

“Would you have done something during the Civil Rights movement?”:

White Anti-Racist Habitus and Civic Duty in the Color-Blind Era

By

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B.A., Tufts University, 2014

Master's Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of

Arts in the Department of Sociology at Brown University

Providence, Rhode Island

May 2018

This thesis by Amanda Ball is accepted in its present form
by the Department of Sociology as satisfying the
thesis requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Date 4/15/18



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Approved by the Graduate Council

Date _____

Andrew G. Campbell, Dean of the Graduate School

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank José Itzigsohn for advising this project and providing crucial guidance and feedback throughout its development. Thank you to Laura López-Sanders for serving as a reader and mentor, and for providing critical methodological feedback. I would also like to thank Daniel Hirschman and Michael Kennedy for providing open and encouraging havens for brainstorming and analyzing ideas related to this project from its conception. To my cohort (Chinyere Agbai, Danielle Falzon, Laura Garbes, and Ieva Zumbyte), thank you for reading early drafts, providing feedback, and the numerous conversations about the project over the course of the past year. Through fieldwork and the writing process, your support has been the most valuable resource available. Thank you to Lia Weintraub for your patience, openness, and enthusiasm for this project. I would like to especially thank my parents, Mark and Nilsa, for the encouragement and support, and my sister, Anna, for all of the advice and guidance she has provided. Finally, thank you to the members of SURJ-DC and ONE DC that allowed me to become a part of their community in a collaborative capacity so that we all may reflect more on the racial justice movement during this tumultuous time.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Figure 1 – Interview Guide	10
Figure 2 – White Anti-Racist Identity and White Anti-Racist Habitus Process	22
Figure 3 – Civic Duty and White Anti-Racist Habitus	31
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. WHITE HABITUS	2
3. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
4. RESEARCH PROCESS	8
5. RESULTS	14
6. COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND THE WHITE ANTI-RACIST HABITUS	28
7. CONCLUSION	33
8. REFERENCES	35

Abstract of
“Would you have done something during the Civil Rights movement?”:
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May 2018

Whether and how does white habitus change when actors make a concerted effort to counteract color-blind racist ideologies and the toxicity of whiteness in their daily lives? Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observations of a white anti-racist group in Washington, D.C., the author focuses on how involvement in white anti-racist community organizing facilitates the process of racial identity formation and production of a white anti-racist habitus in an urban setting. The findings demonstrate that while the conscious production of a white anti-racist habitus re-orient behavior, it exists alongside the pre-existing unconscious white habitus. The white habitus manifests through the members’ rejection of the “activist” label, which ultimately informs group members’ self-perception as volunteers performing their civic duty through racial justice work, evoking American liberal ideals that frame the color-blind racist discourse.

“I think that for a lot of white people, it was uncomfortable for them to realize that there’s nothing that phenotypically separated them from the members of their race that voted for Trump and they felt uncomfortable and guilty and didn’t know what to do.”

1. INTRODUCTION

The above quote documents an attempt by a white anti-racist group member to explain the sudden influx of several hundred new members that joined their ranks after the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. In the time since November 2016, white racial identity has become part of the mainstream media discourse in a way that it has not before. In the years leading up to the election, groups such as Black Lives Matter have expanded nationally in response to acts of violence against Black and other communities of color in the United States. Alongside the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a steady increase in participation by white people in white anti-racist groups. These groups are, they claim, the antithesis to white supremacist groups, and aim to provide a space for white people to grapple with their own complicity in the racialized social structure (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Groups like Stand Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) are intended to serve as partners for marginalized communities, particularly Black social movements, in an attempt to support, rather than co-opt the movements from other groups. Indeed, white anti-racist groups make overt, concerted attempts to address the toxic elements of whiteness, such as color-blind racism, that allow for the reproduction of racial inequality.

In his supposition of the necessary conditions to fight color-blind racism, Bonilla-Silva (2014) put forward, among other things, that “we need to nurture a large cohort of antiracist whites to begin challenging colorblind[ness]” from within the white community. Anti-racist whites, he argues, “cannot just be ‘race traitors’; they must engage in struggles to end the practices and the ideology that maintain white supremacy” (240). The implication here is that

anti-racist whites, who focus explicitly on counteracting colorblindness, will contribute to the conditions needed to undermine the color-blind racist era in which American society has remained stagnant for the past 50 years. This study aims to address this implication directly by asking, whether and how does white habitus change when actors make a concerted effort to counteract color-blind racist ideologies and the toxicity of whiteness in their daily lives?

This study explores how involvement in white anti-racist community organizing facilitates the process of racial identity formation and production of a white anti-racist habitus in an urban setting. The group that serves as the focus of this study, SURJ-DC, is a white anti-racist organization in Washington, D.C., where all of its members are DC residents. As this analysis will show, the process of joining the group as a white progressive newcomer and forming a white anti-racist identity alongside other group members results in the development of a new white anti-racist habitus alongside the preexisting white habitus. This reformulated habitus fundamentally alters how group members orient action and move through the world. However, despite their concerted efforts and reconfigured perspective via the white anti-racist habitus, anti-racist whites continue to perpetuate colorblind racist ideologies by evoking liberal values and referring to their organizing work as civic duty.

2. WHITE HABITUS

Habitus, referring to Bourdieu's concept, is the embodiment of socially produced perceptions, which influence the way that individuals view the world ([Bourdieu 1984: 83] in Bonilla-Silva et al. 2006: 233). Habitus illuminates the "deep cultural conditioning that reproduces and legitimates social formations," and while it "does not determine action, it orients action" (233). Keeping in mind the unconscious nature of habitus, I contend that that the agency of the actor in the process of racial identity formation facilitates the creation of a new habitus.

Though the actor is aware of, and may justify, their altered behavior, the new habitus works alongside the preexisting habitus to re-orient action so that altered behaviors become the norm.

Bonilla-Silva et al. builds upon the original concept of habitus by demonstrating the racialized nature of white habitus, which he defines as “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions, and their views on racial matters” (233). In this formulation of white habitus, “in-group solidarity” and “negative views about non-whites” are promoted as key elements for viewing the social world (233). This racial solidarity, which Bonilla-Silva et al. rephrases as “whiteness, in turn adds to whites’ perceptions that their white lifestyle is the correct and ‘normal’ way of doing things,” which results in the reproduction and legitimation of white racial identity and dominant attitudes towards people color (247). White habitus, he argues, reinforces social closure between racial groups, meaning that whites are able to “create advantage by closing off opportunities to other groups, using boundary maintenance as a way to sustain their interests,” which is accomplished through the social and spatial isolation of whites from other groups (248). Bonilla-Silva et al. states, “[b]ecause the white habitus creates a space in which whites’ extreme isolation is normalized, whites do not experience troubling doubts or second thoughts as to their lack of interaction with blacks” (248). Bonilla-Silva et al. argues that “when everyday whites reproduce a racist habitus, they help legitimate social closure that discriminates by race” (248). Hagerman (2015) notes that though Bonilla-Silva’s conception of white habitus has been “theoretically presented, little empirical support documents how shared dispositions and views become ‘socially acquired’” (59). This study directly addresses this gap by identifying through empirical evidence how collective racial identity formation informs our understanding of white habitus.

This study uses the concept of white habitus to examine how isolating the elements of white habitus and color-blind racism causes a shift and renegotiation of habitus for anti-racist whites. This shift occurs through the formation a white anti-racist identity via participation in white anti-racist community organizing. The experiences that shape the formation of a new white anti-racist identity lead to the development a white anti-racist habitus, grounded in an understanding of group members' role as citizens and their valuation of civic duty. Though the white habitus continues to inform the behaviors of group members, a constant tension between the white anti-racist habitus and white habitus exists as the members re-orient themselves through this lens of civic duty.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 White Anti-Racist Groups and Identity Formation

This study engages on issues of collective racial identity formation and the ways that habitus may shift due to this socialization process. Scholars have explored the concept of collective identity to answer questions about why collective actors are motivated to join movements, strategy and organizational tactics of collective movements, and to examine the cultural impact of social movements (Polletta & Jasper 2011). The literature reveals that collective identity in social movements does not necessarily have to be linked to a shared culture or experience, but can the existence of this shared element can play a role in shaping the in-group and out-group identities between the activists and their opposition. In these cases, political protest acts as a basis for solidarity among participants. Groups may form their identity based upon how they are perceived and treated by those that oppose their view (Jasper & Poulsen 1993, Bernstein 1997) Within the context of collective identity, McAdam (1986) examined motivations

of white activists involved in high-risk activism, in this case the Freedom Summer rides in the 1960s, particularly when white activists have less at stake than other participants.

Scholarship that ties together collective identity and racial identity fails to address how identity formation, and the subsequent re-socialization of actors within the group setting, can inform a racial habitus. Using the same motivation from Hagerman (2015), in which she assesses the extent to which racial socialization may inform the production or reproduction of a white habitus, I illuminate how the development of a collective racial identity facilitates the production of a new white anti-racist habitus while maintaining the previously existing white habitus. This study contributes to the discussion by identifying how a racial collective identity forms, while also addressing how identity formation can inform habitus in the dialectical nature found in Bourdieu's original conception of habitus.

Scholars have examined collective identity in social movements broadly, but only a limited number have discussed the way that white racial identity formation occurs in the context of white antiracist social movement organizations. In his analysis of how white identity formation takes place in social movement organizations, Hughey (2014) argues that social movement literature has failed to recognize the extent to which individual and collective identities are formed relationally, meaning through racialized and gendered understandings of whiteness as mediated by interactions with non-white groups. White racial formation, in this respect, was developed in relation to other whites, creating a dichotomy between "good" and "bad" white people, as well as people of color (Hughey 2012a). While my findings follow a similar relational understanding of white racial identity formation to Hughey, I contend that this process among white anti-racists in SURJ-DC is informed by an underlying desire to appeal to liberal beliefs in civic duty. This may be informed by their location in Washington, D.C. and

how that fosters a tendency to frame behavior in relation to political action and citizenship “duties.”

3.2 Whiteness

In order to fully understand the nuances presented by white anti-racist group members in this study, it must be grounded by an engagement with scholarship on whiteness in the United States. Scholarship on whiteness examines the ways that whites develop and articulate a racial identity, and the extent to which they recognize their own racial privilege and perspectives (Lewis 2004, Hughey 2012, Burke 2011). The reproduction of whiteness involves maintaining a “field of power...by Whites [in which they are] ‘unconscious of any such power and vindictive feeling’” (Du Bois 1899:322 cited in Hughey 2012b:171). Winant (2004) argues that whites “inherit the legacy of white supremacy, from which they continue to benefit [while also being] subject to the moral and political challenges posed to that inheritance,” which he describes as “white racial dualism” (5-6, cited in Hughey 2012: 221). To this end, white racial identity is identified by contemporary scholarship as “marked by whites’ concurrent feelings of normativity and superiority, coupled with perceptions of racial emptiness and longing for racial meaning via contact with non-whites” (Hughey 2012b: 171). As Hughey (2012b) notes, literatures on white antiracism makes assumptions of “stark variation between whites with conscious and strong racial identities and ‘unconscious’ whites” (172).

Though research on racialization and the development of racial narratives is largely grounded in historically specific understandings of structures of racial domination, such as colonialism and chattel slavery, contemporary sociology’s drive for generalizability limits the extent to which time and place play a role in the development of racial identities, particularly when it comes to understanding dominant groups. To this end, more scholarship is needed on the

ways that whites with consciously produced racial identities articulate understandings of whiteness and white supremacy within the temporal and spatial environment in which these understandings were developed (Jung 2015). This study contributes to this discussion by illuminating how current events related to racial violence spark the conscious process of racial identity formation, which facilitates the unconscious production of the white anti-racist habitus alongside the preexisting white habitus.

3.3 Color-Blind Racism and Civic Duty

In Bonilla-Silva's conception of white habitus, color-blind racism operates concurrently to white habitus to occlude whites' ability to recognize their own complicity in the reproduction of racial hierarchies. Sociological literature on race and racism works to understand the reproduction of race through various mechanisms, as well as the production of racism as a "product of racial domination projects," such as "colonialism, [chattel] slavery, [and] labor migration" (Bonilla-Silva 2015: 1359). In this view, racism produces a "racial structure [that]...is responsible for the production and reproduction of systemic racial advantages for some (the dominant racial group) and disadvantages for others (the subordinated races). Thus, racism as a form of social organization places subjects in common social locations" (1360). Scholarship on race and racism in the 21st century has most recently drawn upon the concept of "color-blind racism," articulated by Bonilla-Silva (2015) as a "the racial ideology based on the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that result in 'raceless' explanations for all sort of race-related affairs," (1364). Effectively, color-blind racist ideology works in contemporary society to minimize and neutralize concerns regarding the reproduction of racial privilege and inequalities. Color-blind racism is further characterized by "rhetorical strategies"

that allow whites to “avoid racist language to express their racial views...project their own views to implicate the minority party,” and avoid discussions explicitly about race (1365).

Scholarship in this area has demonstrated that racial reproduction is not dependent upon “intentional, malevolent, or politically conservative white actors,” but rather that this ideology rests upon the conscious ignorance of whites to how racial logic operates in their everyday lives (Mueller 2017: 221). To this end, Mueller (2017) illustrates that whites exert substantial effort to maintain their ignorance of overt and covert racism as an excuse for actions that historically produce and reproduce racial inequalities, as well as a solution for ending racial reproduction in the future (i.e. once other white people learn about systemic racism, they will not reproduce patterns of racialized privilege and inequality) (232).

Following this, I contend that color-blind racism’s origins in the principles of liberalism undergird the actions of white anti-racist group members through their self-conceptualization of activism as “civic duty.” This, coupled with the persistence of white habitus, create the conditions in which white anti-racist actors – regardless of how much they succeed in recognizing their color-blind racist tendencies or behaviors – will never be able to completely erase either element from their white racial identity. In turn, color-blind racism continues to inform the actions and beliefs of white anti-racist group members.

4. RESEARCH PROCESS

The analysis for this study relies primarily on interviews I conducted with 20 group members over the course of three months in June-August 2017, with a follow-up trip in October 2017. Additionally, I conducted five background interviews with members of Black organizations to corroborate findings related to engagement between SURJ-DC and their Black partner organizations. The analysis is also informed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted

through attendance and participation in meetings, events, and protests during the same time period.

The process of gaining access to this group began in February 2017, when I became connected to a lead organizer for the group through a former colleague in Washington, D.C. Between February-May 2017, I spoke with different leaders from SURJ-DC over the phone to discuss how I would logistically integrate myself into the group during fieldwork. During June-August 2017, I met with group leadership in-person several times to discuss my role as a participant. As a result, I attended several events and meetings from June-August 2017 as a participant observer to gather background information and observe the nuances of conversations surrounding whiteness and event planning for the future. It was mutually agreed with leadership that I would participate ethnographically alongside group members in one outreach program, Deep Canvassing. This program provides group members with extensive training on whiteness education and engagement with other whites for the explicit purpose of discussing racism and reparations to Black people for the harms caused by slavery. It then requires that group members go into predominantly white neighborhoods and canvass about these topics to local residents. By participating fully alongside group members in Deep Canvassing, I observed and experienced the training program, which forced me to process my own racial identity alongside group members. I participated in Deep Canvassing twice, which also allowed me to “graduate” from the Deep Canvassing 1.0 training to Deep Canvassing 2.0.

Interviews took the form of semi-structured interviews (see Figure 1 for complete interview guide). Interviewees for semi-structured interviews were selected through a snowball sampling. All interviews were conducted in English and two interviews were conducted over the phone. Semi-structured interviews ranged from 30-90 minutes and were audio recorded and

transcribed upon completion. All interviews were coded for patterns in Nvivo, a qualitative coding software. Codes for this study were organized into six broad themes: (1) activism (2) urban life (3) racial justice (4) SURJ-DC (5) whiteness (6) current events.

Figure 1 – Interview Guide

General Interview Guide	• How long have you lived in DC? • Tell me about how you got involved with working on racial-justice issues • Do you consider yourself an activist? What does being an activist mean to you? • Did you encounter anything during your time in DC that motivated your involvement? • How did you learn about SURJ? • What motivated you to join SURJ? • How long had you lived in DC before actively participating in SURJ? • Were you involved in anything like SURJ prior to joining? • How do you describe SURJ's work/aims/goals? • Can you define white supremacy? • Tell me what the term [white privilege/whiteness] means to you? • What have you been involved with since joining SURJ? • Has your involvement in SURJ DC altered the way that you experience or view DC? • How has the environment in DC changed since you first became part of SURJ-DC? • Can you give me an example of a time that your membership in SURJ-DC has come up in a conversation with someone outside of the group? • What do you like about being part of SURJ-DC? • Is there anything that you dislike?
Additional Questions for Leadership	• How do you decide which groups to form and build coalitions with? • How has the environment in DC changed since you first became part of SURJ-DC? • How do you see SURJ-DC's role in relation to black organizations?

4.1 *Showing Up for Racial Justice*

“When those of us who are white realize that racial justice is core to our liberation as well, then masses of white people will withdraw support from white supremacy. Together, as part of a powerful multi-racial, cross-class movement for collective liberation we can force the system of white supremacy to crumble.” – SURJ Website “About”

The field site for this study was a chapter of a national antiracist organization, called Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), located in Washington, D.C. The national organization of

SURJ asserts their belief in “collective liberation...[meaning] that none of us can be free until we end white supremacy” (“About”). While membership is not exclusive to white people, the purpose of the group was expressed by group members throughout my fieldwork as a space for white people to “deal with” their racial identity without placing the burden on people of color, with the de facto assumption being that membership would be almost exclusively white. SURJ-DC articulates a theory of change in which organizing is ground in a “mutual interest” in ending white supremacy, which they view as the structure that enables “economic injustice, maintaining patriarchy and other forms of oppression.” To this end, by ending white supremacy, the group aims to unseat other oppressive social structures, ultimately leading to widespread equality. They identify three core strategies for their work: (1) delegitimize racist institutions (2) fight for a fair economy that refuses to pit communities against each other (3) shift culture (meaning the underlying beliefs folks have about people and the world) in a way that undermines support for white supremacy.

Members of SURJ-DC vary across age, gender, and economic demographic categories; however, most members¹ of the group identify their race as white. The chapter has approximately 600 members, a number which grew exponentially in the months after the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2017. The chapter is organized into 21 different teams, each with their own goals. The teams include a Welcoming Team, Education and Resources Team, representatives on the Movement for Black Lives Steering Committee, as well as a Queer Working Group, and a Healing Circles Team, which organizes group therapeutic events to collectively digest particularly difficult events, such as the experience of violence at a protest.

¹ Throughout the three months of fieldwork, I only engaged with white members and was told the group was predominantly white. During a follow-up visit, I met two people of color that identified themselves as “brown” and Asian-American.

The influx of group members in the Washington D.C. chapter of SURJ is an ideal case study for examining how white habitus and white racial identity formation occurs within a place-based social movement organization. Many of the members began engaging in antiracist activism while living in Washington D.C., and their involvement with SURJ was integral to their white racial identity formation. The flood of newcomers to the group forced existing members to collectively grapple with what it meant to be an anti-racist white, making more explicit the ways that identity formation occurred in group settings. SURJ-DC's website reads, "In DC, we focus on how we can best support and follow the leadership of Black- and People of Color-Led organizing work, including Black Lives Matter-DC, the Stop Police Terror Project, EmpowerDC, and ONE DC [all Black organizations]. We also work on furthering our own political education and analysis, and connect with other white people interested in doing this work, canvassing, fundraising, and more" ("Home").

Members of SURJ-DC view themselves first and foremost as white residents in Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C. has been the site for several large protests that align with SURJ-DC's partnerships and mission, particularly since the presidential inauguration in January 2017. This urban identity orients their behavior, including their active involvement in protests on the National Mall and throughout the city. Further, Washington, D.C. has a history steeped in racial segregation and, more recently, displacement of Black communities by an increasing white population. This shapes the socio-spatial environment in which group members live, work, and also participate in racial justice organizing.

Washington, D.C. has served as the background for scholarship on racial inequality, deprivation, and the Black ghetto, including the well-known urban ethnography by Elliot Liebow (1967), *Tally's Corner*. More recently, Derek Hyra (2017) demonstrates how the influx of white

Millenials² to the central city has significantly impacted the urban political and economic context of the former “dark ghetto” in DC, transforming it from a Chocolate City to a Cappuccino City³.

Hyra illustrates how political power in DC has shifted over the past thirty years from primarily African American elected officials toward white leadership. Focusing on the historically Black neighborhoods of Shaw and U-Street, which have been the focus of “urban revitalization” efforts since the 1990s and where many of my respondents currently live, Hyra illustrates how redevelopment has commodified Black history to create an “authentic” space in DC. White Millennial professionals, seeking convenient housing with access to the downtown entertainment and service-sector hub where most professional jobs are located, participate in the consumption of historically Black spaces. As Hyra notes, “between 2009 and 2012, DC had the highest increase of Millenials – nearly 12,000 – compared with any other US city” (59). Being a relatively compact city in spatial terms, the rapid influx of this population was felt immediately – and continues to be felt – by local DC residents.

The discussion of how the rapid growth of the white, educated Millennial population in DC impacted urban life for Black DC residents is salient because this serves as the racialized context within which respondents for this study operate as urban dwellers. The dynamics at play in DC – the gentrification of the Shaw/U Street neighborhood, the displacement of Black residents, the catering of amenities to white Millennial professionals, etc. – form the landscape in which white-antiracist group members develop their racial identity and grapple with realizations about their own whiteness and positionality within the racial social structure.

² As defined by Hyra, Millenials are aged between 20-34 during the time of his research collection (2009-2014) (Hyra 2017: 58). PEW Research has defined Millenials as those individuals born between 1981-1996 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/defining-generations-where-millennials-end-and-post-millennials-begin/>). These refer to roughly the same cohort.

³ The metaphor of the Cappuccino City is developed by Hyra as follows, “In DC, the formerly low-income, Black working-class communities – the coffee – have begun to experience a White influx – the steamed milk – and these neighborhoods have become both lighter in hue and more expensive” (148). By Hyra’s description, DC has become a Cappuccino City – white, educated, and expensive (20).

5. RESULTS

This study aims to identify how a white anti-racist organization that takes explicit efforts to isolate and address color-blind racism fosters the conditions for the development of a collective white anti-racist identity and habitus, which in turn structures the lives of its members. Recall that Bonilla-Silva defines white habitus as “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions, and their views on racial matters.” Part of this phenomenon includes the development of in-group solidarity and negative views of non-whites. This analysis examines the extent to which the white anti-racist habitus (WAH) described below converges and diverges with Bonilla-Silva’s concept. To understand how the WAH re-orientes actions of group members, it is necessary to first examine the formation of the collective white anti-racist identity that takes place in SURJ-DC (see Figure 2). The formation of a collective white anti-racist identity serves as the mechanism by which a group member goes from a white progressive, operating within a white habitus, to a white anti-racist that is reoriented by the WAH.

5A. The White Anti-Racist Identity

For the purposes of this analysis, I understand collective identity based on the definition given by Polletta & Jasper (2011). Collective identity is “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may for part of a personal identity” (285). An important element of this definition is that “collective identity carries with it positive feelings for other members of the group.”

For group members of SURJ-DC, the collective white anti-racist identity is based on four shared experiences and understandings: (1) shared understandings of white supremacy and whiteness, (2) shared experiences of “waking up” to racial justice, (3) collective processing of emotions, recognizing whiteness, and experiences of harm, and (4) shared experience of involvement in racial justice organizing altering the way that they live in and engage with the city.

5A.1 White supremacy and whiteness in everyday life

Group members use the term “white supremacy” frequently in different ways; it can refer to white supremacists groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, to a faceless threat (“segregation is happening in D.C. because of white supremacy”), or as a more explicit understanding of power and inequality in the United States. When asked to define white supremacy, group member Marcus⁴ articulated the following:

“[W]hat it means to me is the way in which American society has been built to prioritize and privilege whiteness. And so, for me, white supremacy refers to all of the mechanisms by which whiteness is asserted as a definite racial and ethnic category. And so, I think that there’s like, when people talk about white supremacy, they are sometimes talking about like neo-Nazis in Charlottesville or something. I think about white supremacy in a larger way, which certainly includes people are explicitly racist in their attitudes, perspectives, in the things that they say, but it also includes, like, structures that have – that institutionalize whiteness as the dominant course in American political and social and cultural life.”

This understanding of white supremacy is concurrent with definitions given by other respondents. There is an explicit understanding of whiteness and power that permeates the collective consciousness of the group regarding their positionality in the field of racial justice organizing. Group member Agnes describes how this consciousness informs her work with SURJ-DC:

“Something that I try to hold in my mind when doing racial justice work as a white person is, well, just trying to remember the tension that is sort of inherent in the way that white people do racial justice work, which is that, like, we don’t have to think about race in this country. Because whiteness is the norm and in, sort of, all of the institutions

⁴ All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of group members.

in our society, and that race is like – invisibilized [*sic*] for white people. But for people of color in this country, race is a constant presence in all facets of life. So I try to remember how important it is then to resist the urge to allow that kind of consciousness about whiteness to subside. Because it's easy – it's easy to kind of, like, lose that and just kind of move back into white normative space where your whiteness is not a thing that is present in your mind.”

The need to be constantly aware of the “white normative space,” in the context of racial justice work, was repeatedly expressed by group members throughout fieldwork and interviews. This active engagement with whiteness and an understanding of how group members, as white people, have benefitted from systems of racial oppression serves as a basis of all of their collective action and discussion about racial justice. Cultivating an understanding of how whiteness structures everyday life is central to their work of “organizing white people in DC and support[ing] racial justice movements” (“Home”). Building consciousness about whiteness and developing a white racial identity internally and external to the group is part of their strategy. For example, the group has reading groups that focus on specific topics, such as the Queer Reading Group, and their intersection with race. In their external work, Mia summarizes what was found to be a collective sentiment about developing a white racial identity with people outside of the group:

“Ultimately, I don’t think that this work really works unless people are open to taking on some responsibility themselves to do the work of unpacking what their whiteness means and what their white privilege is. And it can’t really just be imposed on people. So, like, to recognize their privilege, it has to be a sort of process of building consciousness about whiteness that people can enter into themselves...[and] I do think that there is more willingness now than there was four years ago.”

5A.2 Shared experiences of “waking up” to racial justice

When asked about how they came to participate in racial justice organizing, respondents consistently recalled becoming aware of their whiteness and desire to engage in political protest in relation to the most highly publicized, and politicized, deaths of Black people that have been shot or otherwise harmed by police since 2012. Respondents most often referenced Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and the Ferguson, MO protests that occurred in August

2014. Marcus reflected on the impact of these events on his movement towards racial justice organizing:

My work around racial justice in college, um, started after Michael Brown was killed in 2014 and those first protests. And, you know, I think I had been having conversations in college in coursework and among friends about race and class and structural inequality and I think for me, like a lot of other white folks that I have met through SURJ, Ferguson was kind of a big wake up call, that these kind of structural forces that I knew existed in the world had deadly consequences.

A key component of the white anti-racist identity embodied within this group is the ability to identify and reflect on a time before the individual was explicitly aware of white supremacy and racial justice movements, and contrast with what they have learned since that shift occurred. Because the white anti-racist habitus involves fostering spaces for education of white people, several respondents also note when “waves” of interest in the group occur in relation to current events. Mia describes the influx of new members during and after the 2016 election:

I think a lot of white people started to get involved in racial justice work around Michael Brown. It was like the Trayvon Martin wave, the Michael Brown wave. I think people, like we’ve seen waves of people getting interested in SURJ. And then, I ran an info session on SURJ two days after the inauguration and we had 600 people show up. I think it was the inauguration – no, it wasn’t after the inauguration, it was after the election. I think that white people came to realize that – I don’t know the percentage of white people in general that voted for Donald Trump, but I know that 53% of white women voted for Trump. And I think that for a lot of white people, it was uncomfortable for them to realize that there’s nothing that phenotypically separated them from the members of their race that voted for Trump and they felt uncomfortable and guilty and didn’t know what to do... But I would argue that the discomfort in realizing that they look like Trump voters was probably more motivating but people aren’t going to talk about that as much.

As new members flood the group, attending events and joining reading groups, the white anti-racist identity expands to accommodate these moments of “clarity” for new members. In this way, the fact that a collective white anti-racist identity formed concurrently with current events matters significantly and differs greatly from other studies on similar groups (see Hughey 2012).

5A.3 Emotional responses to processing whiteness, positionality, and harm

Every respondent that participated in a semi-structured interview was asked the following questions: “What do you like most about SURJ-DC? What do you like least?” While responses to the latter varied based largely on level of involvement with the organization, every single respondent referenced their appreciation for the group as a supportive space to discuss complex issues related to race and their own experiences as white people related to white supremacy. Part of the formation of the white anti-racist identity involves supporting like-minded individuals in their journey as they process their past, present, and future with a newfound lens of understanding regarding their racial identity as white people. Agnes described SURJ-DC as her “political home,” saying that she has felt “welcomed and comfortable – maybe not comfortable – welcome and loved and challenged and growing in SURJ.”

I think that people are in different places of their understanding of systemic oppression and I think that there is certainly value in white people processing their emotions around this oppressive system together, because we share similar emotions. The guilt, the anger, frustration, feeling inadequate, etc. Shame, whatever. I think having people who understand those emotions, who are able to help you process those together is valuable for some. (Rose)

Part of the process members of processing their whiteness and positionality within the racialized social system involves recognizing past harms done by group members to POC, either directly or indirectly. Harm was discussed in three ways: (1) within the white community, typically in either performing or witnessing racist acts (2) within SURJ-DC, typically across other intersectional lines, including towards Queer members (3) in relation to Black or POC groups and individuals, typically referencing having white spaces to take the “burden” off of POC or with regards to reparations in conversations with other white people. One respondent, Lucy, went to Charlottesville, VA to participate in a counter-protest of the Unite the Right Rally, organized by white nationalist and other right-wing groups in August 2017. During the protest, a car drove into a group of counter-protestors, killing one person and injuring 19 people. Lucy

describes how this experience has informed her recent participation and understanding of SURJ-DC with respect to processing harm and seeking support:

So, I was in Charlottesville in August and was very deeply traumatized and not in a good place for a couple of months. It's actually only been in like the last month, I guess, that I've been able to do some, well, to do a lot of things I used to do, so I just kind of took a break. And it was like, like I still, well, it felt like I wasn't taking a break because I was spending so much time with other folks who were there and who I know from SURJ and like I was still in SURJ spaces, but as far as doing the work, I stepped back from the strategy team for a couple of months because I didn't want to be in meetings. Um, and it's been really beautiful, like, I mean I've seen this over and over again not just with me, but when people need to step back there's always just so much love and support and like, gratefulness and respect for people saying that they need what they need and doing it. And like, not pulling martyr shit and pushing through.

In the organized workshops that train member to participate in discussions about reparations and racial justice issues with white people, the leaders ask everyone to identify the following:

(1) "Tell me about a time when...[you experienced harm and no accountability// you harmed a person of color] (2) Get the details of the story – who, what, when, where ,why? (3) How did it feel when [x] happened? (4) Why? (4.5) What could have made [situation x] better?

This script, prepared by BLM-DC and taught by SURJ-DC to its members, asks group members to recognize that they have both experienced harm that went unrecognized and have also caused harm to POC and did not answer for it. In keeping with the aforementioned discussion of how in-group solidarity is organized in relation to group members' understandings of whiteness and white supremacy, another element of the white anti-racist identity requires recognizing individual participation in perpetuating inequalities and harms to POC.

6A.4 Living in Washington, D.C. while white

Each group member that participated in a semi-structured interview was asked how, if at all, becoming more actively involved in racial justice work had impacted their day-to-day life as residents of Washington, D.C. While there was variation in how this change manifested, all conceded that they had come to view their relationship to the city as white residents as central to their racial justice organizing work. It was common to hear in these interviews, as well as in

larger group settings, lamentations about “gentrification” and “segregation,” with the terms often used interchangeably. Some group members, like Marcus, reflected on their decisions about where to live in the city based on their awareness of race and space in DC:

I settled on U-Street in part because I love the apartment, but also because it felt like a place where there was still, it was still a meeting place for a lot of different types of people, of communities. Also, it didn’t feel like the frontlines of a gentrifying project and some that are deep in gentrifying. That is something that I think that’s, if you are sort of conscious to an even small extent around issues of race, it is this sort of racial segregation in DC that is pretty much impossible to miss.

Marcus went on to articulate a common trope heard in SURJ-DC spaces about the “white young professional” that has come to characterize the city on a national scale:

There’s a real, like, tendency to erase the original residents of DC, the long-time residents, many of whom are black. But also, like, large Latino communities, large refugee communities, who have made lives here. And I think that has also been an important sort of source of motivation for me in the work that I do with SURJ is like recognizing that, like, I am sort of the kind of quintessential, white young professional that moves to DC to work for a few years before leaving, and I want to – at least in the time that I’m here – I want to try to make this a place that is more welcoming, more inclusive, more like accessible, and I see the work that I do, that I’m doing in SURJ, as some small contribution to that project.

This sentiment was echoed by Rose, who discusses how her involvement with racial justice work has informed how she interacts and perceives different residents of her neighborhood:

The development, and the influx of white millennials is pretty astounding. And, I live down the street from a healthcare clinic for homeless men and they’re primarily black and brown and it’s the highlight of my day to walk by them and be able to say hello. And I’ve, like, I mean the men circle in and out obviously because it’s a healthcare clinic but I’ve formed relationships with them and when I sit with them on their bench, I see white people walking by and how they don’t make eye contact or smile and they kind of hold their bags closer around these men and it makes me sad. And I think that part of my commitment to doing this work in DC is wanting to be a member, a good neighbor, a member of a community and make sure that my presence here is also acknowledging the people that have been here for so many more years than I have and who claim this place differently from me.

Part of the white anti-racist identity involves developing an awareness for how day-to-day decisions for group members become exercises of “white privilege.” Mia described the value of the “political education” she received in SURJ-DC:

I mean just like the political education that I’ve gotten on the history and dynamics of DC, like beyond just ‘gentrification is bad and gentrification is happening,’ but the unique ways that it’s happening here. I’ve started – I live in a group house with four other people who are all like, bright and brilliant and wonderful, but who haven’t had a lot of conversations about the ways that policing operates here. We’ve started doing that at house meetings, and

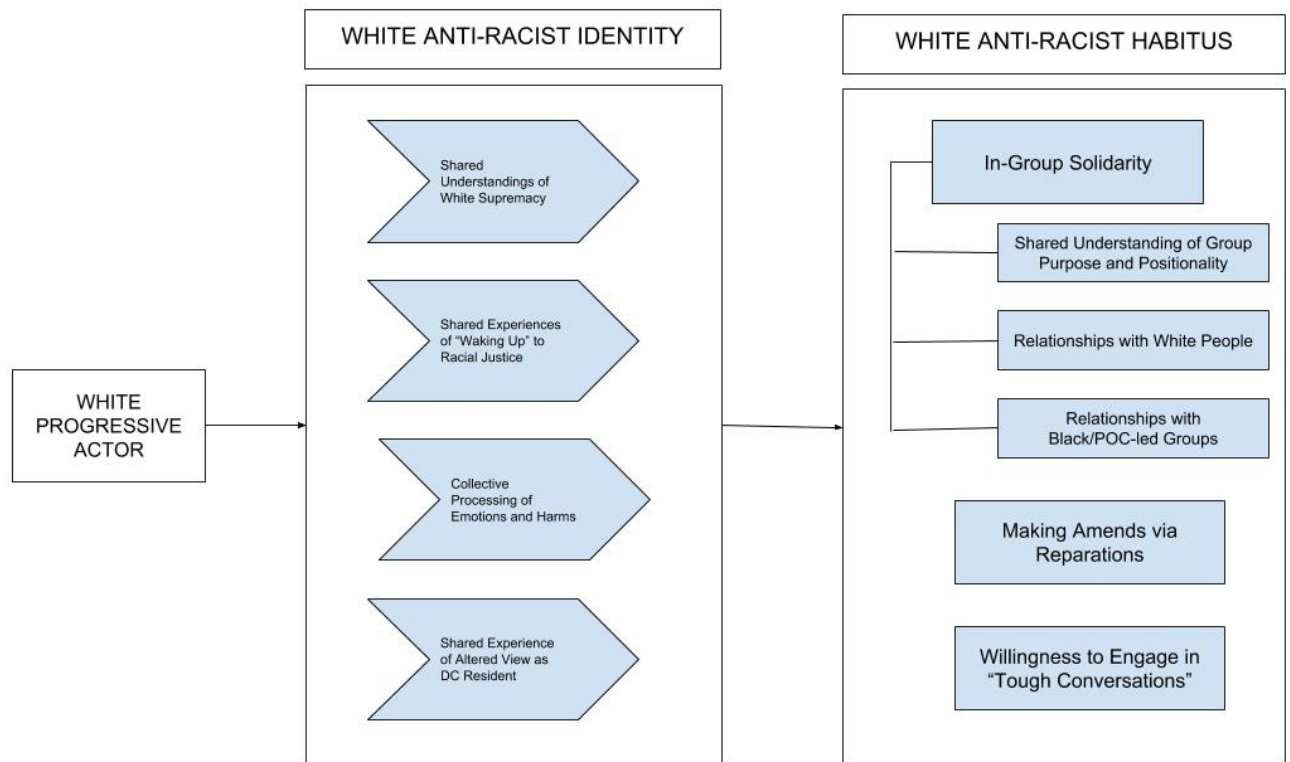
coming up with a plan to divest from the police, like as a house. Like we talk about when we would call the police, when we wouldn't, how can we figure out alternatives, and that's making a bigger effort to get to know our neighbors and go to our [neighborhood association] meetings.

This reflection on positionality is significant for the purposes of understanding how this white anti-racist identity formed via members' experiences within SURJ-DC while living in Washington, D.C. as full-time residents. While this may initially appear to be a trite component of a identity formation, members' understandings of their positionality within DC as white residents was fundamentally altered as they developed a white anti-racist identity within the broader collective confines of SURJ-DC.

5B. The White Anti-Racist Habitus

I argue that the white anti-racist identity formed through experiences as group members in SURJ-DC results in members rejecting their previously embodied white habitus. Through this rejection, white habitus is reinvented to orient action based on this shared white anti-racist identity, forming a white anti-racist habitus (WAH). This process is identified in Figure 2. Bonilla-Silva's white habitus contains three elements: (1) racial solidarity, (2) negative views of POC and Black people, and (3) social closure along racial lines. Comparatively, the WAH includes: (1) in-group solidarity formed in relation to white and Black/POC groups, (2) making amends through advocating for reparations, and (3) willingness to have "tough conversations."

Figure 2 – White Anti-Racist Identity and White Anti-Racist Habitus Process



5B.1 In-group solidarity

Per Bonilla-Silva, white habitus creates a “racial solidarity, or sense of ‘whiteness,’ [which] in turn adds to whites perceptions that their white lifestyle is the correct and ‘normal’ way of doing things” (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick 2006: 247). SURJ-DC members define the group’s work by recognizing that whiteness and white supremacy structure the norms of their daily lives. This recognition provides the foundation for the white anti-racist habitus. In-group solidarity manifests through shared understandings of the group’s purpose and its relation to other white people, as well as Black and People of Color (POC) led groups.

An essential element of the in-group solidarity established by SURJ-DC and its members relates to how members view the work that the organization does and its impact on racial justice organizing in Washington, D.C. When asked to describe SURJ-DC, group members focused on phrases such as “white people that engage in racial justice work,” “our role is to educate white people about racial justice,” and “we support Black and POC-led organizations.” Paula described SURJ-DC as part of a “movement of white people [that] engage thoughtfully and effectively in racial justice...

I think that the important role that SURJ plays is in recognizing that, like, white supremacy – well, the deconstruction of white supremacy – will need to happen with white people in addition to people of color. White people have to be in on board. But that the work of building constituency of white people for racial justice – that work needs to be taken on by white people. And so, SURJ’s role is both to educate white people to build a sort of consciousness and analysis around race and whiteness, and structural racism. And then, also, to mobilize white people to show up when white people need to show up for people of color”

5B.1 In-group solidarity: relationship to white people

In-group solidarity is related to both how group members view themselves in relation to other white people, as well as how they view themselves in relation to Black and POC-led organizations that work in the racial justice space locally. Group members articulate that they actively try to be welcoming and open to other white people, external to the group, when having conversations about racial justice. Multiple respondents described the process of learning to cultivate a sense of understanding of other white people who think differently about race and whiteness, each using the word “disposable,” as articulated by Leslie and Mia:

I also think that for long periods of time, white anti-racist people in particular, have been taught that the way to be like, a good white person, is to reject bad white people. Um, and so we’re really practicing and trying to re-teach ourselves that no one’s disposable, that everyone is valuable, that everyone has something to contribute, even if they do something fucked up. (Leslie)

I really feel that it’s impossible to do this work and come from a place where you think other white people are disposable. You need to believe that, like, every person counts. At least those are my ideals, I don’t live up to that all of the time. (Mia)

The ability to accept “bad” white people, meaning white people who do not share anti-racist views on racial justice, is part of the in-group solidarity for SURJ-DC. Their identities as white anti-racist people are contingent upon their ability to understand the “process” of “waking up” to racism and their position within a wider system of racial oppression. In a training session for group members to learn how to talk with white people about reparations to Black communities, the co-leader of the session, a group member named Abby, urged group members to “create a healthy environment where we aren’t judging and them,” but where “you are actively discussing and dissecting what they say.” She went on to say:

If they say that I’ve struggled but worked hard and black people should do the same, or that life is unfair, make sure that you use that idea of “fairness” and make it a personal response to show how structures like white supremacy mask the idea of fairness.

In the same training session, another co-leader, Lex, warns about falling into the belief that SURJ-DC members are “good” white people:

We are conditioned to have a reaction that holds the people to certain standards about understanding white privilege and being ‘good white people,’ but we have to make an effort to hold them to their own standards – listen to them and take note of the values that they discuss, and then use those values to show them how white supremacy is at work in their thinking about reparation and race.

The group develops an in-group solidarity by framing themselves as white people holding other white people accountable to their “values.” They also view the process as on-going learning opportunity. This idea is articulated by another group member, Rose, where she urges other members to remember where they started in racial justice organizing:

We are also people that have fucked up – we are not just good white people who are shaming these people, but we are actually in the process of figuring this stuff out alongside them, with them.

5B.1 In-group solidarity: relationship to Black and POC-led groups

SURJ-DC started in 2015 after a group of Black organizers, many of whom were affiliated with the D.C. chapter of Black Lives Matter (BLM), held a training called “Zero White

Ally,” about how white people could be allies in racial justice movements. As described by founding member, Leslie:

Initial leadership formed in ongoing conversations with BLM organizers, and eventually decided to call themselves a SURJ chapter. We did our “official” launch in March 2016 and that was when we first sort of came forward and said let’s start to build teams and start to build work and culture. We started with four, what we call accountability partners, originally but now not exclusively black-led organization that we organized with that we try to flank in what they’re doing and also see that some of our work is separate. So it was originally BLM-DC, Empower-DC, ONE DC, and Stop Police Terror Project DC.

Group members view their utility in their partnerships with Black and POC-led groups to be in supporting actions, as well as a way to isolate conversations of race and racial justice within a white space in order to prevent burdening Black and POC groups with racial education of white people. As Rose describes:

“[SURJ-DC] has some strong community partnerships with Black-led organizations, and it provides a vehicle for white people to funnel into that work in the context in which white bodies are valuable for organizations. And then it also engages in organizing within the white community around issues of racial justice, so through the Deep Canvass and through community conversations where white people can process racial justice writ large, and what it means for them to be benefitting from a system that they’re hoping to dismantle.”

Other group members articulated that SURJ-DC provides a way to “connect with and support POC-led organizations and organizing in DC without feeling, or at least minimizing the extent to which [they] feel like it can be a burden to those organizers and activists by relying on them to help guide.” The rhetoric of not wanting to be a “burden” to Black and POC-led organizations is frequently heard in SURJ-DC spaces. In this way, the in-group solidarity coalesces in a shared belief that by creating white anti-racist spaces to educate about and discuss racism, white supremacy, and racial justice, SURJ-DC is alleviating pressure from Black and POC organizers. Within this, there is the belief that white people are more likely to say racist, or colorblind racist, sentiments to other white people because of a shared white habitus. The WAH is dependent on the ability of group members to isolate potentially painful conversations with other white people about race from Black and POC organizers.

5B.2 Making amends: reparations

Bonilla Silva's conception of white habitus normalizes segregation between Black and white people and promotes negative views about non-whites. The WAH leads to active questioning of these two behaviors in the lives of members and the white people that they encounter. The clearest example of this is in the conversations that group members have with each other and with non-group member white people about reparations.

SURJ-DC engages in "deep canvassing," which is a concept that originated through community organizing efforts in Los Angeles that is door-to-door canvassing of neighborhoods for the purpose of having in-depth conversations about an issue (Denizet-Lewis 2016). There is no "ask," as there is for political canvassing that is typically in favor of a particular ballot measure or candidate. Instead, deep canvassing is done by SURJ-DC in predominantly white neighborhoods in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area – primarily in Northern Virginia – with the purpose of engaging white people in conversations about harms to the Black community, "including mass incarceration, slavery, and police brutality" for the purpose of addressing reparations (Fieldnotes). Group members that volunteer for canvassing go through a 2-3 hour training, which includes a crash course on whiteness studies, intersectionality, and reparations. Canvassers employ a script, written and re-written by BLM-DC, that moves through different stages of conversation about experiencing and inflicting harm, accountability, and "unconscious assumptions" made about Black people by the person "at the door." It begins by asking, "On a 0-10 scale, where 0 is completely against paying reparations to Black people, and 10 is completely in favor of paying reparations to Black people, where would you put yourself?" This is also the concluding question of the script. Reparations are broadly defined in the script as "the general idea being to make amends for past and current harm by paying money or otherwise

helping those harmed.” The goal is to “achieve an emotional connection” in a discussion about race and to ask white people to think more critically about the experience of Black people in American society.

In preparation for canvassing, group members discuss the variety of ways in which reparations can be made to the Black community – typically all include money. Before sending a group of second- and third-time canvassers out to their neighborhood zones, the training team reminded members to “expand the definition of reparations as something beyond money, and [remember that] the ultimate discussion is to work to change internal and external structures of white supremacy that keep reparations from happening” (Fieldnotes).

Through these explicit discussions about reparations, particularly with non-group members, the group is attempting to normalize conversations about reparations. Believing that reparations are necessary, whether community-based, on an individual level, through the support of black-owned businesses, or a formal federal program, is an essential part of the WAH. This shapes how they view their partnerships with Black organizations in which they defer to organizational asks, including financial support, volunteer childcare, or carpooling to a protest or housing hearing. This also shapes how group members move about the world. Laura, an early member of the group, described choosing to go to female Black-owned coffee shops and restaurants in Washington, D.C., almost exclusively. Rose described giving monthly reparations to black organizing as a way to “funnel resources” while she works for a community-level form of reparations. The WAH orients action towards making amends for harms done to the Black community and normalizes the belief among white anti-racists in SURJ-DC that reparations are essential for racial equity.

5B.3 *Sitting with discomfort: WAH and willingness to “have tough conversations”*

As discussed earlier with regards to in-group solidarity, group members grapple with how they relate to white people that are not doing racial justice organizing. The WAH is dependent on the willingness to have conversations about whiteness, white supremacy, and harm done to Black communities. This is a fundamental shift from perceiving conversations about race to be uncomfortable or *too* complex for general discussion. Group members, like Mia, often reflect on their ability to have these conversations:

[When discussing my work with deep canvassing] if prompted, I can talk about like, how this work feels important to me because, like, one it's what's being asked and we all know that it's important for white people to be doing internal work. And also, Deep Canvassing, has been so transformative for me and my ability to talk to other white folks. Specifically, my friends and family, who have always struggled with these conversations, right? Like this is the hardest conversation to have when you don't have the words.

Part of the group's efforts through deep canvassing is return to neighborhoods several months or years later, to see if their conversations change. They log extensive notes about the outcomes of conversations – was it successful, or a failure? The WAH is shaped not by the ability of white anti-racist members in changing the minds of other white people, but by their own perception of their ability to engage in in-depth conversations about race in a long-term capacity. Beyond the willingness to have these conversations, the WAH determines that these conversations *must* be had – regardless of who they are with and the outcome.

6. COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND THE WHITE ANTI-RACIST HABITUS

Group members that I spoke with during both semi-structured interviews at events and meetings, and those I formally interviewed, almost unanimously rebuffed being labeled an “activist.” The reasons for this distancing from the “activist” label are encapsulated by the quotes from individual interviews. In both explanations, the respondents articulate that the term

“activist” evokes an exclusive connotation that does not fully encapsulate what they view the work that they do with SURJ-DC or how they go about doing it.

Activist is a really convenient word because it has all of these meanings around it and a lot of those meanings are bullshit. Um, I think the thing that I struggle with the most is that the term activist separates what I think of as like civic duty – like I think that we all have responsibility to be like, we all have our like families and our personal lives and our careers and some of those things are about like, trying to make the world better, but I see the world as so in flames. Calling myself an activist doesn’t reflect that we all should be doing stuff like this, we all should be like taking action to be making the world a better place. The anecdote I’ve been sitting with is like, lots of white people like to think of themselves as like “I would’ve done something during the civil rights movement,” but like if you’re not doing something today, then you know you, like that’s a good indicator of who you would’ve been. (Agnes)

Like Agnes, Mia felt that “activist” was not the appropriate label for herself or fellow group members. However, her discomfort with the term rests on previous experiences of activism leading to exclusivity amongst group members, ultimately perpetuating the status quo. By not identifying as an activist, and later in the interview reflecting on a moral obligation to do racial justice work, Mia isolates activism outside of the scope of SURJ-DC and her own volunteer work.

And I guess, I used to think that you can’t be an activist unless you know all of the words or unless you know all of the theory to be a part of this very exclusive club. That’s the way it was in college at least, and so I felt uncomfortable claiming that for myself because I didn’t think that my life experiences allowed me to do that or that I had the vocabulary, but I think – listen, if we’re trying to make a more inclusive society, we need more activists, because our activists are pushing for that inclusion and if they’re being exclusive themselves than they’re keeping the status quo when they shouldn’t be. (Mia)

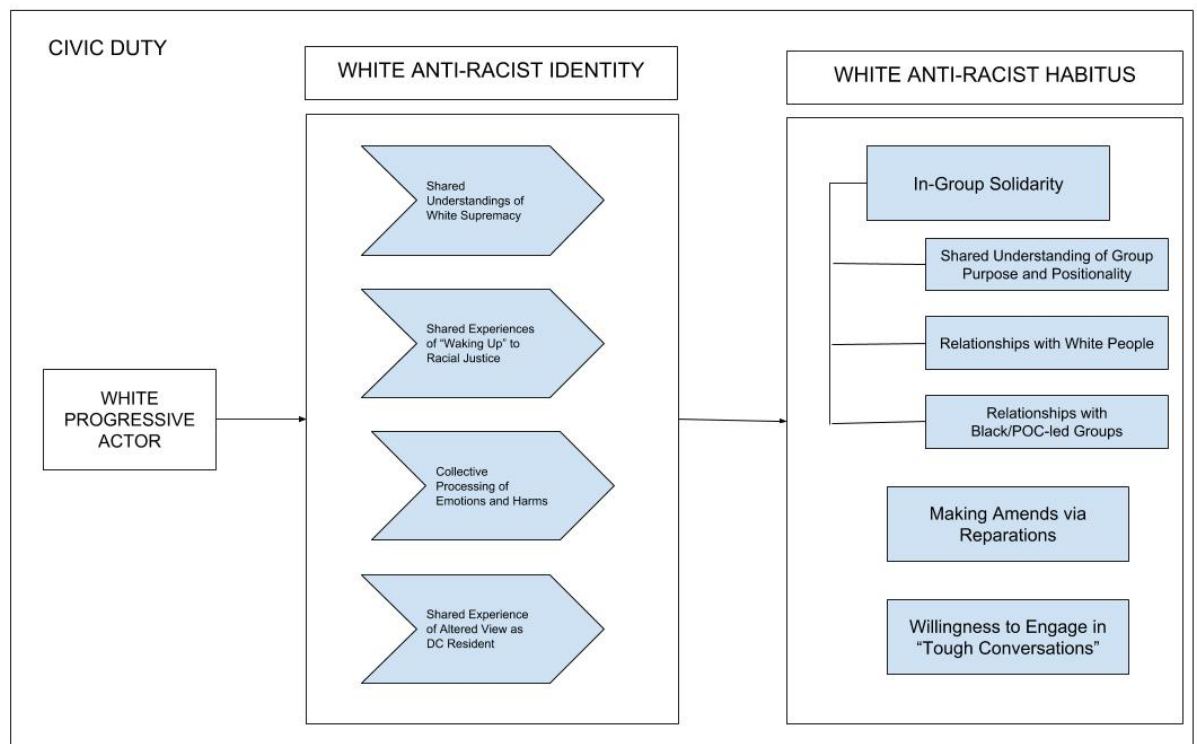
While in the field, I found this phenomenon very puzzling because I classify the group sociologically as a social movement organization of white anti-racist activists given their participation in protests, boycotts, and community organizing alongside other groups within the racial justice movement. Tilly (1999) defines a social movement as a ‘sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a disadvantaged population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of repeated public displays of that population’s worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment’ (257). Despite my own categorization of the group and its members

as a sociologist, one of the values of ethnographic research is hearing how the group and its members grapple with their self-definitions and categorization. Taking seriously their antagonism towards the “activist” label led to an additional question: What does it mean that they categorically reject self-identification as activists and instead refer to inclusivity and universal understandings of “civic duty”?

I argue that by rejecting the “activist” label and categorizing their work as civic duty, the group members perpetuate colorblind racist ideologies that reify American liberalism and citizenship. This is the re-emergence of the white habitus that remains alongside the newly formed WAH. In turn, this complicates our understanding of how colorblind racism permeates as a foundation for white spaces even when specific action is taken by white actors to isolate and act in opposition to “standard” colorblind ideology through the WAH. Civic duty serves as a backdrop for the white progressive actor before, during, and after the formation of the white anti-racist identity occurs through participation in SURJ-DC (see Figure 3).

Research documents that whites reproduce colorblindness and racial logics even under conditions in which they simultaneously acknowledge racism at work (Mueller 2017). The rhetoric of civic duty within SURJ-DC provides a nuanced case for demonstrating how colorblind racist ideology remains present despite agentic efforts of white actors to address it. This illustrates the insidious nature of colorblindness as it manifests in the co-existence of the unconscious white habitus with the consciously-formed WAH. Bonilla-Silva (2014) provides four frames used by whites to ground and justify color-blindness: abstract liberalism; naturalization (referring to racial phenomena as naturally occurring); cultural racism; and minimization of racism. Of these four frames, abstract liberalism is the frame present in this case.

Figure 3 – Civic Duty and White Anti-Racist Habitus



Liberalism has been a source of debate and reification since the establishment of modernity, with its distinguishing features of “individualism, universalism, egalitarianism, and meliorism (the idea that people and institutions can be improved)” (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 69). It was endorsed and served as the driving force for many nation-states, including the founding of the United States. Indeed, like other foundational concepts in modernity, liberalism is steeped in Eurocentric and historical understandings of racial exclusion that occurred in the same historical moment. Abstract liberalism refers to “ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity,’ the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters.” (70). Bonilla-Silva (2014) uses this frame to highlight rhetoric from white (and non-white) actors that oppose affirmative action programs without acknowledgement of historic oppression and exclusion of marginalized groups.

The application of the abstract liberalism frame in this case is made more complicated by the role of the white anti-racist habitus, which necessitates that group members acknowledge historic oppression of Black people and making amends. Despite this, ideas about citizenship and civic duty in the United States context are grounded in abstract liberalism, and, when evoked by SURJ-DC and its members, reproduce color-blind ideologies. An ideology provides a way for people to legitimate the status quo, and are successful “when [it] helps people to understand their lives by providing stories of the world that make sense” (Lewis 2004: 633). The desire to link their work with civic duty and reject the “activist” label allows SURJ-DC and its group members to legitimate their view of their work as acting as a “good citizen,” abstracted from the whiteness linked to concepts of citizenship.

Glenn (2014) illustrates how understandings of citizenship in the United States were constructed in both racialized and gendered ways, ultimately equating citizenship with masculine whiteness. In her analysis, she reviews the historical construction of Blacks as “anti-citizens” and the denial of basic rights of citizens before, during, and after Reconstruction (33). In short, citizenship in the United States is characterized by whiteness, and notions of equality that stem from liberalism fail to acknowledge that the “good” citizen necessarily enacts colorblind logics that allow them to claim ignorance to racial disparities both historic and contemporary.

Civic duty, as used by SURJ-DC and its group members, evokes moral or legal responsibilities as citizens, or as members of a community. SURJ-DC and its group members claim civic duty and reject self-identification as “activists” to make their work have association with long-term institutional and societal impact. By enacting this color-blind logic, they reinforce the idea that there is something valuable in identifying with liberal ideals, specifically that being a “good citizen” means fighting for equality without acknowledging the white privilege that this

belief entails. The outcome of this is to distance themselves from those that identify themselves as activists within the racial justice space, which are predominantly Black organizations. This creates a boundary between those that “volunteer” or feel a moral obligation as members of a citizenry to work in the racial justice movement, and those who agitate vigorously for change in opposition with the status quo. Whether intended or not, by evoking civic duty and rejecting the “activist” label, SURJ-DC and its group members apply colorblind logic, which is rooted in the white habitus, to justify their actions and simultaneously distance themselves from stigmas or negative connotations associated with previous white anti-racist activism or Black activism in the same space.

Recall that much of the literature on whiteness and white racial identity references the role of colorblindness and color-blind racism that serves as a mechanism for the reproduction of white dominance in society. Color-blind racist ideologies permeate all levels at which whiteness is operating in this case, existing at all levels for white people despite the strongest efforts to counteract it. This is a result of the way that whiteness has shaped every social institution in American life.

7. CONCLUSION

This study aims to identify if and how white habitus changes when actors make a concerted effort to counteract color-blind racist ideologies and the toxicity of whiteness in their daily lives. The process of joining the group as a white progressive newcomer and forming a white anti-racist identity alongside other group members results in the development of a new white anti-racist habitus alongside the preexisting white habitus. This reformulated habitus alters how group members orient action and move through the world. I have shown that despite the conscious creation of a white anti-racist habitus, the pre-existing white habitus continues to

structure the actions of anti-racist whites. This manifests most clearly through rhetoric about civic duty and members' belief in American liberal ideals about citizenship and moral obligation, which have been shown to reproduce color-blind racist logics.

Though this study is limited in scope to one case, it provides an empirical case for examining the dialectal process that goes into shaping habitus through socialization and identity formation. This analysis provides fodder for future research on the ways that white behavior and perspective can be re-oriented through an explicit anti-racist (or racist) socialization process. The findings suggest that despite their efforts to address color-blind racism in their behaviors through the conscious formation of a white anti-racist habitus, anti-racist whites remain subsumed within the unconscious white habitus.

Washington D.C.'s unique draw to white young professionals as a node of progressive civic duty orients the particular white anti-racist habitus of SURJ-DC members. Given the growth of SURJ chapters nationwide, future research could extend the present study to another SURJ chapter in a different urban area that has an altogether different racial and political history than Washington, D.C. By comparing based on experiences of identity formation in place-based activism, the research would demonstrate the extent to which context truly matters when it comes to the production and reproduction of white habitus.

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