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VIEWS FROM THE CENTER: MIDDLE-CLASS WHITE MEN AND  
PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Communication Studies

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by  
Sandra Jane Cross

March 2006

VIEWS FROM THE CENTER: MIDDLE-CLASS WHITE MEN AND  
PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

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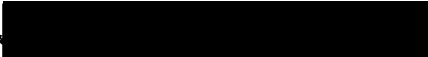
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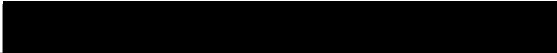
March 2006

Approved by:

  
Dr. Fred Jandt, Advisor  
Department of Communication Studies

16 Mar 2006  
Date

  
Dr. Rueyling Chuang

  
Dr. Kathleen Nadeau

## ABSTRACT

Middle-class, white men are often assumed to hold a central position of power and privilege in the US. This study examined middle-class, white men's perspectives on social privilege. It attempted to address questions about how far groups of middle-class, white men would show awareness of their privilege, and how they would describe their experiences with privilege. Seventeen men were recruited to participate in three self-managed focus groups. They were asked to discuss a series of questions about middle-class, white male identity and privilege.

The resulting discussions were analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The data was sorted into five categories: a) Acknowledging privilege; b) Losing privilege; c) Those with less privilege; d) Those with more privilege; and e) Systemic privilege. The participants were able to perceive many aspects of their privilege, and were able to explicate aspects of systemic privilege. Their comments reflected a wide range of experiences that had shaped their perceptions. The men exhibited few of the strategies for evading and protecting privilege outlined in the theory. However, they revealed certain blind spots in their awareness. A paradox between

their awareness of privilege and their feelings of powerless to effect change was revealed. The study concludes that these middle-class, white men's perceptions of privilege were both more lucid and more complex than expected.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Acknowledgements are also due to the twenty six middle-class, white men who participated in this study, and in the pilot study. Their willingness to contribute their time and their views was crucial, and is gratefully recognized. I would like to acknowledge in particular those participants who volunteered to read and comment upon the transcripts and analysis.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my husband, Andrew Zolnai, for his technical support during the focus groups, for his editorial assistance, and for his rock-solid support throughout this project.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In the United States of today, many would claim that identities based on race, class and gender are deceptive. Essentialism is indeed a dangerous game. It leads to bland generalizations that mislead by ignoring the complexities of modern humanity. Yet this is also a culture in which white people continue to gain power, and white ideology continues to shape mainstream thought (Dyer, 1997). Most scholars of whiteness, as well as other critical scholars, assume that power and privilege is centered on those who not only identify as white, but also as male and middle class. This is still a world where the terms 'American' and 'man' conjure up the image of a white, middle-class person. These essentialist presumptions are the product of a white, middle-class male ideology (Grillo & Wildman, 1997). But what is the reality for middle-class, white men in this system? Do they perceive themselves to be at the center of power and privilege? How do they describe their lives?

Privileges based on social positionality exist in US culture. Likewise, oppression based on identity exists,

creating some inequalities that are palpable, and many that are not. Those who are the victims of oppression are able to see the workings of this system more clearly than those who benefit from the system. Much research has concentrated upon the experiences of those from oppressed groups, especially women and people of color. This has been invaluable in calling attention to how inequality based on race and sex affects all facets of the individual's life. While there have been many assumptions about whites and privilege, the experiences of middle-class, white men with privilege have not been studied. This group has not been allowed to speak for itself in a non-critical environment.

The purpose of this study was to provide a space in which white, middle-class men could consider and discuss their identity and its relationship to privilege. The deeper purpose for the research was to hear the voices of middle-class, white men, particularly what they had to say about privilege, and compare these real experiences with what is said in the critical literature. Focus groups have been found to provide a safe space for research on oppressed groups (Madriz, 2000). Likewise in this research, focus groups became the method of gathering

data. Transcripts from the focus groups, and a thematized analysis of the transcripts became the resulting outcome.

In this study it was assumed that middle-class, white men are the dominant group in US culture. This assumption is asserted in feminist literature (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Collins, 1998). Alcoff (1998) stated:

In much feminist literature the normative, dominant subject position is described as a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied male. This normative figure carries the weight as well in the cultural narrative of reconfiguring black-white relations... (p. 10).

In this study it was assumed that at the intersection of dominant race identity, dominant class identity and dominant gender identity, exists a group possessing the combined dominance of all these identities. It was also assumed that these facets of identity hold more influence than others, such as age, ability and sexuality. This research attempted to capture some of the complexity of the dominant hegemony by considering the intersection of race, class and gender, and its relationship with whiteness. In doing so there are other complexities that are inevitably ignored.

Critical White Theory strongly influenced the assertions in this study. Critical White Theory is an extension of Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory. It focuses specifically on the role of whites in perpetuating a social system based on racial privilege and oppression. Like all Critical Theory, it challenges the status quo in current society. It views society to be constructed as a white-dominated hegemony which enforces inequity between racial groups (Jackson, Shin & Wilson, 2000). Many of the underlying assumptions and ideas in this study are based in Critical White Theory.

This study uses phenomenology to analyze how groups of middle-class, white men talk about their experiences with privilege. A pilot study of a self-managed focus group of nine middle-class, white men revealed that insights about privilege were expressed through personal stories and anecdotes. It became clear that the participants' lived experiences were fundamental to their perceptions of privilege. These lived experiences are the basis for phenomenological research.

Individual perceptions were reported in the pilot study. These were then supported by stories and anecdotes. In phenomenological terms, the phenomena as it appears to

or is perceived by the individual is called the *noema* (Moustakas, 1994). The anecdotes illustrate the reasoning or meaning behind the phenomena. This "perfect self-evidence" (p. 30, Moustakas, 1994) is called the *noesis*. Phenomenology demands an emphasis on individual experience that stands in contrast to Critical White Theory in many ways. It is a contradiction to the essentialism that can occur when one considers middle-class, white men as holders of privilege from a critical vantage point. Phenomenology demands a neutral stance from the researcher. She must cast aside her own biases and the considerations of theory, and come to the experiences of her co-participants with a sense of openness as a "perpetual beginner" (Moustakas, 1994, p.86).

As a *perpetual beginner*, this researcher wished to examine what middle-class, white men participating in a focus group discussion would communicate about their societal privilege. I wished to know if they would recognize that they were privileged. I wanted to hear their personal indications of owning privilege, and their how they measured their privilege. I wanted to see if there were signs that they concealed ownership of privilege. In order to understand the participants'

perceptions of privilege, I had to consider every statement that was uttered pertaining to privilege.

This study was important because it contributed to the body of research in the communication of whiteness in several ways. It focused exclusively on whites who are middle-class and male, thus addressing the intersection between these identities. It asks the participants direct questions about privilege, and attempts to acknowledge their responses as unique and legitimate. This study is an effort to respond to recent qualitative work in the communication of whiteness, using similar methodology, i.e. focus groups. At the same time it attempts to counter particular concerns about the study of whiteness.

This study was qualitative in nature and conclusions drawn from the study cannot be applied to the general population. The participants were not randomly selected, but recruited through personal contacts with the investigator. They were a specific group, living in a relatively small area of Southern California. This location itself may have influenced the attitudes and experiences of the participants, and the resulting data.

The following chapter is a thorough review of the literature on whiteness, which is organized to build a

rational argument for the study itself. It commences with a socio-historical justification for considering gender and class to be an interconnected part of whiteness. It then outlines studies that discuss how whites are believed to perceive whiteness and white privilege. Studies that look at how whites communicate about privilege are overviewed. Finally, particularly qualitative studies that feature whites communicating are reviewed, and the research questions are presented.

In Chapter Three, the methodology is explicated. The use of focus groups is discussed and justified. In particular, the use of self-managed focus groups is defended. The results of the pilot study using this methodology are discussed. Key terms are then defined. The recruitment of participants is explained, and a description of the participants is given. Following this the procedure for the study is detailed, and the phenomenological method of analysis is explained.

In Chapter Four, the detailed analysis is presented and discussed. Finally, Chapter Five contains a summary of the research, a discussion of this study's contributions to whiteness research, and an analysis of the study's

limitations. Recommendations for future research are also outlined before the work concludes.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter builds a scholarly framework for this study, through a review of the literature pertinent to this topic. Literature on whiteness from a variety of disciplines is included, reflecting the interest in this topic from a wide variety of perspectives. I focus mainly on those from the communication discipline, especially studies relating to everyday communication. Very few studies have examined the middle-class, white man. As a result I have mostly used literature discussing whites with the assumption that white, middle-class men are a sub-category of "white". I assume they generally have more investment in whiteness because of their more privileged position. First, literature placing white privilege in a historical frame is surveyed. This is followed by a review of literature outlining the conflation of race, class and gender identities with privilege. Thirdly, existing studies that explore white viewpoints and communicative acts in a white world are examined. Finally, I justify employing a qualitative study to answer specific

research questions on the nature of middle-class, white men's communication about societal privilege.

### White Privilege: Its Historical and Social Context

Stratified systems based on age and gender exist in all human cultures. Further stratification based on "arbitrary-sets" exists only in non-hunter-gatherer cultures, where sufficient economic surplus is available. This is where most overt oppression and violence occurs (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Oppression and privilege can be said to be flip-sides of the same phenomena (Johnson, 2001). Johnson observed "Systems organized around privilege...are *dominated* by privileged groups, *identified* with privileged groups, and *centered* upon privileged groups" (p. 15). Other groups are positioned with reference to the dominant group (Collins, 1998).

Whiteness can be defined as "a *historical systematic structural* race-based superiority" (Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1998, p. 15). In this context to be white means more than to be white-skinned. Bahk and Jandt (2004) described how being white became an important identity in the US in opposition to those people of color with less

rank and power. In early times this included black slaves and 'red' American Indians. Later, immigrants such as the Irish were not considered white, which demonstrates that the dominant white group has the power to create and recreate its own definition. As Miller and Harris stated: "Racially speaking, white is not a color" (p. 224). Today, white skin communicates a position of power and privilege in the social order. Jackson and Heckman (2002) said "...the contemporary use of race is predicated on the social implications of visible physiognomic differences" (p. 436). For the purposes of this research study, to be white is to be an accepted member of the dominant racial group at this present time in US society.

In order to understand whiteness and its interconnection with class and gender, it is useful to consider it in its historical context. The thinkers behind the European Enlightenment constructed the white male as the center-point of rational thinking. Colonized peoples were considered deviant from this norm of rationality and therefore unequal to whites. This notion supported colonization and domination (Kincheloe, 1999). The acquisition of the land and labor from other people was justified openly in terms of racial and cultural

superiority (Sleeter, 1993). Whiteness, therefore, is historically connected with imperialism, by which white men accrued their privilege (Dyer, 1997).

In the US, the visibility of white privilege together with male and class privilege was reflected in the early requirements that voters must be white male landowners (Hasian & Nakayama, 1998). These laws were embodied in such practices as slavery and racial segregation, and in the acquisition of land from Native Americans. Today, in spite of the gains made in the Civil Rights movement, these hegemonic privileges still exist. As Wildman and Davis (2002) stated:

White privilege derives from the race power system of white supremacy. Male privilege and heterosexual privilege result from gender hierarchy. Class privilege derives from an economic, wealth-based hierarchy (p. 94).

White privilege has always been, and continues to be interconnected with gender and class privileges.

Today white privilege is less overtly exercised, but it manifests globally as white power continues to consolidate around material wealth (Kincheloe, 1999). White privilege in daily life in the US manifests as what

McIntosh (1988) referred to as "unearned entitlement": Ordinary events that enact and confirm white domination as they are repeated continuously (Tierney & Jackson, 2003). Today, the fundamental essence of privilege is "...the socially intrinsic privilege of *being* white, not about a possession of power or wealth. It is about *the* constructed privilege, not about what is earned by individual efforts" (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 74). Through white hegemony, whites continue to take from others through social policy and daily acts, while remaining apparently oblivious to their advantages in society (Sleeter, 1993). Lipsitz (1998) quoted polls that showed 70% of whites believed African Americans had equal possibilities of attaining a middle class life style. He compared this with a National Opinion Research Report (1990) which indicated that over 50% of whites thought Blacks to be naturally indolent, less bright and less loyal to their country than whites. White privilege makes it possible to define equality and inequality at will.

The white-dominated hegemony that exists today in the US is ingrained in the minds of both whites and non-whites so that both groups feel this is normal (Jackson et al., 2000). It creates a world that encourages people to use

difference to include or exclude, privilege or oppress (Johnson, 2001). Even subtle bias can lead to the maintenance of social power differences (Fiske, 2002). Hence the hegemonic system is maintained not only by racism, but by classism and sexism, as well as other forms of oppression based on difference. In this system, the power-holders are at once so visible that they are perceived as universal, and so universal that they become invisible. As Ferguson observed:

The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center; elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the entire framework of our culture, and over the ways we think about it" (In Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 291).

In a recent study, Moon and Nakayama (2005) argue for considering whiteness "as a strategic formation of racial privilege that is enmeshed with other social identities such as heterosexuality and masculinity" (p. 89). They believe that other privileged social identities interact in constantly refiguring the strategies which hold power

and privilege in place, and that these have been underestimated in recent studies. In the next section, the intersection of whiteness with masculinity and middle-class identity is considered, although I acknowledge that other privileged identities also add to the complexity.

Power and Intersectionality: White,  
Middle-class and Male

Discussions on whiteness often take for granted that the white middle-class man occupies the "normative, dominant subject position" (Alcoff, 1998, p. 10). Collins (1998) reflected the views of many scholars when she stated:

Designed to represent the interests of those privileged by hierarchical power structures of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, and nationality, elite discourses present a view of social reality that elevates the ideas and actions of highly educated White men as normative and superior" (p. 45).

Whiteness is seen to be embedded in all cultural systems, including organizations. Ashcraft and Allen (2003) claim that the enactment of "professional" embodies white

middle-class male values. White males, more than white females, have been accorded a label-free existence in this culture (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Even though white men vary in their actual relationship to power and privilege, they can claim symbolic ownership of white privilege, and inclusion in the dominant system (Frankenburg, 1997).

DiPiero (2002) discusses the powerful symbolic order created by the combination of whiteness and masculinity. He argues that white masculinity provides "an anchor in the constant slippage of meaning" (p. 13) in the US. Yet white masculinity is also a hegemonic ideal to which no one person can really measure up.

Whiteness has been described as a leaky category (Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1998). For example, in the post-World War II United States, the middle class grew to include many Jews and ethnic groups. It is not clear whether gaining wealth allowed them to become "white", or whether a broader definition of whiteness allowed them access to wealth and middle class status (Frankenberg, 1997). In a hegemonic system, all groups buy into the dominant ideology and hence maintain its power. As Dyer (1997) observed:



A shifting border and internal hierarchies of whiteness suggest that the category of whiteness is unclear and unstable, yet this has proved its strength. Because whiteness carries such rewards and privileges, the sense of a border that might be crossed and a hierarchy that might be climbed has produced a dynamic that has enthralled people who have had any chance of participating in it (p. 20).

Hence, white women, especially middle-class, white women, align themselves with white male privilege (Carrillo Rowe, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Moon, 1998). White working-class men identify more with their whiteness than their working class identity (Leistyna, 1997; Roediger, 1991). People of color feel they can only achieve equality by being accepted by middle-class whites (Jackson et al., 2000). All forms of oppression interact to maintain the silence of whiteness (Crenshaw, 1997). Power in the social order is maintained by minority groups working in opposition to one another, as well as by direct oppression by the white male elite (Collins, 1998; Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Even as minorities attempt to claim recognition for themselves, this focuses more attention "...on the 'white'

(middle class, male, able-bodied, heterosexual) *norm*, the standard by which the margins have been defined" (Perry, 2002, p. 8).

Class privilege and white privilege are interconnected in complex ways (Frankenberg, 1997), and both serve to protect elite interests. Scholars describe both in similar language. For example, Ehrenreich (1989) described the professional middle class "Nameless, and camouflaged by a culture in which it both stars and writes the scripts, this class plays an overweening role in defining 'America'..." (p. 6). US culture suppresses discussion about class privilege by focusing on individual responsibility (Wildman & Davis, 2002), and by maintaining the myth that the US is a middle-class nation (Ehrenreich, 1989). When the identity "white" is mentioned there is an underlying assumption that this indicates middle class. On the other hand there is a middle-class aversion to the white working class and poor (Ehrenreich, 1989; Moon & Rolison, 1998). This is manifested in "white trash" stereotypes, which work to mark poor whites as worthy of rejection in order to maintain white social dominance (Newitz & Wray, 1997).

## White Perceptions of the World

There has been extensive discussion in the literature about whether whites are able to see their privilege and the related oppression and inequity in the world. A comparison of black critiques of whiteness with white critiques of whiteness, demonstrates that white scholars fail to see how whiteness affects their whole lives as do black scholars (Jackson et al., 2000). Being white is an invisible privilege only if you are white. Whites can live as if they are invisible to people of color and as if people of color are invisible (hooks, 1992). On the other hand, white privilege is palpable to people of color. Results of a quantitative study supported the hypothesis that non-whites perceive "... the privileged and dominant positionality of Whites more conspicuously than do Whites" (Bahk & Jandt, 2004, p. 10). It has been suggested that whites use rhetorical strategies to evade discussing their privilege (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Sleeter (1994) argued that whites are knowledgeable about racism as they have been socialized to benefit from white racism. Conversely, it has been argued that whites are unconscious of or confused about their identity and what it entails (Jackson, 1999).

From a white male dominant standpoint it may be natural to compare oneself with others in the same social category rather than those outside of it, and therefore not see oneself as privileged (Johnson, 2001). Calvert and Ramsey (1996) made the following observation from their experience of organizations:

Without a great deal of introspection, it is very difficult for dominant group members to see how their behaviors can be interpreted as racist or sexist - they simply act out of a sense of their right to act. But in the eyes of non dominant group members, the 'innocent' statements and actions of dominant group members often contain subtle and not-so-subtle messages and deeper levels of subtext which are racist and sexist (p. 470).

Perry (2002) notes that the middle-class, white high school students in her study range in awareness "... from the self-concept shaped by little more than an awareness that one carries a racial ascription to full internalization and passionate identification with it" (p. 5). She observes that those with less contact with other races conflate their whiteness with being American, middle

class and normal, and they have less awareness of white privilege.

Kinselica (1999), a middle-class, white man, relates his story of becoming aware of his participation in white privilege. Although he came from a poor, working-class background, and considered himself to be a progressive and anti-racist, he reacted to this discovery with defensiveness and anger. The awareness of white privilege creates discomfort. It is uncomfortable to admit that one participates in a system that benefits middle-class, white men at the expense of others (Johnson, 2001). It is uncomfortable to recognize that one is on the "wrong side", and it is challenging to remain positive about one's identity in the light of this awareness (Alcoff, 1998). As Kinselica remarks, "Realizing my status as a white person posed a new challenge for me, and I was faced with the dilemma of accepting this challenge or avoiding it" (p. 16). Kinselica's story demonstrates the defenses that stand between middle-class white men and a consciousness of their systemic privilege.

Whereas Kinselica (1999) believed he was anti-racist and progressive, many whites believe that racism no longer exists, and that everyone is the same and has equal

opportunities. hooks (1992) observed that whites are strongly and emotionally invested in the myth of 'sameness' even as they enact white privilege. She noted that there is a belief amongst whites that considering 'sameness' over 'difference' will make racism disappear. In the same vein, Crenshaw (1998) exposed the contradictions between whites' beliefs and their actions. She noted that they believe in the existence of racial equality and multiculturalism, and believe themselves to be color-blind, yet they can put a price on the compensation they would need to become black. These perceptions are supported by neo-liberal thought as it exists today. Emphasis on the free market and materialistic values encourages individualism and competitiveness, and moves away from civic responsibility (Giroux, 2003). In the context of systemic privilege and oppression, color blindness is a less than innocuous stance:

Color blindness does not deny the existence of race but denies the claim that race is responsible for alleged injustices that reproduce group inequalities, privilege Whites, and negatively impacts on economic mobility, the

possession of social resources, and the acquisition of political power (Giroux, 2003, p. 198).

In the original context of making discrimination illegal, the discourse of color blindness had good intentions, but it has been twisted to signify blindness to the results of inequality and prejudice (Gallagher, 1997).

Moves to combat inequality, such as Affirmative Action, have created opportunities for white middle-class men to feel 'white' and 'male' for the first time, and to experience the white privilege that they have always taken for granted (Wellman, 1997). The secure privileged systems of white males have been shaken by the entrance of minority groups into the workplace. The old boy network and male bonding no longer works when other groups play by different rules (Graham, 1997). With these mechanisms breaking down, white men feel a *psychic threat*, and a consequent backlash has developed (Alcoff, 1998; Delgado & Stefanic, 1997). White men report feeling oppressed and victimized by affirmative action (Gabriel, 1999; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2000). They defend this perception "by co-opting movement discourse on equality and using it to defend the unequal status quo" (Madison, 1999, p. 414).

This discourse deters discussion of how being white has societal advantages (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). It frames the decline of whiteness as "a loss of order and civility" (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2000, p. 188).

Dominant group members feel indignant about the new problems that face them and blame the traditional minority groups. This attitude of blame gives rise to a new type of racism (Giroux, 2003). Concurrently, the discourse of *tokenism* is used to provide examples of how the system provides equal opportunities through merit, and thus frames those who do not succeed as 'failures' in the system. Cloud (1996) states "Tokenism is the calculated, negotiated response of a 'dominant group under pressure to share privilege'..." (p. 123).

#### Why Do Research on Whiteness?

Kiselica's (1999) story shows how challenging it can be for middle-class, white men to admit to white privilege. In order to deconstruct whiteness in his life, Kiselica needed ongoing support and information from other whites, and connection with people of color. Most whites do not choose to engage in this work. As Jackson et al. (2000) observed:



White people do not have to change who they are, how they talk, or how they behave. The talk and behavior of whites occupy a legitimized cultural space of social interaction, in which the identity of whiteness is acknowledged as normal and standard. Therefore the centrality of whiteness has to be deconstructed (p. 82).

Whiteness is constructed through language and discourse, which shapes ideology and the ways in which ideology is acted upon (Tierney & Jackson, 2003). The aim of research on the communication of whiteness is to deconstruct rhetorical formations that hide and re-establish white privilege and the associated oppression of non-white and other groups (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

#### Listening to Whites Speaking About Being White

A range of studies from media studies, cultural observation, ethnographies (Hyttén & Warren, 2003; Pierce, 2003) and interviews (Jackson & Heckman, 2002) has illuminated our knowledge of how whites talk about being white in US culture. In Frankenberg's (1993) detailed study of white women, she observed three discursive

repertoires that reflected the women's racial consciousness: essentialist racism, color and power evasion, and racial cognizance. She emphasized that these are not simply a linear progression, but depend upon the context of time, space and relationship. The findings outlined below are similar reflections of the context of the research and the relationship of the individual participants to this context. There are some general patterns that emerge and these inform our expectations of how middle-class white men communicate.

Whites generally find whiteness hard to define. They may define themselves as being of the majority, and therefore as a representative of "normal" mainstream America (Jackson, 1999; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Perry, 2002). A male high school student in Perry's study defined his background thus "That plain ol' nuclear family, two kids and a dog, middle-class. Suburbany" (Perry, 2002, p. 51). Whites often highlight their European ethnicity when addressing race (Leistyna, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Sleeter, 1993). This may reflect a strategic avoidance of naming whiteness and its associated privilege (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), or a simple confusion or inability to see white identity (Jackson, 1999).

Whiteness may be masked in discourse, therefore upholding the invisible norm (Grimes, 2002). Silence is a key rhetorical strategy that masks white privilege and allows the continuation of racial comments and acts (Crenshaw, 1997; Moon, 1998; Sleeter, 1994). It is important to consider what is not said in white discourse, as well as what is directly addressed. Ownership of white racism can be hidden in semantic constructions. For example, if the word 'racism' is the subject of the sentence then racism is framed as the enemy and the white perpetrators of racism are not acknowledged. Constructions such as using a passive voice or disembodiment of the subject of the sentence have a similar effect (Marty, 1998; Moon, 1998; Sleeter, 1993).

The denial of racism has the effect of masking whiteness. Color-blind discourse that proclaims everyone is the same and downplays difference has the effect of universalizing whiteness (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Rains, 1998; Tierney & Jackson, 2003; Warren, 2001). When confronted with the concept of race, normally articulate whites may stumble over their words (Pierce, 2003), and bury their real thoughts in political correctness (Moon, 1998). Pierce remarked that the middle-class, white

professionals in her study seem to be "racing for innocence" (p. 212). They simultaneously denied accountability for racism, while they participated in everyday racism.

Whites may use strategies of subtle but overt racism injected into discourse, and held there by silent acceptance. Sleeter (1994) suggested that *white racial bonding* is a significant way in which white privilege is kept in place. She observed that whites communicate this bonding through "... inserts into conversations, race-related "asides" in conversations, strategic eye-contact, and jokes" (p. 8). These apparently insignificant communications quietly but powerfully mark racial solidarity. If one challenges them, one risks isolation and loss of friendship. An example of white racial bonding occurs in Warren's (2001) study. By referring to a Japanese car as a "rice burner" a woman student strategically constructs herself as white and superior to other races. This illustrates how white privilege is re-made and preserved with every racial comment.

Minority group members may be discursively framed by whites in ways that shift the focus from existing structural privilege. Whites may express their inability

to speak for racially different others. This frames the minority group's experience as strange and different, and creates a justification for avoiding it. This reifies the status quo (Rains, 1998). Examples of minority group members who have succeeded in white society may be presented by whites as proof that anyone can make it in the U.S. through hard work. This obscures the harsh reality that the majority that will never succeed in this fashion (Cloud, 1996; Rains, 1998). White discourse may also call into question the presence and potential success of minority members in a white dominated world. They may be framed as breaking the rules, or encroaching unfairly into the workplace through affirmative action policies (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997).

White discourse may re-center whiteness, by apparently addressing difference and inequity yet ultimately allow whiteness to remain the central experience (Grimes, 2002). Often in discussion about racism, whites subtly refer back to their own experiences. They may refer to their own experiences of being oppressed or of dealing with racism in their family or friendship circles (Hyttten & Warren, 2003). They may express a sense of guilt for existing inequity, which shifts the focus

from the experience of people of color (Rains, 1998). Whites have been observed to emphasize their personal lack of privilege (Hytten & Warren, 2003), and also to justify their sense of entitlement to privilege due to personal hard work (Rains, 1998). These responses may all be valid in terms of discussion, but ultimately emphasize individual white experiences over the systemic experience emphasized by people of color.

Whiteness is also re-centered by the way racism is framed in dialogue. Whites may avoid discourse about white racism in order to maintain the invisibility of white privilege (Sleeter, 1993). White dominance may also be defined in superficial, non-immediate ways (Madison, 1999). The discourse of liberal individualism allows whites to disapprove of individual acts of racism while ignoring systemic racism (Calvert & Ramsey, 1996; Marty, 1998; Pierce, 2003). This allows the conflation of racism with individual prejudice (Sleeter, 1993). McIntire (1997) interviewed white middle-class teachers working with poor and working class students of color. She noted that they criticized white teachers who dealt harshly with the students, and attempted to separate themselves from them. Yet they did not believe the students were affected by

their teachers' whiteness. Consciously or unconsciously, whites tend to avoid addressing systemic racism, and subtly re-center whiteness.

Even white anti-racist rhetoric may expose ways in which whiteness discourse recreates itself. Flores and Moon (2002) examined "Race Traitor", a white radical movement that aims to abolish whiteness. They observed "Attempting to disrupt white privilege, Race Traitor positions a narrow and exclusive group of men as spokespersons for race... *Whites* define the problem, its parameters, and its solutions, with little thought to the implications of their view on others" (p. 198). In attempting to envision a truly human culture they fall into old ideological traps, using a liberal color-blind stance, over-focusing on the black/white binary, and envisioning new systems based on hierarchies. Flores and Moon's (2002) analysis show the power of white ideology to remain embedded in rhetoric, even when the speaker consciously intends to destroy the ideology and create social change.

## White Perspectives in Qualitative Research

Findings in the recent qualitative studies in the communication of whiteness reflect more variety and contradictions than critical studies have suggested. When researchers interview white people, their perspectives are more wide-ranging and less clear-cut than have been predicted by theory. Both Jackson (1999) and Perry (2002) note that whites may simultaneously endorse the existence of equal opportunities for all in the US, while admitting to being more privileged. In Jackson and Heckman's (2002) study, the white participants could explain white privilege from the perspective of a person of color more clearly than they could see privilege as part of their experience as whites. In some studies, whites demonstrated an awareness of the complexities of race and society, for example, they may measure the reality against the ideal (Hyttén & Warren, 2003); or see 'white' as a continuum (Jackson & Heckman, 2002).

Qualitative studies seem to reflect the complex reality of whites' perceptions of whiteness. Warren and Hyttén (2004) studied the perceptions of students during a graduate class on whiteness. They found that the students



shifted between a number of different stances that were neither linear nor developmental. From their data they developed a model to map these "faces of whiteness" (p. 325), which exist within the tensions between the individual's self-investment, and the depth of their understanding of whiteness. Warren and Hytten suggest that the individual who can maintain balance between these tensions, a "Critical Democrat", has a better chance of achieving multicultural understanding. This stance engages a dialogic relationship between "action/reflection, speaking out/listening, and guilt/agency" (p. 331).

Warren and Hytten's (2004) study suggests that complexity and contradiction in a white person's perspective may reflect a process of developing a clearer understanding of whiteness and white privilege. Miller and Harris (2005) noticed that the students in their study were moving toward an understanding of racially different others through analogy and personal experience, such as experiences of oppression. Thus it appears that perceptions of white privilege may be driven by the individuals' experiences and by their ability to engage in the complexities of their reality.

In this study, the purpose was to examine the ways in which middle-class, white men communicate about privilege. I was particularly interested in the perceptions and real experiences of the participants in comparison with the theory about how they should respond. Many of the above-mentioned qualitative studies have used white students as participants, though many of these were mature students with professional positions. To my knowledge, no studies to date have specifically engaged middle-class, male whites. I decided that a qualitative study using focus groups would add to the already rich findings in the field while specifically engaging this identity group that represents the more privileged section of white culture.

There has been a recent trend to use focus groups to study racial discourse in communication (Buttny, 1999; Jackson, 1999; Jackson & Heckman, 2002; Orbe, 1994; Miller & Harris, 2005). This method allows attention to be paid to the process of making meaning in a group (Fassett & Warren, 2004). This allows the investigation of how middle-class, white men respond with others of the same identity. Middle-class, white men are generally considered to be of the dominant group: those who create the ideology

and hold the power and privilege. In this study, I endeavored to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are middle-class, white men's perceptions of societal privilege?

RQ2: How do they explain or justify their perceptions of societal privilege?

RQ3: How far do middle-class, white men conceal or acknowledge their privilege?

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

In this study, three self-directed focus groups of middle-class white men were carried out. The participants were given questions to guide their discussion about middle-class white men and social privilege (Appendix E). The resulting 90-minute conversations were taped and transcribed. They were analyzed using a process rooted in phenomenology.

#### Focus Groups

Focus groups have the general advantage of displaying interaction between participants as they tell their individual stories and question one another, and offering "... valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity among the participants" (Morgan, 1996, p.139). They also provide a place where people of similar identity can feel safe to explore issues. There is some question about whether focus groups actually provide more in depth information than interviews or other methods. Some evidence shows that less individual ideas are produced (Morgan, 1996). However, this study seeks to examine how

middle-class, white men communicate together, and specifically how a particular group of middle-class, white men communicate in a particular context, so the general group response is of more interest.

Madriz (2000) emphasized the usefulness of focus groups for gathering data for feminist research, particularly when working with groups that may feel intimidated by other methods. She stated: "... the group interview offers participants... a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people from the same socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds" (p.835). Although Madriz used this argument to support the use of focus groups with "lower-socioeconomic-class women of color" (p.843), her arguments can also be applied to middle-class, white men. She stated that lower-class women of color are in a vulnerable position in US culture, and that researchers find it challenging to gain access to their life experience.

In the case of middle-class, white men, their protected position has meant that researchers have not accessed their lives or even considered doing so. As a group, they have not customarily looked at their oppressor material and privilege in a group setting. Their

individualism has kept them separate, and the need to protect privilege by silence has kept them from looking at these issues as a group. In addition, whites have been observed to be silent in mixed group discussions for fear of being labeled as racist (Miller & Harris, 2005).

Middle-class, white men have a need for the safety provided in a homogenous group in order to explore issues sensitive to the group.

Morgan and Krueger (1993) pointed out that focus groups sometimes show people to be less rational and organized than researchers posit. In this way they provide information about complex behaviors from the individual's point of view. In the case of middle-class, white men, critical theorists have made generalizations that may not make sense when we look at the experience of individuals. Jackson and Heckman (2002) supported this, when they speculated that confusion is as much a feature of views on whiteness as is deliberate intention.

Morgan and Krueger (1993) indicated that focus groups are a respectful approach when participants may feel distrustful of the intentions of the researcher:

By creating and sustaining an atmosphere that provides meaningful interaction, focus groups

convey a humane sensitivity, a willingness to listen without being defensive, and a respect for opposing views that is unique and beneficial in these emotionally charged environments (p.18).

As middle-class, white men may feel defensive when interviewed individually, especially by a female researcher, focus groups were a more comfortable choice of method.

Focus group methodology fits well with a phenomenological study, because they can help reduce the biased, interpretive tendency of the data in a qualitative study (Frey & Fontana, 1993). Accounts from focus groups tend to contain meanings that are elaborated and more "polyphonic", and the interviewer's influence is lessened. A focus group is also a "social event" (Albrecht, Johnson & Walther, 1993, p.54), and may produce data that is more "ecologically valid" and closer to the kinds of views middle-class, white men might produce as a social group in U.S. culture. However, as Albrecht et al. warned, there is also the danger that divergent views will be lost in the interests of group identification and cohesion.

Social privilege can be regarded as a sensitive topic for middle-class, white males. Much of the whiteness literature for example talks about how whites avoid the topic in order to defend their privilege. Zeller (1993) recommended that in focus groups on sensitive topics the participants should carry the discussion, while those who are slow to self-disclose should not be pressured to do so. When there is no facilitator present, as in a self-managed focus group, then the participants truly carry the discussion and choose the direction of the conversation within the confines of the discussion questions. The men in the groups in the present study proved capable of directing the flow of the conversation and including everyone when they were give some direction on how to do so.

There were two primary reasons for choosing to use self-directed focus groups in this study. First, as the investigator and as a white middle-class woman known to many of the participants, I was concerned that my presence would influence the responses and impede the discussion. This influence has been noted in similar research instigated by women (Pierce, 2003). Second, the discussion provoked by the questions was of more interest than



specific answers to each question. As Morgan (1988) indicated, a low level of moderator involvement allows participants to pursue their own interests, and consequently to avoid other material. As what is not said in whiteness discourse can be as revealing as what is said, this methodology seemed particularly apt.

### Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out in February 2005. This was an opportunity to see if self-directed focus groups would be a useful method of extracting data from middle-class, white men about their perspectives on social privilege. Nine men were recruited from the personal acquaintances of the researcher to form one focus group. They were given a list of ten questions to guide their discussion, and the researcher gave them some guidelines about keeping the discussion on track, and including everyone in the discussion. They were then left to answer the questions, and the subsequent 90-minute discussion was audio and video-taped. The tapes were transcribed and analyzed.

The pilot focus group discussion revealed a variety of life experiences and knowledge, which the men used to

illustrate their viewpoints. The sharing of these stories was a key feature in the rich discussion that ensued. Although all the men self-identified as white and middle class, their backgrounds were revealed to be very different in other ways. Four were born outside the US, and thus had lived experience of other cultures. Two were raised working class and poor. This was also a mature group with a wide variety of work experience. They were teachers, archeologists, software engineers, pharmacists, stay-at-home fathers and volunteers. They had an interest in current affairs and were well read.

It was interesting to see how the participants expressed their perceptions and beliefs in a group setting. The participants used stories of their experience to outline and structure their views. It seemed essential to conserve these stories in the analysis. Several types of stories occurred in the discussion frequently and were explored with intensity. These stories existed as interwoven threads within the discussion. Each revealed aspects of theory contained within a developing dialogue. The data was categorized into four story themes. These were: stories of ease and hardship; stories of others;

stories of equal opportunities; and stories of affirmative action.

The pilot study demonstrated the effectiveness of the self-directed focus group in addressing the research question. It also highlighted the importance of the personal experiences behind the viewpoints of each participant. It was determined that in the main study, a phenomenological approach would be most appropriate for guiding the analysis.

#### Definitions of Terms

Participants needed to be white, middle-class and male. Beyond this, diversity of all kinds was welcomed and sought. The definition of "white, middle-class man" brought with it some interesting challenges. The sex of the participants was straightforward to define, but white and middle-class were not as simple to operationalize. Most participants were obviously white-skinned and did not question their whiteness. In the pilot study, however, one man was of Turkish-Cypriot heritage, and an acquaintance of his, also in the group, questioned whether he was really white. This researcher's response was that if he

defined himself as white, then he fit the requirement for the group.

Earlier in this paper (p. 9), I defined being white as being an accepted member of the dominant racial group in the present socio-historic context of US society. The self-definition of "whiteness" fits more comfortably within the critical-theoretical framework, than does the color of skin or ethnic background. In the theory, enacting whiteness has to do with participating in the white hegemonic system as a person with privileges in that system. Therefore, if a person sees themselves as white, then they probably are performing as a white person. Other qualitative researchers, such as Jackson and Heckman (2002), have accepted participants who self-identified as white.

This definition also extends usefully to the concept of middle class. Class is notoriously hard to define in the US, and is challenging to operationalize in research. In the US, class is often perceived to be defined solely by income. However income levels can be misleading, for example, skilled craftspeople may earn more than some white collar workers (Rothman, 1978). Rothman (1978) suggests five criteria for defining socio-economic class:

employment status, ownership and control, quantitative boundaries, complexity of tasks, and manual versus non-manual work. Recent research on class reflects the continuing debate on its definition. Chang (2003) defines class in four dimensions: capitalist ties, workplace authority, skills and expertise, and income. On the other hand, Perry-Jenkins (1994) opts to use a simple distinction in which middle-class people are 'order givers' and working-class people are 'order takers'. The definition of class is further complicated by the influence of the class of the family of origin.

In the present study where the individual's experience is fundamental, it follows that the individuals' experience of class should take precedence over more objective definitions. If individuals define themselves as middle class, this is probably associated with a sense of experiencing privilege within the class system. For the purpose of this study, therefore, a person was middle class if they defined themselves as such.

### Participants

The participants were recruited through the personal contacts of the investigator. Some were friends, and

others were acquaintances through the investigator's church and her husband's workplace. At the end of the first two groups, the participants were asked to suggest further participants from their acquaintance. Three men were recruited in this way. The men were invited to be involved in the study either in person or via a phone conversation. The investigator invited all possible middle-class, white men in her acquaintance who had not previously been involved in the pilot study. Some felt uncomfortable with contributing, or were too busy to be involved, so recruitment was challenging. The investigator willingly answered questions about the research to increase the potential participants comfort level.

It was essential that each participant self-identify as white, middle class and male. Diversity beyond these characteristics was welcomed. It was hoped to achieve diversity in the groups in terms of age, educational background, and political persuasion. Eventually, seventeen men agreed to participate in three one-time focus groups scheduled in November 2005. The first group had five participants, and the second and third groups had six participants. They ranged in age from 29 to 71, with an average age of 47. All of them had some level of higher

education. Nine held advanced degrees. One said he held progressive political views, six said they held liberal political views, seven identified as political moderates, and two identified as conservatives. One declined to describe his political stance. As in the pilot study, the men represented a wide range of professional backgrounds. The groups included a psychiatric nurse, a software engineer, a general manager, and a piano tuner. Two of the men were retired, one was a full-time student, and one was a stay-at-home father.

#### Procedure

Each focus group was scheduled to take place in a university classroom on a weekday evening. Food and beverages were provided for the participants, as some arrived directly from work. The researcher used a written protocol to address each group. The protocol described the process for the evening, addressed the need for confidentiality and anonymity, and gave recommendations for facilitating the discussion (see Appendix A for full protocol). Each man signed an informed consent form plus an informed consent form for Audio and Video Usage as required by the Institutional Review Board of California

State University, San Bernardino (Appendices B & C). Each participant also filled in a brief demographic questionnaire to provide general information about the group (Appendix D).

The participants were given a list of ten questions, which began with general questions about lifestyle and became more specifically focused on the positionality and privilege of middle-class, white men (Appendix E). They were asked to answer all the questions, but the larger importance of the resulting discussion was emphasized. The investigator, following Morgan's (1988) advice, spent some time legitimating the right of all participants to manage the discussion and participate fully. Before the discussion began, each participant made an opening statement, which included their name, profession and place of birth (Morgan, 1988). The opening statement was intended to aid the participants in getting to know one another, and to familiarize them with talking with equipment in the room. After this the investigator left the room. The 90-minute discussion that followed was audio-taped and video-taped. At the end of 90 minutes, the investigator returned and all equipment was switched off. The participants were given a debriefing statement



(Appendix F), and had an opportunity to comment and ask questions about their experience. At this time, the investigator also asked for a volunteer from each group to act as co-researchers, as described below.

The discussion was transcribed from the audio and video tapes for analysis. In order to guarantee confidentiality, tapes were destroyed after the transcripts were completed. Participants were assigned pseudonyms in the written transcripts to ensure anonymity. A sample transcript from the third focus group is available in Appendix G.

#### Co-researchers

In pure phenomenological research all participants are considered to be 'co-researchers'. They may be asked to collaborate in the development of the analysis by reading and providing feedback on the themes and how far they reflect their own experience. The analysis may then be re-formulated accordingly to more closely align with the co-researchers experience (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

Such extended involvement from all participants was beyond the scope of this study. In order to achieve some

measure of collaborative feedback from the participants, one volunteer was asked to come forward from each group. These men assisted with validating the transcribed data, and provided feedback on the accuracy of the completed analysis. When the transcription was completed, the volunteers read the documents to verify that they reflected the course of the discussion as they remembered it. When the draft analysis was complete, the volunteers read and gave their approval of this. The involvement of these co-researchers supported the validity of the data and the analytical process.

### Phenomenological Analysis

Research based in phenomenology seeks to understand the individual's experience as a separate and living truth, free from preconceived notions of theory and scientific truths. Moustakas (1994) states "Transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness" (p. 49). The phenomenological approach demands that the researcher take the position of a "perpetual beginner" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). This means approaching the data with no prior

expectations, but rather allowing the data to speak for itself. Generalization is never a part of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological analysis involves breaking the text down into relevant statements of equal value (horizontalization), creating a "textural-structural description" (Moustakas, 1994, p.122) of the experience of each participant or co-researcher, and constructing a composite description of the participant's experiences. In this study, I decided to follow DeTurk's (2005) approach and proceed with the analysis in the order outlined below. This meant first separating out the verbatim transcript for each individual, and extracting each statement that referred to experiences or thoughts about societal privilege. A first-person description of the essence of that person's experiences with societal privilege was then crafted. This process was particularly useful in this study, because it created a clearer picture of each man's perspective within the group discussion. This made it easier not to privilege one perspective above others.

The second step of the analysis, the phenomenological reduction, involved sorting the data from the descriptions into themes that would summarize the experiences and

thoughts of the participants. In phenomenological terms, a theme is an attempt to capture the meaning of an experience, and as such it is always a simplification of the complexity of that experience (Van Manen, 1990). A theme provides "... shape to the shapeless" (p. 88, Van Manen). In the context of this study, this meant capturing the meaning of each statement uttered about privilege, then reading through the transcripts and descriptions repeatedly in order to create a thematic framework (See Chapter Four). This framework was intended to cover all perspectives and experiences while avoiding bias toward any particular view.

The thematic framework was established by reading each sentence or sentence cluster referring to privilege carefully, and encapsulating what was said as a theme. These thematized statements were sorted into broader categories by cutting up the notes and sorting them into piles of similar themes. This cut and sort process took several re-readings, and categories were re-organized several times. Finally, several broad categories and related sub-categories emerged which seemed to capture the amalgamated experience of the participants as accurately as possible.

The final step was to create a descriptive account based on the thematic framework. In creating the descriptive account, the focus was on summarizing the participant's perceptions of societal privilege as middle-class, white men. This descriptive account is presented in the following chapter. The subsequent discussion section will include a more critical examination of the roots of their perceptions and beliefs. The extent to which they concealed or acknowledged their privilege will also be assessed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS

During the three focus-group discussions a broad variety of views and experiences pertaining to societal privilege were shared. These were organized into five overall categories: acknowledgment of middle-class, white male privilege; middle-class, white men losing privilege; perspectives on those with less privileged; perspectives on those with more privilege; and views of systemic privilege.

#### Acknowledgment of Middle-Class, White Male Privilege

Most participants acknowledged that life was easy for them as middle-class, white men. This was recognized both directly in response to the first question posed to them, and indirectly in later conversations. There were a variety of ways in which they viewed life as easy and privileged because of their identity.

#### Living in the US as Privilege

Four of the total participants were originally from other countries. Lester, Martin and Sven all compared

their lives with their experiences in their country of origin. They were able to pinpoint ways in which their standard of living was comparable or better in the US. As a man born in the US, Alan indicated that he had traveled in developing countries and noted his relative privilege. Henry remarked that the average American does not appreciate the freedoms and privileges that people worked for and died for in earlier times. Thus he indicated his awareness as a more thoughtful US citizen.

#### Being in "The Recognized Mainstream" as Privilege

Many of the men clearly understood that that as middle-class, white men they are part of an accepted and privileged mainstream. Lester stated "White is a good thing to be in the US. There is no other color or race that people would prefer to be". Ben recognized that middle-class, white men have "immediate acceptance" and "the benefit of the doubt". Roy noted that though whites are becoming a minority in California, they still hold power. Growing up middle-class was also seen as "lucky", both in terms of material benefits and in terms of being guided by middle-class mainstream values. Rick indicated that his parents supported his progress through his schooling and further education to his employment. Even as

a retiree with less financial resources available to him, Charles insisted that "The other privileges that I have being white middle class carry me through so I'm still doing quite well".

#### Privilege Compared with Others

Some participants revealed recognition of their privilege by comparing middle-class, white male lives with the lives of others in the US. Preston, for example, felt fortunate to be able to enjoy life, unlike others who have very "serious" lives. He believed his business was more likely to succeed because of his identity: "Were I a person of color or of a different sex I think there would be some of my clientele... would think 'now wait a minute'". Neil recognized his opportunities "...as opposed to... a lot of other people have to climb a lot of ladders". Keith stated that he was privileged as a knowledge worker not to work hard physically as do manual laborers. These men recognize that their opportunities are greater than others due to their identity.

#### Acknowledging Specific Privileges

Many of the men described particular privileges that they have as middle-class, white men. Five privileges were emphasized in the transcripts and are outlined here.



Purchasing Power. Financial privilege was expressed to be a fundamental privilege for most middle-class, white men because it allowed access to other privileges. Neil stated that "Financial equity... pick-you-up-by-the-bootstraps is a concept that runs pretty heavily in the white male environment...". The men seemed to particularly value the ability to purchase houses and education. Vince and David both described life as easy because they were able to buy houses quickly. Rick and Alan identified the availability of college funds as a privilege.

Access to Education. The ability to access higher education was seen a major privilege by many of the participants. It was even valued in instances where there were major setbacks in gaining funding for education. Roy, for example, worked his way through college doing various heavy manual jobs: "...and I just hated it but it didn't matter because it was moving me toward my goal". He was also supported in accessing education through contacts made through his parents' church, and recognized this support as an example of the way middle-class, white privilege can work. Other men felt privileged that accessing education was easy for them, and recognized this

as partly due to the American system, and partly due to parental support.

Freedom to Make Choices. Many of the participants noticed that as middle-class, white men they were free to move around the country, to make career changes and lifestyle changes, and to choose if both partners in a marriage worked. Sven justified his belief that both partners do not have to work in the US middle class: "I would say it's a choice... if you want a five bedroom house, or you want the two cars or three cars you have to work for it". Norman chose to be a stay-at-home-father, and Preston chose to give up a mainstream computer job to be a musician. Both expressed a sense of privilege that they were able to make these choices, despite financial sacrifices.

Safety. Several participants indicated their lives were safe as middle-class, white men. Henry noticed that he had no reason to fear the police. Vince stated that he was given the benefit of the doubt, and would be considered safe as a white man. For Alan being white meant "Not getting hassled by 'the man' when I'm driving through the wrong neighborhood". Clearly, these men felt they were

safe compared with the experience of individuals who were not white, middle-class and male.

Male privilege. Being a man was noted to be a privilege with some downsides. Ben stated: "If you embrace it (masculinity), it can be tremendously fulfilling even though it can be somewhat of a burden". Preston felt fortunate to be a man because he was free from feminine physical issues:

My daughter has horrible times with her periods.

Pretty soon they get pregnant; well I don't think I'd want to do that. Then you have to give child birth - I don't think I want to do that.

Eventually there is menopause... So, no thanks.

Mostly, where they addressed this issue, the participants liked being male.

#### Knowing the Statistics of Privilege

Most of the men demonstrated an awareness of statistics that measure material privilege, and they knew where they stood in relation to these figures. Individuals were able to quote average incomes, average house prices, and poverty levels. For example, Alan was aware that the minimum wage for the state was \$6.25. He was also aware that the average salary is \$40,000 in the US. He said "I'm

close to the average. I'm a little higher than average and I need to do something about that". Chris knew where he stood financially in terms of real estate: "I can sell my house now and buy four in my home town, and I don't live in a fancy house". Roy's statements reflected a watchful knowledge of material privilege. He quoted the average price of housing, and could delineate where people lived to have affordable housing and still earn good money. Many of the men showed a concerned awareness about their material privilege by quoting such statistics.

#### Middle-Class, White Male Privilege as Tenuous

In the last section, I described ways in which the men clearly saw that they had social privilege. In this next section, I outline the ways in which the men described experiencing a lack of or loss of privilege.

#### Privilege as Slippery

"...it can be really easily slip off in certain areas of your life...". When Neil said this he spoke for several men who do not see middle-class, white privilege as predictable and certain. As a man who had a working-class background, he saw privilege and opportunity as hard to

access and hard to hold onto. Accessing opportunities through education was difficult for George, whose parents could only afford technical school. Norman had a middle-class background, but was also unable to afford college when his parents divorced. He tried many approaches, and had so far been to seven colleges without completing his degree. Again these stories of precarious privilege strongly reflect the importance of education to many of these men.

#### Changing Times, Loss of Privilege

Some of the participants felt that in the current political and economic climate, middle-class, white men are not as privileged as they once were. Alan saw the middle class as shrinking in the US and becoming more disempowered. Preston also felt the middle class were getting "squeezed". He compared the unfolding structure with that existing in feudal times and in areas such as Latin America. Norman believed that policies like NAFTA are bringing in more immigrants, and making the middle class less significant. Times were seen to be changing for young and old alike. Keith noticed that young people have to start saving money earlier, while Roy observed that in retirement "The old image of... rocking the rest of your

life away on the front porch is long gone". Neil noticed that in his experience there was less social support. As a Jewish man, he expected support and connections through his synagogue but "... that connection is gone... that's one of the biggest problems... nobody talks to one another anymore". Keith reflected that life as a middle-class man in the US was becoming more difficult: "Work is 10 or 11 hours a day and the weekends we try to do our part to help out with family and chores. If I had a hobby, it would be a problem". Not only were they working harder, but Sven and Rick both noted that house prices were moving out of range for many middle-class people. There was a definite sense from these men that a certain image of a privileged lifestyle was a thing of the past.

#### Lack of Citizenship, Lack of Privilege

With the US drawing large numbers of skilled professional workers from overseas, there is a large group of middle class, white men working in the country without citizenship rights or even green cards. Three men in the focus group represented this group. David moved from France three years ago, and talked of feeling relatively powerless: "I can open the door, give my ideas, do the best that I can do, but in the end the door is closed

because you are not American". Lester also felt he had less privilege because his wife did not have a work permit, and they were forced to live on one salary.

#### Loss of Privilege as Others Become Empowered

Several participants were concerned that as less privileged groups in the US gain power, so middle-class, white men will lose their privilege. Preston explained:

... white American men have really been in the driver's seat of this world all my life... but that is gradually changing as more people become empowered; women and minorities and other countries become more and more empowered and they clearly are. So it still seems like we are in a good position and I hope it doesn't ever change so much that we are highly discriminated against in the future.

Some of the men talked about how whites are becoming a minority in their state though, as Vince remarked, whites are still "the largest single block". Alan wondered if the state will become increasingly like a developing country. Rick felt like he was a minority as an American working in a company with many employees from overseas. Vince thought it was becoming difficult for whites to access manual

jobs, because typically those jobs are taken by Spanish speakers.

Preston was the only participant who spoke of Affirmative Action. He was in favor of the policy, but suspected that on one occasion he may have lost work due to his identity. A few men thought that women have increasingly more privilege. Ben observed that in some fields like advertising, women already have more opportunities than men.

#### Embracing Equality and Loss of Privilege

Some men were very accepting of an adjustment in social power and privilege if it indicates a move toward a more equal society. Norman stated that he would like to believe that whiteness would become less powerful, and would like to see a world where people have equal standards of living. Henry predicted a race-less future: "We may end up a century from now nobody being white, nobody being black, but we'll all be the same race". On the other hand, Keith welcomed the existing cultural diversity in his company: "One of the things I like... is the cultural diversity and... obviously women have every bit as much responsibility as men all over the company".



These men seemed more concerned for equality than for their loss of privilege.

### Perspectives on Those with Less Privilege

In the course of the three discussions, much focus was placed on those who are less privileged than middle-class white men. The men discussed who were less privileged. They debated the reasons why some people have less privilege. They also examined how people with low social status may increase their access to privilege.

#### Who are Less Privileged?

Keith remarked white middle-class men have more privilege relative to women, people of color, and immigrants. Chris indicated that making the choice of a career change might be more difficult for someone "... in another income bracket or maybe a different race". Many of the participants acknowledged that race in particular is an indicator of less privilege. Roy stated "I'm positive that if I were black I wouldn't have had nearly so easy a time in my life as I had". Likewise, Sven observed "If you're from (African American neighborhood of large city) your life may be devoid of opportunity versus being

white". Vince noticed the discrepancy between access to professional and physical labor: "In corporate offices and businesses it's largely white guys, and if you look out on the floor of the plant it's all brown-skinned people".

Most men felt that lack of privilege was attached to those not who are not white, middle-class or male. However Henry pointed out that as a gay man, he does not have the right to marry, "A privilege or right that everyone else around this table has".

#### Why Some People have Less Privilege

Less Money. Many of the men saw that a lack of financial resources leads to less privilege. Lester observed that the US has more extremes in wealth distribution compared to Europe. He said "Something that amazes me is the number of shops or whatever they are, that say 'pay-day advance'. People are really living dollar to dollar and there is no reserve". Henry had worked with many people earning minimum wage, and spoke about how people he knew worked two jobs to support a family. House prices were noted to be a serious problem for the poor, as was accessing education. David wondered how "people who are not on the right track" could afford to save for their children's education. Preston noticed

that subsidies and scholarships had been cut, making it harder for underprivileged people to go to college. Many men noted a connection between having less money and having less privilege.

New Immigrants. Being new to the US, as a legal or illegal immigrant, was felt to be a less privileged situation. Alan thought that this was particularly true if the immigrant group was not organized to take care of their own members. Norman lives in a neighborhood where there are many Mexican immigrants, some of whom are not citizens. He said "The one's that aren't (citizens) let me know on a day to day basis: 'I've got to watch it, if I get a ticket I'll lose my car'". The situation of immigrants was presented as insecure.

Lack of Social Knowledge. Many participants indicated that a lack of familiarity with the mainstream social milieu was connected with less privilege. Roy talked about some relatives who were "quite lower middle class" and did not value education as he did. Home environment was seen as the place where appropriate social knowledge is taught. Certain ethnic communication styles were seen to distance people from accessing better jobs. Neil spoke about people from the African American community needing to learn to

speaking in a certain way to be able to access work in business. As the manager of a company, Ben explained that he encourages people from diverse backgrounds to work for him, and encourages them to acquire good language skills and learn what they need, but "... they are starting at a kind of disadvantage; they don't have a lot of that stuff going in".

Lack of Vision. Tying in with a lack of social knowledge, some men suggested that underprivileged people do not have the kind of vision for their future which would help them access opportunities. Ben said:

If you were a 14 or 15 year old black girl in the middle of (African American neighborhood of large city), your chances of just being on welfare, living there forever, and having low paying jobs, that's pretty much the way it's going to be.

Preston concurred that people in this area might not see the mainstream middle-class lifestyle as possible: "All your friends are there, you don't get anybody telling you anything else, and if they do it's probably some weird white guy".

Stereotypes. There was recognition from some participants that stereotypes play a major role in restricting opportunities for accessing privilege, especially for people of color and women. Neil said "I think that stereotypes are actually what ends up making it harder or easier, and those are nominally set, I would say, by white men". Two men shared stories of their first experiences with racial stereotyping. Henry described watching his African American friend being scrutinized by people in a jewelry store. Rick described a childhood experience of bringing home a black friend to play football and having neighbors call to enquire about his friend.

Sven was surprised by the stereotypical feminine roles in the US: "Females are females, they're not a human being and that disturbs me quite a bit. I'd say it's kind of old-fashioned and conservative, and it's kind of hard on young girls". He believed there is no "equal feeling" between young people of the opposite sex. The first group in particular discussed stereotyped female images and how they trap women into certain traditional roles. Neil described sexism as "enculturated" in the US.

Psychological Barriers. Stereotypes create one type of psychological barrier to accessing privilege. Henry and Neil mentioned two other possible psychological barriers. Henry pointed out that African Americans were brought forcibly to the US, and suggested that this affects their attitude to accessing opportunities. Neil hinted that disillusionment in "some of the disadvantaged communities" is a barrier to attaining social power: "... life is cheap. And one of the reasons why life is cheap is they don't feel they can be valuable for anything". These men saw that there might be a deeper, more engrained reason for remaining in a less privileged position in society.

Oppression. Some of the men described how sexism worked as a form of oppression to hold in place the "glass ceiling" for women. Roy described the historical perspective on sexism: "Well we're not so far removed from the days when, one hundred and fifty years ago, when women were chattel". Vince discussed "the whole concept of the good old boy network". He saw it as sexist as it blocks the inclusion of women. George criticized the continuing sexism of some men in business: "Some still subscribe to the belief that women cannot be as committed to business because they might get married and have children, et

cetera...". These men thought that sexism blocked women from accessing privileged positions in society.

### How Minorities May Access Privilege

Many of the participants shared their perspectives on different racial and ethnic groups, and discussed how some groups end up with more access to privilege than others. Vince discussed how Chinese people are "...very clannish... They work very closely to give each other a hand... They pool their money together and loan money to each other to start businesses and things...". He believed group support helps to overcome the barriers of oppression.

Other men compared Asian groups with people of African descent and whites, and described them as working harder and encouraging their children to work harder at school. According to some, Asians not only work harder, but they value education and try to integrate with mainstream society more than other groups. They noticed that there were more Asians working along side them than Hispanics and African Americans. They speculated that perhaps their labor was cheaper.

Chris had a more personal perspective. He has an adopted daughter who is black. He stated that he believed

that being raised in a white household would help her have a better perspective and less challenges than the average black female in the US.

## Perspectives on Those Who Have More Privilege

### Power as Unattainable/Undesirable

Many of the men stated that they did not want power, had never tried to access power, or did not see power as important. For example, Rick stated "I don't know that I interact that much with people in that position. That's not a thing I strive for is power". In another group, Roy explained that he felt uncomfortable when being treated as being of higher status than others, for instance, being addressed as 'boss'. On the other hand, Vince indicated that he would enjoy being addressed in this way.

The lifestyles of wealthy and powerful people were often presented as very different and separate from their own. Sven described the wealth of a yacht club: "...in order to be a member you had to have a yacht, and the definition of a yacht was something that was either two hundred feet long or cost more than fifteen million



dollars...". Sven presented the image of a lifestyle that is unachievable for him and other middle-class men.

#### Power as Know-how and Choice

In the section above power is defined as the ability to influence by wealth or status. Many of the men also defined power as personal power: The ability to control the course of one's life and to influence through one's expertise and connections. Alan suggested that if he could develop certain personality traits - "...More aggressive, outgoing and determined, with good social skills" - he would have more ability to access wealth and power. Chris believed success "... has a lot to do with attitude, self-perception, and confidence". He illustrated this by explaining how the three siblings in his 'low middle'- or 'upper low'-class family, all with the same upbringing, had ended up in very different positions with respect to power and privilege.

Some participants re-defined wealth and power according to their own value systems. Martin equated power with having a certain quality of life: "...so maybe the college professor is upper class but he doesn't earn that much but he has a greater quality of life"; and self-determination "Part of it is fame, leaving a legacy...".

He illustrated this by telling a story of being involved in building a bridge and the sense of achievement this brought him. These men felt that recognizing their personal power was important.

### Political Power

No-one expressed their sense of power as a citizen of a democracy, though Rick suggested that the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) had a lot of power in terms of voting clout. Politicians were cited as people interested in and having access to power. For example, Roy referred to state governors in this context. Vince agreed: "Oh, well that's what all politicians are interested in, isn't it? They can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for a job that pays fifty thousand. It's not the money in most cases, it's the power".

### Privilege and Inheritance

Many participants believed that access to wealth and power was directly linked to family connections and inheritance. Ben described the wealth and power he sees through his business connections. He said:

The money is the mother's milk... if that wealth is connected to the top country club and the best fraternities and the best universities and

you nourish that, you suckle off that so to speak as you are growing, you go for it and keep that alive... you've got a huge chance.

Lester believed that the political system was dominated by "... the minority that have usually inherited money or connections". He and Charles both expressed the unlikelihood of a middle-class person becoming president in the US. They suggested it was more likely to be a woman or a person of color with exclusive connections. Charles sees this system of inheritance as "rigged" and held in place by exclusive groups.

#### Owning Wealth and Privilege as a Positive Experience

A few men described the wealthy, more privileged lifestyle as enjoyable or positive. Vince described wealth as not having to worry about what things cost, and Ben believed wealthy people can enjoy their lives. He gave the example of Richard Branson, owner of Virgin Air. Lester recognized that some wealthy and powerful people could have strong grounded values. He gave the example of the owner of a large company who drives a basic American car.

## Owning Wealth and Privilege as a Negative Experience

Many men suggested that wealth and power did not lead to happiness, and could illustrate this from their direct observations. Preston had played piano at country clubs and observed:

I find some of the unhappiest people are members there. Their conversations are all about money, their prestige, and their acquisitions. They're just vacuous when it comes to anything that I consider to be real substance. So what kind of wealth do they have? Their houses are cluttered with all these things they have to pay somebody to dust and they're just crazy with trying to defend that wealth.

Henry reported that wealthy people he knew were never satisfied with their level of wealth. He also told the story of how his partner became rich through an inheritance and began spending uncontrollably. He believed that wealth was a corrupting force. These participants saw wealthy and powerful people as ungrounded by their wealth and position, and consequently unsatisfied.

## Perspectives on Systemic Privilege

An awareness of systematic privilege was clear from the dialogue in all three focus groups. Here I summarize the participants' various views on systemic privilege. I then outline perceptions of myth and pretence around privilege in US culture, and perceptions of confusion around class identity.

### Systemic Privilege as Social, Historical and Religious

Many of the men shared their awareness of the various ways in which privilege is institutionalized into US society as a social, historical and religious force. Lester observed that in all societies there is an underclass, often made up of "a racial or ethnic minority", suggesting that racial oppression is systemic in social groups. Sven stated that the land acquisition system in the US worked to the advantage of those in power from the beginning of white US history, particularly as it supported the acquisition of land from American Indians. He emphasized that this system is still around, showing an awareness of historical privilege and oppression that was supported by Vince's question, "You mean how we stole it from the Indians?".

Several men saw privilege as embedded in the history of the religious roots of the US. Sven saw religion as an agent that binds white middle-class people together and supports privilege more than racism. Roy perceived many of the problems in the US to stem from a "strange puritanical streak", because wealth has been viewed as linked with the favor of God throughout US history. Neil agreed with this view: "... the poor are spit upon in some ways... And I think that goes totally back to the original founders, the fore-fathers actually..."

#### Systemic Privilege as Political Intent

The view that systemic privilege is intentionally held in place by the political elite was expressed by many participants. Lester spoke of how the expense of getting into politics leads to a corrupt system which protects elite interests and resists social reform. Norman saw a system that is increasingly in the hands of a few who are attacking the privileges of many groups: "... first they'll take away the Jews, and then they'll take away the gypsies..." Alan described a historical trend. He believed that in response to the equality gained by unions and the civil rights movement:

The power elite began to say 'We've got to get more organized and make people more apathetic'. We can't hide what is going on but we have got to make them not want to oppose it. First we have to get control of the media and then we have to entertain them.

These men all saw that there was little opposition to this trend. Alan, above, suggested that the masses are being intentionally distracted. Norman also thought that people felt powerless to oppose the status quo, because when people speak up they tend to be ostracized instead of supported.

Some of the men thought this political intention extended to foreign policy. Lester saw US policies abroad as protectionist and isolationist, "... look after the clan and forget the rest of the world". Alan wondered how the white elite of the US interacted with other cultures. He was concerned about how they would deal with race and class differences, and suggested they might deal with them as "banana republics". Norman saw the US and British foreign policy as oppressive to other cultures. These views see systemic oppression and privilege as being driven by a small politically-elite group.

## Systemic Privilege Supported by Myth and Pretense

In this section, I summarize the perspectives of participants who saw social privilege as being upheld by myth and pretense in the US. Materialism was criticized by some as being at the root of the American image. Sven shared that the view from outside the US is "that it is very much revolved around things and is measured by money". Lester believed the American myth that it is the land of opportunity is no longer true, but Roy observed that people expect to have increasingly more material possessions: "It's assumed".

Charles believed the American myth supports systemic privilege by blaming those who are less privileged for their situation: "This is a country of equal opportunity and if they had taken advantage of that they wouldn't be down there". He also recognized how tokenism plays into this myth through the celebration of success stories and ignoring the plight of people who are still struggling. Alan believed that many Americans do not have a clear perception of their privilege, or choose to ignore it. Many men had the view that Americans were not honest with themselves about systemic privilege and the existence of oppression, preferring to buy into a certain myth of their



country and their participation in it. Sven observed that the American stereotypical self-image is that everything is clean and pure, whereas underneath there are many problems: "... my point is that over here you don't see alcohol on the street and you don't see anything whatsoever, everything is nice".

As a result of this pretense, some men noticed that people in the US are reluctant to talk about their financial status, and like to portray a certain image of affluence. Vince observed "Americans are very reluctant to talk about income... it's maybe a reflection of our materialistic culture that that for us is one of our most treasured secrets". George noticed that people attempt to look wealthier and more privileged than they are in order to be accepted by the right people, and therefore gain privilege. Image is also connected with house ownership. Sven observed that people choose to live further away from work in new developments, rather than choosing closer, affordable housing in non-white areas. These men all indicated that middle-class Americans go to great lengths to uphold the myth of material success and to ignore systemic privilege.

## Systemic Privilege and the Confusion of Classism

Many of the men portrayed class in the US as a confusing concept. On one hand some of them saw that class separates people from one another, and on the other hand some felt that class was difficult to define. Charles describes his experience of being separated from the poor or working classes: "The system is pretty much segregated; if it wasn't for baseball I wouldn't have known very many Mexican people". Rick noted the distinction between classes as a geographic border in his neighborhood, and Lester pointed out the class distinction indicated by gated communities. In an apparently contradictory comment he said he believed class was not prevalent in the US, where people are more likely to recognize ability. This contradiction is perhaps evidence of the confusing nature of class in the US.

Many participants thought class was confusing to define. In defining his own class background, George felt he had always been middle-class, despite his parents having "menial jobs" and little education. Roy defined his family of origin as "... sort of not middle, middle or a little lower". Vince thought that most people in the US, even the very poor, define themselves as middle-class.

In examining class further, Keith said "The issue of class is always tricky in America because we as a founding principle have always tried to do away with class and it keeps creeping back in and it gets shuffled and turned upside down". Most of the men were unsure what defined class, they suggested income, education, and attitude. They explored the contradictions of defining class solely on income. For example, Martin asked:

What distinguishes you from becoming low class to middle class to high class? I guess it's just income. You go into middle class, you get an education. What are you now? Upper class or what is it? ... Is Shaquille O'Neal upper class because he is super rich?

In essence, many of the men described class as a real but confusing component of the US system of privilege.

## Discussion

### Perceiving Privilege

The middle-class, white male participants in the focus group discussions demonstrated awareness of many aspects of societal privilege. When asked to discuss their privilege, these men revealed that they perceived their

privileged position, and they could describe ways in which they were privileged. They could see that others were less privileged than they were, and were able to specify groups who were less likely to have access to privilege. In addition, many participants shared explanations for these groups having less privilege which reflected a deep understanding of oppression. Many men also demonstrated an awareness of privilege as an institutionalized force, and expressed unease about the system itself. Many of these middle-class white men were clearly able to express aspects of the complexities of race, gender and inequality in US society.

The literature on whiteness provides a guide to what might be expected when middle-class, white men are asked to discuss their privilege. The data from this study contradicts many of these expectations. The observations about the loss of privilege for middle-class, white men might be said to have an element of backlash mentality. Some of the men talked with some trepidation about how life was changing as others gained privilege, for example, Alan wondered if life would become increasingly like that in a developing country. Preston talked about Affirmative

Action, but supported the policy in general. Other men were eager to embrace a more equal future.

Tokenism was not used to support the myth of equal opportunity. On the contrary, in one instance, Ben described government incentives that were available to start businesses, but stated that it still would be difficult unless the person had money of their own. Charles actually described how tokenism is used by the press and how this is misleading. No participants used color-blind discourse. Instead, most participants seemed clear about the existence of racial inequality. Many men expressed their perception of equal opportunity as an American myth.

The men were already defined as white in the context of this research. Perhaps because their identity was acknowledged as such, none of the men avoided referring to themselves as white, although they sometimes substituted the labels 'Caucasian' and 'Anglo' when speaking of their racial group. White racial bonding was not apparent in the dialogue. There were several instances of each of these strategies in the pilot study focus group. This suggests that the pilot study data was an anomaly. Since the methodology for the pilot study was similar to that of the

present study, this implies that the difference was in the participants themselves.

The degree of awareness demonstrated in the focus group discussions may reflect the maturity of the participants, their political views, and the influence of the group on the perspectives shared. The participants were older than those in many studies. Many had traveled or lived in other countries, or had exposure to other racial groups through their work or neighborhoods. Perhaps this combination of maturity and experience contributed to the participants' ability to perceive and understand societal privilege. In all three focus groups, liberal views were expressed by individuals with very little opposition from others. Even in the group where two men identified as politically conservative, the overall discussion consistently reflected an awareness of and sensitivity to inequality and injustice in US society. This was a surprise to this researcher as in the pilot study focus group there was more disagreement and more variation of perspectives. This may reflect the areas from which the participants were recruited. In this study, over half of the men were recruited through a local church

known for its progressive views, intellectual congregation and emphasis on social action.

### Aspects of Privilege Not Perceived

Much was said about middle-class, white privilege in the focus group discussions, but it is also important for the goals of this study to examine what was not specifically addressed. None of the men overtly denied the existence of racism, sexism and other oppression. On the other hand, none of the participants admitted to being personally racist, sexist or in other ways oppressive, nor did anyone admit to directly participating in a system that was oppressive to others.

The participants tended to dissociate from their privilege in several ways. They spoke of sexism and racism as forces of oppression, and referred to others who were oppressive. For example, Vince discussed "the whole concept of the good old boy network" as an entity that blocks the inclusion of women, but failed to make the connection that individual middle-class white men collude with this network. Several sources (Marty, 1998; Moon, 1998; Sleeter, 1993) discuss this as a strategy for avoiding individual implication in oppression. Likewise, when George said "How they run their business is beyond my

understanding", he implicated other men who practice sexism in business. He does not implicate himself in this systemic oppression, which could be a strategy for evading admission of his own participation in this system (Calvert & Ramsey, 1996; Marty, 1998; Pierce, 2003).

The men often distance themselves from any implication in systemic oppression by blaming forces, groups or individuals that are removed from them. For example, Neil and Roy attributed the present day oppression of the poor to the attitudes of the Puritans who founded the US. Other men focus the blame for oppression on a politically elite group, who are separated from their own lives by access to wealth and power.

Although many sources pinpoint middle-class, white men as the dominant group in society (Alcoff, 1998; Collins, 1998), the men in the study certainly do not perceive themselves to be in this position. The participants tended instead to portray themselves as relatively powerless victims of the political system. In their comments, wealth and power are often defined in absolute terms that are beyond their reach. This kind of power is unattainable, but also undesirable. Many of the men denied having or desiring power. There was an



underlying sense that power was a negative quality to own. For example, Norman stated that he did not want power, with the exception of the kind of power connected with being a good citizen and parent. He made great pains to separate himself from the kind of power that is a negative corrupting force in his world.

Many of the men presented views of a world where a politically-elite group was in control. Surprisingly not one man described feeling they had a sense of power as a participant in a democratic system. Framing others as owning more power and privilege can be a distraction. Whiteness is more about entitlement in everyday acts than it is about wealth or power. It is about what Jackson et al. (2000) called "the socially intrinsic privilege of being white" (p. 74).

Many participants certainly felt they were privileged and that life was relatively easy for them, but they also described ways in which they felt they were losing privilege and were feeling edged out. These comments re-center whiteness by focusing on the middle-class, white experience. The re-centering of whiteness also occurs when the men focus their attention on their hard work and struggles to access and hold on to privilege, ignoring the

fact that their whiteness brings with it intrinsic privileges.

The participants' investment in their material privilege is evident in their watchfulness of house prices and average wages. They use these statistics as a measure of where they stand compared to others, and therefore as a measure of their position in society. Although many men express distaste for wealth and power, they do seem to want to make sure they have their fair portion of it. This is paralleled in some of the discussions about class. The myth that America is a middle-class nation (Ehrenreich, 1989) is perpetuated by some of the men when they define themselves and others as "low middle". No-one spoke about the working class, except Neil who said he liked his working-class origins. Where people could not be defined as middle class they were defined as either poor or wealthy.

Definitions of privilege and power were often connected with wealth. Those with less privilege were often seen to have less financial power. Although some participants spoke about the impact of stereotypes, and could see some of the subtler angles of oppression, economic privilege and power was strongly emphasized by

many men. When some of the men shared perspectives on Asian Americans who succeed in US culture due to hard work and strong values about education, these perspectives conformed to the sociotype of this group. This sociotype allows Asian Americans to be considered as both less disadvantaged and more readily accepted by mainstream US culture. However it ignores the experience of this cultural group as "perpetual foreigner" within the US (Chuang, 2004). It again ignores the fact that privilege is about more than about financial status. Here the middle-class, white men are demonstrating part of their privilege: the ability to define who is considered equal with them in the white hegemony.

The participants shared many interesting perspectives and demonstrated awareness of many angles of privilege. However, as middle-class white men, they still speak from a voice that has status and is universal in US culture (Collins, 1998). Their voice is privileged, and that is perhaps one of the most difficult things for middle-class white men to see, especially in dialogue with others who also have this privilege.

Many of the men had relatively progressive views on societal privilege compared with participants in other

research. However even in their ability to view the perspectives of those less privileged and to analyze reasons for their situation, they are defining circumstances from their white perspective as discussed by Flores and Moon (2002). For example, when Neil suggested that those with less privilege needed to learn a certain way of interacting socially in order to access professional jobs, he was saying that they need to learn the intricacies of middle-class white male social interaction. Neil was correct in his observation, which reflects the experience of 'double consciousness' reported by many non-whites in the US (Orbe, 1994). However, the existence of the privileged white voice seems invisible to him.

#### Complexity and Confusion

The perspectives offered by the men in this study demonstrate a complexity of awareness that probably reflects their maturity and experience. Most of their observations fall into two other stances suggested by Warren and Hytten (2004): 'The Cynic' and 'The Intellectualizer'. The authors present these stances as pitfalls on the way to a clearer more pro-active stance called the 'Critical Democrat'.

Warren and Hytten (2004) describe the first of these stances in this way:

The Cynic represents inaction in its most rational guise. We find this pitfall one of the most dangerous, since it denies hope in any form, denying White folks' responsibility for racism (as well as their role in resisting racism), since they too are caught up in a power system not within their control (p.328).

This stance, which can be applied to sexism and classism as well as racism, matches that of many of the men in their comments about systemic racism in particular. They present it as being an entity beyond their control, and in many cases as being in the hands of a more powerful group. An example of this is when Alan describes the power imbalance in the US as "... like a spring getting wound tighter and tighter, the longer they are apathetic the more backlash there will be". There is a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in this comment. He puts the onus on a nebulous "apathetic" group, thus denying his own role in the inaction. Warren and Hytten call this stance "dangerous". In the context of this study, the paradox between the men's ability to perceive their

privilege and their sense of powerlessness is marked, and is certainly intriguing. This paradox portrays these middle-class, white men as pawns in the social system.

The stance of the Intellectualizer is reflected in the combination of active investigation and distance from personal experience presented in the comments of many participants. Warren and Hytten (2004) stated "Ultimately, the Intellectualizer considers the project of whiteness to be exciting, pleasurable, and intellectually stimulating, but fails to allow the experience of scholarship to affect daily life" (p.329). This occurs in the dialogue when a participant emphasized his knowledge over his own experience, such as when Roy talks about sexism: "Well anybody who looks at the statistics knows that there's always this gap between men and women be they white or whatever. Women have never achieved the same rate of pay as men". Through this statement, Roy demonstrates his knowledge and concern about sexism, but does not address his own experience or collusion with sexism.

Often the men approached the stance of Critical Democrat. They seemed to achieve the balance between "Cautious action and careful reflection" by "adjusting their own sense of fairness and justice in view of the

lives and stories of others" (Warren & Hytten, 2004, p. 331). They recognized that they could not know everything, and need to listen to and understand the perspectives of others. What was most often lacking in their contributions was an admission of their own participation in systemic oppression, and a balancing sense of agency, an ability and desire to take action.

This comparison with Warren and Hytten's (2004) model must be tempered by the difference between the two research situations. Warren and Hytten were studying the responses of students to being taught about whiteness over an extended time period, whereas in this study the participants were responding to questions about privilege in a 90-minute time period. However the stances and pitfalls that Warren and Hytten have delineated, throw an interesting light on the perspectives in the discussion. Furthermore, in their model they emphasize the complexity of understanding needed to clearly see how whiteness impacts everyday life and the individual's influence upon it. In this study, the men move between perspectives and stances, sometimes demonstrating startling understanding of white privilege, sometimes circumventing their role in its perpetuation.

It has been suggested that whites, and therefore even more particularly middle-class, white men, cannot see white privilege because their lives are immersed in the dominant white culture (Calvert & Ramsey, 1996; Jackson et al., 2000; Johnson, 2001). It is like having fish describe the water in which they live and on which they depend. Certainly they seem to perceive their privilege less than people of color are able to see white privilege (Bahk & Jandt, 2004). When the data from this study is examined, there are definitely barriers to how far the men perceive their privilege, and pitfalls into which they slip as they endeavor to explain this entity. Does this mean they are deliberately concealing knowledge of their privilege in order to protect their societal position? I find no evidence of concealment in these discussions, only a lack of information and a sense of confusion.

Many of the men referred to the myths and self-deception that hold systemic privilege in place. These comments perhaps hold the key to why life in middle-class, white male America is confusing. These men are part of a dominant group upholding American ideology. This ideology is supported by certain myths: The myth that in the US there are equal opportunities for all; The myth that



anyone can work hard and become wealthy and powerful; The myth that the US is a classless, or middle-class, society. Many of the participants saw these myths for what they are, and saw how many people in US culture still have faith in them. They saw how people conceal their income, pretend to look wealthy, and ignore the uglier side of life in order to preserve these myths. But material standing was also a significant way in which they defined themselves and their position in society. Thus they saw the ideology that upholds the white middle-class male hegemony, but they were still participants in it and could not see it fully.

The system that provides privilege to middle-class, white men was also seen to be beyond the participants' control and in the hands of an elite group. Assessing the reality of this perception is beyond the scope of this study. However the middle-class, white men in this study did not seem to feel powerful enough to make changes in society, even when they saw a need for change. Whether or not they are truly victims to individuals who are more powerful is in a sense irrelevant. Their combined experience of powerlessness and privilege rendered their perception of their position confusing and complex.

The men in this study were able to perceive the extent of their societal privilege to a point. This point seemed to depend upon their exposure to experiences outside of the middle-class, white male American environment and their willingness to embrace these experiences. However there seemed to be a limit to which they could perceive the world outside of their middle-class, white male identity. In US culture, they always have a privileged voice and many everyday privileges that remain concealed from them. Thus their descriptions of experiences with privilege appear contradictory. There is also a sense of paradox between an awareness of their privilege and a feeling of powerlessness. Their views and experiences of societal privilege are complex just as the machinations of the dominant hegemony are complex.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### Summary

Middle-class, white men, as a group, have not been the focus of studies in communications research. With the burgeoning amount of research on whiteness, it is timely to consider the intersection between class, gender and race. Middle-class, white men are often assumed to be the dominant group in US culture in critical research. As such they have privilege and power over other groups. This study provided a space to hear the voices of middle-class, white men discussing privilege in US culture.

A review of the literature showed that whiteness has been interconnected with male privilege, class privilege and imperialism throughout the history of the US. The privileged position in society of middle-class, white men is so universally assumed that it has become almost indiscernible. Many sources agree that whites do not realize the extent of their privilege compared with other groups. It is also argued that whites evade discussion of their privilege, and use defensive strategies to maintain their privileged position. I posited that these arguments

applied more pointedly to whites who are middle-class and male due to their more privileged position.

Recent qualitative studies in the communication of whiteness have revealed more variety and complexity in the perspectives of whites. Researchers have used ethnography, individual interviews and focus group interviews to study whites, but not specifically middle-class, white men. I wished to learn about this group's perceptions of privilege in US society, and their explanations and experience of it. I wanted to understand how far middle-class, white men would acknowledge their privilege.

Focus group interviews were chosen for this study to create an atmosphere in which the participants would feel safer and less defensive. These groups were self-managed in order to avoid the influence of the female researcher and to create a more natural flow of conversation. Seventeen participants were recruited through the personal contacts of the researcher. Three focus groups were carried out using the same protocol and the same guiding questions. The 90-minute discussions were taped and transcribed.

The data was analyzed using phenomenological guidelines. Phenomenology was chosen because it emphasizes

the importance of the participants' experiences over theory. I wished to present a summary of the data which truly represented the individuals' views without the bias of expectations established by the theory. The pertinent data was sorted into five main categories, and summarized into sub-categories. These categories were a) Acknowledgment of middle-class, white male privilege; b) Middle class, white men losing privilege; c) Perspectives on those with less privilege; d) Perspectives on those with more privilege; and e) Views of systemic privilege.

In the subsequent discussion, I acknowledged the extent to which the participants demonstrated awareness of their privilege, and of the machinations of systemic privilege in US culture. I suggested that this may have in part been due to their maturity and experience in the world. I also compared the results with the theory, noting that many expected aspects of white communication about privilege were not present in the focus group discussions. It was not clear that anyone was deliberately evading admission of privilege. However, none of the participants admitted to personal collusion with systemic oppression, and there were aspects of their privilege that they appeared not to perceive. I speculated that this may have

been because understanding privilege and oppression is a complex and confusing task for those with a dominant stance in US society.

#### Contributions to Research

Other communication research about whiteness has analyzed interviews of groups of white students responding to racially provocative situations (Jackson & Heckman, 2002; Jackson, 1999), or responding to classes intended to raise consciousness about whiteness (Warren & Hytten, 2004). This study extended this research in several ways. First, it was concerned with the intersection of whiteness with class and gender, and therefore had a more specifically defined set of participants: Middle-class, white men. Second, it used a more mature group of participants, whose variety and depth of experience, especially in the workplace, increased the richness of the data.

A third way in which this study extended existing research is that it was focused specifically on the participants' perspectives on white privilege, and the questions posed were directly related to this issue. Fourth, the researcher did not interview the participants

directly, but used self-managed groups, so that the participants were able to respond in a more natural discussion format. Finally, the researcher endeavored to present an initial analysis based on phenomenological philosophy to ensure that some responses were not emphasized above others due to pre-conceived theoretical or personal biases.

#### Using Middle-Class, White Male Participants

The focus group discussions demonstrated the potential diversity of perceptions within a small group of whites, who not only share an identity as middle class and male, but also live in the same general area, and are of the same middle-year age range. This data alerts scholars to recognize the danger of stereotyping all middle-class, white men as a narrow type, even as they work to deconstruct white male dominant discourse. Contradictions and conflicts were evident both within the speech of individuals and within the group discussion. This appeared to reflect confusion, and perhaps a struggle to make sense of their lived experience.

The variety within the groups illustrated the true complexity of the intersection between identities and their associated oppressions. Neil's Jewish identity and

Henry's homosexuality meant that they were both oppressors and oppressed in a system dominated by white privilege. Other participants' working-class upbringing also influenced the individual's perspective on privilege. When the men were open about these positions, it added to the complexity of the dialogue and the sensitivity of the ideas shared. The scholarly discussion on whiteness must be expanded to encompass its intersection not only with sex and class identities, but also other identities associated with privilege and oppression. Speaking about race in terms of white and non-white is an oversimplification (Miller & Harris, 2005).

#### Using Non-Student Participants

Recruiting from outside the often-used student base ensured that the participants were more mature in age with an average age of 47. This meant that the participants had a broader range of experiences to draw from, including experiences with work and family. Many participants had also had time to develop understandings of the world that were perhaps more complex and multi-faceted than the average student group. In further research, more effort should be made to access non-student recruits.



### Focusing the Topic on Privilege

The focus groups each used a list of ten questions about privilege to guide their conversations. This forced the participants to address their own privilege as middle-class, white men. Their contributions showed that these individuals were open to the topic, and willing to discuss it, at least in this relatively safe setting with other middle-class, white men. In all three focus groups, all the questions were addressed at least on a superficial level. The participants struggled with some questions more than others, particularly the more specific questions asking what it was like to be middle-class and to be male in the US today. After the focus groups, several participants communicated to the researcher that they appreciated the opportunity to discuss issues around privilege. It is perhaps not a topic that would naturally arise between middle-class, white men. This indicates that asking directly about privileged positionality was useful and needs further investigation.

### Using Self-Managed Focus Groups

The use of self-managed focus groups in this study proved to be successful. In each group, the participants followed the guidelines given in the protocol for managing

the discussion. They shared the leadership for moving through the questions, keeping the discussion on topic and inviting the quieter participants to contribute. The absence of the facilitator enhanced the continuity within the discussion. The participants sometimes addressed several questions in combination, and a natural-flowing conversation ensued. The group situation created a certain level of safety. Some participants reported that after a short time they forgot about the research context and were absorbed in the dialogue. It would be interesting to see how far this influenced how much they revealed compared with the results of one-on-one interviews or a facilitated focus group interview.

#### Using Phenomenological Analysis

Analyzing the transcript data using a phenomenological approach entailed gaining an intimate sense of each individual's perspective and experience, before finding a coding framework that would meaningfully capture all perspectives and experiences pertaining to privilege. This methodology ensured that the coding was not driven by theory, but by a desire to represent what was actually said. The results could then be compared more

objectively with the theory. Phenomenology provides useful guidelines for creating a participant-centered study.

## Limitations

### Recruitment

As the group was recruited through the personal acquaintances of the researcher, some group members were acquainted with one another before the groups took place. This may have created alliances, and a consequent imbalance in the discussion. Recruiting from a church with a clear message regarding social justice possibly affected the group process. Although those eight men recruited through the church had varied backgrounds, they all knew each other to varying degrees and had certain shared values and beliefs. On the other hand, the third group contained only one church member, and the content and process of that discussion were not atypical compared with the other groups.

The recruitment method also meant that the participants were acquainted with the researcher in varying degrees. Although the methodology was designed to avoid the direct influence of the researcher, the tone and shape of the discussion may have been influenced by these

relationships. The discussion may also have been influenced by the participants' awareness of the researcher's middle-class, white female identity.

The participants were likely to be of a similar age, education and life view to the researcher, because they were recruited through personal acquaintance. This was definitely the case. The average age of the participants was the same as the age of the researcher. The education level and political identification also corresponded, although this researcher identifies as politically more progressive than the majority of participants. The researcher has few conservatives in her acquaintance, so recruiting from this political category was more challenging.

The participants were recruited from a fairly narrow geographical area in Southern California. This area is racially mixed compared with other areas of the US. It is known to be an area where people tend to be more broad-minded about racial matters. It is important to emphasize that the data from these groups is reflective of the location from which they are recruited. This suggests the necessity of repeating this research in other areas of the US.

The nature of the research meant that it was hard to recruit staunch conservatives. Several men with this political stance who were approached declined to participate. The singling out of middle-class, white men as research participants may have been the cause of uneasiness to some potential participants. As a result, the voices of such men were not heard in these results. There were no overtly negative reactions to the subject of the research during recruitment. Only one man expressed his view of the "inappropriateness" of this research.

Several men who were approached indicated that they would feel uncomfortable in a discussion or expressed fears that they would not have anything useful to say. Many people, male and female, commented that men do not communicate well. This stereotype may mean that only men who were more comfortable with discussion participated.

#### Accessing the "Full Experience"

There were limitations to how far the experience of the participants could be captured in this study. Time and timing influenced the depth of information gathered from the participants. They were each involved in one 90-minute group discussion which provided an average of about fifteen minutes per individual. Many of the participants

came directly from work, and missed time with their families to participate. Tiredness and lack of motivation may have contributed to the quality of participation.

The focus group questions were not phrased to unmask individual feelings and experiences, which allowed the participants to intellectualize about the topic. Moustakas (1994) suggests that questions in a phenomenological study should aim for extracting the rich, full experience of the co-researchers. I have observed previously that nobody admitted to personal collusion with the system, but the questions also did not broach this angle directly.

This indicates a limitation in using the self-managed approach. Although valuable in other ways, the lack of a facilitator meant that no-one was available to push the participants to reveal their personal feelings about their observations. Often in the discussion, an individual stated his perspective on an issue, but did not explain his experience that shaped this perspective. This depth of data is essential in a truly phenomenological research, and could have been gleaned by a skilled facilitator.

Phenomenology concentrates on the individual experience. It does not take into account the construction of meaning that results from individuals working together

in a group. The synergy of focus group experience is more than the sum of individual experiences. This group effect could not be explored using this approach.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Research must come from a place that recognizes the goodness and multi-dimensionality of real middle-class, white men. Their lack of awareness of whiteness should not be a means of judging them as people. To deconstruct the ways in which a man enacts whiteness, is to deconstruct their reality and means a paradigm shift.

In terms of extending this research, it will first be important to repeat the present study over a wider range of groups of middle-class, white men. The results of qualitative studies can never be generalized to the wider population. They can however provide us with meaningful and multi-faceted data that allows a deeper understanding of how middle-class, white men perceive and feel about the privilege they hold. This present study merely initiates a new direction that must continue to be pursued.

In order to deconstruct an ideology, there is a need to investigate how it has been constructed. In order to

access more comprehensive and personal perspectives, a further study could expand the phenomenological data with follow-up individual interviews. These would provide the opportunity to question middle-class, white men on their life experiences and how these have shaped their perceptions. Questions might be directed to childhood experiences and to experiences with differently raced, gendered and classed people. They could also investigate the individual's experiences with the focus group and how it felt to be with a group of middle-class, white men talking about privilege. This might reveal how far the individual's revealed their viewpoints in the group, and how far they yielded to group consensus.

One specific result from this study that should be examined in more depth is the sense of powerlessness to change society that many of the men expressed. Questions should be designed to gain an understanding of why they feel so powerless and cynical, when they understand themselves to be privileged. Many of the men in the present study were intellectually aware of the need for change. It would be highly useful to understand what they see as their personal barriers to effecting change.



Any study is only useful in terms of its use in the real world, for example, within the systems and organizations that are still the bastions of middle-class, male privilege. It would be interesting to direct a similar study on middle-class, white men in the workplace. Focus groups could be used, posing similar questions about privilege specifically designed to encompass their experience in the organization. The use of triangulating methods would add depth to the kind of data obtained through the focus groups. Complementing methods might include a study of the rhetoric of diversity within the organization, or a quantitative comparison of the perceptions of whites and non-whites within the organization.

The topic of middle-class, white male privilege is broad because of the complex interactions between class, sex, and race. One topic that deserves further in-depth study is class and privilege in the US. Class has been neglected in communication studies, perhaps because it is difficult to define, and because many people wish to believe that the US is a classless society. For these reasons, it is essential that we come to understand how class works in the US, and how it is communicated.

The methodology used in the present study could easily be adapted to this topic, with the aim to understand how class is experienced in individual's lives. A phenomenological approach would enable researchers to discover this topic through the participants' experience and with less pre-judgment. Using focus groups would allow for a sharing of experience amongst individuals from similar class backgrounds. It would be important to gather information from upper-class, as well as poor, working-class and middle-class groups.

Focus group methodology has been pinpointed as needing more research elsewhere (Morgan, 1993). In particular, Morgan points to the need to develop a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of certain types of moderator style with certain groups. As a result of this study, it appears that the effectiveness of self-direction for particular groups should also be examined.

#### Concluding Remarks

Middle-class, white men are historically at the center of power and privilege in the U.S., and apparently continue to dominate U.S. culture on many different levels. Much of what is said in the literature about

whites pertains even more directly to middle-class, white men. Whiteness literature infers that white ideology is recreated with every communication, and this ideology tends to avoid or deny the existence of white privilege. However, this study illustrates that the reality is often more complex and multilayered. Even within the category "middle-class white" there are many perspectives, beliefs and experiences. Kincheloe (1999) said

The discourses that shape whiteness are not unified and singular but diverse and contradictory. If one is looking for logical consistency from the social construction of whiteness, he or she is not going to find it (p.167).

The construction of whiteness continues to occur in everyday talk, and this must be attended to. But we must be aware that middle-class, white men are diverse and contradictory in their perceptions of privilege. We must continue to be willing to capture the true complexity of perceptions, beliefs and experiences of all members of US society to understand how white privilege is perpetuated.

APPENDIX A  
FOCUS GROUP ORIENTATION PROTOCOL

## Focus Group Orientation Protocol

(As the men arrive, I will greet them, give them a package containing consent forms, the questionnaires, and a name tag. There will be food and beverages available. I will encourage them to help themselves and take a seat).

Good evening and thank you all for coming.

For those of you who have not met me, my name is Sandra Cross. I am a graduate student here at CSUSB, and the research in which you have agreed to participate is for my Master's degree thesis in Communication Studies. My research is about middle-class, white men and how they communicate about their lives in the US.

You will be spending a couple of hours together here this evening. First we will go through the forms in your package together. After this, I will share some general information, and explain how the focus group will proceed. I will then leave you to discuss the questions I will give you for about 90 minutes. This discussion will be recorded by this equipment (indicate). After the 90 minutes you will be free to go.

Please make relax as much as you can in this somewhat sterile environment! Help yourself to food and beverages as you wish. Restrooms are (location).

The focus group discussion will be audio-taped and video-taped. Be assured that the resulting recordings will be used for research purposes only. I will be transcribing the discussion using pseudonyms. Please be assured that this research will be anonymous and confidential. If you turn to the form "Informed Consent" this explains what I have said and emphasizes the voluntary nature of this research. If you feel uncomfortable at any point and do not wish to continue to participate you are free to leave. The form "Informed Consent for Video/Audio Use" asks you to indicate which levels of use you feel comfortable with for the audio and video recordings. This is a generic form which we are asked to use. As I indicated earlier, my intention is to use the recordings only for transcription purposes. When transcription is complete the tapes will be destroyed. The other form asks for some brief demographic

information that will be used to collect some general and anonymous information about this group.

Are there any questions?

Please take some time to read these carefully and fill them out before we proceed. (Allow ten minutes for the participants to complete the forms).

This focus group discussion will be self-managed. This means that I will not be present to facilitate the process. I will also not be here to change the tape over! Can I ask for a volunteer to be responsible for this? I have brought a timer that will ring when the tape is due to end. (Ensure someone commits to this task).

In the interest of having an audible recording of your voices, please remember to speak clearly, avoid leaning away from the microphone, and avoid background noises, such as tapping your pen on the table.

(Hand out sheet with focus group guidelines and questions)

On this sheet there are ten questions that I would like you to discuss. I have also listed some ideas to help the discussion run smoothly. Let's run through them together.

1. **All view points and experiences are important:** I would like to hear from everyone even if you disagree with the group's viewpoint.
2. **Include everyone:** Try to make sure that everyone shares their point of view at least once before sharing your point of view for a second time. If you keep this in mind, it will allow those who tend to be naturally quiet in a group to share their point of view early in the discussion. It helps if you can remember this each time you look at a new topic or question, so that everyone gets to speak. Apart from this consideration, I hope you will free to share your views naturally and spontaneously.
3. **Everyone is responsible for keeping discussion on track:** It is natural that discussions will digress from the topic, but usually someone pulls it back on track.

4. **Try to answer all questions:** You may want to appoint someone to keep track of time and ensure that you move on and tackle each question. However I am more interested in the discussion generated by the questions than specific answers to each question.
5. **If you run out of questions, share your own experiences related to the topic:** This is unlikely to happen. Mostly, people get so engrossed in the discussion that 90 minutes flies by!

Are there any questions?

If any significant problems arise, here is my cell phone number where you can contact me (Leave phone number in prominent place on a card).

Now, as a way of familiarizing you to one another and to the equipment, I will turn on the equipment and you can introduce yourselves to one another. I will then leave and return at the end of 90 minutes. (Turn on equipment).

Why don't you take turns to share your name, your profession, and your place of birth. (Facilitate this process).

I am going to leave now, relax and have fun with the questions. I will see you in 90 minutes.

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM



## **INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you have been asked to participate is designed to investigate the communication styles of middle-class, white men. Your participation will help expand the body of communication research in this area. This study is being conducted by Sandra Cross under the supervision of Dr. Fred Jandt, Professor of Communication Studies. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study, you will be asked to discuss several questions in a focus group. The group discussion should last about 90 minutes. The discussion will be video-taped and audio-taped. It will be transcribed at a later date by the researcher. All your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be reported in the written transcripts, and all video and audio-tapes will be kept under lock and key. You will also be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire. This is anonymous, and will only be used to gather information about the group as a whole. You may receive the results of this study upon completion after March 31st, 2006 at the Department of Communication Studies, California State University, San Bernardino. If you have questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Fred Jandt at (909) 537 8101.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions and to withdraw at any time during this study without penalty. When you have

completed the focus group discussion, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. There are no foreseeable risks in this research.

By placing a check mark on the line below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

**Place a check mark here** \_\_\_\_\_ **Today's date:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR VIDEO/AUDIO USE

## INFORMED CONSENT FOR VIDEO/AUDIO USE

As part of this research project, we will be making a videotape and audiotape recording of you during your participation in the study. Please indicate what uses of this videotape and audiotape you are willing to consent to by initialing below. You are free to initial any number of spaces from zero to all of the spaces. We will only use the videotape and audiotape in ways that you agree to. In any use of this videotape and audiotape, your name will *not* be identified. If you do not initial any of the spaces below, the video tape and audiotape will be destroyed.

- **The videotape and audiotape can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.**

Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_

- **The videotape and audiotape can be used in future research projects.**

Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_

- **The videotape and audiotape can be used for scientific publications.**

Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_

- **The videotape and audiotape can be shown/played at meetings of scientists.**

Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_

- **The videotape and audiotape can be shown/played in classrooms to students.**

Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_

**I have read the above description and given my consent for the use of the videotape and audiotape as indicated above.**

**The extra copy of this consent form is for your records.**

**SIGNATURE** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

## Demographic Questionnaire

*Do not put your name on this form. It will be used purely for the purpose of collecting information about group characteristics.*

What is your age in years? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your highest level of education?  
e.g. grade school, high school, grad school)

\_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your political identification?  
(e.g. conservative, moderate, liberal)

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E  
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

## Focus Group Questions

- 1) How easy is life for you in the US as a middle-class, white man?
- 2) How easy is it for you to gain access to a) wealth?  
b) education? and c) power?
- 3) Do you think things are easier for you as a middle-class, white man than for others in the US?
- 4) What kinds of people have more power and resources than you?
- 5) What kinds of people have less power and resources than you?
- 6) Where would you estimate that you stand in terms of income compared with the rest of the population?
- 7) How equal are people's opportunities in the US?
- 8) What does it mean for you to be white in the US today?
- 9) What does it mean for you to be middle class in the US today?
- 10) What does it mean for you to be male in the US today?



APPENDIX F  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

**Middle-Class, White Men and Privilege  
Debriefing Statement**

The study in which you have participated was designed to examine how men who identify as white and middle class communicate about societal privilege. We are particularly interested in the extent to which middle class white men are aware of their privileges in the USA, and how they address issues of privilege in discussion with others.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the focus group questions with others. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Fred Jandt at (909) 537 8101. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Dr. Fred Jandt at (909) 537 8101 after March 31st, 2006.

APPENDIX G  
TRANSCRIPT FROM FOCUS GROUP 3

TRANSCRIPT: FOCUS GROUP 3

Preston (name of company) is in R..., are you all R... people?

David Yes.

Preston I'm in R... S....

David Where is it?

Preston Lake A...

Keith How long have you been in the USA?

Martin 10 Years.

David Me, 3 years.

Keith It will be interesting to see if your perspective differs from ours as we have all been in the USA.

Martin: It kind of relates to the first question, for me anyway, how easy is life for you in the USA? I think it is like, for me, I am better off in the United States than South Africa. It really is. I feel more accepted here. I spent time in Botswana as well and I experienced culture shock even though they are neighboring countries.

Ben: I used to live in Pittsburgh and worked for an international engineering company, I ran the North American operations and we have a few jobs in South Africa and people would come here for vacations and just beg us for jobs.

Keith Was that for the money or the culture or for the freedom?

Preston From what time period?

Ben: I was there from '96 thru 2002.

Keith Did you enjoy visiting there?

Ben Yes, it was very orchestrated and managed. We just didn't walk around.

Martin There is a lot of negativity in the country

Chris I had the opportunity of living outside the country. I lived in Taiwan for a couple of years. Middle class there, they work very hard. All classes there work very hard, I think much harder than here in the US so I would share that feeling. I feel the life in the US is fairly easy. So I would kind of agree.

Preston I think the questions as I looked at them are comparatively for us as middle-class men, is it easier for us than other then it is for other Americans? I think that is were they are heading with the questions. And I would plunge in and say yes, life is pretty easy for an adult white male in America. Still I don't think it is as easy as it once was and I think it will be harder in the future because I think there is a great leveling that is going on worldwide and white American men have really been in the drivers seat of this world all of my life and I think that is the case for most of us but that is gradually changing as more people become empowered, women and minorities and other countries become more and more empowered and they clearly are. So it still seems like we are in a good position and I hope it doesn't ever change so much so that we are highly discriminated against in the future. Anyway, that is my take.

Keith I think the first question is, I think you are right, there is sort of a double meaning. There is an absolute aspect to it, just how easy is life, right, regardless how easy or horrid it is for other people. And there is the question as to whether we have more privilege or it is easier for us compared to women compared to men, people of color or other races or immigrants compared to Americans that are natives, for example, who come from established families and have more access to careers and things like that. So there is a realistic and also an absolute aspect but I agree with on both counts we are pretty privileged as white males.

Preston Yea, I think there are neighborhoods you could go into where that wouldn't be the case, absolutely wouldn't be the case, in fact you would be in trouble just to get out of your car and probably lines of work where that would be the same, but where I live up in R... S... and I think most of R... is a fairly comfortable place for a white male to live.

David: I would like to join in with my point of view. When I moved here, I moved here 3 years ago, the first year I had problems and it was difficult because you have (unintelligible). Life as a white man was very difficult you don't know the right way to do things fast and easily. I was very frustrated the first year. My family joined me. And then once you pass one cycle, say one year, you can find friends then I really felt comfortable here (unintelligible) There are more opportunities here, I could buy a house, in one month I could buy a house. In my country it is very difficult to buy a house after one year.

Keith But I wonder where we're represented, at least the four of us working in a company town, for the company in a company

town and you as a company president also maybe somewhat above the privilege of middle-class, white males. I can't speak to the piano business but certainly someone making a business in music is perhaps representative of the level of wealth generally in society that can afford to accommodate that kind of career.

Preston Keep a musician from starving. Yes, I would agree with all you say, as a musician I have managed to make it. I'm doing OK but I am totally self-employed. That has been a life choice I had opportunities early on to work for companies and actually was doing so until one day I just decided I was going to chuck it all and I moved to the mountains to see what I can do.

Keith How long ago was that?

Preston About 30 something years ago, 36 years, in '69.

Martin When did you start playing music?

Preston I have played music all my life but had not really, I moved to the mountains before I really knew what I was going to do. I was computer programmer in downtown Los Angeles for a couple of years and that was back in the days when the only computers were room size with punch cards and all that sort of thing. That's what I chucked and came to the mountains and really didn't have the piano thing in mind until one day a light came on and I thought huh I bet I could tune pianos and I got into that and that's what got me going.

Chris So you had this kind of big paradigm shift, a big career shift in the middle of your life and that's kind of an interesting thing relative to the question. So was that real difficult, was it easy for you? Do you think it would have been as easy for someone else, maybe in another income bracket or maybe another race if they had that change in the middle of their life, would it have been as easy for them and was it easy for you?

Preston It was actually fairly easy at that point. I had no children and I think it easier then. All kinds of things that bear down heavily on me now, health insurance, insurance of all kinds is a big burden nowadays, but wasn't anywhere near....a nothing little factor in those days and I was young enough I didn't even know I needed as much car insurance, health insurance, life insurance...excuse me, what's that?

Keith I wonder about the young people in their early 20's are told you got to start your 401K now, you got to put 10% in and they're asking - what for? It's a different world now then it was then.

Preston I would have been wise to do more of that but I didn't but anyway I was able to do OK, my expenses were just not that high then. Housing, just all kind of expenses, what was gas back then? And even though there has been generalized inflation, still, at that time it was easy to make that move and by the time I had made it and really did need it I was more established so I came out OK. You know, I'm not getting rich but I think that my being white probably helps in the mountains. Most of the mountain population is white. Were I a person of color or of a different sex I think there would be some of my clientele up there would think 'now wait a minute.' And if I turned out to be the wonderful, nice guy that I am, maybe I would overcome that - but let's say I was black.....

Ben That's the big leg up we have, immediate, initial acceptance and you have all the opportunity to screw it up but generally you are given the benefit of the doubt right out of the box, right out of the starting gate. Many people don't start at a pretty good position and have the opportunity to make the most of it. Basically you have a huge leg up. Not everywhere but it is geographically dependent, also industry dependent and things like that, you don't necessarily have a huge advantage being a white male; look at the general demographics, there is a tremendous number of females in advertising, the technical discipline you certainly have many more males.

David Basically you are assumed innocent until.....

Keith I assume in steel you have a lot more males but probably, demographically, mixed in terms of race.

Ben Oh well, it is amazing - we find it very difficult to get Hispanics and blacks into management because we just don't have.....if you do a total blank assessment of a resume, without knowing the person or anything like that, it is very difficult to find good, qualified, experience people.

Keith Question 2, How to gain access to wealth, education & power and probably when you are looking at promotions, what management to, at least education and to some extent the others?

Ben I work for a pretty interesting company. We are a big company about 7 billion dollars, about 10,000 people, we're international but we are very decentralized and if you are a general manager of a company you live an die by your P & L statement. You have the opportunity that if you do well you can get good bonuses and all that kind of good stuff but if you do poorly you get nothing. It's truly a.....and that's the motivation. It attracts people that are self-motivated and who....so what you want to do

is grow your business for the near term and the long term. So you want to kind of balance the demographics of your management team so you wouldn't have everybody, all of a sudden, retiring in 5 years and keep getting new blood and new ideas and things like that. At the same time you are not really running a charitable organization where you can afford to bring in a lot of people and train them for 10 years in order to get them up to speed. So it's a mix, its tough, you try to find the best people that you can and it's difficult. We have a lot of Hispanics and we find a good guy who has a lot of energy, who is well motivated and learns quickly, things like that, we try to give them every opportunity and motivation to improve themselves and get the education they need. Improve their language skills, their writing and things like that. So it's a good thing, it's a good opportunity for people. But, just like I said before, they are starting at kind of a disadvantage; they don't have a lot of that stuff going in.

Martin Are there incentives given to companies to hire people of color?

Ben No, no - at (name of company) we can get tax breaks just for hiring people who live there regardless of they are because it's a partly depressed area.

Preston What is the term, I know the term very well, that means that giving a more proactive....

Keith Affirmative action?

Preston Yes, affirmative action, I guess that stuff is out there in various ways. It mentioned education and I know I have seen news reports where there is some white male backlash against that because students coming up feel that they are not getting an equal opportunity. That hasn't affected me because I haven't been trying to go back and I haven't been trying to work with or get into big companies. I have almost no experience - I guess I did once. I was tuning a piano for (a Conference Center) up there and I never had to do this before, they had some forms that I had to fill out and they were asking about my ethnicity, which I responded to and I have absolutely no idea whether it was because of this or not but I didn't get rehired to do anymore work for them and I don't know who has been. So that might be an instance where I was affected by something like that. But I am the only guy on the mountain that I know of, that is in the Yellow Pages for instance. So if not, they may have gotten somebody from someplace else. Whether or not there was any ethnic factor maybe they just didn't like my piano tuning.

Keith Maybe your string broke.....



Preston        Could very well be something like that, it's hard to know but I guess what I'm saying I have very little way to answer a question like that from my own experience.

Ben             Even on the business side, looking at the ideas of education, we bid on a lot of projects and you bid in the state of California, there is always a DVD but that's still a pretty small component requirement of the overall, if it's a billion dollar state budget, maybe 5% of that or 2% is pretty much set aside for that kind of work. So you know that's out there and there's opportunities. I know a lot of guys that have done real well because of that and they have built really nice businesses just off state contracts that they would never had the opportunity for because they probably wouldn't have had access to the capital because you get a state contract and you can go to the bank and you can get the money tomorrow, the cash flow. I know I would have a tough time doing that if I was out on my own to do that. I would have a tough time if you don't have a chunk of money on your own it would be much more difficult. So I think for the enterprising view that are really motivated and willing to invest their time they can do really well but it's certainly not easy and I think that a lot of it is a lot more luck involved for someone in that position. More than some of you that go the more typical way.

Preston        The idea is to give them enough of a 'prime the pump' so to speak. They get the results going a little bit, started, get some experience and personally I am in favor of that kind of thing. I think as much as I like having it easy in this world I don't feel much sense of fairness has offended by the idea that.....

Ben             I think a real negative though is when you get to the second generation of those folks, you have an excellent business as a minority contractor and things like that, they have a really tough Time passing it down to their kids because they are either not as motivated or driven to make it succeed, not having it real tough or having to learn what it takes to do that or don't want to put the effort forward. Because what I used to do is mergers and acquisitions and we bought a bunch of companies across the entire U.S. from guys that did fabulously well but were very concerned, they wanted to cash out because they were concerned if they passed the business down to their kids it might not be as successful.

Preston        That's kind of a shame.

Ben             It is, it is.

Keith Do you think it happens more to non-white or woman companies than white male run companies with white male kids. Is there a white male middle-class aspect of selection do you think?

Ben Well, I think there is a whole lot more white owned businesses than minority owned businesses but I know a number of very successful minority-owned businesses that were in that position. They had a bunch of kids and were very concerned about passing the business on to them. So they will probably all end up getting a bunch of money when dad dies but that doesn't perpetuate the wealth-generating aspect of making things go.

Preston No, along with it has to go the putting the mind set of your children...this is where we expect you are going to go and having the Time and energy to back that up with helping with homework and to whatever else it takes to get a kid postured to want to go that way.

Martin By using the revenue from the successful business to give them educational opportunities to do something else.

Keith And not touching the principal! That's part of what we are talking about is keeping that nest egg. Do you think it is different in France?

David I don't know if you are in middle class or if you are in low class if it is easy to get access to education, because I was surprised at the beginning just to see a doctor, go to hospital, you have to pay the money just to have access to the basics. In my country it is free so that was a surprise to me. I have small kids and to get a babysitter or day care it was expensive and I said wow...so it was surprising to spend money just for basic things. How do Mexican people or people who are not on the right track I would say, can afford that. As I said I was very surprised. I'm new in this country and I'm learning to do things but I still don't understand how people can get access to education because when parents start banking money for education for their kids to go to university - wow - when the kid is only 2 years old you need to think about it.

Preston You need to think about it before they are even conceived.

Martin In the U.S. I have definitely noticed the access to education is depended on your access to wealth, it is not quite like that in South Africa where it is based on educational requirement you have help to get through.

Chris I think that has always been true but I think it is more true now then it was when I went to school. I paid \$18.00 a semester hour for 3 years.

Preston       Where did you go?

Chris         In Texas. You will never find that again in the U.S.,  
anywhere - it's like ten times that.

Preston       It varies from state to state a little but absolutely it  
was much easier, it was more of a socialized type of a  
system. Earlier on where more and more that the  
government would take care of is now not being taken care  
of by the government. And there has been such a big cut  
in the last couple of weeks to the university system in  
California. They cut a lot of subsidies and scholarships  
for underprivileged people who now will find it much  
harder to get the money together for college. I never  
heard the term homeless person until, I don't know how  
many years ago but that was just.....of maybe occasionally  
you would hear about bums and hobos but not as a class of  
people. People some years ago where just basically thrown  
out of mental institutions - a lot of people were  
institutionalized and they just kind of sent them out in  
the street. America has gotten embodied with a trade off.  
It's sort of a conservative, monetary, political  
philosophy. But a lot of other countries are taking care  
of their population as a whole by taxing. Taxes are lower  
here; of course we still get taxed and spend it on the  
military and various other things.

Keith         I guess in France, as I recall, I may be wrong, isn't  
there a national system of examinations where people have  
to succeed to a certain grade level in order to be allowed  
to advance to university, right. And if they don't  
achieve this grade level then they are kind of pushed off  
to the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier and they don't have access to an education  
perhaps to some extent as somebody who has been fast  
racked.

David         There is a different notion of a university - you can go  
to the university but it is more general way to learn but  
if you want to learn philosophy or if you want to learn  
something technical, like engineering, you don't go to the  
university, you have to have a certain level of  
achievement.

Martin        What you just described is the case in South Africa. In  
order to go to university you have a certain high school  
grade level of achievement and once you have done you  
bachelor of science of whatever, then in order to get a  
masters you have to achieve a certain grade level in the

Preston       It's kind of similar here.

David         The difference here - in my country - it's free. In order  
to learn something to go to university, it is free.

Martin        So the way you describe it sounds like it's not that way but it is that way in the U.S., you need to achieve a certain grade level to get in.

Keith         Not to get access to a college education, you can really get in a college from any grade level and any examination level. Maybe the school you go to isn't as good as the one you could get to...there isn't the sort of cut off process that I know there is perhaps in some countries. I know I used to work for a French company and I would go to Toulouse and meet with the people and all the leaders of the company. All had long family pedigrees and they all go to (name of company) and there was this very strong elitism in the technical world of aerospace, in Toulouse anyway.

David         What was the company?

Keith         (name of company). We would walk over to the (name of place) cafeteria and everybody there was sort of patrician and I think maybe you had more access in a country like France if you come from an established family and you could trace your lineage to Charlemagne as opposed to in this country where that sort of stuff doesn't matter that much. So you may have more access to education but then again we get to all these grade levels of good schools, bad schools.

Martin.        Yes, that is something new for me.

Preston        What is new for you?

Martin         The different levels of access to education - a cheap school an expensive school, an Ivy League school - that's not really the situation in South Africa.

Preston        Basically, a school is a school

Martin         Yes, it is kind of a standard; of course, South Africa is a small country so it is easy to do that kind of thing. It's not really economically based.

David         We can see with kids only 5 years old - oh, let's go to this school.

Chris         I've seen that taken to larger, even greater extreme in Taiwan for example. I think in China in general this happened. If you talk to people who have kids 6, 7, 8 years old, they are going to school like 12 hours a day. They start at 7 in the morning and get off at 5 in the afternoon. They eat then they come back for 4 hours in evening. I think we kind of chide ourselves in this

country about how hard we push our kids but I've seen them pushed harder elsewhere.

Keith I think in my kid's school - this is a generalization I am somewhat reluctant to make - but I think that the Asian families in my kid's school push their kids a lot harder than the Caucasian families.

Chris It's cultural.

? I agree.

Keith Maybe if you come from a country with a billion people and a huge reserves of rural poverty and you are technologically somewhat backward, the new Chinese tiger of the economy, you see what happens to people who don't succeed. You really push your kids to succeed and I suppose that's what you're seeing in Taiwan to some extent.

Chris Yes, I think so.

Preston Oh absolutely, life varies for a lot of those people and a lot of my contemporaries, we grew up and life was basically about having fun.

Keith Yeah, that is so true.

Preston And it still is for a lot of people. I think most of us around this table, sounds like we work pretty hard, we probably enjoy our work. I certainly have been rewarded by the work that I get to do. I am so pleased that's true for me. But it isn't for everyone and for an awful lot of people life is deadly serious.

Keith None of us work with our bodies, perhaps you have in the steel business, I don't know. I come home and my wife says 'did you have a hard day' and I say, 'oh yeah, my mouse finger is killing me'. There is a real difference between being...again we have the privilege of being knowledge workers. A bad day is when there are a lot of meetings; it's not hard the way it is for a lot of people in the world.

Chris Exactly, back in my home town it's primarily a ranching and farming community and so a bad day is you ran over yourself with the tractor or you fell off the wind mill or you got tangled up with a horse or something. So, yeah, I was motivated.

Preston I think that intellectual work can be very hard work. Sometimes you are just straining your brain.

Keith           The creativity work in your field as well I'm sure. What, do you have writers block and those kinds of things?

Preston        Yea, but I'm not under a situation where I have to crank out a certain amount of product. When the muse hits then...away we go. I drop everything.

Keith           Nice work if you can get it.

Preston        Well I have to; I've learned that it doesn't come back. If something is cooking in your head and you don't attend to it right now it will never be there again.

Chris          Always make the meeting notes that I took to the meeting.

Preston        I see you are leaning in here Keith and I think so too maybe about question 4 & 5, they might be slightly different.

Keith          What kinds of people have all the power and resources, other than (name)?

?

David          He is president of our company.

David          You think it is easy to get power?

Keith          It's a very power oriented company, we don't have internal competition.

Chris          It's subtly is.

Keith          I wonder.

Martin         It's becoming more the way.

Keith          Do you really think so?

Martin         Yes, I think it is. There is a restructuring within the company and a lower tier of management coming in that didn't exist before.

Keith          That would be us.

Martin         You guys have a totally different environment, I'm sure.

Keith          Services, sure. There is no real power conflict that I can see in our services group. It's more about there is so much work to do and finding the people to juggle all the balls. You just take on as much as you feel like, I think. That's the way it feels to me anyway. Again (name of company) is a pretty easy place to work and I don't think you have to be a white male to think that. One of the things I like about (name of company) is the cultural

diversity and there is.....obviously women have every bit as much responsibility as men all over the company.

David If you look at the employees, how many black people...?

Keith Yeah, more Asian

David Well, how many black people?

Chris It's disproportioned.

David So maybe we have a lot of Asian people because they are cheap.

Preston I think it also has to do with what we talked about a few minutes ago, how hard they studied.

David They are very smart, cheap labor for this company.

Keith Yes, I think they are less expensive than blacks or Hispanics would be.

David So we have a lot of Asian guys, they are very smart and they are cheap labor.

Keith You get the math, physics and the computer science - for the Russian or the Asian, it's really....

Preston When they talk about power and access or resources, for some reason I immediately think political power and connectiveness and all that sort of thing. But a lot of people who do seem to have access to the top levels of power....getting into the top country clubs and....

Chris So is that political prowess or is that wealth?

Preston Well, I think they go hand in hand. The money is the mother's milk so people who have a lot of money and are connected make a point of going that route are doing well and there is not much question in this country that are dominated by white males - the country club set. I've had the opportunity to play the piano at a lot of events in country clubs and that's all I see.

Keith That's an interesting perspective.

? It sure is.

Ben From the power, or the access to it, the contacts are a huge deal. I grew up in the northeast and I did all my schooling up there. I think in that area of the country, people in New England, particularly in the financial industry, New York City, Connecticut and those places, I mean it's who your family was, what school you went to -

that determines which investment bank you eventually have a shot at. I was lucky, I went to P... State, undergrad in chemical engineering and then I got a Masters in mechanical engineering. I really liked the business die of things so I kind of chucked the engineering and went to work and got my MBA which was great for me because it was a totally different world then what I was used to. I was a bit concerned because, like, I never had a business course in my life but the engineering background made half of the business stuff really easy because of the math, it's not that difficult. But the people that you meet...I still have a lot of good friends from going to school there and so much of it is who you know, working together, and keeping contacts like that. A lot of my friends work for investment banks and that's definitely, who you went to school with, who you went to high school with. It's just the way it is.

- Chris I'm kind of interested when you first read the question what kinds of people and resources, what was the first thing that popped in your mind?
- Preston Me?
- Chris For any of us?
- Ben I think the other leg up you automatically have is if are born to wealth.
- Chris That was the first thing that popped into my head.
- Ben You just immediately have more opportunity.
- Preston Wealth and connectiveness, if that wealth is connected to the top country club and the best fraternities and the best universities and you nourish that, you suckle off of that so to speak as you are growing, you go for it and keep that alive, yea, you got a huge chance.
- Chris It's not a crap shoot. In the middle class it's more of a confluence of hard work, luck and...
- Ben I think the great thing about the middle class in the U.S.; you don't have to be born to wealth to do very well.
- Keith You have, maybe, more mobility.
- Preston It has historically been that case in the U.S. I'm concerned that the middle class is getting squeezed and that's a well known thing that fewer are popping up the top and an awful lot are falling out the bottom and I don't think that's a healthy situation, although that has been the historical norm. If you think of feudal times, there was the king and pretty much everyone else...a few



people you might call a middle class level. Everyone else was the dregs. Throughout much of the rest of the world now, Latin America and other places, I think that continues to be largely true.

Keith Those kings came to the wealth through inheritance.

Chris They certainly had all the power then.

Preston The poorest of us here and now get to experience things that the Queen of England 200-300 years ago would have given up the throne to have.

Keith So my brother-in-law is the head of (name of large company) and I went to college with him. He wasn't a particularly driven person but he has more power and resources than I do, right, which is painful for a brother-in-law to discover. No, I'm really kidding. I think he has also made a lot of sacrifices that I haven't made. Tonight I biked home from work, had a quick supper with my family and he is on a plane to Malibu to go to a lot of meetings, golf with all these hobnobs and regulators to try to pull (name of company) out of its problems. It's a fascinating contrast. Sometimes people in America that have more power and resources than I do made the sacrifices to get those. I don't think I would, certainly we have the flexibility to decide not to do that. I turned my back on it.

Ben Usually what is not there is the whole quality of life.

Keith Yes.

Ben I think if you are a reasonably successful middle-class, white guy you have way more choices.

Keith Yes.

Ben You can go in the direction that is fulfilling for you. So you have those choices and if you don't really like the direction you are heading you have more opportunity to change that than if you were under a lot of other circumstances.

Preston Absolutely. I think there are a lot of people that simply have very few choices. They don't have the education, they don't have any contacts, they probably don't have very good nutrition, and they don't have access to everything you can imagine.

Ben Well that is the whole thing we were talking about teenage pregnancy rates. If you were a 14-15 year old black girl in the middle of South Central L.A., your chances of just

being on welfare, living there forever, and having low paying jobs, that's pretty much the way it's going to be.

Preston All your friends are there, you don't get anybody telling you anything else and if they do it's probably some weird white guy.

Chris I agree with you. I have kind of an interesting perspective. My daughter is black, she is adopted. I hope this is true but I can't help but feel that she is probably going to have a little different perspective on what it's going to take to succeed in this life then the person you were describing. I think that is going to help, certainly I know there will be challenges because she is female and she is black but we haven't seen those challenges in the 14 years she has been with us. She has always been accepted by all the communities so we haven't really seen that yet. But comparatively speaking I think she is going to have an easier time at accessing things like that then the situation you described. How about you guys?

David Before coming here I had more power than the African community in my country because I was a white man, middle class, well educated. I had more access then immigrant people. Then when I moved here I see just the opposite. If you are not American even if you speak well and easily express yourself and give your point of view, you don't have the power. I see the opposite. It is amazing to see if you are not a citizen you won't have the power so easily. My surprise, OK I can open the door, give my ideas, do the best that I can do but in the end the door is closed because you are not American. I don't know if you feel the same ambition. So that was an interesting contrast before I come and now that I am in this country.

Ben That is an interesting perspective because I think the general opinion, at least from the press and from what I've seen, the folks that have broader experience, international experience and are multi-lingual and are comfortable dealing with English in the U.S. and can go to Europe and feel at home there—those are the guys that are super successful.

Preston I think so, the only problem is in this country, we are, the population at large, we are very provincial here. We're not like a lot of Europe where they change languages, change money, change customs and so forth because they are all so packed in together and are used to doing that and have done that for generations, they are rubbing elbows with each other. The U.S. has done two things; one we are isolated, it was for a long time almost entirely English speaking and physically isolated from everybody else by oceans and deserts. There are a lot of

people in this country who have never traveled other than as a top flight tourist to someplace where they are issuing orders and so forth, they have never lived among the people of any place to get any sense that there are other ways of doing things than the American way.

- Chris            That should be a required course, a year abroad.
- Preston        I spent a year in the Peace Corp in India a long time ago and that was a very good thing for me to have done. I became very ill while I was over there and that was a negative but still it has affected my view of the world ever since.
- Martin         I kind of feel the same way having been in Botswana getting my first taste of an international community. That was a very enlightening experience for me. To answer your question, I don't quite feel the same way as you being a non-citizen. I think at a slightly different environment than you because I married a Peace Corp volunteer and she is from the U.S. so I was immediately kind of familiar with the culture, she would help me with the culture. Also, coming here for the first time was a lot easier for me because of her.
- David          We stay among friends, French people or Spanish or German. We stayed with Europeans. I think for us it's not too good to understand more of the culture and the people. We tried to stay in our community.
- Preston        Unfortunately, a lot of Americans don't treat somebody that's different very well. It's a little embarrassing sometimes when I hear stories of things that people have done.
- Martin         I'm kind of interested; it's kind of a fuzzy boundary. What distinguishes you from becoming low class to low class to high class? I guess it's just income. You go into middle class, you get an education, what are you now, upper class or what is it?
- Ben            I don't think it's that clear cut. It's partly income but a lot of it is in your head.
- Chris          I totally agree. We grew up in a very low middle class situation. You might even call it upper low class, I don't know. But there were three of us. I have two siblings and it's very different where everyone has ended up. Very different. It's kind of spoken to that mobility because there is a lot of mobility in that middle class in terms of what you can do but we are all over the place in terms of where we ended up, at least right now in our lives.

Keith           How so - what specifically?

Chris           Well, we sort of got one sitting high, one sitting in the middle and one sitting very low. I think it has a lot to do with attitude, self-perception, and confidence. There are three very different end points for starting out with the same infusion of cash, in terms of up-bringing.

Martin          Is Shaquelle O'Neil upper class because he is super rich?

Keith           There are people doing blue collar jobs like driving truck that are still making \$90,000 a year. The issue of class is always tricky in America because we as a founding principle have tried to do away with class and it keeps creeping back in and it gets shuffled and turned upside down.

Preston         Yes, it's absolutely fascinating that all the ways things can go. You can take somebody and say you're low class. Sometimes you can say in all ways you can imagine this person as low class and you can take an isolated individual saying that person is high class. But very often it's a mixture; a person may be very, very educated and poor as can be.

Keith           The poor college professor and the wealthy red neck, those things are normal.

Preston         There is actually quite a bit of that in this country.

Keith           Does a poor college professor have less power, less access to education?

Ben             It's again how you define it. Within the sphere that they have chosen they may be top of their game.

Keith           How do you define power? If you take out the political, how do you define power? I think it's the ability to walk into somebody's office, house, church, or whatever and get what you want. That could be by persuasion, by communication ability, by charisma, by any number of things.

Ben             There are a lot of choices that people make. It's the old adage 'do you want to be a big fish in a small pond or a small fish in a big pond.' The relative income levels of being a small fish in a big pond you may make a whole lot more money than being a big fish in a small pond. So it depends on what drives you.

Chris           You may be able to drive your own agenda.

Martin        It comes back to the quality of life so maybe the college professor is upper class but he doesn't earn that much but he has a great quality of life.

Keith         Or a piano tuner. If you paid for your house, you got your network of contacts and you got your profession and you're doing something intellectually stimulating and you're living in a nice place, what do you need? You take somebody like, I won't say my brother-in-law, you know, somebody who's like bussing his chops all day long everyday, has a really huge house, servants, a Lamborghini, life to tough to maintain all of that.

Preston       Among the people, I keep coming back to country clubs but I've had the opportunity to be around them a fair amount and I find some of the unhappiest people that are members there. Their conversations are all about money, their prestige, and their acquisitions. They're just vacuous when it comes to anything that I consider to be a real substance. So what kind of wealth do they have? Their houses are cluttered with all these things they have to dust or pay somebody to dust and they're just crazy with trying to defend that wealth.

Chris         To stay at that level.

Ben            Some other examples like a guy like Richard Branson, is that his name, Virgin Air. There is a guy that is fabulously wealthy and I think he has a great time, he really enjoys his life.

Preston       Among the people I see at these country clubs, there are some people that strike me like that.

Keith         But you probably have more fun than most of them and you're playing the piano.

Preston       I think I am so fortunate to..... It just gets better and better and better for me and I feel so lucky to have the life I'm living. And piano tuning, I must say, is a job. There is not much intellectual going on there. I can put my mind on cruise control and tune a piano. In the end I collect my check and never even so much as thought of the piano. It just seems to happen on automatic. I've gotten all done with them before and thought, 'my gosh, am I done.' There it is in perfect tune and my conscious mind was never once there because I was thinking about something else. But the actual piano playing and teaching, I'm on the edge of my seat all the time. It's a very nice thing for me. I'm sure that isn't true for all musicians but it just turned out that way for me, I'm happy to say. I don't know whether it would make much difference if I was a different sex or of color for me to be able to do what I've done. In that environment, maybe

so. I said early on, if I were to show up a black man knocking on the door some people may be put off. But I would hope that I would be nice enough to somehow win them over and yes that's a good tuning, I've done a good job and I showed up on time and I didn't smell bad as they say in those commercials.

Preston What is the average American income? I don remember reading some number thinking how do they do it?

Chris The poverty level is what now, about \$30,000 for a family of four.

David For the entire U.S.?

Chris Yes, I know it's certainly below \$25,000 but I think it's below \$30,000 that's considered poverty level for a family of four. I don't know what the average is but I would suspect that all of us in here are making well into the upper.....

David In (local county), for a software developer, the average is about \$45,000. That was two years ago. That is not very well considered.

Preston Well wages here for the same job are a little lower then in (neighboring county).

David Maybe if you look in (neighboring county) or the Silicon Valley.

Preston It seems like you should be making more. You'd have to because your housing is twice as expensive.

Chris Which is hard to imagine.

Preston My income is very variable, it depends on business, how it comes, it's hard to say but I think I'm probably doing better than the poverty level, on a good day.

David I still don't know if this area is representative of all the U.S. I see a lot of money along the coast, very popular then in L.A. In R... it's ( ), in P... S... there are a lot of rich people, so I don't know what represents the U.S.

Preston You have to compare it to the whole country. Even (local county) is pretty expensive and fairly good pay compared to the rest of the country.

Chris Exactly. I can sell my house now and buy four in my home town and I don't live in a fancy house. My brother lives in a \$30,000 home and it's twice the size of mine.

Keith Is that in Texas?

Chris No, northeastern New Mexico. So it's very different in other parts of the country.

Ben I just moved her in June and comparable housing was three times as expensive here as in San Antonio.

Keith I moved here from Washington and was able to get a nicer house than what I was leaving in Washington, DC. I thought this is nice, we're moving to a place with affordable real estate. That was four years ago. I was in the real estate market for 15 years and got in when Washington DC was slightly depressed.

Chris Your timing was good.

Keith Let me put a little spin on the question. We probably all have incomes that are significantly higher than the average in the U.S.A. What do our wives think of our incomes?

? Never enough.

David Does your wife work?

Keith No. my wife does not work. Well she works raising two kids. There is a sort of normal aspect and a sort of variable global aspect; we're always pinching on this or that.

Chris That was an interesting question.

Preston I've gotten involved in a project that involves creating a product. The product is a children's CD, actually there are two of them and they are for very young children. There are eight little songs and one has a little bedtime story too. The songs are personalized so they have the child's name sung into the songs. They're pretty good songs and now the question is how to market them. I'm definitely a musician kind of guy, not business, not marketing, not uptown, not knowing how to play that game very well. I don't know that my being a white male is helping me one bit when it comes to that at this point. I don't even know who to approach about getting it properly marketed. We're looking right now at the idea of using it as fund raisers for preschools. In fact we are trying something out with that right now. But there is an area where I don't feel I have the connections that I need and I don't quite know what I am going to do about it. I don't think it helps or hurts in this instance to be a white male. I've got a product, it's a good product and somehow or other I have to get to the right person to get enough respect for the product.

Keith           What do you want to accomplish with this product?

Preston        Well, we want to get it sold.

Keith           Why?

Preston        Well, to make money.

Keith           Is it as simple as that?

Preston        Yes, very much.

Keith           My wife has just written a book about an endangered bird in the Pacific Northwest. It's been published, they printed 10,000 copies and she is really interested in getting it sold. But not so she can make the money on it, it's so she can get her work into the hands of the people. To be an author is to want to be read.

Preston        I am proud of the product. For that matter I have written over a 100 children's songs but these are the only ones that have become a product because we took aim at that to create an actual product. The other songs are sitting on paper in boxes at my house. Sometimes, like I was saying earlier, the idea came and away I went. OK so I take it home and it's in the box and I have to get them recorded. But I'll still have this question of how to get it out in the world. I'm hoping to find the way but at this point I don't feel I have the... Maybe I should talk to those country club people that I had mouthed off so much about.

Martin         Try the internet.

Preston        Actually the product is available on the internet and we get a few hits every once in a while. We're hoping that people will go, 'Oh that was neat' and ten enough word of mouth and it will start to pick up some speed.

Keith           Would you like to tell us your web site?

Preston        (website address). Actually we have another one; we bought the rights to this one which will link you immediately to (website address). But we haven't developed that as a web site.

Keith           So, another brother-in-law who is not a corporate head has done his own CD. He did it all by himself, did the guitar, did the base, did the songs, did the piano, did the drums, laid it all to the tracks, put it out on the internet. He went with a small song marketing company and has enjoyed making this thing. It took him 2-3 years. Sales were initially a little bit and now there is nothing. The internet is not a perfect vehicle for that.



What's interesting, he chose this as his thing to do and corporate life and power is just not that important to him as much as getting his work on a CD and wants people to buy it just because he wants to have it listened to. He doesn't want silence to be the outcome.

Chris Now that's power.

Keith Is it power? Interesting. I wonder. I mean it is in a certain sense to be able to make that kind of decision and kind of throw off some of the conventional ways to spend time. Networking at the country club and golfing with the guy who might buy your product or give you a raise is one way to spend your time. Another way is to go in your basement and work on this thing for three years.

Preston That's basically what I'm doing. I am creating it and hoping at some point somebody will say this is good, let's get this out there. If it doesn't...once something strikes you and you start doing it you almost can't rest until it's completed. I mean you don't have to make a recording but it has to exist in some form where you feel that you got it and it exists in this world. If I were to pass on at least it would be left here and hopefully someone would discover it and like it. But it is very difficult when you have that kind of energy...I don't now, you're the cartographer there, you probably have ideas, we can do this, we can do that.

Keith I'm actually not that smart.

Chris We've had 20 of them and I've had to say no, we have to wait.

Preston I just think that you have some of that going on for yourself and it's exciting.

Martin Part of it is fame, leaving a legacy and also power, some of them derived from each other.

Preston There are some of these that I would like to see get out there and I wouldn't even care if my name was on them. I'd like to have my name on them, it would be great, get some recognition, but I want them to see the light of day. I wrote a song for the millennium. It was a children's song celebrating the changing of the millennium. I never anywhere heard any song that touched this as far as something to teach the children of the world what they were going through, the experience of the millennium. It's not something that anybody is going to get to do for many a generation. We created this thing; we recorded it, made a bunch of video tapes. We sent it out to reporters all over the country; I mean to newspapers, TV and radio stations. I sent it to choir directors of all the schools

we could find and nothing happened. So that is an instance, I'm sure; if I had the connection to the right person at some media company it would have been done. They would have seen it and it would have been a slam dunk.

Martin I think David and I can relate to part of what you are saying - developing software, creating a product and putting it out there. It's not so much that we are going to be famous because we helped to build this, it's more like you see it out there and you realize it's a piece of you that helped build it. It gives you a sense of achievement. One of the things I did when I first came to the U.S is I worked at a construction site. I was a surveyor and we built a bridge over a rive and it was an amazing sense of achievement and every Time we drive over that bridge now it's like...

Chris So being people that relocated to the U.S., have you felt your opportunities have been equal to people who were born and raised here.

Martin I would say yes. I don't feel any disadvantage compared to my American peers.

Chris How about you David?

David I realize that until you get money you don't have the advantages. I'm not a citizen. I don't have a green card. I'm still considered a foreigner. I have a meeting in Europe in January and I am in the process of renewing my Visa. I couldn't come back unless I get a stamp at the U.S. Embassy. So I say OK, what is the process. I have to spend a lot of time to get approval so I still think I don't have the same access and power as a U.S. citizen.

Martin Again I think I have a slightly different story because I got a green card.

David Until I have a green card I won't have the access.

Martin I think there are some instances if I were to try to find another job, being a citizen would help me.

David My wife doesn't have access to work because she has a different Visa and even if I go to stamp on my Visa because I need a Visa for my job she won't have a stamp on her visa so she can't leave the country. I live here, I pay taxes but I don't have the same rights. I thing about the Mexican people who are illegal in this country.

Preston What does it mean to me to be male in the U.S. today? Well I don't know how many times I've said I'm glad I'm male when I see females having to go through all the stuff

they have to go through their entire lives. When they are children I guess its fine, but then they start having periods. My daughter has horrible times with her periods. Pretty soon they get pregnant; well I don't think I would want to do that. Then you have to give child birth - I don't think I want to do that. Eventually there is menopause and then they have that. So, no thanks.

Keith And they outlive us anyway.

Preston So I'm pretty glad to be male just from the physical stand point. Also, I just enjoy my maleness.

Keith It comes with a price. I was reading some article about women making these career changes and trying out all this different ideas, dropping out of their career work place for a while, dropping back in when they wanted to, how difficult and stressful that was. Somebody on the other side said, yes, well it's great for a man; you have the option of working for a living or die. You are expected to work, expected to produce, expected to make do for your family, expected to bring home the bacon, this is the man's job. Even as liberated and relaxed our nation is about gender roles its still the man's job. So my wife says 'why don't you have more hobbies.' Oh for God's sake, when am I going to fit that in? I mean, why don't I vacuum the house more. Work is 10 or 11 hours a day and the week-ends we try to do our part to help out with the family and the chores. If I had a hobby it would be a problem.

Preston I tuned a piano today for a stay-at-home dad. That's what he called himself, he used the term. His wife goes out and works and he stays at home and raises the kids. He also does work out of his home so he is working. But I got the impression that he is doing the majority of the child care.

Keith And that looks to me like a very fulfilling career, probably more fulfilling then a life in technology. If you think about our jobs - the project comes, the project goes, and it becomes obsolete. Six months later nobody remembers what it was anyway. You write the software, the operating system changes, you rewrite it again, you do it again for 9 or 10 or 20 years, whatever it is.

Chris In 20 years you still get to see your work as being your kid.

Keith That's right. My wife has written a book and in 20 years she is going to have this book, its about an endangered species and its going to be more relevant in 20 years then it is now in a certain sense. Looking at a composer, they got music they performed and it's on a CD. It's something

they can look at and say here is something I did, it was 20 years ago and it's still a great thing. To some degree the life of a male is to be somewhat of a support structure for society. You do your bit, then you disappear, who cares.

Preston I met a guy who is doing his student teaching at an elementary school where I am working with the kids to do a Christmas program. He was there substitute teaching. I think he had just about as much grey in his beard as you do. He's that age; he is doing a career change. He told me what he did before, something in the corporate world and he just made the decision to change. We talked about it for a while. I congratulated him and I said boy they need male role models at this age. I've had a lucky thing for me; the superintendent of schools up in the mountains for several years was a guy that knew me pretty well. There is a contact I guess you might say. Anyway, he called me, without a credential, how would you like to come into the schools, kinder thru 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; go into the classroom and make music with these kids. That's what I did and that's where all these kid's songs have come from and I had more fun then you can believe. I still work with one of the schools. Tomorrow I will have about 300 kids that I will be working with and I love it. As part of my maleness, nurturing young children is definitely something I respond to. I think guys love being around kids and helping them along.

Chris I identify with what Keith said in terms of maleness. I do not want this to sound like a burden because I don't consider it to be but maleness in the U.S. certainly means responsibility.

Ben Oh, absolutely. You get choices too. It's something you embrace and try to do really well or something that you can shun, just not get involved in at all. If you embrace it, it can be tremendously fulfilling even though it can be somewhat of a burden. The pressure of making sure you're always there producing things like that. So you either embrace it and do the best you can and get all the good stuff out of it or you don't.

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