White Masculinity and the Navigation of Privilege: How White Men Attending College Both Use and Negate Privilege

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White Masculinity and the Navigation of Privilege
How White Men Attending College Both Use and Negate Privilege

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Sociological scholarship details the ways marginalized groups are limited through institutions of oppression in the United States, but often, the White men, who perpetuate and benefit from oppression are absent. Critical Whiteness Studies scholarship has proliferated in recent decades, but scholars still do not understand how White people rely on and protect their racial privilege in what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004) calls the “era of Colorblind racism.” Moreover, scholarship needs to expand understandings of how Whiteness and masculinity intersect in accruing privilege in the contemporary United States. This in-depth, qualitative study of ten, White men attending Western University shows how White men both rely on their White, masculine privilege as they think about their futures, while simultaneously negating the existence of privilege. Many respondents believed that the U.S. functioned as a meritocracy, in which anyone could be successful as long as they “put in the effort,” “found something they were passionate about”, or abided by a “bootstrap mentality.” These narratives are indicative of a self-protective, yet socially attuned White, masculine habitus unique to White men in college, as respondents were familiar with the “language of privilege,” yet created narrative explanations of this privilege which were oppressive and discriminatory. Furthermore, this study shows how White men conceive of society through a “Powerblind” ideology, as they felt that everyone in the U.S., regardless of their identity, possessed equal social-capital and therefore could equally attain upward-mobility. This study shows the need for increasing education around the current manifestations of racial and gendered oppression and also shows a need for more directed and impactful promotions of diversity as a means of creating more equity in the United States, because as it stands, the magnitude of racial and gender inequality leads White men to hold self-protective and powerblind conceptions of society, used so these actors of oppression may further benefit from their privilege.

**Keywords:** Meritocracy; Powerblind; Colorblind; Privilege; Whiteness; Masculinity; Success; Negation; Racism; Misogyny
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Introduction
As the scope of social sciences and sociology attempt to better understand the manifestations of oppression in its many forms in the contemporary United States, scholars have focused much of their attention on the ways individuals with marginalized identities are limited due to oppression at every sociological level of analysis. This body of scholarship shows how people of Color, women, the Genderqueer community, LGBTQ community, and economically impoverished peoples, among many other identities, continue to be limited by institutions focused in maintaining hegemonic normativity and perpetuating multiple forms of discrimination and inequality. Such scholarship has expanded sociological understandings of inequality and the social construction of what is deemed normal or deviant in the United States and other settler-colonial nations, yet, in the midst of this proliferation of scholarship, the actors responsible for perpetuating oppression, as means of benefiting from inequality, are abstracted or not mentioned. Maintaining a focus on the perpetrators of marginalization is an area of sociology that has expanded mainly through the discipline of Critical Whiteness Studies.

Critical Whiteness Studies is broad in its scope, highlighting aspects of the social construction of race and Whiteness (Harris, 1993), to analyzing the effects of segregation in the U.S. in creating a White habitus (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick, 2006), to showing mechanisms which produce and maintain a colorblind racial perspective (Mueller, 2017). However, in this expansive discipline, there is a lack of scholarship detailing how White people rely on and protect their racial privilege in the era of colorblind racism. The veiled expressions of racism which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes as “the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era (3,2014).” As this colorblind racial ideology has been cemented throughout White America since the Civil-Rights Era, understanding the negation of racial privilege is an important aspect of understanding how institutions of Whiteness
maintain covert supremacy in the modern era. The presence of a White habitus is evidence of the ways White people share similar and unique conceptions of society due to a lack of out-group contact as the result of hypersegregation (Bonilla-Silva et. al, 2006). A key tenant of the colorblind ideology is in framing society as functioning through a meritocratic structure, in which there are no restrictions to which one can pursue economic upward mobility, guaranteeing a “free and fair” society to which any person, regardless of their identity, can pursue any opportunity they want, gaining capital dependent on the amount of effort one “puts in” (McNamee and Miller, 2013). When one believes that society is a meritocracy, one does not have to consider how inequality, oppression, or privilege prevent truly equal paths to upward-mobility.

In order to understand the ways White men may hold meritocratic ideologies as a way of negating racial and gendered privilege, I structured my study to address the research question: “how do White men in college navigate their White, masculine privilege when thinking about both their pathways to success and working in the contemporary U.S?” To answer this question, I interviewed ten White men attending “Western University”, a large, public University nestled in the mountains of Western State. This location is significant to the study, as respondents tended to believe that they were surrounded in a liberal-hub of academia and ideology, when in reality, many attendees of Western University are similarly upper-middle class, or wealthy, and are likely to hold self-protective political ideologies, like the study participants. The purpose of this study was to determine how these White men demonstrated their racial and gendered privilege as they discussed the ways in which people “made it” in society, and also examines how privilege is manifested when respondents thought about initiatives to increase workplace diversity, as well as the ways respondents discussed whether they were or were not privileged individuals. As a
means of expanding the sociological understandings of how privilege is used, recognized, and abstracted by White men, this study focuses on the ways respondents created narratives based in powerblind ideologies as a means of distancing themselves from rewards of Whiteness they expect to gain in their futures. Powerblindness is an expansion of the colorblind racial ideology presented by Bonilla-Silva (2003), but the term “powerblind” is stronger for this study due to the ways respondents ignored or abstracted multiple types of discrimination and inequality, such as racial, gendered, or class inequities, and therefore is relied on more heavily throughout the text. This study details the various narrative contradictions these White men produce as they both claim that the U.S. is meritocratic, while also subtly showing their desire to maintain and benefit from their masculine, White privilege.

Evidence for these claims are made in the analysis of the contradictions situated in respondents claims of meritocracy given their endowment of economic, racial, and gendered privilege. Next, I show the ways in which respondents used powerblind ideologies to maintain their beliefs in meritocracy, and then demonstrate how this promoted respondents to frame oppression as the agentic failure to abide by the tenants of the meritocratic ideology. From there, I present respondents’ anxieties around the promotion of workplace diversity, and finally situate the ways that respondents framed privilege given the abundance of the term in academic spaces.


**Literature Review**

In two decades, sociology of race relations and of racial oppression has expanded to include scholarship which addresses the macro, meso, and micro interactions which produce and perpetuate racial hierarchy – Whiteness (Guess, 2006). The discipline of Critical Whiteness Studies within social sciences is important and necessary because the actors and beneficiaries of racialized oppression have been named, helping to deteriorate a once perceived “natural” phenomenon of racial “winners and losers”, as well as aiding contemporary activism to address ways in which racism still persists and is *socialized* into White people (Kolchin, 2002).

Whiteness Studies grants a more adept study of race relations in the U.S. by positioning Whiteness as an active, socially constructed identity, an identity established before the foundation of the U.S., and based on power, with contemporary effects being the centralization and normalization of Whiteness in every U.S. institution (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Guess, 2006).

Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) thesis on social constructions help to show how race and Whiteness are organizational dynamics used to delineate social hierarchies and privilege: “Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always embodied, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality” (1966: 116). A contemporary understanding of U.S. race relations, the preservation of oppressive institutions, and the everyday interactions, which encode and bolster Whiteness as a power dynamic, shows ways that the U.S. is foundationally constructed around Whiteness (Harris, 1993). Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory refers to the ongoing process of producing, valuing, and normalizing social relations within a given historical context and locale, given the “duality of structure” (Giddens 1984: 374). This duality of structure refers to ways in which actors function as producers of societal structures, just as they are also products of these structures (Giddens, 1984), helping to
understand how contemporary race relations in the U.S. are both producers and products of the regulations, laws, and racialized capitalist structures (Leong, 2013) which ordered, for example, slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow and White terrorism, the Civil Rights era, and our contemporary “colorblind” era (Giddens, 1984; Harris, 1993; Guess, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Leong, 2013). White Americans alive today do not own Black people as slaves, they do not personally deny Black people the rights of representation and ability to vote, they probably do not organize themselves in White mobs to restrict racial integration into their neighborhoods; White people may feel that they are innocent from the foundational legacies of oppression in the U.S., but their positions and privileges are products of these legacies, and White people are still, very much, producers of White privilege and oppression.

Thinking of Whiteness as property allows one to better understand the means through which Whiteness holds legal protection, the right to exclude, and a position atop the U.S. racial hierarchy through means which mirror traditional property rights, as Whiteness was granted similar legal characteristics as property rights (Harris, 1993). While laws which predicated the possession of property with Whiteness - and the negation of ownership with those that were of Color- no longer operate in the U.S. legal system, the ramifications of such distinctions throughout U.S. history position Whiteness as having the legal character of property rights, contemporarily (Harris, 1993). These contemporary rewards should be thought of as the products of the legacies of White property (Giddens, 1984). As White property was allowed to matriculate more wealth and earnings, as people invested in Whiteness to secure rights and negate others from such rights as a means of creating privilege, structures of Whiteness were bolstered through institutional powers as a means of protecting the property characteristics of Whiteness, in that such property accrued value and worth (Harris, 1993). The financial capital of Whiteness is
evident in interpersonal interactions, as well, noticeable via the increased reputations endowed to White people based on their “cultural capital” (Harris, 1993; Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Understanding Whiteness as property helps to see the ways in which Whiteness holds power of believability and perceived innocence – a reputation of expected decency and facilitators of social normalcy (Harris, 1993, DiAngelo, 2004). Accrued wealth and both individual and systemic power, possible only through imbuing capital to Whiteness, helps to explain the persistence of racial disparities in wealth, income, educational attainment, employment rates, incarceration rates - among other indices - in that while high profile, Civil-rights cases in the U.S. have been beneficial in ending de jure segregation, nowhere in the laws are there policies which promote equity or (white) wealth distribution. In this way, Whiteness has been protected and allowed to function atop U.S. social hierarchies, contemporarily.

The articulation of rights should be understood as the articulation of property via Harris’s theoretical frame. Furthermore, though we may function in a contemporarily “colorblind” society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), the historical legacies of segregated property rights forever keep White people privileged, imbued with institutional alignment and expectations of credibility, given that wealth was created and sustained in the U.S. through the exclusion of People of Color to own property, owning one’s rights, one’s ability to make money as one sees fit, and one’s ability to own wealth and distribute it generationally, have all been synonymous with the benefits of Whiteness (Harris, 1993). Whiteness functions in such a hierarchical means that poor White people are more likely to align themselves with bourgeois elites than Black people in similar economic positions, showing the material gains and perceptions that White superiority must be something worth defending and excluding People of Color from (Harris, 1993; DiAngelo, 2004).
Despite claims that racism is no longer a social problem in the U.S., social scientists and economists find that this claim is incredibly inaccurate, and in fact, racist (Dyer, 1997). Understanding the demographic differences in wealth, income, educational attainment, and incarceration rates between White and Black Americans is an important step in understanding the contemporary manifestations of White privilege and structural disadvantages facing Black people and other People of Color, despite the more than half-century of U.S. policy designed to create racial equality. These statistics legitimize the need to further address racial inequalities and show the need for expanding the already dense amount of literature in Critical Race Studies and Critical Whiteness Studies.

The Black-White economic gap has persisted, even increasing in some indices, since the Civil Rights era: in 2014, the median adjusted income for Black-led households in the U.S. was $43,300, compared to $71,300 for White-led households (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor, 2015); among households led by adults with bachelor’s degrees, Black median adjusted income was $82,300, compared to $106,000 for White households (Pew Research Center, 2016). In 2013, the median net worth of White-led households was $144,200, thirteen times more than the median net worth of Black-led households - $11,200 (Pew Research Center, 2016). This staggering degree of wealth inequality between White households and Black households shows the degree of economic advantage White people possess in the U.S., legacies of Black oppression, racial capitalism, as well as both de jure and de facto segregation, inform the ways in which generational wealth has been accrued and passed down through White families, via the possession of profitable property, while Black people have largely excluded, legally and through convert mechanisms, to do so (Harris, 1993).
This is further evident in the ways that U.S. household wealth coincides with home equity: in 2015, 72% of White household heads owned a home, compared to 43% of Black household heads (Pew Research Center, 2016). And even as Black poverty rates have decreased since the 1980s, in 2014, 26% of Black Americans lived in poverty, compared to 10% of Whites (Pew Research Center, 2014). Black people receive much worse education compared to White people, even when attending highly-integrated institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Given these economic, residential, and educational inequalities, only 36% percent of White respondents claimed that racial discrimination was a major reason that Black people “have a harder time getting ahead that Whites”, compared to 70% of Black respondents (Pew Research Center, 2016:11). The lack of contemporary White acknowledgement of racial discrimination as a perpetrator of racial inequality shows the power and pervasiveness of colorblind racism, meritocratic ideologies, and emotional segregation in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Beeman, 2007; Knowles and Lowery, 2012).

Racial inequalities continue to persist in the U.S. in light of the commonly White claims that the Civil Rights Era “ended racism”. As a means of protecting the benefits of Whiteness and negating the legitimacy of racial oppression directed towards Black people and other groups of Color, Colorblind ideologies of race have proliferated throughout White America since the 1960s, functions to explain racial inequalities as the outcomes of inherently nonracial factors (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Furthermore, it is shown that White people, specifically students in college, maintain a colorblind ideology by adhering to an “epistemology of ignorance”, which is done through four main tactics: through “willful colorblindness”, in which actors use a “traditional” colorblind approach; through “tautological ignorance”, where actors create vague definitions of racism so that they may distance themselves from legacies of racism; by promoting
“mystified solutions”, in which White people promote “solutions” to racism which do not take into account institutional changes; and through more classic evasion tactics, in which White actors choose to not talk about race or racism (Mueller, 2016). These tactics of maintaining colorblindness shows how White people reformate racial ideologies in the presence of new information about the legitimacy of contemporary racism (Mueller, 2016).

As a means of abstracting privilege and inequality, many Whites abide by the Myth of Meritocracy, which posits that society is structured in a way to allow anyone to be successful as long as one has the effort and commitment to work hard (McNamee and Miller, 2014). Belief in the Myth of Meritocracy hinges on an individualistic world view, positioning a “lack of success” as a failure of one’s individual effort and dedication (McNamee and Miller, 2014). This ideology is only functional through one’s effort to maintain ignorance to structural inequality (McNamee and Miller, 2014; Mueller, 2016). In this way, using the term “powerblind” allows for more nuanced discussion about the cognitive strategies used by those deploying the meritocratic ideology, as these “believers” must ignore inequalities and discrimination as they regard to gender, class, and sexuality, as well as race (Knowles and Lowery, 2012).

In expanding Bourdieu’s (1972) theory of habitus, which posits that an individual’s dispositions, attitudes, tendencies, and the means through which they react to the social world, are constructed through various factors of socialization, which differ according to an individual’s personal history, as well as their race, social class, gender, sexuality, and availability of economic and educational opportunities. Individuals socialized in accordance to similar demographic factors are more similar and are more likely to conceive of and act within the social world in similar ways, creating an in-group culture structured around this common habitus, which dictates and shapes present social actions (Bourdieu, 1972). A distinctive and pernicious
White habitus flourishes in the contemporary U.S. due to the hypersegregation of White communities from People of Color, which isolates schools and employment, key socializers of habitus, in White spaces (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick, 2006). White habitus functions “best” through colorblind ideologies, promoting the idea that the hypersegregation socializing White habitus, is “natural” and “unproblematic”, when in fact, research shows that Whites living in highly homogeneous communities limits Whites’ chances and abilities to create meaningful relationships with Black people and other People of Color, and also promotes White, in-group solidarity and racialized out-groups (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006). For members socialized into these dynamics, White habitus reinforces notions that hypersegregation is normal, that racial stereotypes are legitimate, and that “looking out” for one’s in-group is typical, which all works to bolster the White desire to segregate communities from People of Color and the perceived “other” (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006).

One study finds that White, working class men in Buffalo, NY, routinely expressed frustration and discriminatory attitudes toward other racial groups when employment competition in the area increased (Weiss and Lombardo, 2002). The researchers found that for these White men, White identity was formed and maintained in relationship to a “dark other” - defined by Weiss and Lombardo as the imagined racial competitor which works to actively take opportunities away from “deserving” Whites - showing the active dynamics of engagement in Whiteness, as perceived economic competition led these respondents to align themselves with other White workers in opposition to racialized others, alluding to the mechanics which maintain White solidarity, and therefore, White supremacy, even in the “colorblind” era (Weiss and Lombardo, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). They find that engaging in Whiteness functions via a set
of deliberate operations used to coordinate and advance the socioeconomic interests and positions of White people (Weiss and Lombardo, 2002).

Colorblind ideologies are fluid and active depending on the spaces in which these racial dialogues are best permitted, but there are underlying White, self-conceptions which casts Whiteness as normality, even as White people believe in the importance of individualism (DiAngelo, 2004). The narrative of individualism posits that everyone acts independently of each other, granting everybody the equal opportunity to achieve success (DiAngelo, 2004). In thinking about the frames used by White people to deny the existence of their own unearned benefits via White racial group membership (McIntosh, 1987), this narrative leads White people to believe that a focus on individualism means that success is more easily attained when people ignore their own familial and personal histories, overlook the effects of structural barriers, and look past unmarked social positions, like race (DiAngelo, 2004). These factors confounded within an individual’s identity are seen as limiting of one’s ability to be independent (DiAngelo, 2004). The impact of this White, individualist framework functions within a colorblind racist frame because to truly be an individual depends on one’s denial of history as being relevant to the contemporary, which then works to deny the existence of benefits to Whiteness via the history of racism and oppression throughout the U.S; regarding one’s self as an individual is the first step to success, and success cannot be attributed to one’s historical accumulation of privilege, which is to say, racism, and other forms of oppression, do not have negative effects on one’s life course in the contemporary United States (DiAngelo, 2004). The denial of contemporary racism, as well as the accumulated disadvantage of racism’s historical legacy allows for the claim that privilege is simply a reflection of hard work and merit (DiAngelo, 2004).
The universalist frame, on the other hand, positions White experiences as default and objective. Universalism conceptually is representative of the “human norm”, and for White people, this “human norm” is seen as being inherently a White possession – a characteristic which defines Whiteness (DiAngelo, 2004 and Dyer, 1997). White universalism places White people as being non-raced, because they represent the human norm, which at the same time positions People of Color as not being able to speak to the commonality of humanity due to their experiences as being raced (Dyer, 1997). White universalism places White people as “just people,” creating a space for people of Color as being categorized as “other,” which functions to encode Whiteness as normal, leading to the White outlook that if People of Color want to function “normally,” they must detach their own identities from any raced position (DiAngelo, 2004). This also limits the degree to which White people feel comfortable in being called White, in that the distinction goes against White socialization which teaches White people to see themselves as “morally neutral, normative, average, and also ideal” (McIntosh, 1988; 73). By this measure, if Whiteness in the universal “normal”, then a person of Color’s identity as being unique from Whiteness is seen by White people as a restriction to one’s ability to claim success, because that non-White person is betraying normative identity. White universalism posits that Whiteness is the human condition, by defining normality and inhibiting it, and the equation of being White with being a normative human secures Whites a societal position of power in a colorblind society (Dyer, 1997).

Even as Dyer creates an understanding of Whiteness and its construction of normalcy, Myers (2003) shows that “White Fright” is a process to which Whiteness is perceived under threat due from the invading other. White respondents in Myers’s study designated People of Color to “otherness” by using racist language to describe non-White people they encountered or
mythicized, as well as surveillance of People of Color in their everyday lives as a means of keeping track of what they saw as “stereotypical” behaviors of People of Color. This act is rooted in White fright, which is racism in closed doors, but generally describes a White condition of fear around changing U.S. demographics, the demographic evolution of Whites to a minority category, and White economic loss at the gains of a racialized “other”. Myers describes that surveillance occurs because of “White fright”, in that “Whites perceived a threat- to their possessions, neighborhoods, safety, jobs, and their overall way of life (139).” Whites in Myers’s study were hyper aware of the infiltration of “White spaces,” which shows the investment of White people towards special segregation, as well as the socioeconomic segregation and racial stratification of opportunity (Myers 2003).

Harris and other scholars often claim that institutional expansions of affirmative action would aid in addressing racial inequalities and promote more equitable institutions throughout the U.S., but White objections to affirmative action are so widespread that such policy is highly unlikely to be put in place. Such denials of expansions to diversity initiatives are often argued against through by framing political arguments, but such arguments come from a colorblind perspective (DiAngelo, 2004). Federico and Sidanius (2002) expand upon Sindanius’s (2000) definitions of principled conservatism, which relies on ideology and the race neutral values of political conservatism to justify the devaluing of equal opportunity programs, like affirmative action, because such programs are seen as unfair and irrelevant on individualist tenants of political conservatism, which are often compounded and bolstered through high educational attainment. Principled conservatism as an explanation to disapproval to affirmative action is juxtaposed with general group dominance (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996), which suggests that disapproval of affirmative action, or similar programs, is based in the desire to preserve an in-
group’s privileged position within society, and that this preservation is accomplished through overt racism and the negation of race-based policies aimed at bolstering minoritized representation.

The group-dominance perspective is centralized upon the need to preserve White supremacy through racism, political values, and opposition to affirmative action, it is theorized by Sidanius and Pratto (2001) that generally, the principled conservatism ideologies by which affirmative action is denied actually serves as a conduit to the group-dominant ideology. Federico and Sidanius’s (2002) analysis shows that the group-dominance perspective was more widely disseminated then the principled-conservatism, and the strength of the relationship between policy-oriented objections to affirmative action and racism increased over time and educational attainment, which runs counter to the narrative that more educational attainment tends to promote more liberal social attitudes and racial empathy within White people. These findings suggest that while highly educated Whites are less likely to verbalize explicit racism, they will find easier means of connecting the group-dominant motives they possess with a conservative policy orientation (Federico and Sidanius, 2002). In this way, it should be understood that opposition to affirmative action is a conscious choice, one which is designed around the preservation of White hegemony, and furthermore, the reliance on principled, policy-oriented objections to initiatives, like affirmative action, may serve as a more socially acceptable means of masking a group-dominant perspective (Federico and Sidanius, 2002).

While Whites in Federico and Sidanius’s (2002) sample expressed a loss of supremacy due to a perception of the proliferation of affirmative action, Warikoo (2016) shows that the expansion of the “diversity frame” in prestigious U.S. universities positions that White students benefit from the “cultural engagement” earned through maintaining contact with students of
Color, and frames diversity as always being a benefit to White students, as students of Color are used to educate White students, imbuing these White students with bolstered credibility of understanding “different cultures”. This shows that even when institutions and White people agree that diversity is useful, this perspective is only held when White people feel they have something to earn from increased diversity, in this case, the positive value of cultural engagement (Warikoo, 2016).

Longitudinal studies among White students at a 4-year university show that a higher degree of interracial friendships, as well as higher non-white representation in neighborhoods in which they grew up, increased White respondents support for affirmative action, as well as feelings of commonality with People of Color, compared to individuals growing up in White, homogenous neighborhoods, who expressed less support for affirmative action, which was similar for politically conservative students, as well (Northcutt Bohmert and DeMaris, 2014). These results show the positive effects of affirmative action for reconstructed oppressive ideologies held by Whites, as inter-group contact promoted higher degrees of racial empathy held by White respondents (Northcutt-Bohmert and DeMaris, 2014).

The use of affirmative action and other ‘equal opportunity’ initiatives must be promoted and increased given the ways that corporate America is structured through norms of Whiteness (Pierce, 2003). Pierce’s qualitative study shows how White employees in corporate structures claim their innocence for being racist given that racism is an everyday practice within these environments (2003). This White innocence and ignorance to racism is contrasted through Black interviewees claiming that such environments led them to quit these jobs in order to get out of such racially hostile environments (Pierce, 2003). These findings run parallel to Mueller’s (2016) findings of the ways White people recalibrate their colorblind racial ideologies in order to claim
innocence and ignorance to the ways they promote racism or fail to understand contemporary racism, and Pierce’s findings show how corporate environments are structured around Whiteness, and therefore, expressive, racist practices.

The findings within this scholarship is evident in Cohen, Fowler, Medenica, and Rogowski’s (2017) survey data comparing Back, Latinx, and White attitudes of race in the contemporary United States, as their findings indicate that even though U.S. citizens, aged 18-25, do vote for significantly more progressive agendas than older generations, this rise of progressive ideology is the result of higher representation of voters of Color, as Whites in the survey sample are far more conservative than Black or Latinx respondents. These findings show that while 52% of African American respondents felt that racism was the most significant problem in the United States, only 26% of White respondents felt that racism was similarly as significant a problem, even as 48% of the White Millennials in the sample felt that discrimination against White people was as bad as discrimination against People of Color (Cohen et al., 2017). White people in the sample held ideologies never expressed by the rest of the survey sample, evident as 55% of the White sample saw the Confederate flag as a source of Southern pride and heritage and 62% of respondents opposed removing Confederate flags, statues, and other forms of iconography (Cohen et al., 2017). These findings show the immense divergence in racial attitudes in the U.S., as nearly 50% of Whites felt that “reverse-racism” was as significant a problem as real racism, showing the basis for many of the self-protective White political ideologies which aid in explaining the election of far-right politicians in the U.S. These findings show that a White habitus continues to flourish among younger generations, showing that racial attitudes do not get better through the internalization of a colorblind ideology (Cohen et al. 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006).
Finally, ethnographic research at an exclusive boarding school in the U.S. shows the ways that elite, privileged behavior is developed and made to be more “democratic” and approachable, showing a concise awareness of the ways elite figures operate amongst the upper-echelon of society, yet do so in a way that is open to interaction with those lower than themselves, such as custodial staff and cafeteria workers at this boarding school (Khan, 2012). Khan (2012) shows how students of this exclusive institution come to understand and deploy their masculine and White privilege through lessons they are taught through their education and interpersonal interactions within the school, showing that awareness of privilege and the deployment of this identity is a socialized and learned quality. By describing this privilege as ‘ease’ to which students feel they will be successful, *Privilege* shows the ways that the “new elite (Khan, 2012; 11)” are prepared to dominate racial, gender, and class hierarchies.
Methods

Research Question

Throughout this qualitative research project, I developed and relied upon the research question: “How do White men in college navigate their White, masculine privilege when thinking about both their anticipated pathways to success and working in the contemporary United States?” This research question was important to study because within the discipline of Critical Whiteness Studies, there is a focus on the damaging effects of White actions and beliefs, but there is far less attention paid to how these views - which inform institutional, political, and interpersonal actions – come to be developed. Another reason the research question is important to investigate is by expanding the understandings of the racial, gendered, and political views held by White college men in an academic environment which is often imagined developing homogenous, often progressive ideologies.

In this way, exploring how White men navigate privilege, given they are asked to imagine forging a path to success, as well as applying to a job among a diverse candidate pool, helps to show how normative values within academia can be molded and deployed in pernicious ways to legitimize arguments. Furthermore, investigating the research question expands understandings around: the degree to which White, college attending college anticipate success; the extent to which middle- to upper-middle class men hold discriminatory views; and aids in understanding whether White college attending men tend to hold similar or varying understandings about their privilege. As a comparative study, this research question expands understandings about the messages and narratives White, college attending men use when expressing their privilege, and also dissimilatory beliefs directed to marginalized identities. As such, this research question should be studied in order to aid in identifying how privilege and
oppressive ideologies intersect, by showing both how privilege is expressed and framed, and also by revealing the ways in which oppressive ideologies can be used as a defense of White men’s privilege, as identified in a sample of White men attending college.

Research Design

The primary research design used in this study was the Grounded-Theory Approach, in which I developed a model of understanding contradictory narratives around White, male privilege which aids in better understanding the social constructivist basis for which White men both deploy and negate their privilege, expanding scholarship within the discipline of Critical Whiteness Studies. I used the Grounded-Theory Approach, rather than other qualitative approaches, such as a Narrative Approach or Phenomenological Approach, because I feel that the project successfully builds upon the existing literature of Critical Whiteness Studies and social constructionism by showing how colorblind and powerblind ideologies are used to both legitimize the Myth of Meritocracy, and also discriminate marginalized groups through “character” or “cultural” arguments. In this way, the Grounded-Theory Approach was more applicable than other qualitative approaches because I relied on existing theories to create my interview guide and guide my analysis, as I was interested in better understanding existing phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Rather than using the Phenomenological Approach to capture participants’ experiences and examine how they create values according to these experiences, I position that these experiences are emblematic of existing theories within Sociology, such as Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) Theory of Colorblind Racism and Bourdieu’s (1972) Theory of Habitus (Creswell, 2013).
The Grounded-Theory Approach was most appropriate to use given the ten in-depth interviews I used for analysis, in that while this sample size was small, the duration and density of these interviews showed me that I had reached a saturation point at which I identified several operating sociological theories through participants responses. This approach differs from the Case Study Approach - in which researchers promote an in-depth study of existing phenomena by using multiple data sources (Creswell, 2013) – because I did not anticipate that these White, college attending men would hold such similar perspectives of society or powerblind ideologies, as it was through my analysis that I found these similarities. Although the Case Study Approach works nicely with the use of in-depth interviews, Grounded-Theory Approach served my needs as a researcher in more impactful ways, as I relied on a deductive approach, rather than expecting that participants would engage with similar narratives and values (Creswell, 2013).

The philosophical paradigm I used was guided by Social Constructionism. As a researcher, I believe that values and understandings of the interaction between individuals and the society they operate within are socially constructed, and only hold meaning depending on the meaning people and institutions produce. As such, my ontological stance within this philosophical paradigm was very much informed by the way participants and I developed multiple, constructed realities through the in-depth interviews we both participated in (Creswell, 2013; 36-27, Yilmaz, 2013). This was done through my interview questions, as I asked participants to “imagine how people become successful in the U.S.”, or by asking respondents to imagine themselves applying to a competitive position at a company among a diverse candidate pool. The use of such hypothetical questions meant that respondents and I created highly-specific and individualized assumptions of the professional world, which as college students, my participants and myself have rarely, if ever, engaged with. This ontological stance, through social
constructionism, promoted respondents to project what they felt their futures would look like, which often times was a replication of their domestic structures. Using Social Constructionism to inform the research designs philosophical approach was emblematic in my epistemological stance, as a researcher, as I similarly promoted the “co-creation of reality between participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2013; 33), which was done through the use of interview questions which asked participants to imagine themselves in various situations as a way to analyze the constructed realities they produced, and as a means of understanding these realities. Of course, these realities were produced as the effect of my interview questions, and in this way, my respondents and I “co-constructed reality” (Creswell, 2013, Yilmaz, 2013).

The axiological stance of the Social Constructivist philosophical paradigm posits that all beliefs and values are socially constructed (Creswell, 2013), which informs my decisions to analyze the values and ideologies held by participants and gain a better understanding of how these beliefs are particular to a White, college attending, male identity, which also brings forth an analysis of how this identity is constructed, and the self-protective motivations which inform why such beliefs must be constructed, internalized, and legitimized by participants. Furthermore, my position and decision to pursue this research question are very much informed by values and beliefs for better understanding and exposing oppressive structures, such as White, masculine privilege, as a means of constructing new realities. This shows that my axiological stance is influenced by my education is Sociology, Critical Whiteness Studies, and Social Constructionism, and as such, aided in co-creating a reality with participants in order to better understand participants’ values and ideologies. Given that this qualitative research relied on in-depth interviews with participants, my subjectivity must be positioned as a researcher, as I held personal and academic values which guided my analysis of interviews and inherently lead me to
understand responses as being emblematic of aspects of Critical Whiteness Studies and the Theory of Social Constructionism. These biased and subjective understandings came forth through my deductive approach.

Researcher’s Background, Values, and Biases

I am a White man attending the same university that participants attended. A senior at “Western University”, I major in Sociology and minor in Ethnic Studies, and as such, the research question used for this study is informed by these disciplines. As a student, I attempt to find impactful and respectful ways through which I can be a better ally to those with oppressed identities, and as such, the deductive path this research followed was informed by my personal ideologies which value exposing oppressive ideologies and reconstructing institutions of White Supremacy. My research is biased and informed by my activism in the Western University community and within other communities to which I have called home.

As a White man in college, I felt that it was important to better understand how those with my identity navigate their position atop constructed racial and gender hierarchies, and the degree to which those with my identity admit to their privilege or find ways to abstract and negate the existence of White, male privilege. As a White man, I believe that many of societies inequalities exist because of the oppressive structures of the U.S. which were constructed by self-protective White, male capitalists. Recognizing this, my research is guided by a desire to create a more equitable society, and as such, I feel that exposing racism, sexism, and classism is an important first step in understanding the basis of these ideologies, which will ultimately aid in deconstructing racial, gendered, and class hierarchies in the United States. These values are
subjective and guided the construction of my interview guide, my decision to only interview White men, my analysis, and the writing of this thesis.

My values proved to oppose many of the beliefs and values purported by the participants, which aided in distinguishing my own values and ideologies from those of the participants, which was highly beneficial to my research (Yilmaz, 2013). But, my identity as a White man in college, coming from a middle-class household, aided in gaining the participants’ trust. I had a much higher degree of access to my population than most qualitative researchers typically possess because my phenotypical identity mirrored my participants’ identities, and we all attended Western University. Furthermore, all interviews took place at times and locations of the participants choice, and as a White man, I felt comfortable to meet these participants anywhere, where this may have been a safety limitation for researchers who did not identify as White men.

**Study Population, Participants, and Sampling Techniques**

The ten participants chosen for the study were all students at Western University, a large, public University in the American West. Of its roughly 30,000 student body, Western University’s racial demographics are approximately 73% White, 10% Latinx, 7% Asian-American, 3% African-American, and 1.5% Indigenous American, with the rest identifying in the “other” category. With many of the White students coming to Western University from out-of-state, including myself, there is a great amount of wealth within the White student population, and as such there are significant, hierarchical social groups within the University that are highly segregated and classist. As such, exclusively interviewing White men attending Western University was an opportunity to better determine the presence of a unique habitus within these participants. These respondents both have racial and gendered privilege, and their position within
these hierarchies at Western University is indicative of White men throughout the United States, and therefore, I felt exclusively interviewing this population aided in better understanding how White men navigate their social positions in the U.S.

I used convenience sampling to get participants to interview. I found these participants through my social networks, through the recommendation of my peers, and by announcing to my non-sociology classes, in a casual way, that I was looking for participants to interview for my honors thesis. Although I had met four of my respondents on occasions before the interviews, I did not know or ever asked about their political ideologies, let alone racial ideologies or any content that would be mentioned in my honors thesis. I chose to use convenience sampling due to the time restrictions I had for completing the thesis, as well as a lack of funding. Convenience sampling was beneficial because the sample was easily accessible, situated in close geographic proximity to myself, were available to be interviewed at a time and location of their choosing, and were willing to participate in the study (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016). Convenience sampling was also chosen because of it is relatively low cost, compared to randomized sampling procedures, and willing participants were more easily found (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016). If I did have institutional financial support to pay participants, I would have attempted to recruit a more randomized sample, because convenience sampling is inherently a biased recruitment method, even as I attempted to interview White men I did not know on a deep, personal level (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016).

This sample was not generalizable to all White men, or White men attending college, and therefore, my study sample should not be taken to be representative of the population of White men attending Western University. Convenience samples are highly vulnerable to research biases (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016), and as such, I attempted to minimize the presence of my
research bias by writing non-leading questions and never discussing my own opinions when interviewing participants. Sometimes, participants would ask for my views on subjects they discussed, to which I had to tell them that I could not answer so to not influence their responses. Although these tactics were helpful in minimizing my biases, future research into the research question should use a randomized sample. For three of my respondents, I used snowballing sampling, and asked participants if I could contact individuals they knew to be interviewed in the future. I had no prior contact with these three participants, and I feel this use of snowball sampling, small as it may be, decreased the study’s bias (Jacobs, 2013).

I chose to use ten participants due to the in-depth qualitative approach of the study and because of a lack of time to complete the honors thesis with more interviews, and a lack of funding to gain a more randomized sample. Furthermore, Baker and Edwards (2012) posit that work using the Grounded-Theory Approach, as well as Narrative and Phenomenological Approach, can attain a saturation point when coding data with samples greater than five respondents. Furthermore, the homogeneity of my sample meant that the small sample size would not be too detrimental to reach the saturation point, as the respondents shared identity, attendance at Western University, and self-identified “fiscally conservative, socially liberal” political ideologies serve as evidence of the sample possessing a relatively high degree of homogeneity (Baker and Edwards, 2012). This homogeneity was only undermined by participants’ class differences, as six of the respondents identified as coming from middle- to upper-middle class households, while the other four participants felt they came from wealthy households. Homogeneity of a sample aids in reaching a saturation point given the small sample size (Baker and Edwards, 2012).
This study had limitations based on the small sample size, use of convenience sampling, and lack of time and funding. Future research should increase the study’s sample size to at least twenty participants, should use randomized sampling techniques, or at least rely on paying subjects so to use a Maximum Variation Sampling technique (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016), and lastly, should increase the duration of the study.

All names, institution, University, business, or other identifying titles throughout the interviews were replaced with pseudonyms I created in order to maintain participant confidentiality and reduce outsider identification. This allowed for a higher degree of trust with participants in the sample, which allowed them to respond with more honest answers given they did not hold anxiety of being identified within the data.

Study Procedure

I collected data through ten, in-depth interviews with white men attending Western University. Once I established contact with potential participants, I asked if they would be interested in being interviewed for my honors thesis. If respondents answered yes, I asked them to pick a time and location of their choosing to be interviewed.

Once these logistics were determined, I met with respondents, bringing with me an interview guide, an IRB approved consent form, a digital recorder, and a notebook to take handwritten notes with. I explained to participants that participating in the interview was completely voluntary, that any specific information provided to me, such as names of people, businesses, schools, or towns would be kept confidential through the assignment of pseudonyms when presenting the data. This confidentiality allowed respondents the ease of mind so they could give more honest answers and not have to worry about being identified within the data.
The use of a digital recorder greatly improved my ability to engage with my data after the interviews and was necessary for transcribing data, which was done through the use of the professional, secure service GoTranscript.com.

In order to keep data comparable, I wrote an interview guide comprised of thirty questions, reading each respondent questions directly from the interview guide, in the same order, in order maintain the ease of comparison between respondents. The beginning questions of the interviews were about understanding respondents’ identities. I asked where participants were from, how they would describe their economic background, how they identified racially or ethnically, why they decided to attend college, and how they identified politically.

From there, questions asked respondents to define success, describe what a successful person looked like to them, identify someone they knew personally who was successful by the respondents definitions, determine how they felt that person gained their success, describe what they felt people needed to do, generally, to become successful in the United States, determine the degree to which a respondent felt one’s economic and social success was based in that person’s individual effort, determine if respondents felt there were important factors beyond individual effort to pursuits of success, determine if one’s background and identity was significant to their pursuits of success, and finally, determine if respondents felt there were restrictions that could be at all limiting to one’s pursuit of success. In order to gauge the degree to which respondents felt the U.S. was meritocratic, I felt that situating upward mobility, deemed success in the interview, was a significant and approachable way to see how respondents conceived of the structuring of the U.S. economy and job market. When I felt that respondents had more to say on a topic, I probed their responses, and asked them to explain their sentiments in more detail so that I could get a better sense of their conceptions around pathways to upward mobility.
Furthermore, I felt that my data was unique because respondents had to position their responses in the future tense, which allowed me to better gauge what they anticipated their future career paths would look like once they completed college. Questions about the universality of success were significant for seeing if a participant felt the society was a meritocracy, as answers that claimed success was universally attainable were typically based in respondents’ views that success was always based in hard work and drive. The question in which respondents were asked if they felt there were restrictions to success were also useful for identifying a powerblind perspective if respondents felt that there were no restrictions to gaining upward mobility. In this way, these approachable questions about success helped in determining the degree to which respondents felt the society was a meritocracy.

In order to better gauge the presence of a colorblind and powerblind perspective, I asked respondents to imagine that they were applying for a competitive position among a highly qualified and diverse applicant pool. I produced a hypothetical situation and relied on the expectation that respondents had applied to a job before, or at least had envisioned a scenario in which they had to apply for a very prestigious job. I asked respondents “How important do you think it is that employers consider someone’s demographic background and identity when applying to a competitive job?” as way to determine if a respondent felt that promoting diversity was unfair or negated a preferred merit-based approach. I then asked respondents to determine how comfortable they would be if an employer considered the respondents identity, as I felt this question could allude to respondents feeling that their White masculinity was undervalued or not necessary if a company was promoting diversity initiatives. Lastly, I asked respondents if they felt employers should pay attention to factors beyond someone’s credential when applying for a position, as this was another good indicator to determine their belief in a merit-based system.
Although questions about affirmative action were not directly in the interview guide, the topic did come up often in this section of the interviews. When affirmative action was mentioned, I simply asked respondents what they thought about it, making sure to not give my own definition so I could record the ways respondents varied in their interpretations of what affirmative action was. This was another good marker for assessing a respondent’s comfort level with the promotion of diversity.

For the last three questions, I asked respondents if they felt they were privileged. From there I asked how they felt being white would affect their futures, and then asked how they felt being a man would affect their future. The simplicity of these questions promoted many different interpretations, and I often probed responses to these answers, typically asking why respondents felt this way and how these views became evident to them. These questions were great in identifying the familiarity respondents had with the term privilege, even if respondents did not provide accurate assessments of this privilege.

Overall, my interview guide allowed me to engage respondents’ perspectives about race, their admission or negation of privilege, their views about the presence of meritocracy, and generally find if respondents maintained powerblind perspectives. While I hypothesized that most respondents would be powerblind and believe in meritocracy, I feel that my interview questions were not leading, but instead allowed respondents to the opportunity to discuss their ideas about meritocracy, which many held, and which many discussed for upwards of an hour. In this way, each of the ten interviews I had provided me with useful data for my analysis, and shows that I created a successful, and approachable interview guide through which respondents directly answered my guiding research question.
Data Processing

Once the interviews were transcribed, I went through each interview twice. In this initial analysis, I looked to develop themes around the first aspect of my research question, “how respondents anticipate being successful?” This initial analysis showed the presence of a meritocratic ideology through nine of the ten participants. Once I had established that this was a common theme, I looked for ways that respondents created narratives to bolster these beliefs and anticipations of universal success. This prompted me to create the subtheme of a colorblind ideology. In this way, I addressed the research question of “how respondents navigate White, male privilege” by showing that this was done through a meritocratic and colorblind ideology. I then went through the interviews a second time, paying more attention to the contradictory messages of their colorblind ideologies by the ways the respondents recognized privilege made their meritocratic beliefs illogical. Through the second analysis, it also became clear to me that only referring to colorblind racial ideologies was not a broad enough analysis of how respondents negated structural barriers, so I used the term ‘powerblind ideologies’ to take into the account the ways respondents ignored or abstracted the effects of gender and class, as well as race. From this point, I felt that I was ready to analyze how respondents discussed privilege and used the previous themes from the analysis to address my research process.

Throughout the data analysis, I used the coding strategies described by Saldana (2013), as I began identifying codes within the data through the recognition of common messages, the proceeded to develop categories through which these codes could be put into sections of the analysis. From this point, I developed theories about the ways participants addressed the research question, and once completed, I developed a more cohesive theme which answered my research question (Saldana, 2013).
Quality Assurance

As an undergrad researcher, I felt that I was able to accurately represent and engage with the views given by my participants, but a major limitation of this study’s credibility is the ways in which I analyzed respondents’ interviews with strong considerations of how their answers reflected themes of Critical Whiteness Studies. As such, the ways in which I analyzed respondents’ answers may be in a subjective way in which respondents may not support, especially those who I identified as being most problematic in their views. The credibility of this data, as it regards the participants views, is strong in the ways that my findings were directly correlated with the data found through the interview process (Trochim, 2006).

I hypothesize that the findings within this study would be found in a different sample of White, college attending men, as the process for addressing this research question through my interview guide was successful in promoting respondents to discuss their views of society and their own privilege, even when respondents did not recognize their own privilege. The research assumptions of the study were that White men have privilege in the U.S. and that this population is aware of their privilege even in college.

The dependability of this study should be seen as a limitation, given that my analysis of these views was so grounded in existing, Critical Whiteness Studies theory. Furthermore, my education has promoted my own biases of how privilege is manifested and biases around the importance of understanding marginal identities as being a significant limitation to one’s upward-mobility in a White, male supremacist society. As such, these biases guided the creation of this research question, development of my interview guide, and analysis. Future research into
this question should be done by a researcher who is not a White man, like myself, and should be
done by a researcher who has not been so biased by their undergraduate education.
Analysis

1. Maintaining a Meritocratic Ideology

Defining Success
When asked about their definitions of success and what success looked like, respondents claimed that success was defined in ways which either denied the impact of money and wealth to success or structured narratives which abstracted the necessity of money to success. Furthermore, the narratives used by respondents as they thought about success were not congruent with their examples of successful people they knew, as they typically used their middle to upper-class parents as their primary examples. For example, Dylan, a sophomore at Western University, is from an affluent town in the university’s state, and defines success as being able to maintain one’s mental health and comfort within U.S. society.

Success is just not losing your mind through life. We’re constantly tried and we really – At the end of the day, there’s no expectation for us to be incredible, we don’t have to be superheroes or celebrities. As long as you are content with yourself, as long as you’re eating and you’re still sleeping under a roof, I think that’s kind of success, in my opinion. Just funding that state of contentment, being comfortable where you are in your life... Yeah, there’s going to be downs and stuff, but I think as long as you keep your sanity, that’s pretty successful.

Within the narrative Dylan constructs around mental health and the importance of maintaining comfort, there is no mention of the role that money plays within creating this success. Typical of most of my interviews, I probed Dylan and asked if he felt that people could be comfortable and maintain their mental health without money, and to what degree money was important to his definition of success. Dylan replied that he felt people could operate through this defined success without money.

Yes, I think a lot of people definitely can [be successful without money]. As long as those essentials are provided for you in some way, I think success is pretty easy to find. Especially if you’re not tempted by large, ridiculous amounts of money, you get used to it and you enjoy that condition. But, I think it’s nice having money. The more and more
money you have, the more blanket you have, the more comfort. But there’s definitely a point where money becomes this weird, endless addiction.

Dylan’s narrative shifts drastically from more abstract messages of success to one which accounts for how money creates the abstract comfort he mentioned earlier. Before he claims the role of money in providing a “blanket of comfort,” he claims that people can maintain their comfort and their sanity within the society as long as “essentials are provided,” showing contradictory messages about how comfort is perceived to function. By claiming at once that money is not necessary to success, and then later claiming that it is nice to have money, it is evident that Dylan is creating a narrative which works to invisibilize his economic privileges gained through his father; Dylan’s narrative about success was constructed in a way which worked to deny his own position and economic privilege, as he attempted to make a “universal” and attainable definition of success which, in reality, is not possible without the money he initially did not mention. He promotes a class-blind approach to defining success, but one which is ended when money is brought up and when he recounts his father’s economic and professional pursuits. When I asked if his “comfort” definition fell in line with his background and the environment he was raised in, he claimed that his definition was not applicable. Furthermore, he situates that his own position and access to opportunities are very much dependent on his father’s economic successes but does so in a way that maintains the importance of his father’s individual effort to gain his position. I asked Dylan “Do you think that image [of success you provided] is similar to how you grew up, or do you think it is more different?”

It’s probably different, just because my dad – He worked hard, he’s very diligent. He worked his ass off his entire life in order to get a good job, to be financially stable, so he could provide for his family. He wanted the same for me. He wanted me to work hard, to get an education, to apply myself.
Dylan initially gives a definition of success based on maintaining comfort and one’s ability to survive within our society. His definition is structured around personal agency to create these things, even when he does not mention the impact of money. But, when Dylan is asked if this definition applies to himself, he claims that even though money was prevalent and important to his father’s success, this success was still attained through hard work and his father’s agency. As respondents attempted to create universal definitions of success, they focused on pointing out the meritocratic basis of attaining success in the United States. Even when they did not account for money within these definitions, Dylan and other respondents were quick to implicate the presence of their economic privilege as evidence that their working parents had more personal agency and dedication than others, and that this was why their family was able to function in a more privileged economic space. In order to maintain this meritocratic view of society, Dylan claims that his economic privilege may actually disadvantage him, because he will not have to work as hard within our society which is based on individual effort to become successful.

I’ve always had a lot of room, a lot of slack. It’s been less pressure for me. But at the same time, maybe that’s not a good thing, because I’ve also been kind of lazy in my life. I’ve not always fully applied myself because of that slack. I think people who are working hard for their money and taking more risk, are more motivated to give it all they’ve got.

Dylan feels that his own privilege is actually the reason that he is lazy and unwilling to dedicate himself, as his father did. This maintenance of the meritocratic frame is working to spin Dylan’s economic privilege, as well as his ability to attend Western University, as potentially being harmful for his success within the meritocracy.

Ben, a junior at the Western University, is from a middle-class, eastern town about two hours from a large city, and currently studies Finance and Economics. When asked to define success, Ben responds:
I’ll say the copout answer, but I feel like the answer is like success is really measured by your happiness. I think you can be pretty successful and happy, and not be a – I want to say like be almost textbook successful, to have a Ferrari in your driveway. There’s tons of individuals that I believe that happens.

Ben’s definition of success is similar to Dylan’s in that Ben creates an abstract definition of what makes people successful – in this case, the presence of happiness. Using happiness to define success was a theme I found throughout my interviews, as six respondents claimed that happiness equated success in varying ways. Also similar to Dylan’s narrative around success, Ben struggled to define the importance of money within success, as money would skew the attainability of success by their definitions. I asked Ben, “for you personally, how related is happiness to money?” Ben responded that,

…Happiness to money? It toys with me all the time because I wouldn’t be totally opposed to – Okay, well, first layer is, I’m in a position where I will most likely make over $100,000 a year, almost no matter what I do, in ten years from now given my field of study and major, but to me, yes. The goal is to be happy. How do I make myself happy? Money is definitely in the equation, but I think the larger part of the equation is intellectual stimulation. If I do a job that I don’t like, for a lot of money, I would not like it.

Ben admits that his narrative of success is contingent on his expectation to make a sizeable amount of money given his decision to study finance and economics at the Western, public university, but Ben makes it clear that money, alone, will not give him the intellectual stimulation that is necessary for him to be happy, and therefore, successful. As is evident through all ten of my respondents, education is seen as the mechanism for which individuals can be empowered and gain access to the meritocratic structure of contemporary society. In Ben’s definition and explanation of success, money is an expectation due to his level of education, but this money could not be enough to make him happy.

When I asked Ben to give me an example of someone he knew, personally, that embodied his definition and this attitude around success, he used the example of one of his
teachers at the university. This teacher continued work in a sub-field of economics which was first started by this teacher’s father, and Ben uses them within this narrative of success because these figures were successful in that “they’ve progressed thought in a direction, they’ve inspired people to think in a direction.” Ben values the possibility of being an influential figure within academics or in the larger, business world, and this influence is what he sees as “true success.” Ben’s messages of success are discussed in a way that is seemingly accessible, primarily through the avenue of education, but this is also contradictory due to his anticipation of making “over $100,000 a year,” alluding to Ben’s difficulties in narrativizing universal paths to success which are unable to be sustained given his own privilege and anticipations of wealth.

When asked whether his definition of success was something that was universally attainable in the contemporary United States, Ben again attested to the necessity of education in finding happiness and leading one to have societal influence. “I think that there is one key to being successful and that’s education. That doesn’t necessarily mean going to school, but just learning something and loving it. That’s the key to success, to learn and love.” I then asked Ben to assess the degree to which individual effort leads an individual to this space, to which he answered:

I think the large majority of people who are successful, again that doesn’t mean rich, are successful because they push themselves. I mean they push their brain and by doing so it helps society and other people and progresses thought and things like that. I think it’s very much individuals that work really hard.

Ben’s path to success is predicated on an individualist narrative which positions any gain as due to an individual. In his answer, he does not mention the role of social networks to aid people in their educational and economic pursuits, nor does he mention how a White, masculine identity benefits one in these pursuits. My next question probed Ben’s previous answer, and I asked him to assess the importance of one’s social networks to their pursuits of success.
Like, it’s almost like a nature versus nurture kind of deal. Here’s my opinion on that idea [of social networks]. Your social network 100% matters, but what I would say matters a whole lot more is that you are inspired to do something. The issue is that a lot of people who lack the social network, they’re just not inspired to do so. They can blame it on their social network and the people they know, but really, a lot of them are not inspired to do something.

This response is deeply troubling in that Ben’s investment in the meritocratic narrative creates an image of unsuccessful people and their position as evidence of a lack of inspiration that is “nurtured” through their environment. These types of messages will be analyzed in the following sections, but Ben’s answer also shows is his belief in the necessity of inspiration to be successful. In his image of a society based on upward mobility through hard work and personal drive, inspiration is something that is attainable through education, and to a degree, the social networks that are manifested through education, as he later uses the example of Michael’s development of valuable social networks through his time in Graduate School. Education is referred to as the tool for success, but neither accessibility to higher education or more general educational inequalities by race, gender and class are never mentioned by Ben. This is further evidence of the contradictory nature of holding meritocratic ideologies, and the ways in which such beliefs are only functional when people maintain powerblind views of their society.

Richard, a senior at the Western, public university, is from a small, East Coast city, and majors in advertising and business. Richard’s father started and owns a small business, and Richard refers to him as being “blue collar,” even though Richard describes coming from an upper-middle class family. Richard decided to go into advertising and business because he felt influenced by his father’s business. “A big influence is I worked for my dad for a couple years and I saw the value of business and how it is the base of our economy and what drives our economy.” Richard’s narrative indicates that he models many future aspirations and current values based off of his father. Richard claimed that he differentiated from his father in that he
does not think his dad has much “passion” in his profession, and passion is something that is integral to Richard’s imagined future economic endeavors. Richard also feels he differentiates from his “blue-collar” father in that he does not feel the same pressure as him.

I don’t feel the same pressure as him because one, he made it clear that I don’t need to have that pressure because he is financially stable, making it clear that I can go to college and get out of here debt-free. He made that a clear point that this is like a gift and just to use it wisely.

While Richard does not use the term economic privilege to describe his position, it is clear through this narrative that he does see his a difference in his opportunity structure, compared to his father’s past, but Richard still claims that his father “is the most successful person” he knows, because “just seeing him in person get-up and go to work seven days a week, 365 days a year, owning and operating a business. I just have the utmost respect for him, for sacrificing his time to provide a life for his family.” The “hardworking father” narrative that Richard uses frames much of his discussion around success, in that he sees that the structure of the United States is built so that anyone can find success if they possess the right degree of motivation. “I feel the sky is the limit for a lot of people out there. In America, you have the right to pursue your interests and whatever,” and when asked about the role of individual effort in becoming successful, Richard answered:

Generally speaking, it’s up to the person to want to be deemed as a successful person. No matter how many times you fail, you have to persevere and get back up and try again. Like I said, at the end of the day, if you don’t love what you’re doing or pursuing, you’re probably not going to be a nice or motivated person.

I then probed his response and asked him about the role of “hard work” within individual effort, to which he responded:

I would say hard work would drive success, because if you look at what America has done as a whole, we are the greatest country in the world and there’s a reason for that. One of the top qualities that we have is that we established what it means to be hardworking people. But I don’t necessarily think there’s a scale for success in America
because it’s a free country. You can hang out on the side of the street and beg for money and if that’s your personal definition of success, more power to you.

I then asked him if he was implying that anyone can “make it” in the U.S. if they were hardworking, to which Richard responded, “Yes, I think if you can get up every single day and have a mission, a personal mission, whatever it may be, this is a free country and any opportunity can be at your feet if you push yourself.” Richard’s answers are indicative of a high degree of internalized meritocratic narratives, as he sees that anyone has the personal agency to pursue and capitalize on their goals, as long as they are willing to be hardworking. Parallel to this claim is that anyone has the agency to “hang out on the side of the road”, as if this is a goal that people choose to do as Americans. Richard’s narrative situates that the United States is open to any pursuit of success because the country was established to benefit hardworking people.

Richard’s responses are typical of the meritocratic narratives used by most respondents, but he is able to more easily define money as being one of the pillars of success, unlike Ben and Dylan. All three of these respondents’ definitions of success, and the narratives they used in speaking about pathways towards success, relied on the use of personal agency to pursue success. Even as their definitions changed, all three respondents presented narratives which positioned U.S. society as being open to any economic or educational pursuits. These perspectives should be understood to be replications and internalizations of messages from their parents, or other influential figures within their lives, i.e. Ben’s teacher. All of my respondents claimed to know a person that exhibited their meritocratic definitions and narratives of success, which shows the power of socialization of these messages within this sample of White male college attendees at the Western University.

Furthermore, when respondents provided abstract definitions and narrative of success, like Matthew, a senior from a “very liberal” town in the Pacific Northwest, claim that “success is
being fulfilled. Success is mitigating your regrets to the highest degree possible,” the impact of these statements is used to bolster narratives which promote the universality of upward-mobility in the U.S., which works to invisibilize the privilege these respondents have by way of their Whiteness, masculinity, and middle, upper-class, and wealthy backgrounds. By abstracting their privilege, respondents do not need to bring attention or empathy to restrictive issues facing people who are not White, cis-male, people in the U.S. Furthermore, these views’ arbitrary conceptions of success function to normalize White, masculine expectations of what life in contemporary society is like. These messages are evidence of similar conceptions of success as they are thought about through a White habitus (Bonilla-Silva et. al, 2004)

Daniel, a senior at the Western, public university, identifies strongly as a Jewish, White man, and is from middle to upper-middle class town outside of a major East-Coast city. Daniel is unique in his presentation of success, in that his definition and presentation of success explicitly mentions the role of money as a measurement of success. “I would say my idea of success is monetary. I would say the idea of a successful person, in my eyes, is going out to eat and not needing to worry about what you order.” Although Daniel’s example of a monetary success rests on the financial freedom to order food, his response is unique to the other nine respondents in that he begins discussing success through monetary analogies, which is significant in that he is not discussing success through arbitrary definitions such as mental health and comfort, influence, or by maintaining the subjectivity of success used by Richard. Daniel’s example clearly identifies the variable that makes people economically privileged, or successful, by first mentioning money.

Respondents’ father figures served as their main embodiments of success, especially when they thought about “successful figures” through their own definitions of success.
Successful fathers were used by nine of the ten interviewees, while Connor claimed that his mother embodied his definition of success because she was the sole, economic provider for his family. Recognizing this parallel between fathers and embodied figures of success shows how strongly gendered success is to respondents, but also demonstrates that their anticipated marker of success will be through the replication of their own father’s role within their family, showing how respondents feel that their success is hinged upon having women be dependent on them financially. This inherently maintains gender hierarchies and secures these participants what they hope is a longevity of male privilege. Using their fathers as their successful individual shows they wish to replicate their normative family structures.

Education as the Ticket to Entry

As stated earlier, each of the ten research participants agreed that education was the main force through which individuals could pursue their goals and become upwardly mobile. While every respondent, except for Daniel, defined success in arbitrary ways which initially did not mention money or wealth, all ten respondents did feel that their choice in attending college was based in their perspective that graduating college would allow them to make more money and have more fulfilling careers. Connor, a senior at the Western, public University, grew up in an affluent, downtown community in a large Midwestern city. When I asked Connor why he decided to attend college, he replied, “I had no doubts in my mind, I was going to continue my education after high school.” I asked him why continuing an education was important to him, and he said, “I needed a job. Looking back on my senior year of high school, I was just like ‘I want to go to college. I want to be a business student and then get some sort of desk job, like work in a company and make stacks…make a lot of money.’” Connor’s narrative focuses on the
monetary benefits of attending college and discusses these benefits as being inherent results of
studying business, and generally becoming educated. Connor’s narrative should be understood as
the result of middle and upper-class messages of socialization, which position that higher
education will bolster one’s career and wealth. But, Connor contradicts this narrative when he
answers my question about pathways to success in the U.S.

Anyone can be successful. Literally anyone. You don’t need to go to college to be
successful, you just have to have an idea. And it comes down to relationships and
networking, for sure. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. You meet the right people,
the right things line up, you know? But you keep working, you don’t take no for an
answer. And like, fuck, if you don’t make it here, where will you then? Is this not the
land of opportunity?

While the former narrative shows Connor’s personal expectations that attending college will
allow him to make “make stacks,” the latter narrative relies on meritocratic ideologies to explain
upward mobility, showing that he is actually disconnected from the meritocratic ideology he
used. Later in the interview, Connor brings up some examples of how residents in the low
income, mostly Black neighborhoods of this large, Midwestern city can be successful, as he feels
that these individuals can gain upward mobility through education and attentive teachers, using
an example of a scholarship program used in his private high school for “inner-city” boys.

It sucks, but some people are just born into low-income areas and it feels like a rock, but
just because you’re born there doesn’t mean you can’t go to college. There’s a program at
[his high school] that saw these kids that were special, that were smart, that had talents,
that worked hard. They have full rides to college because of it.

Connor’s narrative focuses on the individualistic, “driven and talented” qualities of these “low-
income” kids, showing that their hardworking demeanor was recognized and rewarded with a
college scholarships. This message functions meritocratically and promotes a philosophy of
poverty which indicates that disadvantaged youth need to work hard, to the point that a
philanthropic organizations will recognize their “talent” and give them opportunities to enter into
the meritocracy through attending college. College is credited as being the entrance into the imagined, open opportunity-structure of the U.S., and for those youth who are disadvantaged by poverty - as he does not explicitly mention race- Connor believes that their hard work and ability to internalize the meritocratic ideology serves as a basis for them to earn scholarships, attend college, and gain entrance into the equal opportunity, upwardly-mobile U.S. economy.

Alex, a junior at Western University, is from a middle-class family in the university’s state, and like his father, is currently serving in the U.S. military while he attends college. Alex describes the benefits of attending college so he can become a fighter pilot, like his father. When I asked him to tell me what inspired him to join the military, he said, “I saw how people respected my dad in the military and in the Air Force and just the respect from other people and the values that the military gave him.” Alex feels confident in following his father’s path and attended college because “I knew that I could set myself up and I was well educated enough to go to college and succeed. College was always in the plan for me because I could do it, and my parents could financially support both my sister and I to go.”

Similar to Connor, Alex’s narrative of his decision to attend college is based in being able to find more lucrative and exciting work, and both feel that gaining a higher education is the avenue to attain these goals. Alex’s definition of success was that “success is individually based. Success is like happiness for an individual, and that’s whatever you set it as.” Similar to many participants, Alex feels that success is subjective, but is best measured through happiness. When I asked Alex “how does someone put themselves in a position to be successful,” he answered, “It’s all about hard work and dedication. I know, personally, people who have come from poor backgrounds who worked their ass off and done the things they needed to do, even if they didn’t want to do that.” Alex’s narrative on the personal agency to create one’s success. Alex mentions
that his godfather grew up poor, but “he knew that he had to educate himself and then through education, he could better himself.”

Throughout Alex’s interview, he focused on the individualistic and universal basis of attaining success in the United States and came back to the role of education in allowing entry into the upwardly-mobile realm of the economy. When I asked him what someone must do to become successful in the U.S., Alex answered,

Getting a baseline education is mandatory. For a random person to be successful in today’s world, you have to be able to educate yourself to that level. And really, the more education you have, the more power that you have to make informed decisions. With those informed decisions, more than likely are going to come better opportunities and those kinds of opportunities lead to success in whatever they may be.

Alex does not mention any inequalities in access to education, or the restraints of poverty, race, or gender in gaining a higher education. Alex maintains his belief that anyone can become successful given that they invest in their own education, but there is no mention of how people can do this without having the financially supportive family he discussed earlier. In that moment, Alex situated his opportunity to be in college, currently, as well as the future opportunities which will be granted to him by attending, as a “gift” from his parents, yet he doesn’t take into account the lack of such “gifts” that other people do not have. Alex’s perspective on the necessity of education is predicated on this “gift” he’s been given, which very much contrasts from his narrative which focuses on individualistic agency to “get educated”. In order to maintain a meritocratic ideology, Alex must maintain that anyone can become educated, and that education is the ticket for which anyone can pursue their “subjective successful” goals, and this perspective is functional when it ignores the presence of institutional barriers which restrict access to adequate public schools, as well as higher educational attainment.
Interestingly, only Dylan creates narratives about the importance of intellectual growth which is attained through attending college, while the other nine respondents felt that college was a gateway to economic success. These narratives should be understood as the replication and internalization of the financial based curriculum of Western University, as even those studying science, engineering, or psychology created narratives about college acting as a gateway to upward-mobility, choosing not to focus on the value of becoming more educated. This may also speak to the cost of attending Western University and the underlying anxiety held by participants that valuing academics will not be lucrative enough for them to hold privileged positions within the U.S, like their fathers currently hold. Indeed, the replication of economic privilege through education is the motivating factor for why respondents feel people should attend college to gain access to the meritocracy.

“I Want to Provide for my Family”: Success and the Reproduction of Heteronormative Domesticity

Seven of the ten respondents claimed explicitly that they would feel they had reached a point of success when they were able to have a wife and children that they could provide for. Similar to how many respondents felt inspired to pursue goals that were influenced by their parents, the heteronormative environments these respondents were raised in play a crucial role in how they envision their futures and expect what it is that successful life will be. The salience of this domestic reproduction is in the maintenance and reinforcement of masculine hegemony, as Mimi Shippers (2007) theorizes that hegemonic masculinity is functional through its dominance of hegemonic feminine ways of being. As these respondents claim that their envisioned destinations of success lie in their ability to act as the breadwinner for their families, and as they desire to fill the roles of husband and father that their White, middle to upper-class father’s held, it is evident that these White, college attending men are invested in upholding gender hierarchies
and structures of masculine dominance as a means of maintaining their male privilege. This informs why respondents desired to someday have a household with a stereotypical gendered division of labor, as this would be a sign of success in their eyes, in that they would be operating through normative expressions of masculine privilege and dominance. This logic is also evidence of why men are so often cast as figures of success in the sample. Respondents’ fathers were commonly narrativized as successful individuals, in that they made money and “led” their families, becoming the idealized envisionment of men who effectively used their male privilege and became dominant, male figures for the sample to look up to. Even though there was never mention of participants’ fathers overcoming immense obstacles to gain their esteemed social positions, the ways in which these fathers were seen as “committed” to raising a family, by deploying their male privilege, may act as domesticated, meritocratic path through which this sample feels they can use their male privilege to expect certain life-outcomes of having a family they will someday “lead” as well.

Aaron, a senior at Western University, describes being from a wealthy, Jewish household in a suburban town north of a large, Midwestern city. Aaron describes that “there was no limitation money wise” on opportunities he could follow and things he could pursue recreationally, due to his father’s lucrative career in the stock exchange. Even though Aaron’s parents are divorced, when asked to define and describe success, Aaron first focused on happiness and contentment, but then switched to discussing money. Aaron explained,

To have enough money for me, that’s having enough money to support a family and to allow them the kind of childhood and upbringing that I had, which is very unlimited, really. I had options to do whatever I wanted. I feel once I have made enough money to supply that to my family, that is success.

Aaron’s narrative positions that his recognition of success centers around being able to provide for his family the same wealthy and “limitless” structure he was given. Aaron’s desires to
provide for his family is postulated as being the sole economic provider for his family, which suggests that he desires to have a wife that will stay at home, rather than focus on their career, which ultimately maintains hegemonic masculine and feminine roles of dominance and submission, accordingly. This reproduction of Aaron’s familial structure is one which will reinforce and reproduce gender hierarchy, and just as Aaron uses his father as an example of a person that fits his definition of success, claiming that “he’s my role model, he’s who I aspire to be like,” it can be assumed that Aaron will likely socialize his children to desire this heteronormative masculine expectation of female domesticity and male providership, given Aaron’s current economic desires and envisioning of success.

Todd, a senior at Western, is also from a wealthy, Jewish household, and is from a suburb of a large East Coast city. Todd tells me early in the interview that this wealth is derived from his family’s business, which has operated for three generations and is now run by his father. When I asked Todd to define success, he told me that his characteristics would “align with what a white-collar idea of success would be, which is growing up in a very affluent neighborhood and going to a relatively respectable college along with a lot of my friends who kind of do the same thing.” Todd situates that his experiences and path to college are templative to his perceptions of “white collar” life, showing his desires to be able to provide this lifestyle for his children. Later he says that he talks with his friends about having lives like their parents’ do: “When we were younger, we wanted to be able to live like our parents do and be able to go on vacations and have one or two houses in a couple different spots.” This narrative again shows Todd’s desires to recreate the wealthy structure and rewards that he grew up surrounded by. Further into the interview, I probed Todd and asked him if he felt he was setting himself up for success, as envisioned by himself, to which he replied,
I think so, I mean hopefully I’ll be able to work up and be a partner with my brokers, and you know, make a substantial commission on all of the deals we do. And really, be able to raise a family here and put them through the same college experience that I had.

Although Todd explains he does not want to “go into the family business,” he is extremely confident that the networks he developed in Western University, through his internships, and through connections of his affluent family-friends for setting him on a path to have a family and grant them the opportunities he had. Todd is confident that he will attain these goals, and similar to Aaron, the presence of a family to provide for appears as a signal for one being successful. These messages are pernicious in that Todd and Aaron see that success is defined by having women and children be reliant on them as the breadwinners of their families, showing the inundation of heteronormative, masculine hegemony on these men’s self-conceptions.

Even Daniel, whose views otherwise do not align with the other nine respondents, discusses his future desires to have kids and provide for them an environment similar to the upper-middle class household his father endowed to him. Daniel discusses this as he answers my question about why he wanted to go to college. “I wanted to attend college probably because it was pushed upon me by my parent, but also because I wanted to get a job. I wanted to get a professional career, and I wanted to have kids that grew up in the means that I grew up in.” Although Daniel tells me that his mother works, his responses and focus on his father as a role model of success, compared to a lack of positive mentions around working mothers, (except for Connor), aligns with other respondents. Furthermore, Daniel’s narrative shows that his decision to attend college was very much influenced by his future desires to have a family, suggesting that hegemonic masculinity is widely socialized, even as Danial’s narratives run counter to many of the themes found in other respondents.
Throughout my interviews, the roles of the participants’ fathers in “creating success” and providing examples of success shows how these college men attribute masculinity and providership with a confirmation of upward-mobility. The lack of attention attributed to mothers throughout this sample shows a lack of acknowledgement around the legitimacy of female labor and the domestic expectations of women’s roles in their lives. Whether it is recognized or not, these men maintain a gendered hierarchy when they argue that success is defined by being the sole, economic providers for their future families.
2. Maintaining Meritocracy Through Colorblind Racism and a Powerblind Approach

The meritocratic ideology is only functional through the maintenance and reinforcement of colorblind ideologies of race, genderblind ideologies, and generally, powerblind frames of understanding society. The meritocratic ideology positions that any opportunity is attainable as long as individuals try their hardest, “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and are committed to imagining goals and searching for ways to attain them in what is seen as a U.S. society based in upward-mobility (McNamee and Miller, 2014). Respondents claimed differing degrees of this ideology through their definitions and envisioned paths to success, their universal messages around attaining success through individualistic narratives, and through their assumptions that a college education sets anyone up for a path towards lucrative opportunities. Throughout these responses, there was little to no attention given to structural barriers which make upward mobility far less attainable to individuals who are not White men. Respondents did not mention the privileges they have by way of their Whiteness or their masculinity, even if they did bring to light the benefits of the wealth accrued by their father. Furthermore, the ways that respondents positioned their fathers’ success by way of their individual effort and commitment to raising a family shows the pervasiveness of the meritocratic ideology in these respondents’ conceptions of their familial upward-mobility.

Similar to how Whiteness and their masculinity was never positioned as an unearned benefit to their economic pursuits, respondents failed to mention the ways that non-white, masculine identities are limiting given institutional oppression and swaths of individual acts of minoritized-directed discrimination. Their colorblindness is a critical element of maintaining a meritocratic ideology which functions to abstract these participants’ privilege as White men in middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.
Difficulties in presenting Whiteness

I found that one of the earliest instances of the colorblind racial ideology was captured when I asked respondents how they identified racially. Four of the ten respondents positioned that they were either Caucasian, of European heritage, or a combination of these identities before they would mention they were White, and two of these four respondents did not say that they were White. For instance, when asked about how he identified racially, Ben told me, “I’m Caucasian, European. If you break it down, I’m mostly Italian, but to be honest, I wouldn’t consider my Italian genetics to be my most culturally shown. I’d say I look more like someone who’s from Germany or the Netherlands.” Instead of claiming that he is White, Ben says he is Caucasian and then lists the different elements of his European heritage which he feels make him Caucasian. He resists calling himself Italian because of his assumptions of phenotypical distinctions between darker skinned, White Italians and lighter skinned, Northern Europeans. I probed Ben’s response and asked him if his European heritage was significant to his identity, to which he replied,

I consider that my upbringing is from Europe but it’s kind of complicated. I would say though that I do believe that I’m also English. I’m English-German-Dutch-Italian, but I’m mostly Italian. I would consider the works that were done in England and Germany have been the largest influences on me both philosophically and politically.

Ben does not claim that he is a White person anywhere in his analysis of his identity, and points to all the varying, and unrecognizable, aspects of his European heritage, and he constructs this heritage as being specific and unique to himself. While most every White American can identify their European heritage and where their ancestors came from, Ben’s statements are pernicious in how he denies his Whiteness by presenting himself as a unique individual formulated through his connections to Europe. The impact of this view is in his lack of explicit acknowledgement of his Whiteness and the institutional power this identity holds for him. He denies the presence of his
own race, and later denies the importance of identifying anyone according to race, which will be presented more fully, later.

Similarly, when asked about his racial identity, Dylan first presents himself as Caucasian, and then points to different facets of his European ancestry, but quickly mentions that he doesn’t feel engaged with these identities because he was not socialized around their cultural practices, but instead claims that he really thinks of himself mostly as a resident of his home-state.

I’m pretty classic Caucasian, I guess…Polish and Swedish descent. I’ve never really identified too much with my heritage though. When you’re raised in America and you don’t speak any other language and you don’t have any other upbringing in any culture, you’re just what your surroundings are. I mean really, I’m more of a [resident of Western State] than I am anything.

Like Ben, Dylan fails to recognize his Whiteness, first situating himself as Caucasian, and then presents his identity as being specific to his upbringing in his home-state. The term *Caucasian* is a remnant of the academization of race and racism, used in the era of biological racism, as biologists, anthropologists, and naturalists, like Benjamin Rush, Georges Cuvier, and even Charles Darwin came to see the presence of race as a marker for differences in biology, with such differences being used to claim a higher degree of “Caucasoid” brain intelligence in comparison to the “negroid” or “mongrel” (Harris, 2001). As biological racism worked to postulate intellectual Black inferiority to legitimize slavery and other oppressive institutions, such racism also bolstered the essentialist perspective of White, “Caucasian” supremacy (Harris, 2001). I do not assume that respondents are aware of these legacies when they use the term “Caucasian” to identify themselves, but it is obvious that this cultural remnant is pervasive in the self-conceptions of White people, and with its use may come biological views of race, and at the least, a distancing of identity from the social construction of Whiteness as a means of unearned benefits and full citizenship within the United States (Harris, 1993).
Richard uses similar, albeit more direct language when he presents his racial identity. “I identify as a White, Caucasian male,” showing a more acute acknowledgement of his Whiteness, but one which is functional only in the presentation of his Caucasian identity. Finally, Connor responds that he is a “White American, but really, I’m an Earthling.” Connor recognizes that identity is contingent on his race but pushes back on regarding himself as only a White person. The question of race posed to him grants a reaction from Connor that he should more fully announce himself as an Earthling. Although it was not explicitly stated, I felt that Connor’s “Earthling” interjection was used sarcastically, as if bringing up race, especially Whiteness, was something trivial or basic, and something that did not have to have attention brought to it. Similar to the other three respondents, Connor’s insecurity with race prompts him to present himself in colorblind ways that deny the structural impacts of Whiteness. Although every respondent used racialized language to some degree, whether it be through overt racism, colorblind rhetoric, or through racial “dog whistles”, these four respondents show a high degree of colorblind racism just through their lack of a straightforward presentation of their Whiteness as their racial identities.

“I Care About What Impacts Me”: Powerblindness Through Political Ideologies

When asked about their political values, seven of my ten respondents described themselves as having both socially liberal and fiscally conservative values. Whenever answers like these were given, I probed respondents to tell me about specific beliefs they understood as being conservative or liberal, revealing to me the degree to which these White men were maintaining socially inclusive values, but values which may be contradictory in the ways that these men also hold conservative views of economics and taxation, which may be seen to
maintain their family’s current wealth as well as protect these respondents perceived future privileges. Furthermore, this contradiction reveals that respondents would not be comfortable with increases in taxes to fund many of the social programs they claim to support. In this way, the separation between social values and conservative economic practices should be understood as respondents’ desires to maintain their economic positions and wealth, while also disseminating more popular and socially acceptable social values which imbue social security at Western University, which is often framed as being a “very liberal” environment.

The social liberalism which is positioned in their political narratives indicates a replication of acceptable and widely dispersed socially liberal values which are prevalent throughout Western University, which may show that the use of these socially liberal values may be used as a means of fitting in this academic environment, so to not “rock the boat” with what is perceived as toxic conservatism. In this way, these responses may have been given in a way that was seen to be more acceptable when talking to a college researcher in sociology, and there is no guarantee that respondents truly hold the values they claim when they are around family, friends, or are out of a public square.

Furthermore, the contradictions of a fiscally conservative perspective and its intersection with liberal, social values indicates a high degree of powerblindness and self-protective, political ideologies, as no respondent wants to be explicitly “outed” as being conservative, yet most respondents were unable to promote policies which addressed marginalized groups. The responses in this section show that many socially liberal values are not functional when compounded by conservative, economic policy preferences. This preference of fiscal conservatism should be understood the preference of policies which maintain respondents anticipated economic privilege, and the lack of equitable, fiscal policies promoted in this sample.
shows that maintaining the status-quo is seen as an acceptable method for maintaining the participants’ racial, gendered, and classed privilege. And in maintaining this status-quo, respondents’ use of powerblind ideologies casts equitable policy goals as being potentially damaging to the sample’s various encapsulations of privilege, as aiding the “other” is always seen as damaging the strength of privilege.

When asked about his political values, Richard tells me that his parents are “not involved with politics that much, but for the most part they’re conservative.” I then probe and ask him about his own views, to which he answers, “I definitely have some liberal views, but I would say I’m also conservative. As far as economics go, I think that conservative policies drive our economy, and whatever is going to boost our economy, I think is right.” Richard begins his narrative by mentioning that he has some liberal views, but then quickly adjusts his response to align himself with conservative economic policies. I probe this response and ask Richard why he feels this way, to which he responds,

I feel like people that are conservative are – it’s almost like old America, where you get up, you go to work, you put food on the table and you go back the next day. And like, these people don’t have time to worry about all these social issues, ‘cause it’s not in their daily routine. They’re just busy working, it’s a working America, you know?

Richard’s narrative is colorblind in the approach that it takes in creating an image of “old America,” which is too busy working everyday to take notice to or care about varying social issues, which are seen to affect the “other”. Similar to the ways Richard discusses his White father as being “very blue-collar”, Richard creates an image of “old, working America” which is rooted in Whiteness, as well as the assumptions that White people work harder and are more dedicated to success than People of Color. This protection of this class, as he uses this example to illustrate why he aligns more with conservative, shows a protection of the White working class, and an acceptance that issues facing minoritized, yet unnamed populations, do not matter
to these people or to Richard. Furthermore, his narrative functions meritocratically, as he describes working class Whites who work every day to “put food on the table,” and that “old America” is a system of working class people that only pay attention to their jobs, and not to social issues, because they are looking to be upwardly-mobile. Richard discusses Whiteness as being at the root of the American working class, yet he does not use the language of race when describing this population, yet his politics function in order to protect this non-raced group.

For Alex, his political ideologies are similarly “fiscally Republican” and “socially Democratic”, but his narrative quickly reveals that any political decision he makes is done so based on his “priority level”, as he feels that his military background is best protected through conservative policy. “I’m in the military and aspiring to be in the military in the future so I tend to vote Republican because they financially support the military more than the Democrats. When it comes to social issues, I’m a big proponent of the government staying out of your life in any aspect.” Similar to Richard, Alex begins his narrative by claiming that he has socially liberal values, yet when he gives examples of social issues, he simply claims that he wants the government “out of people’s lives”, a popular Conservative perspective which works to deny any expansion to social spending, increased taxation to benefit education initiatives, and typically comes with a negative framing of “handouts”, as Alex discusses later in his interview. Like Richard, too, Alex feels that any political decision that he makes is first based on how policy affects him, showing a lack of empathy for people that are not in their in-group; for Alex, this is people in the military. While it makes sense that military personnel would vote to gain more military spending so that individual members could have higher wages, it is significant that Alex positions that any political decision he makes is based on how he will be impacted, and impacted as a White, middle-class, soon to be college educated man. The lack of empathy within his
voting patterns, evidenced by the necessity to have small government, shows that he is invested in maintaining the status-quo, and such an investment directly maintains structural inequalities and oppressive policy.

With regards to decreasing the “size” of the federal government, Ben tells me that he feels his political values best align with “neo-federalist libertarianism.” He explains to me that his views are inspired by “a Teddy Roosevelt thing called the Rugged Individuals. It’s just people who believe that they can do things on their own. If you had problems, you would just always be able to figure out and do it, just live on your own.” While he can certainly be referring to a desire to live alone in the wilderness, I feel that Ben’s responses are grounded in libertarian ideals that having a large government creates dependency, and this view is detrimental in that it often places this perceived dependency on poor, People of Color, evident by Neoliberal epithets such as calling Black women “welfare queens”, showing an assumption that “handouts” are never used responsibly, especially by Black people. This libertarian approach is a negation of aiding the impoverished. Ben’s libertarian ideals position that social services, like welfare and increased spending on education, limit the degree to which people can function as individuals, and this individuality is central to his political ideologies, and is prevalent through his discussion of pathways to success, as they are meritocratic. I probed Ben’s answers, and asked him what important issues mattered to him given his libertarian ideology, to which he responded,

In most instances, I don’t believe that there’s blanket solutions to a lot of things. I’m a big fan of decentralized democracies where people have more choice. Like I believe that if a state wants to make gay marriage illegal, that’s okay, but I think another state has the right to make gay marriage legal, too.

Ben’s narrative maintains that he does not feel invested in many social issues facing marginalized groups, using the example of gay marriage to bolster his belief that all values are
subjective, and that he is fully supportive of state’s making their own decisions without the federal government. I probe Ben’s answers and ask him how he navigates his own values with this political ideology that smaller constituencies should make their own decisions, to which he responded using the example of gay marriage again, that the only people who should vote on social issues, like gay marriage, should do so because they are actually invested in the issue. Ben explains, “I could care less if they’re married or not. That’s because of my personal life at the moment, I’m just not connected to anyone who’s gay, who’d be affected by gay marriage. So for me to get involved in a debate that I really hold no stake in, I think is almost unfair.” Ben’s lack of investment in social issues which are seen to not affect him should be interpreted as a lack of political investment in anything that does not affect White, wealthy men, and like Richard and Alex, the impact of such a mindset is maintaining the status-quo. And uniquely to Ben, he is unable to bring up any issue that actually affects him besides marijuana legalization. If these respondents only care about issues that affect them, they will most likely be unwilling to garner support for policies which directly benefit oppressed groups in the U.S., thus revealing a high degree of colorblindness and powerblind ideologies which place difference as something that does not need to be noticed, let alone acted upon if there are oppressive issues facing such populations.

Even Matthew, who explains his love for Bernie Sanders when I asked him about his political identity, uses issues that affect him directly to narrativize his political stances. When I asked Matthew to tell me what issues were particularly important to him, he explained, “Obviously, the climate. Just reducing our waste, our carbon emissions, etcetera. The environment is definitely the number one priority for me.” I asked Matthew about his support for
more socialist social initiatives, specifically increases to social welfare spending, to which he
told me,

Honestly, increasing welfare spending is not something I really think about, especially in
comparison to all the work that we need to do for the environment and addressing climate
change. And also, I would push back on being called a socialist, I think it’s a good
philosophy, but I don’t think it would ever work in America. Like I consider myself a
realist, and socialism, really is only attainable in European countries.

I asked Matthew if he could expand on his idea that socialism could not work in the United
States, and he explained, “Well Scandinavia comes to mind, and I think it’s really because they
have a homogenous society, while in America, there is such a huge, diverse population that can
barely agree on anything [chuckles].” Matthew’s answers are problematic in more subtle ways,
but they are self-protective in that his most important issue, the environment, is an issue that
directly affects him, while increasing funding to welfare, welfare he assumes he will never need
because of his economic position, is something he does not ground his politics around.
Furthermore, he claims that increased welfare spending is not something he thinks about,
showing a lack of thoughtfulness or policy orientation directed to poor communities, especially
impoverished communities of Color. Lastly, his answers are troubling because he thinks that
being a realist means that progressive goals will always be more difficult in the U.S. because we
are not a racially or economically homogenous, like some European nations, and in this
colorblind rhetoric, the existence of this diversity is understood to be potentially limiting.

These examples show that while respondents claimed socially adept values to differing
degrees, such claims were quickly contradicted through their narratives which mentioned that
their decisions are made primarily through what affects them as individuals. Even Matthew, who
claims to be progressive, declares that environmental regulation is his number one most
important political issue, yet he claims to not think about social welfare initiatives, showing his
primary regard for an issue which will affect him, showing an overall lack of an intersectional approach or tangible empathy for impoverished and oppressed groups. These political ideologies shape the colorblind rhetoric promoted by many of the interviewees, as their attention to issues which only affect them helps frame the lack of empathy or recognition of individuals who are not White men from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.

Positioning Individuality to Negate the Importance of Identity

Although the respondents’ political values varied and held contradictions, colorblind racism and a powerblind ideology was narratized as a way to maintain the also varied expressions of a meritocratic ideology. Ben, Richard, Alex, Dylan, Connor and Jesse used a colorblind racial framework when responding to questions around: 1) the degree to which one’s personal history and background was significant in their pursuits of success 2) whether they felt there were restrictions to pursuing success in the U.S., and 3) whether they felt there were important external factors beyond one’s individual effort and use of social networks in pursuits of success. Answers to the questions were grounded in colorblind ideologies, as respondents maintained the idea that the U.S. was an open society, to the degree that People of Color, and those who did not identify as a man, were either guaranteed the ability to pursue any goal, or positioned that there were mild institutional restrictions, but that by way of chance, people who were “not in their situations” would have to work harder than the respondents, but respondents claimed that as long as these “othered” individuals understood the necessity of hard work, they would be guaranteed upward-mobility.

Jesse, who identified as being fiscally conservative and socially liberal but claimed that “he doesn’t have a strong political stance,” felt that an individual’s identity and personal
background was significant only to the degree to which someone was educated sufficiently so to put themselves in a position to become upwardly-mobile, and Jesse felt that there were barriers to gaining an education based on the expense of going to college. True as this statement is, a typical colorblind ideology works through positioning all disadvantage in economic terms, as strictly using economic disadvantage downplays, or ignores, the existence of structural barriers facing People of Color, and positions legacies of racism and oppression as only having historical significance (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). I probed Jesse’s response and asked him, directly, to assess the degree to which “identity categories, like race, gender, and sexuality” had an effect in an individual’s economic pursuits, to which he responded, “I don’t think that has a big effect, I think all that’s bullshit. I think if you’re willing to do it and you want to get it, you can do it, no one’s going to stop you.” I probed this response and asked Jesse why he felt these identities had no impact in one’s economic endeavors, and Jesse explained,

I mean, I just don’t see it. I don’t see any limitations. I’m not going to do business with someone based on their sex, gender, race. I don’t give a fuck. If they want to do business with me and they’re giving me a good deal and they’re honest and they’re trustworthy, then I’ll do the deal. I don’t care if it’s a White, old man doing the deal of if it’s a young woman or a Black, a young Black guy or a gay guy, I don’t care.

Throughout his interview, Jesse’s narrative was based on his anticipation of being an entrepreneur and owning his own business. His responses are colorblind in that there is a high degree to which Jesse feels that paying attention to race is “bullshit”, and as he assumes that he will be hiring and “making deals” with “all types of people”, he maintains that paying attention to identity is useless, and something that he will never consider. Furthermore, he admits that he never sees the presence of any structural barriers, as this response is constructed around his experiences as a White, affluent man, showing how Jesse is less able extend empathy or understanding to people who are not in his same economic condition, race, or gender. The lack
of acknowledgement around the importance of these marginalized identities shows that Jesse is also comfortable and supportive of the contemporary structuring of corporate America and the workforce, which is shown to function through White, normative values (SOURCE). He feels that paying attention to identity masks the necessary attention that should be given to credentials and character. What’s more, Jesse positions that these identities do not matter as long as “they’re giving” Jesse a good deal. Jesse’s centers himself throughout his responses and indicated that identity does not matter to him, and that he would take investments from anybody offering to him. The lack of legitimacy he places around marginalized identities shows the presence of an active colorblind and powerblind ideology.

When Connor was asked about the importance of one’s identity and personal background in their pursuits of success, he answered that “it’s important to understand where people come from, but you are who you are today, not yesterday. You’re a new man in every moment, and you can either seize it or give up and just throw your hands up and sit on the couch.” Connor’s narrative positions that identity, which he interpreted to be “where someone came from,” is recognizable, the only identities that are seen to matter to Connor are in the ways people present themselves in the current moment. Connor’s response is indicative of an attitude that treats identity as far less salient than the ways in which an individual presents themselves, and this stress on individual attitudes is an example of a colorblind approach used to maintain focus on people’s values – how they come across in normative, White environments – that demarcates an individual’s worth. Connor’s answer is colorblind and meritocratic in its attempts to invisibilize the significance of identity in contrast to the importance of individualistic work ethic.

Dylan’s response to my question around the importance of identity and background was vague, yet there are subtleties throughout his response that indicate both a powerblind and
colorblind ideology as he promotes the idea that education grants everyone “equal
opportunities”.

I think [the impacts of identity and background] definitely depends. I think once you
reach a certain level, if you get to that level, hopefully people there have the same
opportunity. I’m just thinking about people making it to college. Once you’re in college,
hopefully, everyone treats you the same, and at that point, yes, you have these equal
opportunities. But, you have to take into account that people are maybe there based off
much different circumstances.

Dylan feels that identity matters a small amount, but only in the case of how people are able to
get a higher education. Dylan also feels confident that once people are able to get to college,
there’s going to be a plethora of opportunities there that will always be available to an individual,
regardless of their background and identity. In this way, Dylan’s narrative maintains the
meritocratic expectations of higher education, and as he does not directly mention race, gender,
or sexuality, yet claims that college is full of equal opportunities. I probed Dylan’s response and
asked him again to speak on the importance of identity in pursuits of success. Dylan’s next
answer alludes more fully to his color/powerblindness.

I mean, I think that people are always going to be biased. And it’s this weirs thing where
the more we talk about bias and the more we talk about racial and sexual identities, the
more that we seem to just, emphasize the problem. Then people start talking about that
and then there are definitely problems, you know? Intelligent people, hopefully for the
most part ignore these things, but there’s always going to be dumb people out there.

Dylan’s colorblind and genderblind ideology is fully expressed when I probed his initial answer.
On one level, Dylan feels that there are problems that arise in society when people bring forth
too much attention to identity and the effects of being someone who is not a White male. Dylan
recognizes that there is bias in the U.S., but that paying attention too much attention to the
identities of individuals’ receiving this bias is seen to bolster the problem of discrimination. On
another, perhaps more alarming level, Dylan feels that the “most intelligent” people will not
notice race or sexuality or gender, showing how Dylan attaches a lot of value to a colorblind and
powerblind approach. In his eyes, the smartest people in our society don’t notice identity, and treat everybody the same, a key marker of the colorblind ideology described by Bonilla-Silva (2003) and how the ideology intersects with “good manners” of not recognizing differences across identity, alluding to the agreeable White habitus?

Ben’s answer to the question of the importance of identity is both power and colorblind in the ways that he situates the importance of economic differences as holding far more importance than identity categories, although he does admit that a wealthy background is a benefit.

I think you can grow up in a really poor neighborhood and still be successful, today. I think that you’re more likely to be successful if you come from a wealthier place, and again, I think part of that is not the physical nature of your upbringing, it’s actually the nurture part of your upbringing, that you were probably raised by individuals who were also intelligent and contributed to your actual line of thinking ability to think and recognize the world.

Ben’s answers to the question of the importance of background and identity is rooted in his equation that wealth is beneficial to the socialization of any child, and that the nurturing aspects of wealth produce the most intelligent children, who will eventually find ways to be successful. His response is troubling in that he creates a picture of unsuccessful people as always being raised by unintelligent people, and furthermore, the ways in which he treats wealthy identities is very much reflective of White ideals of wealth, although they are not named as such. I make this distinction due to Ben’s presentation of his background and wealth in the early parts of our interview. He is quick to conflate wealth with intelligence as a means to create positive messages about his own self. But, Ben maintains that poor people can be successful, but nowhere in his response does he point to the significance of race, gender, or sexuality as being distinctive identities in regard to pursuits of success. He maintains a color and powerblind approach through
his focus on economics. I probed his response and asked him to expand on how he feels wealth is a socializing aspect of identity. He responded,

I think that the number one indicator of how hard being successful is going to be is your economic position. I really disagree with a lot of the ideas that it’s going to be your race, your gender or things like that. I feel like a lot of people who are really driven, those things don’t fucking matter at all.

Ben continues to discuss how his mother proves that women can be successful in the workplace, and that quote will be used in the analysis of the “exemplary other”, but within the above quote, Ben willingly admits that there is no reason to pay attention to identity categories, and that any assessment of an individuals’ identity must be done so from strictly an economic perspective. This is one of the clearest and most defined examples of colorblind racism, gender blindness, and a lack of attention to the significance of marginality throughout my respondents, and shows how people, like Ben are being taught to think about identity in these ways at Western University.

Respondents’ answers to the question “do you think there are restrictions to pursuing success in the U.S.?“ differed according to the focus at which they used to determine what a legitimate restriction was. While Daniel, Aaron, and Todd readily acknowledged the presence of structural barriers such as racism, sexism, and wealth inequality, the rest of the respondents maintained that there were no such barriers affecting these identities, and that if there were, they were seen as minimal restrictions that could be overcome with persistence to hard work and individuality. Because the powerblind perspectives represent the majority, I focus on them in order to better understand how White habitus conflates and is structured upon a voluntary negation of seeing structural barriers, or minimizing their effects, to maintain White, masculine supremacy.

When asked whether he felt there were any restrictions to achieving success in the U.S., Richard positioned that people are restricted when they fail to push themselves, and keeps his
answer grounded in an individualistic, meritocratic framework. “Being restricted from success would depend on a person’s outlook on whatever they’re pursuing. If a person doesn’t want to graduate high school, they’re obviously going to be limited to our social factors of what it takes to work a job as a non-high school graduate.” Richard’s sentiment is problematic in the ways by which he frames the personal agency of failure, and positions that poor people are to blame for putting themselves in situations of poverty, using the example of willingly not completing high school, which denies the presence of institutional-level inequalities and the presence of legitimate, oppressive structures. I asked Richard to expand on his answer and asked him to assess if people are ever restricted from making money in the U.S., to which he responded, “I don’t think anyone’s restricted from making money because if you’re in this country, you can choose not to work and the people that are working are paying for you to live here.” This response is colorblind to an extent, but functions even more as a “dog whistle” to show Richard’s distaste for what he perceives as people choosing not to make money and relying on “working people’s” taxes through welfare programs. In thinking about Richard’s conservative political ideology, as well, this disapproval of welfare is often heavily racialized, as Neoliberal policies starting in the 1980s implanted an image of the Black, “Welfare Queen” within the White habitus (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006).

Alex’s response to the question of restrictions to success also mentioned “handouts” and is similar to Richard’s position. Alex answered,

I guess there might be some restrictions, but, America, as many flaws as it has, is one of the best countries for the sole sake of opportunities. I come off as sometimes harsh when I say that people need to do it themselves instead of having all these handouts, and that’s crass how I say it as just “handouts”, but really, I feel like if you don’t put yourself in a position to succeed in America, you’ve either had shit luck or you don’t have the drive to be successful.
Alex is able to bring up initially that he sees the presence of some restrictions that are some “flaws” of the United States, but Alex makes sure to follow up this perspective with the claim that anyone who is “given handouts”, which I always assume to be a racist “dog whistle” for People of Color receiving social services, are perceived to be unfairly supported by the government, because Alex sees that anyone can find success in the U.S. This claim around the openness of society is powerblind in how Alex does not mention any specific structural barriers to upward mobility, and while he alludes that there may exist some institutional restrictions to gaining upward-mobility, he feels that this discussion is not as important as situating his disapproval of “handouts”. I probed Alex’s response and asked if he could give any examples of what he felt was a legitimate structural restriction to gaining success, to which he replied,

Okay, so success has a large part to do with how many opportunities are presented to that individual. Yes, there are individuals and socioeconomic groups that there may be less opportunities, I would say, less socioeconomic areas and circumstances where both parents may be incarcerated, or you’ve had to sustain you and your family since you were fifteen, so you couldn’t go to school. Really, lack of opportunities is a restriction.

Alex’s language is colorblind yet seems to be based in stereotypes of “inner-city America”, evident through the example he provides of a household of two incarcerated parents, where children are forced to take care of their younger siblings. His language is colorblind in that he refers to people who lack opportunities as being in “lower socioeconomic” positions, which either denies or abstracts the impacts of race and gender in one’s pursuit of upward-mobility.

Furthermore, Alex’s powerblind position continues to use a micro-level analysis at the individual-level, which functions to also abstract how oppressive mechanisms affect minoritized groups in different ways. Furthermore, like Alex’s admission of his social liberalism which seemed to fall apart when he brought up specific policies that were distinctly conservative, Alex seems to position the importance of “socioeconomic” indices, as the term is popular at Western
University, and seems to be used as a means of giving Alex a stronger academic ethos to be used to mask his racial politics. Similar to how Ben used economics to center our discussion of inequality, Alex maintains a similar view which is seen to invisibilize his colorblind perspectives by mentioning a scale, like socioeconomic identity, which thereby implicates himself, and his socioeconomic position, within the discussion of structural barriers. In this way, he can make his White masculinity a part of the discussion and thereby maintains his meritocratic and colorblind ideologies by positioning that anyone can face issues if they are poor, which denies the impacts of race, sexual identity, gender, and other marginalized aspects of identity, beyond class. And more emblematic of Alex’s powerblind ideology lies within his previous demonization of recipients of “handouts”, and even as he creates the image of the “low socioeconomic individual”, his previous claims make it clear that he does not feel that issues facing this imagined individual should be solved by government policy. Alex identifies issues but has not desire to fix them.

Alex and Richard’s positions are contested by Aaron’s direct identification of structural barriers, as he respondent to the question of restrictions by focusing on the presence of bias in the U.S.

People are absolutely restricted in America. I mean, there’s so much bias, so much racism. This country is not perfect. People have their bias and people are racist. It’s definitely a lot harder for a person of color to rise up to the top coming from nothing than it is for a suburban White kid, like me.

Aaron recognizes that racism and bias are real and impactful restrictions from pursuing any opportunity in the U.S., and then uses himself as an example of someone that will easily be successful compared to a poor, person of Color. While Aaron’s identification of race and bias is a legitimate recognition of positionality, his expectations of wealth and success for himself, by way of his class and Whiteness, shows how he expects his White affluent privilege to gain him
success, especially when he compares himself to the “people of Color coming from nothing”. I probed Aaron’s response and asked him “do you think that society has a responsibility to help people facing these issues?” to which Aaron responded, “Yeah, we do, I mean with affirmative action and such, if you have the hard work and if you do ‘it’, the opportunity’s there. The public funding is there to get you to school.” Aaron feels confident that hardworking people will always be recognized and aided by programs, such as affirmative action. This is similar to the point Aaron made earlier about the power of hard work to be recognized for scholarships, and generally aligns with the perspective that education functions as a ticket into meritocracy.

Aaron feels confident that as long as people are hardworking, they will be recognized and given opportunities to succeed, which is a view that does not fully consider educational inequalities, the deterioration of affirmative action in education, and the ways that there are also many biases found throughout U.S. universities, which is reality, maintain identity and class hierarchies which reflect the rest of U.S. society. Aaron identifies issues, such as racism, but then uses meritocratic ideologies to create a narrative about solutions. Like Alex’s use of “socioeconomics”, Alex’s understanding of the significance of racism is contradicted with his views that when individuals abide by meritocratic ideologies, showing that while Aaron may engage with academic theories and language, he uses these lessons as a means to bolster his credibility, which is seen to give permission to his belief that hardworking people, regardless of race or gender, will be recognized for their hard work.

These examples of a color and powerblindness are prevalent and often replicated by White men in college. With so many claims of the power of college as a socializer of liberal values, my sample shows how some White men, from middle class to wealthy backgrounds, are aware and careful of how they use language to describe minoritized groups, doing so in a way
that maintains expectations of “progressive,” college values, values that quickly disintegrate when respondents engaged with issues of inequality, demonstrating their powerblind approach. Respondents attempted to keep their analyses of marginality focused on economic indices, rather than naming the actual groups which are disproportionately affected by institutional oppression, sometimes resulting in endemic poverty. Furthermore, beyond the bias that Aaron mentions, none of the respondents mentioned the presence of oppressive institutions and chose to create narratives around the hazards of individual “bad apples”. Regardless if this was intentional or a lack of awareness around such issues, respondents maintain the expectation of a free a fair society, but one which is altered and seen to be thrown off balance by a few, negative individuals. By failing to recognize that discrimination and oppression functions at the meso- and macro-levels of society, participants are able to maintain the expectation of living in a meritocracy, and as will be shown in the following section, respondents tended to feel that minoritized individuals created excuses for a lack of success when these groups argue about the realities of structural oppression. The belief in meritocracy is predicated on a powerblind and individualistic approach, and in so doing, those who are seen to have “failed” in the meritocracy are blamed for their position. Victim blaming of the “failed other” was used by respondents to negate their own privilege, invisibilize the effects of institutional oppression, and position upward-mobility as universally attainable.

3. Blaming Failure

Throughout the interviews, participants’ narratives maintained the perspective that society functioned to allow any form of upward-mobility as a means of distancing themselves from their privileged backgrounds. Some respondents claimed to not recognize or pay attention
to identity, which allowed these interviewees to maintain their meritocratic views. But, these power-, gender-, and colorblind ideologies were stretched, and mostly crumbled, when respondents attempted to create narratives around why people were poor. Upon asking question about respondents’ definitions of success, what they saw as pathways to success, and the characteristics that made one successful, I then asked if respondents could theorize why they felt people became poor, especially when the respondents claimed more meritocratic ideologies. In creating theories of failure, respondents created cultural arguments to explain, and racialize, poverty, respondents claimed that impoverished communities (of color) suffered due to a lack of “good role models”, respondents claimed that individuals in poor communities were “not empowered” to be successful, and some respondents claimed that individuals created harmful “excuses” for failure when they payed too much attention to their non-White, masculine identities. Upon creating a narrative of failure which relied on designating an “other”, respondents could thereby create meritocratic narratives by bringing up what I call the “Exemplary Other”, as respondents found ways to tokenize successful individuals of Color, of different genders, and of lower economic positions. Mentioning these Exemplary Others aided respondents’ claims of a U.S. meritocracy, and created discriminatory themes around the “self-inflicted” wounds of communities of Color and other marginalized groups. Respondents contradicted their powerblind language when creating theories of poverty, using overtly racist, sexist, and generally disparaging language to create working definitions and pathways of failure.

Culture of Poverty Arguments

To explain the existence of inequality and poverty through a meritocratic ideology, respondents blamed the “failed other” for producing a culture of poverty, and thereby limiting the upward-mobility of future generations due to the perceived negative socialization in poor
communities, often of Color. Of the ten respondents, six of them felt that there was a distinct culture of poverty which maintained wealth inequality. Respondents claimed that this culture of poverty, and of failure, produced a negative, limiting mindset, and that growing up in poor areas limited an individual’s drive to be successful, that parents did not teach positive messages in these areas, and that people in impoverished communities lacked a passion to achieve. These arguments are structured to recognize inequality, but there are no mentions of the causes of such inequality, or even sentiments to change these conditions. In order for respondents to abstract their privilege, as well as naturalize the process of gaining racial privilege, interviewees stressed acknowledging how poor individuals (of color) were responsible for their own “situations”, and that they, too, could make it out of their situations by adopting a meritocratic outlook. These views of failure were racialized through the ways that respondents like Connor, Matthew, Aaron, and Derrick situated places of failure as being in the “inner-cities”, and used examples of impoverished, metropolitan communities close to their home suburbs.

In doing this, these participants framed discussions of the “failed other” as always being a person of Color, living in a distinct, racial arena totally detached from the respondent’s lived experiences. The narratives participants created about these “failed areas” disconnected their analysis from mentioning the structural mechanisms which maintain racial inequality in U.S. cities, and in doing so, respondents placed themselves in vicinity to these racial arenas as a means of reinforcing their portrayals of meritocracy. Respondents always used themselves to display examples of positive qualities, so by using the poor, communities of Color they neighbored, respondents created the image of a meritocracy functioning through a White, “culture of success”.
When Connor was discussing the ways he felt society should help individuals facing structural barriers of upward-mobility, he felt that addressing the damaged mindset of people in the South Side of the large, Midwestern City was the first step in changing a culture of poverty.

There really needs to be an education these kids can get. I mean, I feel like that’s where it all starts - with the kids. It’s all about how you raise them and what mindset you’re brought up with. If society puts in the right mentors, the right teachers, the right hospitals, the right opportunities to maybe escape violence and drug abuse that you see in so many of these low-income neighborhoods in [the large, Midwest City]. Connor’s narrative positions the importance of education, yet positions that education is going to be a tool used to socialize children in “low-income” neighborhoods to escape their culture of poverty and violence. Connor’s narrative of failure is predicated on the ways in which parents in “low-income” communities fail to raise their children with a beneficial mindset. This depiction treads on stereotypes based in the lack of good parents of Color, as Connor sees that it is these parents’ failures which maintain poverty and inequality.

Matthew’s narrative depicts a culture of poverty by explaining that unsuccessful people lack attainable images of what success looks like, claiming that individuals in areas of failure are unable to attain upward-mobility because these individuals lack things they are passionate about. Matthew brings up this point when I asked him if he felt there was a universal path to attaining success, which he felt there was, as long as people pursued “realistic goals”.

I think that you need to want and set realistic goals. If you want to live in a tiny shack, then let that be your goal and start working towards it, and then you need to seek an education in some way, whether that be attending a university, or just going to a vocational school. And you need to be hardworking, and value that. But, most importantly, you need to want it and I think you need to, I don’t know, talk about it, and meet people about it. I mean, there’s just so many people that are so limited because they say ‘I don’t know. I don’t have anything that I’m passionate about. I don’t have a major interest. I think that that’s confusing to me because if you don’t have at least one thing where you’re like, ‘damn, that’s awesome, I want to do it,” then I don’t know how you’d make it. You definitely have to have some idea of what you love.
Matthew’s narrative positions that not having passion, and not creating attainable goals are the main ways in which people find themselves in areas of failure. Matthew feels that anyone can be successful, following his vague definition of success, as long as people create realistic goals, like voluntarily choosing to “live in a tiny shack”. In Matthews path to success, someone needs to also have passion, which thereby creates a path to failure in which individuals lack passion, which mitigates any hope for them to achieve Matthew’s abstract model of success. Matthew’s narrative creates a picture of areas of failure in which residents do not have hobbies, anything that interests them, or anything they may be passionate about. In this way, Matthew dehumanizes poor people, and when I probed his answer and asked him the significance of individual effort to creating success, he racializes his image of the failed individual, by placing them in an “inner-city”.

Individual effort is super important, but definitely not all of it. I think that, once again, if you’re born in the middle of [a large, west-coast City], you can bust your ass and your odds are stacked against you from becoming the world’s next billionaire. I mean, let’s be real, the American dream is dead. That’s why I think people need to set those realistic goals, because this guy is going to have an easier time when he focuses on something, like – I don’t know- being a mechanic, then you know, becoming the next Elon Musk or something.

Matthew claims that people from inner-cities will naturally face limiting circumstances, but that people in these situations will do better when they keep their goals “attainable”, and by his use of Elon Musk as an example, it should be assumed that Matthew refers to “attainable goals” for inner-city, People of Color as being distinct from the White, affluent goals, like those pursued by Musk. Matthew also creates the perception of mental limitations for those raised in inner-cities, claiming that people in these economic situations should focus to blue-collar, more manual labor, instead of abstract, difficult, white-collar jobs, because these will always be easier for poor people. I probed Matthew’s answers, and asked him “how do you think the system works so that
it’s stacked against people,” Matthew first mentions the importance of education, and the ways that education is poorly funded, but then brings up the importance of recognizing how damaging one’s culture can be.

I think that the other huge, and more untouchable factor [beyond education], is if you’re born into a culture or born to parents who did not have education or if you’re born into a place that does not prize that, or you’re surrounded by people who make it evident that going to college isn’t important, then it doesn’t matter how bad you want “it.” I feel like what “the odds being stacked against you” look like isn’t that you could, but that you’re not even aware that you should.

Matthew uses a strong “culture of poverty” argument which positions that impoverished communities automatically restrict an individual, and that people born to these areas are limited because the culture of these areas does not value education as much as areas which produce successful people. As Matthew’s response was in addition to his comments about inner-city individuals, I argue that Matthew’s narrative creates an image of poor, communities of Color which positions failure as the result of a lack of positive messages around education and pursuing passion. In this way, Matthew claims that the damages to impoverished, “inner-city” communities are self-inflicted, and his use of “culture of poverty” arguments works to victim-blame, rather than address institutional actors, or the toxicity and oppressive forces of White capitalism, as agents of racial inequality. The apathetic means through which failure is addressed allows participants to ignore how Whiteness, masculinity, and class inequalities create marginality.

Aaron creates a similar narrative of failure when he mentions the damaging effects for one being raised close to the “projects” in the large, Midwest city he grew up by. Similar to Matthew, Aaron situates that those who are prone to failure are raised in a culture where failure is all anybody can envision. Aaron promoted this idea when answering questions about the importance of one’s social networks for becoming successful.
Social networks are helpful, but not necessary. Definitely gives a leg up, definitely is an advantage. But I feel if you’re goals are dead set on being successful, and you have the means to do it then hard work is the only thing that really stands in between that, but there’s different situations that that doesn’t apply to. Like for instance, public housing. Once you’re in that, the environment around you doesn’t give you much upward mobility. Still, hard work in school in something like a housing project in somewhere that’s really low income, not wealthy, is going to recognized.

Aaron’s example of failure is situated in public housing complexes, as he claims that anyone raised in such an environment will naturally be denied any opportunities towards upward mobility. Although Aaron positions that hard work in academics is bound to be recognized, he certainly does not offer any other solutions for people facing this perceived “doomed fate” of living in public housing. I asked Aaron if he could talk more about the dangers of growing up in such an area, to which he responded, “it’s definitely harder for them, because of their surroundings and staying out of everything that goes on around them. Like making sure they’re not engulfed in the culture of where they’re being raised.” Aaron draws attention that the culture of the “the projects” is inherently based in failure, and that this culture of poverty reproduces itself every time a young person is “engulfed” in these surroundings, as this young person is destined for failure. Even as Aaron may make a legitimate point about the constraints of poverty, he does so through the problematic assumption that poor people, people of Color living in these areas, are actively reinforcing these conditions by “giving themselves up” to such an environment. Rather than draw attention to the Midwest City’s lengthy history of segregation, preservation of White wealth, and state-sanctioned violence, Aaron situates that all of these problems are caused by the production and maintenance of a culture of poverty. And while he feels that there are legitimate restrictions to upward mobility, albeit by the cultural limitations of areas of failure, Aaron positions that education is still the entrance into meritocracy, as he continues to situate the importance of individualistic hard work as a means of success.
Early in our interview, I asked Ben to describe his transition from high school to Western University, and how he switched his academic focus from history to economics. Ben answered that he always intended to be a lawyer and felt that economics was the best undergrad fit for him because of the level of difficulty of the classes. He then explained how he felt many of the skills necessary for doing well in economics and law were “natural”. “It’s almost weird, but I just felt like I fit with econ and law. It’s like, people just gain a lot of those skills. The people studying this stuff naturally have a lot of those skills. I think some people just can’t read a lot, I’m not the best, but I’m better than most.” Although Ben’s analysis does not directly position a culture of poverty or failure, our initial conversations are important in this analysis because of Ben’s mention of natural skills and a lack of them. For Ben to claim that lucrative careers, like law, are predicated on “natural” abilities, shows a degree of biological ideologies of human capabilities. Even if Ben is referring to something like school, his belief in “naturally” defined hierarchies of intellectual abilities frame much of his perspectives around failure, throughout the interview.

As we talked about the importance of social networks to one’s pursuits of success, Ben again brought up the importance of an individual’s “natural qualities” to pursue success. I then asked him that if success was predicated in natural abilities, could he provide a theory of poverty. Ben mentioned lots of factors, like the lack of empowered individuals in poor communities, but felt the most important determinant of poverty, globally, was a lack of understanding surrounding property rights, and naturalized values of the poor that maintain people’s socioeconomic conditions.

Property rights are so important to consider. A lot of these countries, where people are super poor, they lack the actual rights to the places they live in. A lot of them are afraid to start businesses or buy land from people or do things like that because no one is actually sure who owns what. And more so, so much poverty is stemmed from the mindset that comes when people don’t have these property rights and the thoughts that people don’t own things. When people own things, when their neighbors’ own things, too, people start
to take this collective interest in keeping their property up. A lot of the issues with places like projects is that people just don’t fucking care.

Although I lack any training in economics, it is clear that Ben’s perspective of maintaining the importance of economic indices is used to mask his essentialist views about natural abilities, and their uses for gaining upward mobility. By creating a narrative about the lack of understanding about property rights, Ben’s narrative positions that poor people are so disenfranchised, and so lack any means of understanding economics, that they are bound to not care or attempt to collectively invest in their communities. Ben creates a nuanced “culture of poverty” argument, but one that is similarly based in victim blaming and a lack of acknowledgement of oppressive structures. His global analysis fails to mention the damaging effects of colonialism and imperialism, let alone racism or systems of racial capitalism. Furthermore, his direct mention of the “projects”, the imagined, domestic “center of failure and poverty”, is used in a way to tie global poverty to the imagined racial arenas of poverty, drug use, and violence in the U.S. It is so telling that Ben and Aaron’s first examples of U.S. failure are always the “projects”, showing an assumption of Black poverty and failure, and a lack of acknowledgement of poor, White communities or general, rural poverty.

Ben continues to formulate his argument surrounding the economic basis of a global, culture of poverty, claiming that there is a mindset which naturally differentiates groups and their pursuits of upward mobility.

I don’t think that most poor people dig a hole themselves, but I think that the hole is slowly dug by things that are mindsets. At least in my opinion, this has a lot to do with the successes of the UK, America, Germany and France. These countries, in particular, their institutions, gave people these rights to land, go out, seek and stake your claim, do things like that and we’ll back you up, we have this whole court system that will actually back you up. That’s why the U.S. is really in a higher position than these third-world countries.
Ben’s narrative centralizes the benefits of colonialism, land-theft, and resource extraction as he creates a metaphor to explain the successes of Western, White nations in contrast to the “third-world.” Ben’s narrative makes no mention of the foundation of White freedom upon the enslavement of African slaves and indigenous genocide, but interestingly, the above quotes aptly describe Cheryl Harris’s (1993) *Whiteness as Property*, in that Ben acknowledges (and celebrates) the structuring of these White, settler-colonial states through the creation of judicial systems which made the horrendous acts racialized capitalism legal. Ben’s culture of poverty argument comes from a unique perspective amongst the rest of the sample, as he positions that poverty is due to disenfranchisement, disenfranchisement which is the result of “not having a history of conquest, oppression, and imperialism.” It must be stated that these ideas are not “natural” to Ben, as he described many skills, but are products of his education at Western University, evident through his persistence to an economic lens of interpreting wealth inequalities.

Connor, Aaron, Matthew and Ben all create elaborate narratives to show how poverty is a self-inflicted wound, and these messages serve to benefit respondents, especially as they are able to negate Whiteness and masculinity as a force of oppression and dominance throughout the history of the U.S. These Culture of Poverty arguments invisibilize institutional actors and maintains meritocratic expectations of society by showing that the U.S. is structured in a way where anyone has the utmost agency to become successful, or poor, if they choose to. Even as people are “engulfed” by the environments around them, as Aaron mentioned, these people are seen to still have the freedom to get themselves into better positions, but the implications of doing so are abandoning the “culture” they were raised in. This is an admission that People of
Color, raised in poor communities, can only become successful when they internalize White values that negate the persistence of such damaging cultures of poverty.

**A Lack of Empowerment and Inspiration Leads to Failure**

Seven of the ten respondents claimed that poverty and a lack of ability to be successful was due to individuals not feeling empowered enough to pursue lucrative opportunities. There was a common sentiment between these five respondents, attached to a culture of poverty argument, but which also described that success was always predicated on passion and inspiration to follow what one wants to do, which created an image of failure bound to a lack of one “pushing themselves” on a path towards success. Like the respondents who claimed there was a culture of poverty, these respondents continually situated themselves as key examples for what inspired and empowered individuals looked and acted like. Because of this, respondents did not see themselves as ever being cast to a position of failure, because they so believed they were inundated to be empowered individuals. While Jack and Connor both felt that there was a lack of empowering role models in “failed areas”, which was seen to explain a lack of empowerment and inspiration to leave impoverished communities and create individual wealth, the other five respondents referred to the “failed other” in ways that blamed poor people’s compliancy around being poor.

When I asked Jesse if he could explain why he felt not everyone could be successful in the U.S., he told me, “Well, I guess by the definition of success I gave, it’s when you give up, then you’re not going to be successful. If you give up on what you want, your goals, then you could fail. And I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but you have to be dedicated to become successful.” Jesse was asked to explain why he felt people were in lower socioeconomic positions, and his answer shows that he feels people always have the agency to pursue any goal
they want but giving up on a goal is always seen as the main way in which people fail. Similar to his replication of a meritocratic ideology, Jesse feels that an individual has complete agency to “make it”, as long as they are motivated to do so. Therefore, failure is positioned as personal decision, based on “giving up”. Jesse’s narrative creates an image of the failed other that either lacks long-term goals or is socialized in a way that reduced one’s ability to stay motivated to success.

As Dylan answered my question around what he felt universal paths to success looked like, he responded that people always needed to advocate for themselves in the U.S.’s capitalist system.

If someone wants to be successful, they need to advocate for themselves, because we’re in a capitalist society where it just emphasizes the whole “survival of the fittest” thing. Those opportunities are there, you can get loans, you can start a business. If you have that great idea, you can find a way. And it’s not just making money, either. Anyone has the opportunity to become intelligent if they go to the library and read a ton or go out and work out a ton. It’s just simple things that you can do to change your life. It’s just that people need to advocate for themselves.

Dylan’s narrative is inherently meritocratic, and the flipside of the ideology places failure as an active decision that is made by fully agentic individuals. Dylan celebrates self-advocacy, given the “survival of the fittest” basis of capitalism, which is a clear example of more overt racial ideologies, even if these racialized views are not actively engaged in the above quote. Furthermore, as Dylan positions that failure is based in a lack of advocacy, he does not give consideration to the wave of activism which is carried out by individuals in poor communities, especially low-income, communities of Color. Surely, these activists are advocating for themselves, yet this is not a strong enough example for Dylan to use. He sees that failure is predicated on a lack of one’s ability to pursue their desires.
Alex, the last example used for this section, feels that individuals fail to gain success when they are unable to create working definitions of success. He feels that solely focusing on money will be detrimental for some, thus showing his vague definitions of success.

I don’t understand people who cannot success because success has nothing to do with money, has nothing to do with anything else. It has everything to do with what you define success as. I feel like in America, you have the liberties to find success and find happiness in whatever you do. Not everyone’s going to be a millionaire, but they can damn sure find something that makes them happy.

Alex’s definition of success is used as a disavowal for claims of restrictive poverty or a lack of opportunity, as he feels that anyone can be successful in the U.S., but that this must come from having a functional definition and goal of what success will look like. Alex feels that people who claim to unsuccessful lack a mindset to seek happiness. Furthermore, the attention given to happiness, rather than monetary markers, maintains Alex’s meritocratic ideology, denies the benefits of his own familial wealth in his pursuits, and situates the lack of individual agency which promotes failure.

The lack of empowerment which is stressed by these three respondents, as well as through Ben and Aaron’s examples, shows how these interviewees blame the “failed other” for maintaining their position due to assumed character traits produced by poverty. These five respondents claimed a lack of inspiration to be successful, and implied that those who have “failed” lack the necessary traits necessary to gaining success. Even as these views were not directly associated with race, the use of inner-city areas of “failure” throughout these narratives shows an assumption that People of Color, growing up in these places, will always lack an empowered mindset. This view degrades the respondents’ “racial other”, and positions that the characteristics of middle-class and wealthy Whites will always be more favorable to gaining success. These respondents stressed the importance of “mindsets”, yet payed little attention the
phenotypical markers of identity. As will be shown, five of the respondents actually felt that paying attention to one’s identity and claiming that one was discriminated from success due to their identity, was an excuse that kept individuals in positions of failure.

**Positioning Discrimination as an Excuse**

Connor, Jesse, Ben, Alex, and Richard created narratives around the lack of importance of identity, and the ways in which claims of structural limitations faced by marginalized groups worked as excuses to mask their lack of dedication to attaining success. These narratives were some of the most overtly discriminatory perspectives found throughout my interviews, serving as proof of the sample’s protection of White, masculine privilege, in that such rhetoric ignores oppressive structures which benefit Whiteness, and creates narratives around the lack of legitimate social issues which minoritized groups attempt to bring forth into the public sphere.

When answering questions about the existence of structural barriers to gaining success, Richard felt that there were no such restrictions, and felt that people make excuses, based on their race, gender, or class, for why they did not gain opportunities as a way to mask their lack of qualifications. “I mean, so many people are going to try and play the point two card and want to bring it back to, ‘oh I didn’t get this job because I’m this or I’m that.’ Really, they were not qualified enough, and they know that.” Richard expresses uncertainty around the validity of any preferential hiring practices, and feels that People of Color, women, and other minoritized individuals focus on “imaginary disadvantages” as a means to ignore their lack of professional qualifications.

A similar perspective was used by Connor when we talked about limitations of pursuing success, as the topic came up several times, and Connor felt it was important to mention his views about race. Connor felt that paying attention to race was important, even though he felt he
lacked the vocabulary to discuss race, as he would ask me for my opinions on the subject throughout the interview. Although I could not give him my perspective, I remembered that he talked about his friends of Color and asked him to discuss if they ever talked about race with him. Connor responded that he felt one of his Black friend currently attending college may pay too much attention to race and racism. Connor brought up that his friend once was angry about being patronized by the police in the large, Midwest city Connor is from. I asked him if he felt that his friends anger was legitimate, and Connor answered,

Yes and no, I mean he goes to college, he’s getting educated. He’s doing better than most African Americans in [the large, Midwest city]. But, I would say no because he’s always saying, like, ‘oh we can’t go to that restaurant, they’re racist,’ and I’m like, ‘Dude, you can go anywhere the fuck you want. You’re in America.’ If they said something to him because he’s Black, that’s a lawsuit, guaranteed. We’ll get a bunch of lawyers and shut that place down. But, luckily, racism really isn’t a big thing these days. I told [his friend] that he should just chill, but it’s definitely sad to hear him being scared about racism. I just wish he could see it’s not a big deal.

Connor may provide some empathy for his friends claims of discrimination, but he does so from a privileged position, guaranteeing that he would get lawyers and go after a lawsuit if his friend encountered “real racism”. Furthermore, he alludes to the ways his friend may be limited by paying too much attention to race, evident by Connor’s claim that “racism really isn’t a big thing” in the contemporary U.S. His anecdotal example of the lack of importance of recognizing race shows that Connor believes people of Color, like his friend, will be more advantaged and will feel more freedom to go where they want when they realize that racism “isn’t a big thing.”

Connor’s perspective differs from Richards, but they maintain a similar point that people can be limited, either in their employment, or in something as carefree as getting dinner with friends, when people of Color pay too much attention to their “differences”. In this way, both respondents maintain the assumptions of the normality and universality of Whiteness and shows the presence of a White habitus focused on.
When asked to assess if there were social restrictions that could limit one’s pursuits of success, Matthew brought up the presence of race, but felt that “self-sabotage” was more important of a consideration that the ways someone may be limited because of racism. “There are restrictions, say by race, of course, but self-sabotage is going to be a much bigger factor than being actually sabotaged by someone. I don’t think that there is very many people or institutions out there who are going to be tripping up individuals.” Matthew feels that racism does not compare to the “self-sabotage” that can be inflicted by People of Color, on to themselves. Similar to Connor and Richard, Matthew feels that People of Color are disadvantaged, or at least, focused on the wrong mechanisms of “failure”, when People of Color focus on racism as being a primary, limiting factor to perpetuate racial inequality. Although it is not explicitly stated, Matthew brings up his feeling that there are more mechanisms of “self-sabotage” facing communities of Color, which are produced by people in those communities, than there are racist individuals or institutions. Jesse provides a similar narrative when he talks about the lack of importance the business world pays to identity, showing that when minoritized individuals think their identity is important, they are spending energy that should otherwise be focused on making money in the business world.

Ben feels that the issues facing Black America are distinctly tied to economic inequality and disenfranchisement, but does not claim that racism is at all responsible for the continuation of such conditions in the contemporary U.S. When asked to elaborate on the importance of economics rather than racism and other forms of discrimination, Ben attempted to create a narrative about the lack of importance of recognizing race.

My whole argument, which most people don’t really have a great response to, is what is the difference between a White kid who grows up in an African American neighborhood and the African American kid who grew up in that same neighborhood? Do they not go through the same things then because they’re different races? To me, it’s more about the
economic place that you’re in. Again, if you want to talk about a lot of the issues that African Americans have, like disenfranchisement, I think a lot of it stems from poverty.

Ben draws on a hypothetical situation of a White person raised in an impoverished, Black neighborhood, wondering how this White person’s experiences would be any different than a Black kid raised in this area. Ben is attempting to yet again show the lack of importance and impact which race has in the U.S., by using economics to bolster his colorblind ideology. As I was a bit thrown-off by Ben’s response, I asked him if he could expand his answer and speak more to the importance of economics rather than race. He responded,

To me, if you’re poor, you’re going to feel disenfranchised. I don’t know if the majority, but – yes, I would say that the majority of African Americans are probably in an economic condition that would be considered poor or close to poor. Again, I think you can pull yourself out of those conditions, though. A lot of communities in America, racial communities if you want to stratify by race, were poor. Germans, Irish, these people were poor. They lived in what would be considered in the modern-day projects. Possibly even worse than the projects, these tenement houses. These racial groups are doing fine today, these people are in the middle class. It just shows that you can pull your straps up. I think it’s a little more difficult in today’s society, sure, but to use race as an excuse for being poor, it’s just not true. I really don’t think a lot of things can be used as an excuse, except for not having money.

Ben’s uses examples of White, European immigrants, exclusively, to create a narrative around the lack of importance of race. He feels that these ethnic enclaves were in much worse economic conditions than what poor, Black people face today, yet feels that the Irish and German were able to gain upward-mobility due to an empowered mindset. Ben assumes that the majority of Black households are poor, which does run parallel to 2014 U.S. Census findings showing that 23.5% of Black households are in poverty, and 28.8% of Black households make between $15k to $35K (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor, 2015). But, even if Ben’s economic analysis of Black American is correct, the sole reliance on economic markers to determine empowerment and disenfranchisement relies on classist and racist stereotypes, as such arguments are often used to
claim a disavowal of social welfare programs and other Neoliberal policy designed to decrease “dependence”.

Ben’s example of Western, European immigrant mobility is used to show that these groups had a mindset that was empowering, and furthermore, these immigrant enclaves did “not make excuses”. These are examples of White people, though, and Ben’s narrative pays no attention to the ways in which these groups were afforded the benefits of Whiteness through racism directed at Black people, both free and enslaved, before 1865 (Lipsitz, 1998). Ben does not recognize the advantages of Whiteness, instead claiming that “racial” success in the U.S. has always been predicated on a “boot-strap mentality”, rather than “making excuses based in race”. Ben shows that he does not perceive that there is legitimacy to claims postulating the detrimental effects of racism in the U.S. Ben does not see the importance of race, and feels that race or any non-normative identity, acts a distraction and excuse for people to be complicit in their lower, economic positions. His views are wrong and racist, in themselves, but show the mental gymnastics necessary to maintain a meritocratic ideology. Respondents also attempted to construct narratives which situated the existence of the “exemplary other” as a way to legitimize their view that those who fail are to blame for their situations.

Bolstering Meritocracy Through the Exemplary Other

Respondent used examples of people who were not White men throughout their narratives to prove that individuals were fully agentic to pursue success. These “exemplary other”, as I refer to them, were used to make claims about women, Black people, and poor people, to prove that that any individual, regardless of their identity, could “make it” in the contemporary U.S. Connor, Ben, Richard, Jesse, and Alex used successful women as their exemplary others to situate a lack of gender-based, structural barriers in the U.S., while Todd and
Connor focused on successful Black people to demonstrate that any person of Color could be successful if they put in the effort. These exemplary others allowed respondents to maintain meritocratic ideologies and show that society was open to everyone, regardless of their identity, as long as these individuals worked hard and were dedicated to their goals.

Throughout Connor’s interview, Connor kept coming back to the fact that his mother was the sole breadwinner of his family. He created narratives of his mother which were seen to prove that her hard work and internalization of the meritocratic ideology was powerful enough for her to create a successful life. “My mom is really who I think about when I think about success, just because I know how hard she works day in and day out to provide for us. I’m sure she would consider herself successful.” Similar to how every respondent felt that being the breadwinner in a heteronormative family would be evidence of their future success, Connor’s narrative of his mother’s breadwinner mentality serves as an example of success, and later, Connor discusses the admiration he has for his mother for being successful in the male-dominant industry she works in. I asked Connor what he felt his mother did to become so successful, to which he replied,

She’s a super outgoing person. If she has an idea, it’s pretty much going to happen unless she has a better idea [chuckles]. She’s so determined and really is just tenacious in how she makes things happen. And she always told me about the power of hard work, you know? She was a woman in her field, she was the vice president [at her company]. I mean to do that, I think she really had to stand out as a woman and make it, and that really shows the power of hard work.

Connor uses his mother as an exemplary other to prove that hard work leads to success, as his mother became the vice president at her male-dominant company. Connor feels that his mother’s hardworking and tenacious nature is what allowed her the ability to be the economic provider for his family. Connor’s mother is narrativized as the exemplary other to show that hard work and individual effort will always be recognizable and rewarded. Furthermore, Connor stresses that success is universally attainable in the U.S., but that it is predicated on individual effort. His
mother is seen as a woman who transcended a marginalized identity and made it, using her as evidence for his belief of meritocracy.

Ben also uses his mother as an exemplary other and notes her success in male-dominant industries in a similar way to Connor. Although his mother is the primary economic provider of his family, Ben notes that he does not feel his mother is as smart as his father.

My mom didn’t go to college, but she made all the money. She’s not actually that smart [chuckles]. My father is much more intelligent than my mother, but my mother has EQ. She’s able to understand, communicate well, network, and she worked as a trader which is just insane. Trading is a profession that’s 90% male, but she’s never really talked about that, but she was able to be a successful woman in a profession without a college degree that was dominated by the opposite sex.

Ben’s mother is situated as an exemplary other throughout his interview. Ben feels that even though his mother did not go to college and lacks a lot of intelligence, she was able to make it in her field by virtue of hard work and communication skills. Later in the interview, when Ben discussed the importance of a bootstrap mentality, rather than making excuses of failure because of one’s identity, he used his mother as an example of someone who gained upward mobility despite their family’s working-class background. “My mom was not born in a great family, she didn’t go to college, she just worked really hard, she never let anything be an excuse and she just made herself into who she was.” Ben sees that this exemplary other was successful because she did not make excuses for herself. She works through Ben’s narrative as an example of unlikely success, but success that was possible through focus and the internalization of the meritocratic ideology.

Both Alex and Richard used examples of their female bosses when asked if they felt they were privileged as men. Alex used his female “project manager” as an exemplary other to prove that women can do “a good job,” too. “My project manager is a woman and she does a phenomenal job.” Similarly, Richard refers to his female boss as an exemplary other as a means
of proving that male privilege does not exist. “I mean, being a man has plusses and minuses, just like being a woman. My first internship was with a woman boss and she’s the most bad ass person that I’ve ever met. As far as opportunity goes, I think there’s no disadvantage of being a man or a woman.” To prove that society is structured in a gender-equal way, Richard uses his female boss to prove that male privilege does not exist, as women, like his boss, can be “bad ass,” just like men. Both respondents feel that their anecdotal experiences with women in higher professional positions shows that gender discrimination and male privilege do not have large effects in today’s society.

Racialized exemplary others were only used by two respondents, and only Connor used people of Color he knew personally as exemplary others, which perhaps shows the lack of interracial contact within this sample. As was shown earlier in the subsection “Education as the Ticket to Entry”, Connor uses the “inner-city” students who went to his private school as examples of the hard work necessary for poor, youth of Color to become successful, as Connor felt that these boys were smarter than him and harder working. In this way, Connor’s use of these students as exemplary others creates a narrative around the universality of determination, especially as it pertains to education, and how hard work is perceived to always be recognized, regardless of a person’s race.

Todd, however, uses famous Black men as exemplary others as a way to show that the People of Color can still become successful given the persistence of racial biases Todd recognizes in society. He first uses San Francisco 49ers Safety, Richard Sherman, as an exemplary other to show the ways in which Black youth can create pathways of success through perseverance, in this case, through athletics, even though Todd feels that there are restrictions to attaining success based on race.
I’m just thinking of Richard Sherman as an example of someone from a tough background, who was able to really push themselves to get an education and become wealthy. I forget where specifically he’s from, but it’s one of those lower socio-economic areas and he ended up going to Harvard.

Even as Todd explicitly mentions racial inequalities in the education system, he uses the example of Black athletes gaining college scholarships as a means for empowerment and pride. Although it is not stated that he feels this is the only pathway to which racial minorities can be successful, his use of professional athletes is significant, especially as he does not explicitly state the need for any institutional investments for creating a more racially equitable education system. Later on, Todd mentions LeBron James and Barack Obama as exemplary others for their roles in empowering the Black community, as Todd perceives these figures following in the steps of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In one of my ethnic studies classes, we learned about how Martin Luther King was put down all the time and no one believed in him and he had a really hard path, but he was a guy that people looked up to and saw him as a massive figure in their society. And today, you look at LeBron James, people go to his games and they call him the King and he’s a big guy with this powerful stance in society. I feel like he is someone that can definitely put a change to a lot of the racial biases that exists in our country.

Todd’s narrative was used to explain the persistence of racial biases in the U.S., but his perspective is troubling in how he only mentions that Black celebrities can create solutions to problems of racial biases in the U.S. Similar to his example of education, Todd does not mention that White people can be engaged in these conversations, or that White people should be educating each other about racial biases, and instead distances himself from solutions, relying on exemplary others to address such issues. His use of celebrities of Color as agents of change within impoverished communities comes from a neoliberal perspective, in which social change is seen to be based in wealth and philanthropy. Todd creates a narrative around the necessity of
addressing racial biases but feels that exemplary others are the only figures able to do such work, thus drastically limiting his real commitment to pursuing this type of work.

By these respondents’ victim-blaming narratives, institutions cannot be blamed for oppression or inequality because the U.S. is seen to be inherently meritocratic to all of its citizens. Instead, respondents found means through which to blame the victims of structural inequality and racialized poverty, positioning that the cultures in which the “other” lives in lack good values, good role models, or does not promote empowered individuals. The rampant victim blaming among my sample is indicative of a colorblind ideology which can quickly shift to overt racism when respondents felt they needed to defend the idea of the “equal, American playing-field.” This defense is based in the need to maintain the status-quo and structuring of wealth acquisition in the U.S., in that most wealth is gained inter-generationally through White families, that employment opportunities are far more open to White people, and White men, specifically, and that owning property, which is far easier to do for White people, is a primary mechanism of developing wealth (Pew Research Center, 2014).

In this way, defending meritocracy is a defense of White, masculine expectations of success. Blaming the “failed other” for their lack of dedication to success is seen to naturalize the very racist structure of the United States, in that upward-mobility has always been conflated with Whiteness and masculinity. Defending this system is seen as a defense of the resources these White men feel they are entitled to and privileged enough to gain. Respondents that used an exemplary other did so as a means of defending their meritocratic expectations of the U.S. society, using these figures to create narratives to deny the impacts of oppression. These examples were often contradicted, especially as respondents used their White mothers or wealthy, Black athletes as exemplary others. These exemplary others served as justifications for
respondents’ denials of oppressive restrictions in society and protected their meritocratic expectations. As will be demonstrated in the next section, most respondents desired to institute merit-based hiring strategies, as many of the ten respondents interpreted affirmative action initiatives as being unfair, which is indicative of White protectionism.

4. Preferences for Merit-Based Hiring and the Threat of Diversity

The third section of my interview guide was designed around interviewees imagining that they were applying to a highly competitive job amongst what they knew to be a highly skilled and diverse candidate pool. By only using the word “diverse”, rather than explaining the presence of people of different races, genders, sexual orientations, and class backgrounds, respondents were more able to bring forth their own definitions and interpretations of the term, but diversity was generally framed through race. From this point, I assessed the degrees to which respondents supported a potential employer deliberate promotion of diversity at this job, and while every respondent, except for Daniel, felt that employers should only hire based on a merit-based system, most every respondent did feel that diversity was a benefit for a company. In times that I felt respondents were alluding to affirmative action, I asked them if they supported the initiative, again allowing respondents to use their own definitions of Affirmative Action, rather one provided by me. Of the six respondents probed about Affirmative Action, four respondents claimed they did not support it, or felt that such initiatives should be changed so as not to promote “handouts”. The responses in this section shows a general discomfort amongst this White, male sample when thinking about workplace diversity, as most respondents felt that directly promoting a more representative workplace was unfair, showing how respondents perceived a racial threat when applying for jobs. However, these views were often contradicted,
as every respondent felt that diverse companies were more successful. These respondents wanted diversity, but only as long as it did not infringe on their opportunities. Furthermore, the perception of threat via diversity initiatives was framed as “reverse-racism” by two respondents within the sample.

Need for a Merit-Based System
In a replication of the meritocratic ideology, seven of the ten respondents claimed they felt employers should only hire employees based on their qualifications based within a standardized, merit-based system. Respondents similarly agreed that people should be hired based on how they aligned with a company’s “core-values” and based on their qualifications, rather than through a promotion of diversity. I interpreted that these “core-values” were seen as a normative corporate environment, which literature shows is based in White, middle-class mannerisms and culture (Pierce, 2003). Thus, the values these respondents referred to were White values.

When asked whether he felt it was important that this hypothetical employer considered someone’s demographic and background when choosing a candidate, Richard felt this was something employers should not think about. “No. In this day in age, any qualified candidate who fits well in the company, whether it be a male or female, Black, White, or purple – I think whoever’s getting the job done deserves the position.” I then asked him if he felt there was any need for employers to pay attention to differences in identity within a company and Richard felt employers should never consider anything beyond a candidate’s qualifications. “I think at the end of the day, most people are getting a job because they deserve it and it doesn’t necessarily matter where you’re from or how old you are, if you’re producing work that meets the company’s needs, you should get the job.” Alex used similar language to Richard when
explaining why he only supported merit-based hiring practices. “Personally, I don’t care if you’re Black, White, green, female, trans. My biggest thing is if you can get the job done better than the next person, I care about performance. I don’t really understand why a job needs to know your demographics, really.” Richard and Alex are adamant for maintaining merit-based employment practices, and it is telling that their assumptions of hiring “diverse” candidates are seen as a negation of hiring a more qualified candidate. This shows that respondents wished to preserve merit-based hiring strategies as a way to benefit qualified individuals that are assumed to not be chosen due to a company’s desire to hire lesser qualified, “diverse people”, alluding to the respondents’ assumption of higher talent based on White masculinity.

Dylan felt that the hypothetical employer should not consider one’s demographic background when considering an employee, as well.

I don’t think they should. I think at that point, if this is a really competitive position and these people are applying for it, you should just be looking at their raw scores. Like what they get on tests and what they have done in the past. And if you end up noticing their demographic background, you should hopefully have the wisdom to ignore that if they’re the most viable candidate, because people can be brilliant from anywhere.

Dylan feels that hiring managers should always approach a candidate pool in a color- and genderblind way, and similar to his earlier sentiment that intelligent people do not recognize identity, Dylan feels that the best companies will not recognize differences in race, gender, or class, seeing how Dylan feels there are intelligent people “from anywhere”. I probed Dylan’s response and asked if he thought paying attention to factors beyond credentials served any purpose, and his response was similarly colorblind.

No, well, I get that people want to create more diversity, but I think by actively attempting to create diversity, it’s just a counter point to the whole picking based off skin color. I think we should be promoting a society in which its just based off ability. We’re all people, so why don’t we start looking at something that’s measurable, rather than something that’s so unimportant, such as skin color and the geographic location of birth.
Because, obviously I want equal opportunity and equity for people who have had a harder lot in life, but, you also want the most competent people doing the hardest jobs.

This narrative is based in the perspective that intentionally creating diversity in the workplace is a racist system, in that to Dylan, identifying anyone based on their “skin color” is a form of discrimination. Even though Dylan wants “equal opportunity and equity”, he feels that the racialized “other” should not gain priority when it comes to hard jobs, as our society should only leave those for “the most competent people.” Similar to Alex and Richard, Dylan subtly alludes to the inherent White normativity of complex jobs, as he feels that to intentionally create diversity at this level of complexity would deny the “smartest person” a job. Nowhere does it appear to these respondents that creating more diverse workplaces is not a negation of better qualified people, but a promotion of intentionally selecting equally qualified, minoritized individuals, rather than a White man with similar qualifications.

Aaron creates a similar argument when claiming that there is a certain level of professional complexity at which point intentionally promoting diversity should not matter. “If you meet the requirements to be in that interview pool, then your demographics should not matter if you’ve made it that far.” Throughout my interview with Aaron, he identified many issues facing impoverished, communities of Color, using the large, Midwest City as an example of racist institutions and a lack of good public schools, yet when it comes to “complex work”, he does not see a need to intentionally create diversity, as this means a smarter candidate would lose a position to a minoritized individual.

When asked to imagine applying for this job among a diverse applicant group, Jesse first situates himself as the boss of the company, and answers, “I wouldn’t care about those things. As an entrepreneur, if you’re qualified, then I’ll hire you if you’re going to do your job.” Similar to the previous interviewees, Jesse is attempting to make an argument about the empowerment of
colorblind hiring practices, as doing so would be seen as meritocratic, but the lack of deliberacy respondents held when it came to promoting diversity shows a maintenance of status-quo hiring practices that disproportionately benefit White men because of biased hiring practices and overt-racism (Pierce, 2003). Jesse continues his answer and alluded to some of the insecurities he would have hiring women given the #MeToo campaign, showing that his powerblind hiring practices were never legitimate.

I’ve had conversations with some of my wealthier friends and they’ve said with the whole Me Too campaign – for example, my friend’s dad has this woman that works for him and she tried to claim sexual harassment even though it wasn’t true. Now, he’s in this situation where he might have to come to a deal with this woman. He’s thinking “Why should I even hire these women if they’re just going to claim sexual harassment?” But, that’s a whole other thing. In my opinion, if you’re qualified, I’ll hire you.

Jesse’s example of purposely not hiring women due to anxieties that female employees would falsely claim sexual harassment is proof that Jesse would not approach hiring individuals solely based off a merit-based system. His example recognizes the “trouble” that could come from hiring “these women”, and it should be assumed that Jesse’s next logical step would be to not hire any female applicants. This logic is pernicious when it’s applies to the prospect of employees of Color bringing up complaints about a racist boss, alluding to a professional desire to not hire People of Color because one cannot be openly racist around these employees, just as one cannot sexually harass their female employees. The desire for a merit-based system of employment quickly switches to a system based in exclusive White-male employment, due to the perceived issues around hiring minoritized individuals who could file lawsuits due to their frustration with workplace discrimination.

In addition to these responses, Matthew also supported strictly merit-based hiring practices, but also felt that employers should hire an individual based upon their alignment with a company’s values, which Pierce shows are based hegemonic White, masculine norms (2003).
This sentiment around the alignment of norms was also framed as a condition to which participants felt they could support a degree of intentional diversity in the workplace.

Benefits and Anxieties Around Diversity

Although seven of the ten respondents supported merit-based hiring practices, as opposed to a deliberate bolstering of a company’s employee diversity, these respondents also claimed that a diverse workforce was always beneficial to a company. These contradictory messages may allude to the ways in which students, especially those in more financial-based studies, such as business, advertising, and economics, are taught to value diversity through their classes at Western University. Respondents could simultaneously claim that a company would benefit from more diverse employees, yet also feel that intentionally hiring people based on their identity was discriminatory and would lead to less qualified candidates. This is evidence of these respondents’ anxieties of losing opportunities due to their normative identities, but the replication of academic language about the capitalist benefits of diversity helped respondents maintain a powerblind approach to hiring practices. Of these seven respondents, most shared similar perspectives with Matthew’s ideas of hiring practices, in that respondents supported hiring diverse employees as long as they fit the values of a company.

Although Richard stated that he did not support intentionally promoting diversity as opposed to hiring on a merit-based system, when I asked him if he felt employers should consider factors beyond one’s credentials and resume when hiring, Richard claimed to be supportive. “Yes, this is absolutely an important thing to do. I think because every company has values and morals, and a piece of paper can only go so far for a person. It really depends on who you are and what you believe in. If your morals and values align with the company, then yes, I’m in.” Richard contradicts his earlier sentiment about maintaining a strictly merit-based hiring
system, showing that a vague alignment with a company’s “morals” are important to determine one’s fit. Richard may be more comfortable giving support for this practice because there is no threat of the “other” when one aligns with a company’s values. Furthermore, his lack of support for directly promoting diversity may come from the assumption that “diverse” candidates inherently do not match general corporate values.

Matthew promoted a similar message to Richard as he discussed the need for potential employees to have a good personality.

If this is a competitive job that requires objective qualifications, demographics should have little to do with choosing an employee. I think personality should have possibly more to do with it, but I think you should consider their background in the same way that you would their personality. I mean, would you want to work with this person? Could they work within our team?

Matthew feels that diversity is attainable, but only if a potential employee could be a good team member for a company. This again positions the importance of aligning one’s values with a company, and drastically reduces the attainability of increased diversity due to the presence of implicit biases which conflate Whiteness with professional values.

Ben simultaneously feels he would be threatened as a White man applying within the diverse work group, but also feels that the presence of varying perspectives in a company will always be beneficial. In this quote, Ben discusses having to provide his racial demographic for an internship application.

I mean, when I’ve filled out paperwork when applying for an internship, I’m definitely conscious about it, because you are at a slight disadvantage as the White guy because there’s this approach for diversity. Again, I don’t think it’s a huge thing. I mean, personally, if I ran a company, I really wouldn’t care what color skin you are. I’d just really care about how well you do your job. I mean, there is something to be said about having someone with a different perspective, but I don’t think that that could be distilled to race or really a lot of categories.
Ben feels that he is disadvantaged because of the contemporary “approach for diversity”, and while he claims support implementing a strictly merit-based hiring system, he also claims that varying perspectives are beneficial for a company. Although he maintains a powerblind approach by claiming that perspectives are not tied to differences in race or identity, he is aware that a company benefits from a diversity of thought. Ben is unsure about how to situate his anxiety around diversity, his preference to merit-based hiring systems, but also the benefits of diversity. His powerblind approach maintains a support of varied perspectives, but not varied identities.

Similarly, Alex feels that he will lose out on opportunities as a White man due to a focus on diversity, but still situates the importance of diverse perspectives for creating better businesses. When asked if he would feel comfortable with a potential employer considering his race and background amongst a diverse applicant pool, Alex told me, “I almost feel like it hurts my chances, just because I’m a straight, White male, I’m the biggest demographic. When I answer those questions on an application, and mark ‘White, not Hispanic,’ that doesn’t do me any favors.” Alex shows that he feels his Whiteness can often be a disadvantage when seeking employment, but later in the interview, he discusses the benefits of diversity for a company.

Having a diverse workforce is great because it does provide people from different backgrounds, and specifically those different socioeconomic backgrounds, and those people are able to people from other backgrounds different ways to approach a problem. Diversity benefits the company and overall performance of the product, greatly. Having new ideas with the old ideas, new thought processes are great.

Despite his anxieties, Alex is confident that diversity initiatives will always benefit a company, evident as he discusses the lucrative nature of “new ideas”. Despite Alex’s disapproval of Affirmative Action, he feels that diversity always benefits a company, but shows that his support for promoting diversity is based in the ways a company will make more capital by using the ideas of those who constitute as being “diverse”. Though Alex claimed earlier to not care about
anyone’s identity, only their ability “to get the job done”, the benefits within his narrative show that his support is only possible when there is a clear, tangible economic benefit from promoting diversity.

Jesse also positions the importance of diversity, using examples from business classes he took at Western University to legitimize the corporate benefits of having a diverse workforce.

I don’t think there should be mandates like, “Yes, we need X amount of this person.” I think that when you’re hiring people you should actually try to make your team as diverse as possible because that’s how you’re going to be getting the most ideas. I don’t know, that just what they teach me at [Western University’s School of Business], they literally say the most diverse business teams are usually the best

Jesse’s classes train him to desire having a diverse business team, but Jesse feels that this should not be made depending on mandates, but through “natural” processes. As shown previously, Jesse feels that it is unfair to the most qualified individual when a company directly promotes diversity, yet he contradicts this view by using lessons from his business classes. Still, the positive aspects of diversity used by respondents always position the benefits of diversity within a company, yet only Daniel claimed that increasing diversity, through Affirmative Action and other initiatives, was the just thing to do given the presence of contemporary racial biases and segregated employment opportunities. Daniel created a moral and anti-racist argument for promoting diversity which is directed at improving the economic conditions of communities of Color, and despite his lack of attention directed at promoting gender equity, he views are still far more impactful and beneficial to marginalized communities in the U.S.

The perspectives used by respondents around the benefits of diversity are similar to the “diversity frame” discussed in The Diversity Bargain, which was used by White college students as they discussed the importance of racial diversity at their university for expanding their “worldviews” and helping them become more educated about “distinctive cultures” (Warikoo,
2016). In a similar way, the interviewees of my study constructed narratives about the financial benefits of diversity within a company but failed to recognize that the merit-based approach they desired for hiring choices would limit the degree to which impactful, diverse representation would be possible. Furthermore, the resistance to Affirmative Action found throughout my sample shows how respondents failed to support institutional initiatives to increase representation of women and People of Color in both the workforce and higher education, showing that even as respondents could claim a relative, albeit small, degree of endorsement for having a diverse group of employees, the prospect of losing a meritocratic system, bound in a powerblind approach, was too threatening for most respondents to support.

**Affirmative Action as a Negation of Meritocracy**

Affirmative action came up in interviews when I felt respondents referred to promoting diversity through institutional methods. I did not define affirmative action explicitly, instead allowing respondents to promote their own interpretations of what the program really did. Although I did not have a question specifically about affirmative action, the equal opportunity initiative came up in seven of the ten interviews, and while Daniel, Todd, and Matthew agreed that affirmative action was a policy that should be expanded, due to the ways in which women and people of Color have been historically discriminated from gaining education and employment, the rest of the respondents either had mixed feelings or fully did not approve of the initiative. These four respondents referred to affirmative action as being racist, in that it gave privileges to people based on their race, as being unfair, or as being an outdated program. For those who did not approve of affirmative action, even if they claimed diversity as being beneficial to a company, there is clear evidence that their negative views were influenced by a
need to maintain a colorblind and powerblind meritocracy, as affirmative action was seen as a direct infringement of what these respondents already saw an “equal opportunity” society.

Richard, Dylan, Alex, and Ben all felt that affirmative action was an outdated policy, in that they questioned the legitimacy of racism and discrimination as a barrier to gaining upward-mobility in the contemporary U.S. Similarly, these respondents felt uncomfortable with the ways in which affirmative action was not based in a colorblind approach, as they felt the program was based in the overt identification of race, which was seen as racist. Most telling, all of these respondents claimed in different ways that affirmative action took away opportunities that should belong to more qualified individuals, and gave them to less-educated, less skilled People of Color. In this way, affirmative action was described as not only the unfair negation of a functional U.S. meritocracy, but also a system that promoted opportunities to less abled individuals, simply by way of their race. Because of the similarity of these sentiments, I will use Ben’s narrative exclusively, which comprised all of these points in a more detailed manner, in order to show the ways in which these five respondents disapproved of affirmative action.

In Ben’s interview, the topic of affirmative action came up when Ben claimed that diversity should only be promoted in “natural ways”. Throughout our discussion on diversity, he came back to the point that he felt it was inherently racist to label people according to their race, especially as it pertained to academic institutions keeping track of student demographics. I then asked Ben to tell me what he thought about affirmative action, and he responded,

I disagree with affirmative action. I mean what is the point of affirmative action? To get people who are “not helped by the system or not franchised by the system” into places in society which they maybe wouldn’t normally be? That seems like a noble and like a great idea, but when you come at the relative cost of not accepting another student, to me, it’s not equitable.
Ben uses a commonly held counter-argument against affirmative action by claiming that when a person of Color is endowed an opportunity through affirmative action, a White person who was more qualified is negated that opportunity. Later, Ben claims that universities using affirmative action are actually producing less challenging classrooms, because under-qualified students are being admitted at the cost of smarter students, thus creating a less educated classroom. These ideas are once again situated in the assumption that anyone gaining an opportunity through diversity initiatives will always be inherently less qualified than the White man who was not selected. Very similar sentiments were used by Richard and Alex. Ben then continues to discuss the ways in which affirmative action perpetuates racism.

Really, I think that affirmative action just reiterates the idea of racism. There’s this idea that racism is – I would always consider it more of a Third World issue, but that racism is beating up other races who are doing bad things to other races, but racism to me just means that you’re separating people by their race mentally then sometimes physically. You’re essentially perpetuating racism, even though I guess you could argue, “okay, now there’s more diversity,” but you’re labeling people and putting them into boxes [laughs]. How does that make the problem go away? And like, I don’t want to say it’s a bad thing, but it makes people more conscious about these issues or about their race and about all these things. I don’t think that people really should even think about race that much.

Ben’s colorblind ideology is so entrenched into his worldview, as he shows that he feels recognizing race is inherently racist, and that there is a perpetuation of racism when a person’s race is used as a determining factor in promoting diversity. Dylan used a similar narrative when he claimed that people perpetuated racism by “paying too much attention” to people’s skin color. Furthermore, Ben feels that racism is mainly an issue pertinent to the Developing World, showing the lack of attention Ben pays to the plethora of racial issues in the United States. This lack of recognition of the legitimacy of racism and institutional oppression is similar to Alex’s perspective, as he claims that issues like police brutality, are the results of individual “rotten apples,” rather than an institutional issue of racialized state-sanctioned violence.
These four similar declarations of the inherent racism and unfairness of affirmative action should be understood as the subtle replication of the “principled-conservative” perspective described by Federico and Sidanius, which posits that objections to affirmative action are based its perceived lack of fairness and irrelevancy in accordance to the tenants of a politically conservative ideology (2002). But, it is theorized that this “principled conservative” approach may simply act as a conduit to mask the “general group dominance” perspective, which distinguishes affirmative action and other equal-opportunity initiatives as a threat to social privilege and White Supremacy, as findings indicate the policy-oriented objections to affirmative action, as well as more covert expressions of racism, increased with educational attainment and age (Federico and Sidanius, 2002).

Ben’s responses, and the similarities they held to the reasoning used by Alex, Dylan, and Richard, shows an immense desire to maintain the perceived meritocratic structuring of U.S. society because White men will benefit from such a system. The disapproval of institutional initiatives to promote diversity comes from a point of White anxiety and fear of losing one’s ease to become successful. Defending meritocracy is a defense of White privilege and one’s unrestricted pursuit of success, as the thought of deliberately increasing the amount of minoritized groups in the workforce and higher education was always positioned as an unfair loss to better qualified White men. These respondents assume that White men are always the “best fit” for a company, that they will have the best values to align with corporate America, and that Whiteness equates to qualification. These respondents do not know how affirmative action truly works, nor did they mention the immense judicial slashes to affirmative action through Supreme Court cases such as Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978) or Gratz v.
Bollinger (2003), in which various manifestations of affirmative action were deemed as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Even as the scope of affirmative action has been greatly reduced by such federal rulings, respondents still considered affirmative action to be a threat to White abilities in gaining unfettered upward-mobility. Respondents lacked any narrative focus around the impacts of racism and oppression in negating such pursuits for minoritized people but felt an immense desire to keep the U.S. fair through a powerblind approach. These desires are based in the self-protection of Whiteness and White masculinity, and as such, shows these respondents’ surveillance and attention to potential damages to their White, male privilege, as the maintenance of such privilege is seen to allow these interviewees a unique, unrestricted meritocratic path through society. But as the protection of privilege was central to respondents’ meritocratic ideologies and powerblind perspectives, my discussion of privilege with respondents were commonly abstract and vague, as few respondents failed to admit they had racial and gendered privilege in the contemporary United States.

5. Reclaiming Privilege: Intersections of Class and Identification of Privilege
The final section of interviews were structured around gauging the degrees to which respondents claimed they had White privilege and male privilege. Of the ten respondents, only Daniel and Matthew answered that they had privilege, and furthermore claimed that this privilege was based in the historical oppression of women and People of Color. Surprisingly, the four respondents who claimed to be from wealthy or upper-class backgrounds were quick to answer that they had White privilege but failed to both mention their male privilege or discuss the development of privilege, given the historical legacies of oppression in the United States, showing a lack of anti-racist or feminist ideologies. Of the six self-identified middle or upper-
middle-class respondents, two respondents felt that both White and male privilege were not real, while two others felt they may have privilege, but privilege was always seen as being a relative distinction based in financial standing, in that other people had more money than them. These respondents also failed to identify their male privilege, as well as the historic origins of privilege in the U.S. The remaining two middle- to upper-middle class respondents, Daniel and Matthew, correctly identified their White and male privilege.

I theorize that respondents were able to identify and discuss privilege because of the proliferation of the term in academic spaces, but respondents who used the language of privilege did so as a means of proving their academic credibility to me, but still failed to understand the development of these raced and gendered benefits, alluding to their lack of anti-racism or feminism. Furthermore, various respondents discussed the benefits of their privilege, framing privilege as a celebration of not having the limiting character flaws of marginalized groups who failed to find success the meritocracy. This analysis of privilege, and the varying ways in which respondents used the term, shows the reclamation of academic rhetoric and socially liberal expectations that are seen to protect White men from stigma and demonization, but the degrees to which these men actually believed such rhetoric varied drastically.

**Middle Class Identity and Differing Admissions of Privilege**

Of the six respondents who identified as having middle class or upper-middle class economic backgrounds, both Richard and Alex felt that privilege was not real. Like much of my sample, these two respondents claimed to hold fiscally conservative and socially liberal political identities, even as they lacked much of any socially liberal social values. When asked if he felt he was privileged, Alex told me,

I don’t think I have privilege, really the whole idea of White privilege or male privilege is bullshit to me. I’ve worked hard for everything that I’ve gotten. I pay my share of living.
I’ve gone to school. I’ve worked. I’ve put myself in the military, enlisted to get a better education to put myself in a more financially sound position. I’ve networked with all the people I’ve worked with. Everybody can do that.

Alex uses a meritocratic narrative to deny the presence of privilege because he feels that he has worked hard and is the only person responsible for getting himself into his current position. If I could have gone back and probed Alex’s answer, I would have asked him if he felt his time in the military helped create this perspective, because there were times earlier within his interview in which he alluded to the military as having a meritocratic structure and influencing others to see society in such a way. This may help to explain Alex’s perspective.

Alex also mentioned that he felt privilege was a term that was used as an excuse for People of Color and women who were unwilling to work hard enough to put themselves in economic positions, like Alex.

People talk about privilege like this thing they can never have, and I think it screws up people’s mindsets, for sure. It’s like, you think of privilege as this thing you don’t have and you want, but you’re not willing to do certain things that go on behind closed door, like all the nights I’ve spent up all night at the engineering center or how I always have to put my studies first before I can do anything fun. People really limit themselves when they say, “hey I can’t do it, I’m not a privileged, White guy.” It seems like people need to stop putting themselves in that box, first.

Alex feels that the rhetoric of privilege comes from minoritized individuals who are unwilling to push themselves to be successful. Alex maintains the meritocratic expectation that when people are unsuccessful, it is due to their lack of hard work, arguing that privilege rhetoric proliferated so minoritized groups could make excuses and keep themselves “in a box.” When I asked Alex if he felt there was male privilege in the U.S., he claimed that the only differences between men and women’s attainment of success was “men are going to be able to do more physical jobs, but that’s it,” which I took as his negation of legitimate benefits for men in the U.S. Alex shows an
entrenched perseverance to the meritocratic ideology, to the point at which he does not feel that White or male privilege is legitimate.

Richard held almost identical views about privilege, which should be expected given the similarities of their meritocratic ideologies. When asked about the legitimacy of privilege, Richard told me that he felt he was privileged only in that he had supportive family and friends. I asked if he could expand this idea and he answered, “well, some people don’t have that. But this whole privilege thing to me – I just feel that there’s always someone better, someone that has more connections. There’s someone that’s more motivated than you, has learned more than you, has worked harder than you.” Richard’s answer undermines the basis of privilege existing through one’s identity, as he uses the term in a relative way, claiming that there are always more privileged individuals in the U.S. because they are better able to abide by a meritocratic ideology. Similar to Alex, he structures privilege as a benefit of hard work, rather than unearned benefits based on identity.

I probed Richard’s response and asked him what he thought about White privilege, to which he responded, “White privilege is, to me in this current day and age, is an excuse for people that aren’t White. I can see where the tension came from in the use of this word fifty years ago, but in this day and age, it’s an excuse.” Like Alex’s perspective, Richard feels that White privilege is more of an excuse for non-White individuals to not push themselves to be successful, as it is a legitimate social construction through which White people are benefited through their race. I asked Richard if he felt that male privilege was real, and he scoffed, saying, “this is a free country, anyone who tells you otherwise is just unhappy with where they’re at.” At this point of the interview, Richard looked very bored and ready to be done, so I did not probe this response, but the speed and nonchalant manner in which he answered this question seemed
evidence enough that he did not perceive the existence of any racial or gender hierarchies within society, as such an admittance would contradict both of these respondents’ powerblind worldviews which maintained their strong, meritocratic ideologies.

When asked if he felt he had privilege, Dylan claimed that he was unsure. “I don’t know. Lately, I’ve been made to feel guilty about it, only when I feel that I’m squandering it. I’ve said this multiple times, my dad worked his ass off for what we have, too.” Dylan recognizes that he is privileged but indicates that thinking about privilege can be difficult to do, while also situating his father’s hard work to provide Dylan with the life he has, which is indicative of Dylan’s belief in the inherency of a U.S. meritocracy, in which one is limited by race or gender. I asked Dylan if he could expand his thoughts about feeling guilty about privilege, and he answered, “it’s weird to feel guilty about wanting to pursue your own path just because this privilege says you are allowed to take this path. It’s like, just because I had the opportunity to become a doctor, why should I feel guilty to become a comic?” Dylan feels that he can use his privilege to pursue any lucrative career path, but senses that becoming a comic is seen negatively by others, given his open opportunity structure as a White man. Dylan certainly senses that he can use his privilege to create better opportunities for himself. I asked Dylan to describe how he felt his Whiteness effected his future in order to gain a better sense of his reliance on his White privilege, and he responded, I don’t think it hurts, but I’m also really sick of having to feel bad for being a White guy because I can’t help it. I’m White but I don’t care about my Whiteness, but the world cares so much, so I am like, required to put my two cents in about this issue, and I just don’t give a shit. If I meet any other person, they will learn very quickly that I don’t care about their skin color or their background. And if the world can’t get over that stuff, then it’s their issue.

Dylan firsts admits that his Whiteness will benefit him, but then creates a narrative around the lack of attention he wants to give to race and his Whiteness. Dylan feels that he is limited
because the “rest of the world” is not colorblind like him, thus making him focus of issues, like White privilege, when really, he could not “give a shit”. The lack of attention he desires to give to race is further evidence of his racial privilege, but the ways in which Dylan feels uncomfortable with White privilege rhetoric shows a recognition and use of academic language without a developed understanding of the concepts. Dylan feels out of place in conversations about White privilege because, while he knows the academic language of the concept, he is unable to truly understand the meaning of White privilege or how it was historically developed, which makes his White guilt seem more mysterious and based in personalized attack, rather than a sentiment about the institutions of Whiteness.

When asked about the effects of being a man in society, Dylan felt that especially at Western University, he had to learn to not give his opinion because he will be ostracized by women around him. I posed this question to gain a sense if Dylan felt he had gendered privilege as a man, and instead, he used this question to narrativize how he’s felt attacked by “ultra-feminists,” as he describes these women, which alludes to Dylan saying misogynistic and anti-feminist sentiments, but also to the ways that he is unable to think about gender as a privilege. While he creates at least a sound narrative about White privilege, he did not have a lot to talk about in regard to the presence of a gender hierarchy.

Ben held similar views to Richard and Alex in the ways that he felt privilege was always relative to other people, using the wealthier students at his high school to show that privilege is dependent on an economic hierarchy. While Ben positions the importance of his class identity and the ways in which his economic privilege is less than wealthier students in his high school, I probed his answer and asked him what effects he felt being White would have for his future. He answered, “I don’t really think it will have an effect, I really don’t think about race that much,
except for maybe some of the issues with affirmative action that we mentioned. I really focus on economic inequalities more than that other stuff.” Ben stresses throughout our interviews the importance of an economic perspective, rather than a racial analysis, and as such, maintains the significance of his financial privilege, while lacking many thoughts about his racial privilege. Although he uses affirmative action as the only example of an “issue” that makes him think about his Whiteness, reiterating his anxiety about diversity initiatives being detrimental to the meritocratic structure of society, it is clear that Ben lacks the academic language and racial education to understand how his Whiteness is an institutional privilege.

However, Ben did feel that his male privilege would be a benefit for him in the future. “I think I probably have a leg up to most women. It’s just like, men are biologically more competitive, and it has been shown in tons of studies that men are more competitive than women.” Ben ignores the historical construction of male privilege and institutional maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, instead using a biological argument to frame his male privilege. I asked him to determine what he felt the effect of being more competitive will be for his future.

Being a man is definitely going to have a positive effect. It gives you more drive. I’m not saying that women can’t do it, it’s just that men seem to have much more of a drive. I’ve seen studies where in IQ tests, women on average are smarter than men, but when you get into these super high percentiles, at 1%, it’s like 20 to one, men to women. Some of that could be a nurture thing but a lot of me has to think that it is biological.

Ben creates a case for the presence of his male privilege by using a sexist, biological argument, supported by vague data, to show that he can rely on his male privilege, due to a perceived lack of competition with women. This was a surprising analysis of male privilege, in that discussions of privilege are rarely framed in such derogatory manner, as Ben feels that men do better in society because women lack drive or competition. This is a different narrative to the ways privilege is contemporarily discussed as the benefits of centuries of oppression directed towards
certain groups. Ben does not situate the male oppression of women or non-normative gender identities, but rather uses biological arguments to claim he is advantaged to not be a woman. He tries to make an argument that he understands how male privilege works, potentially as a way to maintain his academic credibility, as he mentions various, unnamed “studies” as evidence, yet his identification of the development of privilege is false. He also situates the significance to which men are benefitted from their biological nature to succeed in the meritocracy.

The class identities of the previous four respondents is significant to the analysis of privilege, in that these middle-class interviewees may feel more economic anxieties and competition with the “other” than the wealthier respondents, who generally agreed they had some form of privilege. While wealthy respondents may feel more secure in their societal distance from increased minority employment, educational attainment, and wealth, these middle-class respondents denied the impacts of privilege as a means of preserving their dominance and structuring the presence of a meritocracy to which they could benefit from. Even as Dylan identified his White privilege, he still felt entitled to use it to benefit himself. The differences in these respondents’ identification of male privilege shows a lack of anxiety around competition with women, however, and future research should further analyze White, male anxieties around the empowerment of women. From my analysis, however, it does not appear that these respondents felt much competition from women, which may attest to the dominance of their misogynistic ideologies, further evidenced by many of their desires to have a family and be the breadwinner of these families, as this shows an expectation to make their wives dependent on them.

Matthew and Daniel were dissimilar to the other four middle-class respondents in that they were far more deliberate and aware of their privilege and felt they could identify its origins.
These two-middle class respondents did not maintain that their privilege was relative to others, that their parents worked hard to give them their privilege, or that they felt guilty about these unearned benefits. Instead, they were able to reproduce much of the academic theory around privilege. When asked if he felt he had privilege, Daniel was quick to answer “yes, I definitely think I have privilege.” I probed and asked what made this evident to him. He answered,

What makes it evident to me, and it’s a hard thing to sometimes realize because we couldn’t possibly know the experiences of others. I think one thing for me is looking where I’m at in life and what me to where I am, compared to, say my girlfriend who’s Chinese-American. She’s had to work harder than I have. For instance, she’s paying for her own school and my family is paying for all of my education. And I don’t think this is just a product of how hard her parents work because the reason why my dad was able to go into law school and get a job he did was due to his White privilege. If my dad was not White, or a man [laughs], he would have had to work a lot harder to get that job. He really relied on his Whiteness to get him a job, just because of how White that lawyer workforce is.

Unlike the other respondents, Daniel feels that his father’s success is directly a result of his White masculinity and the benefits that held when entering the majority White field of law. He positions that his experiences are much different than his Asian-American partner and understands that he has not had to work as hard as her due to his Whiteness. I asked Daniel to describe how he felt his privilege became evident to him.

I benefit from being White because of how White the workforce is today. Older people in this White workforce don’t think about race as much as they should, and are going to be biased, like what I talked about when we discussed why we need more affirmative action, so really, I have a huge advantage moving forward out of college. Also, my success is not going to be hinged on whether or not I get in trouble for simple misdemeanors with the police. When you talk about systematic racism and police violence, those things don’t affect White people. Being a White guy, I would have no idea what it feels like to be nervous behind the wheel of car, but my sister’s boyfriend, who’s Puerto Rican, gets pulled over every single time he comes into my town.

Daniel situates that he will benefit from his Whiteness due to employment biases. He then mentions the ways in which he does not have to worry about being limited by a criminal record because of a racist criminal justice system. Daniel is aware of the ease to which he can become
upwardly-mobile as the result of his Whiteness. When asked to describe if he felt he was privileged as a man, he answered,

It’s definitely significant and maybe harder to gauge than White privilege. I know that going into the field of astronomy, which has been predominately run by White men, is going to be easier for me. I’m very fortunate to have a woman professor right now, but she has expressed her frustration with that work environment.

Although he feels understanding male privilege is more difficult, Daniel does use the example of the gender disparities in his academic field to identify aspects of male privilege to which he can benefit from in the future. Up to this point, Daniel creates a narrative around the ways he will benefit from his privilege, and I probed his response and asked him, “how do you navigate this idea that you’re benefiting from privilege, yet you see it as morally unjust?” Daniel answered,

It’s very important to be aware of privilege. That’s the first step, but I think it’s important for people to want to give back to those who lack this privilege. I think that if you’re a person of privilege and you’ve benefited from this system, give to charity, accept certain tax policies, advocate for social change, speak out. Be a part of the conversation when other demographics want you to. I think that’s how I grapple with it. Also educating others about this stuff is important to me, morally, as a privileged person. My roommate [Frank] brought up reverse racism the other day and I just sat him down and explained to him that racism is executed with power. In the history of this country, White men have held power. I told Frank, ‘you cannot be racially discriminated against because you’re White, and this country props up White men institutionally.’ Educating others like that is important to do as a White man.

Daniel promotes an antiracist perspective and feels that educating other privileged people is an important way to navigate his own privilege. He also feels that he needs to accept more equitable tax policies, donate to charities, and be a good ally in discussions of social change. Matthew similarly claimed that recognizing privilege was not enough for him, as he said, “I need to do something with my position, you know? It’s wrong to think changes could come without me being effected, and I am totally willing for that to happen.” Both Matthew and Daniel are comfortable and supportive with policies designed to produce more equity, even when that
means they will be directly affected, which was a unique perspective to the sample. Daniel and Matthew both discussed the development of privilege, which was also unique to the sample. Daniel and Matthew are able to identify that their privilege is real and is manifested through there Whiteness and masculinity. Even as they are similar to other respondents in their confidence that their privilege can be used as a benefit, their rhetoric of antiracism, feminism, and recognition is unique. Their admission of the use of privilege may be pronounced because of their middle-class backgrounds and lack of possible reliance on familial wealth. Matthew and Daniel hold unique perspectives to the rest of the sample, but even as the four wealthy respondents claim to understand their White privilege, their use of academic language is hollow when they do not structure any discussion of the need for institutional changes, which may allude to a perception of more direct threat to their wealth via the promotion of institutionalized initiatives around promoting racial and gender equity.

**Wealth and the Navigation of Privilege**

Jesse, Aaron, Connor, and Todd all created narratives around an admission of racial privilege, but largely lacked narratives around their male privilege. Furthermore, while these respondents were able to use acceptable academic rhetoric around privilege, there is evidence that this was done from the perspective of avoiding stigmatization for not abiding by the liberal values of Western University’s social milieu. This was evident as these respondents lacked understanding around the development of privilege and also via the lack of antiracism or feminism mentioned in these discussions, showing that these respondents did not feel a need to change the social conditions through which they accrued so much benefits.

Connor, who told me his mother is a vice president at a successful company, admitted that he had White privilege and that this was made most evident from encounters with the police
in the large, Midwest city. “I have privilege, I’ve definitely gotten out of some situations with the law where I could have been in much more trouble because of my background, strangers are nicer to me probably because I look like an affluent, White dude. Privilege is real, but I don’t think about it a lot.” Connor feels that the way people treat him as an affluent White man is evidence that he has White privilege, but his examples are bound in anecdotal evidence, showing a lack of deliberate education around the topic, even as he seemed attuned to engage in a discussion of privilege. When I asked him about whether he felt he had male privilege, Connor responded,

I mean, having my mom being the breadwinner definitely has been different for sure. My dad was a stay at home dad while my mom was always traveling, so I guess that’s kind of unique. But yeah, being a man is definitely a benefit. I actually feel like I can get my way in more so than no which is also really a privilege of being a White man. But again, these are questions I rarely think about.

Discussing male privilege feels unique to Connor because his mother was the economic provider for his family, which Connor felt was different than most families, even though his mother was the primary economic provider and his father was unemployed, showing the subtle reproduction of heteronormativity, but Connor does feel that generally, his male privileged granted him a sense of entitlement, even as he rarely discussed these topics. Connor is able to admit to being privileged but did not include discussions of the historical development of these benefits. I asked him where he felt privilege came from and he answered, “It’s always been the White man that’s come in and laid out the law. I don’t know why history’s been that way.” This view naturalizes the presence of White, masculine supremacy, and without an analysis of oppression, he naturalizes privilege, as well. His lack of antiracist narratives or feminist discourse shows that he does not think about changing these systems, and it should be anticipated that he will rely on privilege to gain upward mobility, even as he claimed that the U.S. was meritocratic throughout
his interview. His lack of attention to privilege in our interview should be understood as a preservation of a meritocratic ideology which denies structural inequalities created through legacies of oppression. His use and understanding that we were going to have a discussion of privilege shows a familiarity with the topic and foresight about how to speak to such topics, but his lack of investment in the conversation shows this is something he does not address, often.

When asked if he was privileged, Aaron responded, “I am a privileged individual. My family, we are very reasonable people. I just realized that I was never told no on anything reasonable. Like, I couldn’t just have whatever I wanted, my dad told me who wouldn’t buy me crazy things, but anything I wanted to do, like ski or play golf, I was able to.” Aaron creates a narrative of privilege based on his wealth, and I probed his response and asked him what he felt the role of his Whiteness played. “Being White definitely doesn’t hurt. It’s an advantage. It’s a White man’s world, right now.” Aaron is quick and blasé as he responds to questions about privilege, and throughout the interview, he seemed to regurgitate the socially acceptable answers to questions about diversity, privilege, and meritocracy, so it was difficult to determine as a researcher his degree of genuineness. But, the seeming regurgitation of answers does so show the adoption of privilege rhetoric and knowledge about the “right thing to say”. When I asked Aaron what he felt the significance of being a man was, and if this related to privilege, he answered, “being a man is a positive, but not as much as race. White women don’t have it as bad as Black men.” I asked him if he could expand his answer and he replied,

In today’s world, if you’re an adequately qualified woman, you’re going to have to endure some things that White men aren’t going to, like sexual harassment and whatnot. I feel like as far as upward mobility goes, being an attractive White woman definitely isn’t a disadvantage. You’re going to be viewed differently in the workplace to your male counterparts. It’s not a disadvantage if you play it right, which is really disappointing and upsetting that the business world is still sexualized like that. If you play to your strengths, it’s going to help you.
In depicting the ways in which White women are more advantaged than Black men, Aaron describes how women get benefit from workplace sexual harassment, an idea so outlandish and misogynistic that I was thrown off by it in the interview. Aaron creates a situation to which White women are free to become upwardly mobile only when they appear in such a way that they could use sexual harassment to their advantage. In all of this, he depicts a hypersexualized gender hierarchy, yet when I ask Aaron if he feels there is a glass ceiling for White women, he answers, “Yes and no. It’s definitely still a thing, but it’s becoming less of a thing if you’re adequately qualified. It’s starting to crack.” While Aaron is quick to recognize White privilege, he lacks intersectionality as he fails to definitively answer if there is a still a gendered “glass ceiling”. In attempting to structure a narrative about the “white man’s world”, Aaron is able to situate the importance of race in creating privilege, but this identification negates his ability to extend an empathetic analysis to issues facing White women. While he’s able to maintain awareness about racial issues, his adamance for raising and providing for a family is significant in his neutrality to women’s issues, and although he is unable to be explicitly misogynistic, his total lack of feminism is evidence of his unacknowledged, male privilege.

Aaron’s narrative about significance of racial issues, contrasted to his lack of empathy or focus on feminist issues, may be further evidence of a production of dominant academic thought, as conversations of race and White privilege may be more prevalent within Aaron’s education and social networks. The ease to which he claimed White privilege as being legitimate shows a reproduction of dominant privilege rhetoric, while his lack of intersectionality may show the lack of this analysis within his life. Furthermore, he maintains a meritocratic ideology when discussing that the “glass ceiling” does not matter when a woman is “equally qualified”, showing that he feels that White women cannot be limited in their pursuits of upward mobility because of
a reliance on their Whiteness, and his lack of intersectionality maintains the belief that gender is not restrictive. Similar to the other respondents too, Aaron feels he can rely on his privilege, and his lack of discussion around antiracism, expansions to affirmative action, or other general solutions to reduce inequalities shows a protection of privilege and his wealth, especially when he claims White women can do most everything men can. While his fiscally conservative political ideology is a protection of his wealth, his self-proclaimed social liberalism may be used more as an expression of homogeneity with the perceived hyper-liberalism of Western University’s student body. While he subtly engages with the privilege rhetoric, his lack of intersectionality or determination to create equity is evident that these views are used for Aaron to avoid stigma for his conservative views and self-protection of status.

Todd and Jesse, who similarly claimed a fiscally conservative, socially liberal political ideology, discussed privilege in similar ways to Connor and Aaron. Todd felt that his privilege was most evident in the ways he was able to attend expensive summer camps as child, go to college, and have multiple vacation homes, using an economic perspective to situate his privilege. When I asked him if he felt that his Whiteness was part of privilege, he came back to the plethora of social networks he made through his parents’ wealthy friends and the confidence he feels in using these networks to establish a career. “They know that I was brought up in a good family and they know that I have good values. Those people play a big role in pursuing any jobs in the future and being able to always go back on that and using that privilege to help me out in my job search.” Todd’s entire narrative of privilege is an admission of his own economic privilege, but it is unclear the degree to which he situates as Whiteness as a part of this. Throughout our interview, he would refer to marginalized communities as the “other side” and attested to how he grew up in a White, affluent bubble. Even as he has taken Sociology and
Ethnic Studies courses at Western University, he does not explicitly state how Whiteness benefits him, except for his confidence that the White networks he has, via his parents, will guarantee him a good job. Like the other respondents, Todd is unable to situate where his privilege comes from and his reliance on Black celebrities and athletes to create social change, compounded with his political ideology, shows that Todd will make political decisions that benefit his privilege, rather than create social equity.

Like Aaron, when asked whether he felt privileged because he was a man, Todd answered, “Yeah, I think so. Considering that I want to work my way up in the ranks at a company and maybe become a CEO, being in that dominant position is definitely something that is pretty fortunate to be a male in. I think my values and what I want to pursue would probably be different if I was the opposite gender.” Todd’s male privilege is evident to him because he assumes that positions in corporate America, like being a CEO, is something based in inherent, biological, male characteristics, and as such, he is thankful for being a man, because he does not have the flaws of being a woman.

This recognition of male privilege is similar to Ben’s, in that respondents feel thankful they are not women, as they create arguments around failings of women within the meritocracy, like Aaron, as well. Their male privilege is only evident to them due to their misogyny, showing a reclamation of the academic language of privilege, as privilege is evident to respondents because they feel grateful for not possessing the detrimental characteristics seen as inherent to females. While this reclamation was not explicitly stated in this section about privilege, the ways in which respondents discussed the failed other - their lack of motivation, lack of role models, and use of excuses - shows how these White men framed privilege as a celebration of not having the self-imposed, detrimental qualities of the other.
Instead of recognizing that they benefit from a system of historical oppression, segregation, and marginalization, they situate that they are privileged because they do not possess the “legitimate” stereotypes of the other. This is a total reclamation of the term, as privilege for these respondents is structured as a celebration of having the natural qualities which make one able to succeed in the meritocracy, as opposed to the failed other, who is seen as being in a marginalized position because they are unable to push themselves to succeed through the meritocratic structure of the U.S. These overt racist and misogynistic beliefs serve to bolster respondents expectations for success, as many felt they could rely on their privilege to gain upward mobility. Even as various respondents failed to identity their White or masculine privilege, they did so from a classed position, as an admission of privilege was seen as a negation of meritocracy by middle-class respondent who perceived more economic threats from the “other”, but their denial of privilege works similarly to the positioning of privilege as luck to not be the other, as both ideologies work through a powerblind analysis that ultimately blames minoritized individuals for their own failings.
Limitations and Future Research

The most significant limitation of this study comes from its small sample size, as ten respondents is not enough to create generalizable data about the population in question, White college attendees at Western University. Another limitation of the study is sample collection, as the use of convenience and snowball sampling may have inadvertently skewed the perspectives of the sample. Furthermore, this sample is economically skewed, as respondents varied only from middle-class self-identification to wealthy self-identification. Future research should promote the use of more students from working class backgrounds, as well as first generation students. The study is also limited in the lack of analysis of sexuality and sexual racism, as my study had no inquiry to the respondents’ sexuality, and an analysis of respondents’ racial preferences for partners would be an important facet through which to better understand their racism.

The final significant limitation which must be states is that my perspective as a researcher may be limited as a White man, myself, who also attends Western University. Although my Whiteness and masculine gender presentation and identification did allow me a high degree of access to the White men in my study, as a White man, I have inherent racial and gender biases that may have influenced my thinking through the data analysis. Future research on the topic of White masculinity and the navigation of privilege would benefit from a woman of Color’s research perspective.

Future research should promote the use of quantitative methods in addition to the qualitative scope of my study, in order to gain a more apt analysis of the entirety of the population, and furthermore, should promote a comparative study of the attitudes of White men in two Universities in different areas of the U.S. This study is also limited in its lack of
comparative analysis, as Daniel was often framed as a negative case, but his identity as a White male only allows for some vague comparisons of admissions of privilege, a lack of meritocratic ideology, and a lack of a powerblind analysis. Future research should attempt to create a comparative sample among Black male students, Latino male students, Asian male students, Indigenous male students, and other students of Color to gauge the degree to which students with non-White identities compare to a White male sample and understand if the reproduction of meritocratic ideologies is specific to White men. This will help to situate and compare whether racial privilege or male privilege is more influential in the creation of meritocratic narratives, even as the expression and toxicity of masculinity is highly conflated with Whiteness. Furthermore, a future study should analyze differences in the navigation of racial privilege in a sample of men and women as a means to better understand the influences of gender in expressions of White privilege.
Conclusion

This study is constructed around the ways in which White men in college navigate their privilege through an analysis of the narratives they create around pursuing success in the United States. Respondents attending Western University continually claimed to live in a meritocratic society, where everyone is free to pursue their goals in a society comprised of free and open opportunities. Respondents maintained this ideology by drawing on their own White parents’ successes, using their parents’ upward mobility to prove that the U.S. is structured in a way to allow anyone to become successful through their hard work. Respondents desire to reproduce this success was situated as replication of their familial structures. Respondents produced the myth of meritocracy by claiming that successful people create goals for themselves to follow, and by claiming that education is the main way to which people can be successful. Respondents relied on individualistic and abstract meanings to define success, claiming that one was successful when they were happy, or when they were comfortable, or when they had a family to take care of. Daniel’s definition of success was the only one which explicitly stated the importance of wealth in constructing success. In this way, respondents’ arbitrary definitions were used as diversionary tactics to ignore the benefits of their Whiteness and masculinity, as well as their economic privilege which directly bolstered their abilities to upwardly mobile.

Respondents believed that there were both universal paths to success and subjective paths, but central to both of these claims was the importance of education. In this way, attaining a higher education seen as the “ticket” to functioning in the meritocracy. The respondents created narratives around poor people, or poor people of Color, becoming successful through their hard work in high school, which ultimately allowed these people to gain access to college and become
successful. In this way, even attaining a higher education is perceived to be something that is possible through an individual’s effort and their dedication to “making it”.

What is telling about these stories of universal success is that all of the White men I interviewed told me that going to college was something that was expected and was referred to as the “normal” thing to do for people in their hometowns. College is seen as a necessity, but also a rite of passage, which speaks to the respondents’ internalization of White, normative pathways to gaining upward mobility. In this way, respondents projected their normative, privileged upbringing to the rest of U.S. society, which was similar as they discussed paths to upward mobility and markers of success throughout the interviews. Their claims that anyone can go to college deny the effects of educational inequalities. Generally, respondents could not pay attention to any institutional inequalities because such attention would negate a meritocracy.

Contradictions like these appeared throughout my interviews. Respondents claimed that the society they lived in was open for anyone to make it, yet contradicted themselves through their confidence in relying on their Whiteness, masculinity, familial wealth, and social networks to aid them in pursuits of success. In order to maintain this fragile meritocratic ideology, respondents had to think about employment opportunities and upward mobility in colorblind, genderblind, and generally powerblind ways. Furthermore, to maintain the belief that the U.S. is meritocratic, some respondents claimed that White privilege and male privilege were not real, and that neither race nor gender had an effect for how people could become upwardly mobile. Claiming that anyone can make it in the U.S. ignores the societal restrictions set upon marginalized communities and individuals within them. To argue that anyone can “make it” in the U.S., respondents had to find ways to blame minoritized individuals for their own positions. The ways in which respondents thought about failure and its relationship to minoritized groups
was termed the “failed other”, as respondents always kept their epithetical distance to such groups, due to the ways disadvantage called destabilized the existence of meritocracy and also made respondents’ privilege evident.

Narratives of the failed other claimed that inequality was based in a failure to abide by the meritocratic values one must hold to gain upward-mobility. In this way, the powerblind perspectives held by respondents fell apart, as they claimed that marginalization was due to a lack of one’s dedication to being successful, being raised in a culture of poverty, lacking positive role models in a community, disenfranchisement, and most abundant in interviews, feeling that the failed other’s made excuses for not being pushing oneself to success by claiming that oppression limited one’s agency. Respondents who used such arguments about the failed other did so to negate the ways Whiteness is oppressive, and to distance themselves from their racial, gender, and economic privilege which created easier paths to upward mobility for respondents. The use of overt racism and misogyny when discussing the qualities that promote failure indicates such expressions are used in situations to which White men feel a need to negate the existence of their privilege, which had to be done in order to maintain respondents’ belief in meritocracy. Respondents had to navigate the denial of institutional oppression, finding ways to blame the failed other, as a means of abstracting and negating the structural privileges endowed to their identities.

When it came to imagining themselves applying to a competitive positon among a diverse applicant group, respondents maintained their desire for merit-based hiring practices, arguing that deliberately promoting diversity was unfair and led to selecting less qualified candidates. Marginalized individuals imagined benefitting from such initiatives were always perceived as being less smart, able, and qualified than the White man who was not selected,
showing the persistence of racism, sexism, and assumptions of White qualifications throughout most of the sample of men. Even when some respondents claimed that diversity was always helpful to a company, there were still indications of their anxiety of losing opportunities to less qualified people with marginalized identities. This shows the entitled expectations of respondents to gain any opportunity they desire.

Furthermore, respondents framed the benefits of diversity as a reproduction of lessons they learned at their time in Western University, showing the dissonance held by respondents as they used accepted academic theories, yet personally felt attacked at the prospect of affirmative action and other such initiatives. These discussions of diversity were evidence of respondents’ Whiteness and privilege coming under attack through institutional promotions of equity. While respondents may feel they were defending the fairness of a merit-based system, the intense anxiety held by respondents shows the White, masculine self-protection of dominance within the racial-gender hierarchy of U.S. society. The rhetoric used by respondents in describing the importance of maintaining fairness should be understood as the desire to maintain status-quo hiring practices, through which White men are twice as likely to be hired than a Person of Color (Pierce, 2003). Desiring a merit-based system for admission to universities and employment opportunities was a desire to maintain biased systems which benefited White men and therefore, these respondents.

As a study of privilege, these respondents demonstrate the ways in which White men minimize the impacts of identity, oppression, and the accrued, intergenerational inheritance of White, masculine privilege. While two respondents claimed that privilege did not exist, and was used to create excuses for failure, the other eight respondents were similar in the ways they felt confident in benefiting from their Whiteness and masculinity as they pursued their future goals.
Even as views of the legitimacy of privilege varied by class, respondents were familiar with the language of privilege, showing the proliferation of the term throughout the public sphere, but with recognition also came pernicious understandings of the term. At its worst, respondents felt they were privileged because they did not possess the detrimental qualities of the failed other, and at their best, Daniel and Matthew were able to identity that the origins of their privilege came from legacies of oppression, and even as they committed themselves to promoting institutional equity initiatives, these respondents felt confident and entitled to that they would have successful due to their normative identities.

As an examination of narratives used by White men to situate the individualistic, equal-opportunity nature of U.S. society, it is clear that respondents in this sample conceive of themselves as being in dominant identities, as the framing of meritocracy was done to invisibilize and preserve their privilege. The use of powerblind ideologies should not be thought of as simple discomfort among those with dominant identities to avoid difficult conversations. These perspectives are required to argue for the presence of a meritocracy which works to negate discussions of privilege, and as such, are used as social, survival mechanisms for White men living with dominant identities to accrue the maximum financial and social capital in order to live privilegedly.

Although the sample did not reveal where these views came from or how they learned to engage with their ideologies of privilege, it is clear that they are attuned to this discourse. The origins of these views may come from the proliferation of conservative media which serves to dispute the assumed “liberal propaganda” within institutions of higher education. Young, conservative pundits claim the lack of significance to identity, and push back upon the “victim label” which they associate with marginalized groups. Although these sources were not explicitly
named, the sample’s discourse of privilege seems to be heavily influenced by the disavowal of liberal ideologies around marginalization, institutional oppression, and identity politics. Similarly, both the sample and these conservative pundits create narratives about the “freedom of the U.S.” to allow “anyone to become successful,” and do so as a means of negating White privilege, gender privilege, and the benefits of accruing intergenerational wealth. Although respondents may not be directly engaging with this type of media, the fact that they feel their politics match the ideologies of their parents, and the ways that respondents framed their fathers as their inspirations for success, shows that the sample’s parents hold a great amount of socializing power to inundate the sample with their same outlooks of society. More troubling, as respondents desired to reproduce the same familial structures as the one’s they were raised in, we should expect that these same outlooks and ideologies will be passed forward to future generations.

The attitudes expressed by the majority of my sample run parallel to Cohen et al.’s (2017) survey findings showing how Whites, age 18-25, are largely split on the degree to which racism is significant in the contemporary U.S, as 48% of White respondents felt discrimination against Whites was as rampant as discrimination against People of Color. Furthermore, the survey shows that White millennials strongly agree that healthcare is the most serious problem in the U.S., followed by environmental issues and climate change, and then issues of racism and discrimination, which was unique within this comparative sample (Cohen et al., 2017). These findings show that while perceptions of millennial progressivism are valid, this progressive outlook comes from a higher representation of People of Color, as White people in this survey felt largely complacent with current political and racial dynamics in the U.S, showing once again the presence of a disconnected and self-preserving White habitus among Millennials. These
findings are indicative of the ideologies held amongst the majority of my sample, showing the immense need to desegregate the lives of White people in the U.S, as this isolation has created immensely self-protective and detached perspectives of contemporary society that differ significantly from those held by People of Color (Cohen et al., 2017).

There must be increased representation of minoritized individuals in academia, the workforce, and throughout the plethora of hypersegregated, White communities. Institutional initiatives to promote diversity must be expanded if our society wishes to truly adjust the self-protective White, masculine habitus. If our society wishes to create a truly functional meritocracy, there must be renewed dedication to producing equity and representation through mandated affirmative action requirements for every aspect of the public and private sector, and furthermore, we must start engaging in discussions of impactful, wealth redistribution initiatives to produce such equity. Such solutions produce fear at the core of the self-protective and privilege White, masculine habitus, and as such, show that the maintenance of power has always been the basis of White, male political desires. Economic, political, and social domination by White men must be addressed and abolished through a renewed dedication to creating financial, educational, political, and judicial equity if a true meritocracy is desired.
Bibliography


