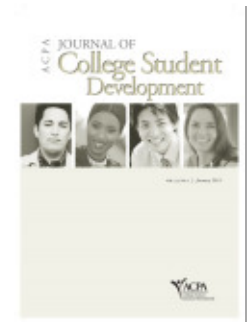# But We're Not Laughing: White Male College Students' Racial Joking and What This Says About "Post-Racial" Discourse

Nolan L. Cabrera

But We're Not Laughing: White Male College Students' Racial Joking and What This Says About "Post-Racial" Discourse

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This study critically analyzes White male college student narratives regarding racial joking. Through semi-structured interviews, 29 participants described a pattern of behavior and rationalization: they heard and told racist jokes frequently; the jokes were framed as not racist; and the jokes were told only among White people, because the participants viewed minorities as overly sensitive. These students were far from post-racial (i.e., in a state where race no longer matters), despite the prevalence of this discourse, and this highlighted a shared responsibility in the perpetuation of racist practices among joke tellers, listeners, and institutions of higher education.

After the election of President Obama, a number of commentators advanced the idea that the US had become a "post-racial"* society. Around the time of the inauguration, Jonah Goldberg (2009) wrote an editorial for the *Los Angeles Times* speaking of how President Obama's election was a partial victory for conservatism. He argued that having a Black man in the White House is the ultimate symbol that the US is a "post-racial" society, and therefore, all race-conscious programs such as affirmative action can be eliminated. David Horowitz (2009) offered his own version of this sentiment, stating that for someone to argue that racism continues to structure US society "is impossible to square with the fact that we have an African American president who was elected by mainly non–African American voters."

Both of these authors are conservative activists who consistently disparage the "radical, leftist academy." However, even the magazine, *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* engaged the issue with the front-page headline "A post-racial society: Are we there yet?" (Lum, 2009). The scholars interviewed, with the exception of Dr. John McWhorter, tended to reject the notion of a "post-racial" society, and Dr. Troy Duster referred to it as "old wine in a new bottle" (p. 14). Regardless, the terminology is seeping into the popular discourse and is slowly taking the place of *color-blind*. This also means issues of race are reframed from minimally important (color-blind) to not important at all ("post-racial").

Within institutions of higher education, the racial dynamics of the larger society frequently play out on the college campus. In particular, White students tend to underestimate levels of campus racism and racial tension (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Initially, this research was undertaken to assess the following question: Where do White male college students see racism in their campus environment? During the course of interviews the prevalence of racial joking emerged as a recurring theme and therefore the research questions were modified as follows:

- Do the participants describe racial joking as a form of racism?
- Are racial minorities present when the jokes are told?

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* For this article, I will place "post-racial" in quotation marks because it is an accurate depiction of the verbiage used in popular discourse while also being divorced from contemporary realities where race issues and racism still exist.

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- If not, how do the participants explain this?

Thus, this research became a critical examination of White male college student racial joking and the environments in which it occurs.

Relevant Literature

This research is contextualized by Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), which seeks to uncover how racial stratification is perpetuated through the hegemony of Whiteness (Cabrera, 2009; Omi & Winant, 1994). *Hegemony of Whiteness* refers to the shift over the past 50 years where Whiteness changed from a symbol of superiority to one of normality, while still maintaining social dominance (Omi & Winant, 1994). In particular, CWS is dedicated to making the frequently invisible privileges of Whiteness visible while critically analyzing systemic racism (e.g., Apple, 1998; Leonardo, 2009; Sullivan, 2006). Within higher education literature, analyses of Whiteness tend to center around racial identity (e.g., Evans et al., 2009) or ally development (e.g., Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). In addition, issues of race in higher education tend to be framed as either the marginalization of racial minorities (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2010) or the positive impacts enacting diverse learning environments has for all people (Jayakumar, 2008; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005).

Within this context, critical analyses of Whiteness are generally divorced from higher education scholarship. There are some notable exceptions. Chesler, Peet, and Sevig (2003) explored the development of White students' racial awareness in college, finding their participants generally came from backgrounds separate from minorities, a pattern that continued through college. The participants' ahistorical and astructural interpretations of race allowed them to view Whites as victims

of "reverse racism," thereby entrenching the hegemony of Whiteness.

Picca and Feagin (2007) examined the "racial diaries" kept by White students wherein they described racial events that occurred in their everyday lives on campus. Picca and Feagin's analysis of these diaries uncovered a consistent trend: the behaviors of White college students were markedly different based upon the presence or absence of racial minorities. When racial minorities were present, White students tended to be more politically correct; and when they were absent, racial epithets were used with regularity including the n-word. The authors referred to this phenomenon as "two-faced racism," because they found persistent racist attitudes and actions, but this racism was largely "backstage performance" (i.e., in the absence of racial minorities).

Even within more racially progressive White circles, students continue to struggle with issues of racism. Trepagnier (2006) conducted 8 focus groups with 25 White female college students who considered themselves nonracist. The focus group interviews centered on the following question: How do well-meaning White people who care about this issue think and feel about racism? (p. 135). Her analysis highlighted how these racially well-intentioned students continued to hold both stereotypical views and paternalistic assumptions about people of color. These views were, in part, a function of minimal racial awareness as well as the absence of antiracist actions taken by the research participants. This process is what Sullivan (2006) refers to as the *unconscious habits of Whiteness*, and highlights how the intent to be racist is not a precondition for racist action.

In their review of campus racial climate literature, Harper and Hurtado (2007) highlighted the consistent prevalence of *White spaces* on college campuses (i.e., areas where Whiteness is the norm and students of color tend to have

difficulty finding cultural ownership). The prevalence of these spaces has a differential impact for students of color versus their White peers. For students of color, White spaces can create a sense of alienation or marginalization on college campuses (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). For White students, the prevalence of White spaces serves to mask the realities of contemporary racism (Cabrera, 2009; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Within White spaces, White students see few examples of contemporary racism (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reason & Evans, 2007), believe their experience to be normal (Chesler et al., 2003), which in turn, contextualizes their skepticism regarding the persistence of contemporary racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera, 2012a; Feagin & O'Brien, 2003; Leonardo, 2009).

Disrupting the normality of Whiteness therefore becomes an integral component of multicultural higher education. Peterson and Hamrick (2009) found that White men attending an historically Black university were not only more racially cognizant due to their localized minority status, but this awareness was also related to their being more aware of the systemic privileges afforded them by their race and gender. The difficulty in promoting racial cognizance among White students is why Ortiz and Rhoads (2000) argue that for college students to get beyond racism and account for racial privilege, it is necessary for them to engage in structured and intentional deconstructions of Whiteness. Due to the prevalence of White spaces in higher education campus environments (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), this aspiration is largely left unrealized.

The current literature on Whiteness is limited in two key ways. First, critical scholarship on Whiteness in higher education is very sparse, instead focusing on racial identity (e.g., Evans et al., 2009) or ally development (e.g., Reason et al., 2005). Rarely do these analyses consider what Whiteness in higher education means in terms of systemic racism. Second, and related to the first issue raised, CWS research has largely ignored analyses on college campuses, instead focusing on K-12 education (e.g., Gillborn, 2008; Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2013). Within this context, the current research begins to fill these gaps in the existing literature by adding a critical lens to Whiteness studies in higher education while offering a higher education orientation to CWS.

Theoretical Framework

This research was informed by O'Connor's (2002) expansion of Wittgensteinian analysis, focusing her critique on systems of oppression; something Wittgenstein never did (p. x). O'Connor's (2002) framework begins with "Wittgenstein's claim that the meaning of a word is in its use" (p. x). For O'Connor, this entails not only an examination of what a person says, but also the environment in which words are spoken. Instead of analyzing *person X said Y*, O'Connor analyzes meaning being mutually constructed through practice. As she asserts, "Meaning and social practices are fused. The meaning of words cannot be divorced from their context" (p. 70); thus, someone who makes a racist comment is culpable and so are those who either encourage the comment or allow it to remain unchallenged.

O'Connor (2002) argues that a key component of analyzing context is attending to the background within which language is used because "it enables us to understand the conditions for intelligibility and meaning for our practices" (p. 6). According to O'Connor, the background is an unspoken, unrecognized context in which intelligibility is constructed. This attention to the background is where O'Connor adapted Wittgensteinian theory to an analysis of oppression: "Oppressive practices are fused into the very framework of the background and are made invisible by their commonplace

nature" (p. 6). Thus, when a person makes a racist/sexist/homophobic comment, the background of White supremacy/patriarchy/heterosexism makes the speech intelligible.

An analysis of the background can be tricky when applied to systemic oppression because this can be misinterpreted to mean that everyone is guilty of everything (with the corollary being therefore no one is guilty of anything). Instead, O'Connor (2002) argues there are different degrees of responsibility within a context, but each party is responsible for his or her participation in oppressive practices. Thus, my research is a concurrent analysis of racial joke telling, racial joke listening, and the context and background in which the jokes were told as a means of understanding the "social practice of racism" on the college campus.

METHODOLOGY
Participants

I chose to study only White men for three reasons: (a) I wanted participants to match the gender of the interviewer to avoid gender-based power dynamics affecting the participants' narratives; (b) White men have the lowest levels of support for multiculturalism and racial equality (Astin, Oseguera, Sax, & Korn, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2006); and (c) coming from a position of racial hyper-privilege being both White and male (Cabrera, 2011), the participants hold disproportionate societal power to both re-create and challenge the existing racial structure (Feagin & O'Brien, 2003).

This analysis is part of a larger project examining White male student racial ideologies and the college experiences that affect their formation. This led to some important considerations regarding recruitment strategies. First, I lacked funds to recruit research participants. Second, I did not simply want to interview those students with the

most extreme racial ideologies, but rather, I wanted to hear from a range of perspectives. As racial ideology is highly correlated with political ideology (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000), I decided to purposefully recruit (Babbie, 2007) through student organizations that had either an explicit or implicit political orientation.

I identified 10 student organizations politically ranging from far left to far right. I then e-mailed the leadership of these organizations to request recruiting in person at their weekly meetings. All leaders agreed, and this strategy yielded 22 interviews at Western University (WU, a pseudonym) with representation in the following, self-described political orientations: Objectivist, Libertarian, Republican, Centrist, Democrat, Leftist, and Socialist. I replicated this process at Southwestern University (SWU, a pseudonym), yielding 21 interviews with participants from these self-described political orientations: Libertarian, Conservative, Centrist, Liberal, Democrat, Progressive, and Leftist. I chose SWU and WU, both public research institutions, because they differed in three key ways: selectivity, compositional diversity, and the practice of affirmative action. At the time of the interviews SWU accepted about 80% of all applicants with an enrollment that was 65% White, and practiced affirmative action. WU conversely, accepted only 20% of applicants, was 35% White, and could not practice affirmative action due to a state proposition.

I based my semi-structured interview protocol on the 1997 Detroit Area Study (DAS), which investigated racial attitudes and ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). For the full DAS protocol, see the appendix in the second edition of Bonilla-Silva's (2006) *Racism Without Racists.* I modified the DAS both to reduce the number of questions and to focus on issues of racism on the college

campus. Interviews lasted 30–75 minutes, were transcribed verbatim, and all names were replaced with pseudonyms. Among these 43 interviews there were two distinct groups of students: those who were oblivious to their racial privileges and those who challenged them. So, I divided the interviews into two sections: students *working through Whiteness* and those *normalizing Whiteness*. Those working through Whiteness (*n* = 15; 7 at WU and 8 at SWU) were identified through their: (a) systemic understandings of racism, (b) auto-criticism of racial bias, and (c) support for race-conscious policies. All others (*n* = 28; 15 at WU and 13 at SWU) were normalizing Whiteness and they tended to: (a) see racism as an individual defect as opposed to a systemic reality, (b) frame racism as largely a relic of the past, and (c) see themselves as not racist. The participants who normalized Whiteness are the focus of this study because the pattern of racial joke telling was present only in this subsample.

Analysis

I initially wanted to conduct a cross-site analysis thinking the racial practices of White men at two universities with substantially different levels of compositional diversity and selectivity would differ; however, the narratives across the institutional sites were more similar than different, so I discarded this component of the analysis. Instead, I employed a constant comparative technique (Glaser, 1965) as a means of identifying the process that facilitates White male college student's racial joking. The constant comparative analysis is a structured means of conducting grounded theory that involves: (a) comparing incidents applicable to each category; (b) integrating categories and their properties; (c) delimiting the theory; and (d) writing the theory (p. 439).

Constant comparative analysis is an iterative process that involves "coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents coded in the same category" (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). While generating themes from the text, I conducted three levels of coding. First, I started by *open coding*: reading all transcripts and coding on a line-by-line basis staying rooted in the data. I then conducted *axial coding* where I took the open codes and grouped them into more abstract and complex categories. Finally, I utilized *selective coding*: "selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116; quoted in Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2006, p. 45). This is the stage where theory is developed, tested against transcript data, refined, and established.

Within constant comparative analysis, theory building derives from inductive reasoning applied to the data that is ideally devoid of a priori assumptions. Rather than follow this method precisely, I took similar liberties to those utilized by Kezar (1996). I could not start analyzing the data for this project without any theoretical assumptions, and I think this is justified regarding the nature of the contemporary racism. If racial theorists are correct that the privileges of Whiteness are frequently invisible to the beneficiaries of the system (Feagin & O'Brien, 2003; McIntosh, 1989; Omi & Winant, 1994), I cannot absolutely rely upon their personal testimonies as the basis for my analysis as this would justify the racial status quo. Conversely, if I were to take a completely critical view of the participants' narratives, I would run the risk of being dismissive of their views. I struck a balance between being rooted in the data while not completely neglecting existing theories of systemic racism. This meant in practice using the constant comparative method to organize and analyze racial joking patterns; however, I needed to rely upon

contemporary racial theory to critically examine the background context that made the participants' narratives intelligible (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; O'Connor, 2002).

Validity

I relied upon the guidance of Creswell and Miller (2000) in establishing the validity of the coding, analysis, and interpretations of the transcript data. Creswell and Miller argue that first the analyst needs to explicitly articulate the paradigm from which she or he is interpreting the data, which in this case derives from a critical, specifically CWS perspective. They then suggest that the analyst rely upon multiple people to verify the validity of the coding scheme and subsequent analytical interpretations. This is ideally conducted by member checks, but after 14 participants were nonresponsive to my requests, I abandoned this approach to establishing validity. Retrospectively, I am not sure if member checking would have been an effective means of establishing validity, because this analysis identified racist practices or beliefs and no one wants to think of himself as being racist.

Instead, I relied upon a reviewer not affiliated, but familiar with, the project to assess how accurately the data (transcripts, interview notes, reflection papers, and coding memos) matched the coding scheme given the paradigmatic assumptions guiding the study. Continuing to follow the Creswell and Miller (2000) method, specific questions directed to the external reviewer included: "Are the findings grounded in the data? Are inferences logical? Is the category structure appropriate? Can inquiry decisions and methodological shifts be justified? What is the degree of researcher bias?" (p. 128). At the multiple stages of the coding and write-up processes, the reviewer offered reflections on the aforementioned questions, which led to a dialogue regarding how to address instances where the analysis strayed from the data. Of particular interest was using the aforementioned multiple sources of data available as a basis of data triangulation. Thus, through both triangulation and the use of an external reviewer, I thereby considered and established validity in the research process.

Researcher Orientation

Being half White and primarily identifying as Chicano, I faced some methodological pitfalls as a researcher studying the issue of Whiteness in higher education. Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that political correctness frequently masks White people's "true racial feelings," especially in the presence of people of color (i.e., that racist attitudes persist, but they are largely driven underground). Within this context, I racially self-identified at the beginning of each interview, thinking this would elicit more restrained and even politically correct responses to my questions.

After hearing raised-voice responses and profanity to my questions, such as "it just f—-ing sucks that [race] is even an issue" (Jeremy, WU), I questioned how reserved the participants were being. To address this issue, I began to conclude interviews by asking the participant how much he thought about my racial background during the course of the interview. Almost uniformly, they responded they either forgot about it or it slipped into the background. This was, in part, a function of my being light-skinned and speaking with a standard American English accent, whereby I sometimes pass as White. In addition, my role as researcher was to hear the participants views whether or not I agreed with them; therefore, this was an unusual cross-racial interaction where the participants frequently forgot my racial background and were even aware that there was very little possibility the interview would turn uncomfortable for them. Thus, my phenotypic and linguistic ambiguity afforded

me access to these students, access many researchers of color would not have enjoyed because of their skin color.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the transcript data highlighted the following interrelated emergent themes: the prevalence of racial joking, but framed as nonracist; telling racial jokes in the absence of racial minorities; and the rationalization of these practices by claiming that minorities are racially too sensitive.

"Dude, It's Just a Joke"

I asked participants in this study to identify instances of racism on their respective college campuses, and the most common example by far was racial joking. Within their racially homogenous college sub-environments, the participants reported both hearing and telling jokes about race on a consistent basis (e.g., "Q: Why can't Stevie Wonder read?, A: Because he's Black."), but they rarely found it problematic ("Dude, it's just a joke."). They frequently discussed incidents where they or their peers told racial jokes, then explained why the incidents were not racist. For example, Jeremy (WU) said, "Evidence of racism here on campus? People . . . I've noticed say it [the n-word] lightheartedly, so in like a joking manner." Jeremy had difficulty labeling these statements as racist, in part because of the joking manner in which the epithet was said. I explored this further by asking, "Do they say [the n-word] in front of Black people?" Jeremy responded, "No. It's not like . . . they would never. The people I know and I'm talking about would never, and they're not . . . they're open-minded people, they're not prejudiced in that sense." Jeremy understood racism as a hatred of racial minorities. His friends did not fit this profile, so he did not label them racist ("they're open-minded people"). For Jeremy,

it was a joke and therefore relatively harmless.

Numerous others described hearing racial jokes while on campus, but they consistently framed the jokes as both funny and not racist:

> I mean, I've heard racist jokes and things like that on campus, but nothing like kind of, you know, really racist. (Kevin, SWU)

> I would say, yeah, with the intention of hurting somebody. I mean, I really don't intend to hurt somebody, sometimes [the jokes are] just funny. (Jack, SWU)

> I mean, I've seen people make interracial jokes, but that's just "Ha-ha." (Ken, SWU)

For many of the participants, racial jokes were the only racial incidents they saw on campus, but they tended to frame them as not intentionally hurtful, not racist, and simply humorous The participants described racial jokes more objectively ("the jokes are funny") rather than from a subjective position ("I find them funny"). I probed these assertions by asking why the jokes are funny, and the responses tended to almost repeat their initial statements. For example, Jack responded, "I don't know, they just are." For Jack no further explanation was needed, a questionable assertion on his part, because like Jeremy, he said racial jokes were rarely told in front of members of the race at the butt of the joke. Adam (WU) discussed this process:

> [Racial joking] probably happens more without the [racial] group present . . . I don't know [why], I think that when it happens, there's still the . . . it's done with a certain level of confidence it won't be misconstrued, but there's still the possibility, so I think you just feel . . . a person feels safer knowing that it can't be misconstrued versus having the person there and it could be.

According to Adam, racial minorities misconstrue issues, and thus it is socially accep-

table for Whites to tell racial jokes behind their backs. Adam saw nothing wrong with racial joking, and he later explained that in his understanding, only political correctness made it improper for him to tell these jokes in mixed company.

This apprehension of political correctness was strong during some of these interviews, because they occurred in the aftermath of the Don Imus controversy. On Don Imus's radio program he was talking about the Rutgers women's basketball team and referred to this group of Black women as "nappy-headed hos." A number of interviewees described how this event was not racist, but Bernard (SWU) was the most outspoken on the issue:

> Well, what's . . . Don Imus? . . . There's always things in the media where people make comments that aren't explicitly racist, but then someone interprets it, when it's obviously up for debate whether it's racist or not, and they get punished for it or they're censured.

Bernard felt the term Don Imus used was not racist because it referred to hair texture, but he was primarily offended that someone could be "censured" over something that he viewed as not racist. Bernard later blamed the "liberal media" and Al Sharpton for making a mountain out of a racial molehill, arguing they make money by stirring up controversy. He then argued that on Imus's show, this kind of behavior was expected:

> Well, I mean, he was generally describing them and he sort of . . . in the context of his show, he's sort of grumpy and he's also sort of a comedian, and so he wasn't . . . I mean, he wasn't explicitly talking about their race.

Bernard used the combination of context and content to argue that Don Imus's remarks were not racist. The question he could not answer during the interview, however, was, How racially offensive do remarks have to be for

them to be racist? He did not have a specific answer, but said he would know it when he heard it. Additionally, the assertion that these jokes are harmless is questionable. Participants consistently stated that racial jokes were told without the minority group present. If the jokes were really innocuous, why would the participants not tell them in front of racial minorities? One possible answer lies in the participants' beliefs that racial minorities are overly sensitive on issues of race.

Minorities are Overly Sensitive

Closely related to the theme of racial joking in ostensibly White spaces, participants argued that racial minorities tend to see racism where none exists. Sometimes this directly related to questions of racial joking (e.g., believing that among White students the jokes would not be misconstrued). Other times, this was a general belief regarding issues of race. Regardless, both themes (racial joking and minority sensitivity) were strongly present in the participants' narratives, even when they were not explicitly related to each other. For example, Lance (WU) did not see racism in his experiences, and therefore he argued that those seeing racism are actually being irrational:

> [Racial minorities] claiming that they don't feel welcomed by Whites in college, I think that's again like seeing racists and race [issues] just everywhere. They can only think in terms of like race, and so they draw these incorrect inferences. . . . [My minority friends] don't see racism everywhere they turn, so my impression is that [claims of racism are] highly exaggerated, if not blatantly false.

Lance personally saw little evidence of racism in his everyday life, his minority friends saw little evidence of racism, and therefore in Lance's understanding, there must be something wrong with people who do.

Many others offered similar sentiments.

Derek (SWU) was succinct in his assessment of claims of racism: "Minorities do play the race card and they are overly sensitive in some issues." Roger (WU) gave his own version of this same theme: "Like sometimes people . . . people see things in situations that aren't there." Robert (WU) offered an example from his father's business. His father fired a person who then sued claiming racial discrimination, which Robert thought was absurd. He argued: "Sometimes you hear about people not getting jobs, and they immediately assume it's, uh, because of their ethnic background." Robert, Roger, and Derek all tended to cast doubt on claims of racism by arguing that minorities are too racially sensitive.

Some participants had theories explaining how in their minds minorities saw racism when they personally did not. For example, Kurt (SWU) made an analogy between seeing racism and the road game slug bug (or punch buggy, where a rider who first spots a Volkswagen gets to punch another rider in the arm): "It's kind of like the Volkswagen Bug effect, you know, [when] you're looking for them . . . you're looking for certain things, and you start seeing them a lot more often than you would ordinarily." Kurt understood the phenomenon that when people are looking for something (VW Beatles), they tend to see them everywhere and he likened this to racism (i.e., if one wants to find racism, she or he will see it).

Others viewed higher education as playing a role in developing and fostering heightened racial sensitivity and a sense of victimization among racial minorities:

> And, and I think that a lot of the dialogue that you get in, you know, Ethnic Studies departments is all about this historical narrative that has oppressed people, et cetera. People really internalize that, and then they feel like they're always being oppressed. (Trevor, SWU)

This belief was contextualized within a number of tense cross-racial interactions Trevor had on campus. He thought Ethnic Studies, in part, might be responsible for promoting racial antagonism where, in his view, none previously existed.

Martin (SWU) took a different approach to this subject. He expressed concern regarding how people "playing the race card" undercut the legitimacy of actual instances of racism:

> I fear for minorities that too many people can be opportunistic like that, just like with anything else, the second you can levy agreements, you can, and people that kind of ruin it for other people I kind of suspect.

In Martin's interview, he was generally suspect of claims of racism, but in his mind, it was racial minorities crying wolf who ruined it for the few with legitimate grievances. This belief, like others in the participant narratives, was contextualized within an ideological orientation where race and racism are seen as having minimal contemporary importance. These beliefs then allowed the participants to frame racial joking as rather innocuous, and therefore, if there were a problem, it was primarily due to minority sensitivity.

DISCUSSION

The theme of racial joking was an unexpected component of these interviews, but emerged as the most common example of racism the participants identified. They also described a very consistent pattern of behavior and rationalization related to this joking. The participants tended to tell and hear racial jokes in racially homogenous, White environments where they did not find this problematic. Instead, they tended to argue that racial minorities are too sensitive regarding race to find the jokes amusing, thereby justifying the telling of these jokes behind closed doors.

The framing of minority sensitivity was very interesting. Returning to Kurt's (SWU) slug bug analogy, he argued that people who are playing the game tend to be more aware of vehicles on the road than those who are not playing. He inadvertently offered a substantial critique of his own worldview through this analogy. Whether or not a person is aware of VW vehicles, they still exist on the road. Kurt saw little evidence of racism, did not believe racism was a significant social problem, and therefore in his understanding, racial minorities who talk about racism were seeing something that is not there. An alternative explanation is that racism exists, but Kurt's White privilege allows him to ignore it. Kurt, like most of the other participants, additionally enacted part of his White privilege to determine what constitutes reality (i.e., that racism does not exist), thereby framing those who see racism as viewing a skewed version of reality.

Within these discussions, most of the participants framed racial jokes as harmless. Taken on the surface, this is generally true. One racial joke does not deny a person of color admissions to a university or subject a person to racial violence. Rather, the problem lies in the underlying ideologies and attitudes that make the joke funny. Jokes are a performative form of communication that requires a receptive audience (Picca & Feagin, 2007. Thus, racial jokes are only funny if people are laughing, and the salient question becomes: What makes these people laugh? In Jeremy's case, his peers used the n-word and laughed at its use, perhaps because if its shock value. But have they ever been the target of racial discrimination? Given the nature of the contemporary racial project of hegemonic Whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994), the answer is no. White people may be subject to a degree of racial bigotry, but they are not systematically disadvantaged due to their racial background (Tatum, 1992, 2003). Jeremy's peers played

with a term whose true negative meaning they can never experience, and thus, they find the shock value funny as opposed to offensive.

This is equally important given the emerging scholarship on racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010; Yosso et al., 2010). Sue (2010) defines *microaggressions* as "the brief and common place daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target a person or group" (p. 5). Racial joking can easily become a microaggression, and this is important in terms of students of color in higher education. Sue further argues that racial microaggressions actually take a greater psychological toll on minorities than overt racism because they are more prepared to deal with racial assaults that stem from the overt as opposed to the covert. Thus, racial joking is, from an empirical standpoint, not as innocuous as the participants in this research believed it to be.

The consistency of the participant narratives across political orientation was a surprising finding given the strong relationship between racial and political ideology (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sniderman et al., 2000). This could highlight a tension in the way that scholars measure and assess racial ideology. My decision to purposefully sample from a range of political orientations relied on survey-based scholarship in political science and psychology. Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that this methodological approach tries to assess participant intention and has too many normative cues that push participants toward politically correct answers. Instead, he argues that intention is irrelevant to discussions of racism, and scholars need to analyze racial ideology as largely unconscious habits in relation to the larger structure of White supremacy (p. 54). The participants

in this study were largely immersed in White spaces where their racial views were perceived as normal and viewed as unproblematic. Therefore, it makes sense that their narratives regarding racial joking were generally consistent across political ideologies.

Returning to the theoretical framework outlined in *Oppression and Responsibility* (O'Connor, 2002), there is much more going on than simply students telling inappropriate jokes. From an environmental perspective, they are able to exist in racially homogenous, White environments where they are immune to criticism from racial minorities. It is primarily within these environments and among peers whom they considered to be like-minded people (i.e., those who would not misconstrue

racist racial jokes) that the participants would tell such jokes. These environmental conditions also highlight an institutional issue: compositional diversity alone is insufficient to disrupt campus balkanization. WU was approximately 35% White, while SWU was 65%, yet on both campuses these White students were able to self-segregate.

Within these White enclaves, both the joke tellers and listeners share responsibility for their respective roles in creating racist social practices. The participants in this study usually described how one of their friends told a joke, but within O'Connor's (2002) framework, those who are laughing at the racist jokes are also complicit in the reification of White supremacy via the tacit approval of racial
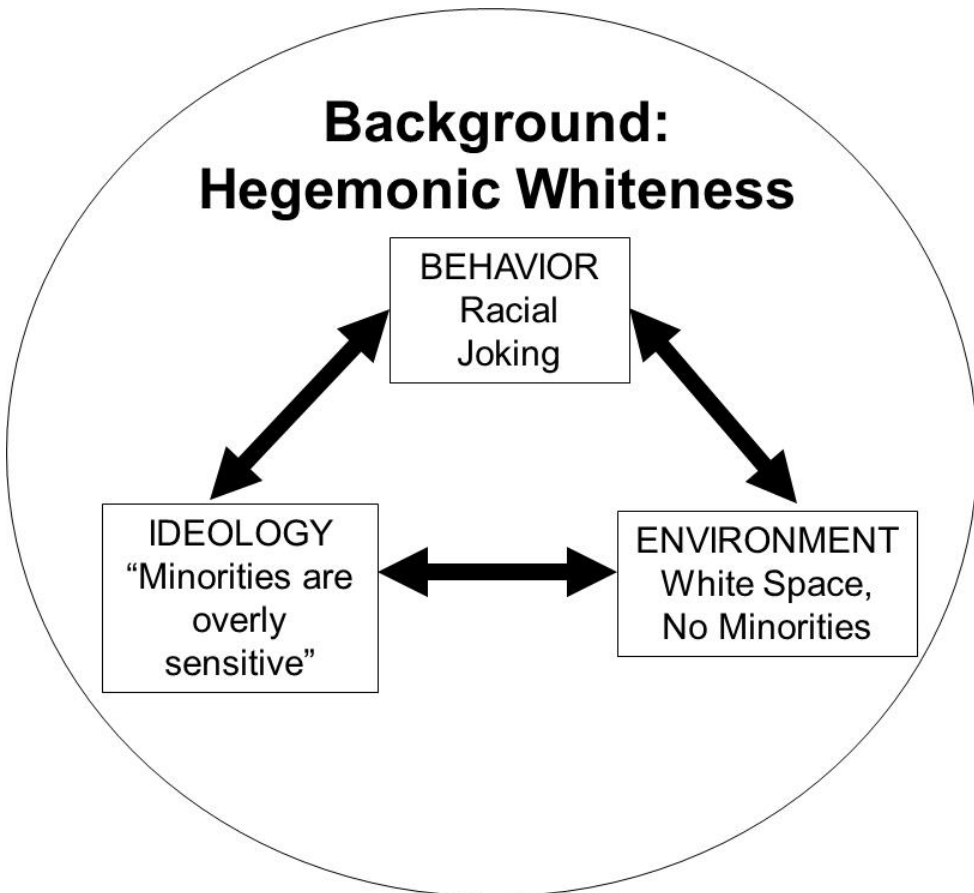

FIGURE 1. The Cycle of Rationalization

joke telling. Probing deeper, the underlying question becomes: What is the background context that makes these narratives intelligible?

The participant narratives in this research tended to rely upon a context where Whiteness is normal, or hegemonic, and the voices and experiences of people of color that contradict this reality are framed as irrational or opportunistic (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera, 2009; Omi & Winant, 1994). This background served as the context for mutually reinforcing behaviors, ideologies, and environmental conditions that function like Harro's (2000) *cycle of socialization*, but this is more a *cycle of rationalization* (see Figure 1).

Within this context, the background of hegemonic Whiteness creates the condition that normalizes the experiences and views of White people. This, in turn, allows for racial joke telling and White racial enclaves to be framed as innocuous and nonracist. These behaviors (joke telling) and environments (White space) are contextualized within an ideological orientation that blames minorities for injecting race into nonracial situations (minority sensitivity). These four mutually reinforcing spheres (background, behavior, ideology, and environment) created a cyclical logic whereby the participants believed there was no racism or minimal racism in contemporary society, because they saw none in their experiences. They saw no racism, they believed, because none existed. Noticeably unexamined by the participants was the role their Whiteness played in the formation of these views.

Despite the engrained nature of these social practices, there is also possibility. As O'Connor (2002) argues, "It is extremely important for people to have intentions and interpretations of words and actions that are rebellious and undermine the dominant social practices" (p. 74). This requires a great deal of work to reach the point where

White male undergraduates will even see racism as a problem (Reason & Evans, 2007). Many are unconsciously embedded within racially homogenous friendship groups where they see few signs of racial tension, which in turn signals that racism is of minimal importance (Cabrera, 2012a; Chesler et al., 2003). It is only when they see racism as a pertinent issue that privileges White people at the expense of students of color, that they can begin to struggle against it (Reason & Evans, 2007). There is no silver bullet in promoting this development, and it is made increasingly difficult as Mills (1997) describes *whiteness* as an Epistemology of Ignorance. Therefore, the first step in disrupting these racist social practices becomes disrupting the epistemology of ignorance that allows White males to frame racist actions as innocuous (Reason & Evans, 2007).

Student affairs practitioners can take a number of steps to help students work through Whiteness (Cabrera, 2012b). There needs to be structured opportunities for White men to both deconstruct what it means to be White (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000) and dialogue across racial difference (Zuñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). It is especially important that these programs be either required or heavily supported by the institution, because White students rarely self-initiate ally development (Cabrera, 2012b; Reason et al., 2005). Within the programs themselves, student affairs practitioners need to develop strategies to help students understand three fundamental issues: (a) racism is still prevalent in contemporary society; (b) intent does not matter in racism (i.e., one does not have to intend to be racist); and (c) White men who allow racist practices to occur in their presence are also culpable (i.e., "racist listening" is still racism). Student affairs professionals also need to be cognizant of how White males frame racial issues and to be able to reframe them in a way that engenders more

personal ownership of the viewpoints. For example, a simple redirect can be from "racism doesn't exist" to "I don't think racism exists." This requires White men to take responsibility for their opinions, views, and values.

If student affairs professionals are able to help White men see racial joking as problematic, they additionally need to prepare them to take action. Specifically, this entails preparing them to not laugh at racial joking even though it might be socially desirable to do so, while also dialoguing with them about strategic ways to challenge racist joke tellers and listeners (Picca & Feagin, 2007; Zuñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). For one example of how to engage those who tell racial jokes, I refer readers to the critical Socratic guidance provided by Tim Wise in *White Like Me* (2008, p. 103). These approaches to racial joking require a great deal of forethought and some fortitude, but as Feagin and O'Brien (2003) argue, "Weighing one person's modest discomfort against another person's often substantial pain and agony [from racism], and finding the former more important, sends a troubling message about the latter's worth as a person" (p. 188).

For student affairs professionals helping men work through Whiteness (Cabrera, 2012b), I offer the cautionary note of Apple (1998): there is a common trap where discussions of Whiteness can re-center racial dialogues away from the experiences of students of color, inadvertently recreating the very racial dynamics these discussions are supposed to combat. Therefore, critical interrogations of Whiteness are necessary to help White men work through their racial issues (Zuñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002), but a balance is needed where White men do not dominate the conversation.

I identified a *cycle of rationalization* within a sample of 29 White male undergraduates. Future research needs to explore if the same model holds for women, low-income, disabled, or LGBTQ White students. Does having one marginalized social identity (gender, class, ability, or sexual orientation) coupled with a privileged one (Whiteness) lead to a different engagement with racial joking? Some preliminary studies indicate that this would be the case (e.g., Cabrera, 2012b; Reason et al., 2005), but there is more empirical work needed before this can be a generalizable statement. In addition, WU and SWU were two specific institutional sites that differed in selectivity and compositional diversity (WU: high selectivity/high racial diversity; SWU: low selectivity/low diversity). Future research should consider whether this cycle exists in an institutional context of high selectivity/low diversity, or low selectivity/high diversity.

CONCLUSION

I collected the majority of these interviews when President Obama was campaigning before his first election, and just before the emergence of the "post-racial" discourse. It is possible, although unlikely, that with President Obama's election these racist practices completely fell out of favor. It is more likely that these jokes continue to be told, and the "post-racial" discourse further entrenches their persistence. If the discourse switched from one of color-blindness (i.e., race is of minimal importance, Bonilla-Silva, 2006), , to one of "post-racialism" (i.e., race does not matter at all), then those working with White male college students will have an additional barrier to even talking about issues of race. This challenge makes the work more relevant and necessary. Having a Black (technically biracial) President is an important symbol of racial progress in the US; however, it should not become an excuse for complacency (Cabrera, 2009).

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