60s, I guess, when we had most of our race riots here. And most of that, I think, started in the schools and in the universities. I remember one night. . . . There was a mob– I don't know how many, but I know the street was full of Blacks, and (chuckles) [the owner] was standing in the door of his cafeteria and he said he wouldn't let 'em in. And just as I got outside . . . down to the corner across the street where I'd parked, they rushed him. (chuckling) And here I am, almost in the middle of this crowd of upset people, and I just got out and just kept going.

Like Trudie, Kenneth recounted this story of civil rights protest—a demonstration at a popular whites-only cafeteria—early in the interview while discussing segregation, and he introduced it as a contrast to the racial atmosphere under Jim Crow. His transition from portraying congenial race relations under Jim Crow ("Now it wasn't all roses…") could have problematized segregation, but instead recalled the trouble caused by protestors that put him in physical danger. This excerpt also shows a related theme in the narratives. Although chuckling while speaking, Kenneth described a volatile situation instigated by a "mob" of Black protestors that he was lucky to escape. In describing segregation protests, numerous participants used words like "mob" and "riot"—loaded terms associated with unruliness and violence. By portraying protest actions that were comprised mostly of sit-ins, picketing, and boycotts as a dangerous time for Whites, Whites are presented as vulnerable bystanders, while nonviolent activists are promoted to volatile aggressors.

This type of perception extended to the most peaceful of protest actions. Nora, a middle-class woman in her eighties who worked in a downtown city building during the 1960s, recalled a march and prayer demonstration by local high school and college students:

> They had a long walk of students . . . and they came to [my building] and . . . they were all knelt down and going to have prayer for the American people . . . And I was just having to step around wherever I could to get down between the people

> and . . . [my coworker] said, "How long are they planning to stay here?" And I said, "They'll leave when the pigeons come to roost." 'Cause I mean (laughing) we had pigeons by the *hundred*—they'd roost up on the ledge. . . . [And] about six heads (laughing) popped up and . . . it was all I could do not to laugh. . . . And [my coworker] kept saying, "Huh-uh, huh-uh! Be quiet! Be quiet!" Because he got afraid that one of 'em would get angry and would get up and start a fight or something. . . . And when I got home my husband agreed with him! (laughing) . . . Now that everybody's telling me about how quick I could've set off a fight or an uprising, I said I would not *do* it again! And I *wouldn't*!

Although her laughter indicates that she found this a funny story, Nora regretted her wisecrack about demonstrators being barraged by pigeon droppings, believing that it nearly got her attacked by a potential "uprising" of Black youth knelt in prayer. Notably, Nora indicated that her perspective had been collectively shaped: others had convinced her that her reckless remark put her in real danger.

Nora vividly remembered this incident as a close call. When I inquired about the intent of the students' prayer demonstration, Nora added another layer to her threat narrative. She believed that the demonstration was meant to taunt White citizens:

> I think that they just wanted to be seen. . . . When they came . . . that day and knelt down as if they were in prayer, I felt like that they were just trying to make a . . . statement to us that 'One day I may have your job.' . . . I don't think that *any* of 'em were *prayin'*. I don't think it was a thing about Christianity or anything like that.

Nora believed that behind a mask of spirituality, their true intent was to threaten Whites with Blacks' impending economic dominance. In framing a silent, prayerful protest of Jim Crow as both a physical and economic threat to hardworking Whites, Nora constructed White adults as innocent and vulnerable to the resentment and deceit of Black teenagers and young adults.

Many participants recalled the civil rights era in Greensboro as a dangerous time to be White. Fewer people, including Suzanne, a working-class woman in her sixties, mentioned that Black Americans had been vulnerable:

> At that time . . . my mother'd take us downtown to shop every weekend, and that was just our highlight of the week to get to go downtown in peanut shops down there and get to go to the luncheon counter, and we felt we were really in the world then. And after that [first sit-in], I can remember my mother sayin', "We aren't going. We can't go anymore." . . . she was fearful of what was going to happen. One of us would get hurt, we would get caught up in something, a fight that would develop, or somebody would lose control and we'd be in their path or something. And we felt fear. And I didn't say *Blacks* didn't feel fear. I think maybe they felt like they had to do what they were doin' no matter how they got there. But, like I said, it shouldn't have been that way in the first place, but it was. And it did need to change, but I don't think either side should have to fear.

Suzanne vividly remembered her mother stopping a happy ritual of her childhood, and she recalled the real fear she felt—promoted by her mother—of being caught in a skirmish. Suzanne agreed with the purpose of the protests and did not present protestors as necessarily hostile toward Whites. This makes her story not as threat-laden as the preceding examples. However, Suzanne highlighted the unfairness of Whites being exposed to danger and worry ("it did need to change, but I don't think

either side should have to fear"), thereby drawing an equivalency between Whites' and Blacks' vulnerabilities and detracting from the reality of White resistance to the Movement (i.e., without White resistance, nonviolent protests would not have escalated to violence). One of the premises of framing is that contradictory ideas can be easily deflected and overruled by the logics and imagery of a dominant frame (Feagin 2013). Although there was much agreement across participants that integration was a morally preferred arrangement to segregation, the most vivid and emotion-laden storytelling of the civil rights era reinforced notions of White innocence and African American dysfunction.

In narrating the civil rights era through a theme of White vulnerability, participants provide social commentary on both the Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow: segregation was the calm before the storm. Participants also portrayed themselves in these narratives—uninvolved in upholding racism, they were endangered by the chaos African Americans created. These threat and victim stories of the Movement uncouple Jim Crow era White Southerners from the system of entrenched racial oppression, construct Black protestors as dangerous, and work to delegitimize the Black freedom struggle. These functions mirror key components of the White racial frame: pairing positivity and normalcy with Whiteness, negativity with Blackness, and promoting White-dominant social structures (Feagin 2013).

Whites Victimized by School Desegregation

Participant narratives of school integration included themes of upheaval and danger as well, but were more commonly infused with a sense of injustice, bona fide victimization, and lingering resentment. Protests were a nuisance; school integration was *personal*. Since most respondents were parents when comprehensive school desegregation was implemented in Greensboro in the early 1970s, their stories were primarily of their children's experiences and their inability to provide protection from the troubles involved in the transition. Although participants tended to acknowledge that the segregated school system had been unfair for African Americans, their storytelling focused almost exclusively on how school integration created problems for Whites. Through accounts of arbitrary school assignments, busing mandates, chaotic classrooms, incompetent Black teachers, and Black student bullies, their school integration narratives constructed Whites as facing injustice and harm at the hands of both impersonal institutional mandates and African Americans.

As described earlier, the city of Greensboro was slow to integrate their public school system. Seventeen years after the school board publicly proclaimed its readiness to comply with *Brown v. Board* (1954), Greensboro became one of the last school districts in the South to implement a comprehensive desegregation plan, in the fall of 1971 (Chafe 1981). Despite this wide time span, in the view of many research participants, integration happened abruptly and callously. Many respondents expressed a lasting resentment towards the hardships they had faced. For example, Darla, a middle-class woman in her seventies, spoke at length about school desegregation and was very critical of its implementation. She relayed her son's experience:

> Our son . . . was the guinea pig of this first busing. He went the first year down to [a formerly White school] . . . The next year he went to [what] had been a Black school . . . The next year he went to [another school]. And he was thrown with Black children. A lot of– well, not only Black children, but a lot of the White children and Black children responded negatively, I think, to the situation. There was a whole lot of teacher discipline, trying to get things under control. He *never*

> came home and said, "There are six Black people in my room," or "I don't like this Black person or that Black person." He really didn't make any big comments about it.

Darla described her son as a "guinea pig," saying he was "thrown with Black children," portraying the uncaring way the school system treated him. She constructed the integrated classroom as chaotic and not conducive to learning. Then, she quickly transitioned from her criticisms to a positive assessment of her son's adaptation. This thematic duality was common among participants: school integration was an unfair and difficult process (White children's welfare was disregarded, classrooms were out of control, etc.), but White children responded with no racial prejudice. Darla began to claim that Black students had been the ones to react poorly to integration ("A lot of—well, not only Black children . . . responded negatively"), ostensibly indicating that her initial perception was that Whites had been the mature and accepting party. Across the interviews, White children were frequently cast as racially tolerant despite their hardships, whereas Black children, when mentioned, were more often portrayed as antagonists and troublemakers.

Numerous criticisms of compulsory busing and school assignments arose in the narratives. Participants spoke with anger and sadness about the inconvenience of bus commutes or their children's assigned schools being located far from home. Arnold, a middle-class man in his eighties, described his perspective on busing by using explicit victim terminology:

> [My children] weren't victims of being forcibly bused, except the one child, my youngest. The others escaped that need, and that could have been bad, if they had to be bused someplace. Busing, I thought, was not a good thing. I know what they were trying to do, but I don't think it was a good thing, because all the people all over town, would have been far better for them to go to a local school. In fact, we'd located our home . . . within short walking distance of three schools . . . so our children could walk to school, didn't have to ride a bus. I felt that was the best way it could possibly be. But you would never get integration, you would never get the mixing of the races that way. I understand that. (chuckles) It just wouldn't happen. It's something had to be forced and that's what happened.

Arnold believed that busing had done its job of creating integrated schools, but he felt that it had created undeserved consequences for Whites: it was "not a good thing," that luckily his older children "escaped." Likely, his conclusion that neighborhood schools were best for everyone was rooted in the race-class privilege that had enabled him to buy a home near to several schools of his choosing—mobility that would have been inaccessible for most Black and poor White families. The emotional resonance of Arnold's story is noteworthy: despite understanding that desegregation policies had to be forced, he retained a feeling that his children were victimized by those policies.

In the preceding examples, White children and families were constructed as the victims of structural mandates. It is plausible that these lingering perceptions were enabled and then solidified by mainstream discourse of school desegregation and busing during the 1970s–80s that framed Whites as victims of these institutional actions (see Lacy 2010). However, in another common type of story, participants constructed individuals—almost exclusively African Americans—as victimizers, illustrating the personalized, and highly personal, nature of their narratives. Several participants vividly recalled Black bullies who had terrorized their children (while only one participant recounted Whites bullying Black students). One was Ellie, an upper-middle class woman in her seventies, who told of her son's bully:

> I just will never forget this. And these are things I fought against, but they constantly came up and you had to deal with them. . . . there was a big Black boy that sat in front of our son, and . . . when he got to school, this Black boy sort of ran supreme in the classroom, and he would have our son get down and lick his shoes and he would say, "Your people have slaved my people, now I'm gonna slave you." And that White teacher never did a thing about it. . . . This had gone on for several months, and our son never said a word, and [another student's] mother called and said, "Do you know what's going on in that class? . . . I think you need to check into it." You see, things like that made problems that were just ridiculous when you stop to think about it.

For Ellie, this story of the "big Black boy" who retaliated against her son for the evils of slavery exemplified the problems caused by school desegregation. She placed some blame on her son's White teacher for not protecting her son from this racialized bullying, but her assertion that the bully "ran supreme in the classroom" indicates her perception that the Black student somehow held enough power that reprimands were not attempted or effective. Hers is a story that constructs the White student as victim-lamb, subject to the troubles of the school integration initiative, then victimized further by Black peers as well as White adults who did not intervene. That Ellie quotes her son's childhood bully (". . . now I'm gonna slave you") is noteworthy, for she would have received word of the incident secondhand. For an unwitnessed account to be relayed in such detail with direct quotes, and that it continued to shape her perceptions of school integration, indicates its deep emotional resonance. Many of these stories included vivid imagery of aggressors (usually Black) and victims (White) and included evident emotional attachment.

Some participants with higher economic means moved their children to private schools during desegregation. Those who had kept their children in public schools most often spoke of problems caused by school integration. They shared stories about their own families, but some stories were more communal, focusing on other White children or White teachers. Empathy was a theme in these stories. Several participants spoke about White teachers struggling to control and instruct Black students in integrated classrooms. For example, Patti, an upper-middle class woman in her eighties, recalled seeing a White teacher dealing with a handful of disruptive, ostensibly African American, students in a predominantly Black, underresourced school:

> She was one of the few White women [at that school] and she's a wonderful, *wonderful* teacher. . . . But there were three children in there that I think you would call special needs who were *so out of control* that they were bouncing off the walls and destroying the educational opportunity of everybody else. . . . It was not the teacher's fault. She was doing *more* than any human—she was skilled. But these three children should *not*—I mean, it was criminal!

Patti characterized the teacher as skilled but under siege by the more dominant disruptive students in the classroom. Patti was exclamatory in this story of injustice (an offense that rose to the level of "criminal!"). This story is reminiscent of Nora's, in the previous section, of her joke about pigeon droppings in that both stories presented Black youth as aggressors of White adults, skewing the age- and race-related power dynamics in ways that assert White vulnerability.

Patti told a story of a Black teacher as well, portraying the woman as incompetent and a major impetus for removing her son from public school. She began her account by revealing that White parents readily questioned Black teachers' competency:

> The White parents have certain expectations for what Black teachers should be able to do. And I will tell you that I finally went to the principal and I said, "You gotta do something about this English class". . . Part of the dilemma was that the English teacher was woefully unprepared. How she was certified to teach English . . . I have no idea. . . . But (chuckles) it was things like, she would read out a spelling list . . . [and] *this* I remember so clearly. Flow! . . . So [my son] had spelled it f-l-o-w. Well he failed his spelling test, and among the many wrong things was flow, because you spelled it f-l-o-o-r. (chuckles) . . . It was just a nightmare for *me* because this was *not* what I considered adequate, but that's what I was stuck with.

In the first story, Patti empathetically recalled a White teacher rendered incapable of doing her job, and, in the second account, her son suffered an inadequate, unfair education at the hands of an African American teacher. These stories construct students and White teachers as disserviced and damaged by school desegregation and by African Americans personally. Note also at the end of Patti's latter excerpt how she personalized her son's experience ("It was just a nightmare for *me* . . . what I was stuck with"), claiming her own secondary victimization.

On the other hand, the few interviewees who spoke of the experiences of Black children in integrated schools tended to gloss over their hardships. I asked Bernice, a middle-class woman in her eighties, to think about Black perspectives on school desegregation:

> Interviewer: Did you have any sort of idea about what Black people felt about integration when it was happening?
>
> Bernice: (pause) (sigh) I don't know. (pause) I think some of 'em didn't want it any more than we did. . . . people like to be with their own *kind* who do things the way they do. . . .
>
> Interviewer: So, is it your memory that Black people and White people were both hesitant about integrating the schools? Maybe not sure if it was going to work?
>
> Bernice: Yeah, I think they were. . . . The Black parents were sort of fearful for their children, which I can understand, 'cause it'd be like sendin' 'em into a hornet's nest more or less. But I never did . . . [hear] that any Black got mistreated or mauled or anything like that.

Bernice struggled with speaking to the perspectives of Black community members (pausing and sighing). She posited first that their preference to "be with their own kind" made them wary of integration, then acknowledged the risk their children faced ("sendin' 'em into a hornet's nest"), but concluded that they didn't encounter significant problems (no "mistreatment" or "mauling"). Ultimately, Bernice acknowledged and then minimized the difficulties African American families faced with school integration.

Numerous participants expressed lingering resentment toward school integration because it had been so hard on their children, themselves as concerned parents, and other (usually White) families. Most also agreed that schools needed to be integrated. Mirroring their commentary on civil rights protests, they expressed intellectual agreement with integration, but vividly remembered, and still felt, that Whites had suffered the transition. The emotional resonance constructs White families as victims and segregated schools as benign. Carla, a middle-class woman in her sixties, made this contrast directly, arguing throughout the interview that school integration brought

more bad than good, particularly for Whites, and that troubling after-effects rippled throughout contemporary society:

> When they integrated the schools, I think the worst thing that happened in my mind–and I'm sure there were racist comments, but yet, I think it's come true. It was at that time my father-in-law, and what he said is, "By integrating the schools, they're not gonna bring the Blacks up, they're gonna bring the Whites down." And I think that's what happened…. It seems like everything has deteriorated. I just don't get it. I don't understand why they're supporting the welfare system that they're supporting. It's like everything *went downhill*. . . . So I blame a lot on integration. And I'm *not*—not the Blacks, but because what happened to the administration of the systems? I *know* that you can say their level of education had to be brought up, but was it? Or, was ours just brought down?

Carla felt that school integration irreparably damaged Whites and doubted even that African Americans had gained ("their level of education had to be brought up, but was it?"). She agreed with her father-in-law's racist integration-era prediction, sprinkled in a contemporary racist criticism of African Americans ("I don't understand why they're supporting the welfare system…"), but saved face by rejecting the idea that she viewed African Americans negatively ("not the Blacks, but because what happened to the administration…"). Carla portrayed school integration as a net loss, most acutely burdening Whites.

These stories of school integration are given shape by notions of White victimization. To a significant degree, they relay harm done to Whites, either by African Americans directly or the desegregation process. White teachers are constructed as victims of Black students and the chaos of integrated classrooms. White students are constructed as outright victims of Black teachers and Black bullies or damaged by exposure to their deficiencies. In the narratives, White children embody an especially vulnerable innocence sacrificed to callous social changes.

FUNCTIONS OF THE WHITE VICTIM NARRATIVE: IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

> *The real world matters, but the interpretations made by storytellers are decisive because they establish the meanings that guide our lives*
>
> —Richard Pride, The Political Use of Racial Narratives (2002, p. 19)

Through our stories we make sense of the world around us and build our identity. The elder White Southerners in this study presented nonviolent Civil Rights Movement activism and school desegregation as times of chaos and threat, in contrast with perceived calm and general racial harmony during Jim Crow. When recounting their civil rights era experiences, participants frequently recalled facing dangerous situations created by Black Americans and resented having borne the brunt of social changes. Although they tended to acknowledge the unfairness of segregation, overwhelmingly their narratives of the civil rights era constructed Jim Crow Whites as innocent and vulnerable and African Americans as instigators of racial hostility or as unfit to contribute positively to mainstream society. Mirroring core imagery in the White racial frame that glorifies Whites and demonizes Blacks (Feagin 2013), participants' iterations of a White victim narrative perform ideologically, by justifying structures of White domination, and are also implicated in identity making, through reinforcing notions of White morality.

Ideology

This analysis suggests that Whites' narratives of vulnerability and victimhood are involved in ideologically legitimizing racism via: 1) downplaying systemic racism, and 2) criticizing racial justice efforts. First, civil rights era White threat and victim stories draw attention away from the fact that the Jim Crow South was a White supremacist society and that Whites were dominant before, during, and after the Movement and materially invested in maintaining the racial hierarchy. The Civil Rights Movement challenged Whites' privileged access to higher wages, neighborhoods with strong housing values and infrastructure, educational resources, voting rights, political representation, and a legal system tilted in their favor. Although Whites had varying access to material privilege via social class and location, Jim Crow also provided a host of advantages on social, cultural, and psychological levels (Roediger 1999). By and large, White Southerners maintained a sense of racial solidarity and an allegiance to racism (Ritterhouse 2006; Williams 2003). Civil rights era White vulnerability storytelling instead portrays the Black freedom movement as an assault on White victims, minimizing the racist status quo and Whites' investment in maintaining it.

A second key way participants' narratives rationalize racism is through critique of racial justice efforts. Stories of aggressive activists and harms done by institutional actions like busing presented the Movement, and African Americans, as frightening and as targeting White safety and security. In recent years, analysts have noted that contemporary White victim claims work to deflate current racial equality efforts (Gresson 1995; Lacy 2010; Pierce 2003). For example, Aaron Gresson (1995) argues that, through portraying White males in particular as victims, politicians and media work to reassert the "White moral heroism" that the Civil Rights Movement undermined. This post-civil rights White victim rhetoric ideologically bolsters White domination by deriding civil rights accomplishments (such as affirmative action and school integration programs) and any further efforts toward racial justice (such as reparations) because they are perceived as going too far in correcting past ills. The analysis herein demonstrates that, in a similar fashion, civil rights era victim claims assert White innocence and morality through promoting White vulnerability. But, by portraying White harm as beginning at the onset of the Movement rather than as an overcorrection in the ensuing decades, elder White Southerners downgrade the value of the Civil Rights Movement itself.

Identity

The White victim narrative is supra-ideological, linked to identity and emotions. In this analysis, the White victim narrative manifested in personal stories laced with vivid imagery and emotional resonance. This indicates Whites' emotional and psychological investment in their interpretations of their experiences. Stories of vulnerability and victimhood during the civil rights era enable Jim Crow Whites to build a lifelong positive identity through seeing themselves as: 1) racially enlightened and 2) racially innocent. David Wellman has noted that White Americans seek ways to "explain racial inequality *without* implicating themselves" (1993, p. 60) and argues that Whites use rationalizing strategies to "cope with the existence of racial inequality without thinking of oneself as a 'son of a bitch'" (p. 208). Whites are intrinsically motivated to be creative users of White racial framing, constructing and maintaining deeply personal threat and victim stories that establish individual and collective morality.

First, participants' narratives asserted White racial enlightenment through building in morality claims of openness to desegregation. Recall Suzanne's commentary on feeling afraid of lunch counter sit-ins: "it shouldn't have been that way in the first

place, but it was. And it did need to change, but I don't think either side should have to fear." By acknowledging the general injustice of Jim Crow for Black Americans and portraying themselves as bystanders who were unjustly impacted by the transition, White Southerners avoid attaching guilt or shame to their racial identity. Second, victim claims enable Whites to assert racial innocence. As James Holstein and Gale Miller (1990) point out, victim making is a strategy that solidifies one's innocence, marks scapegoats, and draws attention away from one's own participation in injustice. Participants narrated the racially innocent White Southerner, blameless for Jim Crow racism and its structures of inequality and yet subjected to the tumult of the civil rights era. African Americans, constructed largely as aggressors and incompetent citizens, become scapegoats for Whites' feelings of vulnerability and loss. Thus, narrating civil rights era victimhood allows White Southerners to establish *lifelong* racial innocence and morality while reflecting on a life lived on the favored side of racial domination.

Contemporary race scholarship implies that older generations of Whites do not have the same level of access to White innocence claims as do younger Whites, who contrast their "color-blind" reality with past eras (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Gallagher 1994; Gresson 1995; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998). Younger Whites link their identities to the post-civil rights era only, so it is to their benefit to construct slavery and segregation as overtly racist. However, elder White Southerners also assert a lifetime of White morality and goodness, despite their participation in Jim Crow, and they need not reject contemporary understandings of the racial past to do so. They can intellectually agree with the injustice of segregation and the necessity of desegregation and also retain the emotional resonance of vulnerability and victimhood; both moves promote a positive identity.

CONCLUSION

That this older generation's claims of vulnerability and victimhood clustered during the part of their lives that most acutely challenged their status and moral center demonstrates that the White victimhood narrative is more than a post-civil rights construct delivered via public discourse. Indeed, the participants in this study were not parroting contemporary storylines or generic complaints of White vulnerability. Rather, they shared vivid accounts of their own troubles, and those of other Whites, during the civil rights era. I make the case that the White victim narrative is promoted by White racial frame logics, but Whites creatively author, embrace, and retain their own victim stories. This analysis also shows how victim claims can be maintained over the long term, despite societal changes, continuing to resonate across a lifetime.

Iterations of victim claims emerge from Whites interpreting challenges to the racial status quo in ways that validate their emotions, prop up Whiteness, and rescue their moral identity. Feagin (2013) argues that elements of the White racial frame are drawn upon "selectively by White individuals acting to impose or maintain racial identity, privilege, and dominance vis-à-vis people of color in recurring interactions," using what they need from the frame "to deal with specific situations" (p. 14). Thus, we can expect the White victim narrative to be personalized and articulated in contexts where Whites perceive that the racial status quo is shifting in someone else's favor, regardless of the level of advantage they had enjoyed up to that point, or that they hold even in the process of perceived changes.

Indeed, beyond the United States, the phenomenon of dominant groups claiming victim status when their advantage is challenged has been well documented. When the government of India passed its first laws protecting disadvantaged castes in the 1940s,

highest caste Brahmins took to the streets protesting the new quotas in education and jobs for discriminating against them (Duster 2001). When South Africa's apartheid system fell in the 1990s, White South Africans immediately attacked the new affirmative action programs as discriminatory (Duster 2001) and in subsequent years have promoted discourses that relegitimate their continuing race and class privileges (Steyn and Foster, 2008; Wale and Foster, 2007). After World War II, many ordinary Germans denied having known about the Holocaust despite much evidence to the contrary (Johnson 1999), even claiming that the post-War smearing of their character amounted to a Holocaust-like oppression (Olick 2005). This kind of victim narrative is responsive, retaliatory, and invoked when the dominant group faces tangible or symbolic challenges to its status. It enables Whites to prop up Whiteness by rearticulating notions of self-as-virtuous, and other-as-threat to rationalize systemic racism and safeguard positive identities.

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NOTES

1. Participant age ranges are from the date of the interview (2007-2009).
2. Interview excerpts were lightly modified for readability, but retain speaker's statements verbatim. Noteworthy speech patterns are preserved, including dialectal nuances. Bracketed words serve clarifying or confidentiality purposes. Stressed vocal tones are italicized. Long pauses, laughter, and other utterances are noted in parentheses.

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