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Whitewashed America: An Exploration of Identity in American College Students

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Abstract

Whiteness in America is often represented and experienced as a norm. The normalization of whiteness both perpetuates the marginalization of racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., and also enables white Americans to leave their own racial and ethnic identities unexamined. This study explores the question of whether and how white American college students perceive connections among their racial, ethnic, and national identities. A series of in depth interviews explores how students understand various aspects of their identities such as racial, ethnic, national, and religious, and which of these identities, may be seen as connected or overlapping. Analysis using a grounded theory approach reveals themes of Protestant Christianity as a norm, whiteness as both invisible and privileged, and the collegiate experience as significant in forming understandings of race and identity.

1. Introduction

This research builds upon the existing body of literature on white racial identity in the United States. Specifically, it examines white American college students and how they conceptualize their racial, ethnic, and national identities. Because whiteness has been shown to be often understood or experienced as an American norm, it is expected that students may consciously or subconsciously perceive a connection between these two components of their identity. Analysis of a series of in depth interviews with fifteen undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina Asheville illuminates various themes regarding how these students conceptualize, experience, and articulate their understandings of their identities.

White Americans occupy a status of dominance and privilege. In the effort to dismantle social systems of inequality, it is imperative that powerful majorities do not go unexamined. This study reveals that the students interviewed often left their master statuses fairly unexamined and categorized their cultural identities and habits as normal or standard. While this may not appear to be active oppression, the lack of examination of privileged identities may perpetuate ideas of social norms that act to exclude and marginalize any identity that falls outside of that perceived norm. This set of interview data not only reveals if and how these students think about connections between their racial, ethnic, and national identities; it also provides examples of a several factors that may impact this consideration and examination of identity such as the college experience and an intersectional approach to understanding personal identity. The themes apparent in this study support past research while providing original insight into the individual identities of these particular students and acting as a potential springboard for further research in the area of white racial identity in an American context.

2. Literature Review

The following research investigates identity construction in white American college students. It explores the ways these students understand their racial, ethnic, and national identities, and any overlap between the three. While race, ethnicity, and nationality are three separate components of an individual's identity, they never happen in isolation[29]. These facets of individual and group identity are often intertwined in ways that impact an individual's social location. Awareness of one's social location is important for purposes of understanding socio-political implications on systemic levels that also impact people's daily lives. A strong sense of identity also positively impacts a person's well-being. Research shows that higher reports of identity confusion correlate with low levels of self-esteem, internal locus of control, life satisfaction, and other measurements of personal well-being[13]. This particular research will look at how white American college students from various backgrounds understand, construct, and maintain their sense of racial and ethnic identity, and how they perceive the connection between these identities and their national identity.

In this study racial, ethnic, and national identities are conceptualized as three separate entities that inform and impact one another. Ethnic identities, while often considered in conjunction with racial identities, have to do with a sense of belonging to a group based both on place of origin and culture[9]. Aspects of culture such as language, food, religion, values, customs, and traditions all impact a person's ethnic identity. National identity is similar to ethnic identity, but may not directly correlate with place of origin as in the case of immigrants or transnational adoptees. National identity is about the country one claims as their home, whether that is the place of their birth, the place of their parents' birth, the place where they were raised for a majority of their formative years, or simply where they live now. National identity has been defined in terms of civic engagement within a political state and assimilation with socio-cultural structures and norms within the border of that state[7]. Racial identity is associated with social meanings attached to physical differences. As opposed to ethnic identity, which is personal and social within a particular group, racial identity is assigned by society based on appearance. Race is a socially constructed category, and as such it has real social implications that may vary in meaning across time and social structures[2]. The following body of research examines various components and implications of racial, ethnic, and national identity and in some cases highlights points of overlap between the three. In order to better understand the identity of white American college students, it is important to have an understanding of the current state of racial identity and whiteness in America.

Ruth Frankenberg's qualitative interviews with 30 American women show that for many whites, their specific cultural identity is ambiguous and difficult to describe[6]. Throughout the women's discourse about culture and racial identity, whiteness began to stand out as an "unmarked marker of others' differences" in other words, a norm by which all else was measured[6]. This normative labeling of white culture within an American context then led to the synonymous perception of white and American culture. As Frankenberg puts it, "the link between whiteness, Americanness, and power are accurate because, as we have seen, the terms 'white' and 'American' both function discursively to exclude people from normativity"[6]. This perception of whiteness as the American norm is an obvious connection between racial and national identity. This study also alludes to a connection between normative status and powerful status. White Americans struggle to define their racial and ethnic identity because in many social locations in America, whiteness is perceived as the norm. The culture of an ethnic majority often goes unnoticed due to the fact that it is the majority[9]. While this may cause some identity confusion for white Americans, it also means that whiteness may be used to either include or exclude individuals from powerful or even valid status as Americans. Other research on American national identity using national survey data has found that religion is used in addition to race in an exclusionary manner[7]. Not only has whiteness been found to be used in definitions of American identity, but Christianity has also been used to describe the nation's identity. If socialization teaches Americans that a white Christian is a normal American, then this image may be used as a mechanism of othering anyone who does not fit this definition.

While socialization helps us define who we are, it also can inform who we are not. As Berger and Luckmann put it, "The formation within consciousness of the generalized other marks a decisive phase in socialization"[1]. The dominant status of whiteness relies on the generalized otherness of non white people. Berger and Luckmann argue that primary socialization is complete when the generalized other is established[1]. The perception articulated so precisely in Frankenberg's research that white and American culture are synonymous is a way of socializing white Americans to understand Americans of color as the generalized other, and this may lead to further marginalization of people of color in this country.

Survey data from the American Mosaic Project also shows a connection between the conception of American and white identities. The survey discusses American identity in terms of culture and values, terms that are often associated with ethnic identity. For example, the survey uses phrases like, "Economic opportunities are a fundamental value in America. The protestant ethic, hard work and individualism are traditional American values"[5]. Survey participants

identified these values as being important in a meaningful American identity. The salience of white racial identity varied among respondents, and Croll's research aims to understand what factors contribute to strength of white identity. Analysis of the survey data points to regional location with the United States and educational levels as having the highest correlation with increase of white racial identity. Ultimately, "The strongest white racial identities are found in less educated whites living in the South"[5]. Heath Pearson's ethnographic work in Huntington Indiana also emphasizes the importance of considering region when seeking to understand how race is understood and experienced. Though the location for Pearson's study was chosen because of its representation of "Middle America"[12], whiteness in the United States cannot be boiled down into one generalized understanding or definition. It evolves across space and time and refuses a fixed appearance[12]. If race were categorically assigned by a society based on interpretation of physical differences, it would then follow that this assignment and perception of racial identity would vary across social and regional location throughout the United States. Thus, the composition of a social landscape impacts the way that we interpret and experience race[12].

While regional and social locations give nuance to the meanings and experiences attached to race, some general themes regarding whiteness in America have been brought to light through historical and social science research. Anthropologist Karen Brodkin asserts, "By the 1920s, scientific racism sanctified the notion that real Americans were white and real whites came from northwest Europe"[3]. This means that by the 20th century, people in America were classified as white not only by skin tone, but also by geographical origin. Brodkin uses the example of Jewish immigrants to illustrate the significant role of socioeconomic status in creating whiteness. Because many Jewish immigrants did not fall under the category of northwestern Europeans, they were often excluded from the social benefits of fitting within the dominant group's established norms, that is, being a white American. However, over the course of the twentieth century, American Jews gained upward social mobility through economic success. This achievement of middle class status enabled Jews to cross the blurry line of American Whiteness. Brodkin highlights the importance of the intersectional process of racial redefinition, "Although changing views on who was white made it easier for Euro-ethnics to become middle class, it was also the case that economic prosperity played a very powerful role in the whitening process"[3]. This example that Brodkin provides highlights both the social construction of race, specifically whiteness in America, and also the significant role that socioeconomic status can have on the interpretation and experience of race. More broadly, it demonstrates the way that one facet of social identity, such as SES, can impact the perception of another part of socially assigned identity, such as race.

Research has also demonstrated that white people often experience discomfort when discussing their race due to an awareness of white privilege and dominance[6, 11]. Many of the women interviewed by Ruth Frankenberg, "appeared to be self-conscious about white power and racial inequality. In part because of their sense of the links and parallels between white racial dominance in the United States"[6]. The history of slavery, Jim Crow, and current racial tension in the United States may make white Americans uncomfortable or even unwilling to discuss the implications of their white identity.

Some white Americans refuse to consider the power associated with their racial identity. Elizabeth Hassrick studies the way white Americans perpetuate their own privilege in the way they choose to engage with their ethnic heritage. She writes, "findings suggest that white people who engage with their ethnic heritage often romanticize the past or evade the complexities of race privilege in the present"[8]. If inequality remains under the table, whites can continue with their "normative" practices and disregard those who are different. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva presents the minimization of racism as a framework of colorblind racism, the phenomenon in which white people minimize the impacts of their own racial privilege by downplaying racial inequality all together[2]. This is obviously a dangerous framework, as it can lead to the further marginalization of minority groups.

Some whites however, explicitly incorporate their position within racial hierarchal systems, including white oppressiveness, in their conception of their racial identity[11]. The willingness to include negative aspects such as an oppressive status in one's identity is an intriguing phenomenon itself. What is also interesting is how individuals who include this element in their personal conception of their identity deal with its implications in their daily lives. Malott et al. discovered a theme of anti-racist efforts and identification as essential to positive self-conception in whites[11]. This anti-racism component in a person's identity may be one way of combatting negative effects of an oppressive identity. Further research may uncover other constructive methods of coping with the weight of a master status that holds a great deal of socio-political power and a history of dominance.

While some American whites explicitly choose to incorporate privilege into their identity, and others may make a conscious decision to ignore it, there are many implicit privileges of being white in America that genuinely go unnoticed by many. One of these privileges is the fact that white Americans can often simply decline to engage in conversations about race and ethnicity. The Early Child Longitudinal Study, a survey of American families with kindergarten aged children, found that non white parents were 1.9-4.7 times more likely to discuss race and ethnic heritage with their children than white parents[4]. This is evidence that white parents are either uncomfortable or

unwilling to discuss race with their children, or that they do not see any need to discuss these elements of personal and social identity. It also means that white children are both less likely to have open communication about race within their families and also less likely to have an understanding of their own ethnic identity than non white children.

Early childhood is certainly is a significant period of identity formation. It is a time when we as people are making sense of the social world and our place within it for the first time. There has been a great deal of sociological and psychological research on how and when children form their conceptions of race. Some may argue that this is the most formative time in a person's understanding of racial and ethnic identity. However, there is also a collection of research that points to the college experience as a significant time in a person's construction and understanding of identity. In a study comprised of in depth interviews with over 80 undergraduate students, researchers found that experiences both inside and outside of the college classroom caused students to think about identity in ways that were markedly different than they did prior to attending college[10]. While the study did not focus on issues of racial, ethnic, or national identity, the apparent impact that college had on other facets of student's identities demonstrates that elements of the college experience such as course content and interaction with fellow students from diverse backgrounds may facilitate a time of critically examining or rethinking one's racial, ethnic, and national identities as well. Studying college students' perceptions and understandings of these parts of personal identity and their social implications will add to this entire body of research that considers what it means to be white in America.

3. Methods and Data

This study consists of a series of in depth interviews with fifteen American undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina Asheville in Asheville, North Carolina. The University of North Carolina Asheville is a predominately white institution (PWI), and has a student population of about 3,900 students. Twelve of the students interviewed identified as white, while three identified as biracial. These three students identified themselves as both white and either black, Asian, or Latino. Nine women and six men were interviewed varying in year in school: five were seniors, nine were juniors, and one was a sophomore. Interviewees also came from a diverse range of majors with six being social science majors, six being STEM majors, and three having a major in the humanities. The interviews lasted an average of about twenty minutes each. Questions dealt with the students' understanding of their racial, ethnic, and national identities. In the context of this study, race, ethnicity, and nationality are conceptualized as three independent, but related aspects of individual identity. These components of identity have been previously defined and supported by literature in the literature review, but are conceptualized essentially as follows. Race refers to socially attributed meanings based on perceived physical differences. Ethnicity has to do with a sense of belonging in a group based on shared culture, values, and place of origin. National identity also deals with sense of belonging, but this is in regards to collective identity due to common citizenship. Race and ethnicity are easily associated as people belonging to one ethnic group are likely to also share a racial identity. Ethnic and national identity are similar in that they both are conceptualized as dealing with a sense of belonging to a group identity and often include place of origin as significant.

This series of interviews explores whether or not, and the extent to which, white American college students made an explicit connection between their racial and national identities. The questions in these interviews were phrased in ways that asked students to think of these identities in terms of cultural elements that were meaningful to them. Students were asked about values and traditions that were meaningful in the makeup of their individual identities. Questions were framed in terms of culture in hopes of discovering similarities and potential connections amongst the different components of identity. It was hypothesized that as the dominant race in the United States, white students may have many overlaps in the way they conceptualize their racial and ethnic identities and how they think about their national identities.

Several questions in the interview focused on variables of identity outside of race, ethnicity, and nationality. These variables included college major, sexual identity, and whether or not students identified as belonging to any particular faith tradition. These variables were chosen because they have the potential of impacting the way students think about their identity in unique ways. College is a significant time of growth, and college major, whether it is in natural science, social science, or the humanities, may have an effect on the extent to which and how students think about different aspects of identity. Sexual identity was considered because students who identify as anything outside of the heteronormative spectrum would have the possibility of considering and constructing at least part of their identity outside of social norms. Variation in faith was considered for its impact on values and traditions, which are core elements in the operationalization of culture. After asking questions about these variables, the interview transitioned to questions regarding racial, ethnic, and national identity. Key questions included:

- How often do you think about your race or your ethnicity?
- Could you give an example of a situation in which you think about your racial identity?
- Could you tell me about some values and traditions that have been passed down through your family?
- What is most meaningful to you about being an American?
- Do you feel that any of these parts of your identity that we've discussed are particularly connected to one another? And if so, how?

A complete interview guide is available upon request.

Snowball sampling strategy was used, with the initial sample consisting of four students who were selected based on known variation in year, gender, and major. From there each interviewee was asked to recommend two fellow students to be interviewed. Students were asked to participate in a discussion regarding their identity, culture, and heritage. Race was not explicitly included in the search for participants due to the literature that indicates either hesitancy or discomfort displayed by white Americans when asked to discuss race. Since the purpose of this study is to understand if and how white American college students think about the potential connection between their racial and national identity, it was considered best to facilitate a conversation in which the participants were as comfortable as possible in freely discussing their identity. Interviews were chosen as the method of data collection for the purpose of creating an open environment in which students could talk about whatever came to mind when they thought about their identity. The interviews also provided the opportunity to note not only what students volunteered as meaningful, but also to note any patterns in what students did not mention. Students were asked questions about racial, ethnic, and national identity, and then asked whether they felt that any aspects of identity discussed in the interview were connected to one another in any way. After coding for any explicit connections made between racial and national identity, the interviews were coded using a grounded theory approach. Transcripts were read through multiple times, and several recurring themes were chosen for analysis. Examples of recurring themes and corresponding example quotes can be found in Figure 1. A full codebook is available upon request.

Theme	**Representative Quote**
College as Pivotal	"My sociology classes help me realize just how much of a difference it makes, and just how important it is for it to be diverse. And I didn't start thinking about that critically until I got here."
Culture: Vague, Absent, or Unclear	"I kind of related to these articles that were talking about how whites don't have a culture, because the culture we have is so negative because it's capitalism and individualism so it's not culture, it's not ethnic, it's not about spices in your food or certain dances. So in that way if feels like we have a very blank culture or very white culture"
Privilege	"I think since, I came out or realized that I wasn't straight, I started really trying to look at different privileges that I had...So since I was about 16 I've tried to be really conscious of like that I was lucky to grow up in a middle class home and have all the things I needed, I was lucky to grow up as a white person so I didn't have to worry about racial profiling or anything like that, so I try to take that into account when I'm experiencing things."
Connections Between Racial and National Identity	"I think predominate American society favors whiteness and so I feel that as an American, as an upper middle class white male, those things are very much linked because that's sort of what's idealized in this society and

	so to embody the kind of social top as a tall white guy, I feel like those two things are kind of linked.”
Christianity as a Norm	"Not really any besides the typical ones, ya know, like Christmas and Easter. Not too many traditions, just the cut and dry standard package."

Figure 1. Sample of interview codebook

4. Findings

4.1 College as Pivotal in Consideration of Identity

Other than a preliminary question about college major, no question in the interview asked participants to describe their collegiate experience specifically. However, seven out of the fifteen participants spoke about college as being pivotal in their consideration of their racial identity. The fact that essentially half of the participants volunteered a common factor in their construction and understanding of their personal identity and social location is highly intriguing. It is also interesting to note that all three major classifications, Social Science, STEM, and Humanities, were represented among the students who indicated that their college experience was impactful in shaping their racial identity. Out of the seven, four were social science majors, two were STEM majors, and one was a humanities major. This diversity in major indicates that curriculum is not the only aspect of the collegiate experience that caused students to think about their racial identities in ways they had not thought about them previous to coming to college, though academics certainly do play a role. As one student said, “I was never really exposed to anything else until it kind of came across academically. I started taking a couple classes in the anthropology department and a couple classes in social psychology, which helped cultivate a better sense of understanding.”[22] Another student mentioned, "My sociology classes help me realize just how much of a difference it makes, and just how important it is for it to be diverse.”[21] Every student who participated in this study was an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina Asheville, which is the state’s designated public liberal arts institution. It is plausible that the liberal arts curriculum, which requires students from all majors to participate in humanities courses and to take at least one diversity intensive course, may be the reason why students from all majors discussed college having an impact on their racial identity. One student, a math major, brought up the humanities curriculum specifically saying, “Humanities has actually made me think about it [race] a lot."[26] This could be evidence of the effectiveness of a liberal arts curriculum, which requires all students to consider various topics from an interdisciplinary perspective through courses like UNC Asheville’s Humanities Program.

Aside from the curriculum, the college experience has other components that may impact how students think about race. The change in social landscape from a student’s high school experience to a college campus is in many cases a significant change that may cause a shift in patterns of thinking. Living on campus with students from various backgrounds, and participating in student organizations and other campus opportunities provide a wide range of unique experiences available to students. One student stated that, “"High school was very white, but now attending college I've become a little bit conscious of my whiteness.”[17] UNC Asheville is a PWI. However, this student’s comment is evidence that for students who grow up in highly homogenous areas with little to no racial or ethnic diversity, attending college, even a PWI, can be an experience that exposes them to racial and ethnic diversity that impacts how they think about their own racial identity. One student shared, "I used to not think about it [race] very much until I came to UNCA, and then I was flooded with all kinds of things about race and privilege... and I just started thinking about it a lot more."[23] This kind of experience can challenge a student’s perception of normal, or illuminate social issues they had not previously been aware of. For a white student who grows up as part of a racial majority in a very racially homogenous community, the implicit assumption that a white American is a “normal” American is constantly reinforced. Attending university and experiencing a shift in the racial diversity of the student’s immediate community may also cause a shift in how that student perceives their own racial identity.

4.2 The Struggle to See Culture

Many participants struggled to answer questions regarding cultural identity. When asked about traditions, values, and family heritage, students had a hard time articulating their answers. Eight out of the fifteen explicitly described feeling as though culture was absent from their families, experiences, or personal identities. Students said things like, “We

don't really have any like, cultural things that we do,"[14] or, "I'm not really sure. That's the thing culture in my family is just really not there."[26] Some students spoke about their culture as insignificant, because it did not set them apart from the "standard." For example, "There's not too much in the way of values and traditions that I feel separate us from a standard middle class family in America,"[18] or, "Not really any besides the typical ones, ya know, like Christmas and Easter. Not too many traditions, just the cut and dry standard package."[15] This indicates that because these students perceived themselves and their families as compliant with a "standard middle class family in America" they did not feel that their cultural identities were worth examining. Or perhaps they simply didn't know how to consider their cultural identities. This data supports previous research that also evidences that white Americans often struggle to define and discuss their own culture.

This last quote in which the student describes his family tradition of celebrating Christmas and Easter as "just the cut and dry standard package" is representative of a theme that came up in several of the interviews. Five out of the fifteen students made remarks that alluded to Christianity, and in some cases Protestantism specifically, as a cultural norm. One student, when asked to describe her religious background, responded, "I came from a small white protestant town, and so I kind of thought I was Christian. But I never went to church. I thought I was Christian because everyone... like that was the default."[25] This student connected the "default" setting of Protestant Christian to the small town in which she grew up. However, other students made remarks that referred to Christianity as a cultural norm more broadly, referring to "traditional holidays like Christmas and Easter"[18] without specifying that these holidays are traditions originating from a specific faith. One student noted the separation of these Christian holidays from the Christian religion itself saying, "Both of my parents care about Christmas, not like because of Jesus, but like as a tradition, a cultural thing and the same thing with Easter."[23] These comments all demonstrate that in these students' perceptions of culture within the United States, Christianity, like whiteness, is taken for granted as a social norm.

While some students spoke about either the absence or the "normalness" of their culture, other students described their culture more negatively. One student shared that, "If I was asked to define white culture, I wouldn't know what to say. I would be tempted to say it's a negation of other things. Like it's not this, and it's not that. Which is really uneasy."[17] This comment is almost a reverse of, but not in disagreement with, a theory articulated by Frankenberg in which she describes whiteness as, "an unmarked marker of others' differences"[6]. Whereas Frankenberg describes whiteness as a standard used to mark differences, this student used "other things" to define whiteness by highlighting what whiteness is not. Even in this ambiguity, whiteness serves as a mechanism of othering in this comment. Another student described whiteness as lacking in comparison thus,

> "I kind of related to these articles that were talking about how whites don't have a culture, because the culture we have is so negative, because it's capitalism and individualism. So it's not culture. It's not ethnic; it's not about spices in your food or certain dances. So in that way it feels like we have a very blank culture or very white culture."[12]

First, it should be noted that this student was talking about white culture in an American context. Though the student did not clarify that the negative white culture being described was specifically American white culture, this can be assumed based on the student's nationality, location, and the use of capitalism and individualism, both of which are often used to describe American culture as a whole. The absence of this clarification is almost an implicit connection between white and American culture. The student then goes on to talk about ethnicity and culture as related to food and dance. Ethnic identity is very closely related to cultural identity, and it seems that this particular student along with many other participants felt an absence of cultural and ethnic identity. This lack of cultural or ethnic identity seemed to come from an inability to identify any traditions, rituals, values, or any other marker of culture that either grounded the individual, or set them apart.

4.3 Privilege, Normalcy, and Intersectionality

A significant portion, eight out of the fifteen participants, included privilege in their descriptions of how they think about their racial identities. Privilege manifested and was described in various ways. Several students mentioned that they did not think about their race very much. One student connected this to privilege saying, "I don't have to think about my race at all really because I know that the world is kind of aligned in a way that will benefit me and so I don't have to worry about it."[21] This student's comment acknowledged that not having to think about race is indicative of a privileged racial status. Another student connected a white person's privilege of not having to think about race to the demographic of one's immediate community. After describing growing up in a very racially homogenous, white community, a follow up question was asked about whether that experience impacted how the student thought about her own racial identity. The student answered, "I mean I just never really thought about race, so I guess in that sense,

yeah. I just was never really challenged to think about race."[23] This student seemed to recognize that the absence of consideration of racial identity does in fact, unknowingly, impact the construction and understanding of what it means to be white.

This lack of examination of whiteness can perpetuate the implicit perception of whiteness as an American norm. After one student used the word normal several times in discussion, he was asked to describe what he meant by the word normal. He answered, "Normal is maybe, being able to not be conscious of yourself, or not having to reflect or be aware of parts of yourself in a certain space. And if you don't have to do those things, then maybe you're more normal."[17] According to this definition, if certain social spaces and systems are maintained in which white people are not required to be conscious of and reflect on their racial identity, as people of color constantly are, the privileged status of whiteness in America will be perpetuated as a result of whiteness' "normal" status being constantly reinforced.

A biracial student made a connection between whiteness and normalcy while discussing her own passing privilege. She said, "I use the phrase, 'I have passing privilege' a lot…. I have such privilege of being pretty feminine and looking pretty white, and I don't really stand out that much against the norm."[24] This quote identifies white status, or white passing status, as privileged because it is again connected to normativity. Passing privilege comes from the ability to be perceived as white, and thus not disrupt any expectations. A biracial person does not have the same privilege of not having to think about race, but a white passing biracial person may have some of the privileges that come with being perceived as a white person or being perceived as complying with social norms.

Another interesting perspective on privilege came from taking a closer look at the students who included privilege in their discussions of white racial identity, it became clear that the students who identified as anything other than heterosexual were more likely to include privilege in their discussions. Four out of the six students who had non-heteronormative identities, whether they identified as gay, asexual, or queer, included privilege in their discussions; whereas only four out of the nine students who identified as heterosexual did the same. This could be because people with non-heteronormative identities have reason to consider identity, privilege, and compliance with social norms from a perspective that heterosexual people do not have. One student spoke about this in relation to her consideration of her racial identity saying,

"I think since I came out or realized that I wasn't straight, I started really trying to look at different privileges that I had...So since I was about 16 I've tried to be really conscious of like that I was lucky to grow up in a middle class home and have all the things I needed, I was lucky to grow up as a white person so I didn't have to worry about racial profiling or anything like that, so I try to take that into account when I'm experiencing things."[28]

This quote is a remarkable example of the intersectionality of identities. This student was conscious of and able to articulate the impact of one part of her identity on another.

A couple students spoke about privilege and incorporated it into their identity by way of describing the meaningfulness of extending social privilege to others. For example, "Being aware of what comes with embodying so many powerful things in our society and trying to extend that to other people has been a big part of understanding my own racial identity."[22] Or another student who said, "I'm constantly thinking of it. Like how am I bettering myself as well as other people of other backgrounds? How am I leveling the playing field and not just rigging it in my favor?"[20] These comments are in congruence with studies cited previously that found integrating both awareness of the oppressiveness of white racial identity and anti-racist lifestyle choices was a way that whites were building both an informed and a positive sense of identity.

4.4 Connections to National Identity

The original question that inspired these interviews was whether white American college students made any connection between their racial and national identities. Just a few of the students who were interviewed articulated or alluded to any connection between these facets of individual identity. Only three out of the fifteen interviewees explicitly connected white racial identity with American national identity. Two students made this connection by describing what image they see, or expect to see when they think of who an American is. One of them said, "My national identity I think of as related to my ethnic identity a lot. Just like what it means to be American, and when I think about being an American whether I'm thinking about a white person or not. 'Cause classically and stereotypically an American is a white person."[20] This student refers to the stereotypical norm of a white American, and he seems to make a conscientious effort to question that image. Another student spoke more generally but with the same idea of describing what is expected of an average American. She described, "a heteronormative, white person that's maybe middle class, is like the expected person that you're gonna run into in the United States, or like the baseline."[24] This comment is another that is in line with Frankenberg's concept of whiteness as an "unmarked marker of other's

differences." This student summarized what she perceived to be the type of American that is generally accepted as normal, and that person was a white person.

The third student to articulate a connection between whiteness and Americanness also included class status in his description, but his framing of whiteness was slightly different from the other two. This student said, "I think predominate American society favors whiteness, and so I feel that as an American, as an upper middle class white male, those things are very much linked. Because that's sort of what's idealized in this society."[9] Rather than framing whiteness as an expectation or a norm, whiteness was described here as an ideal, or a prioritized status. This student attributed this elevated perception of whiteness to American society, connecting racial and national identity.

As in the discussion of privilege, it is interesting to note that of the three students who made explicit connections between whiteness and Americanness and framed this connection in terms of social norms and privilege, two of them held non-heteronormative identities. One of those two was biracial. Because this sample of white American college students was extremely small and not generalizable, no significant or generalizable conclusions can be drawn from it. However, it still may be of interest to note that within this sample two out of the three students who were able to perceive and articulate the connection between normalized and privileged identities, were students who held one or two less normalized and less privileged identities such as queer, asexual, or biracial.

5. Discussion

From this set of interviews, it seems that college is indeed a pivotal experience for some students in the way they approach their racial identities. The opportunity to broaden, deepen, and diversify one's understanding of identity through the academic and social experiences available through higher education is one that may benefit people from all backgrounds. This research demonstrates that the collegiate experience can be particularly educational for white students who have grown up in racially homogenous neighborhoods, and therefore may have either rarely or never been challenged to think critically about their own racial identity previously. While it is apparent that the collegiate experience has led some students to consider race both on personal and social levels more comprehensively, it is possible that universities could do more in terms of educating students on issues of race and identity. In this study a majority of the students discussed white privilege; however, very few made the connection between socially normalized identities and privileged status. While students seemed to understand that whiteness is a privileged identity, few articulated any understanding as to why. If society is to dismantle inequality, the systems that foster and maintain inequality, such as the social maintenance of whiteness as an American norm, must be thoroughly understood.

It was clear that many of the students interviewed saw their personal and familial cultural identities as weak or absent because they could not identify any signs of culture that set them apart from the perceived norm. Whether that norm was acknowledged or not, many of these white Americans students who celebrated Christian holidays seemed to think that their cultural traditions and ethnic identities were not noteworthy. This lack of examination of culture reinforces the notion that "standard" white American culture is the norm. This research has shown that this notion has weakened the sense of identity in some white students. Furthermore the idea that white culture and American culture are synonymous may serve to further marginalize Americans of color.

These interviews also highlight the importance of the intersectionality within an individual's identity. While the research focuses mainly on the interconnectedness of racial and national identity in white American students, intersectionality also played a role in discussions of privilege. It seemed from this small sample that students who held certain identities that are less socially privileged were more likely to address the social privileges that come with being white in America.

Further research could be taken in several directions. A comparison of different types of universities may highlight any specific effect that liberal arts institutions have on students' consideration and comprehension of racial identities and relations. Future interview guides could be adjusted to gain more specific information about how students think about cultural or racial identities or how intersectionality impacts the way people think about identity and privilege. An enlightening addition to this work would be a similar interview process with American students of color and a comparison of how students of color and white students perceive or do not perceive connections between racial and national identity in the United States.

6. Conclusion

This project was built upon the literature that shows a pervasive perception that whiteness is an American norm. The research conducted asked whether white American college students perceived any connection between their racial and national identities. From interviews with a small sample of undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina Asheville, several themes emerged. One theme was that college was a pivotal experience in many students' conception of their racial identity. Another theme that emerged among these white students was a common struggle to clearly identify markers of ethnic or cultural identity. Ultimately, in answer to the original question, while many students included privilege in their conceptions of white identity, very few made any connection between their racial and national identities. This study supports past research that illustrates conceptions of whiteness as an invisible norm in the United States. It also highlights the importance of examining white racial and cultural identity so as to dismantle social norms that disproportionately privilege white Americans.

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