

FACING OFF IN A SOUTHERN TOWN:
BLACK AND WHITE PERSPECTIVES ON RACE AND RACISM

By

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by

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There have been many qualitative race studies that have analyzed racial groups and their experiences and perspectives separately. However, throughout the history of the United States, and especially in the South, the dynamics of race and racist ideologies and practice have greatly affected both whites and people of color in often balancing ways. Therefore this study, which focuses on one Southern town comprised of about fifty percent white residents and fifty percent black residents, analyzes the memories and perspectives of both white and black adult interviewees on local past and current racial relations. This study also further roots its analysis in place by discussing local racially charged incidents over the years by using local newspaper articles and other documented resources.

This analysis concludes that white residents claim to have very short, vague memories of living during the Jim Crow era of segregation. On the other hand, black residents reveal strong, detailed memories of their experiences under segregation and

how they have been affected throughout their lives by racism. Black interview respondents are adept at making connections between forms of racism in the past and current structures of oppression, however subtle.

This work also utilizes interview data with black residents to discuss the cumulative effects that discrimination has on its targets. Some adapted ways of coping with racism are highlighted, including tactics used by parents in preparing their children for lives in a racially discriminatory world. Additionally, white adults' imperceptions of discrimination's cumulative effects are analyzed, as well as whites' difficulty in or resistance to trusting the claims of blacks.

This one town is presented as representative of the state of racial relations in the South. It is concluded that symbols of a legacy of a white-controlled, oppressive political and economic structure still dominate the landscape, many of them tangible. In addition, residential, economic, and social segregation by race are still commonplace today, though current adult residents have very different viewpoints on how much positive progress toward racial relations has been achieved.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: VALDOSTA IS THE SOUTH

Contemporary Valdosta, Georgia, is in many ways strikingly similar to the research site John Dollard (1949) dubbed “Southerntown” in his book *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. He described the early-1900s small town as being bisected by a railroad that divided the white and black sides of town. The white side of town featured manicured lawns and well-kept homes and streets, while the rundown streets on the black side were lined with dilapidated small houses, with people sitting on front porches to keep cool in the summer heat. Also like Valdosta, Southerntown was the county seat. Southerntown, with its caste-like social barriers between white and black residents, represents Valdosta’s past and much of its present racial condition.

Valdosta is a small city of 43,724 people nestled in rural Lowndes County in south central Georgia. Its racial makeup is largely binary, with 47.7 percent white and 48.5 percent black residents. The population of surrounding Lowndes County is about one-third black and two-thirds white, with the next largest racial/ethnic group being Latino, at less than 3 percent. Black and white Valdostans are polarized geographically by residency, socially by minimal interactions across race, and also socioeconomically. While 12.6 percent of white Valdostans live below the poverty line, over 36 percent of blacks are below the poverty line. Median income rates further reflect these striking differences, with the median family income of black Valdosta families being significantly less than half the level of white families.

After having made initial contact with the local antiracist organization Project Change and hearing talk of deeply ingrained racism maintained by an influential, white “good ole boys network,” I began my research in Valdosta with an idea about the white residents’ attitudes toward race. Having grown up in the rural South, I was intimately familiar with super friendly people who are experts at hiding a whole host of stereotypes and ugly feelings behind their smiling faces and charming southern drawls. Living my first 18 years with only white classmates and neighbors, I also was very aware that notions of racial superiority ease a white mind, validating the goodness of whites and somehow not contradicting a good Christian upbringing.

Through my numerous visits to Valdosta, I eventually came to like the little city with the small town feel. There is a certain charm in its downtown sector with one-way roads and little shops and in its tree-shaded streets lined with renovated old two-story homes around the university. Even one of my most pessimistic African American interviewees told me her life as an assertive, educated black woman in Valdosta had been very hard, yet she still saw it as a wonderful place to raise her children. In his book on the area, historian Louis Schmier (1988), utilizing a former Valdosta city motto, proclaimed the setting “A Ray in the Sunbelt.” However, my conclusions about racial relations in Valdosta in many ways present the south Georgia area as quite the opposite.

I present Valdosta as a representative of the state of racial relations and understanding in the contemporary South. It is a place deeply marred by past and present racism, but white and black residents have differing views on racism. White Valdostans unreflectively see racism and discrimination as things of the past, while the accounts black Valdostans assert that racism is alive and well and has multifaceted, cumulative

effects on its targets. I propose that because whites in Valdosta have never had to be as cognizant of their racial categorization as blacks, they are effectively unable and often unwilling to understand racism and its wide-reaching consequences. Whites and African Americans I interviewed live and work in the same small city yet have entirely different perspectives on racism and racial relations in Valdosta. These differing perspectives are a formidable barrier to constructive communication, positive change, and a truly harmonious racial atmosphere.

A Historical Backdrop

Valdosta was established as the county seat of Lowndes County in 1860 and became a major transportation hub, being located on the east-west Albany & Gulf Railroad system (and now on north-south Interstate 75). Lowndes County relied partly on slavery to become a major producer of agricultural goods before emancipation, and so its way of life in many ways has always revolved around white-black relations.

In antebellum Lowndes County, economics revolved around farming. Small farmers raised corn and stock, and large farmers and slaveholders grazed beef and grew rice and cotton on the fertile hammock land. At the onset of the Civil War, there were 29 plantations in the county (Schmier 1988). When the Civil War ended, Lowndes County's white residents shared the apprehensive sentiment of whites across the South toward the emancipation of slaves. Louis Schmier's (1988) book on the historical development of Valdosta and Lowndes County utilized interview data with residents to conclude:

The ultimate price of defeat . . . was emancipation. Having over 2,400 ex-slaves "runnin' around without a wit of control" not only sent shudders of fear through the population, but it struck at the very soul of society. With "bitter apprehension," white residents constantly saw schemes designed to strip them of their rights and to make them grovel "at Sambo's feet." . . . There was little the people could do to protect their civilization. They could only watch helplessly as the fabric of their way of life unraveled. Freedmen no longer instantly obeyed orders; they voted

contrary to the wishes of the white residents; they roamed wherever and whenever they wished; they refused to work as wage hands in gangs; they would not go into the fields for 16 hours a day; they would not work on Saturdays; and women and children refused to work. When the freedmen no longer acted as obedient and submissive slaves, white residents labeled them idle, lazy, unreliable, irresponsible, ignorant, ungrateful, incompetent, and burdensome. (p. 25-28)

Schmier (1988) takes extremely racist views of white residents and presents them as historical facts, only lightly mentioning at the end of this passage that negative stereotypes for Valdosta African Americans were created by a paranoid, racist white populace.

Like agricultural economies across the South, Lowndes County's plantation system quickly turned into a sharecropping system. Valdosta became the center of long-staple cotton growing in the United States until the boll weevil killed the crop in the early-1900s. Lowndes County's agriculture then became tobacco and pine trees and now its major crops include tobacco, soybeans, cotton, and corn. Today, Valdosta is a commercial center of south Georgia, with numerous manufacturing plants (Schmier 1988).

Valdosta has two institutions of higher education, Valdosta State University (VSU) and Valdosta Technical Institute. Valdosta State has an enrollment of over 10,000 students, with 73 percent white and 21 percent African American students (2003-4 school year). Additionally, Moody Air Force base, located 14 miles north of Valdosta, was opened in 1941 and now has a contingent of over 4,000 personnel ("Fact" 2003). Many Valdostans credit VSU and Moody as key guides for progressive changes in racial relations, importing new ideas and tolerance.

Valdosta has had several optimistic city mottos in its history, including "A good spot to settle," "There are no strangers in Valdosta," "Altogether better," "Winnersville,

USA,” “A ray in the sunbelt,” and the current “Azalea city.” However, I found that white and black Valdostans have significantly differing levels of optimism about their city in terms of racial progress and current race relations. In fact, statements from both my white and black respondents make a motto like “No strangers in Valdosta” sound quite preposterous. In terms of the progression of racial relations in Valdosta and the South, William Faulkner’s observation seems pertinent still today: “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”

Purpose

I originally set out to research and document the civil rights movement in Lowndes County and ensuing general racial relations. However, several informants soon revealed to me that “the civil rights movement never came to Valdosta.” One white man attributed the lack of black organization in the area to failure of black churches to lead their members in movement activities. Others indicated there had always been and still remained a high level of fear among black residents. I heard that efforts were made to have Martin Luther King, Jr. pay Valdosta a visit, but white leaders with the support of a few blacks were instrumental in preventing his stopping off in the city. The only rumors I heard of civil rights organization was two black interview respondents told me that as teenagers they had nonviolent sit-ins in the 1960s at a local restaurant until they were finally served at the counter.

Learning that the civil rights movement had not been a force in Valdosta opened up the opportunity to study the area as if it were a representative of a majority of the southern region, where the movement never quite made it. I decided to concentrate on white and black older adults’ perspectives on racial relations in south Georgia, from their earliest memories of race in the Jim Crow era up through contemporary times. To

supplement interview data I also tracked significant racial events that had occurred over the years. This allowed me to layer white and black perspectives on top of the area's documented racial landscape.

Racial relations in such rural places have been little studied, with instead much research being done in major civil rights cities like Birmingham, Alabama (McWhorter 2001). Even fewer works set out to compare white and black views of race and racism or perspectives of racial progress, historically or otherwise (Smith, Ellis and Aslanian 2001, e.g.). I propose that this method is one of the best ways to ascertain where white and black perspectives on race converge and diverge and how to remedy communication barriers. This method serves as a vital supplement to researching racial groups separately.

Racism and Discrimination

The historical status of African Americans has been likened to a caste position, whereas interactions between whites and blacks have been dictated by strict formal rules and equally stringent informal standards. According to Myrdal (1996), the major distinction between the terms "caste" and "class" is a relatively large difference in freedom of movement between groups, such that "a man born [black] or white is not allowed to pass from the one status to the other" (p. 668), which makes the race-caste status very rigid. In the Jim Crow South, this stringent racial, caste-like arrangement severely inhibited blacks' access to essential opportunities in all facets of life. The consequences of this situation are still being felt by blacks across the South.

Racism lives on across the South, and it is important to frame the current problems between black-white relations as a white man's problem (Feagin and O'Brien 2003), because it was white men who created and perpetuated and who continue to reap the benefits of an anti-black racist ideology. Additionally, a majority of whites still desire to

maintain white privilege as well as white control over influential organizations and institutions (Feagin and O'Brien 2003). In order to maintain white control indefinitely, continued racist ideology and discrimination are necessary elements. However, because overt racism has fallen out of popular fashion in recent decades, a new color-blind ideology has emerged. According to Bonilla-Silva (2002), this ideology has an arsenal of tools to dodge the appearance of racism, which then makes it easier to suggest that racial matters have improved dramatically.

Denying that racism and discrimination exists today is a common standpoint taken by many contemporary whites. The idea that discrimination is no longer a problem may be intricately connected to the supposition of black cultural deficiency (Feagin and O'Brien 2003), where whites can assert that they are not keeping blacks in a denigrated position; rather, it is their own fault. Whites also utilize "defensive beliefs" that make anti-black racism seem to be in line with current ideals and therefore justify anti-black discrimination (Dollard 1949). This perspective that blames blacks for racism also allows whites to distance themselves from racism and discrimination when it clearly has occurred. By implicating blacks themselves and a handful of overtly racist whites in the overall "race problem," whites can avoid the guilt that would be associated with admitting that they garner some benefits from anti-black racism.

Feagin, Vera and Batur (2001) discuss such delusions of whites about racism and discrimination as "sincere fictions," or personal ideological constructs that reproduce societal myths on an individual level. These fictions allow whites to see themselves as good people while still harboring an ideological system of anti-black notions and stereotypes. According to Blauner (2001):

Both sensitive to their own possible culpability (if only unconsciously) and angry at the use of the concept of racism by angry minorities, [whites] do not differentiate well between the racism of social structure and the accusation that they as participants in the structure are personally racist. (p. 198)

Sincere fictions of the white self make it difficult for whites to take an objective, unemotional look at racism, because of the fear that in doing so they will implicate themselves as part of the problem.

One of the privileges of whiteness is never having to think about what being white means (Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001). Living an unquestioned privileged life in a racialized world allows whites to have a lack of empathy for people of color. Whites do not see the world as a hostile place, so it is difficult for them to empathize with black struggles to survive and thrive (Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001). As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain:

The capacity for self-understanding presupposes the capacity for mutual understanding. . . . Any real deep understanding of why we do what we do, feel what we feel, change as we change, and even believe what we believe, takes us beyond ourselves. . . . Just as in mutual understanding we constantly search out commonalities of experience when we speak with other people, so in self-understanding we are always searching for what unifies our own diverse experiences in order to give coherence to our lives. (p. 232)

Because whites tend to be very unreflective about racial issues, they are most often unable to form a connection between a potential self-understanding of whiteness and the understandings of people of color.

This disconnect between white and black perspectives leads to a whole host of problems. Most whites have formulated their own sincere fictions rationalizing a racialized world. They are unable to empathize with the concerns of people of color, and they have a very difficult time fitting an institutional form of racism and discrimination into their world view. These problems in the white mind lead whites to reach the

conclusion that racism is a thing of the past, and seemingly relaxed interpersonal relations between whites and blacks are indicators of such progress. Blacks, on the other hand, tend to have an understanding of the underlying power structures that continue to limit their opportunities (Blauner 2001).

For African Americans, racism and discrimination are ever-present phenomena that shape the attitudes and behaviors of all people. A lifetime of experiences with racial discrimination can have long-lasting socioeconomic and psychological effects on people of color. According to Feagin and McKinney (2003), the costs of racism and discrimination for African Americans are extremely wide-ranging and include: economic, physical, social, psychological, family, community, and health consequences.

Feagin and Sikes (1994) posit that the effects of discrimination cannot be boiled down to a mere sum of experiences. Rather they see the effects as cumulative, shaping a person's way of living and life perspective. Each new personal experience with or story of racism heard from another can conjure up irrepressible images and emotions from past experiences. Importantly, Feagin and Sikes (1994) found that an increase in economic status does not lessen the occurrence or the negative effects of racism and discrimination for blacks.

Enduring centuries of racism at the hands of whites has naturally caused African Americans to develop a host of coping strategies. These are both implicitly and explicitly learned and individually tested and perfected. Oral tradition has served as one survival strategy of blacks (Feagin and Sikes 1994), where African Americans pass down family history, pride, the pains of racism, and stories of overcoming obstacles. This type of

collective memory has been key in racial and ethnic struggles worldwide in the maintenance and development of group pride and solidarity (Feagin and Sikes 1994).

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with sixteen residents of Valdosta in the spring of 2004, almost all of whom had lived in Lowndes County for most if not all of their lives. Five respondents were black women, four were black men, two were white women, and five were white men. Respondents' ages ranged from the mid-40s to mid-80s, with an average age of 61. The sample was very well educated. All of the whites in the study had college degrees, with four having advanced degrees, and they all appeared to be of middle- to upper-socioeconomic status. Five of nine of the black respondents had attended some college, and all appeared to be of lower- to middle-socioeconomic status. At least fourteen additional interviews are planned for summer 2004, with efforts being made to include a wider range of white and black participants in terms of economic and educational status.

Initial interview participants were located through a vital contact I made by chance with an employee of a local antiracist organization on my first visit to Valdosta in fall 2003. After the first two interviews were completed, respondents were selected using a snowball sampling technique (Babbie 2001), where respondents and acquaintances I made along the way suggested potential interviewees and passed along contact information. I told the candidates, usually over the phone upon initial contact, that I was studying race relations in Valdosta and was interested in hearing them talk about their experiences and memories. Almost everyone I asked to participate was happy to oblige. Three white men I approached about it expressed hesitancy about being interviewed about race, but two of them eventually complied.

Interviews were conducted in Valdosta, at the specific location, date, and time of the respondents' choice. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the homes of respondents or at their workplaces. I personally conducted each of the sixteen interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and four hours. Informed consent and demographic information were collected from all respondents prior to the beginning of the interview session. Interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed and analyzed for recurrent themes. All respondents were given first-name pseudonyms, and I have made every effort to conceal the identity of the interviewees in the following text. In some cases, details have been omitted or replaced in quotes and discussion in order to ensure the anonymity of interview participants.

Respondents were asked a number of open-ended questions regarding their experiences with race in their lives, and in south Georgia especially. I was particularly interested in comparing white and black conceptions of racial issues and the extent to which they conceived their lives to be affected by race. I asked questions related to memories of segregation and desegregation, focusing on interactions with or knowledge of the opposite race and salience of their own race. I asked each interviewee about conceptions of racism and discrimination and asked black respondents to recall specific discriminatory experiences. I also queried interviewees on their impression of how much progress had been made in Valdosta in terms of racial relations and their perspectives on the current state of black-white relations. Additionally, to gauge differences between white and black perspectives on specific issues, respondents were asked about certain newsworthy events pertaining to race that had occurred over the years in Lowndes

County, beginning with a group of lynchings in 1918 and ending with a 2002 mock lynching of a Barbie doll at a local high school.

In addition to interview data, I also utilized other local sources of information. I not only wanted to document the recollections and experiences of Valdosta residents concerning racial relations, I also wanted to record a history of racial relations in Lowndes County and Valdosta. I referenced many newspaper articles and editorials from major local newspaper the *Valdosta Daily Times* and a few from the independent, liberal Lowndes County paper the *Lake Park Post* (also known as *The Post*). I also perused archived Valdosta State University publications – the student newspaper and various yearbooks. In the discussion of these local racial events, I have concealed the identities of current Lowndes County residents.

Local Racial Events

In this paper I attempt to compare and contrast the perspectives and memories of whites and blacks situated in the same place, experiencing the same local events. Throughout this paper I detail several racial incidents that have happened over the years in Lowndes County. Many of these events represent the sudden eruptions of racism and white power that occur periodically, highlighting an ever-present, underlying racial tension in Valdosta. Perspectives from white and black interview respondents on these specific issues and racial relations in general make clear the differences in how whites and blacks perceive underlying racism and therefore what meanings they attribute to racial events.

Events that are discussed are: a series of lynchings in Lowndes and Brooks counties, the Confederate battle flag emblem on the Georgia state flag, school desegregation, construction of an overpass in the black community, a public cross

burning at a high school, the death of a black man in the county jail, and a mock lynching of a doll on public school property. Taken together, these episodes track a history of racism in Valdosta and indicate that flare ups of racist ideas and behaviors are still quite common today. Valdosta appears to be a typical southern town still very polarized by race, with covert anti-black racist ideology and practice that periodically is dragged out into the light for all to see, and to interpret.

Local Antiracist Organizations

Though most of the white respondents in the sample were unable or unwilling to believe that racism and discrimination are still problems in contemporary Valdosta, the existence of at least four local antiracist organizations would suggest otherwise. Among the organizations that work toward eradicating racism and its effects in the community include: the NAACP, Project Change, Operation Weed and Seed, and the People's Tribunal.

Project Change is an antiracist initiative founded by the Levi Strauss Foundation in 1991 and now sponsored by the Tides Center Foundation. Valdosta was one of four cities chosen for sites across the nation; others were established in Albuquerque, New Mexico, El Paso, Texas, and Knoxville, Tennessee. Its specific goals are to address racial prejudice and institutional racism in the community. Since its 1992 inception, Valdosta Project Change has created two major community programs, one with local banks to help low-income families purchase homes and another to help women, people of color and low wage earners begin small businesses. Project Change has also sponsored several community forums on racism.

Valdosta Operation Weed and Seed began in early 1998, joining 140 other cities nationwide that had the Department of Justice program. Its overall mission is to “weed”

problems and “seed” progress in poor communities through economic development, social services, neighborhood restoration, and with support from law enforcement. Weed and Seed worked with Valdosta Police Department to begin a friendlier way of policing, called a “Stop and Chat” program. Additionally, Weed and Seed recently implemented an after-school tutoring program for neighborhood children.

The People’s Tribunal began in fall 1998 as a direct result of the controversy surrounding the death of black Valdosta resident Willie James Williams in the Lowndes County Jail. Its goal is to publicly address racial discrimination in Lowndes County through community activism.

Difficulty in Naming Discrimination

According to Blauner (2001) black and white interpretations of racial change since the civil rights era differ pointedly because of drastic differences in how they define central terms like “racism” and “discrimination.” He claims that whites and blacks speak different racial languages and have divergent perspectives on American society itself, with race and racism being core to blacks’ points of view while only peripheral to whites’ perspectives. From the perspective of most whites, racism is a thing of the past, because they focus on the current seemingly comfortable relations between whites and blacks. On the other hand, many blacks have a cognizance of the underlying white power structures and how they continue to limit their opportunities.

I did find in my interviews that whites and blacks often had different views on the meaning of certain terms, especially “discrimination.” I found that most whites and several blacks equated only overt behaviors and exclusion with discriminatory treatment. However, when I elaborated on other things that could fall under the umbrella of discriminatory acts, like unkind treatment from whites in stores, nearly all the blacks

could relay recent experiences with such things. I also found sometimes that even after a black respondent spoke of highly discriminatory experiences, some still attempted to paint for me a harmonious picture of Valdosta racial relations where most everyone gets along fine.

When being questioned about discrimination, many people, both white and black, undoubtedly envision scenes such as a racist employer blatantly and maliciously turning down qualified blacks in favor of white applicants. I eventually found that clarification on my part was important for getting some of the respondents to understand what I meant when I used the term “discrimination.” Perhaps the most interesting initial take on discrimination I got was from James, a lifelong Valdosta resident, when he said, “There’s discrimination everywhere, everywhere you look. There [are] some smarter than others, more athletic, ones that get noticed more in the family . . . so what is that? Segregation. It’s everywhere. Even with animals.” He then went on to liken people being segregated racially to different species of animals not “intermingling,” like the exclusivity of horses and cows.

I had thought at the time of the interview that James had not understood me or what kind of discussion I wanted to have, but as I transcribed it and read back through it, it became clear that he had been cleverly avoiding topics he did not want to discuss in depth. When I asked him what he thought about racial relations between people today in Valdosta, he replied, “That’s a very difficult question to answer. I know what I have in *my* mind. The relationship can be good, if you’re not influenced by other people – I hope you know what I’m saying,” and then he promptly changed the subject. If I had interrupted him and asked for clarification at the time, I possibly would have gotten a

more detailed answer than his vague reply of “I know what I have in my mind.”

However, it seems now that James might have been trying to tell me that he did not want to talk to *me* about what he had in his mind because it would contrast the “relationship being good” between a white person like me and a black person like him.

There could be many factors at play concerning why James avoided talking about discrimination, one being a reluctance to think about and rehash with a stranger a lifetime of unfair treatment. It also could have had something to do with a general distrust of whites, or an uncertainty about me being an out-of-town young white woman with a curiosity for hearing about painful experiences at the hands of people who look like me. Whatever the reasons for James’ avoidance, this exchange brought it home to me that all people, within and between racial groups, have very different perspectives and ideas about exactly what racism and discrimination encompass, and they adapt different ways of addressing the topic when it arises.

Naturally, one uncertainty that I carried through my research process was being a young white woman coming into this community to ask people to talk to me about race. Talking about race in America is a highly emotional matter (Bonilla-Silva 2002) and upon the suggestion of it, many people, both whites and people of color, are immediately wary. In my initial phone call to potential interviewees, I was careful to not mention words like “racism” or “discrimination,” merely stating that I was looking at “race relations” in Valdosta and just wanted to talk to them about their experiences. One thing I took a little solace in was that at least I could play up my southern accent when need be, uttering plenty of “yes ma’ams” and so forth. Thankfully, these interviews reminded me

how much people enjoy talking about themselves and their points of view, even to a complete stranger.

Summary of Findings

In the following chapter, I discuss the Jim Crow period through the school desegregation process of the late-1960s. White and black memories of these eras illuminate a sharp contrast between how racial history is framed and how it is perceived to affect individuals currently. White respondents' memories of segregation and school integration were very vague and without detail. Black respondents, on the other hand, could easily recollect how their lives were shaped by the restrictions of Jim Crow and how they navigated hostile white educational environments with the help of strong family and community networks. In this chapter I also discuss how white adults justified Jim Crow regulations, and thus anti-black racism, to their children.

In Chapter 3 I address how strength of memories of a highly racialized past have affected how white and black adults today perceive how much racial progress has been made. Whites' disinterest in thinking about race facilitates their perceptions that a world of improvement has occurred, because they cite all the progress in surface, interpersonal relations. Blacks, on the other hand, are very aware of how racism has shaped their lives, and they worry about their children's future living in a world they still perceive as being discriminatory.

Chapter 4 details discrimination and the cumulative effects felt by its targets. This chapter places blacks' accounts of recent discriminatory treatment alongside whites' denial that discrimination continues to occur. The potential for empathy among whites is also discussed briefly in this chapter.

Chapters 5 and 6 conclude that Valdosta is a representative of the state of racial relations in the entire South. I also make clear that there are powerful symbols of racism still in place in Valdosta. Segregation is social, economic and residential, causing a tangible rift between north and south Valdosta, white from black. Implications and areas for future research are discussed, as well as possibilities for real progress.

CHAPTER 2 LIVING THROUGH JIM CROW AND BROWN V. BOARD

When speaking of their memories living in the Jim Crow South, the whites in the study tended to look back unreflectively at segregation, mentioning things like remembering ‘white’ and ‘colored’ signs on water fountains and public bathrooms. None of them expressed any personal memories of experiences with racial issues during the segregation period. They instead offered up nondescript general statements like, “That’s just the way it was” and “We didn’t question it.” The white respondents saw their childhoods under segregation as a very sheltered period, where they lived in a white world and were unaffected by segregation. The black respondents also remembered their childhoods as being very sheltered, but they describe their lives as being very affected by the confines of segregation.

The same differences were clear in how whites and blacks talked about school desegregation. Several of my respondents were enrolled in public school when integration began in the late-1960s. However, the African American interviewees had a whole collection of memories about the time period, mostly painful. They spoke not only about specific events that occurred but also how they were constantly made to feel unwanted, unintelligent, and unworthy among white students and teachers. This type of denigrating treatment during formative childhood and teenage years understandably can have long-lasting effects on the psyches of individuals, contributing to the cumulative effects of racism that blacks experience.

This chapter makes clear the vital role that family and neighborhood support networks under segregation played in stabilizing black children's self-esteem and ability and maturity to deal with difficult times. Black children, for the most part, were not able to be naïve about segregation and desegregation. There were specific Jim Crow rules that everyone, even children, had to understand, whether they were explicitly instructed about them or not. During segregation, because there was always a threat of malicious white violence, it was necessary for black boys to learn at a young age the safest ways to behave, including specific rules about being near whites. During desegregation of schools, because whites controlled the schools at every level, it became crucial for black children to be provided with a strong support base that would help them succeed in a white racist environment.

White Memories of Segregation

In Jim Crow Valdosta, whites lived in their all-white neighborhoods and attended all-white schools, churches, and community functions. The only interpersonal contact any of the white respondents had with blacks under segregation was through an adult domestic employee or as very young children playing with black children. Phillip described the friendships he formed with black children while his family farmed alongside blacks in rural Lowndes County as naturally becoming more and more socially distant as he aged, though the physical distance remained virtually unchanged.

Only one white respondent, Frank, could recall slightly more than mere generalities about the time. He spoke of a story he remembered his father frequently telling the family during his childhood:

My daddy was an executive at the . . . company where he worked in the late '40s. [He] was in trouble with his company because an African American – a 'Negro' at the time – came into his office to buy [a product], and Dad called him by his last

name, Mr. 'Butler.' And the office just went still, because it was an offense to call a black man by his last name. And they stopped the conversation and corrected my daddy, and Mr. 'Butler' somehow accommodated himself to that system in honor of my daddy.

Frank found out at an early age that white society dictated that black adults were not to be respected and that any challenge to the racist social system, even from a prominent white citizen, would be quickly rebuked. It seems the multifaceted lesson Frank learned about racial relations in his home was that a black man deserved to be treated as a man, but to do so came with personal risks. However, if you did show respect for a black man, he would do more than return respect, he would honor you.

Other whites who spoke about living in the Jim Crow South talked in a very detached manner, indicating that it may not have been right, but it was the way things were, and segregation did not bother them. Several whites claimed that segregation was something they did not openly question, or it was something that was not explained to them, but as will be discussed later in this chapter, white parents often did justify segregation to their children. It is quite possible that part of the reason whites do not remember Jim Crow rules being justified is because, unlike black children, the notions of white supremacy did not disrupt a childlike idyllic view of the world and their sense of a positive self worth.

Black Memories of Segregation

Contrary to whites, most of the black respondents could recall specific memories of things they experienced during segregation, several of them vivid and painful. Shirley remembered an experience she had at a dentist office in Valdosta when she was five years old: "I had a terrible toothache, and . . . I remember the dentist told my mom, 'I'd rather look at a dog's ass than look in your daughter's mouth.'" Shirley learned a hard

lesson as a young child, that her well being was not worthy of the concern of whites. At a very young age, black children also had to deal with the knowledge that, not only was their health not considered important, their lives were in real danger if they made the wrong move or challenged Jim Crow laws. Annie, a black woman in her 60s, told me as her voice cracked, “I look back and I want to cry about what took place in our lives. It’s heartbreaking. . . . We couldn’t even go to the bathroom downtown. ‘You better not go, or they’ll lynch you.’” Black children had to be well versed in Jim Crow laws early in life, because so much was at stake. Any sort of pampered, naïve outlook on life and opportunities was simply not available to them when they stepped out of their segregated black neighborhoods and ventured into white society.

Black neighborhoods served as havens for African American children, close-knit places where they were cared for and looked after by their neighbors. Whenever it could be achieved, black children were confined to the black community. Norma described just how protected she was from whites, only being allowed to venture downtown when it could not be avoided:

Even though this was not a predominantly black county, it was almost like it, because you lived in your own area. You didn’t interact with the whites unless you were employed by them. . . . So I was really raised in a predominantly black world. Like me, a lot of black kids were sheltered from the outside world. We would see white people when we went downtown and so forth. But when we were small, we didn’t go downtown very much, not even to get shoes – they always knew what size you wore by measuring your feet with a string or a piece of paper. That was to keep white folks from not letting you try on the shoes.

As indicated by this description of shoe shopping, black adults often took creative measures to protect their children from the cruelty of racism that they were likely to experience at the hands of insensitive white adults.

Defending Children from Segregation

Sometimes black parents took great personal risks to protect their children from racist treatment. Shirley told a story of her father's punishment for trying to defend her from racism that she did not even perceive as such as a small child:

[My parents and] I went to a little store downtown [that sold] Krispy Kreme donuts. I [thought I] was a big girl. Daddy gave me a quarter and told me, "Go in and get your own donut. I'm going to wait out here in the car." So I went in and asked for a donut, and [the clerk] handed me a pack of donuts. She said, "These the ones you want?" And I really wasn't thinking, because my parents would have spoken with me if they'd known I didn't say 'yes ma'am.' But I said "yes," and she said, "What'd you say?" I said "yes" again, and she snatched them back from me and threw my money on the counter. So I went out to the car, and [my dad] said, "I thought you wanted donuts?" I said, "I did – that lady wouldn't let me have them . . . because I forgot to say 'yes ma'am'." Well, as far as I [was] concerned, it was just a mean lady. And he told my mother and me, "I'll be right back. You stay right here," and he went inside. I don't know if he went and cussed the woman out, but he got put in jail that day.

Up through the late-1950s and early-1960s in rural Georgia, social offenses such as confronting a white person could quickly land black men in jail. Because of this, it was more difficult for black parents to outwardly protect their children from bad treatment. A safer way to keep them out of harm's way was to prepare children with ways that trouble could be avoided when dealing with whites.

Sheltering Children from Segregation

During the Jim Crow era, African American parents also protected their children from the pains of racism by choosing to not point out the injustices of segregation. James described his childhood understanding of racial categorization and separation, such that he had an early awareness of the way things were and how to behave under the restraints of segregation, but he had not been instructed about the unfairness of the situation:

At that time, not realizing how things were, it didn't bother us. Nothing bothers you until you know what it's all about. They had signs downtown [that] said 'white' here and 'colored' there, and we knew exactly how to handle the situation. We

knew our place. When you know your place, you're okay. . . . We didn't know any better, so we accepted life as it was. If you knew better, then you could question it, but we knew nothing to even question about, so we just accepted it. And it was a beautiful part of my life.

Understandably, black parents would want to do everything in their power to protect their young children from being adversely affected by the system of segregation. Many other black respondents described their childhood ideological grasps of the realities of segregation as sheltered. Most of them described that time in their lives similarly as James, who would not have wanted it any other way, remembering his naïveté to racism as a “beautiful” part of his life.

Reasons and Rules of Segregation

Rules for behavior in the Jim Crow South were quite strict, especially for African Americans. Challenging the system of segregation was very dangerous for them. Even black children had to be very well versed in Jim Crow stipulations. Almost all of the white respondents, however, described segregation as something they simply did not question as children. According to Henry, though, a white man in his fifties, segregation was persistently explained and justified by white parents to their children:

Growing up, everything was segregated. . . . That's just the way it was, and if you asked about it, well 'That's just the right thing to do. It's the right thing for the races to be separated.' And a child doesn't question things like that. So you grow up, and all your life you hear that this is the way things have always been, this is the right way to do things, and it's not until you start getting close to adulthood that you may begin to question things.

While black parents were exerting energy to protect their children from the ills of segregation, white parents were reasoning out and defending the Jim Crow institution to their families.

Rules for Black Boys

Black parents did as much as they could to shelter their children from the harshness of racial segregation, but they also had to teach their children survival skills in their dealings with whites. For the most part, the black men and women I interviewed had different experiences with being deliberately taught how to behave around whites. The black women said that they were given no explicit instructions, but several of the black men described specific rules by which they were told to abide. Albert talked about the some of the things he was repeatedly told as a young boy:

We were taught never to look whites in the eyes, and if the whites pass on the school bus, then we turn the other way. And if a white lady approached you, then get the hell away from her, because they could charge you with a lot of things. That was the black experience as a child. And I'm talking about really early, definitely around 12 or 13, [when] you become, it seems, more of a threat to them because you're getting to the age where you can have sex with whites. . . . The main thing I think that kept a lot of the young black men in their place was the fact that we have a verbal history, where the older blacks would tell the younger blacks how to survive – especially black men.

For teenage African American boys growing up in the 1950s, these specific rules passed down by generations of older black men were no trivial or untested matter; they composed a knowledge base that was literally crucial to their survival in a hostile racist environment.

Rules for Black Girls

According to the black women in the sample, African American girls were not instructed as specifically as boys were in safe behavior around whites. However, they were not less affected by the day-to-day constraints of segregation and racism. When asked about the racial atmosphere when she was growing up in Valdosta in the 1940s and '50s, Annie explained:

The only way to describe it would be terrible . . . [Racism] was like an undercover thing in Valdosta. They pretended that it wasn't here, but when they had to bring it out, they brought it out. We weren't allowed to sit down and eat in restaurants. Everything we bought was [at] a counter or a window to take out. We had one movie. The white folks were upstairs, and we were downstairs, and they would drop things down there on us. Everything was racial. We had nowhere to go where we could be a part of Valdosta. . . . It started with the schools, the churches, the jails, the clubs, calling us niggers, walking down the street, in the stores. It was everywhere. They never owned up to being racial. But we knew it was racial. It was really racial. As I look back now and think on the things that took place in my life, that I experienced here, it's hard to believe. It's hard to believe that people will treat people the way we were treated.

Here, Annie uses the term "racial" in substitution for "racist," explaining that malicious racist treatment was something even white children and teenagers could and did use whenever they wanted. Annie describes an extremely hostile racist environment, in which the blacks were fully aware and unsatisfied with the pains of segregation and cruel whites, and in which the whites were similarly aware, but in denial, of the unfairness of the arrangement.

Justifying Jim Crow

As a sharp contrast to Annie's recollection of her early awareness and distress toward segregation stands the claim of Phillip, a white man in his 70s. He matter-of-factly sums up his take on the black experience in the Jim Crow south in one short sentence: "They [blacks] were uneducated and just took things as they were, and that's all it amounted to." Phillip implies that African Americans were not as school-educated as whites, and therefore accepted their denigrated social position without question. However, regardless of how many years of school individual blacks had, they were unquestionably extremely well versed in the injustices of segregation. In fact, their lives depended on it. Phillip likely confuses fear toward self and family with acceptance.

White belief in blacks' open acceptance of segregation was commonplace. In Schmier (1988) a white man honestly explains the condescending attitudes white Valdostans had held during the Jim Crow era about blacks:

That was God's way. If God had wanted us all one way, He'd have made us one color. That never was hateful prejudice! Everybody, us and the nigras, accepted that. Relations between us was good. We took care of them because they couldn't care for themselves. They were like untrained children. And I can't think of a person more in need of protection and care than those helpless nigras. Most Christian folk hereabouts knew it was no fault of their own who they were. (p. 97)

This man combines condescension with sympathy and good Christian values, likening black adults to mere children. This perspective served whites well through segregation and beyond, validating the status quo of white domination.

Whites often construct in their minds an "eons ago" image of outright white oppression of blacks, usually referencing slavery. However, southerners as young as their 40s lived some portion of their lives in the Jim Crow South. Today's young adults are only one generation removed from segregation. I found white southerners' memories of segregation to be short and vague. This forgetfulness is likely partly due to the taken-for-granted nature whiteness has on the white psyche, where one hardly ever has to ponder the consequences of being white. On the other hand, how living through segregation has affected their lives and will affect the lives of their children is at the forefront of many African Americans' minds.

White adults provided children with a justification of Jim Crow, whereas segregation with whites in a superior position was considered best. One of the most popular reasons white Jim Crow children had for supporting segregation was that it was "God's will" (Dickinson 1991). In his autobiographical work about growing up white in the segregated South, Melton McLaurin (1998) admits that as a child he was well-versed

in white supremacist dogma, explaining that he, like most southern whites, had been instructed since birth in the ideology and etiquette of segregation. Much of white southerners' segregationist instructions did not have to be spoken. The arrangement of white superiority was blatantly evident in observable black-white social interactions. As McLaurin (1998) put it: "The message I received from hundreds of such signals was always the same. I was white; I was different; I was superior. It was not a message with which an adolescent boy was apt to quarrel" (p. 14).

Black adults, on the other hand, could not justify segregation as such to their children. They could teach their children how to negotiate the system but not that it was "right" or that God wanted them classified as second-rate citizens. In trying to foster self-worth and pride in their children, it would have been a major contradiction for African American parents to also explain that their denigrated position in Jim Crow society was right and good. This difference in ideological foundation must have greatly affected how the white and black children under segregation grew into the white and black adults in my sample, with completely different memories and perspectives on life under segregation and its current consequences.

School Desegregation

School desegregation hit Lowndes County with full force in 1969. After substantial stalling and a short period of 'freedom of choice,' the local board of education finally implemented a complete desegregation plan. Interview respondents experienced the transition drastically differently. Four respondents, three black and one white, experienced the process firsthand, and the detail of white and black memories is strikingly different. In the case of school desegregation in the Valdosta city schools, blacks have extremely vivid memories, while whites remember practically nothing. The

hurtful experiences that black children had in newly-integrated schools will likely come back to visit them for the rest of their lives. The potential for cumulative effects of racism on the black children who were the first to desegregate schools is very apparent in their painful and humiliating accounts.

The White Mind on Desegregation

The 1952 through 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* trial, which negated the equality of separate facilities for whites and blacks, caused major concern within the white community in Valdosta toward the future of their public schools. This concern over segregated schools was reflected in thirteen daily editorial columns written by Turner Rockwell of the *Valdosta Daily Times* from the period December 1952 to June 1954 (Rockwell 1952a-c, Rockwell 1953a-d, Rockwell 1954a-f). As a spokesman for continued segregation and a man writing for a mixed white and black readership, in eight of these editorials Rockwell asserted that there was overwhelmingly strong support for the maintenance of separate schools by both whites and African Americans.

A common white fiction throughout the Jim Crow era was that blacks were just as happy with the state of segregation as whites were (Myrdal 1996). The editorials attempted to present a unified front on the school desegregation issue, and Rockwell went so far as to project supremacist views as the black standpoint on the issue, attributing claims upon the black community like, “They do not want any *mingling of the races* in the schools (my emphasis, Rockwell 1953d), and:

Georgia Negroes, for the most part, want their children to have their own schools. They do not want them attending schools with the white children. They want their own clubs, their own social activities, their own athletic teams, their own school bands, their own cheerleaders, their own lunchrooms and their own playgrounds . . .

. Left to their own desires our Negro citizens would keep things just the way they are. (Rockwell 1954d)

Here, he addresses whites exclusively, informing his white readers in so many words that their views do not run contrary to the desires of blacks, and they can use the knowledge of it to put their white segregationist minds at ease. Rockwell claimed to have such information about the predominant black opinion from his declared numerous African American friends, but closer to the truth behind black wariness over desegregation was they anticipated their school buildings and traditions being abandoned and their teachers being lost, and feared the treatment their children would receive from white students, teachers, and parents. In 1955 South Carolina journalist William D. Workman warned his segregationist constituents that it was a delusion to think that blacks favored segregation, and he implored them to drop their assumption that blacks were content with the status quo of Jim Crow (Chappell 1998). Rockwell however, like many segregationists, remained steady in his assumed views about black satisfaction with racial separation and opposition to integration.

Before the Supreme Court decision was handed down, Turner Rockwell had already begun preparing Valdostans for the prospect of an unfavorable integration outcome. He prophesied confusion and disarray, invoked the notion of states' rights, called for citizens to remain calm, and reminded them that desegregation would not be implemented immediately, even if the ultimate Court decision were to strike down segregation. Rockwell even oddly asserted that "Negroes and whites live and work together in complete harmony in the South" (Rockwell 1953b) under Jim Crow laws. Throughout his editorials, Rockwell repetitively presents whites and blacks as equally supportive of segregated institutions for the exact same reasons, as if the two groups were

great friends who “lived and worked together in complete harmony,” but who mutually agreed that their children living lives completely separate from each other was a good idea.

Taken together, these Valdosta editorials from the 1950s indicate how clouded the white mind was about white-black relations in Valdosta. Rockwell’s editorials drastically misjudged the level of black opposition to desegregation of schools and misunderstood the sentiment behind what black opposition there was. In the late-1960s, while the school boards deliberated over how to go about desegregating the public schools, several articles appeared in the *Valdosta Daily Times* highlighting actual black opinions on the issue. The then-president of the Lowndes NAACP chapter issued a statement in a letter to the editor, challenging reports that the black community had taken a stand against integration:

I would like to clarify your position, if you please. We definitely are for elimination of discrimination in all walks of life, and are specifically for quality education for all people. Therefore, we are not against the plan for desegregation of the schools in Lowndes County or elsewhere. (Brown 1969)

Other editorials and articles further clarified specific issues African Americans had toward the proposed plan to close all of the black county schools and one white school and integrate the remaining white schools, including resentment over losing black facilities and teacher positions (Crouse 1969a).

Desegregation in Lowndes County

The 1950s *Valdosta Daily Times* editorial columns may have been wrong about the views of African American residents about school desegregation, but they were correct about one thing – the slow speed at which full desegregation would be accomplished in Valdosta. Public school desegregation in the Lowndes County schools and the Valdosta city schools did not happen until the fall of 1969, after extensive stalling on the part of

the white school boards and a suit being filed against them by the U.S. Justice Department. According to Moore (1997) the integration process was smooth in the county school system and somewhat more tumultuous in the city schools. In the city schools, seventh and eighth graders attended Valdosta Junior High, and the tenth through twelfth graders enrolled at Valdosta High School (VHS). The ninth graders attended Pinevale, the formerly black high school. The *Daily Times* was pleased to report a “good-natured cheering contest” at an assembly on the first day of school at Pinevale between the white and black ninth graders, who had self-segregated themselves in the gymnasium. The two groups of students tried to “out yell and clap each other as teachers of their own race were introduced” (Crouse 1969b).

School integration posed a challenge for school administration in negotiating certain social activities, like prom and homecoming. Different high schools handled homecoming ceremonies differently. In fall 1969 there was a walkout of over 300 black students at VHS when a white homecoming queen was named, culminating several weeks of racial tension over a variety of issues, including the playing of “Dixie” by the school band. All the student protestors were suspended from school for three days (Moore 1997). The next year Lowndes High students voted a black girl as homecoming queen. That year Valdosta High chose to not have a queen at all, while nearby Brooks and Hamilton County schools opted to have a black and white representative from each class (“Unity” 1970). It seemed that Lowndes High was setting the example of progressive racial relations for south Georgia.

A Cross Burning at School

Lowndes High School set a standard for peaceful school desegregation across the entire state of Georgia in the 1960s. Then we fast forward to homecoming 1989.

Lowndes High students elected the second black homecoming queen in its history since desegregation twenty years prior. Late in the second quarter of the football game before the homecoming ceremony began, a large wooden cross was ignited on the south end of the football field. Two white male students were apprehended and charged with felonies for the act. The next week a white male student told reporters of rumored fights being planned between white and black students, saying, “The racial situation at the school is getting worse and worse every day” (Avery 1989).

Since the publicized cross burning on school property had happened only fourteen years prior to my interviews, I was confident that most, if not all, of the people in my sample would remember it. However, I found that only a few could even recall the incident, three black women. Annie expressed relief that nothing had been done to actually harm anyone and said, “A light is still shining on Valdosta to let you know it’s not all gone, and that was good,” indicating that the event was an almost positive thing to her, because it plainly illuminated ever-present concealed racism. For Brenda the incident conjured up recollections of other, more vicious racist events:

The thing that frightened me is that these kids are probably capable of hurting somebody and doing things that used to happen a long time ago that we don’t talk about anymore, like the lynchings and all of that kind of stuff. . . . I remember thinking things really haven’t changed that much.

Brenda was reminded by the incident that extreme outbursts of racism were not altogether dead, and that unashamed racism was clearly alive and well among some of Valdosta’s white youth.

Enduring Freedom of Choice Integration

A few years prior to complete school desegregation in 1969, Valdosta implemented a ‘freedom of choice’ plan, which resulted in a handful of black parents choosing to send

their children to white city schools. Three of my black respondents enrolled in a white city school during this period of partial integration. Brenda had always been an honor roll student, but her experiences at the white school made her question her intelligence for the first time. Gregory concurred, saying, “We weren’t wanted there, and we knew it. We were made to feel uncomfortable. We were told we weren’t smart enough to be there. [By whom?] Oh, by teachers, from some of them.” Gregory also relayed his struggle as an adolescent to maintain a level of confidence and self-worth in the hostile school environment, both because he was made to feel unintelligent and because he was constantly harassed by white children who were never sanctioned for their cruelty:

It was about keeping your head up high . . . just the whole conflict of [trying] to be proud of who you were. That’s when James Brown came up with “I’m Black and I’m Proud.” Insults and degrading things happened all the time, so you didn’t live your life around the negative part. I come from a pretty positive family, where when we got home, we would discuss things and get a little extra strength to make it through the next day.

Gregory’s family support through the desegregation process was vital to his ability to endure the white school and to his outlook on life, then and now. Brenda also had a firm family base to fall back on during the integration transition:

I had a solid support system. I had my mom, I had my dad, I had brothers and sisters. I had my grandmother. During that time, people in the neighborhood really looked out for you and talked to you, and we were told, “I don’t care what happens—you’re there to get an education, you have a right to be there, you’re going to school.” So we didn’t have a whole lot of choice about whether we were going to succeed – we had to succeed . . . It wasn’t until later that I realized that the experience was traumatic. Because as a kid, you just do what you have to do and what you’re told . . . It took some getting used to and some adjusting, and we just did it. Now, some kids had been taught that all white people were bad and they were just out there to do you in, so they didn’t do very well.

Brenda’s account of importance of family and community support reveals how much mental toughness was expected of young black children going through desegregation.

Brenda also indicates that her parents had to likely suppress some of their own negative

feelings towards whites and white institutions in order to better prepare their children to achieve success in a white world.

Black children like Gregory and Brenda were highly aware that their experiences were going to be difficult, which left little opportunity for naïveté. On the other hand, white children were less personally and psychologically affected by integration. Edward attended school with the first black students to enroll in the mid-1960s, but his memory of desegregation is virtually nonexistent: “About 1970, I think, was really when we had integration come about at [school]. It started probably in junior high, but I really was kind of oblivious. My recollections are really very clouded on that, and I don’t remember a lot about that.” One specific memory that Edward could recall was a quite trivial, friendly classroom interaction with some black girls: “They used to kid me, girls particularly, and rub my hair because it was long, and they’d say, ‘Well you got lawng hauh.’ Lawng hauh (chuckles), I remember that. We [had] this kind of superficial friendship, because we . . . were both social outcasts during high school. And I just kind of rocked along in that.” Being a self-proclaimed “social outcast” at the time, Edward claimed to have had many black friends in high school in the early 1970s, but he admitted that he could only currently remember one person’s name. Additionally, by saying “I just kind of rocked along in that,” Edward identifies how unaffected he was by the entire desegregation process.

Shirley, the other black respondent who attended a white city school under the freedom of choice integration plan, unlike Brenda and Gregory, did not have a network of family and community members to support her through the process. Shirley’s story of her enrollment at the white school was the most memorable piece from all my interviews.

Her parents were both black professionals, and she had grown up throughout the North, spending some summers in Valdosta with extended family. When her parents separated, she moved with her mother to Valdosta. Growing up as a privileged child, Shirley had always found it easy to make friends with the children of her parents' black professional friends. Upon her move to Valdosta, off she went to a white city school since it was a nearby school in her neighborhood and would allow black students to enroll. She remembers her first day of school vividly:

When they told me I was going to [the white school], it was no problem because I was always an all-A student. [The first day], down the hall I went. Everybody stopped, because it was like 'Where did *she* come from?' First of all, I'm sticking out like a sore thumb because I'm a different color. That wasn't what I was mostly aware of, though. I was aware that the other children had on what they had called poor boys and hip hugger skirts and penny loafers and saddle oxfords, [but] I was dressed to the *nines*. . . . [When I arrived at] my first class, I was the only black child in the room . . . and so when the teacher stepped outside the door with my mom, somebody said, "There's a nigger. Niggers *stink*." And a couple of kids grabbed their desks and moved away from me. So when the teacher came back, I was just sitting there by myself. That was shock number one, because rejection was not something I had ever experienced. I [had been] the child that everybody wanted to be friends with, I was the child that everybody wanted to come to their house. And so here I am, sitting here – I couldn't believe it. Well, the first thing [I thought] when they said, "Niggers stink," was '*I do not stink*, I mean my mom had shopped for this day.' I knew I was neat, I knew I was clean, but I was dressed differently. So for me, [I thought] all I had to do was correct my dress, and then people would automatically accept me.

Shirley promptly had her mother change her hairstyle and clothes, but she never got acceptance from white children. To make matters worse, the handful of black children enrolled in the school had been interspersed throughout different classes, and Shirley was the one black child among a sea of white faces in her classroom. On top of that, she found it hard to make friends with the other black students, because they already had their own clique and did not embrace her.

Even worse than her ostracism inside the classroom was the task of changing classes, which Shirley constantly dreaded: “I hated to change classes, because there were always comments made. Kids would walk behind me, step on my heels, push me, hit me. And there was this constant ‘nigger, nigger, nigger’ and ‘What’s that I smell? I smell a- well, I smell a nigger, don’t you?’ ‘Yeah, I smell one too.’” Shirley describes her white classmates as actively and collectively committed to harassing her.

Dealing with the rejection by children was traumatic for Shirley, and she described her few years at a white school as absolutely miserable. Even still, she worked diligently and maintained stellar all-A grades, except for the most subjective course, English, in which she was given a C. At least as memorable as being taunted and rejected by her white peers was the treatment she received from her English teacher:

I had a teacher, and I still remember her name to this day, [even though] she’s long dead . . . Mrs. ‘Banks.’ She used to check our composition books weekly, and I always did good work, always. . . . She started flipping through my composition book, and . . . I had written something on the back of a page, a little math problem, and it was in pencil, so it could have been erased. But when she saw it, she said, “*What is this!?*” And she was so mad at me about that one problem until spittle came out of her mouth and drooled down in front of me. . . . She was yelling at me in front of everybody. She took my composition book and ripped all the pages out. She said, “*This is wrong! This is wrong! This is unacceptable!*” And then she took [the whole thing] and threw it in the trash.

On top of being ostracized by both her white and black peers at school, Shirley was a lonely pre-teenage girl who had to deal with being completely humiliated by the volatile, emotional, racist outburst of her teacher.

For the ultimate icing on the cake, Shirley did not have the parental and neighborhood support by which others like Brenda and Gregory thrived. Neighborhood children shunned her, considering her “uppity” because she attended a white school. Additionally, her mother was preoccupied with work and the separation from her

husband and did not realize how unhappy her daughter was until over a year had passed. For one year, Shirley was elated to be enrolled a black school in Valdosta, describing it as “heaven,” until that school was soon closed and integration was forced.

Lasting Effects of Racism

Not surprisingly, Shirley’s vivid adolescent memories have affected her perspective on race throughout her life. According to Feagin & Sikes (1994), repeated experiences with racism shape a person’s behavior and life perspective because of their cumulative effect. She described at length struggling with herself against her constant expectations of racist treatment. Yet, her lifetime of experiences with racism and discrimination were reason enough for her to still be wary of potential acts of racism against herself and her children. On the other hand, none of the whites I interviewed indicated to me that school desegregation had any sort of enduring impact on them. They remember it as a minor part of their childhood schooling. For black children, it was an extremely influential experience, the negative psychological effects of which they may never be able to shirk.

As described by my white interview respondents, desegregation had little perceived costs for whites. They vaguely remembered the process as somewhat tumultuous but not significantly affecting them in a personal way. However, the costs that school desegregation had on blacks were enormous. Integration drained the vitality of black communities (Foster 1991). Not only did black children have to handle hostile white schools, black teachers and school administrators were affected economically, with a large share of them losing their jobs from one cause or another within a few years of the process. School desegregation also marked a jumping off point for black access to white culture and amenities, which facilitated the eventual closing of many black-owned businesses.

Blacks' initial wariness of school desegregation because of the negative effects it would have was well-founded. For "instead of strengthening the black community, racial desegregation and integration caused blacks to venture into a hostile white world that from the outset had no intention of truly pursuing and supporting racial integration" (Foster 1991:77). The blacks who were integration children in my sample bravely faced desegregation and found rejection and heartache. The one thing that aided their ability to get through the process was a strong family support network, one that demanded they remain tough and kept lines of communication open between adults and children.

Conclusion

The childhood accounts from African American interviewees in this chapter dramatically show how influential segregation and desegregation were in shaping their perspectives. Whites' lack of memories of these time periods serves as a sharp contrast, illustrating their privilege in being able to live their childhoods in a sheltered white bubble. When white children in the South requested an explanation for the separation of blacks and whites, they received a justification that validated their humanity and their goodness. Blacks, on the other hand, had to live with the knowledge that they could be spat on, cursed, beaten up, or lynched by whites if they violated oppressive Jim Crow laws.

In the next chapter, I discuss the functions of the depth of racial memories of blacks and whites. Whereas blacks often perceive race and racism as being very formative in their perspectives on life, whites tend to disregard the effects of race and racism on their points of view. Because blacks' perspectives are wedded so much more tightly with race cognizance, their ideas about how much progressive racial change has occurred drastically differ from whites. A strong indicator of the level of racism that blacks still

perceive is their desire to protect their children and grandchildren from the effects of racism that they will face throughout their lives.

CHAPTER 3 LONG MEMORY, SHORT MEMORY: BLACK MEMORY, WHITE MEMORY

Throughout my interviews with whites and blacks, it became very apparent that the lengths of memory about segregation differed drastically between the two groups. Because African Americans were so personally and psychologically affected by Jim Crow laws, they are now able to frame the time period as very crucial to the formation of their perspective of themselves and life in general. It is likely that whites' psyches were no less affected by segregation, but they reflect on their lives under Jim Crow simply and matter-of-factly. Whereas whites in my sample were able to say, "That's the way it was," several blacks went one step further and said, "That's the way it was, and this is how it affected me then and now..."

Arguably because black adults have such a profound, experiential understanding of the racism of Jim Crow, they are naturally more attuned to sense changes in the methods of the application of white racism than whites are. The blacks and whites I interviewed had vastly different ways of describing the changes in racial relations that have occurred in Valdosta since the days of segregation. The majority of white respondents saw that a world of change had taken place, while the majority of the black respondents saw that racial discrimination was still very much alive, though in often in more subtle forms than during the Jim Crow period. The white respondents were quite united in their view that a drastic transformation had occurred in racial relations, greatly benefiting blacks in Valdosta and in the South. However among the African Americans interviewed, there

were a variety of perspectives on racism, ranging from very pessimistic to very optimistic, both about the change that had occurred and their outlooks on the future.

The desire of African American parents to protect their children from racism is at least partly due to their own long memories of the racism that they experienced throughout their entire lives. Black parents are well aware of the cumulative effects that their experiences with racism have had on their perspectives, and they want to shelter their own children from these effects as much as possible. White parents, on the other hand, tend to have little to no recollection or understanding of segregation or contemporary racism, so they find it difficult, and often impossible, to relate to the concern black parents have for their children.

Perceptions of Change in Valdosta

All respondents were asked a form of the question, “In terms of racial relations, how much change has occurred in Valdosta in your lifetime?” I received several foreboding responses, especially from the blacks interviewed, and most all of the respondents said they thought the state of racial relations in Valdosta must be the typical condition throughout the South. However, the most negative response I received was from Norma, a black woman in her 60s, who sees Valdosta and Lowndes County as an atypically racist, virtually unchanged place:

It’s something like you’ve never seen or heard of before. Everybody [who] comes here for the first time or lives around here will tell you that. And I [agree] because I have lived in other places. It’s almost like Valdosta is still a small town, even though it’s now metropolitan, if you get my drift. There are things that go on here, [like] we still have Uncle Toms.

Mentioning “Uncle Toms,” Norma indicates the survival skill learned by many blacks in Valdosta, of putting on a front, pretending that there is no racial discrimination in interactions with whites in order to help ensure one’s safety from outbursts of

racism. Dollard (1949) refers to this behavior as an “accommodation attitude,” which enables blacks to adjust to and survive a caste-like social status. According to Myrdal (1996), this behavior was a survival skill since the days of slavery, when white friendliness was extended to individual blacks but not to the entire group.

Racism and condescension from whites can function as an almost tangible thing for many people of color, something that is constantly sensed throughout daily interactions. Norma expressively put it this way: “Everybody laughs with you if they get to know you. And [they] smile with you, but you’re still dumb and stupid. [How do you know that’s what they think?] (whispers) Because I deal with it. (speaks normally again) I deal with it.” Albert also spoke of racism as something he expected to encounter in interactions with whites. Additionally, he implies that white racism affects the psyches of whites and blacks in a balancing way:

I experience discrimination here on a lot of fronts, and I [have come to] expect it. In fact, just in general walking and driving, sometimes the whites want you to yield to them, and they’ll get mad if you don’t. Maybe that’s the perception on some of the blacks’ part because of past history, but I don’t think so. Whites are really just trained that they are better. I [don’t think] they can’t help it, because a lot of blacks [also] believe that they are inferior.

Albert acknowledges that his sensitivity to racism likely tempers his perspective, but, displaying an understanding of institutional racism, he cites the overall historically-based, racial hierarchical system as the culprit for mutual beliefs of white superiority by many whites and black inferiority by many blacks.

Brenda has a carefully considered, experiential perspective on the extent to which changes have occurred benefiting blacks in Valdosta:

I don’t think that a lot has changed. I think the methods have changed. I look back now, and I see a lot of the same problems that were going on when I was younger. I guess at one point we were led to believe that somehow, some way, it was our fault that our neighborhoods didn’t look like the neighborhoods on the north side of

town, or that our sons were always been arrested and harassed by the police, and that it was black males and black people that were locked up in jail the most. But [now], I look at how things are done, and even though I don't think it's all white people [doing it], I think that it's white people who are in power. I think they're always going to be in power and have the upper hand. Systematically, they're keeping us in a substandard position.

Brenda has taken a hard look at the socioeconomic position of her parents' generation, her generation, and that of her children to come to the conclusion that the overt methods for black oppression have become more covert, but she sees the end result being exactly the same.

Sources of Progress

Not all of the African American respondents agreed that overall positive changes in racial relations were at a standstill in Valdosta. Some of them contrasted the restrictions of the Jim Crow era with the current greater availability of opportunity for people of color as evidence of drastic changes having occurred. A few mentioned the relaxed nature of white-black interactions as an indicator of progress. Many of the whites shared a similarly optimistic opinion.

Valdosta State University and Moody Air Force Base. Several respondents stated that two important forces in Valdosta that were causing changes to take place – Moody Air Force Base and Valdosta State University. Edward said, “I think it's people coming from outside our community, from Moody and from the university. They're *dragging* us out of a cultural mindset in both camps that has been around for a long time, and they're making a melting pot sort of effect take place.” Edward sees white and black Valdostans as equally responsible for fostering damaging “cultural mindsets” that strain black-white relations. Edward's viewpoint of Valdosta becoming a utopic “melting pot” seems overly optimistic when considering the prevailing high levels of residential and

social segregation and the sizable income differences between white and black Valdostans.

A racist campus altercation. Also contrasting Edward's claim of Valdosta State University being a positive influence on the surrounding city's racial relations was an October 2000 altercation on campus involving some white and black students. Around midnight on October 2, three black male students were jogging by the house of a white fraternity when someone on the front porch called out, "Run, nigger, run." A disagreement ensued, and a fraternity member called the police. The fraternity's president denied the comment was made by a one of its members and disagreed with the comment's reported "wording and intent" (Cook 2000). The university's Dean of Students was surprised by the incident, claiming he had been unaware of any existing racial tension on campus. A former student and current VSU black faculty member had a different perspective, and he was quoted as saying "That same racial tension has always been there and seems to flare up when there are people who refuse to be dehumanized" (Rose 2000b). Clearly, this African American man with extensive experience in and around the university disagrees with Edward's opinion of the role of VSU in actively ameliorating racist ideas and practice and setting a progressive standard for the city of Valdosta.

VSU's Racist History

As a traditionally white institution, Valdosta State University has a history of racism toward African Americans. Established in 1918, it was originally an all-female college, and was made co-educational in 1950. For the 2003-4 school year, the enrollment in the regional university was over 10,000, with 73 percent white and 21 percent African American students. On the year of its inception, a full-page editorial ran

in the school periodical (coincidentally just one month before a string of lynchings that are discussed in Chapter 5) entitled “Our New Negro Problem,” (“Our” 1918) which matter-of-factly elaborates just what this new “problem” was all about:

Now that we seem about to have woman suffrage, how are we to exclude the undesirable vote of the negro woman? Because of their shiftlessness some of the men were excluded from the polls on a purely educational ground, but would this do in the case of the woman? Scarcely, for she has in most cases superior mentality to the man, and then too, a stringent educational test would exclude some of the more desirable votes of the white woman. The negro woman is more business-like in every way than the man. She is also always on the alert to everything out of which she may gain. She is far more ambitious than the man by nature, and more apt to prove insistent in her affairs than is the man.

This excerpt speaks for itself on the “progressive” white views toward blacks at Valdosta’s institution of higher learning. In the above passage, the young female author seems to be thinking aloud, but at the end of the editorial, she sends out an urgent rallying call for people to put their heads together to find a real solution to the “new Negro problem”:

What are we going to do about the negro woman if suffrage is extended to her by the same hand that extends it to the white woman? Are we going to eliminate the undesirable vote, or are we going to allow our politics to become as corrupt as they became during the reconstruction period? This is a question far-reaching, of enough importance to command the attention of the public, and pressing enough to require immediate action.

This point of view was afforded an entire page in the new college’s publication, and it symbolizes the racist ideological foundation of its original classes of students.

The first two black students were reluctantly admitted to the college in 1963, against the will of the college’s president at the time, who wrote in a business letter to a man in Charlotte, North Carolina:

As you know, all of the regulations of the State of Georgia to maintain segregation have been declared unconstitutional, and we are working under the forced system of the Supreme Court and of the Kennedy dictatorship. We were directed by the

State Law Department to admit these two students, as they would be forced in anyway by the federal courts. (Thaxton 1963)

Clearly, VSU's president was resigned to the idea of desegregation, and seems here to be apologizing to the addressee for his forced admission of the first two black students, a young man and young woman. These first two black students each completed their degrees in 1967, and reflecting upon her four years at the college in a school newspaper article, the black female student recalled open animosity from white students and several incidents of name calling. She also said she thought student attitudes were starting to change, but for the most part, she found her white peers "cold and hypocritical" (McCoy 1967).

In the fall of 1967, four years after integration of the university, segregationism remained a common theme for some white students. A campus newspaper article relayed student opinions on potential Presidential candidates. One student, reportedly dressed in a Confederate uniform, preferred George Wallace, stating, "Well, the one I'd like to see is good old George. He'll stick up for states' rights, segregation, and the little man" (Teasley 1967). This young man wore his persistent hope for re-segregation literally on his sleeve, walking around in the uniform of the fallen Confederacy on a college campus that had already graduated two black students and that had black students currently enrolled. It is very likely that this type of dressing up was somewhat commonplace until 1970, when the school's mascot, the Rebels, was quietly changed to the Blazers.

Throughout its history Valdosta State University displayed a sometimes subtle, sometimes outspoken detestation of African Americans. Now, many Valdosta residents, like Edward, credit the same institution as some real force pulling the entire city out of a racist mind frame. Not everyone agrees, however. According to Shirley, the racially

harmonizing effect VSU has on the surrounding community is minimal to nonexistent, saying:

For a town that has a university, Valdosta is a million miles behind . . . you really wouldn't think it had a university. And when people graduate here, they don't stay here and work. They take their skills elsewhere. People are being educated here, but they're just not staying here.

She depicts Valdosta as a city virtually unaffected by the potentially positive influence of a university. However, she also goes on to explain that there are qualities to Valdosta that make it a wonderful place to live in her eyes, despite the lack of progress:

In spite of the bad things, there are so many good things [about Valdosta]. Look at the weather. Look at the cost of living. Look at the crime. For a city this size, we don't have much crime. My son could go on his bicycle and ride around, and I didn't have to worry about somebody trying to sell him drugs. . . . This is a good place to raise a child, and that's why I'm still here.

Shirley does not view Valdosta as a progressive city, but she acknowledges that it is not without its virtues, in many ways epitomizing a charming, community-oriented, small Southern city.

Throughout the South, desegregation brought about enormous gains for people of color for access and more equal opportunities. Both whites and blacks in the sample agreed that attitudes, however, have been much slower to change. There were also differences in perceptions of the levels of changes that have occurred. While some whites were of the opinion that Valdosta was being rapidly transformed into a more racially-harmonious place by what they thought to be open-minded institutions, some black respondents believed that Valdosta was almost at a standstill in racial relations progress. Because of this perception among African Americans, the respondents still felt a strong need to work to protect their children from the ills of racism that they would surely experience.

Protecting Children from Racism

A common theme in my interviews with blacks in Valdosta was the desire to protect their children and grandchildren from racism. This preparation often took the form of a strong ideological framework that would facilitate their navigation of a white-dominated world. There were discrepancies among interview respondents on how to go about grooming children in this manner – some wanted to pass down a tradition of oral history detailing anti-black racism, and others desired to hide awareness of many painful events from their children in order to focus on more positive aspects of being black. Both of these tactics had been prevalent in the respondents' own childhoods in the early- to mid-20th Century as well.

None of the white respondents spoke of the need to either teach or hide the history of the oppression of African Americans from their own children. Questioning them pointedly on this matter might very well reveal that there would be a desire to withhold any detailed information of the terrible way that blacks were treated in order to hide the ugliness of the past from impressionable, innocent children. Some blacks share this sentiment, but others see the need to keep children knowledgeable of what whites were capable of doing to their people only a few decades earlier. Here again we see the function of the cumulative effects of racism on its targets. Because of a lifetime enduring racism, African Americans cannot ignore racism, and finding a way to portray it to children is of utmost importance to them. White adults on the other hand can ignore racism, because they do not see it as a factor for the way they live their lives or how they teach their children to live.

Revealing a History of Racism

The maintenance of an oral tradition serves for many blacks as a survival strategy, helping African Americans in their struggle against everyday racism (Feagin and Sikes 1994). Bernard felt it very important to pass all the knowledge of racism and discrimination he had acquired in his life down to his children, likening the transference to Jews' enduring remembrance of the Holocaust:

I want my children to know everything that I know about their past. The one thing that I admire about Jewish parents is they don't ever intend to let anything that happened in Germany happen again. They've got museums everywhere. They talk to their children. They instill Jewish pride, and I think that's commendable . . . And just as they do not rely on public schools to teach their children about Jewish history, we should not rely on public schools to teach our children about our history, because they're not going to do it.

To Bernard, remembering the past of African Americans is crucial to blacks understanding their history of oppression and using that knowledge to continue to demand a more equal status in American society. Here, Bernard also stresses the importance of deliberately working to counteract the effects a white-washed public schooling has on black children.

Concealing a History of Racism

Gregory spoke of the importance he places in finding the strength to let go of past wrongs in order to live a more positive life and set a good example for his children. Brenda is also selective in what she chooses to reveal to her children, after making conscious decisions as to whether specific bits of knowledge would work to their advantage or not:

My children would say that I always try to protect them, and I always think everybody's good. And there have been certain things that have happened in the family [that] I've chosen not to tell them because I didn't feel like it was going to benefit them any. . . . So I guess things like [lynchings], I would want to protect

them from knowing that there were people capable of doing things like that. And whether or not that's a good thing, I don't know.

Brenda questions her desire to withhold painful information of racism from her children.

Shirley spoke of her teenage son's resistance to her constantly reminding him of her experiences with racism, and she worried that his utopian ideas about racial relations would someday blow up in his face. In a way, she was grateful for his lack of bitterness toward whites because it allowed him a more positive outlook on life, but her biggest worry was that he would be psychologically unprepared to deal with racial discrimination when he encounters it.

A Mock Lynching at School

Recently in Valdosta many black parents feared for their children's safety from racist acts at school. On October 3, 2002 at Lowndes High School, Georgia's largest high school outside the Atlanta area, three white students painted a Barbie doll black and hung it from a tree on school property, prompting debate in Lowndes County and across the nation about the presence and danger of racism on school campuses. Twenty-five percent of Lowndes High's 2,750 students at the time were black, with the rest of the student body being primarily white. A school investigation into the incident revealed that the day before the reported mock lynching, a similar black-painted Barbie had been found hanging from a tree, but the students who took it down simply threw it in the trash and did not report it. The lack of attention received by the first attempt prompted the mock lynching to be repeated the following day, and this time the group of black students who removed it took it to school authorities. The school investigation also discovered the letters "KKK" scrawled on a wall in a boys' bathroom, which was quickly closed for repainting (Davis 2002).

White community reaction. Initial reactions from school officials were embarrassed yet assertive that the mock lynching ran contrary to the actual state of race relations at Lowndes High. Several students were quoted in the *Valdosta Daily Times* explaining they thought black-white relations were healthy and the incident was not indicative of any strained racial atmosphere at school. However, one white student who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal was reported as saying that racial tension between blacks and whites on the high school campus was an ever-present reality (Pope 2002b). On the other hand, the superintendent and principal declared there were no racial tensions at the school, referring to the incident as an isolated one and not intended to intimidate or scare black students (Davis 2002).

Black community reaction. The mock lynching led to an immediate, strong reaction from some black parents, who expressed fear for their children's welfare. In the *Daily Times* one black mother voiced her commitment to protect her son from future similar acts of racism, saying "If I have to go to that school every day to ensure [my son's] safety, I will do so" (Pope 2002a). Some parents called for the offense to be classified as a hate crime and for the three young men to be punished more severely than the original five-day suspension they were given. Debate in the community finally led to the boys being transferred to the other county high school for the remainder of the school year.

White respondent reaction. Most of the whites I interviewed expressed disappointment that the mock lynching had occurred and straightforwardly asserted that the children who did it deserved to be punished. Surprisingly, two white respondents had no recollection of the highly-publicized event that had happened less than two years

earlier. Several of them saw things like the mock lynching and the 1989 homecoming cross burning as unfortunate, but isolated, acts. Henry downplays the gravity of the act and tries to distance the actions of the three white boys from the rest of Valdosta's white community:

That's not as bad as really hanging somebody. It's not as bad as really hitting somebody with a stone and calling them names. People shouldn't do that kind of thing. But on the other hand, should a person go to jail for it? It's the kind of thing I would not know how to deal with. It's wrong, it shouldn't happen. Kids who do that should get suspended or expelled for a period of time or something like that. But when a few people do something they shouldn't do, does that mean the *whole* community is that way? I don't think so.

This kind of almost apologetic yet defensive sentiment was fairly common among the whites quoted in the local newspaper and in interviews I conducted with other white Valdostans.

Black respondent reaction. For many black parents, the 2002 mock lynching did not represent an isolated event but rather served as an indicator that white racism is alive and well in the minds of Valdosta's white children. Bernard also pointed out that the students at the school were not the ones who made a big issue of the event. Rather debate was led primarily by black parents and community leaders, and he blames black students' lack of informal education of historical racism:

I was even more disturbed that there was not more of a reaction from the other kids at the school, white or black. In the 1960s nobody would have been at school the next day, not a single black child. More was said by us and the people away from that school than was said by the students, and I found that not only interesting, but disturbing. . . . Kids don't have any kind of appreciation for what happened in the past. And that's unfortunate, and that's as much my fault and the fault of black leaders, and particularly black parents. There is apathy in our own community now that is almost unbelievable.

As mentioned above, Bernard is of the opinion that black children must be taught the history of anti-black racism in order to recognize racism when it occurs, and to be able to

anticipate when they may be in real danger. In speaking of the mock lynching, Brenda again questions her choice to conceal painful memories of racism from her children:

A lot of this stuff that happened before, like lynchings and stuff, [is] not in the books. They don't want the children to know. But somebody's still teaching these children [hate]. Somebody's still telling the white kids how they used to do and what was acceptable. So do we want our kids not to know that this is what people have been capable of? Or do we want to protect them and say, "Oh well, now we are all one big happy family and this stuff never happened"? Because they need to know just what people are capable of.

Brenda goes through an internal debate with herself about how best to both prepare her children to face a racist world and to protect them from the psychological effects of learning the extent of racism. All of the African Americans I interviewed spoke of the responsibility they felt toward teaching their children to survive and fight racism. Some taught their children to proudly stand up for themselves. Some taught them African American history. Some tried to hide racism from them. Some taught them a combination of these things. One thing is clear: learning how to deal with anti-black racism can be a lifelong journey involving attitudes, behaviors, and psychological struggles.

A Series of Lynchings

The NAACP periodical magazine *The Crisis* published the story of a series of lynchings that occurred during the week of May 17-24, 1918 in Brooks and Lowndes counties in south Georgia (White 1918). Lynchings of black men were fairly commonplace in the South in the decades following the Civil War. The lynching of black women was much more uncommon, and the story of the gruesome death of Mary Turner continues to draw the attention of researchers (Work 1919, Ginzburg 1962, Jensen 2002). The lynching of Mary Turner also inspired a poem in the 1920s by African American poet Anne Spencer entitled "White Things."

Multiple black men were lynched in this episode of mob violence, which spurred from the murder of a white man by a black man. In May 1918, Hampton Smith, a Brooks County, Georgia plantation owner with a reputation for ill treatment of his black employees, was shot to death in his home by a fed-up worker, Sidney Johnson. When news of the murder reached the community, posses of white men and boys from Brooks and Lowndes Counties were immediately formed to search for Johnson. The mob also suspected that a group of black conspirators for the murder had held a meeting at the home of Hayes Turner, who had suffered at the hands of Smith, and whose wife Mary had been beaten by Smith on several occasions.

On Friday, May 17, Will Head and Will Thompson became the first of the mob's victims. Both were lynched near Troupville, about five miles from Valdosta. Over 700 bullets were fired into the two men's bodies. On Saturday the mob took Hayes Turner from police custody about three miles from Moultrie, and he was lynched with his hands still in handcuffs. The next day, hundreds of sightseers traveling by automobile, wagon, and on foot visited the site. His body hung until Monday, when county convicts took him down and buried him about fifty feet away.

Another black man, possibly Eugene Rice, was lynched on May 18 near Morven. In addition, Chime Riley was lynched and drowned in the Little River. Also during the outbreak, Simon Schuman was seized and likely lynched. Three unidentified bodies of black men were discovered in the Little River about a week later. During the week of the killings, Sidney Johnson had been hiding out in Valdosta. The mob received a tip and surrounded him in a house, and a gunfight began. Johnson was found inside already dead, and the disappointed mob mutilated his body and dragged it in open daylight down

Patterson Street, one of Valdosta's business thoroughfares. His body was then strapped to a tree outside of town and burned, finally ending the week of mob violence.

The lynching of Mary Turner. As detailed above, an extensive amount of lynchings occurred in the hunt for one known man, and the most well-known murder to occur during this one week in May 1918 was that of Mary Turner, who was almost full term in her pregnancy. Upset by the killing of her husband Hayes on May 18, she made the public remark that if she knew the names of the mob participants she would make sure they were punished in the courts. This news prompted the mob to "teach her a lesson." Turner was captured and taken to a secluded spot near Folsom's Bridge over the Little River. She was eight months pregnant. Her ankles were tied together, and she was hung from a tree upside down. Gasoline and motor oil were thrown onto her clothes and set on fire until the clothing was burned from her body. While still alive, a knife was used to slit open her abdomen, and her unborn baby fell to the ground. According to statements from onlookers, "The infant, prematurely born, gave two feeble cries and then its head was crushed by a member of the mob with his heel" (White 1918). Then hundreds of bullets were fired into her body.

Memories of the lynchings. Though the exact count of lynching victims in this episode is unknown, some accounts of the weeklong incident claim there were eleven total victims. This bout of violence caused the exodus of over 500 black residents of the Valdosta area. I questioned my interview participants on their knowledge of the incident, hypothesizing that many of the blacks and few of the whites would have been told by parents and grandparents of the lynchings. I expected a tradition of oral history in the black communities of Valdosta to have circulated information to subsequent generations.

I found that about half of the African Americans in the sample had ever heard of the lynchings, and fewer knew the details as they were reported by the NAACP investigation. Not surprisingly, none of the whites I interviewed had been told by family or community members of the incident, and most of the reactions I got from them when I asked how it made them feel to know something like that happened in Lowndes County were quite nonchalant.

When an accurate version of African American history is given, many blacks vicariously relive the experience in a very emotional way (Feagin and Sikes 1994). One black respondent, Bernard, courageously tried to control his emotions as he spoke to me about his feelings on the lynching of Mary Turner:

It's hard for me to talk about that (voice cracks), even now. You wonder how anybody can do that, unless they did not define her, and the others – she was not the only one, but hers was the most gruesome and brutal. To string somebody up, to tie their feet, to take the butt of a rifle and ram it into her stomach to force the birth of that baby and then take your heel and grind it in the dirt . . . it hurts (voice cracking). And all she was looking for was justice for her husband (pauses, clears throat). That was one of those times when you read stuff like that, [and] there develops inside of you a rage. And if you do not accept some way of fighting oppression, you will go mad, and you will do something that you will probably lose your own life and the lives of others. But it's that kind of thing that's encouraged me to keep fighting.

This level of rage, whether it is expressed or silenced, can lead to inner turmoil, emotional withdrawal, or serious physical problems (Feagin 2001). The lynching of Mary Turner was a very personal experience for Bernard, who worked to funnel his rage into community activism. Gregory went about dealing with the painful knowledge of the 1918 lynchings in a completely different way. He tried to reject that the knowledge had any effect on him, keeping it in his memory, but pushing it out of his psyche. This topic was by far the most strained in my interview with him, because he acknowledged to me that

he knew of the lynchings, but he blatantly avoided my questioning. The exchange below shows how he and I both tried to control the direction of the conversation:

[Are you familiar with the lynching of a woman named Mary Turner?] Right. The Troupville lynchings. [What do you know about that?] I don't. [You don't know anything about it?] No. [Do you want to know anything about it?] No. [So you've heard something about it...] Well, what have *you* heard? [I've read the story about it. The NAACP had an investigator down here, and they wrote it up in their monthly publication, so it was a pretty big deal. You're smiling at me, like...? A lot of people here haven't heard about it—] Those who say don't know, and those who know don't say. In the past, people had to protect their family. Sometimes you let sleeping dogs sleep. Like I say, things are different now. I've watched the die-hards die, the old Klansmen, and I watched some of their children die now, the ones that used to control the area. A judge and a sheriff used to run this whole city – they're both gone. Their legacy is gone, so that part doesn't have to be reinforced. There's no reason for my son to know ignorance. I mean, I don't deny the knowledge of the past, but there were so many things just out of pure ignorance you just let die, because I don't see it anymore. I will not acknowledge it. It shouldn't have happened during the time that it did. The innocent people that suffered because of the ignorance of others. . . . [but] some bad things you just let go.

Gregory did not want to talk about the lynchings, but in this passage he ultimately reveals that he has a whole host of memories of painful past events that he chooses to suppress.

According to Ross and Buehler (1994) however, although it may be possible to reduce current distress by avoiding disturbing memories, a person may ultimately suffer in different ways. During the interview Gregory spoke often of his children, how he did not want them to know pain if he could help it, and how a positive outlook on life was crucial to his happiness and his strength in front of his children.

When speaking of painful memories of racism, many of the black respondents mentioned their desire to conceal certain information from their children. They wanted their children protected from knowing details of the ignorance and cruelty that they and other blacks had experienced at the hands of whites. According to Annie, this protective quality had been prevalent in her parents' generation as well. She said her parents lived in Valdosta during the time of the lynchings but never told her about them:

My dad always tried to avoid us being aware of things that took place, because it irritated him a lot. . . . He used to say, "I don't want to talk about it. Just don't talk about it". . . . Who was lynched, who was killed, what they did to us, we did not know.

Extreme acts like lynchings, and racism in general, were things that African Americans were virtually powerless to change. Annie's account of her father's treatment of painful issues indicates that in the Jim Crow South, undoubtedly one of the most effective ways to deal with an inflexible, cruel system was to not dwell on it.

Conclusion

Proper decisions on how best to protect black children from the evils of racism are often at the forefront of the minds of black parents. Though preferred strategies vary between people and between families, these tailored approaches are a part of a necessary set of coping tactics. Black adults intimately know how a lifetime of discrimination can have psychologically damaging effects. Choosing to conceal a history of racism may be an attempt to keep cumulative effects of racism on their children's psyches at a minimum. Choosing to reveal a history of anti-black racism may be an attempt to prepare and mentally strengthen children to face a racist world by teaching them what can be endured, challenged, and overcome. Whether a parent chooses concealment, exposure, or a combination of the two methods, their ultimate intent is to provide their loved ones with formidable tools in dealing with a future likely marked by many experiences with discrimination.

White southern adults display a much shorter memory and understanding of segregation than black southerners. At least partly because of this difference, they perceive changes in racial progress differently as well. Whites tend to see that a drastic, almost complete, change has occurred, allowing widespread white humility and black

equality. Blacks, on the other hand, feel the need to continue to prepare their children for life in a racist world. Many of them perceive racism as still rooted in institutions and not just present in individual minds. As one respondent put it: “Discrimination is in the ground,” forming the foundation of everything that is built atop it.

In the next chapter, discrimination will be discussed at length, citing black respondents’ experiences, their coping strategies, and the ways they fight back. The cumulative negative effects that racism has had on the African American respondents will also be made much clearer in their accounts. Alongside this discussion of blacks’ experiences, I place the opinions of whites, who downplay racism’s cumulative effects and disregard the discrimination claims of blacks. I also briefly discuss the possibility for white empathy towards the experiences of blacks.

CHAPTER 4 PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION AND ITS CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

People have very different ideas about what exact behaviors can be placed in the category of “discrimination.” The framework I follow for anti-black interpersonal discriminatory behavior is that presented by Feagin and Sikes (1994): “blatant, subtle, and covert actions taken by white people, willfully or half-consciously, to exclude, restrict, or otherwise harm black people” (p. 20). Considered in this broad light, discrimination includes such things as being ignored in stores and restaurants, being racially profiled by police, and being turned down for a job in favor of less-qualified whites.

Every single black interviewee relayed at least one personal experience with discrimination as defined above, and most of them easily recalled a very recent experience. They spoke of different coping strategies used to deal with discriminatory incidents, and they often referred to a range of emotions and images that each new act of discrimination conjures up in their minds. White respondents, on the other hand, had a hard time speaking to discrimination, either downplaying it because they believed it no longer occurred on a prevalent, systematic level, or flat-out denying the validity of blacks’ claims. However, some whites have the potential to use empathy to gain a better understanding of the experiences of people of color with discrimination.

Employment Discrimination

Whites are more likely than blacks to view racism as a personal issue (Blauner 2001), which can make it a very emotional topic for discussion. Most of the whites I

interviewed had no comprehension of the institutionalized nature of racism in America. When asked if they thought discrimination still occurred, some stated that it might occur from time to time, but the deciding factor would be the views of the specific people involved. Workplace discrimination can have multiple negative effects on its targets. Discrimination from co-workers, customers, employees and employers can have psychological disadvantages. Discrimination in hiring and promotions has direct economic disadvantages and indirect psychological disadvantages.

Despite the recent historical prevalence of blatant workplace discrimination against blacks and current research documenting contemporary racial discrimination in job hiring (Pager 2003, e.g.), many whites are unaware or in denial that similar discriminatory dynamics occur today. Louise, an upper-class elderly white woman, when asked whether she thought discrimination was still present in hiring practices, optimistically saw it as an individual state of mind having individual consequences:

Since I retired, I have not applied for a position or a job, so I can't answer that and tell you. I would like to think no, but I guess that's true that if there's somebody out there that has a job to offer. It depends on how he feels in his own heart and mind about the black community as to whether there would be that much discrimination or not.

Louise, like a few other white respondents, has trouble fitting racial discrimination into her view of the world, as she claims to live a life so far removed from such thoughts and troubles. Notably, Louise avoids answering the question decisively by claiming to be out of touch with the employment scene.

Some older, retired black respondents, however, had no problem speaking to hiring discrimination, several giving examples of black youth who are educated in Valdosta but must go elsewhere for work. Annie, a black woman in her sixties, sees discrimination from more of a functionalist perspective than Louise: "The average black that attends

college and that lives here has to go to Atlanta or somewhere to get a job. Why? It's because the average white person has a friend who has a daughter who [will get the job].” Annie has an understanding of hiring discrimination as being jointly about the exclusion of blacks and the preference for whites. Brenda, a black woman in her forties, worries about her children's futures if they choose to reside and find work in Valdosta, saying:

I wonder sometimes how long they're going to be able to stay here and take care of their families and have a career, because some people say that this town is really sewed up, and if certain people don't want you to have a job, then you won't get one. . . . I've seen a lot of people with enthusiasm and desire just fizzle out here in Valdosta.

Brenda sees a high level of hiring discrimination unique to Valdosta's employment scene as a force very likely potentially hurting her children and other black children both financially and psychologically.

The Role of Social Networks

Both Annie and Brenda understand that social networks play an integral role in limiting the opportunities of blacks in the employment sector. It is important to note that the networks most beneficial in connecting people to opportunities such as employment can be weak ties, which are connections with acquaintances as opposed to friends or family members. According to Granovetter (1973) it is actually the weak ties that are an important resource for making possible opportunities for mobility. Granovetter (1973) also found that weaker social ties are much more effective in minimizing social distance when dealing with white-black connections, whereas blacks maintaining acquaintances with whites is absolutely crucial to blacks having access to the benefits of white circles.

African Americans' access to some white groups, or cliques, however, can often be made impossible by the racism of members. One of my black respondents was employed at a work placement agency, and she accounted a recent experience in her

workplace, involving a black worker who had been employed by a white employer for only a few weeks when he became fed up with his treatment:

He told me, “I want to let you know . . . that I can’t work for this man. I’m going to quit this job. . . . First of all, I don’t like Kunte Kinte jokes. And this little boy hangs around the work site, and he threw a rubber rat on me, which I thought was kind of funny, but then he looked at me and said, ‘My daddy didn’t tell me the truth– he told me if you scare a nigger, he turns white.’” So he did leave the job. He had worked in this job for about three weeks, and I had checked on him every week . . . and the first [three] weeks his boss told me, “Ah, he’s great! He’s got ambition, he’s smart. I can see where I’m going to be able to train him and leave him at this work site all by himself.” On week four I got a phone call: “(sigh of disgust) I need somebody else over here . . . [he] was sullen, disrespectful, slovenly, and showed up for work late.” I asked him, “Well, why didn’t you tell me that the first [three] weeks?” And he said, “I was trying to give him a chance, but I don’t want him anymore. Now, do you have a little Mexican man there that would come work for me? It’s okay if he doesn’t speak English.” So I sent him someone. The guy’s been there for about two months, and his boss says he’s the best worker in the world, but I suspect that he’s the butt of many jokes.

According to this woman, it is becoming harder and harder for white and black farm laborers to find employment in Lowndes County, because employers are increasingly showing a preference toward Spanish-speaking immigrant workers. This force is among the factors that would inhibit social and political unity between African Americans and a slowly growing population of Latinos in south Georgia. According to 2000 Census data, together the two groups comprise over 50 percent of the populace of Valdosta (Georgia 2002) and over 36 percent of the population of Lowndes County (“County” n.d.). The above quote also points out that racism pushes black men out of farm work through bad treatment of employees, which then allows white employers to treat the replacement Spanish-speaking workers with even less respect and dignity.

Shirley told of her experiences in the Valdosta job market, explaining how her college degree and skill level had not significantly increased her employment opportunities:

I applied for a job . . . doing testing – good salary, good hours, good benefits, and when I read the job description, I said, ‘This is me through and through.’ I went in feeling really confident and had what I thought was a good interview. I had two interviews, and then nothing. Subsequently [a white woman] got the job with less experience [and] less education – I knew that because I know the woman. One of the things I thought would get me the job is the growing Hispanic population, because [I am] bilingual. I said, “So for those people who are trying to get their GED in Spanish, I could administer the test in Spanish.” And you know what they told me? “Oh, there’s no need for that. We don’t have that many people needing that. I doubt if anyone will ever use that skill here.” So they hired this [other] woman, and one of the first things she did was call [me], “Ms. Shirley, um... I have some people who need to be tested in Spanish. Do you think you could help me out?” I said no! It [wasn’t] her fault, but nevertheless, it wasn’t needed when I interviewed. They had to go outside of that job and get somebody to help her, when everything could have been done right there.

Shirley’s entire two-hour interview was a lesson in perseverance through racial prejudice and exclusion, which she had encountered head-on, and for the most part single-handedly, since her pre-teenage years.

Discrimination in Stores and Restaurants

Economic racism via workplace discrimination harms people of color both financially and psychologically. The racism that African Americans often face in stores and restaurants takes the form of a more social kind of discrimination, for example being routinely overlooked or passed by for white customers. Many of the black respondents had no trouble relaying a recent personal experience with some form of discrimination.

Shirley spoke of repetitively cold experiences in one local eatery:

There is a restaurant downtown that I’ve gone in three times, and each time I’ve gone, I was meeting someone from another organization for lunch. And I’ll go in, and I’ll stand there. They pass by me, they pass by me, and pass by me. And then another member of the party will arrive, who’s usually not black, and they’ll come up [and ask], “Can I seat you!?” I’ll say, “Well, I was already standing here, and you haven’t seated me yet.” Very friendly, they say, “Ah, honey, I didn’t see you standing there!” Now, I draw attention anyway just because [of the hats I wear], so how in the world did you miss me? And if I tell someone in the party, “They ignored the crap out of me the whole time I stood here – they didn’t even acknowledge I was here until you walked in,” they’ll say, “Oh Shirley, you’re just

being sensitive. Don't you think you're being just a little bit too sensitive?" You would be too. Why wouldn't I be sensitive?

Assessing potentially racist situations can put a strain on the mental energy and psyche of people of color (Feagin and Sikes 1994). A repeated experience like this is troubling for Shirley in at least four different ways. First, she must cope with being ignored by white restaurant workers. Second, she has to deal with the hypocritically friendly comeback from the worker that she does not believe to be a genuine gesture. Then, Shirley has to handle the disappointing, insensitive reaction of her companions, who brush aside her feelings as unreasonable. Finally, she very likely second guesses the validity of her initial reaction at the same time as the incident conjures up memories of a lifetime of similar incidents.

Discrimination from Law Enforcement

African Americans across the nation have a high level of distrust of police forces that is facilitated by a long history of black oppression at the hands of law enforcement (Feagin 2001). This distrust of traditionally racist police forces and other white-dominated institutions is quite rational (Granovetter 1973), but many whites have no understanding of, and even an aversion to, black claims of subtle to overt unfair treatment at the hands of police.

I seldom asked my black respondents about the police, but fear and mistrust of law enforcement was a prevalent theme in most interviews. Even treatment that two of my black male respondents had received at the hands of police decades ago, when they were teenagers, lives on vividly in their minds. The following discussion of a recent local controversy over the death at the county jail of a black inmate clearly shows how divided whites and blacks are on police and institutional trust.

A Black Man's Death in a Jail

The most debated, racially divisive issue in Valdosta in perhaps the entire history of the city was the death of Willie James Williams in the Lowndes County Jail in 1998. Williams was a 49-year-old black Valdosta man arrested on September 1 for drunk driving and being in violation of parole. About 24 hours after his arrest, Williams was found on the verge of death in a pool of his own vomit in the county jail. The events from the time he was pulled over by a white police officer up until his death have been widely disputed. Still, no consensus has been reached. The general story of events holds that Williams was under the influence of alcohol and resisted arrest to some degree, prompting the officer to subdue him by throwing him to the ground. Due to injuries sustained during and perhaps after his arrest, Williams was transported to the hospital to sew up a cut on his lip, returned to the jail, and later found unconscious.

Lowndes County is known across the state as being hard-nosed in its approach to crime. The controversy that followed Williams' death symbolized a culmination of suspicions about Lowndes County Jail's treatment of black inmates. Williams was the third African American inmate to die of questionable circumstances since a local white man took office as sheriff in 1993. Also brought into the light because of the incident were demotions and firings of blacks by the sheriff's department and numerous complaints filed by jail employees with the Equal Opportunity Commission (Dunlop 1998). Interestingly, the Lowndes County sheriff had been named Sheriff of the Year by the Georgia State Police just days before the death of Willie James Williams.

Two days after his death, Williams' mug shot photo was printed on the front page of the *Valdosta Daily Times*, showing the right side of his face hugely swollen, his eyes (possibly swollen) shut, a large bandage across his chin, and his arm in a sling. In the

adjoining article, the sheriff was quoted as saying, “Nobody beat him. He fell” (Scott 1998). Coincidentally, the Georgia Crime Lab listed the death as a homicide due to blunt force head trauma, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) and FBI launched probes into the case. Throughout the investigation and ensuing trial, the sheriff stood by the arresting deputy and defended the integrity of all his officers’ actions, which one local newspaper commended: “[The] sheriff . . . has backed his men, an admirable trait in administration and handling personnel” (“It’s” 1998).

Black leaders in the community sprang into action, formed an organization called the People’s Tribunal, rallied protestors, and led a peaceful march of somewhere between 1,200 and 1,500 people from Williams’ place of arrest all the way to the Lowndes County Jail. The large crowd was not very racially diverse. The vast majority of the marchers were African American, despite the specific request of the march leaders for support from predominantly white area churches (“Community” 1998). Valdosta State University’s student newspaper described the demonstrators as a determined group that sang a rhythmic “Amen” chorus audible to the inmates inside the jail, inciting them to cheer the procession as they approached the building (Delaney 1998). In the speech by the march leader, the Lowndes County Sheriff was likened to Albany, Georgia’s 1960s racist sheriff, Eugene “Bull” Connors.

The arresting police officer was put on trial for the death of Williams. The five-member jury acquitted him by a vote of 3-2, with the three white members voting in favor to acquit and the two black jurors dissenting. After the decision, one of the black jurors concluded that Williams had been killed by the white arresting officer, while one of the white jurors claimed “the system” was to blame (Richard 2000). Two lawsuits

were filed as a result of the Willie James Williams controversy – a multimillion dollar civil suit by Williams’ family against the Lowndes County Sheriff’s Office (pending as of June 2004) and a libel suit by the arresting officer against local liberal newspaper, the *Lake Park Post* for calling him a “murderer,” which he subsequently won. The racially split decision in the original trial and the deputy’s libel victory signifies the division between black and white Valdostans in general and the persistence of the white power structure in maintaining the status quo.

Distrust of Police

Throughout the Williams controversy, the People’s Tribunal called for the resignation or the dismissal of the sheriff. The leader of the People’s Tribunal reportedly told a packed house at a community meeting that the least the sheriff could do, considering the vast majority of inmates at the jail were black, was to have some credibility with the black community (Parsons 1998). According to Granovetter (1973) the lack of trust blacks have in the police is not irrational. Fragmented social ties between a white-dominated law enforcement and the black community can be detrimental for the development of trust because “Leaders . . . have little motivation to be responsive or even trustworthy toward those to whom they have no direct or indirect connection” (p. 1374).

In January 1998, just months before Willie James Williams died, the Valdosta Police Department in association with the Weed and Seed Initiative had implemented a “Stop and Chat” program in order to combat mistrust of the police. Under the program police officers were expected to perform a specific number of stops in poor, primarily black neighborhoods to converse with residents in the streets. The strategy noted that: “The result should be that officers become better acquainted with the residents in the neighborhoods they protect and citizens begin to trust and cooperate with officers,

resulting in a safer target area” (Scott 1997). If any progress was made in building trust in the black community of local law enforcement, the death of Willie James Williams certainly brought it crashing down.

Personal Roots of Distrust

Mistrust of police and other political and governmental factions does not just appear out of nowhere. Not only do people of color as a group, and African Americans especially, have a long history of oppression and exclusion to draw upon, many black adults have had their own pivotal negative experiences with police officers. Both Bernard and Gregory told stories of discriminatory treatment they received at the hands of white police officers as teenage boys. Upon asking Gregory if he had ever been scared for his life, he quickly and simply stated, “Of course,” explaining:

It was about 1970, and I was [a teenager]. Basically what happened was the cops were called – it was a black-white conflict for me being with a white girl, and it ending up being a big fight. Another friend of mine left me to run and call my dad [to tell him] the cops had picked me up. My father ran up to the police department, and the police had taken me to the woods. Apparently they had called on the radio during this time, told them to get me back down there [to the station]. . . . [So what happened?] They drove me back to the station. They had taken me out to the woods to teach me a lesson. [They didn’t do anything to you?] Well [when] the radio call came through, they already had me outside the car and had taken the handcuffs off me and told me to run. I was scared to death. I’d been slammed around, slapped, and beaten. But they took me back to the station. When I told my father they had taken me out to the woods, they denied it and said they had another call they were checking out.

Not only did Gregory have to deal with fearing for his life as a teenager at the hands of men who were supposed to be upholders of the law, his story of discrimination was immediately invalidated by the reputable police officers who had beaten and abused him only moments earlier. Bernard is in his 60s, yet his boyhood run-in with the police haunts him to this day:

Something always comes to the pit of my stomach when a police officer is behind me. And he may not be thinking anything about me. But because of my experience in 1954 . . . it's difficult for me to shake that. [What happened?] Well, I was on my way to Montgomery, [Alabama]. The state trooper put on his lights, and it was raining. I pulled over, and I just sat there. Then he came over on the loud speaker and said, "Get out of the car." Well, I didn't think he meant right then – it was raining. So I just sat there a moment, and he said, "Get out of the car now." I got out of the car and looked back there – he had a partner with him. And he said, "Walk to the back of the car and open the trunk. Take everything out and put it on the ground." It was still raining. I took everything out and put it on the ground. I turned around, and they were sitting there laughing and talking to each other. And after my clothes were ruined, he said, "Put everything back in the trunk." I put everything back. He said, "You can go now." Never said why he stopped me, never gave me a ticket – *nothing*. So when something like that happens to you and you see a police car, you feel a little different, even at [my age].

These two men's unforgettable, frightening, humiliating experiences understandably will likely shape how they react to the police for the rest of their lives.

White Mistrust of Discrimination Claims

Many whites have no frame of reference to understand blacks' distrust of police or sensitivity to potential or actual discriminatory treatment. Edward thought blacks' mistrust of police was nonsensical and unfortunate, saying of the controversy over the court's decision in the Willie James Williams case:

It went through a long process where the officer was vindicated in *multiple* instances . . . in *our* judicial system, he was exonerated. And the sheriff [and] all of the people that were involved were exonerated. So . . . it would be hard to believe that at *every single* juncture that it would break down. And the allegation might be, "Well, the legal system is stacked in your favor," i.e. white, i.e. law enforcement, as opposed to the black man. But I (sighs), I think that's sad. I think there's a sense of mistrust there, and I'm not sure how we're going to overcome that.

Edward agrees with many black Valdostans that there is a problem of trust concerning law enforcement. However, by insinuating that the justice system is not at fault, he indicates that blacks' distrust is something blacks should "overcome." To many whites who have not experienced the kind of repeated, harsh treatment by law enforcement officials that many blacks have, claims of racial discrimination by African Americans

about the police are extremely difficult to prove. Consequently, they are lightly regarded as mere “allegations.”

For many blacks, workplace discrimination is an almost tangible thing, while for many whites, it is a hypothetical suggestion because it is so removed from the realm of their experience. Some whites I interviewed could entertain the notion that discrimination might be possible and felt it would be an unfortunate occurrence. Undoubtedly, many whites feel like Phillip does about it, that equal opportunities are available to qualified, educated applicants, regardless of skin color: “There may not be the most opportunities here for colored people, or white people either, who are uneducated. If they have education, why they can get a job in any industry around here. That wouldn’t be a problem.” Contrasted with the recent lived experiences of several of the black respondents in the sample, Phillip’s assertion sounds like wishful thinking, though he presents it as fact, because from his perspective it is the only logical conclusion.

A few of the white respondents displayed a firm resistance to trusting the claims of blacks about discriminatory treatment, and one white man completely discounted the testimonies of blacks with discrimination:

[Would you believe it if someone claimed that there were discrimination here in jobs, or housing, or anything else?] I might accept that statement, but I would really want to know, “Show me your evidence to that effect.” I think there’s a lot of assumptive sort of comments made that aren’t backed up by anything. “*Show me your data. Prove to me that things are the way that you say they are.*” And then if I don’t believe it, I’m in denial. I think there’s a lot of stuff flying around that is unsubstantiated, or nobody says, “Okay, here’s a longitudinal study that we’ve done,” or “Here are real-world examples – verifiable examples – of what’s happened.”

From Edward’s point of view, “assumptive sort of comments” regarding discrimination are haphazardly and illogically “flying around” from blacks, and he cannot consider that they are backed by the verity of personal experience. While many whites tend to assert

that blacks conclude too quickly that they have discriminated against, Feagin and Sikes (1994) concluded that blacks often take a “long look” at a situation before proclaiming it discriminatory (p. 25). Edward implies that his perspective could not accommodate any claims that were not quantified by official research. He clarifies his request for real-world examples of discrimination by saying they must be “verifiable,” which, conveniently for his psyche, would throw out all claims that are not supported by what he would consider tangible evidence, perhaps things such as official documents, court cases, or quantifiable data. Edward needs to have substantiated proof revealed to him that he cannot refute before he can even begin to try to fit contemporary racial discrimination into his frame of reality. For a person who does not seek out such existing data, it is unlikely that Edward will come to understand that discrimination does in fact still occur today, and it occurs on a pervasive, institutional level, affecting all people of color in a cumulative manner.

Cumulative Effects of Discrimination

Over a person’s lifetime, racism and acts of discrimination have a cumulative effect on its target, shaping one’s way of living and one’s life perspective (Feagin and Sikes 1994). Each new incident a person of color encounters can spur memories of past events, causing any combination of pain, anger, frustration, resignation, and depression. As several black respondents described, these effects are not conscious creations, but rather irrepressible images and emotions. Not only do actual instances of racism on a personal level conjure up memories, but also can things such as listening to others’ stories, learning of historical occurrences, and dealing with questionable episodes that are not overtly racist. Repeated acts of racism have a lasting effect on the psyches of African Americans and other people of color in their dealings with whites and within white institutions.

Shirley spoke of often wanting to block out the internal dialogue she frequently goes through in the presence of whites when she anticipates discriminatory treatment. However, she finds it virtually impossible to suppress the internal chatter, because it is often triggered by little things, causing a slew of painful memories and feelings. Though often on target, Shirley is occasionally proven wrong:

[My son and I] were in a restaurant, and the waitress continuously passed us by. (sighs) I looked around, and we were the only black people there. I said (whispers), “I know why she’s doing that.” And he said, “That’s not what it is, Mom.” When she came up, I was ready to ask her, “What’s your problem!? Why haven’t you waited on us yet!?” But he said [to her], “You sure are busy today . . . You’re having a hard time. Everybody’s on your case.” She put her head down, and she said, “Baby, you just don’t know – you’re the first sympathetic word I’ve heard *all day long*.” She took our order, came back, served us before other orders she had taken, and was so attentive to us, and she told him, “You are *such* a sweet young man. I bet your mother just cherishes you.” And I felt about this big (indicates tiny with fingers).

This type of jarring incident can lead to damaging self-doubt and guilt over having expected a white person to discriminate. For at the same time as her life experience has proven to her that she will be a constant target of racism, Shirley is tortured by the uncertainty of her suspicions. Yet she finds it impossible to stifle them.

Fighting Discrimination

Internal coping strategies are very important for helping people of color deal with discriminatory treatment. However, targets of anti-black discrimination are not helpless victims. Rather, they develop and adapt ways of challenging racism and discrimination, which can be very effective, especially in public settings, where it is no longer considered acceptable to treat people of color differently than whites. In her lifetime, Norma had come to expect being looked down upon by whites, to realize when it was happening, and to challenge whites in their moments of discriminatory behavior. She told several recent

stories of being discriminated against by whites in stores and how she fought back, including an experience with two white clerks in a department store:

The lady was very ugly with me [and] didn't want to be bothered, so I got what I was going to get and left. I came back later, and she was just all grinny, having a nice little conversation with this white lady. . . . I was looking for something, so I asked [her] where it was. She was short with me again. I went on, still in the store, and asked another white [clerk] about something, but some friend of hers came in, and she just left me standing while she stopped to have a conversation. . . . By this time I was good and angry, and I went to the cash register and told them I wanted to see a manager, and I told [the manager] about the clerk in notions and the one in housewares. The cashier was black, and she said, "I wished I would have known this is what you wanted. I'd have gotten you a black manager." Nevertheless, later that night I had to go back, and I ran into both of [the clerks], cutting their eyes at me and everything. I didn't have any more problems with them, though.

Norma's story indicates that discrimination in stores is something that many, if not all, blacks have experienced and understand, and so they quickly give credit to the account (Feagin and Sikes 1994). In the interview, Norma told two other similar stories of demanding the attention of store managers to racially prejudiced employees, with similar results. Racism from individuals was something Norma expected to encounter, but she had developed a means of challenging demeaning treatment and prevailing over it by appealing to customer-friendly supervisors and by refusing to back down.

Desensitization

Another way to cope with discriminatory treatment is through desensitization from the act. Though she described frequently being on the edge of paranoia because of her sensitivity to potential racist treatment, Shirley made concerted efforts to desensitize from racist treatment in order to cope with the stress it caused her, allowing her to focus on the things about her life that she could change. Today racial discrimination is, for her, a matter of course, an ever-present obstacle to be navigated, and also one which she feels equipped to handle:

There's definitely exclusion in jobs . . . and it's been so much a part of my life that I'm not even outraged anymore. When you push a door, and it doesn't open, you try another door. This is what you do until you retire or you move on to another job. You either come to accept it without getting outraged, or you lose your mind.

Here, Shirley shows that she had acquired the ability to distance herself psychologically from some of the damaging effects of repeated employment rejection. She attempts to desensitize herself from the process, to accept the harsh reality of racism with some resignation.

Along with being prepared, avoiding internalization of frustration, anger, and negative images, knowing oneself, and framing attitudes about whites, desensitization is a common internally focused coping mechanism that blacks use to deal with racism (Feagin & McKinney 2003). Shirley's resolve through workplace discrimination is typical of many middle-class blacks (Feagin & Sikes 1994), whose successful psychological negotiation of a white, often exclusionary, business world plays a central role in their ability to maintain their middle-class status, and their sanity.

Downplaying Discrimination

There was some disagreement among the African Americans interviewed about the prevalence of racial discrimination. Geraldine, black woman in her 50s, after describing racist treatment in a previous job, currently dealing with racist co-workers, and being recently ignored in a local retail store, then went on to downplay the existence of racism in Valdosta altogether:

Every town you go in, you're going to have some mean people. Some people could say Valdosta is racist. . . . A lot of [black] people tell me it is. Well I don't have to agree with them because they said it, but they'll tell me in a minute, "You just don't know Valdosta – it's very racist."

Geraldine is of the opinion that discrimination is the result of "mean people," and she does not display an institutionalized conception of racism and discrimination. Of the

black respondents in the sample, the ones who, like Geraldine, were least involved in community organization and activism tended to frame racism on an individual basis rather than in more systematic terms.

As indicated above, Geraldine questions the validity of the claims made by African Americans of racist treatment. From her perspective racism does not play a vital role in her life, so it is difficult for her to accept the testimonies of others who tell her racism is prevalent and institutionalized in Valdosta. To accept their perspective as valid would require a reframing of her individual world view. Despite a difference in perspective, Geraldine did explain that she can accept the experiences of other blacks with racism and its damaging effects on them. Many whites have a much harder time grasping the extent of discrimination and the wide range of effects it has on its targets.

The White Mind on Cumulative Effects

School desegregation had a lasting impact on black children, and the interview participants were able to recall detailed memories of their intimidating introduction to uninviting white schools full of hostile white children and cold white teachers. However, white children, even some active participants in the harassment of black students, have difficulty as adults remembering their role in the process. For example, Edward told an amazing story about when his racist treatment of a black student was brought to his attention at a community workshop for unlearning racism he had attended only a few months prior to the interview. The black student had been none other than Shirley:

[Project Change] brought some people in who facilitated a diversity training for the community. . . . And they told us to break out in groups. And so I [joined] this little group, and it was mostly black people in the group. . . . and we went around and we talked about some of [our] early recollections of racial discrimination . . . And it came to 'Shirley,' and she turned and looked right at me and said, "You don't even remember me, do you?" And I said, "Honestly I don't." And me being Mr. Tolerant and Mr. Open-minded and everything, she looked at me and said, "Well, I have to

tell you, you treated me pretty badly.” And I said, “I did? Well, what did I do?” . . . She had *carried* this thing all this time. And she didn’t really go into a lot of specifics, and didn’t really have to, and I looked at her, and I said, “You’re probably right. I probably said or did whatever you’re thinking that I said or did.”

It must have taken a significant amount of courage for Shirley to confront an old bully about the hurt he had caused her. However, in telling the story, Edward displays virtually no empathy towards her or real remorse for his cruel actions. Instead he reacts with surprise that she had held onto the memory of his treatment. Edward was one of the few white respondents to claim to have had real black friends as a teenager, and his admission that he had “probably” mistreated Shirley perhaps indicates that his claimed friendships with blacks, if in fact existent, were very superficial.

Easing the white conscience. Edward continues his story, explaining what he did to remedy the situation with Shirley:

So what I did [then] was apologize and ask her to forgive me, because when I became Christian, the quintessential essence of Christianity is forgiveness and restoration of relationships . . . And I think she accepted it. I don’t really remember . . . But I knew I did the right thing, and I felt a *tremendous* release myself. And I would be willing, I think, to do that in any and all settings that I’m aware of. There are just so many relationships where we unknowingly wound and hurt people, racially or otherwise.

Edward’s conscience rests easily, even though he could not recall a mere few months after the confrontation if she had even accepted his apology. Though he contributed to Shirley’s lifetime of painful memories of racism, Edward only experienced a few moments of mild discomfort. In fact, he indicated in the interview that he felt more uncomfortable from being spotlighted in front of the small group of people than from learning that he had harassed Shirley. This incident signifies the psychological burden blacks carry as a result of racism and how easy it is for whites to live in complete

oblivion of it, even if they are made aware that they have been instrumental in contributing to it.

Displacing blame. Telling about the incident with Shirley did in fact trigger an emotional response from Edward, but only in his displacing the blame for the damaging effects of racism on its targets, defiantly asserting that it was not his fault that many African Americans harbor painful memories and knowledge of racism. Rather, it was their defect and their hindrance:

The problem is those people who are carrying that hurt. They are the real people [who] are at fault, because when you carry that fault and there is no forgiveness, there is no restoration. And I know that for a fact, because in my own life, where I've held people up over time for things, there's always just that bitterness and that broken communication there. . . . The black race was brutalized in America for so many years, and that offense [by] the white race has been carried forward, generation after generation. And the *only* way it's going to be fixed is for people to embrace one another and truly forgive and *move on*, not continue to apologize and continue to say, "Oh, my great-grandfather was such a bastard, I know, hurt you and brutalized you, or raped your mother, your great-grandmother, whatever. I'm just sorry *again today* for that. And I'll be sorry again tomorrow, and the next day and the next day." You know what I mean?

I did in fact know what Edward meant. He was frustrated with the little bit of guilt over white racism that he had allowed himself to acknowledge. He felt powerless to fix anti-black racist acts that had happened in the past. He believed it would be much more effective for African Americans to try to forget all about an entire history of discrimination than for whites to try to go back and right all the wrongs that were committed over centuries. At least it would be much easier on his conscience.

By defining blacks as paranoid or too demanding, whites are able to rationalize their lack of support for ideas that might actually help end racial discrimination (Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001). Edward, like many whites, takes offense to being reminded that racism and its effects are real. Insensitively pointing out that his own ancestor may have

“raped your mother, your great-grandmother, whatever,” he trivializes one of the most brutal, dehumanizing racist acts habitually carried out during slavery. Additionally, in clinging to the idea that the cure lies in blacks learning to forgive, Edward implies that racism no longer exists, utilizing his Christian beliefs to support his stance.

Potential for White Empathy

A white respondent who did not choose avoidance or defensiveness when questioned about racism was Jackie. She held strong views about the far-reaching damaging effects of racism, having been involved with a local antiracist organization and gaining awareness of various kinds of discrimination throughout her life. She was shocked by the ability of others to deny that racism still occurred, saying, “This idea that people here have that there is no overt or covert racism, I think that’s utterly absurd and ridiculous. I think anybody who is observant knows otherwise.”

A personal experience Jackie had with the police aided her ability to empathize with local blacks. A comment Jackie had made during the Willie James Williams controversy about the necessary obligation that police are under to provide adequate care for their inmates had been reported to the sheriff’s department. Subsequently, Jackie’s politically influential husband received two warnings via phone call that she should be silenced on the issue. The subtle threats drastically affected how Jackie began to view her safety in Valdosta:

I was saying to my husband at that time, if I have begun looking out my front windows at night and circling the house . . . if I felt intimidated – and you can tell from our environs [upper class neighborhood] that we have the wherewithal not to fell at mercy to someone – what about someone who doesn’t have means. What about someone who can’t call on attorney friends. What about someone who wouldn’t have people. That goes beyond intimidation, to me. That goes into terror. . . . It’s incomprehensible to me the fear that must set in some people, the feeling of powerlessness. I can’t even imagine it.

Whites who have experienced some forms of formal discrimination have an easier time empathizing with people of color. O'Brien's (2001) work would classify Jackie's account as an "overlapping approximating experience," where she is able to relate her own oppression to that of people of color. Still, Jackie acknowledges that her mentally draining experience must pale in comparison to the multiple and cumulative experiences of African American Valdostans with racism and intimidation.

Unfortunately, few whites in fact are observant of the range of whites' discriminatory behaviors and attitudes that blacks deal with daily. They are unaware of the psychological warfare involved with being a person of color and having to grapple with racist stereotypes and behaviors. Few whites are able to use empathy as an aid to understanding what racial discrimination feels like. The sword is double-edged for people of color, because not only are they forced to manage both overt and covert methods of discrimination, they also must deal with the ignorance of whites who could potentially be empathetic allies against racism.

Conclusion

The 1998 Williams case had an enduring impact on the city of Valdosta. It shone a light on black-white polarization, black distrust of police, and the maintenance of the white-dominated status quo. The major negative effect the case of Willie James Williams had on Valdosta may have been the further polarization of whites and blacks. However, the case also resulted, for a time, in the greatest amount of black organization around a racial issue that Lowndes County had ever seen. It symbolized Valdosta's short-lived, but significant, contemporary civil rights movement.

Whites, perhaps because of their experiences due to an unquestioned white privilege, have a very difficult time seeing how single acts of racism and discrimination,

however subtle or historical, can affect people of color deeply. Whites tend to perceive separate experiences with racism as completely separate events that people of color can “get over” if they want to. They have a hard time seeing that the effects of each new experience may be multifaceted and uncontrollably cumulative, building upon one another and invoking old feelings and images.

Though I found some variation between the blacks in my sample regarding their perceived levels of day-to-day discrimination they face and how it affects them, there was still a sharp contrast between the views of blacks and whites on discrimination. Arguably, all blacks have experienced some forms of discriminatory treatment, so their ability to empathize with other blacks’ experiences with racism would naturally be more adept than most, if not all, whites. However, as personified by Jackie, some whites definitely have the potential to empathize with targets of racism, whether through their own similar oppressions or through the ordeals of friends and loved ones of color.

In the next chapter, I discuss Valdosta’s recent and current symbols of racism. I address existing physical structures and how they symbolize white and black separation in the city today. I also try to highlight how contemporary Valdosta, several decades after Jim Crow, is still very segregated both in its neighborhoods and in its interpersonal relationships.

CHAPTER 5 ENDURING SYMBOLS OF RACISM

The current racial segregation in Valdosta is easy to observe. It begins in the segregated neighborhoods and gets reproduced in neighborhood schools, social activities and social networks. There are several concrete indicators of this separation between white and black, and between rich and poor, in Valdosta. White and black respondents' perceptions of these symbols and structures further demarcate not only the physical separation of white and African American residents, but also the ideological distance between the two groups.

Like many southern towns and cities, Valdosta remains quite racially segregated. The majority of blacks reside in the older neighborhoods, located in the central and southern areas of the city. Newer developments in north Valdosta are heavily populated by whites. These patterns reflect the income levels of the two groups, which are highly stratified. According to 2000 Census data, white Valdostans earn a median household income of \$37,789, while black households earn a little more than half that amount, \$20,876. White residents earn a median family income of \$56,787, and blacks earn significantly less than half that, \$23,938. The ratio of median family income indicates a greater distance between the two groups, which could be the result of a combination of factors, including a greater ratio of black single-parent families, the minimal effect that added income earners have in black families, and higher black unemployment rates. Not surprisingly, poverty levels reflect discrepancies in income for the two groups. About 12

percent of white Valdostans live below the poverty line, while three times that amount of blacks do, at approximately 36 percent.

Two Valdostas

Income levels indicate a sharp separation of black and white Valdostans. Another strong indicator of the significant differences between the current standard of living of whites and blacks in Valdosta and their geographic segregation can be ascertained fairly easily by driving around the city. In 2001 a Valdosta State University sociology research team drove every city block and visually counted each house that would be considered substandard by city building codes. Over 900 housing units in the city limits were classified as substandard, with the majority being in predominantly black neighborhoods in the central areas of the city (Brooks 2001).

In addition to having numerous substandard housing units, the predominantly black, older neighborhoods in Valdosta also lack quality roads, sidewalks and gutters. According to Brenda, a black respondent who spends a majority of her time in one of these black communities, it has not been for lack of requesting community improvements that has caused black neighborhoods to remain in a state of disrepair:

People who've lived in this neighborhood talk about for the last 30, 40, 50 years they've been complaining to the city about the water supply and the quality of the water, flooding in the community, sidewalks, and these railroad tracks down here. And to this day, they've still not done anything about it. But after you leave this part of town, things get better. And they get mad when you say there are two Valdostas, but there are. There's their part, and there's our part. And our part, even though we've made some improvements and achievements, still we're in no way going to catch up. . . . And they don't understand that we're not satisfied . . . because they gave [us] this or that. Well, you did that because you wanted to. You never asked us what it was we wanted.

Brenda talks about "two Valdostas," the white and the black, the status of which are controlled by city leaders, most of whom are still white and who have failed for decades

to bring about improvements that would make south Valdosta physically comparable to north Valdosta. She cites a lack of consideration on the part of city leaders for what the citizens of south Valdosta want to see happen in their communities.

The physical isolation between whites and blacks in Valdosta is not a contemporary development, but rather a holdover from slavery. Just as slave quarters were detached from white homes, postbellum Valdosta city planners intentionally kept whites and blacks separate. According to Schmier (1988):

The city council always found that “new difficulties had presented themselves” whenever black leaders asked the council to extend roads from the white section of Valdosta into the black section. Partly as a result of the council’s disinclination to physically join the two sectors of town, each developed apart from the other. (p. 75)

The separate development of white and black Valdosta continues to be detrimental to racial relations. According to Granovetter (1973) when local, in-group cohesion is strong and bridging between-group cohesion is weak or nonexistent, overall fragmentation between the groups is the overall effect. It appears that Valdosta is greatly fragmented according to race and socioeconomic class.

An Arm’s Length Ignorance

Not only have the city leaders historically been out of touch with, or unreceptive to, the concerns and plight of the old African American communities on the south side of town, there remains a social distance between the white and black residents, as well as a more general disconnect between the upper-middle economic classes and the lower socioeconomic class. One white respondent compares the current social distance between whites and blacks to that of his grandparents’ era:

My mother’s parents ran a . . . business here in town, and they even had a black . . . business on the other side of the tracks, three blocks away. They had set those people up in business as a satellite operation. The irony of it is that they had such a great warmth, but it was like . . . [every] night they went home to their own world

and their culture, and that crossing of the tracks – there was a disconnect there. And that maybe typifies a lot about this community, and about so many communities in the South, that perspective of “Oh there’s nothing wrong here. I don’t dislike Johnnie May or Elijah, or whatever. They’re good people – as long as they’re over there, as long as we have this arm’s length kind of relationship.”

This man implies that whites preferred in the past to be separated from African Americans, and that they still possess a desire to maintain this type of “arm’s length” distance. This facilitates whites being able to put on a friendly face temporarily in unavoidable interactions with blacks, but to go home each evening to their white family and their white neighborhood – their comforting, familiar, segregated world.

Residential segregation leads to a lack of contact between groups, which then leads to white ignorance and misperceptions of people of color, feeding negative stereotyping (Feagin 2001, Feagin and O’Brien 2003). The upper-middle- and upper-class white residents I interviewed displayed very little knowledge of the living conditions and the goings on in the poorer communities. Jackie described a common conversation she would overhear at places like the country club, where white members would condescendingly say about the poor, “I wonder what *they’re* doing now.” Edward reveals his own detachment from black communities:

I understand there’s an increased gang activity going on around here. . . . And of course that tends to be in the black community and/or Hispanic community. So [it’s] alarming to me that we’re getting some big city activity. It’s probably not a highly publicized thing, but according to what I heard – and I only heard it from one person, but this is a guy who works with probation environments, so he knows I think.

Edward’s “understanding” of gang activity stems from the assertions of one man. He is alarmed by the idea that “big city activity” has cropped up in his hometown, which he assumes to be occurring on the other side of town, in the black neighborhoods. This account makes clear that even in a small southern city like Valdosta where the ratio of

whites to blacks is about one to one, whites have the ability to go through life completely disconnected from the realities of black communities that lie just across the railroad tracks and below the overpass.

Physical Structures of Segregation

Two major physical structures have facilitated the disconnect between north and south Valdosta – the railroad tracks that have run east to west through the downtown area since 1860, and an overpass, which was constructed on a main north-south artery in 1981 to divert traffic flow over the railroad tracks. The railroad being built through the area caused the establishment of the city of Valdosta and led to it being known as a transportation hub in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Schmier 1988). However, the growth of the city around a major railroad system eventually caused north-south transportation difficulties. Ambulances were frequently held up by passing trains, and so the overpass was finally designed and built.

A Divisive Overpass

Early in my research I heard rumors that the prominent overpass was actually constructed to divide the black community and to destroy and divert traffic away from a prosperous section of long-standing black businesses. When I questioned my respondents on their opinions of the reasoning behind the overpass, most of them believed that its purpose was only to enable better emergency assistance to the south side of town. Jackie referred to its other consequences as “typical blundering,” saying, “I think it was typically not looking at the unanticipated negative consequences of the action. If there had been people with more clout who potentially could have been affected, sure there would have been more consideration of that, but I don’t think there was any planning.”

Bernard, a black man who did not live in Valdosta at the time of the construction, said emotionally:

It's a shame (voice cracks), and I wish I had been here. We lost somewhere around 200 businesses because of that. The railroads and overpasses have always locked us out. It's just that simple. I remember when my dad used to bring us back here to visit, all those businesses belonged to blacks. Now the number one business for blacks in Valdosta is the undertaker. . . . We had a little hotel down there. We had the mom and the pop stores. We don't have them now. . . . This whole thing has robbed us of any real desire to be businesspeople now.

Bernard mourns the losses in property and self-determination for black business owners that were created by the overpass. Brenda blames city planners for the consequences of the overpass design, typical blundering or otherwise:

There were a lot of reasons why those businesses closed, but the bottom line is the overpass is a dividing line for the city. I think that it's another one of those little things that they do for us that's not really for us – it's for them. . . . It seems now like everything on this side is *ours*, and on the other side is theirs. And I know that there were people that died and couldn't get the medical attention they needed because of the trains and that sort of thing, and the overpass has certainly helped with that. But overall, I think just like the railroad tracks, it divided the city. And it's kind of like an invisible wall, and this is their side, this is our side. . . . One thing that I learned is that this is typical of every city. If you want to find the black neighborhoods, you find the railroad tracks, and you find the overpass, and you find the boarded up stores, and you know you're there. And that doesn't just happen by itself.

For Brenda, the overpass is just one more thing planned and constructed by white leaders, signifying the denigrated position of blacks in Valdosta and their symbolic and physical distance from the best amenities and neighborhood improvements. She also implies that city leaders plan such “improvements” for black communities deceptively, with at least some unapologetic knowledge of the potential negative consequences.

Symbols on Street Signs

In addition to the large physical dividers of the railroad, the overpass, and the university, Bernard cites the names of streets as another indicator of blacks' lower status

in Valdosta. He considers the recent designation of one of south Valdosta's east-west streets as East Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive as a cowardly tactic to please and satisfy black residents:

If I had been here, I never would have accepted [that] street to be given the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. It's a disgrace. [Why do you say that?] Why not Ashley [Street]? Why not Patterson [Street]? Here in Valdosta, you have one of the most run-down streets in town named after the man who gave us the most and who gave the most to this country. . . . The civil rights movement never really came here, so I guess when they were offered [that] street as Martin Luther King Street, they thought that was something really nice to get. It wouldn't have been really nice to me . . . Fifty-two percent of the population is black – how many streets did you see named after blacks, even in the new developments? And if symbols are not important, why do white people have them?

Bernard sees the renaming of the street that runs through the heavily black-populated part of town as just another indicator of African Americans' demeaned status in Valdosta. It is interesting, however, that he suggests the main thoroughfares of Ashley and Patterson Streets as better options for the name change. In the early-1900s Ashley Street was condescendingly referred to by white residents as "Nigger Street," (Schmier 1988) and in the 1918 lynching of Sidney Johnson, his mutilated body was dragged down Patterson Street in broad daylight by a white mob.

Symbols of the Confederacy

From the end of the Civil War until the late 1940s, most Southerners preferred that the Confederate flag should be furled, symbolically interred in the pages of history (Davis 1998). Proper display of the Confederate battle flag was limited to special occasions like re-enactments and veterans parades. However, the flag began to take on a greater political significance when it appeared at the segregationist Dixiecrat convention in 1948 in Birmingham, Alabama as a symbol of Southern protest and resistance to the federal government. The State of Georgia adopted the battle flag emblem after the symbol had

acquired racist connotations through its use by both the Dixiecrats, fraternal organizations, and the Ku Klux Klan.

The Georgia State Flag

The new flag design including the Confederate battle emblem was adopted during the 1956 Georgia General Assembly, when the southern state leaders were desperate to preserve segregation after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. At the time, Georgia Representative Denmark Groover asserted that the new flag “will serve notice that we intend to uphold what we stood for, will stand for, and will fight for” (quoted in Azarian and Fesshazion 2000:11). Former Representative James Mackay, who voted against the flag change, stated years later the legislators’ express intent behind the flag change, “There was only one reason for putting that flag on there. Like the gun rack in the back of a pickup truck, it telegraphs a message” (quoted in Azarian and Fesshazion 2000:11).

Though there is no official record of the Georgia state legislators’ intentions for adding the Confederate emblem to the 1905 state flag, the entire 1956 General Assembly session was devoted to maintaining the status of segregation in Georgia. A resolution was overwhelmingly passed during that session that declared the *Brown* decision “null, void, and of no force effect” in the state of Georgia. Laws were passed that empowered the governor to close down integrated public schools and reopen them as private segregated schools. Legislators approved bills that allowed parks, playgrounds, golf courses, and swimming pools to be privatized so that they could remain segregated. The General Assembly also passed bills requiring separate waiting rooms for interstate passengers. Additionally, the General Assembly passed a law that would strip police officers of their retirement benefits if they failed to enforce any segregation law. These same legislators,

who brazenly and overwhelmingly fought to preserve segregation also supported a new state flag designed a proposed by arch-segregationist and powerful chairman of the state Democratic Party, John Sammons Bell (Azarian and Fesshazion 2000:33).

The Confederate battle flag in the South has been a divisive symbol of white oppression for over 50 years, and according to Davis (1998), the Georgia flag change was motivated and carried through by racism. However, the suggestion of Governor Zell Miller in 1992 that the Confederate emblem be removed sparked extensive public debate over the need for such a change. Supporters of a flag change argued the 1956 flag was bitter reminder of segregation and white supremacy. Opponents of a revision proclaimed it was a non-racist testament to brave Confederate soldiers and Southern heritage. Understandably, most blacks tended to support the change, while most whites did not.

White views on the flag

Two different studies gauged the opinions of white Georgians in the late-1990s, both concluding that racial attitudes were the strongest predictor of positions on the state flag issue (Reingold and Wike 1998, Clark 1997). General interest in and closeness to southerners, as well as pride in the Confederacy were only weakly related to public opinion on the flag (Reingold and Wike 1998.) White Georgians' loyalty to the 1956 state flag had little to do with their pride in the Confederacy. Instead, both the 1956 flag change and contemporary support for the battle flag emblem were driven by racism.

The Georgia state flag was finally changed in 2001 and again in 2003, eleven years after the official proposal. Some Georgians were upset that their choices on the 2003 ballot did not include the 1956 flag. However, the elected current banner appears to be inspired by a Confederate national flag (Copeland 2004). In a *Valdosta Daily Times* call-in poll in 2000, a reported mere handful of the 231 callers wanted the battle flag removed.

One of the quoted supporters of the flag called the controversy petty, saying, “The flag is just cloth. When people realize that both blacks and whites died for the flag . . . they didn’t care about the flag, they cared about what it stood for- freedom!” (Rose 2000a).

This woman’s nonsensical logic was supported by the sentiments of several recent editorials published in the *Daily Times*, including one by a Valdosta man who said:

Many decent folk are being hoodwinked into believing the Confederate flag and the Georgia flag stand for racism. The truth is the Confederate and Georgia flags are no more or less racist than the U.S. flag. We should honor our Confederate ancestors – black, white, American Indian, Hispanic, Asian and European – by proudly flying both. (Lamon 2000)

People touting these types of opinions clearly possessed no knowledge of the racist, segregationist attitude behind the 1956 flag change. For these people, the truth behind the controversy was exactly whatever they wanted it to be.

White interviewees vastly ranged in their opinions on the state flag. Jackie internalizes black offensiveness to the Confederate battle emblem:

I don’t like the Confederate flag at all, simply because it’s offensive to some people. An analogy I use is of a man and a wife, who of course love each other, if he had an heirloom knife that had belonged to his family – it had heritage attached to it – but someone broke into their home and used it to stab his mother-in-law to death. You don’t think he’d put it up on their wall after that. So to me, it’s just ridiculous, because it has been usurped. And it has so many other connotations, that people who say it’s about heritage, I’d have to kind of doubt their agenda.

Jackie does not buy for a minute the ‘heritage not hate’ argument of many white 1956 flag supporters. Instead she makes an empathetic correlation between black disapproval of the symbol and a mourning wife.

Henry, another white supporter of the flag change, deals with the issue in a much more impersonal way, explaining how he eventually came to the decision to back a revised banner:

When I first heard that they wanted to change the flag, I thought to myself, ‘Now why would anybody want to change the flag? It’s been up there, and don’t people have something better to do than worry about the flag?’ But then I heard it was changed in 1956, and before then it had been changed a number of different times. . . . At first I thought that was the way it was from the very beginning. But once I found out the flag is something to be changed – not like the American flag – I thought what’s the big deal if a group of people want it changed, and it’s been changed in the past for a number of reasons, then I don’t care. One more time isn’t going to hurt. . . . If it will bring about more harmonious race relations, then it’s a good thing.

Here Henry implies that it was not the offensiveness of the flag that swayed his decision, but rather the knowledge that the flag had previously undergone several changes throughout Georgia’s history. He applauds a racially harmonious result of the flag change, but he does this somewhat hypocritically, after he refused to give his initial support in the name of improved racial relations.

Phillip expressed the firmest opposition to the flag change of all the whites I interviewed. Here he firmly stands by his opposition to the flag change while remaining emotionally detached from the issue:

I think they should leave it alone, leave it like it is. I don’t see any reason for changing it. I don’t know why anything’s wrong with it, as far as I’m concerned. (Interviewer explains how the flag has been changed multiple times over the years) Why would they want to change it now? I mean I don’t see the point in that, do you? [I know the Confederate battle flag is offensive to some people.] I don’t know why it would be. That happened eons ago, and nobody can do anything about it.

Phillip shows no capacity to empathize with blacks on the flag debate. He also attempts to reject the feelings of those who are offended by it by saying, “That happened eons ago.” It is unclear what “that” refers to in this statement, but he is probably citing slavery or the Civil War, and he wants to shush the issue by unremorsefully letting history be and by leaving old symbols firmly in place, unfurled in broad daylight, for all the world to see.

Black views on the flag

Of the black Valdostans interviewed, most were happy about the change in the flag. However, a few expressed resignation toward the whole issue, indicating that they did not want to spend their time and energy fighting symbols. They were aware of the racist connotation of the battle flag emblem but saw the controversy as a minor concern.

Gregory explains this point of view:

To me, the flag . . . [has] always represented racism. . . . I see it for what it is – I don't see heritage, I see the racism. But guess what, I don't have to rip it off your back. I respect your opinion, and as long as you don't try to wrap it around my throat and hang me by it, we're okay.

Gregory knows the historical meaning of the flag and what it ultimately means to him, but he chooses to not let this bother him. He has been able to desensitize himself from the issue, choosing to fight the battles he deems more important.

On the other hand, for some respondents, the symbolism of the flag was very important. Bernard chooses to critique symbols of the Confederacy, because to him they are significant representations of both white oppression and black powerlessness and apathy:

The people who were saying they want to keep the flag now want to talk about heritage and all of that foolishness. Always go back to purpose. If you understand the purpose of the thing, then your reaction should be different. . . . When you're defeated, your symbols go, [except] in the South and in the United States. You lost (laughs), they lost. And yet look at these statues. You go down to the courthouse here, and there's a statue of a Confederate soldier. For what? And yet, if you go down the street to the bank, you'll see one small wooden plaque about the blacks who were in the Union army that camped out there. They fought to help free their people from slavery. . . . And then behind that, there's a whole big monument to one white police officer who died. And you know why they do things like that? They figure that black folks don't care. And unfortunately, a lot of them don't even think about it. But that has to change. They need to be educated about what their rights are and what they deserve.

African Americans' proper awareness of white symbols is very important to Bernard, because they stand like statues exalting white culture and denigrating black culture. Bernard regards challenging taken-for-granted white icons as a crucial step toward blacks' psychological salvation from white oppression.

Conclusion

Valdosta has two distinct, primary structures that symbolize the separation of north and south Valdosta, white from black – the railroad tracks and the overpass. For Viki Soady, Valdosta State University Women's Studies director, the university itself serves as another symbol of the divide between white north Valdosta and black south Valdosta, saying the campus "is positioned, almost symbolically, in the middle of the social and economic divide" (Soady 2002:12). Additionally, I spent a significant amount of time on the VSU campus, there was a high level of racial segregation among white and black students. This type of segregation is very common on traditionally white college campuses across the South, but the separation seemed more acute on this campus than two other southern universities of which I am familiar. I experienced less eye contact from blacks than whites, and I remember being very surprised when a small gathering of black students invited me to a concert as I walked up the steps of the library.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain physical boundaries using a "container metaphor," where just as people's bodies are set off from the rest of the world, allowing an inside-outside separation, so are natural environments oriented. Whether it is a railroad line, a university campus, or an overpass, "We impose boundaries – marking off territory so that it has an inside and a bounding surface" (p. 29). In Valdosta, it has been the primarily white city leaders imposing the boundaries and the poor black neighborhoods suffering the consequences.

In the proceeding concluding chapter, I present an overall analysis of Valdosta as a city representative of the South. I overview the roots of the differences between white and black perspectives of my respondents, and I surmise the effects these differences have on how each group views racial events. I also discuss the implications of my findings and areas for future research.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: “IGNORANCE IS BLISS”

According to blacks, racism is alive and well in Valdosta. It sets up house in the minds of whites. It gives color to the ink that prints community development plans. It props up substandard housing units. It lurks in the shadows under an overpass. It rides in the police cars patrolling the south side of town. It sets up shop in local stores. It bounces along in the backpacks of college students. It whistles through town with each passing train. Until a few years ago, it flapped in the breeze above every state building.

According to whites, racism is a thing of Valdosta’s past. It was hardly a childhood concept, though it shaped their every move. It is still present in individuals, but strong forces of progress have eradicated it from institutions. Its legacy is more present in the minds of blacks than in the reality of everyday life. It has nothing to do with flags or statues or concrete structures. The perceptions of the white and black Valdostans I spoke with about racial issues differ markedly from each other. There is of course variation, but overall blacks are adamant that racism is commonplace and continues to shape how they live their lives. Whites overall, on the other hand, are unaware or in denial that racism is a contemporary problem and that it also affects how they live their lives.

Ignorance Is Bliss

Brenda and I talked long after the tape recorder had been turned off and put away. Throughout our conversation, I was struck by her deep understanding of racism and her resilient yet exhausted optimism. However, she expressed her opinion of the denial of both blacks and whites of racism and discrimination in a way I may never forget. She

stated simply: “You know that cliché ‘Ignorance is bliss?’ Well, sometimes it is.” From my interviews, it appears that ignorance of the extent of racism truly is bliss for both whites and blacks. The most optimistic respondents spoke of racism as gradually disappearing from society and what was left as stemming from individuals and not institutions. The most pessimistic respondents made statements like “Racism is in the ground” and spoke of their shrinking ability to have hope for a better future for children of color. One of my black respondents expressed his commitment to continued activism in spite of meager hopes, saying:

I don't think there's much help for humanity . . . I've given my life to fight and I'm about ready to give up the struggle, because I don't think that we're going to change. There's too much hate in the world. There's too much racism mainly, and it's not going to change. White people will burn this country down and destroy it before blacks come into power. . . . The joy of my life is when I exit here and leave this planet. But will I stop fighting? No.

This opinion was uncommon among my interviews. Most of the black interviewees, even some of the most informed and experienced, displayed a high level of optimism toward their lives and for the future.

Ignorance was truly bliss for one elderly, upper-class white respondent, whom I asked if she ever thought about her whiteness. This is what she had to say:

[Would there be a time when you would think about your whiteness?] I don't think so. Now, if I had the druthers and could wish to be reborn, I would certainly want to come in as a white. [Why do you say that?] I like the way I live. I like where I live. I like me, just the way I am . . . I wouldn't want to be Japan, I wouldn't want to be China, I wouldn't want to be black. I wouldn't want to be anything but just me.

This woman's response sounds like a confused, ill-informed mixture of white supremacist views and individual pride. Though not stated explicitly, there appears to be a cognizance in her reply of the comfortable life that being white has afforded her, but

she tries to accentuate that it is rather her individuality detached from race from which she derives benefit and enjoyment.

The Rise and Fall of a Racist Document

For over 20 years the original Valdosta city charter of 1860 had hung proudly framed inside the city hall, just outside the doors of the municipal court room, next to photos of all the city's mayors – long rows of venerable-looking white men in 8x10 frames. If you peruse the document, you will find that Section 11 of the charter states: “The mayor and council shall pass all proper and necessary laws and ordinances for the control of slaves and free persons of color in Valdosta, and suppress and abate all nuisances arriving from hogs, dogs, horses, or other stock straying at large in Valdosta.” I attended a Valdosta city council meeting in March 2004 to hear a black man whom I had met through my research, address the council about the prominent display of the old charter in a governmental building of justice. I will refer to this man as William Tanner. He had previously written letters to both to the mayor and the editor of the *Valdosta Daily Times*, making his argument for the removal of the outdated document, citing Section 11's demeaning references to African Americans alongside unruly animals (Wayne 2004).

William Tanner is the most pessimistic activist I have ever met, and he told me before the city council meeting that day that he believed nothing would come of his speaking at the session, but felt it was something he had to do. I sat behind him as he waited anxiously, watching the other ‘citizens to be heard’ take their five minute turns at the podium. After it appeared everyone else had said their piece, Tanner raised his hand and hesitantly approached the podium. Once he began speaking, his confidence seemed to swell as the minutes ticked by, and his speech became more and more impassioned and

unclear. His tone rose and fell as he evoked images of slave ships, lynchings, and black children walking into city hall, and preached about humiliation, equality, justice, and God. He even revealed his retirement certificate from the U.S. Armed Forces, turning around to the audience and sweeping the room with it for everyone to see. The nine councilmen and mayor sat virtually expressionless during his address – even the three black councilmen – and the few attempts the mayor made to quiet him as he ran over his five minute time limit failed. During the last few minutes he spoke, there was a steady increase of impatient mumbling and groaning in the audience.

I sat there in the audience uncomfortable, longing for William Tanner to plainly state his case and even his tone of speaking, because it seemed that the ineffectiveness of the speech that he had predicted was becoming a reality before my eyes. I left the council meeting ashamed of my embarrassment for him, and when I ran into him on my way out of city hall, he excitedly asked me what I thought of his address. It was an awkward question for me, but I smiled and bravely told him it was very passionate. In my notes that day, I wrote, “I can’t help but wish he’d gone about it a different way, more gently, more subtly persuasively. I know [the councilmen] felt attacked. They seemed tolerant, but not affected. Sad.”

I was not proud of my embarrassment, but I really believed in his cause. I had gone to that council meeting hoping that people would get the message he was ultimately trying to convey, that it was not the mere mention of slaves in the antebellum charter that was offensive, but rather the blatant likening of all people of color beside hogs, dogs, and horses in need of control. For William Tanner, the current showcasing of the historical document served as a symbol of change that had not yet occurred in Valdosta and of old

ideas being reawakened and proudly displayed under the guise of heritage. His perception that nothing would come of his speech in front of city leaders and citizens was a product of his experiences as a black man and activist in Valdosta, where one white male resident told me, “He tends to rub people the wrong way.”

I have had several conversations with William Tanner, and he has never rubbed me the wrong way, even when he told me he does not trust white people, especially researchers like me who come in from out of town to gather information from the black community for personal benefit, leaving nothing behind for the open-minded black folks who sacrificed their knowledge. He is a jovial man with an extensive self-education in world religions, and global, national, and local political and economic issues, but I believe he has been hardened by his experiences with racism and through being an antiracist activist in Valdosta. He takes pride in not catering his attacks on racist institutions to the egos of powerful, smug, white men. Thus, I have no doubt that he does in fact rub many people in Valdosta “the wrong way.”

When I was present for the city council meeting in March, I had not seen the original city charter hanging on the wall, so at the end of April 2004 I returned to the city hall to take a look at it. My search was in vain, and a secretary in the building informed me that it had been removed from the wall about a month prior, which must have been shortly after the March council meeting. I was quite surprised and wondered if William Tanner had been informed of the change he must have brought about. When I asked the secretary if she knew why it had been removed, she was unsure, telling me that someone had decided it was time for it to be retired to the Historical Society museum. It seems some things do change, but not without a fight.

I view the removal of the original city charter as yet another surface change that does not alter the underlying racist structure. It does not necessarily indicate any real change in perspective or empathy for African Americans like William Tanner who are personally hurt by such things. Its removal is also not all that significant in the grand scheme of things. The print was tiny where the passage lay in lines of the document, and compared to black neighborhoods being in perpetual disrepair and the loss of hundreds of black-owned businesses, the retiring of one outdated document seems like quite a trivial matter.

White and Black Perspectives: Roots and Consequences

I present Valdosta, Georgia, as a typical small southern city, proud of its neighborly interactions and focus on community. It is a place still extremely polarized by race, with white and black perspectives contrasting sharply on the progressive changes that have occurred and the current state of racial relations. These differing perspectives facilitate drastically different views on the meanings in racially-charged incidents that still occur quite frequently. From a white perspective, racism is hardly a murmur, so racist events are seen as isolated, harmless incidents. From a black perspective, racism is more of a rhythmic, ever-present buzz, so outcroppings of blatant racism serve as markers for an underlying racist tension.

Today ideologies about skin color begin to be formulated by children at a very early age, which include traditional racist stereotypes and negative views of blacks (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001). The same must have been true of children growing up in the Jim Crow South. This early foundation of white supremacy ingrained in the psyches of whites like those I interviewed who lived through segregation must affect how whites are able to perceive racism and discrimination. Contrasted with the blacks I interviewed who

understood their perspectives to have been deeply affected by racism, whites displayed minimal cognizance of the extent to which racism is still prevalent today and their role in a system that oppresses people of color.

Because of these differences in perspective, the way whites and blacks perceive and make sense of racialized events like mock lynchings and cross burnings are drastically different. It is within blacks' perspectives of the world to connect even subtle racist events to a larger web of white racism. However, it is far outside the world view of most whites to consider such an association to exist; it is much easier to view separate incidents as isolated events.

These differences in white and black perspectives also lend themselves to the perceptions of acts of discrimination affecting blacks in a cumulative manner. Experiences with racism begin early for African Americans, and they can be eye opening and very traumatic. Each new experience throughout an individual's life can set off an uncontrollable barrage of old images and emotions. Such is the cumulative nature of discrimination – each new episode brings back memories of other episodes and then becomes part of a network of memories of racism as opposed to standing alone as an isolated incident. Whites' minds, on the other hand, are seldom preoccupied with ponderings of race, either of people of color or of their own whiteness. This enables them to view racist events as entirely separate phenomena, as individual acts with individual consequences.

African Americans adapt coping mechanisms to deal with discrimination when they encounter it, and they often launch challenges to the behaviors of racist whites. Adults prepare their children to deal with racial discrimination when they encounter it

throughout their life. Blacks in Valdosta have a high level of distrust of institutions, especially the police force, which most whites cannot understand. Despite a high level of mistrust of local officials, the black respondents I spoke with also displayed a significant degree of perseverance through discrimination.

Perseverance of Blacks

Throughout my interviews with African American respondents, I often found myself in awe of the strength required to be able to handle all that they had been through as a consequence of racism. It made me more acutely aware of the ease my life had afforded me and all the hardships I would never have to overcome. Several times I found my eyes welling with tears in the middle of interviews. During one of those moments, I asked Shirley pointedly, “What makes life worth living?” and she answered:

[Despite] what I feel I think I know, it doesn't necessarily have to be so. Because in spite of the fact that I have put my shoulder up against that door and pushed over and over again, and most times it doesn't open, every now and then, I'll push and there's a little crack for me to inch my way through. Life's worth living because tomorrow another door might swing open. . . . There's joy in my life, lots of joy in my life . . . Gosh, I don't know many black people who are suicidal. Even when we were in slavery, we weren't suicidal. We were always hoping for the next day that brings something better. Maybe that's why as a race we haven't [had] the unity to get together and pillage and burn the shit out of everything. I'm not even sure that's part of our spirits. It's the hope that keeps us going.

Here Shirley epitomizes the hopeful perseverance that African Americans have been able to develop in spite of racism in order to live joyful, fulfilled lives. This same perseverance has equipped them with the strength to continue to challenge a racist system.

Implications and Future Research

The implications of this analysis of perceptions of racial relations in a southern town are at least threefold. First, probing whites and blacks about their recollections of

life in the Jim Crow South reveals that they have vastly different ways of seeing the extent to which their lives were affected and shaped by the spoken and unspoken rules of segregation. Second, because of the divergent ways in which blacks and whites have distinguished and made sense of race and racism ever since childhood, their perceptions of the meaning and significance of past and contemporary racial events also similarly diverge. Third, because these viewpoints are rooted in the polarized experiences of being either white or black and are not merely based on individual opinion, it would be extremely difficult to bring blacks and whites to one mind on the issue of racism and discrimination. It is also important to note the role of white guilt and defensiveness toward the suggestion of past racial oppression, which makes even the idea of an open forum for addressing racism a volatile topic.

This analysis makes clear the formidable barriers hindering communication and understanding between whites and blacks on racial issues. Perhaps comprising the largest barrier is whites' misconceptions of the role of race and the prevalence of racism and their inability to empathize with people of color. Future research should explore further how understandings of race are formulated and rationalized by whites and the processes by which some whites come to embrace antiracism. Research should also delve into how socioeconomic class differences among whites and blacks may shape views of race and racism. Lowndes County is just beginning to experience a growth in the Latino population, so this discussion does not pointedly address perspectives among and about these racial/ethnic groups regarding discrimination. Other research could explore such discrepancies.

More research should be conducted that qualitatively gauges the views of whites and blacks on racial issues. This research should not only document differences in perspectives but attempt to explore the roots of the differences and how to minimize them so that ideally some sort of general consensus on race and racism may someday be reached. As long as whites and blacks view racism and discrimination in completely opposing ways there cannot be wholehearted cooperation to create a truly more racially harmonious world. In truth, ignorance to racism is not bliss. It is rather an escape from the racist reality that is Valdosta and thus is the South.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristen Lavelle was born in November 1979 and grew up in rural Arkansas with two brothers and two sisters. She graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from the University of Arkansas in May 2002. Lavelle was awarded an Alumni Fellowship upon acceptance to the University of Florida Sociology Department for her graduate studies. After completion of her Master of Arts degree in August 2004, Lavelle will accept a research assistantship at Texas A&M University' to pursue her PhD degree in sociology.