

BACKSTAGE, FRONTSTAGE INTERACTIONS:
EVERYDAY RACIAL EVENTS AND WHITE COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

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by

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This dissertation is dedicated to the thousands of U.S. college students who allowed me to read their personal thoughts, feelings and interactions. I also dedicate this to their instructors, who encouraged them to think critically about race and who ultimately made this dissertation possible.

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By

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May 2004

Chair: Joe R. Feagin
Major Department: Department of Sociology

Social scientists have often documented in surveys the apparently liberal shift in whites' racial attitudes since the civil rights era of the 1960s. However, a few recent studies strongly suggest that the abundance of survey data indicating that whites are more liberal in their racial attitudes today than in the past are insufficient, as whites today may be concealing true racial attitudes in some settings against persons of color. Data for this project were derived from the journal writing and diaries collected nationally from 626 white college students across the United States. Using the extended case method, I offer insights from these extensive data into institutional racism. This project explores the inconsistency in the presentation of white racial attitudes, and examines how whites rationalize the contradictions. Specifically, this project answers the questions how do whites interact among other whites ("backstage") and how do whites interact among people of color ("frontstage"). The interactions within these two regions are strikingly different. This is illustrated in the mechanisms that whites use to protect the backstage

boundary, such as verbal warnings and nonverbal avoidance. This project examines the “slippage” between the two regions, and how whites account for racetalk in the backstage when physically near the frontstage.

As racialized interactions are social in nature, this project provides insight into how whites learn and reproduce racial attitudes and actions with their critical social networks. Many whites in the sample described racial relations in individualistic conceptualizations, or rationalized that the positive individual attributes negated the consequences of racist interactions in the backstage. I examine critically here both the colorblind ideology and individualist perspective of racial relations, as whites’ everyday racist practices and backstage interactions sustain a racial hierarchy in the larger societal structure. This project seeks to help better comprehend what is happening in the everyday world, descriptively and analytically, as a means to understand systemic racism today.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

I went over to the Smith farm this afternoon around dinnertime. I went to a small farm school, graduated with 42 kids, all white and mostly farmers. The farmers that I graduated with are all racist, everyone knows this—it's not a secret. Todd asked how school was going and then asked when I was going to let them come down and visit. I said, "I don't know guys, one of my suitemates is black, you would have to be nice to her." All the guys said, "Black!?!". Like they were shocked that I could actually live with someone of another color. Then David said, "Now why would you go and do that for?" Then they agreed that nothing would be said if they came to visit and then started to talk about some fight they had gotten into with some black kids in town. The conversation was short lived and I wasn't surprised by their comments or their reactions to Lisa (my suitemate). They are all really nice guys and I think if they came to visit that they would be respectful of Lisa. I know, however, that they would talk and make fun later about me living with a black girl. I know this summer I'm going to get shit from them about it. (Becky, WF, 19, Midwest)

The above quote was written by Becky, a white female college student, who describes an everyday racial event. Becky's white male friends admit they would be polite to the Black woman to her face, but would behave very differently in a private location just among white friends. This account illustrates one major focus of this dissertation project: whites' interactions among other whites (defined as "backstage") are often very different than their interactions among people of color (defined as "frontstage"). This dissertation examines the varying ways that whites interact in the everyday world as described in everyday journal writing. This data-gathering technique is unique compared to the more traditional methodology of surveys and interviews for studying racial views, attitudes, and actions.

In this chapter, I discuss the relevant literature on whites as a racial category that pertains to this project. I first explore the research on whites' racial attitudes as gathered

via survey research, and compare that to interviews and participant observation. Second, I explore the research on colorblindness and racial classification schemes. Third, after providing this brief literature review, I then set up the theoretical framework for this project, specifically institutional racism as it develops and plays out in frontstage and backstage settings. Fourth, I define the key concepts used throughout the dissertation and present my specific aims for this project. Lastly, I set up the rest of the dissertation chapters.

Literature on Whites

Traditionally, racial and ethnic research focuses on persons of color, and their experiences with discrimination. The majority of research on whites examines whites' attitudes and behaviors toward persons of color. Although Gunnar Myrdal (1998) in 1944 spoke of the need to study "what goes on in the minds of white Americans," only recently in the 1980s and 1990s have scholars examined whiteness, or whites as a racial group. Scholars such as Toni Morrison (1992) and Ruth Frankenberg (1993) are often attributed as the pioneering whiteness scholars.

Survey

Social scientists have often documented by means of surveys the apparently liberal shift in whites' racial attitudes since the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s (Hyman and Sheatsley 1964; Lipset 1996). There is much significant survey research on whites' racial attitudes. Survey data indicate that the rate of whites who publicly profess blatant racial stereotypes has declined, but it is still substantial. For example, a 2001 National survey indicated 58% of whites applied at least one negative stereotype to Black Americans (such as lazy, violent, prefer welfare, or complaining) (Bobo 2001).

However, a few recent studies strongly suggest that one factor in this liberal shift involves whites saying one thing in public, and saying (and doing) something contrary to that in private. Specifically, two recent studies (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Myers and Williamson 2001) suggest that the abundance of survey data indicating that whites are more liberal in their racial attitudes today than in the past are insufficient, as whites today may be concealing true racial attitudes in some settings against persons of color. Whites operating under a colorblind ideology may be more likely to ignore race in certain contexts (such as the oft-quoted phrase, “I don’t see color, I just see people”), yet still interact only in white social networks (Feagin 2000; Feagin and Vera 1995).

Colorblindness Literature

Colorblindness among whites is often conceptualized as an extension of white racial transparency. As whites are the dominant group (economically, politically, culturally, and statistically), whiteness is rarely defined or examined (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Haney Lopez 1996). Whites enjoy the privilege of racial transparency, or not having a color (McIntosh 1998). In this way, whiteness remains invisible as it perpetuates privilege, normalcy, and power.

Within this framework, it is easy for whites to ignore “race” within themselves, and to extend this avoidance of race among others, yet still navigate in a white world. Even when interacting with persons of color, for many whites the goal is to maintain a stance of not noticing color, for focusing on race is equated with white supremacy (Frankenberg 1993). In other words, to notice or talk about race is racist (Carr 1997).

Scholars like Leslie Carr (1997) argue that the colorblind ideology has replaced evolutionary racist ideology. Unlike what many whites will argue, ignoring race is not a solution to institutional and systemic racism, but it is a new form of racism. From a

white standpoint, major social institutions are not white, but just “normal and customary” (Feagin 2000: 100). Many whites have adopted a colorblind position, whereby they claim that there is no longer a problem of racism if people do not acknowledge race.

Among the most cited research on white racial attitudes is conducted by Ruth Frankenberg (1993), who examines among other issues, colorblindness. From her 30 in-depth interviews with white women in California, Frankenberg outlines three paradigms of racial construction: essential racism, colorblindness, and race cognizance. As well as contributing to racial theory with these three shifts in race conceptions, Frankenberg’s book is a landmark because it attempts to analyze the emotionality, or the “deeper feelings” of race relations and racism. Through personal interviews, Frankenberg offers a better understanding of whites’ emotions regarding racial relations that range from innocence to guilt, and fear/anger to pride/superiority.

In addition to Frankenberg’s research, currently only two other in-depth interview projects explore white racial attitudes; all three suggest that whites harbor very racist attitudes (Feagin and O’Brien 2003; Feagin and Vera 1995). Feagin and Vera (1995) limit their analysis of whites to one chapter of a larger project, but many key features used by these scholars are beneficial to this project. These authors rely on analyzing racial events, which they suggest reveal “the ways in which actions create and reflect structures both in and through time” (Feagin and Vera 1995: 17). Similar to Frankenberg (1993), Feagin and Vera (1995) hint at the range of often negative emotions (particularly fear and hatred) whites express toward people of color, especially African Americans. Emotions, thoughts, and actions are often tailored according to the social location of the racial events.

Feagin and Vera (1995: 143) suggest that regarding racial events, we can use Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis to explain how whites act differently in the public frontstage versus the more private backstage area. This similar conception is found in the social psychological literature referred to as modern racism, where the surface level (or public frontstage) covers deeper racist attitudes (in private backstage areas) (Dovidio and Gaerthner 1991). Compared to the recent past when overtly racist comments were tolerated and expected, now social pressures exist to avoid such overtly racist statements. However, subtle measures and tests in psychology suggest a racist core is still intact (Pettigrew 1989).

Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) argue that a new racial ideology of colorblind racism accounts for whites putting on an antiracist mask over an often prejudiced and racist core. They argue that this antiracist façade is captured in survey responses that may not accurately reflect whites' true feelings. Whites report more prejudice in in-depth interviews than in surveys, and they also rely on semantic tactics in interviews to appear less racist (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). For example, white college students may use hesitation, disclaimers, and ambivalent statements to save face and appear less racist while still conveying a (colorblind) racist ideology. Given the findings of Bonilla-Silva and Forman, the methodological approach used to gather information is critical to examine for how it impacts what data are, or are not, captured and how it is framed. Bonilla-Silva and Forman confirm the social psychological literature, and also contextualize it in a social and historical context of racism.

Social Psychology

There are also numerous racial experiments in psychology and social psychology (Devine 1989; Helms 1992). The research of Patricia Devine provides useful ways to

think about stereotypes, particularly when they are activated or repressed. Devine and Elliot (1995) suggest that on the whole, everyone is aware of racist stereotypes, such as “Blacks are lazy” and “Jews are materialistic” no matter what level of prejudice a person holds. In other words, even if a person does not believe the stereotype, people possess knowledge that the racial stereotype exists.

Devine and her colleagues suggest a two-step model of the cognitive process: the automatic processing brought up by a stimulus (such as a member of the outgroup); and the controlled (conscious) processing that can ignore, refute, or confirm it. She suggests that less prejudiced persons use their conscious processing to edit out negative stereotypes. Although Devine’s work is respected in her field, some scholars take issue with the implication that negative stereotypes are automatically activated in everyone. Fazio and colleagues (1995) suggest that considerable variability exists in people’s automatic processing of negative stereotypes.

Racial Classification Scheme

Some researchers have used Goffman’s theoretical orientation to describe whites’ “schizophrenia” of racial relations, where whites say one thing in public, yet say and do something contrary to that in private (Feagin and Vera 1995; Myers and Williamson 2001). In the frontstage, whites learn that it is not appropriate to express racist sentiments; yet in the backstage, whites can relax this expectation.

In addition to conceptualizing racial events into Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis (1959) of performing in the frontstage and backstage, other researchers have categorized narrative events in other classification schemes. Feagin and Feagin (1989, 2003) describe the sites and range of discrimination along three distinct forms: overt discrimination (obvious to the victim and perpetrator), subtle discrimination (obvious to the victim, but

not overt), and covert discrimination (hidden and difficult to document). Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) use a similar typology to describe various forms of sexism.

Additionally, Yamato (1987) utilizes similar categorization of four different manifestations of racism: aware/blatant, aware/covert, unaware/unintentional, and unaware/self-righteous. According to Yamato, the level of awareness is from the perspective of the white perpetrator. Like Feagin and colleagues, she differentiates between blatant (or overt) events and covert events that tend to be more difficult to document. We can find criticisms in Yamato's categorization, such as the categories may not necessarily be discrete and fixed, but may be more fluid and overlapping. However, she does offer key elements of racial events to consider, such as examining the level of awareness and intention of the (white) perpetrator.

In this dissertation, I provide my own classification scheme based in part on Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor. I discuss frontstage, backstage, and the slippage between the two regions. I conceptualize the borders around the backstage region, and how whites protect a safe backstage, even when in the presence of people of color in the frontstage. To better understand the framework for this project, I will further detail Goffman's perspective.

Theoretical Perspectives

Goffman's Dramaturgy

In sociology, Goffman suggests that people use impression management (they present themselves using certain techniques) to sustain a performance that fits the requirements of a particular situation. As though we are actors on a stage, he suggests that there are two structural features of dramaturgy: the frontstage and backstage.

In the front region (“frontstage” in this dissertation), individuals and groups (referred to as “performance teams”) perform the roles that leads the audience to form an impression. According to Goffman, the front is “that part of the individual’s [or team’s] performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (1959: 22). Goffman also notes that in the front, performers typically conceal behaviors, attitudes, and emotions that can be expressed in the backstage.

According to Goffman, the backstage is a place “where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted” and “where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (1959: 112-113). Errors and mistakes are often corrected in the backstage before the frontstage performance. The backstage is characterized by a less formal atmosphere, where the actors can openly violate expected role behaviors.

There is a critical barrier between the frontstage and the backstage, for if the two intersect (such as when an outsider intrudes into the backstage) it leads to a “spoiled performance.” In the event of a mismanaged performance, remedies must be made, such as performing a new role fit for the intruder, or offering an aligning action or verbal account.

Goffman’s dramaturgy framework is typically discussed as a “micro” perspective, stemming from the symbolic interactionist theoretical paradigm. Goffman examines symbolism and the meaning of everyday interactions within the social context. In this project, I argue that the everyday interactions in the frontstage and backstage are not

tangential to the social structure, but they make up the racialized social structure, within the context of structural and institutional racism.

Structural and Institutional Racism

The literature on white racial attitudes often does not situate the research within a theoretical framework, such as a framework of institutional or systemic racism. This theoretical framework asserts that systemic, or institutional racism is composed of individual and collective attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors (both subtle and overt) that systematically support a racial hierarchy that privileges whites and limits the social reality of persons of color (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Feagin 2000).

My dissertation seeks to overcome these critical shortcomings in the literature by examining everyday racial events as described by white college students in theoretical perspective. The term “everyday” is used deliberately: it does not mean only an occurrence that occurs repeatedly on a daily basis. In sociology, “everyday” has a more specific meaning. Dorothy Smith (1987: 98) is credited with implementing the idea of the “everyday world” which “begins in the actual daily social relations between individuals.” She argues that the everyday world must be seen as being organized by multiple social relations that are not observable from within it. According to Smith, the focus of the everyday world is on how lives are organized by social relations and how individuals are located institutionally; this approach provides the foundation for “everyday racism” (Essed 1991).

Essed specifies that everyday racism is racism but not all racism is everyday racism; everyday racism constitutes the systematic, repetitive, familiar, and cumulative practices involving the (socialized) complex relations of attitudes and behaviors. Such discriminatory patterns and practices involve more than the actions of a few individual

bigots, and also include the systemic practice of racism built into major societal institutions. By racism, I mean systemic racism: discriminatory patterns and practices which involve more than the actions of a few individual attitudes, but rather the systemic practices of racism built into society's major institutions (Feagin and Houts 2004).

Everyday racism means experiencing multiple layers of incidents, feelings, reactions, pains, and responses at any one time, and the accumulation of these over an individual's, family's, and community's lifetime (Feagin and Sikes 1994). Although Feagin and Sikes (1994) were referring to experiencing racism as the target, this project will examine everyday racism from the perspective of white participants. As described by Essed, it is these types of repetitive, familiar practices and these effects that I examine in this project.

In this project, I examine the meaning and symbolism of everyday racial events and interactions within the social context, specifically within the framework of institutional racism. Whites' interactions in the frontstage and backstage are not tangential to the social structure, but they make up the racialized social structure. Throughout this project I rely on terms like "racial events," "frontstage," and "backstage." Although other scholars have used these terms, I will clarify how these terms are defined in this project.

Key Concepts

Racial Events

In this research, I examine "racial events." In defining "event," Atkinson and Coffey (2002: 811) said:

In order to be observable and reportable, events in themselves must have some degree of coherence and internal structure. An "event" in the social world is not something that just happens: It is made to happen. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The structure of events is narrative in form. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) suggest that events are a collective, shared cultural resource; rather than finding meaning within the phenomena itself within a social vacuum, the meaning lies within what it is linked to and how the narrative is organized. Narrative accounts, experiences, and memories are enacted as a type of social action, such as the performativity of social life described by Goffman.

Racial events can be examined among their various dimensions, including the content as well as the relational, spatial, temporal, and emotional dimensions (Houts, Feagin and Johns, forthcoming). Although “events” are typically conceived as an “action” or “behavior,” events also encompass sentiments and attitudes. In defining racial events, Feagin and Vera (1995) highlight the dimensions of (1) the social actors; (2) located in social structure, spatial setting, and temporal frame; and (3) motivated by attitudes and emotions.

Within racial events, Feagin and Vera describe that white social actors often fall into different categories of participation. Using the metaphor of a religious “racial rite,” these scholars define whites as playing one of three roles: the officiants of active racist behavior who initiate and instigate a racial event; the acolytes who support the actions; and the passive participants who act as inactive bystanders understanding the meaning and consequences, yet allowing the racial event to continue (Feagin and Vera 1995: 9). They also recognize the role of the (often less common) white active resisters of racist behavior.

This project seeks to examine these cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of racial events, as described by white college students. In addition to focusing on the

meaning and significance that white actors place on the interpretations of data, I also analyze the language used, the actions that take place, and the organization of the network of people involved in the racial events. In other words, I examine the social networks of who is allowed entry into the interactions, as well as who is denied access to the racial events.

Frontstage, Backstage, and Slippage

In this project, I focus on the frontstage and backstage of racial events. I define frontstage as racial events occurring among persons of all racial groups. As this project focuses on whites, the frontstage involves interactions with whites and persons of color. In the frontstage, most whites have learned it is not appropriate to express blatantly racist or racial sentiments. Many whites suggest employing a colorblind ideology in the frontstage, where the goal is to ignore any indications of “race.” Throughout the project, the frontstage is identified as a “performance” where whites understand that certain racial activities, behaviors, and emotions, are concealed in the frontstage, yet are more safely expressed in the backstage.

I define the backstage as racial events occurring within the same racial group (real or perceived). This means that the backstage includes racial events that take place with only other “whites.” (Chapter 6 problematizes whiteness and actors who are assumed to be white, but come out as “not all white.”) As the frontstage is characterized by expected nonracist appearance, in the backstage the frontstage expectations can be relaxed and openly contradicted. Although the backstage often deals with white friends and family members, as evident throughout the chapters, white strangers are often assumed access to a safe backstage. I use the metaphor of white skin as being a “passport” into a safe

backstage, where racial (and racist) performances are not only tolerated, but often sustained and encouraged.

Goffman comments about “spoiled performances” such as when an outsider intrudes into the backstage. I refer to this as the “slippage” between the backstage and the frontstage. The slippage is typically unidirectional, meaning that the frontstage crashes into the backstage, or the backstage turns (abruptly by accident, or carefully crafted on purpose) into the frontstage. This may occur when whites do not completely secure the backstage borders (Chapter 5), or when whites forget that they are not in a safe backstage (Chapter 6).

Specific Aims

As this project seeks to understand events that occur in the whites’ everyday racial events (that is, a covert arena that necessarily excludes the presence of an “active” researcher), data were collected by means of journal writing of college students across the U.S., modeled after the pioneering research of McKinney (2000), Myers and Williamson (2001), and Miller and Tewksbury (2001). For example, Myers and Williamson (2001) look “behind closed doors” to see how racist discourse is manifested in everyday conversations by using trained undergraduate informants to record conversation they heard or participated in. Their findings suggest that contemporary racial relations can be labeled as schizophrenic where the public face is antiracist and colorblind, yet the private talk shows rampant racism at the microlevel.

This dissertation seeks to expand on earlier research methods and conceptualizations in several ways. The only previous study in this area, Myers and Williamson (2001), limited their sample to college students at one University. My project includes a much larger sample size (626 white students compared to under 50

students), and is more geographically diverse than this earlier study. Additionally, other studies focus on racetalk (like boundary marking, policing, and maintenance). This project examines conversational discourse, as well as racial events, interactions, and its key dimensions.

Conceptually, my project seeks to better comprehend how whites think and feel in racial terms by analyzing racial events. I examine the content (“what”) of the racial events and observations, but I focus on the underlying mechanisms that operate (“how”) in both the frontstage and the backstage. For example, in the racial events, I examine the role of gender and race, joking and stereotypes, and the language used by whites in the frontstage and the backstage. I also analyze how white students contend with any tension between striving for a colorblindness ideal in the frontstage, yet maintaining very protected white-only social networks in the backstage.

Rationale for the Study

This project is important because it seeks to further delve into the white mind, specifically by examining the everyday racial discourse, behavior, and emotions. These attitudes are not individually but socially determined and constructed. Dyads and groups are critical to examine as racial attitudes and behaviors are constructed socially: through groups, individuals learn, perform, and alter their racial conceptualizations (Halbwachs 1950).

Although social scientists have examined the “more public” behaviors and attitudes captured in survey data and interviews, there is relatively little information on what is happening in whites’ everyday “more private” lives. This project seeks to help us better comprehend what is happening in the everyday world, descriptively and analytically, to help us understand systemic racial relations and the racialized social structure. The

backstage area should not be conceptualized as tangential to the social structure, because critical and definitive racialized practices often occur in the backstage area (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Feagin and Vera 1995).

To better understand the importance of this study, I outline three specific reasons why this project is sociologically significant to the racial literature. First, this project provides insights into the white mind and the propensity to act. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal spoke of the need to study “what goes on in the minds of white Americans.” However, exactly 60 years later, whiteness studies are still a relatively new area in race literature. Scholars like Toni Morrison and Ruth Frankenberg in the 1980s and 1990s are often credited with being the pioneering whiteness scholars.

Second, I particularly want to research the racial thinking of “ordinary” white Americans, which few studies examine. Much commentary today on whites focuses on the racial thinking of those at the extreme end of the racial continuum, such as white extremists like Ku Klux Klan members or Neo-Nazi Skinheads, or more recently the work of white antiracists (O’Brien 2001). However, in my project I want to focus on how even “well-meaning ordinary” whites may sustain a racial hierarchy (Collins 1998).

Further understanding the racial structure of U.S. society from the perspective of those who shape the racial hierarchy will advance the knowledge of contemporary racial relations in sociology. When sociologists and other social scientists better understand white racial attitudes and ideologies, scholars can better understand contemporary racial relations with the goal of changing public policy in the direction of a more racially just society. This is a significant and timely project to better understand racial relations from

the white actors' perspective, especially as some census data projections indicate that whites will become the numerical racial minority within the next 50 years.

Third, choosing to study college students is deliberate. Although college students are an often-researched and convenient sample, they represent the next generation of leaders. As education is often thought to be the great equalizer of racial relations, I wanted to specifically study those popularly believed to be more "racially aware" than, say, the stereotypical white racist "Archie Bunker" types.

Summary and Dissertation Outline

In this chapter I have provided the context for the rest of the dissertation. I have provided the literature on whites and the theoretical perspective that the dissertation will embed in: institutional racism and symbolic interactionism (esp. performativity and Goffman). I have defined the key terms that provide the foundation (racial events, frontstage, backstage, and slippage). I have described the specific aims of this project, and provided rationalizations for why this is an important study.

In the rest of this project, I examine the multiple ways whites participate in the social networks in the front and backstage. In Chapter 2, I describe the methodology used to gather the data. As very few sociological projects use journal writing as a data gathering method, it is important to specify the unique advantages and challenges provided by this methodology. I also describe the sample of students who volunteered to participate in this nationwide project. Chapter 3 describes the frontstage, specifically looking at how whites interact among persons of color. Specifically, I focus on the measures whites actively take to control the interactions (such as performance, avoidance, defensive, and offensive measures). Chapter 4 examines the backstage region, focusing on the group dynamics and confrontation styles whites' use in the safe

backstage. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the slippery regions between the frontstage and backstage. In Chapter 5, I analyze how whites interact in the backstage when it is physically near the frontstage. Chapter 6 examines the context shift between the front and backstage, focusing on the unreliable safe backstage, and problematizing whiteness. In Chapter 7, I provide analysis for the regions, focusing on the mechanisms that drive the border protection.

CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY

In the physical sciences, the Heisenberg principle refers to the process whereby measuring an object changes its very nature. I faced a similar conundrum in my research. My research objective is to study how race plays a role in the everyday lives of whites. However, as a researcher, I am challenged: How do I access data that are purposively hidden from public discourse? Myers and Williamson (2001: 8) relied on trained students, or “informants to secretly record private conversations” acting as “participants as observers.” Rather than training selected students from a single university in orientation sessions, I wanted to extend my research beyond a limited sample and geographic location. There remains a stereotype that racial relations are only problematic in the South. Given this southern-stereotype, I felt it necessary to extend my data collection to other geographic areas.

Instead of privileging one form of data gathering over another, scholars often agree that “the problem under investigation properly dictates the methods of investigation” (Trow 1957: 33). Because of the covert nature of the backstage, I used student journal writing to gather data. Although student journals (also known as diaries) are often used as a teaching tool in the classroom (Miller and Miller 1976; Wagenaar 1984), it is not a common method of data gathering in sociology, particularly for a large sample.

I selected U.S. college students as the population to study for two main reasons. Most obviously, as a student, researcher, and teacher in a college environment, I am constantly surrounded by college students, who make a convenient sample. College

students can be easily encouraged to participate in research: Who else could I convince to keep a daily or weekly journal for 3 or 4 months for free or for “points” (a commodity meaningless outside of academia)? I tried to convince some of my friends, family members, and colleagues to keep a journal, and even a few professors promised to keep a journal, but ultimately it was the college students who I could depend on to participate.

A second, more important reason why college students are studied in this project is because they represent a critical population demographically in racial studies. Whites who are often stereotyped to be racist include the “Archie Bunker” country bumpkins who typically represent older, rural males in the working class, without higher education. If we could map a stereotypical white racist, with the “greater than sign” facing the more racist individual, it would probably look like this: older > younger; rural > urban; no higher education > college educated; working/lower classes > upper/middle classes; male > female. Although there is little validity to these stereotypes, it seems appropriate to study a group of people who appear to be more on the “nonracist” end of a racist continuum.

Research Design

I began collecting data in Spring 2002 at a large southeast university, in an Independent Study of Racial Relations course, sponsored by Dr. Joe Feagin. The journal writings of these ten students helped to launch a national data collection process that began Summer 2002. Although I continue to collect data, the dissertation findings examine the journals collected from Spring 2002 to Summer 2003.

Starting in Summer 2002, I recruited undergraduate students to keep a regular journal of “everyday” interactions that they participate in (or observe via participant

observation) that reveal racial issues. Students were recruited through my and my committee chairperson's contacts of instructors across the country who are teaching lower- or upper-division undergraduate or graduate-level courses in disciplines where student journal writing might be expected (such as social science or humanities disciplines). The instructors I contacted were encouraged to invite their colleagues to participate in the study of student journal writing, hence beginning a snowball technique of gathering a larger sample size (Warren 2002). An aggressive effort was made to get journals from the four major areas of the U.S. (Southeast, Northeast, Midwest, and West).

Upon approval from the instructors to solicit students to keep a daily/weekly journal, each faculty member decided how the student journal writing would be used in the class (such as a course assignment or extra credit). Such decisions impacted for how long the students were asked to keep a journal, and the length required of each journal entry to merit credit, if any was offered. Most students wrote an average of one to two paragraphs per journal entry, although the length ranged from a short phrase to five pages per entry.

Of the 23 instructors who had their students participate in the project, some faculty members asked their students to write for a specified amount of time (anywhere from 2 weeks to an entire 20-week semester) consecutively, no matter what the content of the journals entailed. In the journal instructions, I discussed the notion that "no data are data" so the students would recognize the benefits of writing even on "no race" days. More often, the students were asked to write a certain number of journals (usually 10 to 20) that included a racial event in each account. Allowing each faculty member to decide how they wanted to frame the journal writing process provided me with a nice mixture to

compare accounts. For example, one of the more common themes students wrote about regarding racial events was sports, specifically whites as spectators to football or basketball games. It might be tempting to conclude that every sports interaction would invoke a racial comment, yet with the inclusion of students who wrote daily, I could readily see multiple examples of students watching sports (sometimes the same game) with no racial comment made.

The journal assignment for most students was an extra credit opportunity. Approximately 3 professors required the assignment of their students, and one professor extended the project allowing her students to choose which structure of privilege/oppression (such as gender, sexuality, age, social class, or dis/ability) they wanted to write about. Obviously this study includes only her students who wrote about race.

I provided each faculty member with the appropriate number of journal instructions for each student. Although the journal instructions were a lengthy 5 pages long, I tried to make it detailed, yet clear for the students, such as including sections like, “When should I write [in my journal]?” and “How will I be graded?” I also included 6 examples of journals written by students in the Spring 2002 Independent Study, so the students could see the preferred format of describing their accounts.

In the journal instructions, students were advised to document and analyze racial interactions, accounts, events, and racial comments. Instructors gave their students my detailed instructions regarding what and how to write in their journals, including journal examples. [See Appendix A for the journal instructions.] Students were also instructed

to be unobtrusive in their research techniques. The Informed Consent, signed by each student who participated in the project, summarizes the student expectations:

You will be asked to keep a journal of your reactions to everyday conversations about racial issues, images, and understandings. You will be instructed about unobtrusive research techniques so that the person you write about in your journal will not be aware that they are being studied. You will be instructed to be detailed in your accounts, yet to ensure anonymity, you will be instructed to conceal all identities (even your own) and to disguise all names and identifiers of persons you write about. Even though there will be no identifying markers in the journal, please keep your journal in a safe, private space so that it is not read by others. In your journal, you will be asked to emphasize your reactions and perceptions to these everyday events. You will have the opportunity to meet regularly with your professor to ensure all your questions and concerns are answered...

Unlike other research projects that rely on journals or participant observation (see Myers and Williamson, 2001), I did not define for the students what constituted a “racial issue.” The instructions of what is a “racial issue, image, and understandings” are purposively vague, so that the students may determine for themselves what embodied a racial event.

On the last page of the journal instructions was a cover sheet that the students were to attach to their journals. On the cover sheet, students were asked to write their name, gender, race, age, sexual orientation (optional), and any comments to me. My email and telephone number were listed on the cover sheet and in the journal instructions, in the event that students wished to contact me. Students were also invited to include their contact information in the event that they wished to be contacted about their journals.

All students who participated in the journal writing activity and who agreed to share their journals with me for the dissertation project were instructed to sign an IRB Informed Consent form. Students had the option of participating in the journal writing assignment for their class, but not signing an IRB Informed Consent form, in which case their journals were not used or analyzed for the project, ensuring voluntary participation. In other words, even if each individual instructor made the journal writing assignment

mandatory for their course grade, students were still given the choice whether or not to participate in the study, with no penalty for their decision. Each instructor was encouraged to collect their students' journals themselves, and then send them to me. Only 1 instructor had their students submit their journals directly to me, and student participation was not high for that course. Upon receiving the student journals from the instructor, I encouraged each instructor to complete an "exit interview" questionnaire [provided in Appendix B].

Data Analysis

After securing the appropriate consent forms from each journal collected, I followed general qualitative research procedures (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Silverman 2000) as well as those specifically developed by pioneering analysts (Feagin, Vera and Imani 1996; Myers and Williamson 2001) to systematically and rigorously analyze the data collected. Most of the students submitted a typed paper copy, and journals were painstakingly scanned or typed into an electronic format. The electronic versions allowed me to more readily systematically code and recode the journal entries for prevalent themes.

Extended Case Method

The study utilizes an alternative to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the extended or iterative case method (Burawoy et al. 1991). An iterative, recursive case method constantly uses the cases (data) collected to reexamine the prior conceptual view. This process repeats itself, developing a deeper and more nuance view of the conceptual or theoretical starting point with each added step. The initial view is tested, refined, and sometimes rejected, as additional cases and accounts are examined, until a point that reasonably exhausts the issue at hand.

In grounded theory, data are examined inductively, whereby the analysis is not set up to confirm or disconfirm specific hypotheses. In the extended case method, categories that emerge from the data were compared to pre-existing theoretical frameworks (such as Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of the frontstage and backstage) as a means to verify, extend, or reconstruct existing theories of racial issues and development. My project attempts to extend, confirm, reorganize, or reject key ideas of the existing orientation.

According to Burawoy (1991: 279), "The extended case method looks for specific macro determination in the micro world...It seeks generalization through reconstructing existing generalization, that is, the reconstruction of existing theory." As an example, the current conceptual approach emphasizes a dichotomy between the "frontstage" and "backstage." Based on my research presented in Chapters 5 and 6, I theorize that conceptualizing racial events along these discrete categories may be too simplistic as there are many underlying dimensions at work in the backstage. The backstage may be better understood as a fluid category allowing for slippage between the front and backstage. There are moments when the backstage becomes frontstage, or vice versa, such as when the relational dimensions change (for whites with the presence or absence of a person of color). The backstage therefore may not be a homogenous arena, as there are varying levels of privateness and publicness to the backstage. With the extended case method, analysis begins with themes in which data are constantly and rigorously coded and re-coded as a means to extend, confirm or reject existing conceptual ideas. This reciprocal, or cybernetic, process offers the potential to develop new ideas using the concepts of previous studies.

Coding

Coding was ongoing throughout analyzing the journals to ensure that insights, data connections, and new categories of data are constantly being improved. I read through each journal account multiple times as the project evolved, careful to note prevalent themes and categories. The journals were categorized on at least 4 separate occasions. First, as an initial read-through to get a sense of the prevalent themes the students were writing about. Second, as I “cleaned” (typing or scanning the journals into an electronic format) the data, I created categorical headings for each journal account. Up to this point in the research process, the data were organized regionally by each instructor. The third coding process took place when I sorted the data into common topics. Next I bundled common groups into prevalent themes, such as “how’s” versus “what’s.” Finally, the data were double-checked to ensure the logic of each categorization.

The accounts of all white students in my sample were read, coded, and analyzed for prevalent themes. With a very large sample size, I had to make decisions about which accounts to include for analysis and exemplify in the chapters. When deciding which accounts to examine, I paid particular attention to more substantial accounts that provided detailed analysis, narrative linkages, informative stories, and a situated context. I also included accounts that occurred frequently, or on a regular basis across the students. Within my data, there are plenty of striking accounts. My dissertation examines some of the “extraordinary” narratives, but I also seek to pay attention to mundane accounts that reveal whites’ racial thinking in everyday activities.

Fragmentary comments, such as simplistic journal entries like, “I heard a racist comment today” were not included in the analysis. For example, the following account written by a white male (WM) in the Southeast would not be used in the analysis:

Today one of my friends made a racist comment, “All niggers are like apples; they look good hanging from the trees.” I was very offended by the remark. I was extremely upset because I have great relationships with so many members of my team that happen to be black. So I was furious and told him to keep that kind of stuff to himself. (Ted, WM, Southeast)

Although this account is startling in revealing a racial joke, the student did not include the context in which the offensive comment is made. For example, we are left not knowing the race of his friend, when he said it, where the conversation took place (on the field? at a party? in a dorm room?), who else was involved in the conversation, how it was said, and what the friend’s reaction was to his comment to “keep that kind of stuff to himself.” In selecting which accounts to analyze, I was looking for some level of detailed analysis to be able to contextualize the comment.

Even though I have a large sample size, I strived to maintain a holistic component to each journal entry. Rather than simply see each individual journal entry in isolation, I strived to contextualize each account in order to maximize the details. Many students would reference previously written journal accounts, such as a specific event or the history of a family member, so it was necessary for me to consistently refer back to the journal in its entirety and not broken down by prevalent themes.

While coding, I kept notes (eventually typed next to the account) detailing how the events may have built on each other. I also made special notes of apparent contradictions within the same journal. For example, a white female (WF) in the Midwest describes an event on March 10, 2003 about her mother’s reaction to watching a popular television program, *Fear Factor*, where contestants voluntarily engage in disturbing behaviors:

My mother (white female, age 48) and I were watching Fear Factor one night and on the show the contestants had to eat cow, sheep and fish eyes. There was a black female contestant on the show and it was her time to eat the eyes. My mother looks over at me and says, “I hate to say it but she’s black.. .she probably likes that stuff.” (She had a smile on her face when she said it and was almost chuckling) I didn’t

know what to say so I just kind of looked away and continued to watch television. I wondered where she thought of that from. (Marian, WF, 22, Midwest)

Two weeks later in her journal, this same student writes about her mother's reaction to hearing her son make a racial comment:

March 24, 2003

We were sitting watching the news like always again and my brother (White male, age 28) of course had to say something about the war and the people we are fighting. So we were just sitting there listening to the news anchor talk when my brother just blurted out "Ya know, I would much rather spend my tax dollars on the war instead of fat shines dropping babies like cigarette butts." I was appalled to hear that come out of his mouth. I have never heard anything that harsh directly in front of me, especially a family member. I wasn't sure what to say, I just sat there open jawed in awe. My mother of course slapped him upside the head and yelled, "Who teaches you things like that? Not me!" My brothers' response was "The world does but mostly the media." It made me stop and think about the theory that violence in the media or on television. Does it really create hatred or does it just amplify what is inside the person waiting to come out? (Marian, WF, 22, Midwest)

By contextualizing the account in her entire journal, the account written on March 24th takes on a different dimension of a mother's apparent contradiction. The picture of a concerned mother worried about where her son is learning about fat shines, a derogatory term for African Americans (Burchett 2001), is distorted when we pair it with the account of her mocking African Americans while watching television. These contradictions were not uncommon throughout many students' journals, but were rarely noted by the student authors. Although most of the accounts will be presented in a disconnected isolated fashion, I have made a concerted effort to carefully analyze the accounts as a whole.

Sample

I continue to collect journals for future projects, yet this dissertation examines data collected from Spring 2002 through the Summer 2003. During this time, 934 college students of many racial groups have submitted journals. The sample is racially diverse,

approximately 67% white, 12% African American, 10% Latinos or Hispanic, 6% Asian American, 5% other racial group or not identified.

Although I am specifically seeking to study white Americans, I extended the journal writing opportunity to members of all racial groups who gave consent to share with me their journals. The inclusion of people of color to share in the journal writing process provided the opportunity to examine the larger picture of racial relations and its effects. In order to keep the data manageable, the dissertation sample includes only those students who self-identified as “White” (or a congruent term such as Caucasian or Anglo) on their cover sheet. Many students indicated their ethnicity and nationality as well, such as White/Swedish, or Black/Jamaican. Students who identified as White/Hispanic were included in the study, but students who indicated only Hispanic or Latino were not. This self-identification of race allowed students who either identified themselves as white, or those who indicate that others identify them as white (such as “Hispanic, but look white”) to be included in the analysis. To keep the manuscript readable, I simply refer to the students as “white.”

Of the 626 white students who make up the dissertation sample, 68% are white women and 32% white men. The higher rates of women participants should not be surprising given that more women tend to take classes in disciplines where journal writing might be expected (such as Sociology or English).

Despite aggressive efforts to maintain geographic diversity, the majority of the white students (63%) are from 5 universities and colleges in the Southeast (Florida and Georgia). The next largest geographic participation came from the Midwest with 19% of the sample (from Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin). Students from the West (Arizona,

California, Washington, and Wyoming) comprised 14% of the sample, and the remaining 4% of the students are from the Northeast (Connecticut, Maine, and New York).

Most of the students in the sample voluntarily signed up for a course in which race and ethnicity was at least tangentially discussed, and all of the students in the sample voluntarily submitted a journal to me on racial relations. Although the white students have this in common, this is also where the commonalities end. The comments and ideologies expressed by the students in the journals varied considerably, as did their social class and geographic location (ranging from a small rural town in Wyoming, to a major metropolis like New York City).

Most of the students in the sample are in the traditional college student age range (18 to 25 years), although there were many students in their late 20s and 30s, and a handful of students in their 40s and 50s. Even with most of the students in a traditional age range, I want to caution the reader not to think of the students as a homogeneous population. The students are not simply white kids who (sometimes) attend class, study on occasion, and hit the local bars...although this was certainly true on some occasions. Most of the students talked about working, commonly in retail or restaurants, but also in the military, autobody shops, and in hospitals. Students talked about varying life experiences, such as being away from home for the first time and feeling scared, to discussing their spouses and children. They talked about the neighborhoods they lived in, and the homes they owned.

In the exit interview, I asked professors to comment about the type of student who participated in the project, as I was concerned that I would only get journals from a “certain type of student” such as a vehement antiracist, or an emphatic defender of

colorblindness. On the whole, most professors did not identify any one type of student who was more likely to participate in the project. In my own classes, it seemed that the students most likely to submit their journals were those who engaged in other extra credit opportunities to achieve an academic goal (such as trying to keep an “A” or avoid an “F”), rather than linking the student participation rate to a specific racial ideology.

As noted previously, the students were given an opportunity to provide feedback directly to me on their cover sheet. Of the students who wrote comments, the vast majority of the comments were similar to this one provided by a 19 year old white man in the Southeast, “This assignment made me realize how many racial remarks are said every single day and I usually never catch any of them or pay close attention.” Students typically noted a feeling of being extra sensitive to observing racial issues while participating in the project that might otherwise slip under the radar.

Other students used the request for feedback as an opportunity to provide further explanations about their personal history. For example, a 20 year old white man in the Midwest wrote:

I would like to start by saying a little about myself. Unless you understand the viewpoint from which I am writing I feel that it will be very difficult to understand in what I am recording. I come from a very small town with little to no diversity. This has been nothing more than a subject that has been taught to me from a textbook stance. I do not fear diversity. In fact, because of my lack of exposure to diversity, I have a strange form of curiosity of those different from me. If what you read can be interpreted as racism or negative, please change it in you mind so that the wording is in no sense degrading. Once you have done this you will understand what I am trying to say. (Dennis, WM, 20, Midwest)

Many students included background information about their families, and a few, like this student, noted a “disclaimer” on how to read (or re-read) the accounts from a nonracist perspective. As this account illustrates, even though the researcher was not physically present in the data collecting, and even though most of the students had not met me, they

were still concerned with what I thought about them and making sure that I understand them from their perspective.

Although most of the comments were encouraging, from “interesting study” and “Good luck with your project,” one student did take issue with my research project. A 20 year old white man in the Midwest commented on his cover sheet, “This [project] causes us to look at things superficially by race. Racism [sic], and logically racism, are wrong and superficial. You are reinforcing this perspective.” Although I appreciate the student’s feedback, I am unclear how examining race in one’s daily life equates with a superficial analysis. I would not agree with his claim that “racism is superficial” given the literature detailing the physical, emotional, psychological, and societal costs of racism (Feagin and McKinney 2003). Despite his negative comments toward the project, this student’s journal accounts were no different from the rest of the sample.

Journal Writing

Benefits

As few sociological studies utilize journal writing, it bears mentioning that this data gathering method proved to be very useful. Unlike an interview or survey conducted at one point in time in which participants retrospectively reconstruct events, this project offers the advantage of allowing students multiple points of reflexivity. As the journals were kept for days and weeks at a time, students were able to recognize patterns in their own journals. Reflexivity occurs at the moment the event occurs (“I thought this at the time”), at the moment the event is reconstructed in the journal writing (“Writing this up I think”), and in reviewing the event reconstruction at a later time (“Re-reading what I wrote, I think...”).

Students also are able to shorten the length of time between participating in an event, and reconstructing the details in a journal (or retrospectively). Although some students wrote about accounts that happened to them in their childhood or years before, most were writing about very recent events. A shorter time frame between the event and journal writing increases the likelihood that specific details are remembered. In the journal instructions, I encouraged students to jot down their notes quickly after an observation, and suggested that they may even find it useful to carry small pads of paper to jot down notes. Although I had my doubts that any of the college students would take my advice, at least one participant acknowledged jotting down notes. A white woman in the Southeast wrote about her experiences having dinner with a white male co-worker who complained bitterly about African Americans, “We all began eating pizza while I secretly grabbed a pen and a pizza coupon to write on. Every couple of minutes I would get up and run to the bathroom to write down everything that I remembered.”

A third benefit to using journal writing to gather data for a large scale project is that this process allows students some level of safety in their anonymity. Although this is a debatable point, students may have felt it was easier to confess their feelings to someone they have never met. A few instructors facilitated this safety net by having their students submit the journals directly to me, or had the students seal their journals in an envelope ensuring it would not be read by the teacher, an authority figure who ultimately determines their grade.

Another benefit to using journals to collect data is the opportunity to use the accounts as a teaching moment in the classroom. Researchers have long examined the benefits of using student journals or diaries in the classroom as a means to evaluate

knowledge at a higher cognitive level (Wagenarr 1984). Journals allow students the opportunity to connect abstract concepts (such as institutional racism) and personal examples from their own lives. In the spirit of the sociological imagination, students are able to contextualize their individual experiences into the larger socio-historical cultural context (Mills 1959). By using journals to gather data and to stimulate teaching conversation, it best advances the “teacher-scholar” model praised by many academics.

Limitations

Journals of everyday interactions provide an opportunity to examine (especially backstage) events to which an interviewer is not ordinarily privy, and this approach has only been used in a few studies (McKinney 2000; Myers and Williamson 2001).

However, there are limitations to using journals for data collection. A first limitation is not being able to ask follow-up questions from material solicited. For example, consider the following journal entry:

I went home to South Florida to visit my family for Spring Break. At dinner, my father...kept making remarks about black people, saying things like, “I love ribs, maybe I have a little brotha in me! What do you think about that?” He made comments like this because he knows that it makes me angry and he thinks because I am only twenty that I don’t know anything about what black people are really like. I am having a hard time figuring out what to say to him when he makes these horrible comments and I am planning on going home [back to the University] sooner than I thought I would because of this. (Beth, WF, Southeast)

This journal entry reveals many racial themes, like a caricature and stereotype of African Americans, and the father policing the borders of “us/whites” versus “them/others.” We also see a racial trigger, where ribs, and other foods like fried chicken that are commonly associated with African Americans, serves to trigger a conversation about race (Devine 1989).

Although we see many themes, we still are left with some questions about the relational, spatial, temporal, and emotional dimensions of whites' thinking and feeling about racial matters. If we were interviewing this woman, we could ask her questions like, "When does your father make these remarks? Is there a social component to his teasing: does it usually come up around other family members? Besides anger, how does it make you feel when he says these things? Does he make remarks about other racial groups? Do these conversations only take place at home?" In the journal accounts, the data are limited to only a one-sided conversation, where, as the researcher, I do not have the opportunity to follow-up.

A second limitation of using journals is not knowing what data are being excluded. Asking people to write a journal of everyday racial events is a time consuming, and often energy draining activity. As I am not able to offer monetary compensation due to lack of funding, the only compensation the journal writers received was from their instructor, typically credit in the class. Many students did write reflections such as they thought an event was not racial but included it anyway. Not knowing how each student defined a racial event means that I do not know what data are excluded.

Students also admitted thinking about deleting a racial event from their journal.

For example a white woman in the Southeast admits:

When I went to pick up the laundry, I saw a young black man sitting in the driver's side of a mini-van with the engine running. My first thought was that he was waiting for a friend to rob the store and he was the getaway driver. Even worse, I had to look into the store to see what was going on and what (or who) he was waiting for. ... I am so embarrassed and saddened by my thinking and I suppose I could even omit this from my journal but it is too important to try to pretend that I don't have thoughts like this that pop into my head ostensibly from no where.
(Kristi, WF, Southeast)

This woman admits that she thought about deleting this acrimonious self-reflection from her journal, but she did not. Based on the social desirability of wanting to please the researcher by valuing racial equality, we can surmise that many other students may have deleted such honest confessions. Another student echoes these same concerns:

As I am getting ready to turn in this assignment I looked back over some of the entries above and thought that I should change a lot of them for fear of whoever is reading them might be offended even though I was very reserved in some of the accounts of what happened. I wondered to myself is this blatant racism surrounding me just because of me and the people I associate with? Then I think back to a lot of the analysis in my sociology book for this class, and how it draws conclusions based on the white middle-upper class, college educated families and those are the people I associate with so maybe it is not just me. (Adam, WM, 21, Southeast)

This student notes reflexivity, a benefit of utilizing journals I have already described, in re-reading past journals and drawing conclusions from his previous entries. He also notes another benefit of journal writing I described, which is linking his personal accounts to the sociology text. However, he notes a limitation of the journals: students could be holding back material in their accounts for fear of offending the reader.

A third limitation of journal data gathering is not knowing which students are opting not to participate in the journal writing process. In order to account for the types of students who are opting not to participate in this project, I asked each instructor to complete an exit interview that queried the approximate percent of students who participate. Of 23 instructors, some rates of participation vary from as low as 0% to as high as 80% (about 15-30% is average).

Informally, I have asked a few students why they have not participated in the project, and their answers are striking. A former white student of mine told me she did not hear any racist remarks as her friends were not racist. This comment is especially interesting as this project examines racial relations, and not *racist* relations. Another

former student of mine, an Asian male who did participate in the project, informed me that he felt uncomfortable participating in the project as he felt he was “telling on his friends.” Each student who completed a journal was instructed to complete a cover page which left a space for students to write comments to me personally, and a few students repeated this concern. Another reason why students may not wish to participate is lack of time, or lack of interest in the project.

A potential limitation of this project is not knowing if more race-cognizant students are more likely to participate in this project or to take classes where this assignment would be offered than students who may not be aware of racial relations. The majority of students who wrote comments to me on their cover sheet tended to indicate that this project made them more aware of conversations and behaviors that related to racial relations than they would have been otherwise.

A fourth concern for this project may be that there is student bias in reporting their journal entries. I was concerned that students would feel that the more obviously racial, or racist, comments would warrant them more credit if their journals were evaluated by their instructor. For this reason, it is mentioned in the journal instructions, as well as reiterated to each instructor in a separate memo, that if the students are graded on this assignment (for class credit or extra credit) that the students know they are receiving credit for their detailed writing, systematic observations, and level of analysis, and *not* for the content of their journal accounts. Quite a few white students reported deleting or toning down racist accounts (as noted by Adam earlier), as opposed to inventing racial comments.

Additionally, with such a large sample size, the concerns of validity are lessened. For example, a student writing about differential treatment with the police in Florida becomes much more believable when compared to similar accounts in Connecticut and Wyoming. Many students have close acquaintances and friends in their college classes and interact together outside of class. In many instances, more than one student in a class would write about the same event from their perspective, lending more credibility to the details of the racial event. Besides checking the data for internal consistency (within one journal, across students in the same class, and comparing students across the U.S.), the details were compared with data from other studies that focus on racial relations among whites and college students (such as Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Feagin and Vera 1995; Myers and Williamson 2001).

Active Qualitative Research

The notion of “true data” becomes inconsequential if we take on a more active approach of qualitative research. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) have written extensively about the active interview, and the underlying concept of their argument can be extended to the student’s journal writing as well. Rather than viewing the students as an empty vessel simply reporting events that have already happened, we can conceptualize the journal writing process as active “reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995: 4). Meaning, issues such as whether or not the respondent is telling the truth or if the data are “contaminated” are irrelevant, as the active respondent is not merely relaying existing information, but the active subject is constructing their own reality.

Scholars are encouraged to examine not only “what” is told in narratives, but also to pay critical attention to “how” stories are constructed (Garfinkel 1967). In other

words, the “what” questions examine the content of “*what* is happening, *what* are people doing, and *what* does it mean to them,” whereas the “how” questions analyze “*how* are the realities of everyday life accomplished” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 14).

Understanding the reflexivity of social reality assists us in acknowledging that research methods actually produce constructions of reality as much as they produce descriptions of reality.

Summary

In this chapter I have provided my rationale in selecting college students as the population of interest. I described the research design of collecting data, including the method of snowball sampling and the detailed journal instructions each student received. Next, I outlined my data analysis, focusing on the extended case method and the categorization of journal themes. Then, I detailed the gender, geographic and age distribution of the white sample.

I followed with four benefits of using journal data gathering: (1) multiple points of reflexivity, (2) shortened retrospectively, (3) the safety of anonymity, and (4) creating a teaching moment. Then I discussed the four limitations of the journals: (1) lack of opportunity to ask follow-up questions, (2) lack of access to excluded material, (3) lack of knowledge about which students chose not to participate, and (4) potential bias in reporting. However, this last limitation only exists when we conceptualize the respondent as reporting reality rather than creating reality.

CHAPTER 3 FRONTSTAGE

This chapter will focus on the frontstage racial events, as described by the white students in my sample. In this dissertation, I define the frontstage as interactions among whites and people of color. As a general rule, whites learn it is not appropriate to express racist sentiments in the frontstage. There are many themes that emerge in the frontstage that illustrate whites' interactions with persons of color and other whites. The content, or "what" happened, in the conversations and behaviors varied considerably as illustrated in this section. However, we can conceptualize the interactions in the frontstage as falling into general categories that illustrate "how" meaning is produced.

In the chapter, I describe the interactions occurring more or less in the frontstage, specifically *how* the white students interacted with people of color. There are numerous ways to conceptualize these interactions, and I focus on the recurrent themes in the frontstage as described by the white students in the sample. These mechanisms can be categorized into four components: performance, avoidance, defensive, and offensive strategies. The first component illustrating how whites interact in the frontstage is performativity, where whites admit to acting around persons of color.

Performance

The first theme of whites' interactions in the frontstage takes some ideas from Goffman's frontstage conceptualization where individuals and groups perform roles appropriate for the audience. The white students reported performing or acting in a way that they might not have if they were around only whites. In the performance, there are

many roles the whites could assume, but this analysis focuses on three specific portrayals: acting extra polite, performing acts to “prove” they are not a racist, and appropriating the perceived racial role of “the other.”

Extreme Politeness

In the frontstage, many whites reported interactions with people of color in which they operate with extreme politeness. In the following example, a white Resident Assistant notices that her white residents act extra polite to her African American woman friend:

As I have mentioned before I am a white female, who is an RA in a predominately white hall. Being an RA, I get to observe a lot of behavior from residents, most of the time more than I'd actually like to. ... One of my best friends is black. She is a sophomore and lives in the hall right next to mine. ... One night this week I went down to the first floor to let her into the side door. She came up the walk and I let her in. As we walked down the hall and made our way to the stairwell, I started noticing how many people were stopping, and even going out of their way, to say hi to her. There are about 20 resident rooms from the side entrance of the building to the stairwell and every person in the hall at that time, along with some standing or sitting in their rooms, greeted my friend. Because I was leading the way, I knew that they were addressing her and not me. And I believe that each greeting given to her *was* absolutely genuine. Some even went as far as asking how she was doing and wishing her a good night. As we walked up the stairwell, those that passed us also said hello. And when we entered the second floor where I live the same thing happened. All those in the hall and some who were in their rooms stopped what they were doing and the conversations they were having to greet my friend at 1:00 in the morning. She then commented to me when we got to my room, “People sure are friendly here.” When I began to think about it, I realized that this happened every time she came to visit me. The situation leads me to believe that they greeted her the way they did based on her race, because they don't treat each other or other white strangers the way they have treated and continue to treat my friend. It's definitely an interesting twist on interactions and behavior based on race. I also think this situation illustrates that our hall would greatly benefit from having minority residents. If not for any other reason, that people might treat one another more courteously. (Elizabeth, WF, 20, Midwest)

In her journal, Elizabeth reflects about how her white residents act in frontstage, that they are overly nice to her Black female friend. The performance is not missed by the Black woman who comments about the extreme friendliness. Elizabeth comments that her

mostly white school in the Midwest needs more “minority residents” so people would treat each other more courteously. Contextualizing this comment in the frontstage and backstage regions, it appears that Elizabeth is suggesting using racial minorities to draw some of the frontstage pleasantries into the backstage realities.

Elizabeth also notes that she believes her white residents are sincerely genuine in their performance. Goffman’s dramaturgy is not suggesting that people are cynical performers trying to present a false image of ourselves. He argues that performers are “merchants of morality,” tailoring one of our many selves in order to fit the requirements of a particular situation (Goffman 1959: 251). The white residents should not be viewed as merely manipulative, for they genuinely were interested in expressing an overly positive image to the Black visitor of the dorm. A more important issue is why they felt they needed to present this positive image. In the following account, Fran admits why she acts extra nice to the Black women who live in her dormitory:

I am a freshman living on an all girls floor in a dorm. I am a white, Jewish girl and it just so happens that majority of the girls on my floor is white and Jewish also. However there are two black girls that live on the very opposite end of the hallway, and for some reason they never talk to us. I often wonder if we are intimidating and if they feel as though we would not accept them. ... I often feel like I need to watch what I say and the way that I say it. I do not consider myself a prejudice person at all, however I feel like I need to prove that to these girls and I am almost overly nice to them because they are black. I always make sure I smile and say hello to them when I see them in the hallway, even though they don’t even make an effort to get to know me. I don’t really know why I feel like I have to make myself look accepting to them. To be completely honest, these girls aren’t even that nice themselves. They always look me up and down in the hallway and if I didn’t smile first, I’m pretty sure they would not even acknowledge my existence. It’s probably just that they are the minority on my floor and I feel like I want them to feel comfortable, but how do I know that they don’t already feel comfortable? My nice actions may even be making them feel uncomfortable. (Fran, WF, 18, Southeast)

When Fran writes that she feels the need to watch what and how she speaks in front of the two Black women, she is illustrating that the backstage and frontstage regions are

incompatible. If the two regions were compatible, there would not be a need to watch what she says. Fran ends this journal account by stating that her intention is to make the women feel comfortable in the dorm, as she notes in the beginning “for some reason they never talk to us [white women].” Given the nature of dormitories where it is difficult to maintain frontstage interactions all the time, the Black women may likely recognize the performativity of the pleasantries.

In Elizabeth’s and Fran’s accounts, the role of gender is vitally important. In both examples the frontstage audiences are Black women, and most of the performers described are white women. Although in the sample a few white men indicated performing extra politeness in the frontstage, the majority of the actors expressing politeness are white women. Particularly white women are socialized into docility and to express a “sunny countenance” least they be viewed as mean, bitter, or a bitch (Frye 1998: 147). This frontstage performance by white women may be an extension of the larger patriarchal social control dictating restricted emotional displays for social subordinates (Hochschild 1983; Lutz 1996).

Fran also says she is not a prejudiced person, but uses the qualifier “however” to indicate that she recognizes that some people may view her as prejudiced. Many white students in the sample commented that they believe in the minds of persons of color, white skin is a marker for a racist and prejudiced person. For Fran, if she acts extra nice to the Black women, even if it is not reciprocated, then it must mean she is not prejudiced. White students often make comparisons between someone being nice, fun, or polite, and their level of racist tendencies. Here, Fran is paralleling politeness and not being prejudiced: acting polite is a way to “prove” that she is not prejudiced. This leads

us to the next role whites perform in the frontstage: actions meant to illustrate that they are not a racist.

Proving Not A Racist

Although we could conceptualize acting extra polite as a tool to prove non-racism, white students also discuss blatant and unequivocal measures meant to illustrate that they are not racist. For example, Maggie writes about her experiences riding the city bus:

I took the #60 bus to school from work. It was 11:30 when I left, and when I got on the bus it was crowded towards the front, so I headed towards the back. Most people on the #60 are non-white; Latino, Asian, and Black mostly, and you are likely to hear many languages. As I moved towards the back of the bus, I consciously decided to sit next to the young black man who had a seat free next to him, rather than an Asian woman or other white passengers. I did this because I think that most white people who are socialized to fear young black men would have chosen not to sit next to him, thus displaying their discrimination against him. I wanted to show him that I do not hold this stereotype. I didn't act any differently toward him than I would sitting next to anyone else. I pulled out my book and read, and when a window seat opened I moved to it. I guess I was just trying to treat him as a normal person, because he is, and there is no reason to fear him. (Maggie, WF, 21, West)

In this account, Maggie is performing in the frontstage the role to prove she is not a racist, and she does this by sitting next to a Black man as instead of the typical white or Asian seatmate. Maggie wanted to prove to the young Black man on the bus, and perhaps even to herself, that she does not hold the stereotype to be afraid of Black men. Although Maggie does not believe it, she is aware that the stereotype exists, and actively uses her conscious processing to edit out the negative stereotype (Devine and Elliot 1995).

Maggie is telling us that she does not believe the stereotype, yet the underlying subtext suggests that she struggles to view the Black man as a "normal person." She has to specifically point out that he is a normal person, insinuating that this might be up for

debate. By specifically pointing out that he is normal, she is reinforcing the notion that he is not thought to be normal.

Performing the role of a proven non-racist can be expressed in other ways besides not avoiding certain people of color (here, Blacks and Latinos). In this next account, a white woman goes out of her way to say hello to a Black man:

Today I was so shocked at the actions of an individual. This white girl and I were walking back from class and she made a comment that she was not racist. Then, she said, "Look, I will prove it." Then, she turned to a black man, and said "Hi." She had no idea who he was. This to me was so rude. I could not believe she did that. I think to me it symbolized that she was racist. Would she have said hi to a white man? She made me think about how racist people could be, without realizing it. (Trina, WF, 19, West)

Again, here, whites are performing in a manner that they would not otherwise do with a white person. Although we are not sure what caused the white woman to claim she is not a racist, she went out of her way to prove she was not racist by greeting a Black man on the street. As noted previously, being friendly is equated with not being racist.

In the majority of the white students' accounts in which they reveal performing in the frontstage to prove they are not racist, the whites are performing for Blacks or other whites. Similarly, by whites proving they are not racist, it suggests an underlying component that there are racist tendencies to overcome. Trina interpreted the woman's overt friendliness as rude and racist.

Appropriating Race

A final role whites perform in the frontstage is appropriating the perceived racial role of "the other." In other words, the white students would act the way they believe the person of color would act. As the following examples illustrate, this lends itself to whites stereotyping how Blacks and Latinos/as act. Susan writes:

I was in the dorm hallway with three other girls (two white and one African American). The African American puts her hair up every night in a bandana wrap as a way of protecting it because it is so fine. One of the other girls I was talking with was intrigued by this and questioned her. So the African American girl explained what she did, and the other girl immediately perked up getting involved, “Can you do that to my hair too? We can all pretend we’re black for a night!” I was a little shocked that she was forward enough to say something like this, but it didn’t seem to bother the other girl. The African American girl just went on to explain that we probably couldn’t do it with the other girls’ hair because it so different from “black hair.” I was in awe of the whole situation, but it seemed to work itself out without any conflict. (Susan, WF, 18, Midwest)

Most whites can structure their days so they minimize contact with people of color; Blacks and other persons of color cannot (Feagin 1991). This leads to a knowledge asymmetry, where Blacks know a lot about white culture, but whites have the privilege not to know anything about Black culture (Waters 1990). For Susan’s white friend, asking questions and ultimately attempting to take part in a Black woman’s hair tradition was a method of interacting in the frontstage.

Wanting to pretend to be Black *for the night* illustrates bell hook’s “commodification of otherness” where “ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (hooks 1992: 21). The white woman does not desire cultural appreciation, but cultural appropriation, in using the racialized image for her own entertainment. While she can have the fun of pretending to be Black for one night then return to her privileged white lifestyle, her Black hall-mate does not have the same option.

In the next account, Karen admits to assuming a Black dialect when interacting with Black men in her dance class:

In my social dance class, there are about 25 white males and about 5 men of color. At the beginning of class today, we were doing a mixer. As part of the mixer, we rotated around the room and in the period of about ten minutes, I found myself dancing with every one of the guys in the room...What surprised me when I came to several of the black students in my class was how drastically my personality

changed for the 30 seconds or so that I was with that partner. Immediately, my voice became louder and my gestures more exaggerated. The two of us would immediately hit it off and start joking about dancing and what we did over the weekend. As I talked to one particular black student, I especially noticed how my speech pattern changed. I think that subconsciously I was trying to model my speech after that of my partner. I soon found myself talking with a “black dialect” of sorts. It was really very strange. My speech patterns never changed when I danced with the white students. Maybe that was because we, as whites, have more similar speech. Maybe it was because I was trying harder to connect with the black students since we didn’t have our skin color in common. (Karen, WF, 20, Midwest)

Karen admits to acting differently when dancing with the Black men than the white men. She theorizes that her appropriation of Black culture (taking on a Black dialect, speaking louder, and exaggerating gestures) is a means to connect with the Black men. Although Karen has a lot in common with the Black men (such as they attend the same university, are enrolled in the same course, as well as commonalities by age, geography, and interests), the social significance of skin color takes precedence over all other factors.

White women are not the only gender to perform roles in the frontstage. Doug describes appropriating a stereotypical “Latin lifestyle” in order to impress Latinas:

I went to a party for my friend’s 22nd birthday tonight and it was pretty loud and wild. At one point in the night some Latin girls showed up and we got them some beers. The running joke for the night was that we were going to interact with these Latinas in a manner that we felt Latin guys would talk to them, even though we are all white. So we would talk about low riders, gang fights, tagging, and anything else that was stereotypical to a Latin lifestyle. We did it as a joke, we weren’t trying to be mean or anything, and as far as we could tell the Latinas enjoyed our little stereotyping endeavor. I think we tried to talk like Latin guys because we needed some humor to break the ice and open a path to conversation with these ethnic girls that none of us have any kind of experience with. (Doug, WM, West)

A recurrent theme in the frontstage performance of appropriating race is that whites have minimal contact with the groups they are usurping. Doug admits that he and his white friends have no experience with the Latino culture, as they rely on gross stereotypes such as participating in gangs and graffiti writing.

Doug comments that his white friends are only joking, and they mean no harm. This is a very common defense mechanism for whites to use when acting inappropriately in the front or backstage. Under the guise of “we were just joking” comments and behaviors can be dismissed without consequence. The role of joking will be further addressed later in this chapter.

Avoidance

The second theme of whites’ interactions in the frontstage can be seen as the opposite of performance: avoidance. While the theme of performance included the appropriation of race, the avoidance theme is characterized by avoiding race at all costs. There are two components to this theme. The first is avoiding any mention of race while still interacting with persons of color. The second is avoiding people of color, or retreating from the frontstage.

Avoid Mentioning Race

Many whites interacted with people of color yet went to great lengths to avoid mentioning race. This component is part of the ideology of colorblindness, where whites proclaim not to mention race or notice color, yet still navigate in a white world (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carr 1997). Even when interacting with persons of color, the goal is to maintain a stance of not noticing color, for focusing on race is equated with white supremacy (Frankenberg 1993). In other words, to notice or talk about race is racist.

In the frontstage with a Latino friend, Mike notes that he and his white friends avoided mentioning anything related to the race or ethnicity of his Mexican friend John:

My friends and I were at my place and we were looking for somewhere to go to dinner. It was me, two of my white friends, and a Mexican friend name John. We started to list places that we wanted to go: Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Italian, and so on. Then I noticed that no one had said Mexican. Everyone was worried about saying anything about it in front of John. I did not say anything to anyone

because I did not want my friend John to feel isolated from the group. If I would have said something about my observation he would feel as though his friends were not comfortable enough around him to even suggest going to get Mexican food. That does not say very much for the kind of friend that I am or does it? I don't know, but the whole situation made me think about society. If I can't say certain things around my friend then what can others say around strangers. Everyone is so worried about offending people that they limit what they say and they are constantly trying to avoid racism. If you are constantly trying to avoid being racist, you have racism on your mind. If you have it on your mind then you are going to be thinking racist things more often. People just need to be educated in diversity and be themselves, and that is all that you can do. (Mike, WM, 19, West)

Similar to the white students who perform to prove they are not a racist, actively avoiding any conversation about racial matters implies that talking about race is problematic.

Mike is conflicted about his decision to avoid any mention of race or ethnicity around his friend John. He cites that his intentions are good, that he is trying to protect John from any comments about race. According to Mike, mentioning race, even in the context of a restaurant, is equated with racism and isolation. Mike hints that his white paternalism may be damaging his friendship; his good intentions may be creating further divisions with his non-white friend.

Mike notes that he and his white friends may be using cyclical and faulty logic. As the saying goes, by telling someone not to think of a pink elephant, odds are pretty high that the person will think about a pink elephant. Similarly, Mike and his friends want to avoid thinking about race so they are not racist, but this means they have to actively think about repressing their racial thinking, so now they are thinking about it even more.

The white student ends the account with the only solution he knows: we need more education about diversity. Education is thought to be the great equalizer of racial relations, however many scholars are quick to note that this may be a superficial quick-fix to the larger institutionalized racial hierarchy embedded in the social structure (Schuman et al. 1997). Like many white students in the sample, Mike recognizes the

impact of his interactions and he theorizes about the consequences in the larger social structure. Theorizing about racial relations is not unique to sociologists, and the white students should not be viewed as mindless dupes who lack reflexivity.

Like Mike, in the next account Patty is conflicted about her reasons for avoiding mentioning anything tangentially related to race in the frontstage:

At work today I brought back a 12-year-old black female and her mother. The patient was being seen in our office for a weight check and third Hep B vaccine. ...The girl's name was Mary, which without even being aware, I presumed to be a "white name." As I called her name, I was surprised to see the black girl and her mother. I remember my thoughts being somewhat like, "they look sweet." I weighed the patient and took her to room 10 and explained what today's procedure would be. By habit, I checked the patient's previous weight. She had lost five pounds. I almost commented to the girl and her mother, but chose not to because I did not want them to feel I was being racist by noticing her being overweight. Rachel, an RN, came in to give her shot and looked over the chart, immediately exclaiming, "You lost five pounds!" Both of their faces lit up with the mother saying, "I was waiting for you guys to notice!" They were so proud. "We've been working hard." I was embarrassed because I should have congratulated her and the color of her skin should not have been an issue. (Patty, WF, 19, Southeast)

If Mary had been white, as Patty first presumed, she probably would not have thought twice about congratulating the young girl on her weight loss. A white woman interacting with a Black child becomes a site of conscious thought and struggle: Patty does not know if it is racist to mention weight loss to a Black child, as she associates weight problems with Blacks. Patty does not account for why she makes this association, even given the recent media attention to the growing U.S. obesity problem across all races, genders, and ages. Instead, Patty avoids what she considers to be a race issue, to the disappointment of the family.

This interaction between a health care provider and her clients would not make sense without contextualizing the account within alienating racist relations. According to Feagin (2000: 20), "The system of racism categorizes and divides human beings from

each other and this severely impedes the development of common consciousness and solidarity.” The interaction holds racialized meanings: For Patty, no matter if she did or did not comment about the weight loss, she viewed herself as making race an issue.

Given this context of uncertainty for whites (where whites inaccurately perceive that they cannot say or do anything right in front of people of color), it is not surprising that many whites would choose to simply retreat, and avoid any person of color, which is the next category in the avoidance theme.

Avoid People of Color

When interacting with persons of color in the frontstage, some white students opted to simply avoid them. When whites enacted this strategy, it was almost always around Blacks and sometimes Latinos. In this account, Ed’s friend avoids a shorter line because of the Black cashier:

My white friend and I went to [the grocery store] to pick up some food for dinner. We each had our arms full of food, and I was definitely ready to buy our food, and go home. When we walked up to the checkout line, we realized that there were only two open cashiers one was black and the other white. The black cashier had a shorter line, but my friend still insisted on waiting for the white cashier. I didn’t want to cause a scene in the store, but I was offended that his racism was going to inconvenience me. I did not want to wait any longer than I had to so I waited in the shorter line with the black cashier. I was finished checking out before he even started. I hope that maybe he won’t let his racism have such an influence on him in the future. (Ed, WM, 19, Southeast)

The actions of Ed’s friends could be described using rational choice theory, where individuals calculate the potential costs and benefits in decision-making. When presented with the opportunity to interact with a Black person, the white friend opted to pay a small price (a longer wait) for the benefit of not confronting a Black person. For some white students, racism is merely an inconvenience. It is something that whites can avoid, if they avoid people of color. Although Ed writes that he disagrees with his friend, he does

not confront him. By serving as a passive bystander, Ed enables the racist action (Feagin and Vera 1995).

In this next account, a group of white and Asian friends avoid a popular bar “dominated” by Blacks.

11:00pm. I was walking with a group of 18-year-olds (2 white males, 1 Asian, 2 white females). We were thinking about going into [a popular club], but as we were walking by, one of the white males said “Girls keep walking.” When we got to the other side of the street, he commented that he didn’t want us in a club that was dominated by black people. (Sarah, WF, 18, Southeast)

Gender plays a critical role in whites’ frontstage interactions with people of color. In this interaction, white men operate to protect white women (note that the gender of the Asian individual is not mentioned) from the perceived danger of Blacks. White men accomplish two goals in this protection. First, it perpetuates the racist ideology that Blacks are dangerous. Second, this protection perpetuates patriarchy, as white women are dependent on white men to protect them.

The temporal and spatial dimensions of the event are critical. This interaction takes place late at night, and on a public street, both factors that heighten the perceived threat of violence that whites attempt to avoid by avoiding persons of color. One of the most common racial events written by the white students involved white men protecting white women from Black men in public places (though not always necessarily at night), as we shall see in the next section.

As I have outlined, in the frontstage, whites interact with persons of color by actively avoiding any mention of race, or by choosing to avoid the persons of color themselves. Similar strategies used by whites are defensive strategies, where whites feel they have to protect their whiteness or their symbolisms of whiteness.

Defensive Strategies

In the frontstage, the defensive strategies assume that whites are being attacked, violated, or threatened by persons of color. The defensive strategies may appear to be similar to the avoidance strategies where whites avoid persons of color. Although there is some overlap between the categories, there are key differences. In the avoidance category, whites do not always assume that there is the threat of wrongdoing by persons of color. Whites may choose to avoid people of color simply because they do not like them, or they want to avoid the label of being racist. In the defensive strategies, whites sometimes (though not necessarily) avoid people of color, but they also take defensive measures to protect themselves from perceived threat.

There are two defensive strategies that whites employ in the frontstage. The first is whites defending themselves from the perceived wrongdoing of persons of color (such as assuming persons of color will steal from them, or will attempt to attack them). The second is whites defending their racial characteristics.

Defending from Perceived Wrongdoing

In this category, whites assume they are interacting with persons of color who will commit a crime if given the chance. For example, in this account, Robert follows the bug exterminator in his house assuming the Black man will steal from him:

Now that I have been trying to be aware of the racism surrounding me I am beginning to pick up on more and more things. We have a guy that comes every two weeks or so and sprays the inside of our house for bugs. Normally this is not even an issue. I usually just let the guy in and go about my business. They are pretty thorough so it takes them a little while to finish. Usually it is these two white guys and I don't even think twice. But this particular day it was a rather scruffy looking African-American man and my birthday had just passed and there were some expensive items like clothing, electronics, etc. I let him in and walked back to my room. Completely subconsciously I returned to the living room and started watching TV, although I had no intentions of doing this before. I just

wonder if this would have happened if it had been the same two guys as before.
(Robert, WM, 21, Southeast)

Robert admits that when the exterminator is white, he pays no attention and goes about his usual activities. However, when a “scruffy looking” Black man enters his house, he “subconsciously” returns to the room the man is working in. Carr (1997) suggests that whites use colorblind racism to appear not racist: by describing the Black man as “scruffy” and specifying the expensive items around, he could be referencing prejudice based on social class and not race. However, at the beginning of the entry, Robert states that he is more aware of his own racism, so the defensive strategy is used racially. Robert subconsciously or consciously assumes that the Black man will do wrong. This heightened level of surveillance over Black men is one defensive strategy used by whites in the frontstage.

Another defensive strategy used by whites is to avoid persons of color. Similar to the account written by Sarah in the “avoidance” category, here we see white women afraid of Black men:

Last night a friend and I were walking downtown to find somewhere to eat. We passed a group of white men in their early 30s who began asking us where we were going to see if we would stay with them at the bar. My friend just laughed and we kept walking, thinking nothing of it. A short way down the road was a group of black men about our same age standing on the corner goofing around. My friend grabbed my arm and told me to turn around. I did, and we went back to the other corner to cross the street there so we wouldn't have to pass the group of black men. When I asked her why she made me turn around she said, “We are two young girls walking alone at night. We have to be careful who we walk by.” It was funny that the thought did not cross her mind when we passed the other group earlier. (Kim, WF, 19, West)

In this account, the temporal and spatial dimensions underscore the perceived danger the white women feel from Black men. At night, at a downtown public location, Kim's friend feels afraid of specifically Black men. Together, the defensive strategy used to

protect themselves from the perceived danger is to walk in the opposite direction of the threat.

This account is different from many racial events described by white women. In this situation, Kim's white friend jokes with a group of white male strangers, yet runs from a group of Black male strangers. Many white women will argue that it does not matter what race a man is, that (especially at night) any unknown man would elicit fear. For example, in the following account, Donna reinterprets her white roommate's fear of two Black men:

On this particular Monday evening, I actually was not in the dorm room, but had gone home for a doctor's appointment. I did not actually witness this event, but it was the first thing my roommate wanted to tell me as soon as I got home the following day. My roommate had been sitting in the room reading an assignment when there was a knock on our door. As usual, she just yelled "Come on in," as we would any other time, thinking that it would be the girls down the hall. Two rather large black males who were around twenty years old and wearing baggy pants with shirts that showed off their rather large, muscular arms, walked into the room. She said it totally caught her off guard and she was a little nervous. Not only was it two guys that she didn't know, but she had her nightgown on and felt quite vulnerable. They introduced themselves to her and told her that they lived on another floor in the building, and they were just trying to meet some people. They talked to her for a little while about her classes and where she was from. They ended up being two of the nicest people she had met so far. We still don't know how they got onto our floor which makes us a little nervous because we don't just want anyone wandering around. She told me that she felt bad after they left for being frightened just because they were black, but I told her that I am sure no matter what color they would have been that she more likely would have been nervous because it just isn't normal for two guys to come walking in our dorm room. (Donna, WF, 19, Southeast)

Donna's roommate directly states that her fear was caused by the men's race, as she was not expecting two Black men to enter her dormitory room. She states that she felt vulnerable: she was in her nightgown, and she described the men as being muscular and large. Donna's description references the white fear of Black men sexually violating white women. Although the roommate specifically states she was afraid of the Black

men, Donna reinterprets her story to the more socially correct fear of men in general regardless of race. We can see colorblind racism at work: Donna is relying on the semantic move of “it’s not race, it’s gender” in order to safely express the interactions of the frontstage.

In the next account, Heidi notes that her white boyfriend uses a defensive strategy to protect her from a Black man:

Tonight I was downtown with my boyfriend, going to one of the local clubs. As we were walking back to the car at approximately 2:15am, we passed a black man dressed in tattered clothes standing beside a building. My boyfriend immediately grabbed me tighter, and switched me to the other side of him so that he was in between myself and the black man. I asked my boyfriend why he had done this, and he responded with “I just worry about you.” After talking to him for a bit about it, I found out that he did this because of multiple reasons. These reasons were: 1., because it was late at night and the man was thus hidden by the shadows, 2., because the man was dressed in attire that suggested that he may possibly be homeless, and 3., because the man was black (although this reason was not directly stated, I sensed that it was a reason by his response.) Although I noted this, it didn’t bother me. I feel that this is because I appreciated my boyfriend’s concern, and because I think that his being affected by the person was mainly due to his positioning and clothing rather than his color. (Heidi, WF, 18, Southeast)

Black men continue to be demonized in our culture, viewed as unpredictable violent criminals (Russell 1998). We certainly see examples of this reflected in the white minds of the student journal writers. The threat of urban Black men preying on white women’s safety and sexuality increases in the public space and at night.

This account weaves social class, specifically the assumption of homelessness, with race. In defending the actions of her boyfriend, Heidi utilizes an excuse of colorblind racism. She attempts to avoid race terminology, and preserves the mythological nonracialism through semantic moves (such as, “[it] was mainly due to his positioning and clothing, rather than his color”) (Bonilla-Silva, 2003: 70). Like most semantic moves

to avoid race, she “slips” by mentioning that race may play a role (her third reason) in explaining her boyfriend’s actions.

Heidi interprets her boyfriend’s actions (pulling her tighter) and words (“I just worry about you”), not as racist, paternalistic and inappropriate. Instead, she interprets the interaction as a token of his concern for her safety. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 164), “White women’s inability to acknowledge how racism privileges them reflects the relationship that they have to White male power.” Unlike most women of color, many white women benefit from private patriarchy economically, socially, and physically, as Heidi is protected from the perceived threat of the Black man.

To summarize, in the frontstage, the first type of a defensive strategy is whites defending themselves (and other whites) from the perceived wrongdoing of persons of color. This is done through surveillance, avoidance, and physical protection from people of color. A second mechanism of the defensive strategy is defending whiteness.

Defending Whiteness

Social scientists have long examined the stereotypes associated with people of color. For example, Devine and Elliot (1995) suggest that even if individuals do not believe it, most people possess knowledge of racial stereotypes such as the “industrious Asian,” “cheap Jew,” and “criminal African American.” Although it is not as commonly researched, according to the white students, there are also stereotypes about whites. The white students commented that the assumptions people of color have about them range from white’s lack of skill in certain cultural areas (such as whites cannot dance and have no taste in music), to those based on economics (all whites are rich) and privilege (all whites are racist). Therefore, in many frontstage interactions with people of color, whites reported utilizing a defensive strategy against whiteness assumptions.

Tara describes defending her race to a Black man:

I was talking about music with a black guy. The guy made a comment about how I actually had some pretty good music for a white girl. I responded, "I'm white, not stupid." We both laughed. (Tara, WF, 18, West)

White students commonly reported that because of their white skin, they were assumed not to know how to dance or appreciate good music. Calling out the stereotype and making a joke about one's whiteness can facilitate bonds between whites and people of color, as is the case with Tara.

It should be noted that most of the stereotypes against whites are not truly damaging to anything like most stereotypes against persons of color. Similarly, many white stereotypes are due to the racial social structure that whites themselves created. For example, Charlotte defends the assumption her African American coworkers have about her not needing money:

I work as a pharmacy technician in my spare time from school. My pharmacist, as well as all of the other techs excluding myself and one other woman, are all African American. We all get along fine, although I can tell, as well as the other lady, that the others are the pharmacists' "girls," as he calls them. Anyhow, when we get our paychecks there is always discussion about how I supposedly don't need the money, which in actuality is quite the opposite of the facts. I normally just blow it off, but yesterday at work we were going to get our checks again and a similar comment was made. I asked them why they always say that because I was curious to see what the response would be; because I had the suspicion that my lack of need for money had to do with the fact that I was a white female in college and so that meant I had money. My pharmacist answered as I thought, also pointing out that I don't work many hours a week and over the summer I went on two vacations with my boyfriend. I corrected their false assumptions and explained the facts. One being that the only reason I am in college in the first place is because I received a full scholarship to attend [college] to play soccer and that rather than looking at my few hours a week at work as a lack of need for money, it is really my squeezing in what I can on top of my schoolwork and soccer obligations like practice and traveling and games because I badly need the extra money to get by. My father died last November and I am totally financially independent of my mom because she can't support herself, my brother, and me all at the same time. I work two jobs in the summer to help save money for the upcoming semester's expenses because I know I won't have a lot of time to work during the season. Also, I added that the two vacations that I went on were totally paid for by my boyfriend and had I had to

pay for them, I wouldn't have been going anywhere that summer. They all just said that they had no idea and that they just assumed... Maybe next time they'll think before just assuming someone's status based on their race or education. I know I may not be as badly in need of the money as the other girls who work with me who are raising multiple children by themselves, but that doesn't mean that my need is any less significant to me and my life. My family is definitely not a white, "middle class" family by the definition. We'd be more working-class if even that. This situation did provide me with some insight into race however. I was surprised to find myself offended by having to defend my status and need simply because of assumptions made by my race. I can only begin to imagine what it must be like to have to live with such instances daily, and constantly have to defend yourself just because of the color of your skin. It must be frustrating and tiring! (Charlotte, WF, 22, Southeast)

Charlotte goes to great extent to disprove the assumption that a white college student has economic privilege. She describes to her African American coworkers her economic situation, such as paying for college through athletic scholarship, and working for "extra money" to get by in college. Charlotte's father passed away and she does not benefit from the private patriarchy of her father. However, she does admit benefiting from her heterosexual privilege as her boyfriend has paid for two of her recent vacations.

This account suggests that Charlotte has to defend herself from the stereotypes that whiteness equals an assumption about economic comfort. However, she also comments that she knows her situation is not nearly as bad as those of her coworkers. Her coworkers may not benefit from an athletic scholarship, a full-ride to higher-education that will benefit Charlotte throughout her lifetime. Her coworkers may not also benefit from heterosexual privilege or from white privilege [a later journal account indicates her boyfriend is white]. In this defensive account, Charlotte ends by recognizing what it must be like for persons of color who have to defend themselves against harsh stereotypes every day.

Offensive Strategies

Having described three of the components whites utilize when interacting in the frontstage with persons of color (performance, avoidance, defensive), I will now discuss the last component: offensive strategies. By “offensive,” I mean interactions that take place in an aggressive or forthright manner similar to an offensive strategy in sports. I do not mean “offensive” as disrespectful or rude, although that certainly surfaces. Offensive strategies are characterized by initiating a conversation about race or a racial comment in the frontstage. Two offensive strategies that whites use in the frontstage are racial joking, and confrontation.

Racial Joking

Racial joking, either telling racial jokes or making racial comments in a joking manner was extremely prevalent in the white students’ journals. Joking serves many functions, for example, it relieves stress and tension. Joking may also serve to unite a group, such as by showing how tight-knit a group is to allow taboo joking. Joking may operate to “test the waters” of a topic and to decrease accountability: it allows the opportunity to say things that might be inappropriate or unkind. Under the guise of “just kidding around” comments can be tossed around without consequence: it is just a joke, and not meant to be taken seriously. Even with the “light hearted” joking context, most scholars suggest that the underlying context of fun reveals often hostile, hurtful, and deliberate sentiments.

The white students reported that they used or heard their white friends use racial joking against persons of color. For example, Amy writes about her white male friend who jokingly make a racial comment to a Middle Eastern friend:

Thursday night, around 1:30 am, I headed over to the dorm next to mine to see some guy friends of mine (5 white males and 1 Middle Eastern male). All 5 white males are from the same area and had friends visiting from another college (2 white males). We were all hanging around in the dorm rooms, being social. I started talking to one of the visiting friends, Chad, about his college and fraternity. The Middle Eastern, Brad, was walking around like everyone else, when all of a sudden Chad said, "Hey hijacker!! How are you?" As soon as Chad said this, the whole room went silent. Brad calmly went up to Chad and said that was very offensive and to never call him that again. Soon after, Brad acted as if nothing had happened and we went on hanging out and having fun. I was so upset with Chad after that remark, but he did make a simple mistake and he understands that now. (Amy, WF, 18, Southeast)

Chad, a white male, offensively uses racial joking by calling a man of Middle Eastern descent a "hijacker." The white students commented that negative remarks to Arab Americans and persons of Middle Eastern decent increased after the events on September 11, 2001, such as this comment linking Brad to the planes' hijackers.

The fun in the frontstage came to a halt as Brad had to educate the white man about the meaning of his statement and told him never to repeat it. Like many other analysts (Feagin and McKinney 2003), feminist Maria Lugones (1990) stresses the burden of the oppressed: it is up to the oppressed (who have suffered the embarrassment in this example) to educate their oppressors about the consequences and harm of their actions. Brad could have responded by erupting in anger, leaving, laughing it off, ignoring him, or educating him. Although Brad did not choose to put himself in this situation, he is faced with the difficult decision of how to best rectify it, with optimal results so Chad recognizes his blunder. Again, it is the burden of the oppressed to police the boundaries on racial stereotyping. Although Amy states she is upset with Chad, she also appears to downplay the significance of his offensive comment by claiming it was a "simple mistake."

In many racial events described by whites, there is a social component to the racial joking. The joking did not disrupt the fun, as it did for Amy, but the joking often buttressed the fun. For example, Kendra describes an event in the dormitory where an Asian male is asked what derogatory term he would prefer to be called:

The hall across from me is the guy's floor. Most of the guys on the floor are white and 18 or 19-years-old. One guy on the floor is Asian, and his name is Tyson. I was hanging out over there with one of my friends. The conversation was between a white male, Kyle, and Tyson. Of course the two guys were joking, but I couldn't help but feel like there was some sort of animosity or resentment between them. Kyle was asking Tyson about Asians and how they are usually treated, and then he asked him what Asian derogatory term he preferred. Everyone laughed, including myself, but afterwards, I was surprised that I laughed at that. No one prefers any derogatory term when it's aimed and directed towards you. But Tyson apparently had a carefree attitude and acted like he didn't care. Tyson's response was "Bitch is a good term, just call us that. That works." Everyone laughed again and two guys patted Tyson on the back, as if he had proved something by brushing off that comment and joking about it. I guess in situations like this, it's better to laugh it off when you know the people that are joking about it, rather than getting offended. I've noticed that guys do this more than girls. Girls tend to take more offense to comments aimed at their race or ethnicity or religion more than guys. (Kendra, WF, 18, Southeast)

Again, as mentioned in the performativity section, most whites have the privilege of not knowing about the experiences of other racial groups, while the opposite is not true for persons of color. The white men ask Tyson about Asians, and Kendra notes that although they were joking, there is an undercurrent of hostility. This feeling of animosity is not uncommon among racial joking, particularly as there is typically a layer of truth underlying the "fun."

Tyson had "passed the test" with the white males by allowing racial joking to continue without getting offended and without disrupting the fun. Like many persons of color, Tyson may be "picking his battles." He may be attempting to make dorm life tolerable by acting carefree instead of acting offended at being asked to select a derogatory term, as there is a social component to the joking. Kendra notes that at the

time of the event, she went along with the fun, but reflecting on the event in her journal, she realizes it may be problematic not to question what the fun was based upon.

Kendra notes that gender plays a role in this racial event, as she suggests men laugh off any confrontation, whereas women might be offended. Comparing the racial events in the frontstage, Kendra has a point about the significance of gender. In the performativity section, there are more examples of white women acting extra polite and proving they are not a racist, compared to white men. Similarly, in the offensive strategy section, there are more examples of white men using joking or confrontation compared to white women. I return to the role of gender at the end of the chapter.

As well as hiding animosity, racial joking may operate to illustrate the close bonds between friends:

Over this weekend I was visiting some friends at [a nearby university]. Three of my guy friends live together: one is Italian, one is black, and one is Hispanic. They've all been good friends since high school, and it is funny to watch them interact with each other on a racial level. On this particular morning, they wanted breakfast, but didn't want to make it. After trying to make me cook, using a sexist standpoint, they turned to using racial stereotypes on one another as a means of convincing. I forget the exact terms they used, but I know that if they weren't such good friends they could not have gotten away with the words they were using. It was interesting to see though, how sharing a close bond with people can erase racial differences to the point that racial slurs just become comical and vacant of any meaning. It was easy to tell that words were just words between them, and though I expected some sort of tension to arise, it eventually became apparent that their friendship is blind to race. (Olivia, WF, 19, Southeast)

Olivia suggests that racial slurs used among these friends serve to cement the closeness between friends of different races. She comments that the terms are “comical and vacant of any meaning” but if the terms were not used by such close friends, it would not have been tolerated. It bears mentioning that all racist interactions are collective enterprises, that is, it flows in and out of white social networks (Feagin 2000).

The context in which racial joking is exchanged is critical. For example, the term “queer” originally a derogatory term referring to non-heterosexuals, has been reclaimed by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community as an empowering term. The term does not sting when used by members of the community, for the context and meaning is understood. Similarly, when friends use racist terms as joking, it signifies a social benefit by showing how tight-knit the group is to allow such taboo joking, and to reclaim the racist term.

Joking becomes problematic when outsiders attempt to utilize the same racist joking accepted by the in-group (such as friends of different racial groups). For example, a white first year student on an athletic team learns that he does not have the same connection to a Black man as a white senior:

Our [athletic] team here at the [university] is a real close, tight-knit group. Everybody on the team is white, except for two people, a black guy and a Mexican guy. Everybody on the team makes fun of each other but today it got carried away a little bit too far. At around 2:00 p.m. this Thursday everybody on the team was sitting around in the locker room watching television waiting for practice to start. A lot of the older guys on the team call the black guy “lil monkey,” just as the black guy has nicknames for all of us. We call him this because he is short and sometimes black people are referred to as monkeys. One of the freshmen on our team called the black guy “lil monkey” instead of his real name. It is okay for one of the older guys to call him this because we have all been together for a while and he is comfortable with us calling him that. When the black guy heard that he snapped and got into the freshman’s face. Some of the guys had to step in between them so they would not fight. We had to explain to the freshman that only certain people can call him that and he isn’t comfortable with you calling him that. In other words, the black guy knows that it is not a prejudice comment coming out of one of the older guys mouth, but since he really doesn’t know any of the freshmen that well that he doesn’t know how that comment was supposed to be directed. The freshman apologized and he learned his lesson the hard way. (Neal, WM, Southeast)

The white first year student had to learn that not all whites are equal when it comes to racist joking. Although Neal recognizes that it is inappropriate to refer to Blacks as monkeys, the friendship apparently overrides any prejudice. Note that we are only

getting the story from Neal, a white man. We do not know what the Black man feels, and research suggests that people of color often have no choice but to accept this type of joking (Feagin and McKinney 2003). The context of racial joking is critical: it depends on how it is used and who uses it. When the older white teammates use racial joking, it is part of the fun, and there is no disruption in the social activity. However in this situation, the offensive strategy of using racial joking is not tolerated by a subordinate.

Confrontation

In addition to racial joking, a second type of offensive strategy used by whites in the frontstage is confronting persons of color. This typically involves anger, hostility, and sometimes violence. Among friends, the confrontation may appear like joking, but it often includes a not-so-subtle underlying message. In the next account, Derek writes about a white man who becomes a racist when he's drunk because he is not used to being around Blacks:

Last Friday night, around 1 AM, my friend Sam (who is black) was walking towards the doors to go outside and get something to eat. He stops to talk to someone who he knows at the entrance to the doors. He saw Al (who is white) and starts to approach him to see what's up. Al is with his girlfriend, and looks like he had one too many beers that night. The first words that came out of his mouth were "What up nigger" with a big smirk on his face. Well, Sam flipped out and started to go after Al.

Derek continued his journal entry:

After a day or two, I asked Al why he said those racist comments, and his response was, "where I come from, there aren't too many black people, but now here at college, there is a lot more than I feel comfortable around, and when I get drunk, I can't help myself I was bought up this way." (Derek, WM, 18, Northeast)

A white man openly confronts a Black man with a racist epithet, arguably the most violent and harshest term used against African Americans. Although Al had a smirk on his face, he was not joking in using the term, and Sam picked up on that. Al excuses his

inappropriate frontstage behavior on numerous accounts: he was drunk, he grew up that way, and he's not comfortable around Blacks. He offers no accountability for his actions, nor any apologies. Numerous white students in the sample point to the role of alcohol as a factor for racial confrontations. Although alcohol can be attributed to loosening one's inhibitions, it cannot create a sentiment that is not already there.

Some whites offer no apologies or excuses for confrontation in the frontstage. For example, Ian's friend yells "speak English" to strangers in the mall:

Today I went to the mall with two of my friends. Both are white males age 19. While we were walking around one of my friends started to say to people who looked foreign "Speak English." When we would walk past a person or a group of people he would pretend to be talking to my other friend or me and he would say at a moderate tone "Speak English." What started him saying this was when we first arrived at the mall we all heard a group of middle-eastern males speaking their foreign tongue. The entire time we were at the mall I felt embarrassed because my friend started to attract attention. (Ian, WM, 19, West)

In this account, a group of Middle Eastern males not speaking English serves as a trigger to harass non-native speakers. Since the events on September 11th there has been an increase in hate crimes reported against Middle-Eastern and Arab persons (or persons perceived to be of these groups). Many white students commented about either making or hearing harassing comments to these "foreigners" particularly around the September 11th anniversary.

In Ian's account, there is a layer of safety and protection for the white student. He is with his friends who did nothing to stop him, even though Ian writes that he is embarrassed. Also, the interaction takes place at a shopping mall where there is a level of surveillance. The surveillance is not enough to stop him from harassing strangers, but it is enough to protect him in case anyone fought back. Physical violence is not typically tolerated in a shopping mall, so the white student could feel confident in verbally

harassing strangers, knowing that at worst he could be expelled from the mall, but there is no immediate threat of physical violence from the confrontation he is creating.

White confrontation often involves more than a verbal assault in a relatively safe space like the shopping mall. In the following entry, Mandy describes how her friend, a Black male, was harassed and beaten by five white males after driving home a white female friend:

On Friday night my friend Jesse (a black male) was picking up a friend (white female) to give her a ride home. When a car pulled up behind him on the street and started honking and screaming "Move your car, nigger." Jesse laughed thinking it was some of his friends yelling at him. He got out of the car smiling and laughing and the white male driver of the car continued yelling things at him. After his friend got in the car, Jesse pulled away to take her home and pulled into the parking lot behind [a Hall on campus]. The other car followed and pulled in next to Jesse. My friend then realized that the car had five white males inside and they all jumped out and circled around him. Then the driver came up and continued to yell racial comments and punched Jesse in the face. He continued to punch Jesse until he had blacked his eye and knocked one of his teeth out of place. When Jesse told me about this incident I was completely shocked. I did not think that outright hatred like that really happened anymore, especially not at a place as safe as [our university]. I did not know what to say to him to make him feel better. I honestly felt ashamed that someone of my race is capable of such cruelty. Have times really changed all that much or will there always be people who are willing to hurt others just for fun? I feel so upset that I had to see one of my friends get hurt in order to realize how much racism still exists on a daily basis. (Mandy, WF, 19, Midwest)

Jesse thought the yelling and racist epithets were said by friends jokingly (part of the offensive strategy), but later realized it was meant violently. In this interaction, white men violently confront a Black man in the frontstage interaction. Similar to the defensive accounts where white men protect white women from the perceived (sexual) violence of Black men, here white men lash out physically and verbally at a Black man seen driving with a white woman.

In this confrontation, the white men had all the advantages: the element of surprise, the safety in their numbers, and the physical location. Five white men beat one

defenseless, unassuming (and no doubt surprised) Black man behind a building on campus. Mandy writes that she is shocked, ashamed and bewildered that her safe white campus could be dangerous for her Black friend. The white woman does not know what to say to her friend, for her experiences on the university campus are strikingly different.

Summary

This chapter describes how whites interact with people of color in the frontstage. I categorize the interactions into four components: whites performance (such as whites acting extra polite, proving they are not a racist, or appropriating race); avoidance (avoiding any mention of race, or avoiding people of color); defensive strategies (defending from perceived wrongdoing, or defending whiteness); and offensive strategies (joking, or confrontation). Most of the descriptions suggest the racial events in the frontstage are uncomfortable, hostile, and hurtful. However, this may not tell the complete story of the frontstage. It is possible that many white students had pleasant conversations and interactions with Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, but that they were so commonplace and ordinary that the students felt there was no need to provide the details. Having said this, it does not negate what the students did write about, such as acting uneasily, avoiding race, and joking about race. The implications of these interactions will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 4 BACKSTAGE

In Chapters 3 (Frontstage), 5 (Backstage, Near the Front), and 6 (Fluid Boundaries, Slippery Regions), I describe the mechanisms that whites use to protect the backstage while in the frontstage, or when the backstage is in jeopardy. In this chapter, I describe the characteristics of the backstage, or how whites interact among other whites during racial events. The backstage is a complex network of interactions. Many components play a critical role, such as who is allowed (and not allowed) in the backstage, what language is tolerated or expected in the backstage, and what actions take place.

In this chapter, I describe the two main themes of how the white students interacted with other whites in the backstage. By themes, I am going beyond simply the content of “what” is said. Although this is critically important to provide a description of the content, my goal is to access “how” interactions transpire, or the underlying mechanism that operates in the backstage. The first theme in the backstage is that the backstage operates as a preparation stage for racial relations in the frontstage. A second and much more common theme is that the backstage is a safe space to relax the frontstage expectations. As this was much more common, most of the attention is directed there.

Preparation Stage

In the data, one theme that emerges is the backstage as a preparation stage for frontstage racial relations. Here whites teach each other how to act, or not act in the frontstage. The interactions tended to be either: (1) educational in nature, or (2) cautionary, such as offering a warning. Backstage interactions that were educational

tended to focus on whites correcting each other's vocabulary terms or myths and misconceptions about people of color. This specific socialization that is educational in nature is different than whites teaching each other racist jokes and beliefs (I discuss this in the safe backstage), as these jokes are not meant to be shared in the frontstage.

Educational

Racial education in the backstage, as part of the preparation for the frontstage, was most common between the white college students and young children or older whites. In this account, a white woman educates her grandmother about correct racial terminology:

On this particular afternoon my friend Yvonne's mother and grandmother were visiting my friend from California [everyone is white]. ... After a little bit of casual conversation, ... Yvonne began to list the restaurant options. Upon her mention of the Chinese restaurant uptown, Yvonne's grandmother interrupted and began to tell a story. She said, "Oh! I have something funny to tell you! The other day I was at a restaurant and I had a lovely Oriental waitress—" She didn't get any further because Yvonne interrupted her. "Grandma!" my friend exclaimed, "*People* are not '*oriental*.' *Food* is oriental and *clothing* is oriental, and there is even a part of the world often referred to as "*The Orient*." But you can't say that people are '*oriental*!'" Yvonne's grandmother looked at her, completely shocked that she had been rebuked, but she was also pretty confused. "Well, then, Yvonne," her grandmother said, "What *are they* called??" Yvonne told her grandmother that people from China or Japan, etc. are often referred to as *Asian*, or even directly by their heritage, if it is known, such as *Chinese* or *Japanese*. But she laughed again as she said. "Not *oriental*!" Her grandmother was pretty oblivious, you could tell, but accepted the mistake she had made and went back to her story, making sure to emphasize that she had an *Asian* waitress this time. I couldn't help but laugh at the way Yvonne had called out her grandmother, but was grateful she had. (Caroline, WF, 21, Northeast)

The backstage can be an educational setting where whites learn the correct terminology for racial groups. Even though there are no Asians present in this interaction, Yvonne felt it was important to teach her grandmother that describing someone as "Oriental" is not acceptable in the frontstage, or in future backstage interactions. Yvonne is preparing her grandmother for future interactions in the frontstage. Even though it is a backstage

conversation, there is still a level of accountability where whites sometime act to keep each other in check.

This account also highlights the social component to the backstage: whites are actively teaching, learning, and reconceptualizing racial language and ideas. Yvonne corrects and teaches her grandmother the preferable term, and allows her grandmother to continue her story only when she repeats the new term. Yvonne's mother and Caroline who wrote the journal account were also involved in this event, and allowed the education to persist without interruption. Caroline even admits that she is grateful that Yvonne corrected the mistake even when there were no immediate consequences of the term "Oriental."

Many white students indicated that their grandparents often used "incorrect" terms such as referring to people of color as "colored," "Negro" or "Oriental." The vast majority of these students did not inform their elders that these terms are no longer socially acceptable, often for fear of seeming disrespectful or because the students did not like the tensions from family confrontations or saw changing their opinions as "hopeless." Caroline is one of the few students to confront and educate someone a generation or two older than she is.

Whites also taught each other in the backstage about who was or was not allowed in a safe backstage conversation. In this account, a mother teaches her family not to say racist jokes in front of children:

I was eating Thanksgiving dinner with my friend and his family (southern-Baptist Caucasian family). There were several generations at the house. Everyone had a comic attitude, always looking for opportunities to crack jokes. At one point, my friend's cousin said the word "nigger" but I didn't hear what she was talking about. However, I heard my friend's sister-in-law say, "Don't say that stuff around the kids, last week they almost got kicked out of day-care for calling a boy that." The

moment the kids left, my friend's brother said, "What do you call a nigger with a wooden leg? Shit on a stick." I felt really uncomfortable, especially since my parents would have smacked me in the face just for saying that word, let alone the context in which it was used. Everyone but me laughed, and I tried to pretend to, but I could feel myself being really fake. (Will, WM, 22, Southeast)

The backstage interaction takes place in a private home among only invited white family and friends. A white mother uses the backstage as an opportunity to teach the other whites not to say certain things in front of the children. The children have not yet learned to censor their racist talk in the frontstage, so the adults have to censor the backstage until the children leave.

The adults are preparing the children for the frontstage, so the usual racial language must be censored until the children learn that there are different expectations in frontstage and backstage. Already the children have said the racial term in daycare, indicating that they have heard the racial language before, and understand the content and the meaning. Other scholars have examined children's racial attitudes and behaviors, and note that children are very quick to pick up adult's racial ideologies and experiment with them in interaction with other children (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001).

As soon as the children leave the setting, the racist language continues. The friend's brother uses the harshest racist epithet in the context of a racist joke, which parallels (disabled) human beings with feces. Will notes that there are several generations involved in the conversation, and he feels social pressure to laugh at the joke, even though he is uncomfortable. The white family apparently felt no discomfort at telling this harsh joke in front of an invited stranger. Though Will could confront the family or sit silently, he notes the strong pressure not to resist or go against the racial talk. Many white students commented that even though they may not have agreed with racist

humor, they did not want to disrupt the performance that was oftentimes “just part of the fun.”

Warnings and Cautions

In this preparation for the frontstage, whites also caution each other about future interactions that may take place. For example, whites often warned each other in advance when an unsafe backstage may transpire. This was often the case with persons who might be mistaken for a safe “white” backstage member, such as a Jewish person or light skinned Latino. It was also typical in situations where a person of color is not expected, such as a Black roommate (as evident in the account in Chapter 1, when Becky warns her friends back home that her suitemate is Black).

As described in Chapter 6, whites would often try to avoid an unreliable safe backstage, where persons who are assumed to be safe backstage members come out as not being completely “white.” In this account Gail’s cousin warns her family that her new boyfriend is Jewish:

I went home to visit my family for birthday celebrations and because my cousin brought her boyfriend and they were both home visiting from San Francisco. None of my family members made any racial comments, but before we met my cousin’s new boyfriend, she just asked everyone to watch what they say. My family can sometimes say some racial things that might offend people who don’t know our family that well, and how everyone interacts. Also, my cousin wanted to make sure nobody made any cheap Jewish comments because her new boyfriend was Jewish. (Gail, WF, 19, Northeast)

Knowing the family’s history about making “racial comments,” Gail’s cousin warns her family in advance not to make anti-Semitic or otherwise offensive comments when her new boyfriend visits. Gail comments that her family *not* making racial comments is atypical; her family had to be warned in a previous backstage conversation. By indicating their collective consent to the warning and not telling racial jokes, the family

recognizes that such comments are not appropriate in certain contexts (such as in the frontstage with a Jewish visitor). Stated another way, for many whites, telling racial comments is appropriate in certain backstage contexts.

Like Gail's cousin, Jared warns his roommate that a Jewish woman is visiting, assuming that his roommate would not want to say anything to offend the guest:

A friend of mine and her two roommates came over to play cards with my roommate and me. John, my roommate, had never met them, so he asked if they were good looking, which is a pretty normal question. Well in asking me that, I remember that one of them, who has red hair, is Jewish. I felt I had to warn my roommate of this so he didn't make a fool of himself by making a Jewish joke. He then informed me that I should have instead warned her that he may make Jewish jokes and it's nothing personal. (Jared, WM, 21, Southeast)

Jared may have felt the need to warn his roommate about the red headed woman as John may have assumed the woman was "all white" (meaning Gentile) and it was a safe backstage. In a safe backstage conversation, Jared was taking measures to ensure that his roommate does not create an uncomfortable situation in the frontstage. This interaction could simply be a fun time playing cards. However, John is so committed to his anti-Semitic jokes that he will not even reserve his comments in front of a guest. This creates the potential for alienating racist relations. The socially imbedded racist relations distort what could be an engaging relationship; instead, as evident in the language of "warning" and "make a fool of himself," any relationship is spoiled.

John notes that any anti-Semitic comments are not against her personally, but against a "generic" Jew. Throughout the journals, many whites commented that a stereotype against an entire group never seemed to apply directly to person in front of them. For John, the Jewish jokes made in front of a Jewish woman should be "nothing personal."

Safe Space from the Frontstage

Much more common than backstage-as-preparation-stage-for-frontstage interactions was a backstage as a *safe space* from frontstage expectations. In the frontstage, most whites know that it is more or less inappropriate to express racist sentiments openly. In a safe backstage among only whites, racist comments and jokes are not out of the ordinary, but are often tolerated, encouraged, and even expected. There is an assumption that such comments will be protected in the backstage, and that all of the white social actors support the racial performances. (Chapter 6 deals with an “unreliable” safe backstage, such as where persons who are assumed to be white and are not, or whites who do not support the racial performance.) Recall that in Chapter 3 on the frontstage, I discuss whites performing for people of color. Oftentimes in the backstage, whites also perform for each other to shape and encourage the racial events.

Normalized Backstage

So very common. Many students commented that racial events in the safe backstage between whites were expected, normal, and common. In their journals, some white students even quantified how frequently they heard racial comments just among whites. Don (WM, 21, Southeast) indicates that, “Today I heard the word Nigger about 27 times in my house. I have never really paid much attention to how it gets tossed around and how offensive it can really be.” In his journals, Don, like most white students, recognizes that there are different expectations in the backstage, where it is okay to say the word “nigger,” compared to a frontstage where it is not permissible. Don notes that it is so common to hear the racist epithet that he forgets the negative association.

In his account, Don continues, “The reason that made me think of the amount of times this word was said is because my roommate’s dad calls a few times weekly and tells us his newest jokes about blacks, Jews, and other ethnic groups.” For Don, there is a social network to support this type of racial joking. The backstage is a safe zone to perpetuate racial humor and to support the racist performances. The joking was not just among those white roommates physically present, but other whites are involved as well. There are multiple generations within the social network, routinely supported by the expectations of “a few times weekly” phone call.

Other whites comment about the routine nature of racial jokes. Racist jokes are not a hidden, secret pleasure, but part of the fun in an open comfortable backstage atmosphere. In a safe backstage, Eileen discusses that her white male friends relieve their boredom by creating racial slurs:

As I sit in a room with a bunch of frat guys, Phil walks in chanting “rotchie, rotchie, rotchie!!” I ask quietly what that term means and I am answered with a giggle and a quick “it’s slang for nigger, like niggerotchie.” What makes me wonder most about these guys is why they think it is funny to make racial jokes. The guys I hang around (white college males) constantly spend their “bored time” making up new ways to criticize each other, and the easiest way to do that is to call each other racial slurs when everyone is clearly white. I don’t know what the pleasure is in calling people names that don’t even make fun of them. If there happened to be people of a different color there in the room, they would never say anything like that. So why is it so easy to make slurs when they aren’t there? I see that making racial slurs is only really “racial” when it is said to the person of the race. Otherwise, it is more of a term people use to define someone, where sometimes it has negative connotations. I just don’t understand why people choose race as a means to make fun of other people. (Eileen, WF, 18, Midwest)

Phil teaches Eileen the white code language, that “rotchie” is slang for “nigger.” Any one who intrudes on this backstage might question white men who chant the word “nigger.” However, the group of white men can relax in their secure backstage by replacing the harshest of epithets with a code term “rotchie” that has no apparent racial

connotations unless educated about the meaning, as Eileen was. There is a very clear white social network, as only whites are invited into the backstage and certain whites are taught the racial meaning of their code language. The white men are clearly performing, literally chanting, their racist beliefs.

In this backstage interaction, Eileen notes that the conversation is only among whites. She suggests that “if there happened to be” people of color in the room, the men would *not* use their racist terms in the frontstage. Her language suggests that there does not “happen to be” people of color in the room often. As many whites indicate in their journals, these men do not have to interact in the frontstage often, as their social networks are almost always all-white.

For these white men, the racial slurs are said to relieve their boredom. The slurs are unidirectional, as the white men are attacking persons of color. In this way, there are never any negative consequences for their actions. Eileen also notes her confusion that the white men would make fun of people of color who have never made fun of them. It would seem rational to mock persons who attack the group, or if the mocking were reciprocated in some way.

Eileen rationalizes and accepts that her friends are chanting an equivalent term to “nigger.” For many whites, it is not viewed as a real racial slur if it is not said directly to people of color. As they see it, their created language is simply a term to describe an entire race of people who are not like them, and the term *happens* to be negative. Yet, by using explicitly racist terminology backstage in their critical social networks they are reinforcing negative images of people of color in the minds of all in hearing distance. Such performances are the way in which much white-racist thought and proclivity is

passed along in this society. People of color are never invited into the safe white backstage, as they are not equal to the white fraternity men or their white associates like Eileen.

Many other students indicate that their white friends and family do not mean their frequent racist joking. Amy (WF, 19, Midwest) rationalizes her family commonly telling “black jokes”: “I know that they don’t mean what they say. They were just joking around. I’d never really thought about it as anything more than simple jokes and fun because they are always laughing and having a good time with it.” For the whites who are involved in the joking, it is just comfortable, commonly accepted, and a frequent occurrence. There never has to be any deeper acknowledgement or questioning of why making fun of Black people is normalized: it is tolerated, accepted, and often encouraged.

The common and normalized racial comments in the backstage are not only racial jokes or statements made in a joking manner. Other safe backstage comments include random racial comments. Abby describes watching television at a white girlfriend’s apartment with a group of friends:

We were watching television; it was 10:00pm... Five of us (all white) were at the apartment when one of the guys came over and joined us. On the television was Arissa, one of the cast members of Real World. This guy says, “That was a good shit I just took.” I then said, “Thanks for sharing that with us!” He then pointed out Arissa on the TV and said, “Well looking at her reminded me because she is black. She’s black, my shit is black, she’s a piece of shit.” This guy is pretty weird and always said outrageous things. Everyone in the room is used to how he acts so no one gave him a response. The guy who said these things is white and has a fetish for girls of all other races. He always talks about wanting to have sex with them. (Abby, WF, 21, Southeast)

In this narrative, a white man felt comfortable announcing to a room full of people that a Black woman on television reminds him of a “piece of [literal] shit” for no other reason

than her racial characteristics. The trigger to this offensive statement was simply seeing a Black woman on the television which for this man activates his association with feces and Black people. This man is not the first to make this connection between Blacks and dirt or feces, but he is referencing an old stereotype that justifies the “subhuman” quality of Blacks that deserve to be subjugated (Bogle 2001; Kovel 1970).

This white man may be making the connection between Blacks as human waste without even considering the meaning behind his comment. Curse words are commonly used without self-reflection, and his comment may be made with a lack of reflection to the meaning. Everyday racist actions performed by whites are often done without meaning or reflection to the association.

Within this safe backstage conversation, the other whites are “used to” this man making outrageous comments. This may account for why, in a room filled with people, no one challenged his offensive comments: equating Blacks with feces, or discussing bathroom habits that are typically not announced to friends. It may be that as his friends know he is making the comment for shock-value, and they will not give him the benefit of responding to his comment. A key feature of everyday racist behavior of whites is this tolerance of the active white officiants by passive white bystanders. The latter’s acquiesce is essential to the perpetuation of racist performances, and realities. None of the whites challenged his offensive comments, which indicates quiet support.

The backstage has a clear spatial dimension, and in this account it takes place in a private apartment setting. This ensures that only those invited into the setting will be allowed to participate. It is highly unlikely that such a comment would be said in the company of a Black person.

The last part of the account is revealing and potentially confusing: Abby notes this man's "fetish" for women of other races. Even the language of "fetish" (defined in the dictionary as "an object or body part of irrational reverence"), suggests that the Black woman is objectified; she is not a human subject, or viewed to be a *rational* sexual partner choice. According to Abby, although the man equates Blacks with human waste, he has a desire to be with them sexually. The apparent contradiction of desiring an object on television (again, she is not a subject of desire, but she is objectified) that is devalued is common among the controlling image of the jezebel or "hoochie" (Collins 2000; Kovel 1970). Historically, Black women have even themselves been blamed for white men's sexual attraction to them, even when white men view the Black women as non-persons (Anderson 1995).

Telling racial jokes or making outrageous racist comments is very typical in many white backstage interactions. In this next account, Debbie describes watching a movie with her four roommates (two white women, two white men) that lead to one of the men to tell a racist joke:

When we heard the joke, my one roommate Lillian said she thought that joke was "terrible." My other roommate Mike said, "It's true though." We all yelled at him and said he was the worst, etc, etc. However, none of us was really mad or really offended by what he said and we probably should have been. Instances like this make me realize that people have gotten too used of people making jokes about minorities. We are too willing to accept people making inappropriate comments about minorities. I feel like I'm so used to people saying jokes like that, that I don't even take them seriously anymore. The strange thing is that I don't think any of my friends are actually racist, they just sometimes say inconsiderate things that they don't really mean. (Debbie, WF, 20, Midwest)

As other whites have commented, here Debbie notes how easy it is for whites to get accustomed to making and hearing disparaging comments against people of color to the

point where it is taken for granted. For many whites, making inappropriate comments about racial minorities is no longer offensive; it is just the norm.

Who is a racist? For Debbie and many whites, a person who makes negative comments against persons of color is not necessarily a “racist” individual; they may just be exculpated as whites who say inconsiderate things. Making negative racial comments can be viewed as an appendage to an otherwise healthy and good white person. This claim also resonates with claims some whites make about a person’s “level of racism” based on individual character attributes. For example, as argued in Chapter 3, many whites claimed that a white person who is polite to an individual person of color cannot be a racist. This makes sense given the social network these whites are participating in: racism tends to be defined as an individual attribute of racist individuals. These racist individuals are often conceived as only white men in robes burning crosses. It is very clear in the journal accounts that beyond the ivory towers of academia, there is little public discourse among whites regarding the social nature of systemic and institutional racist networks and organizations.

A white man in the Midwest, Sam, makes a similar claim about what is considered to be “real racism”:

On Sunday night I had a discussion with Frank, a white college male, about racism in our building. I asked him if he felt like there was any in the hall and he told me that he hadn’t observed any “real” racism in the building. I asked him what he meant by “real” racism and he replied that while he had heard racist jokes, he didn’t see any “clans men or burning crosses” so he didn’t take it to be a serious problem. I asked him why he didn’t consider racist jokes to be as serious a problem as racial violence. He said that as long as nobody was directly being hurt, either by words or by more physical means, then it shouldn’t be considered real racism.

Sam tried to convince his friend Frank that telling racist jokes contributes to an environment that supports the racial hierarchy and other racist actions. Sam continues his account indicating that Frank was “skeptical” about Sam’s claim:

He told me that he wasn’t quite sure if what I said was completely true or not, but regardless he promised to make an effort to cut back on the racist jokes and comments that he was prone to, if not because what I claimed was true, then only because I was asking him to do so as a friend. (Sam, WM, 20, Midwest)

In this safe backstage conversation, Sam confronts his friend by telling him that racism is more than the KKK and other racial terrorist groups. According to Frank, racist jokes are not considered “real racism” because no one was being hurt. For many whites in the sample, telling racist jokes in the company of whites is not harmful; the only harm may come if the “wrong” person (such as a person of color, or an unsafe white person) stumbles into the backstage. Evident in Frank’s skepticism, many whites cannot understand how telling racist jokes in the privacy of one’s social group can perpetuate the racial hierarchy.

Frank cannot promise that he would stop the racist jokes, only that he would “make an effort to cut back” on the joking. He also indicates that he is “prone to” telling or listening to racist jokes. Using language like “prone to” reveals how deep this issue goes: telling or listening to racist jokes is automatic, like it was encoded on his genes. This suggests how imbedded the racial socialization is: like a biological drive, he is “prone to” racial joking. There is an apparent social component as Frank does not tell or listen to jokes alone. This is not an individual problem, but often what the group interactions are based upon. Many whites indicate the group dynamics (explored in the next section) support and expect racial joking. Such group interactions are, indeed, at the very core of white racism, and are essential to its production and reproduction in this society.

The joking operates to ensure that people of color are kept out of the safe backstage, and it serves to perpetuate a racial hierarchy where whites are at the top. As whites are in the majority (politically, economically, etc.), whites have the privilege to ignore the existence of the racial hierarchy, and to claim that the joking is separate from the racial hierarchy: there is no harm as it is dismissed as just jokes. For the white social actors, there are no negative consequences to their backstage interactions (unless they are caught, accounting for the measures to secure backstage borders noted in Chapter 5). There are only social benefits, such as group bonding and perpetuating a hierarchy that actively places them at the top.

There were occasions when students were surprised not by what comments were said, but by who made the comments. For example, some white women in particular were assumed not to make racist comments, or white strangers who gained access to the safe backstage. The role of white strangers in the backstage is critical for indicating that the backstage is not categorized by intimacy or levels of closeness, as white skin alone is often a passport to allow entry into the backstage. Even when the social actor (or who says it) may be surprising, often the comment of what is said is normalized.

In this next account, a white man reacts to hearing his “cute little innocent” girlfriend yell repeated racial slurs “to make her feel better”:

My girlfriend and I were in her room. She is white and a freshman. She was working on a computer project that was due Friday. Today is Wednesday and she was really stumped in her work ... and she then got really frustrated and repeated a racial slur more than once. My girl friend is very country oriented and likes to do outdoors activities, but she went to school with a whole bunch of black people. I was pretty surprised to hear this out of such a cute little innocent girl. I told her that I couldn't believe that she said that. It really doesn't offend me when I hear a racial slur, but I think that's just because of how I was brought up. So I then proceeded ask her why she said those slurs. She told me the reason she said those things was because it made her feel better. I didn't quiz her any more about why

she made a racial slur but in a way it kind of made sense to me. I mean we are all supposed to follow certain norms and when you rebel against these norms and knowing that you're not going to get in trouble just kind of makes a person feel better. I think it is a weird out look on anger management but she said it was a way to relieve stress and to feel better. (Jack, WM, Southeast)

The spatial location, in a private room, contributes to a backstage interaction between a white boyfriend and girlfriend. Jack insinuates the difference between the frontstage and backstage area. He refers to “following certain norms” in the frontstage where the norm is not to yell racial slurs. In the safe backstage it is possible to “rebel” against these norms without consequence or getting “in trouble.” Behaviors in the backstage may violate expectations in the frontstage without repercussion.

The image of a “cute little innocent [white] girl” is different than the stereotypical “Archie Bunker” image of a white who repeatedly yells racial slurs. Many times white racists are depicted in the mass media as rural, working class people in the South. Jack describes his girlfriend as “country-oriented” and outdoorsy, similar to a person who is depicted as being stereotypical against people of color. He then qualifies his statement by describing her “but she went to school with black people” hinting that someone who associates with Blacks would know better than to use racial slurs.

People often shout obscenities out of anger and frustration, breaking the social norm. Few probably give thought to the meaning and symbolism behind their chosen terms. Jack notes that he is not offended by racial slurs. As part of the racial majority, it is not expected for a white male to be hurt by racial slurs. Part of white privilege is not recognizing the damage done by racial slurs; white privilege ensures that racism is not viewed as a problem for the dominant race. The cost of racism for whites is minimal compared to the physical, emotional, social, psychological costs of racism for people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Feagin and McKinney 2003).

There is a social component to the interaction, as his girlfriend did not censor the slurs from Jack, but she repeated it more than once. Her inappropriate comments made sense to him as a way of rebelling against frontstage expectations. She is still a good person who happens to use racial slurs when frustrated. Like many whites have indicated, a person who makes racial slurs does not transform into a total racist person; they may have a racial appendage to an otherwise good core.

Unexpected person, expected comment. For Jack, it was not the comment that was unexpected, but who said it. This was often the case with white strangers who were allowed into the backstage with their white skin passport. For example, Sheila notes her surprise in meeting a white man who immediately includes her in a backstage conversation:

My friend Gary needed a ride to his friend Tony's apartment, so I went with him. When we walked in, one of his roommates, named Fred, started talking to Gary. Fred was holding some sort of crowd control device, like a metal baton because he works in a club as a bouncer and just felt like carrying it around. The sight of it prompted Gary to ask him about working in the club. He asked if he ever had to stay after and clean up, to which Fred replied "I don't do the nig jobs." As a person who was meeting him for the first time, I felt a little awkward that he would just say something like that. But I guess since I was another white person, he figured I wouldn't care. The strangest part of it to me was that he said it very casually, like he talks like that all the time. First impressions are important to me, and its not that I expect people to always be politically correct, but hearing such a blatant derogatory remark made me a little uncomfortable. (Sheila, WF, 19, Southeast)

Sheila notes that she was surprised the white man would make a racially derogatory remark in front of her. Fred could have simply said "no" when asked if he ever has to clean up at the club, but instead he invokes a racist statement comparing cleaning up to a "nig jobs" presumably referencing "nigger jobs." Sheila notes that being white was interpreted by Fred as she "wouldn't care" that he made the comment. Her white skin allowed her passport into the backstage conversation, where it was assumed she would

agree with his statement or at the very least that she would not challenge his assertion. There are at least three people present in this conversation, Gary, Sheila, and Fred (and perhaps even Tony). Within this whites-only social network, no one questioned Fred's language, presumably as the white participants knew what "nig jobs" meant, and no one challenged Fred's racial claim.

For many whites in the backstage, even among acquaintances and strangers, using racial slurs and terminology is customary. Sheila comments at the end of the account that she does not expect "politically correct" language, perhaps acknowledging that the comment itself is not problematic, but the context which it was said, in their first meeting, was the real issue.

Other whites commented in their journals about whites who assume making racial comments would be accepted in the backstage. In this account, a white waiter approaches a group of white women with beer and racial jokes:

I was sitting at [the bar] with 3 other Caucasian females in their early twenties on a Saturday night. We were drinking beer and having normal conversation, and since the night was slow, the waiter sat down to join us for a cigarette. He was a white male in his late twenties. He wore a work uniform and had an eyebrow ring. After normal introductory conversation he leaned in after noticing one of the black girls walking across the street. He began in a lower voice than he was using previously, "I'm not racist or nothing..." Me and my friend glared at each other uncomfortable while my other more drunken friend leans in to hear what he has to say, "but I know some damn good jokes about black people." My drunken friend laughs and eggs him on to share the jokes. He continues to tell the joke, which has a punch line involving black people and watermelons. It was not particularly funny, and made a stereotype of all black people liking watermelon. I honestly didn't get the joke and asked him light heartedly to stop before he told another one. The mood of the group became uncomfortable. I believe that I didn't allow myself to take a harder tone because he was giving us free beer. He shied away from the conversation and refilled our beers, returning to talk to us about other topics. (Jillian, WF, 20, Southeast)

The white bartender recognizes that it is inappropriate to tell jokes as he provides a disclaimer of "I'm not racist, but..." With the disclaimer, it gives the man permission to

tell racist jokes with a clear conscious, as he has clarified that he is not a racist. The joke, about Black people and watermelons, was not invented by the bartender, but he learned it most likely from other whites. Even in this account, two women report being uncomfortable, but it only takes one (drunk) woman to encourage the man's racist joking. Alcohol is commonly used to excuse a person from any accountability, but alcohol cannot create a racist sentiment or an atmosphere that condones racist interactions if it is not already preexisting.

Here, there are advantages to going along with the racial fun: racist jokes provide an environment of bonding, unity, and in this example, free beer. This interaction also illustrates the difficulty in going against other whites and calling out a person for being racist. In the white backstage, the expectation is that racial humor and comments will not be confronted or challenged. Whites often report how difficult it is to confront white friends, family members or strangers; this illustrates the concrete expectation not to disrupt the backstage as a safe space from frontstage expectations. Jillian had the support of her friend, who also "glared" uncomfortably, but even they could not confront the racist jokes that are typically dismissed as "just part of the fun."

Group Dynamics

In the backstage, there are real social networks operating, including variations of who is involved, and who is actively excluded. Often, white skin alone will grant a person passport in the safe backstage. I explore when this is problematic in Chapter 6. Many students commented that racist comments were more prevalent in group situations, than if only two whites are in the backstage. In his journal, Trevor describes a recent meeting with five white male friends, all current college students or recent graduates:

When any two of us are together, no racial comments or jokes are ever made. However, with the full group membership present, anti-Semitic jokes abound, as do racial slurs and vastly derogatory statements. Jewish people are simply known as “Hebes”, short for Hebrews. Comments were made concerning the construction of a “Hebeagogue,” a term for a Jewish place of worship. Various jokes concerning stereotypes that Jewish people hold were also swapped around the gaming table, everything from “How many Hebes fit in a VW beetle?” to “Why did the Jews wander the desert for forty years?” In each case, the punchlines were offensive, even though I’m not Jewish. The answers were “One million (in the ashtray) and four (in the seats)” and “because someone dropped a quarter,” respectively. These jokes degraded into a rendition of the song “Yellow,” which was re-done [in our group] to represent the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. It contained lines about the shadows of the people being flash burned into the walls (“and it was all yellow” as the chorus goes in the song). We also spoke of a mutual acquaintance who happens to be Jewish. The group feeling was that he insulted Jewish people far more than any of us did. ... This led to an entire diatribe on a discussion of the rather revolting personal habits of the Jewish person previously mentioned. It should also be pointed out that the most often uttered phrase in the group is “That’s just wrong.”

Trevor continues his journal entry with another example of racialized joking:

A member of the group also decided that he has the perfect idea for a Hallmark card. On the cover it would have a few kittens in a basket with ribbons and lace. On the inside it would simply say “You’re a nigger.” I found that incredibly offensive. Supposedly, when questioned about it, the idea of the card was to make it as offensive as humanly possible in order to make the maximal juxtaposition between warm- and ice- hearted. After a brief conversation about the cards which dealt with just how wrong they were, a small kitten was drawn on a piece of paper and handed to me with a simple, three-word message on the back.

If this were not enough, the group now turns to jokes about Italians and Mexicans, groups that many whites still stereotype viciously:

After that little incident, the group dynamic switched over to a more personal so less offensive topic: Italians and people of Italian descent. ... Then the jokes about the sex drive, smell, and intellect levels of stereotypical Italians began. This I found shocking, as two of our members are very proudly of Italian descent. Some jokes were repeated from a stand-up comedy special dealing specifically with the quirks of stereotypical Italians living in New York. Of course, no group is particularly safe from the group’s scathing wit, and the people of Mexico were next to bear the brunt of the jokes. A comment was made about Mexicans driving low-riding cars so they can drive and pick lettuce at the same time. Comments were made about the influx of illegal aliens from Mexico and how fast they produce offspring. (Trevor, WM, 22, Midwest)

Trevor notes the social character to the racist joking. There is a clear group dynamic as he acknowledges that comments are more likely to surface when all 5 of the white men are together, as opposed to when only 2 are present. Trevor indicates that the most uttered phrase is “that’s just wrong,” which may possibly be said sarcastically or jokingly. At least some among the 5 men sometimes realize that the extent of their racial humor is inappropriate. While some in the group acknowledge their transgressions, they continue the racial comments, transitioning (apparently seamlessly) from Jews, to Blacks, to Italians and Latinos. Utilizing a cost-benefit analysis, the benefits of this typical racial joking must outweigh any potential costs, otherwise the group joking would rationally cease (assuming these interactions can be analyzed “rationally”). The benefits such as group bonding, laughing, and having a good time, must supercede any costs such as knowing what they are saying is “wrong.” When a group member interrupted the fun to question the offensive “Hallmark card” idea, the group did not stop the racial comments, but continued the racial fun, and moved to the next target.

Trevor notes that no group is safe from their “scathing wit” as they even poke fun at Italians, with whom two group members identify. Scholars like Brodtkin (1998) suggest that ethnic whites often poke fun at themselves as a means to assimilate fully into “white America” and to access the rewards and benefits of whiteness. Although Trevor comments that no one group is safe from their joking, there were apparently no comments made against mainstream Anglo-Saxon-Protestant whites.

Each individual is not inventing the stereotypes that they rely upon for their humor. Trevor notes where the jokes are learned from, such as: from other friends outside of this group, from television and stand up comedy routines, and from each other. Trevor’s

journal account is striking, not only as it highlights the social dynamic to racial comments, but it is a multi-dimensional account. These men are intelligent, college educated and some college graduates, who among other things are using their knowledge about World War II to create offensive song lyrics from a contemporary song. They are not simply telling jokes to pass the time, but they are using their talents to describe rich details, and to flesh out their racial performances. In their version of a Hallmark card, they describe the details of the ribbons and lace on a basket filled with kittens. The men are collectively using a lot of creativity, time, energy and effort to define and illustrate their racial comments.

Other students commented in their journals about moments when racial comments in the backstage were more likely to surface. Molly describes a conversation she had with her white boyfriend:

We were talking about the usual stuff when he started telling me about the guys he works with. Andy works for a construction company, where most of the men are in there thirties or forties. They all are southern boys, or what other people would call “rednecks” or “hicks.” He told me about some of the jokes they like to tell, which insult women and black people. I asked him if he laughed and he said “of course I did, they were funny jokes.” I thought this was bizarre because my boyfriend isn’t racist in the least, although he is also of southern upbringing; yet he can laugh at jokes with racial or sexist content. When I asked him if he thought it was ok to make fun of black people or belittle women, he smartly answered no in fear of me ripping into him. What was most interesting to me is that I know he would never listen to or tell jokes like that unless he was in front of this particular group of friends. This proved to me how people can change their feelings and attitudes depending on what group they are hanging out with. (Molly, WF, 18, Southeast)

Like Trevor, Molly notes the social character to racial joking. Although she suggests her boyfriend is not racist, within certain group dynamics, Andy would listen or tell jokes. She describes the construction company where he works as having “southern boys” or “rednecks” (actually, the latter is a derogatory and stereotypical term for working class whites) insinuating that they are the type of white men to tell misogynist and racist jokes.

Molly suggests that Andy's southern upbringing explains why he can find humor in racist or sexist jokes. Thus, there is a tendency in all these accounts for whites to excuse or rationalize the racist actions. Comments that are humorous are not simply random statements, but humor is socially derived based on a common vocabulary and ideology (which explains why translating a joke across cultures is often impossible). Although Andy claims that the jokes are just funny, the jokes were framed within a common understanding that insulting women and Black people are appropriate targets. Molly notes that Andy is savvy enough to recognize that his backstage antics with his coworkers is a different context than with his white girlfriend.

Within certain contexts and group dynamics, there is often an understood agreement among whites as to what is appropriate in a safe backstage. However, this is not always the case. On occasion, some whites will bring frontstage expectations into the back. In the next section, I describe whites who confront each other in the backstage, particularly as it relates to the role of gender.

Confrontation. As described in Chapter 3, the frontstage expectation is usually that whites will not make racist comments. Many white students described moments when this frontstage expectation crept into the backstage. The white student journal writers sometimes reported holding their friends accountable for comments made in a safe backstage. However, it was much more common for whites to report "going along" with the racist "fun" in the backstage, even though they knew it was wrong. Some students reported feeling guilty, but not knowing how to confront their friends, or they feared what the consequences would be. For example, Tonya describes a weekend with 13 white friends who were all white:

For the rest of the weekend, two or three people kept using the word nigger whenever we would mention a black person. I know they wouldn't dare say it in public, but I thought saying it in the apartment was just as bad. Whenever someone said it, I tried to ignore it, but then I decided to say something. I casually told them, "Geeze, guys, do ya have to use that word?" At the time I didn't want to put a damper on the situation. I later realized I should've been firmer when I said it because they'll probably keep saying it in the future. (Tonya, WF, 19, Midwest)

Tonya notes that she tried to ignore the racist epithet so casually used, as she did not want to interrupt the fun. Reflecting back on the interaction, she realized she should have pressed the men further to stop using the racist terms. Many students made comments that they wished they had confronted the racism in the backstage. Rarely did students confront a racial comment that they wish they had not, and I discuss this in Chapter 6.

Other students make excuses for their friends' racial joking:

After a long night out of drinking at the bars, three of my friends (a white girl and two white boys) and I went back to my house to drink a little more before we ended the night. My one friend, Dylan started telling jokes. Most of them were dumb and in good fun, but he told this one joke that was racially oriented. Dylan said: "What's the most confusing day of the year in Harlem?" "Father's Day... Whose your Daddy?" Dylan also referred to black people as "Porch Monkeys." Everyone laughed a little, but it was obvious that we all felt a little less comfortable when he was telling jokes like that. My friend Dylan is not a racist person. He has more black friends than I do, that's why I was surprised he so freely said something like that. Dylan would never have said something like that around anyone who was a minority. I realized something the next day when I was thinking back on this night. It is this sort of "joking" that helps to keep racism alive today. People know the places they have to be politically correct and most people will be. However, until this sort of "behind-the-scenes" racism comes to an end, people will always harbor those stereotypical views that are so prevalent in our country. This kind of joking really does bother me, but I don't know what to do about it. I know that I should probably stand up and say I feel uncomfortable when my friends tell jokes like that, but I know my friends would just get annoyed with me and say that they obviously don't mean anything by it. (Hannah, WF, 20, Midwest)

Hannah describes the clear differences between the frontstage and backstage interactions. In the backstage, her white friend Dylan tells racist jokes that he would never say in front of his many Black friends. (We can seriously question how close his friendships really are, as he refers to Blacks as "Porch Monkeys.") Hannah justifies that Dylan is not a

racist person, but he just tells racist jokes. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, many whites conceptualize racist comments as an appendage to an otherwise nonracist core.

Interestingly, as I do in this dissertation, Hannah uses language like “behind-the-scenes” racism to indicate the private backstage interactions. She is one of the few white students in the sample to acknowledge that the everyday nature of the backstage interactions “helps to keep racism alive.” Her cognitive awareness of the nature of the backstage is very different from her emotional justifications that her friends “don’t mean anything by it.” In other words, even though Hannah recognizes that her friend is very wrong in making racist comments, she also dismisses any thoughts of confronting him for fear that he would be annoyed at her. She knows that she should confront her friend, but the group dynamics make it difficult to challenge.

As a way to deal with the group dynamic, other whites reported subtle or passive techniques to interrupt the racial interactions in the backstage. For example, Andrea describes an interaction at a party and how she stops a racist game:

We all sat down to have a couple beers and play some drinking games. In the particular one we played, there is a part where someone will pick a certain card and when they do, that means they select a category for the group to describe, for example types of cars, cereals, etc. My girlfriend Holly chose a “category card” and for her category she laughed and said, “slang words for black people.” I was completely disgusted, and the worst part is that everyone else (a small group of white kids) just laughed and went along with it. Well, it wasn’t funny, and when it came my turn I said I didn’t have one, and that’s when the category ends. It is just so frustrating because I know my friends mean well, and we all have African-American friends, but they still think it’s okay to say such things; I thought she really crossed a line. (Andrea, WF, 19, Midwest)

By not perpetuating the racist fun, Andrea is able to stop the racist category, but not stop the card game which is allowed to continue. While Andrea is glad the category is over, she is also frustrated that her friend Holly would come up with this category, and the other whites would support it. She believes her friends “mean well” as they all

supposedly have Black friends. Researchers have questioned the many whites who claim to have many Black friends, but in practice can only identify white friends (Bonilla Silva 2001). For many whites, having one or two Black “friends” or acquaintances may allow them to tell racist jokes with a clear conscience: they cannot be racist if they have Black friends.

By not passively participating in the racist rituals, it sends a message that this type of racial fun will not be tolerated. Travis’s friend challenges the group by leaving an environment where racism is the focus of the fun:

All the people at the house were Caucasian males. It was real late, probably 2 in the morning and it was obvious that all my friends had been drinking alcohol for a while. As we sat there, my friends started telling racist joke after racist joke and pretty much cracking jokes on every ethnic group that has ever had a joke made up about them. They laughed and laughed and told joke after joke. My other roommate returned home, he is also a Caucasian male and he came into the back. As he sat around and listened to the jokes being told, he stood up and said, “These are really dumb jokes,” and then he left the room. After he left my friends paused from telling the jokes for a second and then they proceeded to tell more. It was surprising to see my one roommate kind of stand up to the kids telling the racist jokes. He never has expressed that he has a problem with racist jokes or has ever really stood up and told people that racist ideas are wrong. It was sort of amusing to see the dumb look on my friends face after my roommate told them their jokes were stupid... Another thing I noticed was that my friends, who were telling the jokes, weren’t offended or even mad that my roommate voiced his dislike for the jokes. Hopefully it will make them think next time though. Even though they didn’t stop telling the jokes right after he left, it quickly ended and it definitely didn’t have the same effect on the three of them as the jokes had had before.
(Travis, WM, 19, Midwest)

On some level, the white men who are telling the jokes most likely realize that their joking is not appropriate, which may account for the “dumb look” on his friends faces when they are caught. Travis also comments that the white men were not offended or bothered by the racial protest. Even though Travis does not specify it, the gender of the male challenger may account for why the other men were not upset. As will be discussed

in the next section of this chapter, white women who resist racial comments are often called to defend their interruptions, especially when they challenge white men.

Both white women and white men discussed the need for social support to challenge the group dynamics that are focused on racial fun. In this backstage interaction, Don reveals that he needs support to confront his white friends:

While playing a game of euchre (a card game that is very popular here in the Midwest) on a Saturday night a hand had been dealt. ...One of the players (a white college aged male) rolled his eyes and grumbled in frustrated disbelief. He stared at the table and commented in a voice clearly loud enough for anyone of the other players or observers to hear, "My hand is blacker than east St. Louis," meaning his cards were all black and he needed red cards to take any tricks. One of the other players (also a white college aged male) laughed loudly and commented back "Blacker than Harlem?" to which the first player responded "Oh yeah!" There were no objections to the comments even though they were clearly racist. Those who disapproved simply kept quiet and continued to play the game. The two continued their banter by beginning to impersonate what they thought of as stereotypical African Americans from those regions with their voices. They said things like "Lordy, Lordy, my hand is black" and "I'm gonna pop a cap in someone's ass fo' dis hand." At this point another player (a white college aged female) groaned in a disapproving way. It was only after this grumble that I felt like any verbal objections I made would be supported, and only then did I speak up and say "C'mon guys, don't be like that." As soon as I said this both of the players who made the comments defended themselves by saying "What's wrong? It's not like we're racist or anything. We're just having fun and making jokes." I replied in a short voice that "You may not be racist, but your jokes are and that doesn't help anyone." After that I lead the first card signaling that I wanted to play cards on my Saturday night rather than deal with these kids and their comments. (Don, WM, 20, Midwest)

Even though Don was disturbed by his friends' racist stereotypes, it was only when another person in the backstage voiced their disapproval before Don confronted the men.

As expected, the white instigators defended their comments with the typical response:

they are not racist, it is not hurting anyone, and they are just having fun. As noted throughout this chapter, many whites who make racist stereotypes and comments clarify that they themselves are not racist individuals.

As was true with Travis, the white men did not appear to challenge Don further.

Many white women report the harassment they receive from white men when they confront them about racial comments in the backstage. Tina describes her experiences camping, and the need for social support to confront racial comments:

During our very cold night in the woods, the conversing around the campfire somehow became a discussion of race. Among the group of twelve, all were white and college-age. Unfortunately, I cannot recall how the issue of race came up, but my ears quickly perking up when I heard one man giving his opinion of black people. He was telling the rest of the group how a black friend of his had been invited to join our camping fun that evening, but the friend declined. Evidently, this young black man then told his white friend that, "Black people don't like camping." During this part of the story, laughter surrounded the campfire. I, however, was dumbfounded. As another young, white man sitting around the campfire added his supporting argument that one of his black friends does not like to go hiking, camping, or any activity outdoors, there began to be a consensus that African-Americans do not like to be out of doors. I was appalled at this absurd stereotype and realized that I was not the only one, as one of the young women sitting near me looked at me and said, "Tina, aren't you going to say something?" Indeed! I waited for the laughter to die down and somberly added, "You can't stereotype a whole race of people because of two opinions." There was definitely an awkward silence which followed. The initiator of the conversation laughingly replied to me, "Alright, we know you're a sociology major, but we're just speaking the truth!" Clearly, I was not laughing as he was, but also did not want a confrontation. So I offered the reply that saying all blacks do not like camping is like saying all whites could not dance. With this, laughter surrounded the campfire again and another male voice from the darkness said, "We can't!" I realized they did not understand because they did not want to understand. The friend nearby who had urged me to speak up looked at me with a sympathetic glance. I felt very alone. However, I felt guilty for feeling lonely, as I realize my own whiteness still benefits me and give me the entitlement of the majority every place I go. Of course I was pleased that I had spoken up to counteract the racial stereotypes I heard, but I wondered if it had made any difference. I am sad that so many people in this world, many whom I would consider my friends, are so discriminatory and often bigoted. (Tina, WF, 20, Southeast)

Even though a Black male friend had been invited to join the camping trip, this account involves a backstage interaction as only white college students surround the campfire.

Two white men each describe a Black male friend who does not enjoy camping and other outdoor activities, and the group globalizes this to mean that all Black people do not like

camping. In this example, although white men claim to know the outdoor habits of all Blacks, it is disputed even in the backstage area.

There is a disjuncture between what many of the white students perceive to be the “truth” from their experiences compared to the “truth” from sociologists. The spatial dimension to racial relations contributes to this disjuncture. Most whites can structure their daily activities so they never have to interact with people of color (Feagin 1991). Therefore, when whites do interact with one or two people of color, it is tempting to rely on stereotypes or to overgeneralize traits to the entire race. Even amateur sociologists like Tina recognize the danger in stereotyping a group of people based on two opinions. However the group is unconvinced. Many journal accounts mirror this skepticism of academic bias, which may not always match the lived experiences of whites, which may reinforce negative stereotypes of people of color.

Stereotypes, a schema that operates to organize knowledge and beliefs, offer a cognitive shortcut in our attempts to understand other people (Fiske 1993). These schemas act as filters, straining out information that is inconsistent with prevalent themes. Like self-fulfilling prophecies, when images fit the stereotype they are reinforced, and images that negate the stereotype are rejected. Tina’s analogy of a white stereotype backfires, as the group accepts the not-so-devastating white stereotype.

The social dimension of the racial conversation is apparent with the multiple references to laughter and that Tina did not want to kill the mood before confronting the fun. Deciding when to confront the group was also a social decision. At least one other white woman was disturbed by the stereotyping, but instead of confronting the group, she probed Tina to say something. Tina carefully planned her confrontation to the group:

after being prodded and knowing she had some support, but also after the laughter died down. Again, the participants in this account follow gender patterns typical in the journal accounts with white women confronting white men's stereotypical comments.

Tina reveals contradictory emotions regarding this interaction: she feels sad and lonely for speaking out against the group. She is frustrated with her friends for not understanding. Then she feels guilty for her feelings since she still benefits from white privilege, and she is pleased with speaking out. The emotional dimension is complicated, varying, and still vastly unexplored in the sociological literature.

Although Tina confronts the stereotype in the backstage, as indicated throughout this chapter, other whites have acknowledged that they could have done more to confront racist comments in the backstage. However, there are costs associated with objecting to the backstage interactions. In this account, Katie describes being uninvited to a party for questioning a woman's claim of a "bad neighborhood":

After school, I hung out with a friend of mine and a couple of her friends that I didn't know (all White). They were smoking outside and talking about a party going on this weekend. One of the girls made a comment that it might be in a bad neighborhood. She also said that we need to be careful because the neighborhood has a lot of Black people. And I jumped in and asked if that is why she thinks it is a bad neighborhood because a lot of Black folks live there. She looked at me and asked who I was. I introduced myself and she responded by saying, "You're not invited." I couldn't believe that but I realized that she thought I was trying to offend her. The fact is that she couldn't even back up her comment by saying that, "This is the reason why I said that..." The fact of the matter is that she just said that it was a bad neighborhood because Black people live there not because she heard of a mugging or killing in that neighborhood. Right? (Katie, WF, 20, Midwest)

As noted throughout this chapter, the backstage is not only among friends and family; here a white stranger feels comfortable sharing her racial views with Katie. After Katie confronts her, the offended woman could have rethought her bias or justified her comment, instead she quickly uninvites Katie to the party.

The social dimension of white women discussing the dangers of occupying space with a lot of Black people reveals a common gender component to backstage racial conversations. Throughout the journals, there are two common ways that gender plays out in the backstage. First, white women often police the actions and conversations of white men. A second way that gender impacts backstage conversations is white women discussing the dangers of interacting with Black people, specifically Black men. In this account, white women are warning each other to be careful of the mere presence of Black people. Mentioning violence, gangs, murder, or muggings is not necessary to convey a “bad” neighborhood, as these terms are already connected to the description of a Black neighborhood. The implicit message is clear: Black people occupy a space that is not safe for whites, especially white women.

Gender. As noted throughout this chapter, disproportionately in the data, it is white men who make racial jokes or comments, and white women who confront them. There are times when white women make jokes, but much more often it is white men. In many accounts, like this one written by Dee Dee, there is a gendered component to the social interactions.

It was my 20th birthday tonight and we had a party at my house. Everyone there was white. Anyway, I don't remember how it came up, but one of my guy friends, Ron said the “n” word. Another one of my friends, Samantha, gets really mad when she hears people use that word. She says it is dirty and disgusting. When Samantha heard Ron use this word she really reamed him out. My other guy friend's thought it was real funny that Samantha was yelling at Ron so much so they started putting the “n” word into every sentence. A lot of people laughed at first, but pretty soon even the people who had originally thought it was funny started to feel uncomfortable. This stupid word game went on for about 10 minutes or so, before they finally got bored of it. There really was nothing any of us could say; because it seemed like saying anything would just egg them on. This is another example of how people my age who are white just have no concept of how hurtful that word is to another race. I'm sure if we could feel how black people feel when they hear that word, we would never say it again. I know that none of my

friends want to hurt anyone's feelings; they are just immature and ignorant sometimes. (Dee Dee, WF, 20, Midwest)

The interaction is spatially located at an all-white house party. The participants have control over who is, and is not, invited in the backstage. At some point in the party, Ron uses a harsh racist epithet, and Samantha's fierce objection to the term is the catalyst for it being used in every sentence and the humor associated with it.

This racist term has a dark and violent history and is arguably the harshest epithet used against African Americans. Dee Dee speculates that the men used the term as they are immature and ignorant, but they are ultimately good people who "don't want to hurt anyone." However, the white group seems aware of the term's dark symbolic meaning and blatantly disregards it, as there are no consequences and it serves a social benefit by showing how tight-knit the group is to allow such joking. Again, the backstage context is clear for this type of joking, no matter *why* it is used, probably would not have been done in the presence of other racial groups.

In this account, joking is used within the protected backstage boundary. Joking obviously serves many functions: it relieves stress and tension, it unites a group, it operates to "test the waters" of a topic, and it also serves to decrease accountability. Joking allows the opportunity to say things that might be inappropriate or unkind. Under the guise of "just kidding around" comments can be tossed around without consequence: comments that are just a joke are not meant to be taken seriously.

As it pertains to this section, this journal entry illustrates a gendered relationship. Typically, in interactions between white men and white women, the men serve as instigators of racist talk or action, and the women operate to police racist activities. White women also play a supportive role, but more than men they operate to channel,

slow down or stop the racist actions, as here Samantha yells at her male friend Ron. This finding resonates with the research of Peggy McIntosh (1998) and Tiffany Hogan (cited in Feagin and Vera 1995) who suggests white women can draw on experiences of gender oppression to understand racial oppression.

Dee Dee is caught in a complicated situation, as it is her birthday party, she does not want to spoil the social event. By choosing to remain passive, white bystanders send the message that comments are permissible. The backstage context often involves great social pressure not to resist her friends.

Other white women note that the real function of racist joking among white men may be to harass and mock white women:

I was over at a friend's house the other night and since she lives with boy roommates I'm used to hearing offensive talk. Sometimes when I come over they get all goofy and try to impress me especially if I bring a friend or something. Well on this night they were joking around and someone got on the subject of telling African American jokes. They all knew about 10 jokes apiece so of course each one had to take turns telling them. They could tell after about the second joke that I didn't appreciate them because I wasn't really smiling or laughing but for some reason they like to bother me so they continued telling the jokes. I know they've told the jokes many times before because my friend rolled her eyes in recognition. They weren't telling the jokes for each other's benefit, but to see how far they could go before I got upset. I tried not to give them the benefit, but I eventually left the room. The jokes ceased right afterwards. (Elaine, WF, 19, West)

Elaine notes the social network of telling jokes against Blacks: each white person knew about 10 jokes a piece, indicating how committed the group is to learning and memorizing, then performing their jokes for each other. Elaine notes that the white men shared their jokes as part of their backstage ritual (illustrated by the woman roommate's eye roll). She believes the men were telling the jokes to get a reaction from her, indicating that even in the backstage, the white men knew it was inappropriate. When the stimulus (Elaine) left, so too did the racist joking.

Other students make comments about the role of gender in the backstage. Carissa commented about her group of white friends who got on the topic of Black people:

Then they got on the subject of so-called nicknames for black people. Some mentioned were porch monkeys, jiggaboos, tree swingers, etc. The one thing I took notice of was that not one girl made a comment. Most of them just seemed to stare off and pretend to not hear anything. Is this because women are more sensitive? Or are they just afraid to express their true feelings? (Carissa, WF, 20, Southeast)

Many white students indicated a clear gender division with backstage relations. Carissa speculates that it could be women's socialization to be caring and concerned about other people's feelings that may account for women not actively contributing to a racist conversation. Similarly, it could also be women's socialization that accounts for women not always challenging men: in this account, the women in Carissa's social circle did not confront the men about the racial comments. Further research is necessary to fully understand why there are apparent gender distinctions in the backstage.

Summary

In this chapter I have examined how whites interact in the backstage. Specifically, I examined the backstage as serving two functions. First, the backstage is often a preparation stage to get ready for the frontstage interactions. Within this stage, the backstage white participants often educated other whites about correct racial terminology. Also, whites used this as an opportunity to warn or caution other whites about future interactions.

A second, and more common use of the backstage was as a safe space to relax frontstage expectations. In the safe space, racist events may be common and normal, even among strangers when it might seem unexpected. Within this region, I analyzed what the white participants construed as a "racist person" compared to a person who happens to make racist comments. I also examined the group dynamics, including when

and how whites confronted each other in the backstage, and the role of gender in the backstage.

CHAPTER 5 BACKSTAGE, NEAR THE FRONT

So far, I have described the characteristics of whites' interactions in the frontstage (Chapter 3) and in the backstage (Chapter 4). The frontstage and backstage are not discrete and isolated regions. There are many moments in the racial events when the backstage is fluid, and whites utilize mechanisms to protect the backstage boundary.

I refer to this fluidity as the “slippage” between the front and back region. Goffman (1959: 126) notes “that many regions which function at one time and in one sense as a front region and at another time and in another sense as a back region.” For example, there are moments when the context shifts, such as when an “intruder” enters into the backstage, and the regions shift. This slippage is usually unidirectional: the backstage often slips into the frontstage (or the backstage becomes the frontstage), but there are fewer instances in the data when the frontstage becomes the backstage.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss this context shift, and the implications for whites' interactions. Chapter 5 discusses racial events that occur in the backstage, but are physically located near the front (or near people of color). The students discuss a variety of mechanisms to maintain the backstage boundary. This chapter highlights three types of border protections: nonverbal mechanisms, verbal mechanisms, and mechanisms that are no different than those used in a “safe” backstage.

Nonverbal Mechanisms

In accounts that take place in the backstage, but are located physically near the frontstage, three nonverbal mechanisms maintain the backstage boundary: body

language, waiting for the intruder to leave, and avoidance. Many of these mechanisms are similar to those discussed in the frontstage and the backstage. This repetition is not problematic, but rather further illustrating the overlap between the two regions.

Body Language

The white college students in the sample often use a nonverbal, but still clear body language signal to indicate that the backstage conversation was not secure. In the following account, a group of white friends are in the university cafeteria talking about a movie:

I did not think that I was going to have to do a journal entry today, but then I went to this class. [She discusses watching the film “The Color of Fear” in class.] I left that class thinking a lot about what I had seen and about what the men had said. I ran into my twin sister on the way back to our room and told her about this class and the video. We talked about it in the car on our way to the grocery store, where I did almost all the talking. She listened and then told me I need to speak up in class if I have an opinion. ... After a few hours I met a group of my girlfriends, all of whom are white, upper-middle class, female college students. We went to go get dinner in our dining hall. The conversation was typical and we carried on as we usually do. The cafeteria was about half-full and was comprised of almost all white people. Toward the end of dinner, I decided to bring up the movie and wanted to hear their opinion as well as share my views. I began to describe the video by telling them the composition of the men talking. I was explaining it when I said “...and there were two black men in the circle.” One of my friends quickly quieted me and gave me the eye roll to look to my left. I looked over and a black girl was sitting two seats down from me. I then looked back at my friends and one of them said, “Be Careful” referring to what I was going to say next. They were afraid she might hear our conversation. I then decided to end the story and not go on. I went back to my room after dinner thinking about the importance of what just happened. Why couldn’t I say “two black men” in front of a black woman without someone being uncomfortable? Why couldn’t I share the black man’s views from the movie in front of her? Did it make my white friends and I uncomfortable or would it have made the black girl sitting next to me uncomfortable? Honestly, I think both. We, as white students, did not want to make her feel uncomfortable or look racist or “un-P.C.” in someway. Guessing here, I think that she would want to speak her opinion if she over-heard our conversation but would feel outnumbered or she could become offended. I don’t exactly know how to deal with this situation but it definitely made me think and question how we deal with racial issues, which is in privacy. (Julie, WF, 19, Midwest)

This account clearly illustrates the difference in conversation styles between the backstage with her sister in the car, and a conversation with her white friends in a more public cafeteria. We could conceptualize the interaction in the cafeteria as a backstage conversation located physically near the frontstage. Although Julie notes that the cafeteria is almost all white, the presence of just a few people of color makes it an insecure safe backstage. Julie's friends protect the backstage region, by silencing the conversation about racial matters. This is done both nonverbally in body language with giving the eye roll, and with a clear verbal message to "be careful." The verbal message could refer to an intruder who might accidentally slip into the backstage.

Julie questions why her friends are uncomfortable talking about racial issues while physically near a Black woman. The white friends appear to be utilizing the "discourse of essential sameness," or colorblindness, where the goal is to maintain a stance of not noticing color (Carr 1997; Frankenberg 1993). Under colorblindness, focusing on race is equated with white supremacy. In other words, to notice or talk about race is racist.

The white friends were clearly uncomfortable, and they assume that the Black woman would be uncomfortable as well. Julie predicts that the Black woman would be offended at whatever comment the white women make. In Chapter 3, I discussed that a common technique for whites interacting in the frontstage is to avoid any comment about racial matters, as many whites perceive that they cannot say or do anything right in the frontstage with people of color. Here, too, Julie assumes that the white women will say something "racist or 'un P.C.' [politically correct]" and that the Black woman would confront them. Julie and her white friends expect the Black woman to disagree with their conversation about race (meaning, she could not possibly agree with their conversation

about racial matters), and the best course of action is to discuss racial issues in the private backstage.

The body language, like giving an eye roll, was not always paired with a clear verbal message. Many times the nonverbal message was implicitly understood between whites. In this next account, Shannon comments about a backstage conversation with her white friends that was located near the frontstage:

I was standing in line at a fast food restaurant on Friday at about 1p.m. with two of my female friends (both white and 20). There was a black family in front of us in the line. One of my friends was trying to explain a contestant on a reality show she had seen the night before by saying, "That black girl..." My other friend's eyes widened and she motioned to the family in front of us, as if to say my friend should not be referring to someone by saying they're black, if people of that same race are in ear shot. I didn't think it was an offensive comment, as she was just trying to describe a person more effectively. I also doubt that my friend would have had the same reaction had my friend referred to someone by saying, "That white girl..." (Shannon, WF, 20, Southeast)

Although no verbal comments were made, the white friends clearly understood that the body language of eyes widening and motioning to a Black family meant it was not safe or appropriate to mention a person's racial characteristics. In this situation, it seems that race was mentioned only as a descriptor for a television contestant, although we do not know for sure since the conversation was abruptly stopped. Unlike describing someone by their height, age, or gender, using race as a descriptor was often viewed as problematic for many of the whites in this sample.

The symbolic meaning behind race is unparalleled to other demographics. For example, discussing gender in front of women or men is often taken for granted normality. However, for many whites, even mentioning race in front of people of color is uncomfortable as it violates the norm of colorblindness. Even in my own experiences, it is not uncommon for someone to be talking in a normal voice, yet then say

“He was <black>” in a whisper. For many whites, being colorblind and mute is the best way to deal with racial matters.

Shannon notes the asymmetry related to mentioning race, as it would be acceptable to say the “white girl” but not the “black girl.” As whites are the dominant group (economically, politically, culturally, and statistically), whiteness is rarely defined or examined (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Haney Lopez 1996). Whites enjoy the privilege of racial transparency, or not having a color (McIntosh 1998). Therefore, it is assumed that a contestant on television would be white unless noted otherwise (except in certain contexts like a “white basketball star”). In this way, whiteness remains invisible as it perpetuates privilege, normalcy, and power.

Waiting For the Intruder to Leave

After body language, a second nonverbal mechanism to protect the backstage is actively waiting for the “intruder” in the frontstage to leave the backstage area. For example:

Tonight I went by work to check the schedule and I noticed one of my friends was working. He is a white college student around the age of twenty-three who comes from an upper-middle class family. It was late and there were not many people there... I discussed with him my choices concerning classes I could take for the next few semesters and also the universities that offered my major. I mentioned that I have been considering changing my major since there are only two schools that offer my program. Then I retracted my statement and mentioned there was a third but I didn't want that to be one of my options. I mentioned it was a school known for being predominantly black. He looked around and waited for one of the black cleaning ladies to pass then in a quiet, laughing, whisper asked, “What, you don't want to go to [the predominately black school]?” Afterwards, he went on to saying how I would come back talking and acting differently. Then he started acting out exaggerated body movements and using slang words with an accent. (Dawn, WF, 21, Southeast)

A white man waits for a Black cleaning woman to pass by before making a racial comment. The mechanisms he used to protect the backstage include waiting for the

“intruder” to leave, and talking in a quiet, whispering voice. When it was a safe location, the friend exaggerated his body movements, mocking Black persons. For Dawn, the predominantly “Black” school was not even regarded as an option to consider. Other white students in the sample wrote about measures they would take to ensure they were not in a situation where whites were in the minority (such as dropping a class or leaving a party).

Similar to Dawn, Betty notes that a white male friend waits for a Black student to leave the area before making a racial comment:

Tonight I went to the library on campus to study with a friend. We were sitting outside taking a break and it was really late and quiet. Another student was talking loudly while walking in the library and my friend and I looked at each other waiting for one of us to make a comment. Knowing my friend usually makes remarks about black people being loud I was waiting for him to make a comment about the black guy that just passed us. He mentioned that black people are always loud and when I asked why he thought that he said it was because they had big lips. He waited until the guy was inside the library and no other students were around before mentioning this to me. (Betty, WF, 23, Southeast)

This comment illustrates the measures that some white students take in having a backstage conversation located physically near a person of color. In this conversation, Betty describes two unspoken understandings between herself and her white friend. First, there is an understanding that a racial comment would be made, as she notes that her white friend usually makes remarks about Black people being loud. Second, it is understood that the comment would be made *after* the Black student left and the backstage was secure again, as she noted that she “waiting for” the comment.

The white man invokes an old, yet still contemporary, stereotype of Blacks having large lips (Pieterse 1992) which Betty’s friend claims accounts for their loudness. The white students actively wait for it to be a safe space before making the racial comment. Some scholars argue that the blatant racism (or “in your face”) racism is “preferable if

one must suffer it” compared to this backstage or covert form of racism that is purposively hidden from the target audience (Yamato 1987: 21). Some scholars argue that the covert or hidden form of racism is harder to confront and remedy (Benokraitis and Feagin 1995).

Avoidance

In the previous section whites waited for people of color to leave the area before continuing the backstage conversation. In this section, it is the whites who leave. When physically near the front, a third nonverbal way that whites maintain the backstage area is to avoid or leave the front region. This avoidance is very similar to the discussion in the frontstage chapter (Chapter 3). This commonality illustrates the similar mechanism that whites use when interacting with (or avoiding) people of color in the front and backstage.

In this account, Becky talks to her white friend on the phone who confesses that she will not go into her own living room for fear of interacting with her Black roommates:

My friend Linda was paired up with three random roommates this year. It is a four bedroom apartment and it is Linda (white) and her three black roommates. We never hang out there because Linda never really comes out of her room. Today I was talking to her on the phone and asked her to turn the TV on (in the living room) to a certain channel. Her response was “No, I can’t. My roommates are out there and I’m scared.” She feels really uncomfortable around them and hasn’t even made an effort to get to know them just because she feels like the minority. I understand that she feels uncomfortable but that is how black people probably feel most of the time since they are the minority. (Becky, WF, 19, Southeast)

This interaction takes place via a private phone conversation in the backstage. College students are in a unique situation where it is entirely possible to be paired to live with someone they do not know or do not regularly interact with. It is not uncommon for many college students to dislike their roommates. However, Linda reveals not that she dislikes her roommates, but that she *fears* them due to their racial characteristics. The white students in the sample revealed very powerful emotions when interacting with

people of color. The emotions varied by situation, but the more common emotions expressed included fear, anger, awkwardness, and guilt.

It is entirely conceivable that this is first time Linda has been a racial minority. As a minority in her own home, she retreats to her bedroom and “never really comes out.” Becky understands and validates Linda’s uncomfortable feelings, but insightfully equates it to how the Black roommates must feel on a daily basis. The interaction (or lack thereof) between Linda and her roommates illustrates an alienating racist relationship: what could be an engaging and egalitarian relationship is distorted into an alienated relationship (Feagin 2000).

In this next account, two white women avoid interacting with a Black man who knocks on their door:

Today is the last day of my documentation and something interesting happened. It’s Saturday, one of the few days for me to rest. I had just woken up and it was almost the afternoon. My roommate and I were cleaning the house a little bit. We live in a decent neighborhood but not the best. Some people refer to it as the ghetto, but it is not that bad. Anyway, someone knocked on our door, which is unusual. My roommate went and looked through the peephole. She noticed it was a black person and she was sketchy about the situation and why he was knocking. She came back to me and we decided not to answer the door. The person could have been harmless and very nice. We decided not to find out just because it was a black guy, we were protecting ourselves. It’s crazy that we discriminated like that. I wonder if it would have been different if the guy had been white. (Marge, WF, 21, Southeast)

Marge invokes race by noting that she lives in the “ghetto” typically a place of lower-income people and racial minorities (Myers 2003). She defines a Black man at their door as a “sketchy” situation, and rather than find out why he is there, the white women protected their safe backstage area by avoiding the Black man. Marge acknowledges that avoiding the man is “crazy” but also a form of “protecting” themselves. Like other white women in this sample, Marge questions if it is the race or the gender of the Black man

that they feared. Such a question elicits colorblindness where whites rely on the semantic move of “it’s not race, it could be gender” in order to safely rationalize their avoidance of a Black man.

For some white students, it is more than avoiding people of color in the frontstage, but actively leaving a frontstage location to protect the backstage:

This past weekend I attended the [university] football game. It was a very crowded game, and by the time I arrived there were few seats left to sit in. My friends and I walked around looking for somewhere to sit where we could all fit. We wanted to stay in the student section because it is fun being around other students. We saw two rows behind each other where we could split up and sit all together. As we started walking towards the seats there was another group of like 4 girls in front of us. They were heading in the same direction we were, and we thought they were going to take the seats before we did. When we got near the rows, one of the girls said “keep walking” to her friend. The girl turned around and asked her why, and she pointed to the rows in front of the row where they were going to sit, and made a face. When I saw this I looked to where she was looking and noticed that there was a large group of black students sitting together, probably like 20 of them. I was leading my group of friends so when the other girls passed the seats up, I sat down in the row. I told my friend who was sitting next to me what the girl had said. I couldn’t believe that she wouldn’t sit there because there were blacks sitting in front of her. There are thousands of people at football games, people of all different races. I must admit that the black population at [our] University is small, but there are still many black students. I had as much fun at the game that day as I would have sitting somewhere else. They were very into the game and were cheering and having fun, just as my friends were doing. It would be one thing if the whole section was primarily black, and the girl felt uncomfortable. But there were rows behind it and next to it that had all sorts of different people of races and ethnicities. My friends and I had a great time at the game, and we would have no matter who we were sitting next to. (Ruth, WF, 19, Midwest)

In the first group of white women who pass up the seats, there is evidence of the mechanisms to protect the backstage while being near the front. The white women use nonverbal cues, by pointing to Black people and making a face, and the verbal cues to “keep walking.” At the end of her account, Ruth notes that the white women would be legitimized to feel uncomfortable “if the whole section was primarily black” and the whites would be in the minority. Yet since there were “all sorts of races and ethnicities”

and perhaps still a white majority (highly likely, given the demographics other students have provided about this specific “white” university in the Midwest) Ruth claims that the first group of white women’s discomfort were unfounded.

In the first group of white women, no one stopped the leader to confront her or call out her racial actions. The other white women, acting as acolytes, simply followed the officiant in performing the racial rite (Feagin and Vera 1995). If Ruth, who was not a member of the first group, observed and understood the implications of “keep walking,” we can speculate that others not involved in the group, including persons of color, also understood the racial meanings.

Gender certainly impacts racial relations in the backstage and frontstage. As evident in the last two accounts, white women often report fearing and avoiding Black men. This fear and avoidance is often taught to them by other whites. In this next account, a white woman gets in trouble for having a Black man visit her at the house:

I went home for the weekend and decided to visit one of my friends who was also home. Her name is Michelle, and she is an 18 year old white female. Well as I was going over to her house my cell phone rang and it was one of my best guy friends Troy. Troy just happens to be black. He asked what I was doing and if maybe he could come with me because he knows Michelle also. I said that it would be fine not knowing what was in store for me and Troy. When I finally arrived at Michelle’s house it was around 6:30 at night, her family was eating dinner. Troy was actually the first one to apologize for interrupting their dinner, and then I did. So Michelle, Troy, and I went outside and were just talking thinking about what we were going to do that night. Well not even 2 minutes into our conversation her mom came out and asked to talk to her inside. Troy and I didn’t think anything of it, but then we heard screaming. I wondered what the heck was going on. Michelle then came out and said it was probably best if we left and to call her later. I asked what was going on but she didn’t want to talk about it right then. I called her later that night at around ten, and she then told me the sudden urgency of us leaving. Michelle said that her father didn’t like black people in his house or hanging out with his daughter. Then thinking back on it I remember her father not even uttering two words to me or Troy. Michelle asked me not to tell Troy about any of this because she was embarrassed about what was said and the way her father was. Of course I agreed and it was never discussed again. I really

do not understand how anyone can be that way. I guess I am lucky my parents raised me differently. (Kerri, WF, 18, Southeast)

Linguistically, it is common for whites to report that a white person “is white” but a Black person “*happens* to be black.” For purposes of this chapter, the focus of this account is that it reveals a conversation in the backstage that is physically near the frontstage. In this interaction, there are multiple backstage and frontstage regions. The interaction with Michelle, Troy and Kerri can be conceptualized as frontstage. The backstage can be seen as the conversation between Michelle and her parents, as well as the interaction between Michelle and Kerri on the phone later that evening.

For Michelle’s parents, they create a backstage interaction by “actively removing their white daughter from the frontstage. Michelle’s parents force her into the backstage of her home, and when Michelle returns to her friends, she responds to Kerri in a vague manner that she “didn’t want to talk about it then.” Kerri finds out later in the safe backstage phone conversation that Michelle’s parents, especially her father, would not tolerate an interracial friendship. Throughout this exchange, Troy is purposively kept out of the loop. The white parents purposively sever the friendly relationship between their daughter and a Black man, yet Troy is never informed about the meaning behind the backstage yelling.

Verbal Mechanisms

As evident in the last few account, whites often use verbal mechanisms to protect the backstage, when they are physically near the front. At the football game, Ruth noted that the white women indicated to “keep walking” to avoid the Black men. In the last account, Michelle tells Kerri in a vague language that she “didn’t want to talk about it right then” when they were physically near their Black friend Troy.

There are three other verbal mechanisms that whites use to protect the backstage boundary when near the front: whispering, using vague language, and using code language. Each of these three illustrate an attempt to secure the backstage, while trying (often unsuccessfully) not to arouse any attention to the persons of color in the frontstage.

Whispering

As a function of the colorblind ideology, whites appear to be uneasy directly speaking about race in the frontstage. There is fascinating, yet relatively undocumented, phenomenon that when race is mentioned in conversation between whites, it is whispered. Take for example a situation that happened to me while I waiting tables at a popular restaurant:

It was about 12:30am after a busy Saturday night; the restaurant was closed. Most of the servers had either gone home, or were in the back of the restaurant finishing their chores. All of the servers in this restaurant are white. The front stage portion of the restaurant was empty except the bartender who was near the front entrance of the restaurant, and I was in the back (near the restrooms) cleaning tables. A fellow server approached me, and as he waited for me to finish refilling a salt container, he told me in an animated voice that he had a great night and even got a compliment. His voice then dropped and he whispered, “and they were black!” It is intriguing that he would lower his voice considering I was the only person in the restaurant within hearing distance. (Author’s personal notes 1999)

There are a number of reasons why a person would lower her or his voice to a whisper. First, it may serve a functional purpose such as in a library or church so as not to disturb other people. Second, the voice may be lowered so only the person you are talking to will hear you, such as in the case of gossiping. Third, whispering may be used when speaking about a taboo topic such as “She died” or “He has AIDS.” When whispering, the signal conveyed is that there is discomfort in the appropriateness of the conversation: either the place or context of the conversation is uncomfortable, and/or content of the

conversation is uncomfortable. The irony in whispering is that it often creates more attention to the situation than speaking in normal volume.

This server whispered the racial comment probably not for fear of someone overhearing him, as it was a relatively secure context (the restaurant was closed, and all the restaurant personnel were white). He could have been uncomfortable speaking of race, perhaps uncomfortable with recognizing race and violating the colorblind ideology. Additionally, he may have known that he should not be addressing race since his comment reveals racist undertones as he was surprised to receive a compliment from Black customers.

Within the journals, the students often commented about the change in voice tone and volume. Here a student reveals a friend who tells a racist joke and whispers it:

Today one of my friends who is 21 years old and is a white male told me a racial joke when he saw me at school. It was about African Americans and was very negative. The punch line of the joke pretty much states that all African Americans are stupid. When he was telling me the joke we were on the University campus and it was right after classes let out at 9:50am, so there were many people walking around. When he was telling the joke to me he came up to me real close and was almost whispering it in my ear. At the same time he was looking around probably making sure no one could hear him. (Steve, WM, 19, Midwest)

Measures had to be taken to protect the backstage conversation, when it was located in the frontstage. The white student violated the cultural personal space boundary (“he came up to me real close”), particularly significant between male friends (Hall 1966).

Protecting the backstage trumped over cultural personal space boundaries. In addition to getting physically close to Steve, the white friend whispered the joke, while looking around to make sure no one heard it. With this level of protection (surveillance, whispering, getting physically close), it sends a clear message that he is aware that this type of joking is not appropriate openly in the frontstage.

The backstage region is not only a space where white friends and family interact.

In this next account, a white store manager whispers to Cathy about following a Black woman around the store:

Being in a bad, depressed mood I decided to lift my spirits and take myself shopping. ...[I went] into a popular, all-girl clothing store (targeted at the younger generation), I noticed that the store was empty. There were two workers behind the counter, both white and one seemingly older than the other. I'm guessing that she was the manager. Being the only customer, I quickly helped myself to the racks of clothing. Both of the women were extremely helpful and gave great customer service. I felt bad because I had been there for so long trying on so many different outfits. It was surprising that neither of the two women got frustrated with me. While checking out, both of the women were behind the counter helping me. While the manager was ringing me up and the other woman was folding my clothes, a black girl around my age walked into the store. She did not look like she had much money, but she was entitled to shop in the store just as much as me. Not to mention, one should "never judge a book by its cover." I saw the manager stare at her with suspicion. She leaned towards her co-worker next to her, and mumbled, "Go over there and keep a close eye on her. I have a bad feeling." I turned back to look at the girl shopping. She looked like she wasn't causing any harm. As the co worker headed over to the black girl, I just stood there amazed by what was said. The manager leaned over the counter and whispered, "You never know who you can trust anymore." I just stood there and thought about what this woman just said to me. What was the difference from me walking in the store by myself and the black girl, besides our color? I could have had all the intentions of shop lifting, and with the manager being so close minded, would have never had any suspicion because I was white. If I weren't so addicted to shopping I would have left without my clothes. I felt bad, but was there really anything I could have done to change the woman's mind. Maybe, but I seriously doubt it. (Carol, WF, 20, Southeast)

In this narrative, whispering is a tool used to secure the backstage location so that the Black woman does not overhear the conversation. Even though the two white women do not know each other, the store manager assumes that Carol's white skin is a common bond, or a "passport" into the backstage.

This account reveals the differential treatment, or racial profiling, that many whites reported observing against people of color (often Blacks). Many whites wrote in their journals about similar situations: they observed blatant racial profiling like Carol wrote about, and whites also wrote about being told to mistreat people of color by their white

employers. For example, many white students in the sample wrote about being instructed by their bosses to tell a Black person that the “job is already taken” yet to accept applications from whites. This type of differential treatment was most common in employment situations (such as retail and restaurants), as well as observing interactions with the police.

Examining who has the real power and the perceived power in this situation, reveals where Carol’s values lie. Carol assumes that the power rests with the white saleswoman who controls the clothing that Carol is reportedly “addicted to.” However, from a capitalist business perspective, the paying customer wields the true power. For Carol, securing her possessions and not causing a scene is more important to her than seeking social justice. In other words, the material possessions are more valuable to Carol than equal human relations. Carol chooses the path of least resistance, and rationalizes it in her mind that the woman probably would not have changed her views, even if she did confront her.

Reading this journal entry within the context of her other accounts reveals a different side of Carol. In this situation, Carol does not confront the white manager, even though she knows this woman is in the wrong. In her journal, the account written before this one reveals Carol fighting with her boss whom she calls racist. Carol confronts her white boss at a health care center who turns away a Black family with a very ill child. The boss refuses to work out a payment plan with the family, which is what they do for many whites. Carol could lose her job, yet she reports screaming at her boss:

My rage finally exploding, I turned and looked at her and exclaimed, “What makes you any better than them? Your children are on Medicaid, and because you might have a little more money, and you are white, that makes you have priority over them? The way I see it, a disrespectful white is worse than a poor black!” Even

though I knew I was going to be in big trouble come Thursday, I didn't care.
(Carol, WF, 20, Southeast)

Reading the journals in context, it makes little sense why Carol would jeopardize her job by yelling at her white boss, but she would not confront a store manager for blatantly profiling a Black woman. Perhaps as a college student, Carol is not economically invested in her part-time job. Further exploration is warranted into determining what causes whites to confront racism in some situations, but not in others.

Vague Language

In addition to whispering, a second verbal mechanism that whites use to protect the backstage when physically near the frontstage is using vague language. This often took the form of ambiguous comments like “you know what I mean” or the pronoun “they” to mean persons of color. Here, Vanessa uses vague language instead of using race as a descriptor while sitting next to a Black person:

Today, I was on break in between classes, [and] I decided to call my boyfriend. During our conversation, I heard loud yelling down the hall. I could tell it was a black boy yelling, the more I listened I figured out that he was screaming at a girl. He was telling her what she had done wrong and he didn't want to put up with her attitude anymore. My boyfriend could hear the yelling and asked what it was. I had to wait until their argument stopped, because I could not hear my phone conversation. After I could hear again, the first thing out of my boyfriend's mouth was, “were they white or black.” They're happened to be a black person sitting near me so I didn't want to say out loud “black.” I asked him which one he thought it was. He responded “black.” He was right, but it was almost like he knew which race it was from there actions. He assumed that black people would be more likely to behave in public like that. (Vanessa, WF, 21, Southeast)

This conversation is a backstage phone conversation that takes place physically near the frontstage. Since Vanessa is sitting next to a Black person, she does not feel comfortable mentioning race, so she relies on vague language like “Which one do you think it is?” By using ambiguous talk, she can effectively deal with this apparent contradiction: she can

safely communicate to her white boyfriend, yet hide from the Black man that she is violating the colorblind ideology.

Vanessa does not actually say that she *saw* the couple arguing; only that she heard loud yelling and “could tell it was a black boy.” Vanessa and her boyfriend are relying on racial markers other than skin color to define race. Voice, volume, and perhaps language may be all that they need to hear to assign racial definitions to the couple. Even over the phone, the boyfriend could guess the race of the couple, and its significance.

Rather than guessing the race of the couple, a more important question to ask might be, why is the race of the arguing couple important? It seems that Vanessa’s boyfriend is validating the stereotype that Blacks misbehave in public. This definition of “appropriate behavior” is almost always based a white standard upon which all others are judged (Collins 2000).

In backstage conversations that are near the frontstage, Vanessa reported using vague language to disguise her discomfort with mentioning race. Many of the white students reported hearing other whites use vague language, such as reported by Jerry:

It was about 7:00 p.m. on Saturday night. My wife and I were at Wal-Mart getting some household items. The store was very full of adults and children. The people at Wal-Mart were diverse in race, gender, and age. While we were shopping, Rena and I ran into one of her co-workers [from work]. This woman lived in a town that is just down the road from the Wal-Mart we were shopping at. She mentioned that her town is submitting a proposal to build a Wal-Mart super center and that another town closer to inner city has also submitted a proposal to build a Wal-Mart super center. She commented “Hopefully if they build that store in [the inner city] it will keep certain people away from our store, *if you know what I mean.*” Then she looked at a young black lady that had several children yelling in the aisle. My wife and I just smiled and then said goodbye to the woman. I was a little disturbed that Rena’s co-worker had made that comment because I have seen just as many white women in Wal-Mart that had children that were acting obnoxious as black women. (Jerry, WM, 28, Midwest)

Rena's white coworker relies on vague language like, "certain people," "our store," "if you know what I mean" paired with nonverbal body language to convey an implicit meaning. All of the white actors in this account understood that "certain people" meant "inner city" people of color. There was no need to explain why this woman did not want "certain people" away from "our" white, middle-class store.

Not only was there an implicit understanding in the woman's ambiguous statement, but there was also an understanding that the inappropriate comment would not be challenged. Even though Jerry was disturbed by the comment, he and his wife both smiled and walked away. The coworker was not confronted, and her racial comment was allowed to pass without consequence. Similar to Carol who did not confront the blatant mistreatment by the manager in the clothing store, whites often remain passive bystanders to inappropriate racial comments and behaviors.

Code Language

In backstage interactions that occur near the front, not only did whites use vague language, but they also used specific code language. This code assumes a common understanding of the terms, perhaps conceptualized as a created "white" language. In this next account, a white woman is educated about a racial term:

Today my husband and I went to [a University football] game. When we were leaving it was getting dark and my husband says to me "look at all of those moon crickets." I confusingly asked him what he had meant by that. When we got into the car, he explained to me that all of the black people walking around under the moon light looks like a bunch of crickets scurrying around. Then he said "what do you call a stoned Mexican?" "A baked bean." (Rebecca, WF, 26, Midwest)

Rebecca did not know the meaning of her husband's racial term, and she had to be educated about the meaning of this code language. As "moon crickets" is a strange term which does not readily convey racial connotations, her husband may feel comfortable

saying it near the open frontstage. However, in the privacy of their car, he can reveal to her the significance of the racial term. A number of white students in the sample described using animal metaphors, such as crickets, monkeys and gorillas, to describe persons of color. In explaining the meaning of the term, it triggers her husband to tell a racist joke against Latinos.

The code language is not only used among friends and relatives. The language is often structured into the workplace as well:

My roommate shared another experience with me that she had at work tonight. She explained to me that whenever suspicious looking people come into the store the manager advises her to “go stock fragrances,” which really means to go on the other side of the store to keep an eye on the suspicious looking individuals that entered their store. I am sure it is just a precautionary measure taken by the manager to make sure they don’t steal anything, but my roommate noticed that the individual’s ethnic background varied, but typically they were minority groups. (Vicki, WF, 21, West)

At this place of work, the code term “stock the fragrances” is an understood phrase to mean keep an eye on “suspicious” individuals. The term can be freely said in the frontstage, yet the meaning is conveyed safely in the backstage conversation between manager and worker. Although the term “suspicious” has no inherent racial connotations, the implicit meaning is that it refers to racial minorities and perhaps poor whites. Semantically, the whites in this account use deliberate nonracial language to convey racially motivated and meaningful interactions.

The white code language at work is not uncommon, especially in service sectors like restaurants. In this journal entry, a Black waitress is reduced to an acronym:

This has been occurring for a while, but today I heard it and decided to write about it. One of my very good friends is an African American. We work in the same restaurant, and today at work I heard our manager calling her BG. I asked her what that meant and she said Black Girl. Let’s not point out any more obviously that she is our only black employee. I truly think that my manager is racist. He didn’t like

my friend when she first started working there, possibly because she was black.
(Anna, WF, 21, Midwest)

In this account, Anna's friend is reduced to simply being referred to by acronym "BG" focused on her race and gender. Anna does not indicate if her friend is aware of her title, and whether or not this term is used in front of her. As Anna had to ask the meaning, it indicates that the code is not readily known (at least to whites) and that Anna had to be educated about the term and its reference.

The food service industry is a major employer of Black employees, compared to all other major industries (Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001). When employed in restaurants, Black workers are more likely to be found in "back of the house" positions (like cooks, kitchen staff, and custodial), rather than in positions that have regular interaction with paying customers (like servers and bartenders). According to Feagin, Vera and Batur (2001: 69), "16% of kitchen workers and 19% of cooks are black, compared with only 5 percent of waiters and waitresses and less than 3% of bartenders." As Anna's account indicates, many Blacks who are employed as wait staff, particularly in large chain restaurants, face differential treatment by managers on account of race.

Racial prejudices and discrimination are prevalent not only when Blacks are the servers, but more commonly when Blacks are in the frontstage of the restaurant as the patrons. Just as Anna's friend was referred to simply as "BG," a similar acronym is used to refer to Black patrons:

I was at work tonight and 23 year old white guy said to me that he didn't want this table. I asked why, and he said, "It's a BT." BT stands for Black Table. The he walked away before I can ask him anything else. That wasn't the first time I heard BT. (Ellie, WF, 19, West)

White restaurant servers use the code language between themselves at work, and here the code word of "BT" is already known. Ellie does not have the opportunity to question the

white server further. The code language served its purpose: it quickly conveyed that the table is undesirable simply due to the patron's race.

In the dissertation sample, there were thousands of accounts written by white students who worked in restaurants, all across the country. Literally hundreds of accounts were written about the stereotype that Black patrons were worse tippers compared to other racial groups. Because of this stereotype, many white servers admitted to not trying as hard, and giving poor service (such as not refilling beverages when asked) to Black customers. A few whites noted the self-fulfilling prophecy: whites expect a bad tip from Blacks, do not give good service, and receive a poor tip (Mok and Hansen 1999).

The nature of when stereotypes are activated as a cognitive schema also assists in the stereotype that Blacks are undesirable patrons. Schemas act as filters, straining out information that is contradictory to or inconsistent with the stereotype (Fiske 1993; Higgins and Bargh 1987). Meaning, whites tend to remember only situations that fit the stereotype (such as the Black patrons who tip poorly), and dismiss the situations that do not fit the stereotype, rather than reject the stereotype. Blacks who tipped well were viewed as rare or inconsistent with the stereotype, rather than rejecting the stereotype outright.

As a method of conveying inappropriate racial talk, some whites will invent code terms that be safely used in backstage conversations that may be overheard in the front. In my own experiences waiting tables, the term "white people" was often replaced for the more accurate term "Black people":

In this restaurant, it is very common to hear servers say "Black people can't tip" or to complain about receiving less than 15% gratuity after waiting on black patrons. Ironically, it is also common for a white server (almost always male) to enter the kitchen and yell, "I hate white people." Initially this statement may seem out of

place in an all/mostly-white establishment. However, these comments are always uttered after the server has waited on non-white patrons. By replacing the word “white” for what would be typically “black” the server saves public face, and the sarcasm is usually dismissed with a laugh. (Author’s personal notes 1999)

Most whites have learned that it is not appropriate to be blatantly racist, yet they may continue overt racist practices and beliefs under a guise of code words and euphemisms. Yelling “I hate white people” is a safe way to express an underlying racial message. The (usually male) server does not have to recognize his racist tendencies, and the comment can be dismissed as a joke.

The use of code language is a systematic method of implying racialized attitudes and practices without the overt knowledge to the victim of racism. When using these code words, whites can get their racialized message across, yet maintain their naiveté and innocence for they have not technically violated racial language. By hiding race, it allows whites to keep a clean conscious and maintain moral integrity. White servers may defend their innocence of racism, yet still reinforce the racial hierarchy.

Lynn reports that at her restaurant, the term “Canadians” is code word for Blacks:

My roommate Roxanne is a hostess at [a popular restaurant] and she told us that she has always questioned the veracity of complaints thrown at her by servers who whine about poor tipping by black customers. ... The servers at [the restaurant] have verbally attacked Roxanne for seating them with black customers. Roxanne usually yells at them for coming to her to tell her not to seat “Canadians” (a code word for black Americans at this restaurant) in their section. I have had similar experiences while working as a hostess at this restaurant. This idea of “Canadians” is quite disturbing when people in the restaurant understand that it is the equivalent of using “niggers.” (Lynn, WF, 22, Southeast)

The white servers in this popular restaurant use a safer term “Canadians” (though still problematic) to convey to the hostess that they do not want Black patrons in their section. As Lynn views it, the term Canadian is the social equivalent to the racist epithet “nigger.” Research suggests that other restaurant code words to refer to Black patrons include

terms like “Cousins” and “Moolis” (Dirks and Rice, forthcoming). Through the common vocabulary, white servers are able to safely express racial meanings with other whites who know the language, even if they are physically near the frontstage.

Other restaurant code language described by whites in the sample, include terms that refer to the presence of too many Blacks either in the restaurant or in a server’s section.

For example, Gary (WM, 19, Southeast) discusses a night he was waiting tables and eight African Americans entered the restaurant, “The server looked at me and said, ‘Boy, it’s getting pretty dark in here.’ She then proceeded to complain about getting the party because she assumed that she was going to get a bad tip.”

Besides phrases like “it’s getting pretty dark in here,” other whites reported hearing phrases like “nightfall is approaching” to refer to the arrival of persons of color. Patricia commented that the phrase “in the ghetto” was used to refer to numerous Blacks that were in her section:

Tonight there were quite a few remarks about tables coming in. I know that most non-white people are usually stereotyped as bad tippers and this isn’t always true. But there is a stereotype for a reason, because most of the time it is true. I don’t consider myself a racist at all. In fact, before I moved [here] I didn’t have very many close white friends. All of my friends were either Asian or Black. But I still find myself being prejudice towards blacks. While I did not make any remarks, I did notice my mood change when I was sat 2 all black tables in a row. A little later another black table was sat in my section and somebody made the remark that my section looked like “the ghetto.” While I don’t have any bad feelings towards black people, or think they are any less of a person or human then myself or anybody else, it is a well known fact in the restaurant business 75% of blacks are bad tippers. I don’t feel too guilty because in the past I have worked with other black servers, and even they hate waiting on black people, not because they are racist, but b/c it is like waiting on somebody for free. And worse yet, we are missing money because another table would potentially tip much better in their place. As I expected, all three black tables I had tonight tipped less then 10%. One was even a 5% tip. I did not treat them any different, and could not find a single justifiable reason for such a bad tip. (Patricia, WF, 22, Southeast)

As related to this chapter, a white server uses the code language of the section “in the ghetto” to refer to the many Black patrons in Patricia’s section. Patricia’s account is so common among the white students, it warrants further consideration. Patricia uses many semantic moves to prove she is not a racist (including saying “I don’t consider myself a racist at all”). She offers that she has many Asian and Black friends and she provides a disclaimer that she cognitively knows that the stereotype of Blacks and tipping is not always true. However, Patricia admits to being prejudiced towards Blacks, but claims that it is based on experience and economics, not race.

As we have seen in other journal accounts, Patricia specifies that she does not think that Blacks are less than human, as if this point were up for debate. She also calls out that she does not feel guilty about her feelings, as she can legitimize it by referring to Black servers who feel the same way that she does.

Patricia notes that she received a poor tip from her Black patrons. At the end she notes that she did not treat them any differently (presumably compared to her white patrons), and that she is not sure why she was tipped less. However, at the beginning of her entry, Patricia admits that she is prejudiced towards Blacks, and that her mood changed. Waiting tables is emotional work: servers are required to smile, appear gracious, and accept their servile position. In order to receive a good tip, it often entails doing more than just meeting the needs of the table. For example, a server doing their job means providing a drink refill when it is asked. Yet, doing a job well means anticipating that the patron will need a refill and replacing it well before the last sip is taken. There is this “gray area” in defining and measuring “good service” (defined by actions, as well as attitude), compounded by racial expectations. Given this, it is often

difficult to convince a white server that doing a “good job” with a white table does not compare to doing a “good enough job” with a Black table.

Patricia rationalizes the stereotype of Blacks tipping poorly by claiming “it is a well known fact that 75% of Blacks tip poorly.” Many white servers in the study used statistics as facts to illustrate that Blacks are poor tippers. For example, Fred (WM, 24, Southeast) claimed, “There are black people who tip the 15% that they should and some even 20%, but on average 90% tip poorly.” Few whites in the sample referred to the widespread mistreatment of Blacks in restaurants by whites, even though there is extensive literature documenting the mistreatment (Feagin and Sikes 1994)

This section has discussed in detail the code language that whites use with family members and coworkers to convey racial meanings. Numerous examples were provided in the restaurant, where there is a clear frontstage and backstage. By using terms like “Canadians,” “BT,” “BG,” “in the ghetto,” and “getting dark” whites are able to more comfortably hold a backstage conversations, even if it may be overheard by persons of color in the frontstage.

No Change in Backstage Conversation

Thus far I have described two processes that whites use when having backstage conversations that are near the front: verbal and nonverbal. A third way that whites deal with protecting the backstage is to not change the conversation style at all. This is the least frequently reported type of interaction with students in the backstage near a person of color. These conversations tend to be uncomfortable for some whites, and may lead to consequences.

In the backstage among whites, it is safe to refer to a store owned and operated by Middle Eastern persons as “Habhibs,” a racist term. Typically white students do not use this same racist term in the frontstage, however, Matt describes otherwise:

There is a store down the street called [store name]. Two Middle Eastern people own [the store] and everybody knows the stereotypical name is Habhibs. So not trying to be racist my friends and I actually call it Habhibs. It just makes it easier and more people know what we are talking about when we say lets go to Habhibs to get something to drink. I know it’s not the nicest thing but we don’t physically call it Habhibs in front of him. Today my friend went to the store pretty inebriated and in the store he received a phone call and said he was at Habhibs while purchasing something to drink. I don’t know his real name but he got very offended and kicked him out of the store and told my white friend never to come back. (Matt, WM, Southeast)

Matt’s white friend did not protect the backstage conversation from the front, and because of this, he suffered the consequence of getting kicked out of the store. Matt legitimizes why he and his friends use the racial term: it is convenient as his friends know what store they are talking about. He also comments that there is no real harm as they do not (normally) say it in front of the store owners. Matt uses semantic moves and disclaimers like “trying not to be racist,” suggesting that perhaps they have tried but failed to be non-racist, as they continue to refer to the store as “Habhibs.”

The role of alcohol is often used as an excuse for diminishing one’s accountability. Perhaps if the white student were not drunk, he would not have referred to the store using the safe backstage name. Although alcohol can be attributed to loosening one’s inhibitions, it cannot create a sentiment that is not already there (Feagin and McKinney 2003).

Alcohol is not the only factor accounting for students who carry on backstage conversations near an unprotected frontstage. In this next account, white women have a private race conversation in a public coffeehouse:

Today I went to go for some coffee with some of these girls I know. As we were waiting online a discussion arose about one girl who had been randomly roomed with an African American for the fall semester. The other two girls gasped when they heard this exclaiming that they didn't know what they would do if they had been so unfortunate. One girl said, "I would be out of there so fast. Black people just don't live the same way we do." She then continued to explain how when she got the name of her roommate, she was so worried that it sounded like a black name. She said she was so relieved to come to school and realized she was white. Meanwhile, every single person on line was listening to this conversation; I was so worried that some of them would get offended. (Lisa, WF, 18, Southeast)

The white women do not stop their conversation even though they are in a public coffeehouse line. As noted previously in this chapter, college students many times do not have a choice as to who they will be paired to live with in the dormitories. The white women "gasped" when finding out that a white woman had been "so unfortunate" to room with an African American. There is an obvious us-versus-them dichotomy established, as one woman claims that *they* do not "live the same way *we* do."

Lisa does not note what the racial composition of the coffeehouse line is: it is entirely conceivable that only whites were in the coffeehouse, perhaps suggesting a secure backstage. However, Lisa's hesitation and concern that someone would be offended suggests that the setting was not a safe backstage. In Chapter 6, I further explore the notion of an unreliable safe backstage.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explored conversations that take place in the backstage, but that are physically near the front. In most of these interactions, whites take precautions to protect the backstage location, however this is not always the case as the last section illustrates. I outlined the nonverbal mechanisms (body language, waiting for the intruder to leave, and avoidance) and verbal mechanisms (whispering, vague language, and code language) that whites utilize in protecting the backstage. Racial action has a repertoire of

verbal and nonverbal language that is shared and reinforced among whites in the backstage. (I further analyze this white social network of the learning, sharing, and reinforcing of racial actions and attitudes in Chapter 7.)

Examining whites who carefully guard the backstage boundaries against people of color illustrates the different expectations in the frontstage and backstage interactions. If there were no difference in whites' interactions in the frontstage and backstage regions, there would never be a reason to secure the backstage boundaries. In Chapter 6, I explore further the slippage between the frontstage and the backstage, and the implications for whites' racial interactions.

CHAPTER 6 FLUID BOUNDARIES, SLIPPERY REGIONS

In the previous chapter, I described how backstage and the frontstage are not distinct separate regions. There is often slippage between the two regions, and for many whites, measures must be taken to protect the safe backstage. For example, in a backstage conversation that is physically near people of color, the white students reported using verbal and nonverbal mechanisms to protect the safe backstage. This chapter continues that conversation, focusing on the “slippage” of the shifting contexts and unreliable boundaries.

There are 3 main sections in this chapter: First, I examine moments when the white participants are aware of boundary shifts. The white actors can account for the change, even though they may not have a lot of time to change performances. For example, I discuss situations where there is an abrupt, but aware, shift such as when an “intruder” enters the scene. In this section, I also account for moments when whites carefully craft the shift, such as quickly transitioning from backstage to frontstage, and backstage again.

Second, I look at moments when whites forget they are not in the backstage. I divide this section into three parts: whites who forget that a person of color is in the setting; whites who “get caught” by persons of color just outside of the interaction; and whites who “confess” that they slipped in the backstage.

Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I examine the unreliable safe backstage. Unlike the other two sections where racial categorizations appear to be clear (even if whites forget that not everyone in the interaction is white), in this section race assumes an

ambiguous category. In this section I discuss two components, whiteness as a “passport” into the backstage, and whites who problematize whiteness. For example, there were a few whites who “came out” as not being all white, even when nothing in their biological and cultural background would suggest otherwise.

Context Shifts: Back to Front

Typically when the social context shifted and it was accounted for, it moved from a backstage to a frontstage conversation. By “accounted for,” I mean that even though the shift may have been abrupt, it was noticeable to the white actors so they could alter their performance. The switch between regions occurred for two main reasons. First, an intruder entered the scene, forcing whites to modify their interactions. Second, there are cases where whites purposively manipulated the stages and shifted contexts.

Intruder Alert: Abrupt Shift

In his dramaturgical analysis, Goffman notes that there are times when the audience segregation fails between the frontstage and backstage and an outsider stumbles into the backstage. At that time, the performers in the backstage may abruptly shift to an act that is fitting for the intruder to observe (Goffman 1959: 139). For example, George writes about his white friends’ interactions when Black students entered the student union:

I was hanging out at the Union with a bunch of friends, all being white kids from Wyoming. Our conversation was about nothing important, but when a couple of black kids walked up, everybody got kinda quiet and weren’t being themselves anymore. I’m not sure if they stopped talking because they felt threatened or if they thought they might accidentally say something that would offend the two black kids. But it was obvious that the black kids were definitely the cause of the conversation changing. (George, WM, 21, West)

There was a clear backstage conversation among white men, yet the intrusion of two Black men shifted the region to a frontstage interaction. Goffman notes that in this case, the whites need to shift to a performance that is fitting for the Black students to see.

However, the white students seem to be unsure about their frontstage performance as “they were quiet and weren’t being themselves anymore.”

In the frontstage, the white students here are afraid they may “accidentally” say something that would offend the two Black students. This concern about saying the wrong thing indicates that in the white mind, there is a right and wrong way for whites to interact in the presence of Blacks. According to George, the whites collectively felt potentially threatened, awkward, and uncomfortable. The white men did not just individually change their interaction style, but as a group, their social networking changed.

In George’s account, the concern is that whites will do something wrong to violate the new frontstage. However, in this next account, the whites at a party are worried that the newly arriving Black guests will do something wrong:

I was at a party with a bunch of my friends. The party was predominantly white. We were all having a good time and there had been no trouble. Everyone was laughing and having a good time. At about eleven a group of people showed up. Almost everyone in the group was black. They were greeted well and told they were welcome to stay, but you could tell that the mood of the party had changed ever so slightly. Everyone was a little more serious and tense. I noticed that people watched the group of people to see what they were doing and where they were going. The group did look a bit like trouble, but they seemed nice enough. At the end of the night they went home. Nothing was stolen, broken, etc. There had been no problems all night long. Everyone at that party it seemed, was just waiting for those people to do something wrong. But everyone was wrong. They had been no different from any of the other people at the party except for the fact that they were black. I found this to be very, very sad. A lot of people at that party had such bad stereotypes about black people that they changed the way they were at a party. They obviously did not have as much fun if they were constantly watching and worrying. (Mike, WM, 19, West)

The white backstage interaction changes when a group of Black people enter the party.

The interaction starts with whites laughing and having a good time, and then transitions to a serious, tense, and apprehensive atmosphere. Although there is extensive literature

on racial profiling in public places (Walker, Spohn and DeLone 2004), much less is known about the private surveillance of Blacks while in the company of whites. The white students keep a police-like eye on the new guests, waiting for something bad to happen. Mike's language paints a disturbing picture. Using terms like "those people" who looked "like trouble" conveys a sense of otherness about the Black men: *they* are different than *us*, simply due to race. The underlying assumption is that they will steal, break things, and otherwise act unruly.

The location is not a public environment, and we can speculate that the Black men were probably invited to this party by some white person there (they were greeted well and welcomed to stay). Based on Mike's account, the assumption for many whites is that a private environment will be white, and there is surprise when "black trouble" walks in. Their reaction suggests that for many of the whites at the party, there may be very little friendly social interaction across racial lines.

As further testament to limited cross-racial friendships, Mary notes how her usual group of friends act differently around a Black man:

After Thanksgiving dinner my friends and I regrouped for one last night of fun. My group of friends consists of whites and Asians. However, on this night we had a black guy hanging out with us. He was one of the nicest and one of the funniest people I have ever met. Many of my guy friends make comments that are uncalled for about race, age, gender, etc., but tonight they seemed to be on their best behavior so to speak. I think they really had to think before they spoke. This is a lesson they never practice. We all had a very fun night. (Mary, WF, 18, Southeast)

The white and Asian friends collectively censor their backstage comments when they were hanging out with a Black friend. As Mary says this is an exercise they never practice, it implies that the group does not typically hang out with Black people. This extra effort to sanitize their stereotyping comments reveals that the group is aware that such comments are inappropriate and wrong. They clearly know who the "target" is of

their usual derogatory comments. Rather than rethinking their comments in general, the group just watches what is said when the Black friend is present. There is apparently no consideration given to the damaging character of racial and gender stereotyping for whites as well as Blacks, nor is there an attempt to end such stereotyping.

Mary specifically calls out that it is the males who instigate the inappropriate comments about race, age, gender. In other journals in the sample, many white students wrote that it is white men who typically make racist, sexist and homophobic comments in the backstage. As noted in previous chapters, some white women make inappropriate comments, but disproportionately in the data, it is white men who make sexist and racist remarks.

Mary notes that her usual group of friends is not only white, but also includes Asian friends. The inclusion of Asian friends here is interesting and might not involve full breaking of the color barrier, as certain conforming-to-whiteness Asian Americans are awarded “honorary white” status by whites, at least temporarily (Aguilar-San Juan 1993).

In this section, I have examined and accounted for shifts in context, such as when a Black person enters a typically white scene. In the next part of this section, I examine other context shifts such as when whites purposively manipulate the shift in the backstage and frontstage. Again, in both of these situations the actors are not completely caught off guard, as whites can often instantly change their performance in the new context.

Transitioning Performances: Back and Front

The characteristics of this transitioning performance include manipulation and fakeness. Whites in the backstage are privy to the carefully crafted performance in the frontstage, while people of color are only apprised of the frontstage performance. Joanna

reveals her disgust at a white stranger who tells a racial joke to her, and then engages in conversation with a Black man:

I took my driving exam (and passed!!). It was lunch time and the test center was busy. I had to wait in line before I could be seen by the next assistant. There was a girl waiting behind me in the queue, we exchanged general chitchat. ...She was white, with very short bleached blond hair, approximately 25 years old. We started discussing test questions from the book, and making fun of how stupid some of them appeared to be. She read one of the questions, "What do you do if you are approaching a stop light, and see someone on the side of the road with a white cane?" I laughed at this question, and said jokingly "isn't that extra points?" She turned looked at me, smiled, turn to see who was around her and then in a very quiet voice moving her head closer towards me and answered, "No, that depends on what colour they are." I was amazed and shocked at what she had just said. I looked around and noticed that the guy [just near] her was black, and there were several other ethnic groups around. I choose not to make a big deal of it — and therefore didn't react or say anything. After this comment, our interaction was limited. I chose not to converse with her, apart from the occasional nod of the head or answering yes or no. However we were still sat next to one other. I was disgusted at the sincerity in her voice, how so much hatred could be exposed though so few words. I just wanted to finish the test and leave. The girl then turned to the (black) guy and asked if his questions were as stupid as ours, he smiled and said yes. This bothered me more, because not only was she racist but also two-faced. She got up and left the table, departing saying "Good luck to you both" (myself and the black guy). I was infuriated because the comment ("no that depends on what colour they are") was said so nonchalantly, she didn't think anything of it. And it appeared that she thought I would agree with her, and think the same thing. The thing that troubled me the most was that she was so comfortable saying it to me, it made me wonder how I appeared to others. Because the last way I would want to portray myself would be as a racist or not excepting to those different to myself. (Joanna, WF, 21, Southeast)

In a previous journal entry, Joanna reveals that she is an international student from Europe, and is involved in a long term interracial relationship with a Black man. Most of her journal entries were insightful, as this one illustrates. Joanna recognizes and is disturbed that her white skin is interpreted by some as a marker that she shares the same racial ideology as other whites. Here, her white skin is a passport that allows her into the backstage of a woman she just met.

It is critical to note that the backstage is not only between trusted friends and family, but the backstage also involves interactions among white strangers, often based on the (sometimes false) assumption that all whites share a common ideology. As discussed in the last chapter, the white woman took careful measures to protect the backstage: she looked around, used a quiet voice, and got physically close to a woman she had just met, all to ensure that her inappropriate comment is not overheard in the protected backstage.

Note too the critical assumptions of the interaction. The white woman assumes Joanna would: (1) understand what the comment refers to, (2) agree with her comment, and (3) not confront her on her racial comment. Although Joanna did not agree with the woman, she specifies that she *chose* not to say anything, indicating that on some level, Joanne recognizes that she had the option to respond in many ways. Joanna could have verbally confronted the woman by yelling or softly telling her she did not agree. She could have questioned her about what she meant, or why she said it. Joanna also had the option to leave the testing center or at least move away from the woman.

As it relates to this chapter, the white woman being discussed did not have to include the Black man into her conversation. The white woman crafted the stages: she purposely kept the Black man out of her backstage conversation with Joanna for purposes of telling a racial joke, but brought him into the frontstage, allowing Joanna to see both performances. Although whites have learned it is not appropriate to be outwardly racist in the frontstage, as noted in Chapter 4, oftentimes these expectations carry over into the backstage. The woman may have included the Black man into the

conversation to prove to Joanna that she is not racist, as she might have sensed that Joanna did not appreciate the comment.

In the sample, many whites made the parallel argument that being polite to a person of color is equated with not being a racist. As we saw in an account in Chapter 3, if a white person is nice to a person of color, then it means they are not racist or prejudiced. Joanna takes issue with the white woman making a racial comment, and then being kind to a Black man, and calls her “racist and two-faced.” People of color are not ignorant to “happy faced racism” and often indicate that verbal confrontation is preferable to the hypocritical and deceitful gestures (Yamato 1987).

Similar to Joanna’s account, Crystal observes a white friend’s father in the backstage and in the frontstage:

One of my (white) friend’s Dads took a few of us (all white) out to dinner tonight. My friend is from Boston, and her Dad was going on and on about what a great city it was. He talked about how it was a great city for people our age and how we should all come visit sometime soon. Her Dad said that one of the reasons it was such a great city was because unlike all the other big cities he could think of, there weren’t a lot of black people running around. Sue (whose Dad it was) was obviously embarrassed. I think the rest of us all thought it was a little weird he would say that, but none of us even talked about it after because we didn’t want Sue to feel weird. We also know that parents were raised in a different time period and it just seems that parents, more often than kids in our own generation, just have a different view of minorities. I don’t think they are bad people for it, I just think they have to be a little more open-minded about things.

After dinner, we went back to Sue’s house to hang out and talk. One of Sue’s roommates (Monica) is half black, half white. Sue’s dad was very cordial and seemed to take real interest in what Monica talked about. He did not seem to be racist at all. He even told Monica that she should come out to visit Sue at their home sometime. It is always weird to me to see how people like Sue’s Dad group minorities all together, but when they meet someone who actually is minority it seems that the stereotypes they usually think of never seem to apply to that person. (Crystal, WF, 20, Midwest)

Crystal observes Sue’s father make a racial comment against people of color in a backstage conversation, yet act very cordial around a biracial woman in the frontstage.

The white man is actively manipulating his racial presentation to best fit the frontstage interaction, compared to his backstage interaction. According to Goffman, individuals are not cruel and cunning in the manipulation, but individuals have multiple “selves.” Depending on the situation, individuals (and collective groups) engineer the presentation of the self to best fit the situation. As some whites are privy to both the backstage and the frontstage, the presentation comes across as manipulative and artificial.

Crystal comments that age generation is often a factor in racial attitudes, and excuses the white man for making an inappropriate comment as he was raised in a different age cohort. In the sample, many white students commented that they would not confront a parent, or grandparent for making a racist comment for this reason. More than one student wrote something like, “Racism will die when Grandpa dies.” The underlying assumption is that younger whites are more racially tolerant and accepting than older whites. Scanning most of the accounts in this chapter alone illustrates that this naïve thinking is *far* from true.

In Crystal’s account, a person who exhibits some racist tendencies (typically a negative attribute), can still be a good person (a positive attribute). Personal racism can be a mostly non-critical appendage to an otherwise good core. In the previous account written by Joanna, a person acting nice is assumed to be not prejudiced or racist. Many students compare a person’s personality or personal attributes to their “racist tendencies.” There are many implications for comparing personality type or performance to racial tendencies. Examining race only at this micro-level ignores the structural implications, and denies how racial actions and attitudes may impact social networks. Individually,

these may be very kind, well-meaning whites, but they still contaminate the social network.

Sue's father notes that "a lot" of Black people is not "great," but he seems fine with controlling (and limiting) the number of people of color he associates with. Other scholars have noted the segregation patterns initiated by whites to maintain a white-majority location (Massey 2001). In the sample, many whites reported controlling their surroundings to maintain a white-majority population, such as by actively leaving situations where whites were not in control.

Crystal notes that the white man and others like him group people of color together in the abstract, but often their real experiences do not match the stereotype. To account for this cognitive dissonance, whites could reevaluate the abstract stereotype to match the actual lived experience. However, as Crystal comments, most whites have a firm grip on the stereotype and when confronted with a "real" person of color, they operate on the assumption that she or he is simply an exception to the rule.

In both Crystal's and Joanna's accounts, the social actors took into consideration their performances in the frontstage and backstage. The interactions were carefully planned and crafted. However, in many settings whites are not always able to make such provisions. Whites are not always able to predict when the frontstage would crash into the backstage, or when the backstage would transition suddenly to the frontstage.

Accidental Shifts: Forgetting Not In the Backstage

In other settings there are disrupted performances, and there is a need to repair the situation with aligning actions, such as excuses, accounts, or setting up a new performance. This section will examine spoiled performances, and the methods that whites took to correct the accidental slippage between the backstage and frontstage.

There are 3 components to this section. First, I examine whites who forget that a person of color is in the interaction, and that it is not a “safe” backstage. Second, I examine whites who “get caught” making an inappropriate comment by persons of color located just outside of the interaction. Third, I examine the whites who confessed in their journals the moments when they slipped between the backstage and frontstage. This last part is significant, as in most of the other journal accounts whites “tell” on other whites.

Excuses: Repairing the Slippage

Most whites took careful measures to ensure the people of color were not included in the backstage, such as whispering, using code or vague language (see Chapter 5), or avoiding people of color (Chapters 3 and 5). However, there are moments when whites forgot that persons of color were in the interaction. In this first account, a white woman forgets that her Black man friend is in the car:

Tonight some of my friends and I decided that it would be fun to go downtown for the night to party. The people that I went with were all students from the same college that I attended. We go to a school that is pretty safe and very far away from any major city or town, so [downtown] is very big and different to most of us. The people that I went with were 2 other white females, 1 white male, and 1 black male. As we were driving through one of the more primarily, black, run down neighborhoods, one of my girlfriends said, “Quick everyone, lock your doors.” Then we all looked at her with a look in our eyes that told her that she had said something stupid. All of us know that our black male friend would probably feel offended since he somewhat identified with the area that we were driving through. The she said again, “Wait, what am I talking about, Zack (the black male) can protect us.” This comment again was not quite the right thing to say. It seemed as if she was making the situation more uncomfortable than it already was. (Caitlyn, WF, 19, Midwest)

Caitlyn begins her entry contrasting the safe, white, college town her school is in compared to the downtown, mostly Black city they were visiting for the night. Although she says that her friends are not familiar with the downtown area, she also claims that Zack, her Black friend, can identify with the “black, run down neighborhood.”

The spatial location of this account takes place in a private car among friends, as they travel through a public area thought by these whites to be unsafe. In the journals, many whites (especially women) indicate that it is automatic to check the security of the car doors while in the presence of Blacks (especially men). The white woman apparently did not think twice about checking the security of the doors, and announcing to her peers that they do the same. White (especially women's) fear of Black men is so ingrained in their thinking that it appears to be beyond a conscious thought process, to a subconscious and deeply rooted level. The white woman in this account assumes that she needs to protect herself from Black harm.

The white woman forgets that she is not in a safe backstage among only whites, and her friends give her a nonverbal cue to indicate that she violated the frontstage boundary by crossing into backstage conversation, and that she needed to repair the situation. As a means to remedy this spoiled frontstage performance, the woman acknowledges her mistake and shifts to include Zack into the performance. The role she assigns for Zack is to be the white protector against harmful Blacks. In other words, she is assuming that her Black friend can protect her from other Black men. Zack no longer is her friend, but is her protector from other men who look like him.

In this next account, a white man forgets that he is not in a safe backstage, and makes a racial comment at a crowded party:

I was with one of my friends (male Caucasian, 19 years old) during a party to celebrate a football win. There were many races of people there, Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic mostly. The young people ranged in age from 18-20 there were more females than males and the total people there were about 100. The fact that females outnumbered males was one reason why we attended the party, but our friend also threw it, he is a Caucasian male, 19 years of age. My friend that I came to the party with was talking to me and two girls, the one I was with was Hispanic and 18-years old, and the other was Caucasian and the same age.

Before we knew it the party began to get out of hand and a few people, all Hispanic, that were drinking ran into our little group disrupting our conversation. Before my [white] friend could stop himself he said, “Damn Mexicans!” Suddenly the people around us got dead quiet. The girl I was with looked at my friend with an angry stare. She said, “Not all of us are Mexican, I am Jamaican, and I do NOT appreciate you saying that!” She went on, “I don’t care why you said it, and I don’t care who you said it to, but if I hear you saying ANYTHING like that again, I will have to personally hunt you down and kill you.” The room was dead quiet and I was shocked. Everyone was staring at us. From the back of the crowd, someone whispered, “What happened??” The answer slowly came, “I don’t know man...” After what seemed like an eternity of silence, we left. I will never forget that as long as I live. My friend and I do not talk about it that much. I still date the girl I met at the party, but she cannot stand being in the same house as my friend. Let’s just say my friend has not heard from his girl since then. (Alex, WM, 20, Southeast)

At this party, a white man presumably forgets that he is not in a safe backstage conversation. Alex indicates, “Before my friend could stop himself,” indicating that this racial comment was an automatic reaction to the situation. The friend did not stop to process the meaning of what he was about to say, and what the consequences might have been. Many white students indicated in their journals that most of their interactions are just among white people, so there is little practice to edit their performance for the frontstage.

Alex’s girlfriend rightly puts the white man in his place. In just a few words, she educates him (“Not all of us are Mexican”), tells him how she feels, tells him there is no excuse for his comment (either in the frontstage or in the private backstage), and tells him the consequences if he says it again (“hunt you down and kill you”). Even though she had no idea the man was going to make an ignorant comment, the onus of responsibility is on her shoulders as a person of color to respond to the comment (Lugones 1990). As evident from her forthright and eloquent response, she was certainly prepared with an arsenal of potential responses.

At the party, Alex notes that there were whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. The category Hispanic, or “Mexican” as noted by Alex’s friend, is often an umbrella category for “brown people” when the actual descent is not known (Dávila 2001). Even Alex notes that his date is “Hispanic” at the beginning of the entry, yet she clarifies at the party that she is Jamaican. Since Alex is clearly writing this account *after* the incident took place, it is unclear why he would not indicate her correct ethnicity.

By forgetting that he was not in the backstage, the consequences lead to social awkwardness and disrupted fun. This is true not only for himself, but also for his circle of friends, and for the other party-goers. The remedy for a spoiled frontstage performance in this case was to leave the situation.

Getting Caught

In the previous section, the white participants forgot they were not in a safe backstage. In this section, the participants may not have forgotten, as many whites made their comments on purpose, but did not expect people of color to overhear. Although whites often take precautions to ensure a safe backstage (such as outlined in Chapter 5), this was not always the case. Whites did not always secure the backstage boundary, and many times unsuspecting outsiders not in the backstage were witness to an unfortunate performance.

In this account, a white person is caught making a racist comment at a restaurant and is forced to apologize:

I went to [a sports bar] with some of my friends to watch Monday Night Football and eat thirty wings. To me it is the best dinner when you only have five dollars to spend. My friends were ordering sandwiches and other entrees while I was ordering the early bird wing special. One of my friends was willing to buy me a meal, but I insisted on having wings. All of the sudden I hear, “Look, Bob’s ordering the nigger special” and then many of the guys laughed. I wanted to punch the kid so bad for what he said. However, a black male college student heard what

he said and asked him to apologize to him, and me for calling me a “nigger.” The white kid, in fear of his life, quickly apologized to the black male and me. It was perfect timing that the black male was there to show my friend up and correct him in his racial ways. My buddy did not say another racist comment the rest of the night. (Bob, WM, 19, Southeast)

The racial trigger in this example is a food item, and equating chicken wings with Black people. The racist epithet is a source of bonding and laughing among the white men, until they are caught by a Black man outside of the conversation for using the term. Bob could have confronted his friend, as he reported being mad enough that he wanted to strike out at his friend. However, he waited for a Black man, again not in the conversation, to correct his friend. As noted many times, most whites do not feel it is their responsibility to challenge other whites’ views on race, placing the burden directly on the shoulders of people of color.

Black men are viewed here as dangerous and violent, as Bob’s friend was “in fear of his life.” At the end of his account, Bob notes that his friend corrected his racial ways, and perhaps learned their lesson. It is feasible that the only lesson Bob’s friend walked away with was that he should secure the backstage conversation so he can safely make racial comments without getting caught.

Getting caught making a racist comment did not only take place in public locations like a restaurant. The next account takes place at a private college party, where using profanity is part of the fun until they realize a Black woman is in the room:

Last night some people (white males and females, one black female) were sitting around playing a drinking game called Kings. In this game, one of the cards means you must make up a rule for everyone to abide by if you pick this card. The game went on for a little while and finally someone made a rule that you must swear in every sentence. People thought it was funny and went along with it until someone was telling another person to drink when he exclaimed, “Drink up, nigger.” As soon as the word was said, everyone in the room was silent as the guy that said the comment turns around to see an African American girl sitting behind him. As soon as he realized it, he felt very embarrassed and immature for his comment. Not only

was he embarrassed, but the girl was also. Everyone in the room was uneasy and no one could think of anything to say. It was so easy for him to slip and say something like that because black people are such a minority on this campus. When this is true, he doesn't need to worry about personally insulting black people by using slurs because it isn't likely that he'll be in the presence of anyone black. It still should not give him a reason to use racial slurs when people aren't around because it could still insult people. (Christy, WF, 18, Midwest)

In this account the white man is "caught" using a racist epithet in what he thought was the backstage. He was not caught by the African American woman, who does not appear to stop the fun, but he is caught by the other whites who stop to stare at him and the Black woman. Understandably, the Black woman is embarrassed as now everyone at the party is looking at her, probably to see what her reaction will be.

The Black woman did not ask to be a part of this situation, and it appears to be just as awkward for her as for the white perpetrator. She has the burden of responsibility in deciding how to react, such as to get mad, laugh it off, educate the white person, or just leave. Whatever she decides may have real consequences for how the white students will treat her in the future. Although she may just want to ignore the comment and wish it away, it may send the wrong message to whites that it is okay to make such disparaging comments. Similar to the last account, none of the white actors took responsibility for directly confronting the casual use of the harshest racist epithet.

Christy rationalizes that the white man "slipped" by making a racist comment because he is not used to being around any Blacks. Slipping conveys that there are moments when this type of language is acceptable, such as around other whites, but that he "slipped" and said it in the wrong context. Again, the slip does not refer to using an inappropriate word, but he used the inappropriate word in the wrong context.

Confessions

The previous two sections under the heading of “Accidental Shifts” have examined the excuses whites offer when they forget they are not in the backstage, and how whites handle getting caught by persons of color on the periphery of the backstage interaction. This third section examines whites who confess that they themselves forget they were not in the backstage. The confessions are critical at revealing whites who slipped, but were not always caught by people of color in the frontstage.

The white students often revealed that they have slipped by using backstage conversation in the frontstage. In the following account, a white man forgets that his Asian friend is not white:

11:45 P.M. I just got back from an ice hockey referee’s meeting . . . I took notice to the racial make up of the referees at the meeting. At first glance, there was only 1 non-white out of about 25 referees. I wondered what it was like to be the only black kid on a hockey team . . . The rest of the meeting, these thoughts mulled in my mind, over and over. After the meeting, I walked back to my dorm with my friend, also a referee. I didn’t even think about it at the time, but I asked him what he thought about hockey being a predominantly white sport. He said “Andrew, I’m on your team.” I looked at him, and then I just put my hand to my forehead, and told him I was a moron. My friend “Nick” [his American name] was from China, and was on my intramural hockey team. Yet, as I quickly categorized the people in the room at the meeting, he became white. It was just another example of how whites ascribe white status to certain races, and often-times this status is associated with the tone of their skin color. I told him that I didn’t even think about it. I was just so used to being around him that the idea of him being of another race doesn’t really enter my mind. (Andrew, WM, 19, Midwest)

Andrew begins his journal concerned about the only Black hockey referee and his experiences with discrimination and prejudice. Inadvertently, Andrew mistakes his Chinese American friend with the status of being “honorary white.” As Andrew states, his friend “became white” since he was so used to being around him. Andrew allowed Nick into the backstage conversation as he would with any of his white friends, but then slapped his hand to his forehead, when he realized his mistake. He minimizes the

experiences of his friend Nick by classifying the hockey players solely in terms of white and Black.

In this next account, a white student reports about an incident that took place three months ago that still causes him guilt and shame:

This happened about 3 months ago. I was hanging out with some of my friends, 5 of them white and one of them black. We were playing a card game and my black friend, James, put me out of the game and I slipped and called him a nigger. I have trouble writing about this even today because it brings back tremendous emotions of guilt and just pure shock at how stupid I could be. He seemed extremely shocked that I had used that word in front him, let alone directed at him. To me that word had no worse a meaning than calling someone an asshole, and that was all that I intended it to mean in that situation. My school is almost totally white and I have no black friends from my school. so I can usually get away using that word. Actually it had become sort of a joke, no one at my school even considered the word racial anymore; they jokingly use it as they would any other word. This I believe completely desensitized me to what the word means to other people. I never think of my friend as black, but it was foolish of me to think that he would have the same luxury. He has to think of it all the time, and that word means a lot more to him because of that. This whole incident made me think a lot about how even though I personally believe all people are equal, I can still commit actions that are hurtful to people of other races, just because of the desensitizing of me by the people I hang out with on a normal basis. Most of my friends feel the same way too about race, they believe all people are equal and we often joke around about stereotypes given to races. This joking however if seen by people of another race or people outside our circle makes us seem like incredible bigots. (Jason, WM, 18, Midwest)

The everyday experiences with racism are not momentarily experienced then forgotten, but serve as lessons learned for future accounts (Halbwachs 1950). Even though this incident took place three months ago, Jason's mistake remains in his memory, as well as the emotional feelings associated with it.

Jason recognizes that this harshest epithet can mean supposedly nothing more to him than "asshole" but that it obviously has a deeper meaning to his Black friend James. The collective memory for many African Americans involves the collective sharing of concrete events and interpretations of the events that cause physical and emotional pain

and suffering (Houts, Feagin and Johns, forthcoming). Feagin and Sikes (1994: 24) write that to a Black person the term nigger “brings into sharp and current focus all kinds of acts of racism—murder, rape, torture, denial of constitutional rights, insults, limited opportunity structure, economic problems, unequal justice under the law” and so forth.

Similar to Andrew in the previous account, Jason notes that he never thinks of his Black friend as being Black. For Jason, his friend has become white like he is. This racial transformation in the white mind may indicate that Jason has one negative conceptualization of what he believes a “generic Black man” is like, and now that he knows James does not fit that construct, in Jason’s mind, James has “become white.” Further proof can be found as Jason admits halfway into his entry that he “has no black friends” from his school, and has limited contact with other racial groups.

Jason says that he “slipped and called his friend a nigger,” and since he goes to a white school, he can almost always get away with the term. The significance of the situation should not be ignored: Jason did not slip by using the word nigger. He slipped in his context for when he said it. The word itself was not a problem for Jason, as he justifies that the word is not even racial to him. In other words, there are situations and contexts when using this language is not an issue.

Like Jason, many white students wrote similar accounts about how commonly used the word “nigger” is today. When I first started reading all 626 journals written by white students, I was astounded by how frequently whites used the word “nigger” or “nigga” in everyday conversations. Many white students used the term in the historically negative context against Blacks. For example, Jenny (WF, 19, Southeast) described an account where seven white students are having dinner at a nice restaurant and they are describing

another student: “The other girls whispers across the table to me, ‘He acts like a nigger.’” Similarly, Chad (WM, 19, Southeast) described asking a friend to grab a beer for him from the fridge, and his white friend answers, “What do I look like, a nigger?” These are not isolated or rare accounts.

White students also used the word nigger as slang or a greeting between whites. Many white students described greeting other *whites* with phrases like, “What up, nigger?” or “What’s up, my ‘gro” [as short for Negro]. One white woman in the Southeast describes her friends using the atrocious phrase, “Let’s hang this nigger” to mean “Let’s get going” or “Let’s get this show on the road.” Many white students rationalize using the term as they believe it has lost the racial connotation, and it may serve to unite a (white) group, as the term can only be used without consequence in a safe backstage. A white man in the Southeast rationalizes how his friends use the phrase “nigga please”: “*Nigga please* is a slang saying for something that should be obvious. For example, if I were to ask my roommate if he was going out Saturday night, he might respond by saying ‘*nigga please*’ or ‘obviously.’” This language is not unique to the Southeast, as it was evident in every geographic region I sampled.

A white woman in the Midwest confesses that she slipped and used the backstage term “nigga please” accidentally in the frontstage:

Tonight my white female friend Tracy and I went over to our friend’s dorm to drink. It sounds stupid now even as I write it, but a common saying in our group of all-white friends is “nigga please.” Since we are usually around all-white people, I’ve kind of forgot how bad the “n” word is. When we say that saying to each other, I don’t even think about black people. It is just something we say. Anyways, after we’d had a couple of beers, Monica and I decided to use the public bathroom together. As we used the bathroom, we talked through the stalls and she said something and I responded “nigga please.” It wasn’t until I got out of the stall that I realized we weren’t alone in the bathroom. There was one other white girl in the bathroom with us. I was very happy that there were no black people in the

bathroom, but was embarrassed by my insensitivity nonetheless. It was the first time I realized that my words had more meaning to them than I really ever intended. What is just a saying to me, can be seen as a huge insult by other people. I realized though this experience that I have to be more sensitive to other people's feelings and watch that I don't say anything that could be perceived differently than how I meant it. (Brenda, WF, 20, Midwest)

Although many white students reported that they did not consider the n-word to be racial, Brenda certainly recognizes the terrible racial connotations when she accidentally says it to an unknown audience. Brenda reflects on her vocabulary choice, and comments that "it sounds stupid as I write this" indicating that she acknowledges the inappropriateness of the phrase. However, she also comments that the term is completely appropriate in her all white circle of friends, as they have the privilege to use the term without understanding the historical connotations of the term, or the consequences to African Americans when it is so casually and callously uttered.

At the end of the account, Brenda does not say that she needs to stop saying the phrase, but that she needs to be more careful that she does not accidentally say it around people who do not understand her meaning. In other words, in this confession, Brenda is not sorry that she says the term, but that she needs to ensure that it is only said in her safe backstage. There is a social character of the backstage group that not only allows, but perpetuates this type of interaction. Brenda is not alone when she says "nigga please," but she is playing out the racist talk in social networks. In her all white group, the members have learned and shared this code language, and actively exclude people who may perceive their talk differently.

Unreliable Safe Backstage

In the first two sections of this chapter, I examine the slippage that is either accounted for, or accidental between the frontstage and the backstage. In this last

section, I explore the “most slippery” of the shifting regions, the unreliable safe backstage. A secure backstage may not be possible when “whiteness” is a problematic category. I examine two parts of this section: whiteness as a passport into the backstage, and problematizing whiteness. These two categories are not mutually exclusive, but are part of the same mechanism of ambiguously defined racial meanings and identifications.

White Skin as a Backstage Passport

Throughout this project, I have defined “backstage” as racial events occurring among persons within the same racial group, or among whites. There are moments when individuals are assumed to be part of the white backstage, yet they came out not being “white” or “all white.” Hence, the backstage slips into the frontstage, not on account of an intruder entering the area or whites forgetting who were in the backstage, but whites not realizing that the participants are not completely “white.” For example, Dana writes about her friend Megan assuming that the backstage is safe to make a racial comment:

On Thursday September 12, my friend Megan (a white female) went on her first date with Steve. As their conversation began they discussed typical first date topics like family, friends, home, etc. Somehow Megan began talking about how squirrels in The Bronx are black and so people call them “squiggers.” When Steve did not laugh Megan wondered why he did not think it was funny. As the conversation progressed and Steve began to talk about his family, he revealed to Megan that his dad is black and mom is white. Right then, Megan realized why Steve did not find her joke to be so funny. Megan felt horrible. Without realizing it, Megan hurt someone that appeared to be just as white as she was. Comments that can seem to be harmless to most people can really hurt someone. I realize that even the most open minded people can hear a racist joke and repeat it without truly every realizing the depth of its implications. (Dana, WF, 19, Midwest)

Megan assumed that her new date Steve “appeared to be just as white as she was” and that it was a safe backstage region. Steve’s light skin allowed him passport into a white backstage conversation. Dana indicates that comparing Black people to the n-word and

to animals is “harmless to most [white] people” unless it is said in the frontstage or a slippery backstage.

Megan felt comfortable around a “white” person that she did not know that well to repeat this innovative racial phrase. She apparently felt horrible about making the comment, but only *after* she was caught saying it in the wrong context. Megan did not feel horrible making the comment, but felt bad only when she realized the backstage was not secure. Using the looking glass self (Cooley 1902), Megan may imagine that she looks racist and insensitive in the eyes of her new date.

The term “squiggers” was not invented by Megan, and she is not the first white person to call Blacks a derivative of the term “nigger.” [An internet search reveals that this term can be quickly found on such websites like www.urbandictionary.com (retrieved 2/13/04).] Although Megan did not invent the term, she is perpetuating the racist talk in social networks. She learned it from her social network in New York, and carried it with her into this date in the Midwest. Additionally, this account is not written by Megan, but by her friend Dana, so there is an added layer of social interaction involving this racial comment. Racist ideas are supported and reinforced in social networks and through friends’ collaboration. Dana alludes to this sharing of racial ideas at the end of her account when she states “even the most open minded people can hear a racist joke and *repeat* it.” The interactive social component involves the exchanging of ideas, the sharing of code language, and the meaning behind the terms.

In the next account, the backstage is considered safe for a group of white men to exchange “Black jokes” but slips into the frontstage when Jacob makes an Anti-Semitic joke:

Location: At the Golf Course. Today I went golfing with one of my friends (Elijah) and a kid from our fraternity that we didn't really know to well (he just transferred here from another school). So we are out on the course and having a good time until all of a sudden, the new kid says, "Hey, do you guys know any black jokes?" Elijah said yeah, and told about three or four, and we all kind of had a good laugh about it. And then I told a joke about Jewish people, and he got real straight faced and said, "I'm Jewish." My stomach dropped. I apologized probably 15 times. I have not felt that bad in I don't know how long. He made me really think about how I stand on people that are different than myself. I then realized because of this one ignorant comment that it is really not fair for me to act they way I do and think the way I do. Most of the time, I have this vision inside of my head about what I think of someone before I meet them, either because of what they look like or where they come from. If I see a girl driving a nice car around Miami, I will assume that she is a spoiled bitch and did absolutely nothing to earn money to buy a car like that. Every time I've met black people on campus that I did not previously know I would think of them as lazy or unintelligent. I do the same generalizing with people from other fraternities than mine. I'm no different or better or worse than anyone on this campus, we just hang around different people. Actually, many of my close friends I generalized and stereotyped before I met them! I have finally for the first time decided that I want to change. I'm going to try being nicer to people; not just minorities but everyone. What good has come from my stereotypical ways? Why be miserable because I think I hate someone before I meet them when I could be happy most of the time? (Jacob, WM, 21, Midwest)

The racial event takes place at a local golf course in the Midwest, traditionally a "very white" location. This is a secure backstage to tell racist jokes against Black people; the joking against Blacks does not ever become an issue for the group of white men.

However, the anti-Black area does not translate into a secure region against other racial or ethnic groups.

The white man new to the social network initiates the anti-Black jokes. The joking serves as a source of bonding and group unity through the laughter and good times.

Jacob's intimate social network not only tolerates this type of joking, but supports and promotes performing racial humor. The men are learning new jokes from each other (or supporting old ones they already knew), and reinforcing that this type of humor is acceptable and encouraged.

Strikingly, none of the white men indicate any discomfort in this type of social interaction. The joking only becomes problematic when it shifts to a topic that one of them has a vested interest in protecting. What was considered a safe backstage to tell anti-Black and anti-Semitic comments slips into the frontstage when the new group member comes out that he is Jewish. The man who initiated the racist joking suffers when his white skin is translated as a passport into a “white” and “Gentile” backstage.

As noted in many other accounts, Jacob does not feel bad for telling the racist joke, but he feels bad only when he is caught making these comments in an unsafe backstage. Jacob freely admits in his journal that he holds negative stereotypes against specific racial and gender categories. Many other students in the journals, like Jacob, freely admitted to stereotyping all Blacks as lazy and unintelligent. Jacob did not invent this stereotype; he learned it from his socialization, possibly from agents such as family and peer groups, media, and other social organizations. In turn, he plays out the racial action in his own social networks.

Jacob now acknowledges the social costs to his racist thinking: he is miserable hating an entire group of people, and there is the cost of feeling bad when he slips out of an unreliable safe backstage. Although Jacob could be celebrated in wanting to change, we should be justifiably skeptical in his new found attitude. Jacob needs to do more than “just change” his thinking. He would also need to change his social networks that support and expect the racist thinking. Jacob would also need to acknowledge that it may be possible that the benefits of his racist joking (such as group bonding) may outweigh any costs.

Not all of the accounts took place in informal social interactions like on a date or at the local country club. This next account takes place at a work setting. A white man who is included in a backstage conversation against Asians reminds the group that he is not all white:

I was at work and it was break time. Sean and Todd, both are thirty something white males, were discussing side jobs they once had. Sean said he worked as a mechanic and did overflow work for Nissan. He said, "Nissans are the most difficult transmissions to work on because the "chink" that designed them didn't know what he was doing." I was shocked that he would say that in front of me. My response was, "What did you just say?" He said, "No offense, Dan." "How am I not to take offense to what you just said," I replied. Sean said, "I didn't direct it towards you." Sean knows that I am half Chinese because we had discussed my heritage before. I said, "First of all, Nissan is Japanese car. Second, that person that designed that transmission has more brains in his left testicle than you have in your whole body. And thirdly, you're a stupid, uneducated, asshole who should think before you speak! But I guess that is asking to much from a fucking retard!" I got up and walked away. Moments later I got really mad at myself because I never wanted to be one of those people that used race as a source of conflict. I should have just sat there and smiled. Next break period Sean apologized in front of all thirteen employees. I was very impressed. (Dan, WM, 29, Southeast)

I mentioned in Chapter 2 that the students self identified their racial categorization on the cover sheet that they submitted with their journals. Dan is part Chinese and white, and on his cover sheet, he indicated that he is white. In this situation at work, he assumed by his coworker Sean to be white, as he is included in the backstage anti-Asian hostility. Dan clearly takes issue with being included in the conversation, and confronts his coworker. When Sean realizes that this was not a safe backstage, he offers an excuse (he meant the Nissan engineer, not Dan) and placates Dan by telling him he "shouldn't take offense."

Dan rightfully corrects Sean's ignorance about the company he is criticizing, but he later regrets his outburst. Dan equated correcting his coworker for making a racist comment, with "using race as a source of conflict." People of color are often accused by whites of "playing the race card"; this often is used to discourage people of color and

sympathetic whites from confronting white racism (Tatum 2002). Internalizing this need to stay silence, Dan admits that he was angry at his own outburst, and wished that he sat there and smiled.

In the journals, there were very few instances like Dan where a student confronted a racist interaction and regretted challenging the act. Much more frequent were students who observed a racist performance, but said nothing and regretted remaining silent. In this next account, also relatively uncommon in the journals, a white man is glad that he challenges his friend's ignorant comment about interracial relationships:

Again I'm in a situation where a friend makes a comment that I do not like and I get offended by. I am very protective of my family. I do not accept people making fun of them even if it is unintentional. This encounter was quite heated and I got a little angry. Yesterday there were four of us, all white guys, walking home from class. Brian, Kris, Don and I were just talking about the usual stuff. We passed by an attractive white girl with blond hair. She looked like the typical good-looking girl for our campus. Now my school is not very diverse. The minority population is very small. So this blond girl was holding hands with a black male. They were just a normal college couple. My friend Brian makes a negative remark about interracial couples. He says they are wrong, should be outlawed, and he not approve of any interracial couples. He said a good white girl that has a boyfriend that is not white is tarnished forever and they dirty. First of all this is an awful thing to say. Anybody should be extremely offended by what he said. Kris just half laughed. Don did not say anything, but I lost it. I was even more offended because one of my sisters had married a man who was Hispanic, Native American, and part black. Basically he had just called my sister dirty and a bad person. I started questioning him in a non-aggressive manner not letting go of my position. He just kept going on about how all of the girls are wrong and bad. So then I said, "So you are telling me to my face that my sister is dirty and a bad person?" He was confused and asked what I was talking about. I got angry and told him about my sister and her husband. He tried to backtrack since I was so angry but he could not. He was like "uh, I didn't mean it like that" or "I didn't mean her" and stuff like that, but I knew he full of garbage. We got into it for a while. Basically it was me yelling at him, but he was apologetic and tried to get out of it. He did not have much to say after that. How could someone be so ignorant? I am still a little fired up about it. One problem is that I would have done what I did if my sister was not in that situation. So maybe I am not the supporter of equality that I think I am. I guess someone should say something no matter what, but I did and I am glad I did. (Dave, WM, 20, Midwest)

The backstage among four white friends is understood to be safe space to make disparaging comments about interracial relationships. The common racial identity (they are all white) may translate to an assumed common racial ideology: it is assumed that the men will all share common racial understandings and beliefs in the backstage.

The racial trigger in this example is observing an interracial couple on campus. Given that the school has few people of color, it can be taken for granted that interracial couples are relatively rare on this campus. Throughout the journals in this sample, hundreds of white men in particular made negative comments about white women involved with Black men. Like Brian, many referred to white women involved with Black men as “race traitors” and as “tainted” or “tarnished forever.” The white women are seen as trading in their white privilege and connections to white male power (Ferber 1998).

Interracial relationships, especially Black-white, are still relatively uncommon (Harrison and Bennett 1995), and not surprising given the strong emotional resistance as illustrated by Brian. Brian could be described as a “border patroller” operating to police the racial borders, often as a means to maintain white institutional power (Dalmage 2000). Especially in Black men-white women intimacies, Black men are seen as a threat to patriarchal whiteness.

Within the four white men, each one of them acts as one of the four different categories of white participants. Brian is the “officiant” performing the principal action; Kris, who just laughs, serves as an “acolyte” supporting the agenda of the officiant; Don acts as a “passive participant” who watches and understands the meaning of the racially hostile conversation. Although Don may feel uncomfortable or may not agree with

Brian, he does not interrupt the interaction. Only Dave acts to actively resist the “racial rite” (Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001: 20). Dave also questions why he felt such a strong emotional connection to fiercely debate his friend, and wonders if it were not personal to him whether he would have still confronted his friend. Many proponents of white antiracism suggest that to get whites involved in the fight for racial equality, the fight needs to be personal in order to develop true empathy (O’Brien 2003).

Brian relies on a stereotype of a “generic interracial relationship” as being dirty, wrong, bad, and generally negative. However when he is confronted with a personal connection, a friend’s sister, Brian tried to backtrack by saying “I didn’t mean her.” As we have seen throughout this project, when whites are confronted with real situations that contradict their stereotype, whites often try to contend with this cognitive dissonance by claiming the example is an exception to the rule, rather than reconstructing the rule.

In this section I have examined that the backstage for whites is considered safe to make disparaging comments (against interracial relationships, Asians, Blacks, Jews), unless someone says otherwise. White skin is often assumed to be a passport into the safe backstage, and a marker for an assumed common racial ideology. The next part under this section of “unreliable safe backstage” looks further at problematizing whiteness.

Not All White: Problematizing Whiteness

“Race” is more than skin-deep or just a matter of skin color. It involves a complex network of physical and cultural racial markers, political and social meanings, and self and perceived identification. In the journal accounts, a few students make disclaimers that they are often assumed to be “white,” but that they are not really “all” white. This is true for students like Dan who identify as white but are also part Chinese. It is also true

for students who are light skinned Latinos, who indicated that they are often presumed to be “just white.”

There were also whites who, often for family or relational reasons, did not “feel” completely white. This was typically the case for students who had stepparents or siblings who were not white, or persons involved in interracial relationships. Meaning, there was nothing in the persons’ physical background to suggest that they would not be anything other than white, but for personal reasons, these students often indicated that they did not identify as completely white. This is different than the research that suggests some whites “play the white ethnic card” in order to distance themselves from the white oppressor label, and ignore their white racial privilege (Gallagher 2003). Often these whites did not deny their white privilege, but accepted it and challenged it in their daily lives.

As described in Chapter 4, the backstage is assumed to be a safe space to relax the frontstage expectations. However, it is not always easy to determine a person’s race, and even if the race can be determined, it does not necessarily mean an inherent agreement about what constitutes appropriate frontstage and backstage behavior. There are numerous examples in my sample of an “unreliable safe backstage” that problematizes whiteness. Typically, Person A will make a racist joke or racist comment, and Person B in the backstage will get angry, hurt, and will “come out” that the comment directly impacts them. For example, Heather describes “coming out” to a white classmate who tells a racist joke in class:

Paul, this white sophomore in one of my classes was telling jokes. He looked at me and told me a racial joke that went like this: “How do you get black people to stop jumping on the beds? You put Velcro on the ceiling.” I looked at him and told him that I found it offensive. He looked at me and told me that I should not because I

am not black. I told him that I had 3 adopted African American sisters and he laughed in my face and thought that I was telling him a joke. I let him know that I was serious and that he should be careful when he's telling racial jokes because he does not know everybody's history, and that it makes him sound uneducated. It makes me upset that people think that they can tell racial jokes simply because you're not the color that they are making fun of. (Heather, WF, 19, Southeast)

This account again illustrates the role of gender and white women in policing the frontstage/backstage boundaries, and the role of "joking" or racial humor. According to Heather, they are not in a safe backstage area. The backstage literally shifts to a frontstage region where the racist joking is no longer appropriate. It is critical to note that in some contexts, this type of joking *is* viewed by such whites as appropriate. Heather does not tell the white male that he should not tell racist jokes. She tells him to "be careful" because he does not know who is safe and not safe in the backstage.

According to Paul, the only people who should be offended at the joke are those that it directly affects. Like so many whites, he does not comprehend that such anti-Black racist thinking could come at a cost to whites as well as to the target group (Feagin 2000). When Heather tells Paul that she has African American sisters, he laughs at her, assuming this type of interracial intimacy must be a joke.

Heather's white skin was a passport into the backstage area, but as she challenged the definition of whiteness, the boundaries shifted and the frontstage crashed in. Other white students used a similar strategy to stop a white person from telling racial jokes:

Some kid was telling us some racist jokes out at the beach one day, and I joked him out by saying that my dad was African-American, which is true (He was born in Liberia. Technically, he's a blind African-American blues musician, but he's white and he can still sorta see, although he's legally blind). Anyhow, the kid started tripping over himself to apologize, which was funny, but I explained to him how he was just born there. I don't know if my explaining myself like that is an example of institutionalized racism, also. It might be, because it's almost like saying "Aha, just got you there! All's well, carry on with your prejudice." Well, through experience, I've found that saying that usually shuts the person up and moves the conversation on to other things, which is good, I guess. (Joe, WM, 20, Southeast)

Like Heather, Joe's white skin is assumed to be a passport to a safe backstage until he problematizes his assumed race by coming out as the child of an African born white man. In this way, Joe uses creative measures to stop the racist joking. He could have just confronted the white man and told him to stop. Heather tried this and the white instigator would not let up. Both Joe and Heather have found this creative approach of relying on African American family members (biological or adopted, Black or white) may be the best method to stop white racism with maximum results and the least amount of effort. Joe alludes to this approach by saying "through experience, I've found that usually shuts the person up."

Joe recognizes that in later revealing that his father is actually white, that he may be redoing the racism he tried to undo: at first he aligned himself with a subordinate group to stop the racist jokes, and then he purposively distanced himself from the same group. Joe rationalizes this as he is still able to get the conversation away from racist joking, which is his main objective.

In both of the accounts written by Joe and Heather, there is the social component to the anti-Black joking. Like so many other accounts have indicated, within this social network it is assumed to be safe to mention racist jokes among whites, unless whites are otherwise stopped. Whites learn and tell these jokes through interactions in social networks that support this racial humor. Unless the backstage boundary is disrupted, it is assumed to be tolerated and is often encouraged.

Joe problematized his whiteness by relying on his father's technical identity. In the next account, Jeff creates a fictive racial identity in order to disrupting the backstage boundary:

After class my roommate and I decided to go to the fish store to look at some fish tanks. I happened to be wearing a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and my baby blue beanie [skull cap]. As I walked in the store, the salesguy looks at me and says, “Don’t only black people wear beanies?” That really upset me. I told him I had family who was black and I actually had some black in me. He says, “Oh, Sorry,” like he owed me an apology or something. I was actually just joking around about it to see what he would say, but boy did I make him feel stupid. (Jeff, WM, 19, Southeast)

Again, the backstage is not only among friends and family, as here a white salesclerk invokes a white backstage conversation by calling out that Jeff’s attire is identified with Blacks. Jeff further identifies himself with the Black community by pretending and telling the white stranger that he is part Black himself.

Jeff says that he told the white stranger this because he was “just joking around” but he also indicated that he was angry at the man. Jeff could be angry at the man because: (1) he made Jeff question his fashion style, and/or (2) he aligned Jeff with Blacks. Jeff may have felt offended to be categorized with Blacks, so he further aligned himself with Blacks as a way to get back at the sales clerk. Whatever Jeff’s motive, he succeeded in making the clerk feel guilty. The clerk apologized, not for making the initial comment to Jeff, but for “getting caught” in an insecure backstage conversation.

Like Heather and Joe, Jeff problematizes his whiteness as a means to teach a white person in the backstage a lesson about making racial comments. These three white students revealed that they were not “all white” and actively created the shift between the unreliable backstage into the frontstage.

Summary

In this chapter, I have examined some of the slippery regions between the front and the backstage. I examined three parts to the context shift. First, I analyzed accounts when whites were able to account for the context shifts (such as when an intruder enters into the backstage, or when whites carefully craft their transitioning performance).

Second, I examined accidental shifts between the boundaries. There were three instances when this most likely occurred: when whites forgot they were not in an all white interaction, when whites were caught by people of color on the periphery of the interaction, and when whites confessed that they forgot (even though they may not have been caught).

The last section of this chapter examined the unreliable safe backstage. I discussed that a secure backstage may not be possible when “whiteness” is a problematic category. I examined two parts in this section: whiteness as a passport into the backstage, and problematizing whiteness. This section illustrates the challenges faced by actors in the interaction when whiteness is assumed and when racial meanings and identifications may be ambiguous.

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this research, I explore the patterns and inconsistencies in the presentation of white racial attitudes across space. Specifically, this project answers the questions how do whites interact among other whites (“backstage”) and how do whites interact among people of color (“frontstage”) in regard to racial matters. I also examine how whites view racial matters generally, rationalize contradictory views, and maintain divisions between the fluid “stage” boundaries and slippery backstage regions. In this final chapter, I review the findings presented in this project, and examine how this research calls for the modification of current theories. The last section of this chapter examines how the findings of this research impact racial relations in the post civil rights era, and the possibilities for future research.

Frontstage, Backstage and Slippage

Within this project, I have described how whites interact in the frontstage in regard to racial and ethnic matters, such as by performing to prove that they are not a racist, and actively avoiding any mention of race or avoiding interactions with persons of color. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, a general rule in the frontstage interactions is that it is not appropriate for whites to express racist sentiments in the frontstage. Many white students expressed a fear of appearing racist in interactions with people of color, and would take measures to convey a non-racist ideology.

I have also described how whites interact in the backstage among only whites. I examined the backstage as a preparation stage for frontstage interactions, but more

commonly it is a safe space from frontstage expectations. The backstage is characterized by normal, expected, and common racial interactions, typical not only among white friends and family, but also with white strangers as evident throughout this dissertation. Within the backstage, it was not uncommon for frontstage expectations to creep in, as illustrated by whites who confront each other about racist comments even when no persons of color were present. There is a clear group dynamic and embedded social network in the backstage, and this will be explored in the next section of this chapter.

The interactions between the frontstage and the backstage regions are strikingly different. This is illustrated in Chapter 5, where I discuss the mechanisms that whites use to protect the backstage boundary when they are physically near a person of color in the frontstage. This protection often included verbal warnings and manipulated language, as well as nonverbal techniques such as avoidance and uncomfortable body language. Some whites did discuss that their interactions were no different between the frontstage and the backstage, but these interactions were rare, and were characterized by discomfort.

This project also examines the “slippage” between the two regions, such as the accidental and accounted for shifts between the frontstage and backstage. In Chapter 6, I analyze white skin as a passport into a backstage conversation, and the potential for tension when whites themselves problematize whiteness. The examination of the manipulations (either accidental or created) between the frontstage and backstage regions, and the embarrassment when the regions shift, illustrates the importance for whites of keeping a backstage safe from intruders.

Most of the descriptions suggest the racial events in the frontstage between whites and people of color are uncomfortable, hostile, and hurtful. Additionally, many of the

interactions in the backstage are racist, manipulative, and calculated. However, this may not tell the complete story of the white college students' interactions. It is possible that many white students had pleasant conversations and interactions with Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, but that they were so commonplace and ordinary that the students felt there was no need to provide the details of these interactions. However, this is unlikely given the research studies that show social segregation of whites from students of color even on multiracial campuses. It also should be mentioned that many students wrote about backstage interactions that did not involve hurtful comments against people of color.

Having said this, it does not negate what the students did write about as presented in this research project. Overall, the journal accounts are written from the perspective of only white college students. Most of the whites in this sample did not give much thoughtful consideration to what people of color would think and feel about their frontstage or backstage interactions. They do not see the world from others' point of view. The spatial dimension of whites everyday racial interactions contribute to this white-only worldview. As noted throughout this dissertation, most whites can structure their daily activities so they never have to interact with people of color (Feagin 1991). Therefore, when whites do interact with one or two people of color, it is tempting to rely on stereotypes or to over-generalize traits to the entire race. These stereotypes act as filters, straining out information that is inconsistent with prevalent themes (Fiske 1993). Like self-fulfilling prophecies, when images fit the stereotype they are reinforced, and images that negate the stereotype are rejected.

Underlying Themes

There are many underlying themes consistent within the racial events outlined in this project that occur in the frontstage, backstage, and slippage regions. In this section, I

describe four prevailing themes: white to black oppression, the role of gender and race, joking and stereotypes, and language.

White-to-Black Oppression

As the United States becomes more multiracial, particularly with the increasing representation of Latinos, scholars are increasingly talking about a shift away from the white-to-black model of oppression (also known as the black-white dichotomy), and toward a three category system (to include Latinos and Asians). Throughout the dissertation sample, many white students did discuss interactions with or stereotyping about Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, Middle-Eastern and Arab persons. These interactions were often geographically determined. For example, there were more racial events involving Native Americans in Wyoming, and Asians in Washington compared to the Southeast and the Midwest.

However, disproportionately as evident in this project, most of the interactions in all geographic regions involved whites commenting about Blacks. Even as contemporary demographics change, some things stay the same, with more than one white person commenting, “Is this 2003 or 1803?” This reference to “historical racism” was particularly prevalent in racial events involving whites’ casual use of the harshest racist epithets (noted in Chapter 6). The students are not simply reproducing inappropriate stereotypes, but the students are actively producing and reproducing white supremacist ideologies. Undeniably, the harshest and most negative comments and events in this dissertation journal involved white racism targeted to Black men and Black women. Thus, clearly, there is a very fundamental character to white-on-black stereotyping in most whites minds, which generally goes beyond the stereotyping of other racial groups.

Gender and Race

Throughout the project, I described the role of gender in whites' everyday racial interactions. Typically gender impacted racial interactions in two direct ways. First, white men tended to instigate and perpetuate backstage racism more than white women. White women more often assumed the role of policing the backstage borders, and holding white men accountable for their racist comments and actions. This finding resonates with other researchers who suggest that white women can more readily empathize with racism by approximating with their experiences with sexism (Feagin and Vera 1995; McIntosh 1998).

Additionally, gender role socialization may account for the differences between white women and men in racial interactions. White women may be more likely to disrupt white men's racist interactions as women's gender socialization includes fostering a nurturing and supportive environment for all participants. On the other hand, men's gender role socialization often includes an autonomous "toughness" or a lack of concern for others, which may account for why more white men perform racist talk and action compared to white women.

In the frontstage interactions between whites and people of color (discussed in Chapter 3), gender role socialization may again account for why more white women utilized strategies such as performing extra politeness and avoiding people of color compared to white men. Although some men reported engaging in avoidance and defensive actions, many more white men reported participating in offensive strategies such as racist joking and hostile confrontation.

Besides white women patrolling white men's racial events, a second gender distinction in the racial interactions is white women indicating their fear of Black men.

Only a few white men in the research sample revealed that they were afraid of Black men, but much more common were white men who suggested that they protect white women from the perceived danger of Black men. This protector role for white men more closely matches the male gender role socialization, so it is not surprising that it is more common for men to report the protector role than admit fear.

White men protecting white women from Black men accomplishes two goals. First, it cements patriarchy by reifying white women's need for white men. Very few white students questioned the assumption that Black men posed a dangerous threat, but instead took this fear as a normal, taken-for-granted assumption. This stereotype of Black men as posing a threat to whites, especially white women, is deeply embedded in the white collective memory as a means to justify white imposed slavery, legal segregation, systematic lynching, and de facto segregation. However, this myth is consistently unfounded, given that the vast majority of violence and rape toward white women is perpetrated by white men (intra-racial, not inter-racial) (Feagin 2000). Within the white college students in this sample, statistically, most of the white women should be more worried about defending themselves from their white male protector, rather than the mythical Black criminal male.

Second, white men protecting white women from Black men discourages any intimate relationships between whites and Blacks, maintaining white racial purity. Most contemporary inter-racial relationships between whites and African Americans are between Black men and white women (as opposed to Black women and white men) (Dalmage 2000). Therefore, white men actively keeping white women afraid of Black men maintains racial isolation and segregation.

Joking and Stereotypes

A third theme throughout the backstage and frontstage is the role of joking. This includes comments made in a joking way, as well as explicit racist jokes. As mentioned throughout the dissertation, joking operates to “test the waters” of a topic, and it serves to decrease accountability. Under the guise of “just kidding,” comments can be tossed around without consequence to the white instigator.

Throughout the journal accounts, most of the joking comments revealed very old racial stereotypes. The stereotypes were not invented by the white students, but most referenced and reinforced age-old stereotypes such as the “industrious Asian,” “cheap Jew,” or “criminal Black.” Although many whites claimed to be “equal opportunity” racists through their humor, almost none of the racial joking committed by whites was directed at mainstream Anglo-Saxon-Protestant whites.

As noted in Chapter 3, racist joking was sometimes used in the frontstage directly at persons of color. However, more often, racist joking was reserved for backstage interactions, away from the racial target. When whites were “caught” making a racist comment or joke such as in an unsafe backstage, most whites revealed that the negative stereotype did not directly apply to the person of color in front of them. For many whites, racist jokes often applied to a “generic” person of color. However, given the spatial dimension of racial interactions, many whites admitted only relying on the “generic” person of color as they did not regularly interact with people of color.

Most whites know the frontstage expectation is to not make racist comments. As many whites have very few frontstage interactions, they do not often “practice” being non-racist. Many whites claimed that they did not know very many people of color, as they actively avoided people of color. For example, Mick (WM, 19, Midwest) noted that

the journal writing activity made him aware of how little contact he has with people of color, and admitted, “I shy away from diversity because I was afraid. I know this sounds stupid, but I was afraid of being accused of being racist that I would avoid confrontation whenever possible.” The white students comment not only about the lack of interaction with many people of color, but also relying on gross stereotypes for information. As presented in Chapter 6, Jacob admitted, “Every time I’ve met black people on campus that I did not previously know, I would think of them as lazy or unintelligent.” Many whites admit that they do not have *any* meaningful interactions with people of color, so relying on stereotypes is often their only source of knowledge. As whites do not know many people of color, and know little about the group beyond gross stereotypes, it makes sense why racist joking is so prevalent in the backstage.

Joking is a very effective method of perpetuating racist fun for three critical reasons. First, the content of the racist jokes actively conveys the sentiments of racism, and perpetuates the racial hierarchy that keeps whites at the top. In order for jokes to be effective, it must resonate with or make sense to the listener. There must be a common culture and language between the joke teller and the listener, in order for the joke to make sense (which accounts for why it is often impossible to translate jokes across languages). This common ideology explains why so many contemporary racist jokes utilize centuries old racist stereotypes. Many white students in the sample told or heard jokes with the punch line referencing African Americans eating watermelon or stealing televisions. These jokes “make sense” as they resonate with the white collective memory of Blacks as lazy and Blacks as criminal (Bogle 2001). Imagine a joke with the punch line referencing “cheap African Americans” or “lazy Jews.” These analogies do not make sense within

the racist stereotyping, and they never appeared in the 626 white student journals. However, jokes made in the reverse about “lazy African Americans” and “cheap Jews” were very common as there is a common racist foundation to support the jokes.

A second reason why racist joking is so prevalent among whites is because it minimizes and dismisses the racial comments. Racial ideologies are exchanged and perpetuated, while simultaneously dismissed as “it was just a joke” and not meant to be taken seriously. As the goal, racial joking often slips under the radar of active consciousness (or so many whites claim). Numerous students in the sample reflected that they never realized how frequently racist jokes were exchanged, until they were asked to critically deconstruct their everyday worlds.

A third reason why racist joking is so effective is that *if* (I purposely state “*if*” and not “*when*” as racist jokes are not commonly challenged in backstage interactions) racist jokes are challenged, explanations are often reverted back to the protester of racist jokes, rather than the perpetrators. An empathic white who interrupts racist joking very often has to answer questions such as, “What’s the matter with you? It’s only a joke. It isn’t doing anyone any harm. Don’t you have a sense of humor?” Instead of the joke teller being held accountable for the racist jokes, typically it is the challenger who must defend the confrontation.

Joking and racial humor are complicated when it is also used to undermine racist stereotypes. Stand up comedians, popular television shows (such as *South Park*, and *Chappell’s Show*) and interracial friendships often use racist joking in a sarcastic manner to illustrate the absurdity of the stereotype. As Olivia notes in Chapter 3, racial joking is also used to show how close the friendship is to allow the racist joking. The context of

racial joking is critical: it depends on who uses it and how it is used. Many whites have a firm grip on the sincere fiction that the racial playing ground is equal (Feagin and Vera 1995). As such, when whites hear Black people in the mass media (often not in person) refer to each other using the term “nigger” as a means to reclaim the harshest of racist epithets, they truly do not understand that using this same term in an all white backstage setting can be problematic.

Language

I mentioned in the last chapter that when I first started reading the white students’ journals, that I was astonished at the racist language that was so casually used by hundreds of whites across the U.S. Much of the language used by whites today in the backstage harkens back to the overt, blatant racism of the Pre-Civil Rights Era. Although all people of color were targets of racist language, the heaviest brunt was against Blacks. In this sample, hundreds of whites referred to Blacks as “niggers” or “Negroes.” Whites also utilized direct comparisons with Black men and Black women as: (1) animals, (2) criminals, (3) feces, (4) dangerously violent, (5) sexually available, and (6) welfare leeches. These underlying metaphors were not accidentally or occasionally used, but were consistently and artfully woven throughout the accounts. It was not uncommon for whites, especially white men, in backstage groups to spend time and energy inventing new racist language (such as “rotchie” as noted in Chapter 4).

Within backstage groups, whites rehearsed and performed racist language, jokes, and stereotypes, and actively taught the white code language to other whites. As well as using overtly racist terms, whites also used vague language and code language to convey racial messages in both the frontstage and an insecure backstage. For example, whites commonly used phrases that dichotomized “us” versus “them” (such as “those people” in

“our [white] store,” as noted by Jerry in Chapter 5). Whites often utilized apparently colorblind statements (“it’s not race, its gender”), and even corrected other whites who violated the colorblind goal. Using colorblind language is further explored in the theoretical section of this chapter.

When whites were caught using racist language, such as in an unreliable safe backstage (Chapter 6), it often was not the language that was considered problematic, but the context in which the language was used. Whites would often warn each other when using racist language was not appropriate, such as cautioning when a person of color was nearby, or when a person might be mistaken for a “safe white.” The implicit message that these white students are giving one another is clear: it is not the racist language itself that is problematic, but the context in which racist language is used that may be problematic. In other words, there were many contexts in which using racist language was appropriate; in many backstage settings, it was tolerated, expected, and encouraged.

For many whites in the backstage, racist language was excused with the claim that it was not hurting anyone. Even for whites who reported feeling offended at racist language, the vast majority took no accountability for correcting or challenging the racist language. Ultimately, in the majority of the accounts, the onus of responsibility for challenging and confronting racism was people of color who were actively and purposely denied access to the backstage. Backstage racist language was only consistently addressed when people of color were accidentally privy to a backstage conversation (as when the borders were not patrolled, or when whites forgot there was a person of color present).

Theoretical Implications

Having outlined briefly the descriptive findings of the frontstage and backstage, and the prevalent themes in the regions, I now discuss the theoretical implications of the racial events analyzed in this study. I revisit the extended case method, and examine how the descriptive findings of backstage and frontstage interactions impact research on: (1) the individual attributes (agency) and social networks (structure) of racial relations, and (2) colorblind racism.

Extended Case Method

In Chapter 2, I explained that this study utilizes the extended case method (Burawoy et al. 1991), where categories that emerge from the data are compared to pre-existing theoretical frameworks as a means to verify, extend, or reconstruct existing theories of racial issues and development. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, a guiding framework for this project, emphasizes a deliberate dichotomy between the "frontstage" and "backstage" regions. Based on the data presented, conceptualizing racial events along these discrete categories may be too simplistic as there are many underlying dimensions in the backstage. The backstage may be better understood as a fluid category allowing for slippage, accidental and deliberate, between the frontstage and backstage. The backstage is not a homogenous arena, as there are varying levels of privateness and publicness to the backstage.

Goffman notes the performativity that defines the frontstage interactions, and I note whites' performance (typically acting extra polite, or appropriating racial assumptions) in the frontstage. However, there is also a layer of performance in the backstage among whites as well. For example, in Chapter 4, Trevor writes about his white friends transitioning from making fun of Jews, to Blacks, to Italians and finally Latinos. These

men are not telling racist jokes to pass the time, but they are performing for each other, and creatively fleshing out the details (such as describing the details of the ribbon and lace on a basket filled with kittens, all while conveying the message of “You’re a Nigger”).

Although not as common as performances in the frontstage, there is also accountability in the backstage, such as white women who hold white men accountable for their racist actions. Perhaps instead of conceptualizing racial events in categories of frontstage, backstage, and the slippage between the regions, the backstage may need to be further broken down into “front-backstage,” such as whites who bring frontstage expectations into the backstage as when whites hold each other accountable as they would in a frontstage.

Beyond Individual Attributes: Collaborative Social Networks

Throughout this dissertation, I note that most whites did not, or could not, conceptualize racial relations at the macro-level. Most whites could only think about their interactions at the micro-level, revealing an individualistic (as opposed to structural) perspective of racial relations. The white college students actively suppressed any recognition of how their individual actions may contribute to the larger social network and structural component of racial relations.

In the sample, whites often used individual character attributes to signal, or excuse, racist tendencies. Two common responses from the white students illustrated this only micro-level focus of racial relations. First, many whites claimed that an individual who was polite in the frontstage to a person of color was a non-racist individual. This also included whites who relied on one or two Black “friends” to indicate that they could not be a racist person. As noted in this project, researchers have questioned the many whites

who claim to have many Black friends, but in practice can only identify white friends (Bonilla Silva 2001). For many whites, having one or two Black friends or acquaintances may allow them to tell racist jokes with a clear conscience: they cannot be racist if they have Black friends.

Second, many whites claimed that they or their friends who make racist comments were ultimately not racist individuals. In this research, I compare this to a “good” nonracial core that happens to have a “bad” racist appendage. Many whites went to great measures to prove they were not a racist, acknowledging that a racist identity for most was a very negative thing. When whites did indicate who they thought were racist individuals, many used popular images of extreme racists such as Klansmen wearing white robes and burning crosses.

Most whites in the sample minimized or denied individual agency to the contribution of the larger racial social structure. Although most whites did not acknowledge the social network of racial relations, the accounts provided by the students illustrate that racist actions in the backstage were viewed as normal, natural, and common. Much of whites’ backstage interactions were defended, justified, and rationalized. For example, racist joking was often excused and dismissed as “just fun” that did not hurt anyone.

Whites’ racist action has a repertoire of verbal and body language (noted especially in Chapters 3 and 5); it is shared, learned, and reinforced within the white social networks, and with whites’ collaboration. This networking of learning and sharing is a critical dimension to the racist action. Throughout the journal accounts, there is in actuality no racist *individual*, but social networks and groups that support the racial

hierarchy. The white students are not inventing racist concepts and jokes, but are actively relying on centuries-old deeply embedded and institutionalized racist ideologies. Even the whites that are inventing racist terms (like “rotchie”) are typically working in groups and relying on the preexisting underlying racist metaphors. Within white social networks, the white college students are learning, teaching, and reinforcing racial ideas, language, actions, behaviors and emotions.

Whites commonly acknowledged that even in a secure backstage the racial interactions were not appropriate. In the backstage, disclaimers were often made such as “that is wrong” (as Trevor notes in Chapter 4), and whites purposively waited for a person of color to leave (as noted in Chapter 5) before continuing with their racial event, illustrating the recognition that certain comments were not acceptable. Even though most whites recognize that the racist interactions are not appropriate, within the white social network, there is a clear expectation that racist fun will not be interrupted in the backstage. As noted in Chapter 6, it is assumed that the backstage is safe to make racist comments, unless cautioned otherwise. The inclusion of white strangers into the backstage, with their white skin passport, provides further credence to the shared assumptions in the white social network.

Within the white social network, individuals often acknowledge the inappropriate nature of backstage racial events, yet there is great social pressure not to disrupt the racial interaction. As I have noted throughout this project, the majority of white students did not confront other whites in the backstage, even when they wanted to. For many of the whites who did challenge backstage racial comments, they described needing support from other sympathetic whites who may have lacked the courage to confront themselves.

Beyond Colorblind Racism

Throughout the journals, whites indicate that they strive to maintain a goal of colorblindness. For many whites, the goal is to operate on the assumption that race and ethnicity is optional, and that to eliminate racial inequalities, whites should simply ignore race. In a vacuum this may work, but in a social world where racial hierarchies embed every social institution, this becomes impossible. Whites may strive to ignore race at the micro level, yet they still operate in a white (macro-level) world, and carry around racist thoughts, images, and stereotypes.

As whites strive for colorblindness in the frontstage, and even in the backstage, the reality of the normal backstage racial inequalities creates undeniable tension for many whites. For most whites, even when participating in a backstage that included racist jokes or joking, there was still recognition that the racial performance was inappropriate or wrong. In order to contend with cognitive dissonance, many whites attempted to downplay the interactions, such as calling it humor, or rationalize that it was not hurting anyone. Whites also attempted to shift the focus away from race, and onto other structural features such as gender or social class. For example, operating within colorblind racism, many white women claim that their fear of Black men is due to “gender, not race,” or when following and profiling Black women while shopping, it is due to her “social class, not race.”

The concept of colorblindness or colorblind racism is evident in the data, but the terminology of “colorblindness” may be problematic. As presented throughout this project, the students’ journals are more than colorblind. They still operate in a white world, and most racial joking is not colorblind, but race specific (white racism targeted to people of color, particularly Black men and Black women). The white social networks

still perpetuates a social structure that directly benefits them and places them at the top of the racial hierarchy (that whites created and actively maintain).

On the surface, racial relations have changed, as less openly racist epithets are tolerated and expected in the frontstage, but this is not always true in the backstage, where racist epithets are supported and often encouraged. As colorblindness is the goal on the surface in the frontstage but is far from true in the backstage, perhaps a clearer terminology is “two-faced racism.” The term *two-faced racism* more accurately reflects the different expectations and manifestations of racial relations in the frontstage with people of color, compared to the backstage among only whites. As an alternative to colorblindness, *two-faced racism* more readily highlights that racial interactions for whites are often: (1) hypocritical in nature, and (2) dependent on where the racial event is socially located. More importantly, *two-faced racism* suggests that even the “nice, polite” performance in the frontstage still contributes to the structural racial hierarchy.

Future Research in the Post Civil Rights Era

Hope for the Future

Throughout this project, the vast majority of the journal accounts and analysis are downright depressing. However, there is a glimmer of hope for backstage and frontstage interactions that can be gleaned from this project. As mentioned previously, most of the whites in this sample took their white world for granted. When asked to reflect on their everyday lives and deconstruct what they consider to be “normal” interactions, many white students responded with genuine shock at the number and substance of the racist comments that they took for granted. In using student journal writing as a data gathering tool, it required students to critically examine their own normalized experiences. As this project has attempted to illustrate, racial relations would benefit from mandating that

whites in the Post Civil Rights Era critically examine their own everyday experiences. Too often well-meaning whites agree that racism is a problem with *other* whites, but never take the next difficult step to analyze how they themselves may be contributing to the racist hierarchy.

Additional hope can be found in the number of white students in the sample who reflected the tension in wanting to fight for racial equality, even in small ways such as confronting their friends, yet who may not have had the courage to speak out. Perhaps in seeing how other whites confronted their friends even in backstage group dynamics (such as in Chapter 4), it can provide inspiration to other whites who understand that everyday racist comments do support the racial hierarchy.

Future Research

This project has attempted to better comprehend what is happening in the everyday world, descriptively and analytically, as a means to understand systemic racial relations and the racialized social structure. Future projects will consider comparing the journals of white students to their students of color counterparts.

There is still much critical and exciting research to be conducted on specifically whites' racial attitudes and how whites interact in the frontstage and backstage in regard to racial matters. This project utilizes journal accounts, and the data are limited to a one-sided conversation, where, as the researcher, I do not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. Future research projects could triangulate journal writing with in-depth personal interviews, as a means to further clarify the data gathered.

Through interviews, there is the possibility to get a better sense of the type of students who are keeping the journals, and which type of students are not represented. Interview questions could also access data that are not readily apparent in the journals,

such as where the students learn racial attitudes and comments, and what motivates their backstage interactions, such as racist joking.

I mentioned that some of the students presented contradictory information, such as Carol in Chapter 5, who confronted her boss about making a racist comment, but not a store manager at a clothing store. Through interviews, we could directly ask why some whites police racial activities in some situations but not in others. Knowing what causes whites to confront racism, and what hinders whites from challenging racism, would better enable whites' preparation to protest racist events that they encounter.

Expanding the sample is another possibility for future research projects on whites' racial attitudes and interactions. This project examines only white college students, most in the traditional age range of 18 to 25. It would be interesting to compare this sample to older adults, as well as younger students, such as those in high school. Also, most of the students in this sample are coming from two-year colleges to prestigious state universities, but none of the students are from the very elite schools such as the Ivy League. Comparisons could also be made with persons who are not afforded the opportunity to attend college, such as working class whites (although many students in this sample identified as being in the working class or middle class). Future projects could also further explore geographical differences. This project is heavily dominated by white students in the Southeast and Midwest, so subsequent studies could further examine whites in the Northeast and West.

Throughout this dissertation and especially in Chapter 5, I note the importance of language in the backstage, such as whites whispering, or using vague and coded language to convey racial ideologies. Many scholars argue that language does not merely convey

preexisting ideas, but it actively constructs thought as noted in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf 1956). Given this, more work needs to be done on the racial language whites' use. For example, scholars could examine the shared assumptions and prevalent metaphors whites utilize in the backstage.

Racial events involve not only cognitive and behavioral processes, but also fierce emotional responses as well. Many of the white students revealed a range of neutral or negative emotions, such as feeling indifferent, guilty, angry, afraid, or disgusted when interacting with people of color in the frontstage. Although emotions were often at the forefront of whites' everyday experiences with racial events, only a few scholars have critically examined this emotional dimension (Feagin 1997; Helms 1990; O'Brien 2001). Experiences with racial events are experienced at both the cognitive and emotional level, for both the victim and the instigator. There is still much work to be accomplished in order to better understand whites' racial attitudes, interactions, and emotions in the backstage and frontstage.

APPENDIX A JOURNAL INSTRUCTIONS

Instructions

Oftentimes, with regards to racial issues, what we say and do in the “backstage” (or private) area is very different from what we say and do in the public “frontstage.” Racial issues are an ever-present factor of our everyday lives, yet we often ignore race, talk around it, or only mention it in private settings. This exercise will require you to think beyond your everyday interactions, and analyze “your everyday world” as a social scientist.

The goal of this study is to examine what really goes on in our everyday “backstage” lives with regards to what we think, act, and say about racial matters. You will be asked to keep a journal of your observations of everyday events and conversations that deal with racial issues, images, and understandings. You should look for incidents involving not only whites and blacks, but also other racial groups such as Asian Americans, Latinos, and Middle-Eastern Americans. The issues do not have to be *racist*, but just when race and ethnicity comes up (or does not come up).

Unobtrusive Participant Observation

In your observations, please use unobtrusive research techniques so that the person(s) you write about in your journal will not be aware that they are being studied. In other words, you may *not* interview anyone you observe as a researcher, but you may interact with people as you usually would.

Please be detailed in your accounts, yet to ensure anonymity, it is important that you conceal all identities (even your own) and disguise all names of persons you write about. Even though there will be no identifying markers in the journal, please keep your journal in a safe, private space so that it is not read by others. Before you turn in your journals, please include the cover page provided to you.

Writing Up Your Observations

In your journal, you will be asked to emphasize: (1) your observations, and (2) your reactions and perceptions to these everyday events. Please note details, such as: are you observing a middle aged white female, or a teenage Asian American male? It is helpful to note the approximate age, race, and gender of each person you mention in your journal.

As well as noting *what* happened, be sure to note *where* the observations took place, *when* it took place (such as was it on a Saturday night? On your Tuesday lunch break?), and *with whom* you were with. Often these dimensions of time, place, and other actors are critical when people feel comfortable talking about race and when people do not mention race. When you are “in the field,” ask yourself, would this happen if the time or place was different? Ask yourself if this person would make such a comment if the people involved were different (such as, if this person were in a mixed race group, or with all Latinos).

It will also be key to note any “race triggers” that you notice. For example, are there objects or people that trigger when people talk about race? In the sample journal entry below, the student mentions that ribs, a race neutral food item, triggers her father to talk about Blacks:

March 3, 2002

I went home to South Florida to visit my family for Spring Break. At dinner, my father...kept making remarks about black people, saying things like, "I love ribs, maybe I have a little brotha in me! What do you think about that?" He made comments like this because he knows that it makes me angry and he thinks because I am only twenty that I don't know anything about what black people are really like. I am having a hard time figuring out what to say to him when he makes these horrible comments and I am planning on going home [back to the University] sooner than I thought I would because of this.

When writing down your observations, be sure to be detailed in your comments on the manner and way in which people interact. Such as if someone makes a comment sarcastically, or whispers certain words that deal with race, be sure to note the sarcasm or volume change. Be sure to note occasions when race is brought up unexpectedly. For example:

It was about 12:30am after a busy Saturday night; the restaurant was closed, and most of the (white) servers had either gone home, or were in the back of the restaurant finishing their chores. The front of the restaurant was empty except the bartender who was near the front entrance of, and I was in the back (near the restrooms) cleaning tables. A fellow server approached me, and as he waited for me to finish refilling a salt container, he told me in an animated voice that he had a great night and even got a compliment. His voice then dropped and he whispered, "and they were black!" It is intriguing that he would lower his voice considering I was the only person in the restaurant within hearing distance.

Also be sure to note the occasions when race is blatantly ignored:

January 28, 2002

Monday night I was with a group of girlfriends (4 white, 1 Latina) watching tv. Sue [not her real name] mentioned another girl, Betty, and was trying to describe to the other girls who Betty is. I should mention Betty is from Korea. Sue described her as kinda short, ponytail, and works out around the same time that we do (which describes just about every girl at [our school]!!). I don't know why Sue didn't mention she is Asian—it would have made describing her a lot easier.

If you are finding that you have not noticed any racial issues to write about, write that down as well! Jot down what you did that day (did you go to the gym, go to class,

have lunch with three white friends, then hit the library). Be sure to include the racial composition of the people you interacted with (such as, “all whites,” “mostly whites” or “group mix of Asians and Blacks”). In Sociology, often even “no data” are data! Be sure to put on your sociological imagination and think critically of what you observe.

When Should I Write?

If you can, you should jot down your notes as quickly after your observations, so the details will be fresh in your mind. You will be surprised how quickly you will forget key details if you do not jot it down right away. You should make it a point to write in your journal at least once a day, even to note that you did not observe any racially connected events.

How Should the Journal Look?

Your initial notes to remind yourself of what you saw may certainly be handwritten scribbles on small scraps of paper. You may find it useful to carry small pads of paper around to jot down notes to yourself. If at all possible, I would prefer for your notes to be typed, and on a disk or via an email attachment if you can. Please be sure that your journals (if they are handwritten) are legible to read, and are written on regular notebook paper and not small note pads.

Be sure to note the date that you are writing the journal entries, and the date and time when the incidents took place. I understand that college students lead very busy lives, so I do not expect you to be able to write in your journal immediately; just be sure that at some point each day you systematically write in your journal.

Each journal entry should be at least half a page or more. Oftentimes with racial issues, people feel afraid to say or do “the wrong thing.” Keep in mind there are no “right” or “wrong” responses, and your journal entries will be completely anonymous, so

there are no “mistakes” that you can make while writing in your journal. You will not be graded on your observations or your reactions to your observations.

How Will I Be Graded?

Your instructor will determine what credit you will receive for participating in this project. She or he will also determine for how long you will be asked to keep a journal and the length required of each journal entry to merit credit. Again, you will not be graded on “what” you see (so please do not make up any data), rather you will be evaluated on the quality and detail of your systematic observations and field notes.

Is This Voluntary?

Yes. All students who participate in the journal-writing activity and who agree to share their journals with me for the dissertation project will be asked to sign an IRB Informed Consent form. You have the option of participating in the journal writing assignment for your class, but not signing an IRB Informed Consent form, in which case your journals will not be used or analyzed for the project, ensuring voluntary participation. In other words, even if the journal writing assignment is an assignment for your course grade, you are still given the choice whether or not to participate in the study, with no penalty for your decision.

What Will the Data Be Used For?

This study is part of a larger dissertation project involving students across the nation. The data collected in this project may lead to publications such as articles and books on racial issues.

What If I Have Questions?

You will have the opportunity to meet regularly with your instructor to ensure all your questions and concerns are answered. If you have additional questions at any time,

please contact Leslie Houts, M.A. [contact information removed]. I will be happy to answer any questions that you have regarding this study.

More Sample Journal Entries

From a Black Female College Student:

January 13, 2002

Today I went to Joann Fabrics to pick up some items for the quilt that I have been making. My white roommates and I were being our normal silly selves. After picking out our purchases and waiting in line, the white sales associate began chatting with my roommate. Their conversation was light and cheerful. Next I came with my spool of thread, and I noticed a distinct change in reception. The sales associate did not bother to talk to me and when my purchases were completed she waited until my debit card was approved before bagging my purchases. After bagging she pointed to the forms on the side of the desk and said that I should consider entering my name in the box in order to receive coupons. I was kind of shocked and quiet afterwards. When we got in the car, I asked my roommates if they had noticed anything different about the way the sales associate treated me. Mia affirmed that she noticed the cashier's coolness and was surprised about the coupon comment. Lara on the other hand did not agree and she claimed I was being overly sensitive and taking things "way out of context."

From a White Male College Student:

February 22, 2002

Tonight my friends (all white) and I ate dinner at a nice restaurant. We were talking about the fact that my grandfather is from Iraq so I am part Iraqi. A little later, someone asked my friend Dan what he was going to do after he graduated from [college] this summer. He pointed at me and said, "I'm going to join the army and shoot towel-heads." I let him know that I was really offended by that comment. After that, I didn't feel much like being there. I was in a bad mood the rest of the night.

From a Black Female College Student:

March 18, 2002

While I was getting ready for bed, my roommate (white) and I were talking about this class and journal writing and we got into a conversation on privilege. Becky said she attributes her willingness and openness to view the hardships and oppressions of others to seeing the movie "Ghandi" when she was in middle school. She said she couldn't understand why access to normal human functions were not available just because of a person's skin color or social position. She said,

“It hurt and it made me want to understand and do something about it.” She admitted that she had a long way to go and was nowhere near where she should be in regards to being more racially accepting. I think that having knowledge of the inconsistencies and the privileges her skin affords her, is the first step to become an activist for equal rights.

Cover Page

Thank you for participating in this research! I hope you found it enlightening to record your observations on everyday racial matters that we often take for granted.

Your journals will be kept completely confidential. I will be the only one reading it, and I will change your name to a pseudonym for use in the research. I ask for your real name only on this cover sheet so I can make sure I have your signed IRB form (required to participate in this study). If your instructor is offering credit for participating in this research, I will send the names of all those who have completed the journals, along with the number and length of the journals, to your instructor.

Please complete the following information and attach this form before submitting your journals.

Name: _____

Gender: _____ Race: _____

Age: _____ (Optional) Sexual Orientation: _____

Do you have any comments you would like to convey to me? _____

Are you interested in being interviewed for this project? YES or NO

If so, please provide your contact information:

Email: _____

Phone Number (include area code): _____

Thank you! If you have any comments or questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

APPENDIX B
EXIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

Thank you again for encouraging your students to participate in this project. I would appreciate any feedback you can offer regarding the journal assignment in your class. I realize how busy professors are, so even a short response to a few of the questions below would be appreciated. I can be reached at [contact information removed]. Thank you again!

Questions

Assignment

Did you modify the assignment from what was described on the instruction sheet (asking for racial and ethnic accounts from their everyday lives)? If so, how? If it's easier to attach your syllabus or instructions, please feel free to do so.

How long did you ask your students to keep a journal? Were they instructed to keep the journal for a certain length of time, or did were they asked to write a certain number of entries?

During the time when students were asked to keep a journal, did you ask your students to keep a journal everyday, or to write when they "noticed" race?

Grading

Were the students graded on the assignment? Was it for a required assignment or for extra credit?

Was the assignment worth a certain percentage of the students' overall grade? If it was for extra credit, approximately how much was it worth?

If the students received credit for this assignment (either course grade, or extra credit), how did you determine the grade?

Submission

Could you briefly describe to me how the students submitted the journals? In other words, did you collect the journals, grade them, give them back to the students, then ask if they wanted to give them to me? Or when the students submitted them to you, they knew they were giving them to me? (I am curious if the grade a student received affected their likelihood to submit their journal to me.)

Rates of Participation and Submission

Approximately what percentage of your students submitted their journals to you?
Approximately what percentage of your students submitted their journals to me?

General Impressions

What was the general student reaction to the journal writing assignment? Was it positive? Negative?

What is your reaction to the journal writing assignment? Do you have any comments or feedback for me?

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Leslie Ann Houts was born and raised in Northern Virginia. She attributes her educational success to her supportive parents, Betty and Robert Houts, who stressed education and the desire to keep learning. She has three talented siblings scattered across the country: older sister Dawn in Alexandria VA, older brother Bobby in Tucson AZ, and younger sister Julie in Philadelphia PA.

Leslie graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg VA in 1997. After a brief stint working in real estate in Washington, D.C., she returned to her passion of learning and matriculated to the University of Florida in 1998. She earned her master's degree from the Department of Sociology in 2000, and her Ph.D. in 2004. Her areas of specialization are race, gender, and sexuality. As well as keeping an active research agenda, she has a passion for teaching and has had the privilege to teach at the University of Florida, Flagler College (St. Augustine, FL), and the University of Cincinnati.

She currently lives in Cincinnati, OH, with her biggest supporters Michael Picca and their cat Abby.