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Perceptions of Whiteness and Class Privilege in a Post-Obama America

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Perceptions of Whiteness and Class Privilege in a Post-Obama America

by

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ABSTRACT

The election of President Barack Obama in 2008 marks an important moment in American history. To most Americans, this election provides evidence of our success in improving race relations and limiting racial inequality in the United States. Research on the ways that this election has affected perceptions of stratification is essential to our understanding of many aspects of inequality in the contemporary period. Research on social class and whiteness shows the difficulty Americans have in acknowledging unearned advantage and disadvantage. In this study, I look closely at one segment of the population by asking the question, “How has Obama’s election influenced the way upper class white college students perceive their whiteness and class privilege?” Interviews with 20 white college students from affluent families at a private university reveal the complex perceptions of white privilege in a post-Obama America. These interviews review three major findings in respect to perceptions of privilege and the election of President Obama. (1) The students used color-blind ideology to justify their decision to vote or support the president, (2) to many of the participants, the President’s election reaffirmed their belief in the ideology of meritocracy, and (3) the election of President Barack Obama threatened the students’ privilege, but the current ideologies settle their unease. These ideologies enabled those interviewed to justify their privileged positions. I argue that the election of America’s first African American president has not changed, but reaffirmed, the existing perceptions of privilege held by white and wealthy young Americans.

Introduction

“I was really proud of the people. Quite honestly I didn’t think that the majority of Americans would be able to look beyond it.” This quote, from a white female college student, sums up how many Americans felt about the election of President Obama. The “it” that the student is referring to is President Obama’s race – his perceived blackness. The dream of having an African American President came true on January 20th, 2009 as an estimated 1.1 million people gathered in Washington D.C to watch the inauguration of Barack Obama. President Obama represented what many thought was impossible, the election of a minority into the White House. For many, the election reaffirmed belief in the American dream. What does this mean for those who are not disadvantaged? The study of the privileged and unmarked groups is continually overlooked. The omission of privileged groups has had a negative effect on the study of inequality. By focusing on the privileged, we are able to reverse the traditional focus from the victim of inequality to those who benefit from it and offer a needed perspective on the topic (Sherwood 2010; Kimmel 2009; Doane 2003).

While many Americans believe that the election of President Obama represents substantive change in race relations some scholars, like Roxanna Harlow, believe it will have little or no effect (2009). Others, like Tim Wise, suggest that it is simply a shift in the type of racism and racial politics; from racism 1.0 to racism 2.0 (Wise 2009). I will show that among privileged college students the election has little impact on the ideological framework from which they draw. By examining the privileged, both racially and economically, we can get a better understanding of the elections affect on some Americans.

Whiteness is one dimension in the study of privilege. In sociology, researchers examine how the dominant racial group reproduces power. W.E.B Dubois inferred that during the 1800's white workers embraced their racial identity instead of the class identity to obtain an advantage in the social order. Dubois and other scholars of whiteness have examined the benefits of joining the dominant group and how white identity has become the normative racial identity in America (Doane 2003). France Windance Twine and Charles Gallagher argue that research on whiteness has moved into the third wave. This new wave of whiteness asks scholars to explore the ways "whiteness as a form of power is defined, deployed, performed, policed and reinvented" (Twine 2008, p.5). I ask the question, how do whites perceive the unearned advantage that they receive?

To examine how individuals perceive their racial privilege, we have to understand how whites identify with their own race. One concern when defining whiteness is how it is perceived differently by everyone. A concept that can be used to create variation in whiteness is an individual's class status. Class is a complex concept that is made of various socioeconomic indicators. While class is also difficult to define, most individuals can place their subjective class status (Hunt 2007). However, knowing what class you belong to does not make it a significant factor in your life. To Paul Kingston, contemporary America is a classless society where the differences across classes are so insignificant that those differences have little influence on our lives (2001). Is class dead? Elizabeth Aries and Maynerd Seider argue that, although social classes are less defined today, they still have a significant impact on individual lives and identities (2007). The solidarity that comes from being a member of a class is particularly relevant to those individuals who are privileged. For this study, I examine how upper class white college

students perceive the unearned advantage they receive from their racial and class positioning.

Racial and class privilege intersect frequently. Those most privileged by wealth are disproportionately white. Therefore, I set out to ask the question: “How has Obama’s election influenced the way upper class whites perceive their whiteness and class privilege?” This question provides insight into two distinct areas requiring study; the privileged and the election of President Obama. To answer this question, I performed qualitative semi-structured interviews with white college students at an elite private university. The interviews were to determine their perceptions of Obama’s election. These interviews permit access to the complex perceptions of privilege, which these individuals embody. By using qualitative data, I can illuminate the meaning behind the historical moment of this election.

In the following sections I will present three major findings. First, white students use color-blind ideology to justify their decision to vote or support the President. Second, to the participants, the President’s election reaffirmed their belief in the ideology of meritocracy. Finally, the election of President Obama threatens student privilege, but the dominant ideology of individualism works to settle this unease. These three findings all lead me to believe that the election of President Obama has had little influence on those individuals who reside in positions of privilege. Before going any further, I will discuss the current literature on color-blind ideology, race talk and meritocracy.

Color-Blind Ideology

America has had a long history of racism and racial subordination. In the 1950's and 60's blacks fought for their rights as American citizens and won many liberties. Today, both racism and racial segregation continue to exist, but no longer in the overt form experienced by previous generations. In his controversial book, William Julius Wilson argues that in the post civil rights era overt racial discrimination has become less important and economic subordination has become more important (1978). Recently, popular anti-racist Tim Wise made a similar point. Wise posted a reaction to the 2010 midterm Republican win and pointed out that we only have one generation alive that actually recalls "the good old days" before racial equality (2010). Wise's statement points out that there is only one-generation left who knows life without integration. Those born after the civil rights movement have been socialized to believe that race does not and should not have any influence on individual opportunities. Wise argues that as America moves away from the era of racial domination, we will continue to become more accepting of racial difference. Scholars who study color-blindness may not be as enthusiastic as Wise. While the debate over Wilson's claim has not subsided, scholars like Dalton Conley and Thomas Shapiro have set out to provide evidence of racial economic subordination. These scholars have shown how wealth inequality has expanded the gap between blacks and whites (Conley 1999; Shapiro 2004). The growing gap in wealth between black and white Americans creates new obstacles for scholars and activists trying to minimize the current inequality.

We can make sense of the growing inequality between whites and other minorities by examining an adaptation of a well-known statement from W.E.B DuBois, "The

problem of the 21st century will be the problem of color-blindness” (Lewis 2004). Color-blindness is the name that scholars have given to the contemporary phenomenon that insists that institutions and individuals be color-blind in order to promote equality. Seeing the world color-blind leads people to downplay the influence of race. When individuals do not see the way in which race influences opportunities and achievement, they reproduce the racial hierarchy that influences success. Color-blindness has become a form modern racism that works to reproduce the racial hierarchy.

Color-blind ideology today has permeated the way that non-whites perceive their achievements. Eduardo Bonilla Silva shows how minorities who get jobs over whites are quick to accredit affirmative actions laws as the reason for their success instead of their own hard work (2004). Attitudes like these offer whites an advantage. Bonilla-Silvia’s example shows how whiteness as a form of symbolic capital is recognized and legitimized by minorities. If we concede in perpetuating the notion of color-blind ideology, the real effects of race and racial discrimination cannot be challenged. The lack of seeing oneself as part of a racial group can be contributed to the lack of a Whites’ racial identity. Color-blindness and whites inability to see the influence of race makes it difficult for whites to recognize themselves as a racial group (Lewis 2004).

White racial identity is central to the understanding of whiteness. However, this concept is difficult to define. In her study of white activists for women’s rights, Ruth Frankenberg found that because of how whiteness is socially constructed women had few experiences with their race (1993). As the field of whiteness developed it became evident that the way whiteness held power was by being cultureless and unmarked (McKinney 2005) This finding makes it clear that we cannot talk about whiteness without also talking

about blacks, Asians, Hispanics and all racial others who whites may interact with (McKinney 2005). An individual's interaction with different races affects the meaning that they place on their white identity. Pamela Perry infers that because of the lack of interaction between racial groups, many whites do not believe their race has any influence over their life (2002). The understanding of how race influences an individual's life is instrumental to understanding the issue of whiteness. In other words, if whites develop a racial consciousness through interaction with "others" but these interactions are limited by space and availability, it should not be surprising that many whites have very limited racial identity. Paul Croll shows how Whites' racial identity and their feelings towards minorities fall on a continuum. He shows that individuals with strong racial identities have both anti-racists and racist views depending on their education level (2007). Therefore, the lack of interaction and racial identity allows whites to prefer a color-blind ideology.

The lack of a racial group for whites directly contributes to the normative disposition of whiteness by presenting all other races as "others". The normative nature of whiteness has led to many whites thinking that they do not have a race at all and therefore turn to colorblind ideology to justify their unearned advantage. The lack of racial consciousness is evident in the way that white individuals discuss their racial groups. An example of this is in Amanda Lewis's study on whiteness and group identity. One respondent said "what group?" in response to a question asking what she had learned about her own racial group in a class on race relations in America (2004). When whites are pressed to think about their race, they often use stories and narratives that present it as both an advantage as well as a limitation. When asked about particular racial legislation,

whites see their racial identity as a hindrance to them (Bonilla-Silva 2000). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva shows that the contradictory understanding of whiteness comes from the nature of how it was formed. Whiteness is a product of minority entrance into the social realm and in a way this threatens the normative nature of being white. Whites only see their race as being a hindrance to them and consequently turn to color-blind ideology to discredit attempts to aid other groups (Gallagher 1997).

As I have suggested, Whites' lack of racial identity has contributed to their dedication toward a color-blind society. In a study on white college students, researchers found that they often do not feel the need to identify themselves as white, but are happy to reap the privilege of this classification (Jackson 2002). Ronald Jackson studied the reactions of white students to a racial hate crime that happened on campus. He found that racial identities are still socially constructed and, that while whites are more liberal now, they still view the world with 'rose colored lenses'. In other words, white students still do not want to accept the prevalence of racist acts. Jackson claims that the main difference today is that whites want non-whites to also view the world with similar rose colored lenses (Jackson 2002). These attitudes reflect a greater misperception of race and its effects on everyday life. Whites' beliefs and ideals are often based on meritocracy thus they find it difficult to believe that race or class might affect an individual opportunity. When this notion is challenged whites often turn to negative rhetoric that justifies the positions of those in less fortunate situations.

Nyla Branscombe found that whites tend to have increased modern racism once exposed to the idea that they are privileged. These findings were consistent with social identity theory's contention that high status groups will express negative attitudes toward

lower status groups when their position is challenged (Branscombe 2007, p. 211). Their hostility can likely contribute to Whites' inability to recognize inequality as a product of their advantage rather than an outcome of minority disadvantage. To justify this discontent, whites turn to color-blind ideology. In the case of employment, it has become typical to hear phrases such as "a black man took my job". Whites' use of narrative to challenge affirmative action policies has been well documented by scholars like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004). They also rationalize their racial privilege by contributing their success to individual action rather than racial preferences (Hartmann 2009). Whites' color-blind mentality suggests that whiteness is a form of symbolic capital that all whites can draw upon (Lewis 2004). More currently, the language used by whites has moved toward a notion of white marginalization. Charles Gallagher shows how Whites' misperception of racial size leads to feeling as though they are in the minority. Gallagher argues that these feelings have led to the contemporary Tea Party Movement and the idea that whites need to be given minority status. These misconceptions have raised the question of whether or not whites are racially oppressed (Gallagher 2010). Color-blind ideology and misconceptions of racial size have led whites to increased feelings of victimization eventually causing resentment toward challenges to white privilege.

As I have already suggested, Whites' experiences with race are typically limited to interactions with individuals of other races. The limited experience is caused by the invisibility and lack of an identifiable racial group of whites (Lewis 2004; McKinney 2005). Understanding how whites are privileged, and whether or not they recognize it, is instrumental to the study of whiteness (Twine 2008). Part of understanding white privilege is how color-blind ideology is used to justify Whites' position in the racial

hierarchy. There are two perspectives in the theories of white privilege. The first and more accepted perspective argues that white Americans tend not to be aware of the privilege that they receive. This hypothesis contests that whites are unable to see the structural forces that provide advantage to them. The second perspective suggests that whites do recognize their racial advantage but use “race talk” to downplay its significance (Hartmann 2009, p.407). I argue that whites are not aware of their racial privilege, and when they are made aware they then engage in “race talk” to rationalize their advantage because of a firm belief in color-blind ideology.

Race Talk

The growing sentiment of color-blind ideology has led whites to mask their racist views with “race talk”, or the language which demeans people on the basis of race or ethnicity while trying to obscure the speaker’s racist intentions (Myers 2005). Ashley ‘Woody’ Doane argues that “race talk” and other modern manifestations of racism have led acts of racism to become more of a collective act (2006). As racism moves from the realm of the individual to being perpetrated by collectives, the structural issues that complicate race relations in America become more oppressive. The transformation of racism can partially be contributed to the inability of many whites to recognize their racial position in the social order (Lewis 2004; Frankenberg 1993).

Woody Doane argues that studies on whiteness can offer important and insightful findings but research cannot fully understand the topic without exploring the issue of racism (2003). In today’s society, many whites use precise language to tell stories about race that masks their racial prejudice unseen (Bonilla-Silva 2000, 2004; Myers 2005). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has studied the use of “race talk” by whites to explain racial

inequality. He found that the narratives used by whites frame the issue of discrimination as largely affecting the white population. These storylines and narratives put whites in the position of discrimination, which suggest that the response to racial inequality be color-blindness. Bonilla-Silva and other scholars of color-blindness suggest that this language has shifted the victimization of our racialized society away from minorities and toward whites. Therefore, the popular narratives used by whites have transcended the oppressor and are now reverberated by those who are oppressed by racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2004).

While Bonilla-Silva has explored the use of “race talk” in public settings, Kristen Myers and Passion Williamson have examined its private use. They found that in a private setting, whites are more likely to use racist rhetoric that is unacceptable (2010). Myers and Williamson’s findings reaffirm the marginalization of racist rhetoric and also confirm that racist beliefs are still present among whites. While racist rhetoric has been marginalized, color-blindness has helped to remove the stigma from those individuals who used “race talk”. The change in perception of racism is partially due to the changing perception of whites as a minority.

While economic subordination replaces overtly racist acts, color-blind ideology compliments the change and minimizes the influence of race as a structural factor. Whites have championed this ideology likely as a result of their own inability to recognize a racial identity. Amanda Lewis shows how Whites’ lack of racial identity is partly due to an inability to recognize their racial group (2004). The ideology of color-blindness has also guided the way for new forms of racism that privatize racist talk. The modern racial subordination and the prevalence of race talk have complicated the issue and challenge

any policy that could minimize the inequality between whites and blacks. Meritocracy compliments colorblind ideology and the use of race talk.

Meritocracy

Color-blind ideology has gained such prevalence in part because Americans generally want to believe that things are fair. For most people, the success of the rights movements in the 1950's and 60's paved the way for equal opportunities for all Americans. This change helps to explain U.S. Citizens adamant belief in meritocracy. In American society, meritocracy is the popular belief system that suggests those who work the hardest are the ones who will be rewarded. Heather Beth Johnson shows how this belief has taken the shape in the "American Dream" (2006). While most Americans believe that we live in a meritocracy, many scholars of class argue that it is a myth. Shamus Khan shows how privileged high school students are taught to be at ease with their privilege in order to see America as a meritocracy and themselves having earned their position in the hierarchy (2011).

Like race, social class provides identity to individuals. This identity is particularly useful to individuals who work and live among the upper echelons of the hierarchy. While social class is difficult to measure, understanding it allows us to examine its very real effects on social life. In particular its influence on institutions like education, business and politics. Despite the advantaged position, privileged individuals see themselves as having earned the place. By using the language of meritocracy, these individuals are able to justify and reproduce their privileged position (Khan 2011).

Research on subjective salient groups has shown that individuals identify class as one of the most influential aspects of their identity formation. Class-consciousness is particularly prevalent for individuals in the upper class, who use it to orient themselves in the stratified social structure as being ahead (Aries 2007). Class solidarity creates an interesting obstacle for individual mobility. For instance, lower class individuals often struggle with their lower class identity and the identity formation that is happening as a result of going to college. The struggle of changing class identity is greater for individuals who attend elite colleges rather than state universities (Aries 2005; Reay 2009). The significance of class solidarity in the creation of identity raises an interesting question about the plausibility of society being a meritocracy. If those who are born privileged are given an advantage simply by their class identity is the race fair? The concept of cultural capital can help us understand how an individual's social class can create advantages beyond those that are financial.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital calls attention to how cultural resources influence the market place. Cultural Capital is one way to understand how the privileged reproduce their unearned advantage (Swartz 1997). Bourdieu argues that individuals in lower classes do not obtain the cultural capital that upper class do to navigate the higher education institution. Bourdieu presents the effects of cultural capital on education in his book, *Inheritors*. He finds that having cultural capital gives upper class students the ability to succeed in higher education (Bourdieu 1979). Cultural capital is the resources that are passed down through generations, which makes the education system a comfortable and familiar place (Wallace 2006) Student's ability to navigate the structure is due to their familiarity with it. Individuals, who are raised in an environment that

critical thinking is a valued skill, are able to engage the needed ability more efficiently (Lareu 2003). Due to the lack of cultural capital, individuals from lower class backgrounds struggle with their ability to connect with a new class identity that they encounter during their college years (Reay 2009). The inheritance of cultural capital enables individual's to achieve more in society by way of having more knowledge and more comfort with their surroundings. Again the uneven distribution cultural capital challenges the notion of whether or not meritocracy in America is a myth.

Those privileged by class often downplay the significance of their advantage. The minimizing of class privilege is most apparent in education. Education is perceived to be the great equalizer in our society. While most scholars argue that the wealthy are unable to perceive their advantage, Heather Beth Johnson found that the privileged would often acknowledge advantages they receive while insisting that hard work played an important part (2006). Parents do not disguise the increased opportunities they are giving to their children. However, it is unclear whether or not they fully recognize this as privilege.

While many recognize that there are disadvantaged groups, they still believe in the "American Dream" (Johnson 2006). Similarly in a study of privileged college students, Jenny Subter was surprised to find that her participants were well informed about the advantages they received (2010). These parents and students might be using this acknowledgement to engage in class talk or the downplaying of class privilege to justify their advantaged position. By using class talk, or the language of meritocracy these individuals are able to justify their position or the position given to their children.

Wealth also has an effect on the social networks that individuals have access to. For families that are able to send their children to elite boarding schools, wealth provides

them with the opportunities needed to get into elite universities (Khan 2006). When students at elite boarding schools apply to college, they are given a counselor who has small amount of students. The relationship between student and counselor at these is much different from the relationship in public schools. The intimacy that these students have with their counselors gives them an advantage. The advantage includes more focused time talking to colleges about each student. In the end, these students are given a greater chance of attending the elite universities that lead to elite careers (Khan 2006). The evidence that Khan offers shows the power of social networks and reinforces the notion that meritocracy is a myth.

Jessica Holden Sherwood shows how wealth grants access to exclusive country clubs where social networks offer connections with high-powered businessmen (2010). Wealthy elites, who are typically white males, use their selective process to limit membership from women and minorities. The low number of women and minorities given access to these elite clubs works as tokenism, which reproduces the existing racial and gender hierarchies (Sherwood 2010). The disproportionate membership of wealthy white males provides them with advantages not available to women and minorities. Since members of these exclusive country clubs often make up political, social and business leaders they have the unique ability to influence policy that could change the structures that create inequality. Unfortunately, the members of these social networks have reinforced the ideology of individualism manifested as meritocracy or color-blindness. In the end, these ideologies create a barrier to the wealthy's ability to fully understand the complex societal issues that create inequality (Johnson 2006).

Wealth also provides individuals with the safety net needed to take risks. Dalton Conley opens his book, *Being Black and Living in the Red* with two stories of working class families. The first has some family wealth to fall back on while the second does not have financial support from extended relatives (1999). The scenario laid out by Conley exemplifies the influences that intergenerational transfer has on opportunities.

Intergenerational transfers can be understood as the passing of wealth through assets among family members. Thomas Shapiro shows how for the wealthy, and most often white, this comes in the form of down payments for homes, college tuition and other assets that assist the wealthy in succeeding (2004). Heather Beth Johnson takes this one step further, showing that intergenerational transfer gives these asset holding families the ability to send their children to “good schools” that will aid in the reproduction of their advantaged position. In another study of how wealth perpetuates the racial gap in America, Thomas Shapiro shows how wealth works as a safety net for individuals to take risks (2004). The existence of these safety nets through intergenerational transfers shows how meritocracy is likely a myth. In other words, privilege is passed down through various methods, however many of the methods allow for individuals to see their success as their own.

To sum, those privileged by wealth are able to provide the best education for their children, are protected by a safety net from financial risk, and have access to social networks that provide the best opportunities possible. However, those privileged by these things continuously call on the ideology of meritocracy to justify their position in the social ladder. By doing this they are able to reinforce the notion of America as a meritocracy with the perception that those who work hard get ahead.

Meritocracy and color-blind ideology minimize the influence that social factors have on an individual's ability to succeed. Using these two ideologies in addition to "race talk", individuals' privileged by race and class justifies their place in the social hierarchy. I now return to my research question: how has the election of President Barack Obama influenced the way that individuals perceive their whiteness and class privilege? Before answer this question, I will provide a description of the methodology used.

Methodology

To answer the question of how the election has influenced perceptions of privilege, I focused on the individual. By centering my attention on the micro aspect of individuals, I gained access to complex aspects of the individual's perceptions that a macro level analysis would not have captured. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has shown how individuals are able to hide racist beliefs when asked questions about their racial views in surveys (2004). In addition to this procedural reason, Heather Johnson argues that individual perceptions are complex and require probing questions and clarification (2006). In the case of studying privilege, the complexity of individual perceptions is an issue because privilege is typically unrecognized or deemphasized using ideology.

The inability to grasp one's advantage has been established in studies of racial and class privilege. Therefore, to reveal these complex perceptions of privilege, I felt as though it was important to provide a setting in which I could harbor trust and rapport with the students. Consequently, I interviewed twenty-two private university students, aged 18 to 24. This qualitative method of capturing data gives me access to details and explanations, in addition to a relationship with the participants. This relationship would not be obtained

using more quantitative methods. Unfortunately, the small number of participants I interviewed limits the generalizability of the findings. This said, the micro level approach allows my study to recognize an individual level phenomenon rather than making macro level presumptions about society.

While a study on the entire American population would be interesting, I examined only one group of college students. There are two distinct reasons why college students are valuable for a study on privilege and the election of our first African American President. The first is one that Karen McKinney raises in her book, *Being White*. She argues that when studying race and racial identity, particularly in whites, today's college students offer a unique perspective because they have been raised after most of the battles of segregation have been fought (2005). In schools today, acceptance and multiculturalism is taught to students as important characteristic to embrace. Similarly, Tim Wise argues that the generation growing up today has never known a world where overt racial dominance is acceptable. Therefore they do not identify with the "old fashion racism" of the past (Wise 2010). Some may argue that being raised today has instilled in students a greater acceptance of multiculturalism. Student's belief that they are more accepting has enabled them to believe that differences, in any way, should have less influence on an individual's aspirations and opportunities. Therefore, students today are more likely to embrace a color-blind ideology that ignores racial differences and the real influence that it has on an individual's life. I believe that for this reason college students are especially useful for a study of white privilege.

The second reason that college students are an appropriate population for this study is their interaction with the 2008 election. Some of the participants voted in their first

election in 2008. Others, who were not old enough to vote, actively followed the historical race in their high schools. For these reasons, college students have an interesting perspective of the election and would have understood it as influential to their lives. Before I move on, it should be noted that this study is not measuring the change in perceptions since the election. Instead, this study works from the assumption that college students have been influenced by the election through their first time involvement in politics. There is also a substantial amount of evidence to suggest that the youth voter turnout in the 2008 election gave a substantial advantage to President Barack Obama. The Pew Research Center published a report following the 2008 election showing the significance of the youth vote. They have found that in recent history the youth has leaned toward the democrats and in 2008 sixty-six percent of the Youth voted for Obama (Keeter 2008). Due to their involvement and influence on the election, college students provide an exceptional perspective on President Obama.

Sample

Due to lack of any student registry for use of a sampling frame, I was unable to obtain a random sample of students. To overcome this obstacle, participants for this study were recruited using a convenience sample of university students. To get this sample, a pre-screening survey was circulated to determine eligibility and to capture data on each potential participant. The pre-screening tool asked students several socio-economic status (SES) questions as well as their age and availability to participate. An online advertisement asked individuals interested in participating to take an online survey. Using this survey, interviews were scheduled.

In addition to advertisements, individuals were solicited in several sociology courses, introduction to sociology, sociology of education and sociology of children. The introduction to sociology course had 120 people. Sociology of education and sociology of children each had roughly 20 to 30 students. In each of these classes the students were asked by their professors to fill out the pre-screening and potentially be interviewed. To avoid coercion the students were asked at the end of the questionnaire to provide whether or not they wanted to be contacted for an interview. More than half the individuals who filled out the survey declined being interviewed. These surveys were dismissed.

Overall, a total of 52 individuals filled out the survey and indicated that they were interested in participating. Of the 52 potential interviewees, three were not contacted because they did not meet the criteria for participation. Of these three, one student was under eighteen which was a requirement by the University IRB. The other two participants removed had self-identified as lower class. Their input would have been valuable, but due to limited resources I opted not to contact them. Of the 52 who agreed to participate, twenty-two students responded to follow-up and were interviewed.

Using a convenience sample gave me access to a sizeable number of participants for this study. Unfortunately, this method of sampling created a great deal of sampling bias. These students, in particular the ones received from sociology courses, were typically being introduced to this mode of thought in class. The knowledgeable student creates a minor dilemma for this study. While it offers a unique perspective, it is likely that these students were unrepresentatively informed about the topics of race and class privilege. While I am acknowledging the potential limitation, I did not find any difference in the way these students and non-sociology students spoke about the topics. It should be noted

that while these students were well informed about the factors being discussed, they still reverted to ideologies that explain their position on the social ladder.

The Setting

The sample of participants in this study came from one mid-sized university. This university is an ideal place for the study of privilege. It is a private institution, located in the Northeastern United States. It has roughly 5,000 undergraduates and 2,000 graduate students. By all measures the university is an affluent setting with the total cost being greater than fifty thousand dollars per year. In addition to the class positioning of the school and its population, it also reports a high percentage of white students. The university website reports that it is 71% white. The homogeneity of the school is uncovered by a high attrition rate of African American Students. The Education Trust recently published a study of attrition at universities, which ranked this university high for African American student attrition. No reason for this high rate is given, but the affluent culture of the campus may offer some explanation. The university also has high academic standards. To add to the prestige of the school it accepts roughly 30% of total applicants, and it draws from the 25th to 75th percentile of SAT scores.

The Participants

In the end, I interviewed twenty-two college male and female students. The participants were between the age of eighteen and twenty-four and each graduating year was well represented. The majority of the participants were white. However, I did interview two African Americans and one Asian student. While the students were a racial minority they did come from affluent families, making them eligible by encompassing at least one dimension of privilege. Of the nineteen white students, two identified ethnically as

Jewish. For these two students, their ethnicity was a significant part of their identity. One of the two students told me that when asked about her race she always identifies as Jewish and not white. Finally, one student identified as mixed race, telling me that her father was Caribbean. She did however admit that she typically thinks of herself as white. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the race and gender of the participants. Overall, the sample I interviewed was predominantly white. I felt the few exceptions to this added an important layer of variance that could offer valuable information for my findings.

Like the racial diversity, the variation in class of the participants was very small. When asked about their class status, nineteen of these students identified as middle class. There was however a distinction between middle class categories including lower-middle, middle and upper-middle class. The majority of the students identified as the latter. This said, three students identified as upper class. I followed up by asking what being upper class meant to them. In response each of these individuals alluded to the fact that they did not ever have to want for anything. In other words, these students did not feel as though they were limited, financially, in any way. While this may be similar to how upper-middle class students spoke, I believe it is an important distinction to make when talking about the influence of class.

The student self-identification of class positioning matches the responses from the prescreening survey. Most students indicated that their parents owned their own home, seventy-seven percent. Sixty-six percent of the students also indicated that their family income was greater than 90 thousand dollars when they were 16 years old. Table 1 shows the educational levels of the participant's mothers and fathers. The homogeneity of these students is representative of the class background of the student body at the university.

For more detail on the interviewee demographics information see table 1 in the appendix. In order to keep anonymity all participants are referred to using pseudonyms throughout the analysis.

White Habitus

The racial landscape in which these students grew up was patterned as well. Following some demographic questions the first bit of information I asked about in the interview was about the student's community. With very few exceptions, students were quick to tell me how "white" their towns or high schools were. The students could typically recall the exact number of African American students. Sometimes they would provide a rough breakdown of the community, which was predominantly white. Even among the few minority students I interviewed the racial habitus was colorless. While this pattern is not a major finding, it is worth noting here in the methodology section. Most of these students were raised in an atmosphere that was predominantly white. The lack of diversity likely gave these students an unclear understanding of how race and class influence an individual life.

The white students' habitus can help to explain the lack of racial identity that these students had as well. While I did not directly measure the racial identity of them, the responses I received implied that many of them rarely thought about their race. When asked how often they think about their race many of the participants replied "never" or "only when I am asked." To further exemplify this, the students would also offer a time when they did think about their race. Typically they would think about their race in examples of themselves as a racial minority. One student said, "I mostly think about

being white when I am in a non-white situation.” This pattern is likely a partial explanation of their use of ideology that explains their position in the world.

The Interviews

Like the demographic and background of the participants, the interviewees were very homogeneous in their attitudes toward the topic being studied. The interviews were semi-structured. The protocol was made up of twenty-six prepared questions in addition to allowing follow-up and probing. The interview was designed to allow the participant to describe their childhood environment, their beliefs of how race and class influence their life, and how they feel about the less fortunate. After these general questions, the interview turned to discussing the election of President Obama as well as their thoughts and feelings about it. This included how they perceived it influencing their life, the university and America. Some of the participants even went as far as discussing the influence the election might have globally. Due to the nature of the research questions, there was much focus on how their perceptions have changed in light of the election. The interviews ended with an opportunity for the participants to discuss anything they wanted to share about President Barack Obama. For a further understanding of the interview guide see appendix 2.

The interviews took place during the end of the 2010 fall semester and the beginning of the 2011 spring semester. Each interview was recorded and transcribed to allow for a thorough analysis. The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one hour. The basic feel of the interviews was that the students were overall interested and excited to talk about the election of President Obama. Their enthusiasm came as some surprise to me because of an assumption I made about students' apathy. Overall, the students

interviewed overcame this stereotype. Some students however, were hesitant to discuss the election because of a self-perceived lack of knowledge in politics. Interestingly, the students who expressed this sentiment typically were well informed about politics and the Obama administration. On the contrary, the students who did not share this reservation had many more misconceptions about President Obama and his policies. Most often these misconceptions came in the form of the President creating more jobs and aid for African Americans and other minorities. One student with this belief said, “Evan the fact that he is putting more minorities into political office.” This statement is representative of the way several students spoke of President Obama’s policies.

The majority of the interviewees were enthusiastic about the election of President Obama. The general tone of the interviews was positive with many people complimenting the President and expressing a belief that it will have a positive effect on society. Of the twenty-two interviewed, two did express feelings of discontent. One of these simply noted that he “was rooting for the other guy.” These participants did not express any objections to the election of Barack Obama that the more enthusiastic participants had.

To sum, interviewing was an ideal method for this study because it allowed me to probe individual response and gain access to often guarded perceptions of privilege. Students make up an excellent population because of their age and their interaction with the election. The interviews with students went great. They were enthusiastic about the President’s election and eager to discuss the topic with me. I now turn to the major findings of the study and the general pattern that helped me understand the influence of the election.

Data/Findings

The main focuses of the interviews were race and class. Therefore, I think it is appropriate to concentrate my analysis on the ways in which the students talked about these two distinct but intertwined social factors. By closely examining the students' rhetoric around class and race, I hope to show how the election of President Barack Obama has influenced these students' perceptions of privilege. In this section I will present patterned responses of the participants. Following this section, I will discuss how the responses and these patterns demonstrates the influence that the election of America's first African American president has had on white privileged male and female college students.

Before closely examining the way students talked about race and class, it is important to show that many of these students believed it was difficult to distinguish between the two forms of privilege. One student said, "It is hard because class and race are two different things but like very much of the time they come together. So they can be seen as one." While this may be a result of sampling a large number of sociology students, it is an interesting pattern. The complexity of race and class may offer some explanation as to some of the similar language used to explain the different forms of privilege. I believe that my research will show that students' reliance on ideology is a product of their privilege and not the fact that the issues are so interconnected. I should note that the topics of race and class were not dealt with individually in the interviews but rather as two topics that have great influence one another.

Students Talking about Race

It should not be surprising that the participants mainly focused on the issue of race. Their attention to the racial dimension of the election is not surprising, being that President Obama's race is what makes this study important. Also expected was the students' reliance on a well-studied ideology, *color-blindness*. This contemporary form of racism insists that race has no influence on an individual's life course, and that if we are truly an equal society we should focus on being *color-blind*. White students who believe that America is an equal opportunity society where race should not and does not influence an individual's life naturally embraced color-blind ideology. Embracing this ideology ignores the very real effect that race has on an individual, but I will come back to this issue later. First, I want to focus on how these students used color-blind language to explain their decision to support President Obama.

Before exploring the students' use of color-blind ideology, I want to note that many of the individuals I interviewed came in with a surprising enthusiasm for President Obama. The students started their testimony with statements like, "I just think it was really exciting. I think most people never expected to see a black president. I mean I don't know I love Obama, I just thought it was really exciting." This comment is representative of how many college students, and many Americans in general, felt about the election of President Obama. When these students were probed about their decision to support or vote for Obama, they typically turned to a color-blind ideology – or the ideology that race has no influence over individual's ability to succeed. This tenant of the

participants enabled the students to inspect the election of President Obama, and criticize the fact that race played a role in his election.

The frustration with the part of the electorate, who focused on President Obama's race, was presented by most of the interviewees within the first few questions about the election. Hannah, a freshman girl from a self-described middle-income family in the northeast, did not like the role race played in people's decision to vote for President Obama. She was not able to vote, but followed the then Senator Obama's campaign. I asked her the question, "What were you thinking/feeling during the election?" The enthusiastic freshman first stated her excitement that Obama won. She followed up by saying,

One thing I didn't like about it (the election) was the people seemed to be voting for him solely because he was an African American. Like the shirts that said "Black President." That didn't really seem right to me. That was defeating the purpose, instead of like only voting for someone because they were white; it is kind of like the opposite.

While her frustration is shared with many Americans, the criticism disqualifies the fact that his race has had a major influence on his life. This is not to mention that his race, and his experiences from it, is part of what potentially makes him a great president. This disappointment with those who focused on his race is qualified by saying that it is "defeating the purpose." But voting for a white version of President Obama is not the same, and by suggesting that it is ignores the influence in which race has on an individual's life, especially for people with minority status.

Hannah's response was typical of many of the students. The white upper-middle class college students did not relate to why someone would vote for him solely because

of his race. Instead, students would rationalize their like or dislike for President Obama as a list of rational choices or issues. The students would then argue that President Obama's race was an afterthought or was an unimportant factor. I wonder, is the President's race a political issue? Many of the students I interviewed suggested that it was, and that it fell below all of the other issues in its rightful place. Aaron, an African American senior from wealthy family in the south, described the process he went through to make his decision. He said,

So I guess the first thing I did was like an interview process. I looked at the qualifications of these three. Then I looked at the actual politics in which they were following... But I really, honestly I consider myself to be a Republican but leaning a little left. I was actually planning on voting for McCain until because I really strictly looking politics but then he made the move. And then the thing is Obama's politics are probably even stronger. I felt like there was deterioration in McCain's follow up and responses to things. And I felt like Obama was just a little bit stronger.

Like Hannah, Aaron is implying that race should not have played as large of a role as it did. For Aaron, race had very little to do with his decision to vote for Obama. He goes on to explain that voting for someone because of one factor is "mental." About supporters of Hillary who were not sold on Obama initially Aaron said,

I felt really, I remember when Hillary lost the primaries there was a Latino women's movement that said oh since Hillary didn't get the Node we are going to go vote for McCain. I am like that is mental, when you make that the majority of your decision. I mean I respect that you vote but I don't respect how you do it.

Hannah and Aaron are both expressing disapproval for individuals who voted for Obama, or McCain, based on the issue of race. To these two students, voting should be about the issues not a person's physical characteristics.

Similarly, Ashley suggested that race should not have played a significant role, but she was subtler and did not express any disappointment in others. About her decision to vote for President Obama she says,

I mean I voted for Obama because I thought he was the best choice regardless. I mean I can't take race out of my decision. Our politics are pretty much in line, I agree with what he wanted to come in. I thought he was the lesser of the evils in that election. I would have voted for him if he was a white protestant male. But I think that there was a little satisfaction in the race thing.

Ashley's quote is representative of how many of the students rationalized their decision to vote for President Obama. She offers a clear explanation as to why she chose the President. She furthered her use of color-blindness by expressing that even if he was white, she would have voted for him. This explanation was pretty typical, and like the previously used examples, Ashley is really trying to express the ideology that race was not a significant factor in her decision.

While many students expressed these overt examples of discounting race, some of the participants were less clear about their choice to vote for President Obama. In an attempt to disguise their intentions, they beat around the bush and did not provide an explanation other than his race. Erin, a white female biology major, was unable to vote because she was not 18. Like her friends, she followed the election. To defend her decision to support President Obama she said,

I choose Obama initially because of what he stood for and the change he was promising... if McCain had been black, if it had been switch. It probably would have confused me a little bit more, but I think I still would have voted for the candidate who represented what I wanted...I think it added a little bit more to the progressiveness of the whole movement that he was black, or is.

It seems as though race was an important factor to Erin, but when she attempts to rationalize her vote, she cannot express a more color-blind answer. Her inability leads her to expressing a vague explanation, “progressiveness.” Becca expressed a similar rationale for voting for President Obama. When I asked her what she was thinking or feeling during the election she told me,

I remember thinking well I don't know that I want Barack Obama Because I don't really agree with a lot of his things. I heard somebody say well foreign nations were thinking that if they don't elect Barack Obama what a chance America has passed up by not electing a black president. And I was like, well that is kind of cool. Maybe by not, if we don't elect him other countries will think they are not all that encompassing. And it was kind of a hard trade between, do I agree with his policies or do I want a new era of having a black president.

To Becca, President Obama's race was an afterthought. However, from her statement it is clear that once she was presented with the *coolness* of voting for him, she did not offer another explanation. In both these examples the respondents told me that President Obama's race had a significant impact on why they voted for him, but they still offered other justifications (i.e. foreign affairs or just plain progressiveness). The fact that these students could not tell me that his race was a primary reason they voted implies that they did not feel it should have mattered.

In a final attempt to de-legitimatize race as an important characteristic, students would remove President Obama's race from his character entirely. The belief that the President was not black enough was expressed by several of the interviewees. By challenging President Obama's blackness these participants are yet again expressing a degree of discontent with the fact that his race was on the forefront of the election. This challenge was expressed by Edward, a senior white male who is majoring in computer engineering. Edward expressed these thoughts by reminding me that President Obama was only half black. He said, "We have had what before Obama, we have had what 43 or 42 presidents who are 'old white guys' and now it's one who is only half white." Edward makes an attempt at removing the President's racial difference by framing the president as "half white." By framing Obama this way it suggests that the president is more white than black. This challenges the significance of the election.

While Edward challenged the president's blackness by questioning its totality, Heather challenges the president's racial authenticity. Heather suggests that, while significant, the election of Obama is really not that much of a triumph. She said, "I was disappointed that he wasn't more maybe if he had been an African American president out of the suburbs of Philadelphia it might have been different." Here Heather believes that President Obama's blackness was not authentic because he was not from the right place, Philadelphia. This challenge to the President's blackness suggests that although he is African American, President Obama does not fit the criteria to make his accomplishments significant.

Both of these interviewees are exemplifying the thought that although the election of President Obama was an accomplishment, if he was *blacker* the election would be

more important. Throughout the interviews individuals attempted to remove or challenge Obama's racial difference by expressing to me that his mother was white, he came from a wealthy family or that he went to Harvard. By doing so they are attempting to remove his race from his character and making the decision to vote for him less racially driven. These students see voting for President Obama as an issue of color-blindness. This is exemplified by them expressing, that they see the President as white, and not as a minority.

How does the issue of color-blind ideology explain how perceptions of white privilege have changed since the election of Obama? To understand why students would embrace a color-blind ideology, we need to first understand how these students viewed their own whiteness. Almost all of the white students acknowledged what Ruth Frankenburg pointed out in her groundbreaking study on female white identity. She found that white women did not think about their race unless they are in a position in which they, as whites, are the minority (Frankenburg 1997). The students I interviewed would tell me that they rarely thought of their whiteness. In response to the question, "How often do you think about your race?" the students typically would respond with "never" or "only when I am asked a question like this." Since these students do not typically think about their own race, it only seems logical that they would discredit others racialized experience.

Interestingly enough, while these students told me they do not think about their race often, they were quick to downplay the significance of the privilege they gain from being white. In many of the conversations participants would subtly tone down the significance of their white privilege. Erin, a white female biology student, made this

comment to show how she felt race influenced people's opportunities. She said, "I wouldn't say that being a different race would decrease your opportunities. But that's how a lot of other people see it. So I guess it does increase your opportunities because most people come from a place that is mostly white." While she is acknowledging that race might have some influence on opportunities, this influence is more of a perception than reality. What is most interesting about Erin's quote is not what she said, but what she did not say. In the quote she acknowledges that people might perceive whites having unearned privileges, but does not say who would think this. She infers it by saying, "But that's how a lot of other people see it." It is implied that the "other people" or minorities just perceive whites receiving unearned advantage. The feelings expressed by these participants are representative of how of the students downplayed their racial privilege.

Another example of how white privilege was downplayed comes from Jacob, a male sophomore sociology major. Jacob comes from a middle-income family and told me that he grew up in a community situated between a poor minority community and a wealthy white community. As a sociology student he expressed that his racial awareness might be more advanced than many students outside the discipline. However, in response to how Jacob thought being white influenced his opportunities and aspirations he was not an outlier. He said,

I guess they have increased my opportunities. I guess because white is a privileged class or something. And also because there is a stereotype against minorities as just being like, not having opportunities or being poor or something in some way. But other than that, I don't know I just sort of imagine that I had been someone that is the same person as me but just except a different skin color. I guess maybe a little better but I am not sure I guess.

Like Erin, Jacob downplays the advantaged gained from being white as being really not that insignificant. He does so by acknowledging that being white has increased his opportunities, but quickly downplays this by suggesting he would be equally as successful if he were a minority.

While few of the other participants offered rhetoric suggesting their life would not be different if they were a minority, many of them held this minimized view of racial significance. Evidence showing that students downplay the significance of their racial privilege is indicative that there is little change in the way that they perceive the advantage in which they gain.

While many students just expressed a discontent with race being a primary issue in the election, some even downplayed the significance of their own white privilege. Other students expressed an attitude that suggested Obama was a threat to white privilege. Nyla Branscombe argues that when confronted with the presence of white privilege, many whites expressed increased modern forms of racism (2007). The individuals interviewed for my study were not directly confronted with their racial privilege but the conversation about President Obama's race did provoke some racialized feelings. Jerry, a sophomore white upper class male who went to a boarding school in the northeast talked about the election of President Obama. Like the other interviewees, he was mainly bothered by the fact that race played such an important role. But what he seemed to be mostly bothered by was the significance of the election at all. His discontent was most evident when I asked him to elaborate on how he thought individuals should

have acted, in light of him saying the election received a lot of “unnecessary hype.” In response to my probing Jerry said,

We should all be equal no matter what race. We should all be given the same opportunities... I don't think it should be this championship for one race, I mean he is going to be our president not just one races president.

Jerry's “champion for one race” reference really suggests feelings of racial separation and a perceived threat to his racial privilege. While I am sure he would act negatively to being called a racist, this comment suggests a white supremacy rhetoric that whites' privilege needs to be protected. It should be noted that Jerry's rhetoric was somewhat extreme compared to the other participants. Other reactions had more subtle suggestions that white privilege was being threatened. The more typical response was comments like, “for minorities I could see it (the election) having more influence,” and “I don't think that it will disadvantage us at all. I think that it will just up the advantage of the black race as well.”

While Jerry's comment is more defensive, other comments were meant to reassure that Whites' still were in control. Julia, a junior white psychology major from an upper-class family, showed a sense of ease in voting for President Obama. For most of the interview, Julia expressed her political views as more liberal and argued that she supports the President. In response to what she was thinking or feeling during the election she said,

It was his policies and the way he presented himself. It was clear that he wasn't just taking over, and that he wanted to do something different. I think things had come to a standstill so that was a good approach to take.

She felt comfortable voting for President Obama because he “wasn’t taking over,” suggesting that whites would still be in control. Again this quote is somewhat unique in its frankness but is representative in the way the many of the individuals felt about voting for President Obama. Nyla Branscombe’s argument that when confronted with white privilege, white express increased amounts of modern racism, or the covert demonstration of racist thought and beliefs, can help us understand what is going on here. We can assume that this reaction is more representative of whites reacting to the threat of their privilege, than an overall need to defend Whites’ racial position.

The participants in the study allude to the color-blind society they have been raised to expect. Many of the participants suggest that Barack Obama’s race could and should be ignored. The students expressed this ideology in a variety of ways; discrediting Obama’s race, downplaying their own race, and defending white privilege. By minimizing the significance of race, the students ignore the fact that the President’s race has had a significant impact on his life. The reliance on color-blind ideology leads me to believe that perceptions of privilege these students have were not changed by the election of President Obama. I will come back to how perceptions on racial privilege have changed, but for now I turn to how the students talked about social class.

Students Talking about Social Class

While race, and the role it played in the election of President Obama, was the main focus of the interviews, I also asked the students a lot about the influence that social class has had on their life and how they perceive this influence. Since social class and race are interconnected, the students did not hesitate to share their stories and experiences. Like race, I asked the students many questions that directly addressed the issue of how social

class has influenced the students' lives. In addition to general influence, I asked questions about how the election of President Obama has changed the way they perceive their class positioning. Similarly to race there were mixed views on its influence of their lives. In this section I will discuss how the students talked about class, and how they perceived the election of President Obama as reaffirming their belief in Meritocracy.

Before I go into the way in which students utilized the election of Barack Obama as verification of meritocracy, I think it is appropriate to show how the students generally talked about social class. To many of the students, there was no clear connection between the election of Barack Obama and class stratification. Heather, a female freshman business major, was very enthusiastic about the election. She told me that the diverse community where she grew up was overwhelmingly supportive of President Obama, and that this made his election even more exciting. However, when it came to seeing the election in terms of class she expressed these feelings about how class has changed since the election. I asked,

Researcher: How has it (the election of Barack Obama) changed the way you think about your class positioning?

Heather: No

Researcher: For any reason?

Heather: No, I just don't think that it (the election) doesn't change my class. But it didn't affect it.

This short exchange with Heather, exemplifies a portion of the interviewee's beliefs of how social class was influenced by the election. I think in some way the participants who failed to make this connection, simply did not understand the link between these two forms of stratification. The lack of understanding the association between race and class is likely due to growing up in a privileged category.

The contrasting view from students was that the election of President Obama helped them to understand the ways in which class functions in America. This was typically depicted in the form of policy change or raising taxes. Julia, a junior upper-class psychology major, exemplifies this view. She said,

I had never even been aware about classes. Like I knew the general like outline of it (Social Class). But until Obama was deciding on new policies on taxing and making it more equal I had never stopped to think about it. Or why it (Social Class) was necessary for the country and what that could change.

Julia's statement suggests that the election of President Obama changed her perception of privilege. The change however is only implied. A more appropriate analysis would be that her complete lack of awareness about social class, and its implications on society, would limit her ability to have any meaningful realization of its effects on her own place in the social hierarchy. In fact implying that class is necessary for the country implies that she really does not care to understand how it influences people differently.

These two distinct views on how the election influenced their perceptions of social class, offer a similar theme of a naivety about the influence of class. In both cases the students exemplify a position that does not see social class as a important factor that is interacting with many other social factors. Many students did express understanding how social class influenced their lives, that they were unable to truly understand how the election of Obama was socially significant because of class, just like race.

Similar to a color-blind ideology a major pattern that emerged was a reaffirmed belief in Meritocracy. Many of the interviewees expressed that the election of President Obama reaffirmed what they already know hard work pays off. A society dedicated to meritocracy, is one where the individuals in power are those who have worked the

hardest. When this ideology is applied, individualism becomes the dominant rhetoric and the influence of social factors loses their ability to explain inequality. Heather Beth Johnson showed how parents relied on the ideology of meritocracy to explain the decision, which they made to give their children an upper hand (2006). Like the participants in her study, the students I interviewed believed firmly that things were fair and that hard work and dedication is what you needed to make something of yourself. What the students were able to add to the rhetoric of the American Dream was proof that ideology is realistic.

The proof that they were able to present, was President Barack Obama. In many of the interviews with the white students, the fact that President Obama worked his way up is evidence that anyone can do it. Jerry detailed the hard work of the President, paralleled to the work of his father. He said,

I kind of always thought about it. I always knew that my father was a really hard worker and I always valued that. Cause I mean, he worked his butt off so me, my brother and my sister could go to school where we wanted. He never thinks about himself. I think about that a lot. I think Barack Obama did the same thing. I mean he went to Harvard, I don't know where he went to undergrad. I mean to get there he probably had scholarships, and probably worked really hard to get there.

The emphasis on hard work and selflessness were two characteristics of a person who is likely to succeed. Many of the students detailed to me the accomplishments of Barack Obama as evidence that he earned his position as President. There is some irony here. The position of president assumes hard work and dedication, yet the students felt that President Obama needed more justification. Perhaps this is defense is a juxtaposition of President Bush, which many students used as an example of someone who had not earned

the position. While this rationale may be the case, I think defending President Obama's success is more indicative of the importance of color-blindness to students. I have already discussed that, but it does translate to the complimentary ideology of meritocracy. It is interesting that to these students President Obama represented hard work. He earned his degree from Harvard, he earned his position as senator, and he earned the title of president. The emphasis on earning ones position is representative of the American ideology that those who work hard get ahead and those who do not, fail.

Many students offered testimony similar to Jerry's, arguing that President Obama's election reaffirmed the ideology of meritocracy or the American Dream. Aaron, the African American student I talked about earlier, felt that President Obama represented precisely this. He saw the President's story as symbolic of what he was hoping to do, work hard and succeed. He said,

Opportunities, you know I feel like, I see my opportunities as being endless... That is what he did. He grew up, he went to school, he went to Harvard law and all that other stuff, and then he went to the senate. He took his steps and time and he worked hard for it and now he is in a position of power as president... My mom did it, my dad did it, and the president did it. That leaves more opportunities for me to do it.

Like Jerry, and many of the students interviewed, Aaron sees hard work as the key to success. To the students interviewed why would it not be. For all of the successful figures in their life hard work has been the propeller to their success. I saw this rhetoric in how the students make parallels between President Obama and their parents. Like Aaron said, "My mom did it, my dad did it, the president did it." Aaron is expressing a common theme among the interviews, which suggests that an individual's success is related to their own hard work. I think the connection between the students' parents and the

president is important. It shows a proximity effect. They all know, and have been taught, is that hard work is all that matters. For the students, this paradigm is what they experienced. Why would anything else matter, they have evidence that hard work is all that counts.

But where do the students learn this explanation for success, or the language of meritocracy? We can answer this question by examining some of the students' responses. To these students, President Obama represents meritocracy, he exemplifies the story in which American children have been taught since a young age. Erin, a white upper-middle class freshman expressed how she always believed in meritocracy because it was what her parents taught her. She said, "My parents sort of, from a very young age, from birth, emphasized the, I guess, idea meritocracy in America. And that people are just people and you should judge them just on that." This quote from Erin is somewhat unique in its bluntness about where she learned this ideology. However, the quote is representative of how many of the students spoke about class and its influence on their lives. I think it is an important factor that the ideology of meritocracy is taught to privileged youth as a means of validating their position in society. As I argue later in this paper, the students' strong belief in ideology may be a reason that, despite this monumental moment in American history, little change has happened in way of perceptions of the privileged.

While I think the use ideology is in some ways representative of the language of youth today, the interviews also offered another explanation as to why such ideology would be called upon. Similar to racial privilege, the acknowledgement of wealth privilege might have provoked a somewhat defensive response. This reaction came out in

criticisms to President Obama's policies and an attempt to label these criticisms, in my own words, *class warfare*.

In many cases throughout the interviews the participants would turn to the policies of the administration and question the role that the policies played in reproducing or transforming the social hierarchy. An example of this can be seen in the way that Hannah discussed President Obama's influence on how she understood her social positioning. This quote is representative of many students that had poor knowledge about the actual policies being put into place. She said,

A little bit maybe, just in that class as he's focusing on. And say the ones he is focusing his policies on. And that could potentially affect me. And if his changes affect my social class than I will have to reexamine what I want to do, where I want to do it, do I want to do it. Like if I am international relations major do I just want to leave because I could just leave.

In some ways Hannah's quote is simply representative of the contemporary language around political party objectives. This rhetoric polarizes the political elites into two groups, those for lower taxes that "help American families," and those arguing for higher taxes who are presented as "giving handouts to the poor" (Fiorina 2010). It should be noted that these interviews were happening during the 2010 debate over taxes. This said, I do think that the presence of political rhetoric like this is important. First, let me offer another example of how students used polarized language of taxes. In Julia's statement presented below, there is a sense that the wealthy or at least the middle class should be worried about whether President Obama will protect their interests. In response to whether the election changes the way she perceives her class positioning she states,

Yeah Definitely... I don't know a lot of policies that have been proposed and stuff makes you realize exactly where

everyone stands and what could change for them. Just being surrounded by my family and being a certain bracket and what changes that could mean. Especially from the recession. I had just never thought of it. And my dad worrying and his two kids at college and freaking out.

From this quote, you really see a sense of worry about how President Obama will affect her family's wellbeing. Julia presents her worry of the Presidents *take over* in overt language, but some of the participants expressed this concern in more subtle ways such as, "I don't see my opportunities changing." While the latter expression may not be seen as radical, there is still a sense that the advantages gained from wealth need to be closely protected. By the students expressing that the opportunities have changed, they see those opportunities as deserved. I imagine that if President Obama did equalize opportunities by taking away some of the advantages that the wealthy receive, these students would be very appalled.

With all this language of meritocracy and what eventually leads to perception that President Obama will arouse class warfare in America, how do these wealthy students see their privilege? It should be noted that like Jenny Stubler, I was surprised to find that many of the students recognized that their class status offered them unique opportunities in education, experience and social networks (2010). Almost all of the students I interviewed acknowledged these privileges in one way or another. To some degree this is interesting, but I think a popular idiom can sum up these students initial responses- You talk the talk, but can you walk the walk. By calling on this expression, I am stating that while some participants acknowledged the advantages they have received, they would often downplay them as the interview continued.

The ways that students underrated the significance that social class has had on their lives occurred in a similar manner as downplaying white privilege. In many cases, within one interview the students would acknowledge that class positively affected their life, but also minimized the influence. This contradiction most likely occurred during two periods of the interview, when I asked them how the election has change the way they think about their class positioning and later how it has influence the way they think about their achievements.

The first way that students downplayed the significance of class was by suggesting that class is not well understood. Alex, a junior female mechanical engineer, told me that she never had a good grasp on class positioning. Throughout Alex's interview she was well aware of racial privilege and very critical of it. She also expressed many views that were critical of conservative rhetoric. Because of her political awareness it was somewhat surprising when she said,

I never had a very good grasp on my class positioning because I always thought that middle class was kind of everyone. Except, and I know that there is probably a real definition of middle class, but everyone I have met identifies themselves as middle class...So I don't know what middle class is. I think there is general consensus that you have to have a home, you don't have to own it but you have to have somewhere to live.

Alex's poor grasp on what social class is leads her to underestimate the influence that class positioning could have on an individual's life. Her confusion as to what is *middle class* was a perplexity that many of the interviewees shared. Expressions like, "who isn't middle class" and "everyone identifies as middle class" regularly appeared especially when I asked students to tell me what social class they identify with. Like Alex, students

that expressed this rhetoric of middle-class fuzziness, likely downplayed the effects which class had on their lives.

In a less covert manner, students also would call on the language of meritocracy to explain their advantage. By calling on this ideology students were able to walk a fine line between understanding the influence of class positioning while justifying their position as a result of their own hard work. Becca, a middle class white international relations major, told precisely this. She believed that her achievements were based on her own hard work, and saying it was exactly the same for the President. She explains,

I don't know that it really affects the way I think my achievements. Because I always think like what I said about the hard work, what you put into it, you get out of it. I think like, getting into Lehigh, winning the awards I did, going to the places I went. I think that is more like my hard work and ethic. I think that if he can inspire more people if he can inspire a different ethnicity to say whatever we put in we get out. Even through his, he went to Harvard he is a great speaker, lead Chicago. That is a good thing for them. As far as my accomplishments I think I did what I did.

From this testimony you can see that Becca believes social factors had little or no influence on her achievements. Her statement is similar to the way many of the other participants explained their achievements. Often the students felt comfortable telling me that social factors were not very significant, because to them President Obama represents precisely this. To the participants hard work and ethic can explain who succeeds and who does not. Some of the participants did express a unique view about their accomplishments, but I will come back to this. For now lets look at how students used Barack Obama to justify their success while explaining that the opportunities are not equal.

While many called on this language of meritocracy, they did not call on the popular discourse that those less successful were lazy. In fact many of them challenged this discourse by explain that there are more factors to account for than just hard work. In order to justify their privileged position however, they turned again to the President as evidence. Emily exemplified this by telling me that the election of Obama “let me off the hook.” I asked her to elaborate what she meant by this. She told me,

Well you know since I come from white middle class. I was always taught that the world was open to me. And I know that a lot of people who don't have these opportunities aren't raised that way. or if they are raised that way based on circumstance it might not happen for people less fortunate. So there is always that, umm not guilt, yeah guilt that you just got lucky. Like why me, why not someone else who might have a higher IQ or potential to go further but were born in the slums and never got the opportunity to move out. Obama was raised by his mother, and never knew his father. A lot of kids who grew up that way just have this perception that they aren't going to amount to anything. But you can do it. So I guess it just shifts the causes of success.

While her response was actually to a question about race, I think that it is more appropriate to report it here. The imagery that she calls on really suggests the influence of social class. What is interesting to me about this quote is that it actually should suggest the opposite of what I am reporting. In the quote Emily is obviously expressing a degree of feeling “lucky.” But she is comfortable acknowledging this because she has been “let off the hook.” While this is an extreme example, many of the participants I spoke with had this view. To them, social positioning is less significant now because that we have elected someone who was not part of the elite.

To sum, the students I spoke with often acknowledged that social positioning offered them some degree of privilege. However, after they acknowledged this they

turned to a familiar ideology – meritocracy - that helped them justify their privileged position. For the students, President Obama’s journey epitomized and reaffirmed this ideology. One participant exemplified this by saying, “I always felt like the sky was the limit. If you worked hard you will get there. Maybe it reaffirmed that but I always thought that.” Calling on this ideology gave students the ability to feel comfortable about justifying their own privileged position, as well as their parents. Like protecting white privilege, they use the language of meritocracy to suggest that any policy or taxes that take their privilege away is bad. Finally, students downplay the privilege that they receive and suggest that President Obama “lets me off the hook.”

Needing work

All of the data shown above helps to answer the question of how the election has influenced the perceptions of privileged white college students. To a degree all of the findings were as I expected. It is too early to suggest any real influence from the election, but some interesting patterns emerged. For the most part, white middle and upper-middle class students rely on the rhetoric of meritocracy and color-blindness. Since they have been taught these ideologies all their life, it is not that surprising that they would use it to explain the election of our first African American President. These findings tell us a lot about how students perceive the privileges they receive. However, another theme did emerge that I was not anticipating, and I would like to briefly describe here. Because I did not directly address this pattern with any questioning, I can only speculate and offer a preliminary reporting of the pattern.

A number of students, not a majority, reported the election of President Obama as proof they needed to work harder or that they could have achieved more. In this section I

will present the data and offer a little interpretation while acknowledging that it is something that requires further investigation with specific questions relating to it. I am going to split the data into two categories, those who feel like they need to work harder and those who think they should have achieved more. It is important to make this distinction because it might be representative of two different feelings.

The notion that President Obama's election instills individuals the sense that they need to work harder to some degree is representative of defending white privilege. Charles Gallagher wrote about how whites have a misperception of racial size (2003). The misperception is fueled by Whites misinterpreting of their population size. Charles Gallagher shows how this has now translated into whites feeling a sense of minority status. These comments might be representative of the attitude that the election of President Obama is evidence that whites are now a racial minority. Susan, a white female sociology student who identified as upper class, suggests that she feels as though she needs to work harder. She says, "It makes me want to like try harder. Not like be a better person but like work harder." What she is not saying but I think she might mean is that if she wants to keep her place in the world, whites need to start working harder.

Other students expressed this view a little more subtly. Julia, told me, "like I said not necessarily that you would say that you didn't achieve as much but just that you have to take into consideration that not that your achievements have been easier but that someone else's may have been harder." This much more subdued statement, gets at a similar point. While she is saying others had to work harder, she is strategically leaving out her perception that she needs to work harder. These two examples really raise the question of whether the election of President Obama is perceived as a threat to white

privilege. In both cases students are using “Race Talk” to mask the fact that to some degree they feel as though President Obama’s success might not be a good thing for them.

The second way that this pattern presented itself was through the “could have worked harder” expression. While this dimension of the pattern is a little bit less racially charged, it is worth exploring with the same lens. Jacob, sophomore sociology major expressed this view by saying,

I guess I sort of, I have recently thought more, maybe just now, more about the fact that maybe my achievements are at least partially due to the fact that I am white because I just have more opportunities and more. I guess the social structure exists so that I guess I am more privileged. It sort of, that sort of leads me to think that I should have achieved more because I started out on better footing...By that I mean that if they happen to live in a poorer community, I guess that has to do more with class, that makes their achievements look greater and mine look smaller.

Jacob’s comment is very different from the two previous statements. There is a sense that he does not feel comfortable with this information, which could be understood as a threat to his privilege. It might however represent uneasiness with having this privilege. This point is made more clear by Anna, who had a similar comment to how the election has changed the way she perceives her achievements. She said,

I think that learning about white privilege in general um, after all these things happened.. And learning that I have white privilege, what white privilege was. It just made me realize that my achievements that I had perceived as unique or special weren’t. And I think that is par for the course for white people. Which, I struggled with at first but now I am ok with it (white privilege).

Like Jacob, Anna is expressing unease with being made aware of her racial privilege. But she suggests that this unease is really just a struggle that she has been able to overcome.

As I have already expressed, this pattern emerged unexpectedly from the data. While I find it extremely interesting, at this point I cannot make any large claims about it. There is a sense that these white middle and upper-middle class students are simply, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva would suggest, using “Race Talk” to mask some racist rhetoric. I now turn to my discussion of how the students use ideology to explain how their unearned advantage and how these perceptions have likely not changed with the election of Barack Obama.

Discussion

As I have shown, students utilize ideology to make sense of the election. I have argued three things: (1) white students use color-blind ideology to justify their decision to vote or support the president, (2) to many of the participants, the President’s election reaffirmed the student’s belief in the ideology of meritocracy, and (3) the election of President Barack Obama threatens student privilege, but the current ideologies settle their unease. These ideologies enabled students to justify their privileged positions. For both race and class stratification the students acknowledged the privilege they received but thought that President Obama “let me off the hook.” Rhetoric like this suggests that privileged students do not perceive their privilege any differently than prior to the election. These three findings all lead me to believe that the election of President Obama has had little influence on those individuals who reside in positions of privilege.

The lack of change in perceptions is most likely caused by these students deep investment in the ideologies stated above. Color-blind ideology and meritocracy both pull from a similar belief in America, *individualism*. This moral stance emphasizes the importance of human agency over structural forces. Individualism sees individual success and failures

as outcomes of personal agency. To challenge the strong reliance on individualism, C. Wright Mills wrote the extremely influential book, *Sociological Imagination*. In this book, Mills wrote about the importance of being able to distinguish between *personal troubles* and *societal issues*. Today many sociologists stress this point to their students, hoping that they enable them to see how structural factors influence the individual. The ideologies expressed in these interviews, exemplify the strong influence that individualism has had on American culture. Many of the students interviewed expressed to me that what the election of Barack Obama reaffirmed the belief they have been taught their entire life, hard work pays off.

The first finding of the study showed students reliance on color-blind ideology. For these students do not understand why President Obama's race was such an important factor in the election. This stance is partially due to their lack of racial identity. Amanda Lewis and many professors attempting to teach whites about racial identity have found the lack of group recognition leads whites to have misunderstood the role that race plays in their own life (2004). Whites' lack of understanding leads them to underestimate the role that race has on individual opportunities, aspirations and achievements. To complicate this matter, these students have been taught their entire life to respect diversity. What respecting diversity means to these students is to be color-blind. Since they do not identify with their own race, they cannot understand the significance that race has had on others.

In order to embrace color-blind ideology the students often go as far as suggesting that concentrating on President Obama's race, as one student put it, "defeats the purpose." The students do not even feel comfortable with the idea that the influence of race might

be different for people. I think it is apparent that these students are expressing a threat to their white privilege. This threat is put at ease by the fact that many of the students discredit the President's racial difference. All of these students used the language of color-blind ideology to suggest that President Obama's election should represent that race no longer matters in America, or at least not in a significant way.

The second major finding from this study was that, like the use of color-blind ideology, meritocracy enabled these students to minimize the influence that social class has on an individual life. Many of the students believed that social class had no relation to the election of the President because that was an issue of race. But for those who did make the connection, the election worked as confirmation that hard work is all that matters. By holding this position, the students were able to justify their own privileged position. The students did this by telling me about Obama's hard work. Many offered examples like his successes at Harvard and the hard work it required to get through law school and become a U.S. Senator.

In some of the cases the students suggested that anything that went against the ideologies of color-blindness and meritocracy was damaging to the social order of things. This is prevalent in the discussion of President Obama's race, which many of the students clearly thought was over emphasized. There is not a quote that better represents this than Hannah's expression of her disapproval for the shirt that says "black president." She was bothered by the existence of such a shirt because it represented what she thought was an inappropriate use of the President's race. Obama is black, and to suggest that we should just ignore it is ridiculous. The rhetoric created by these ideologies was also present when

students talked about taxes. Many of the students saw President Obama's legislation as an attack on the wealthy.

These two ideologies worked to mask the individuals from seeing the *societal issues* that influence our everyday life. More interestingly, they saw the election of Obama as an affirmation of these ideologies, which further marginalizes the effect of *issues*. The first two findings can be summed up by a quote from an interviewee,

I would say that the American Dream is overcoming whatever circumstances you're given, making the best of them. So like you said earlier "How do you think race would change your aspirations?" Obama showed that race doesn't necessarily have to change your aspirations. Which I think is like the preconceived notion that a lot of people have. Is that like, you go to a not established high school because you are in this demographic and you can't achieve these ideals? But he is kind of saying that you can have those things and still become president.

With this quote, the student is embracing both color-blind ideology and meritocracy. She sees President Obama as the epitome of both. Overall this quote sums up the feelings of all the participants. In short, the election Barack Obama proves that individual hard work is all that is required to be successful.

Finally the students used these ideologies to explain their own position in the racial and class hierarchies. I think this is most evident in the downplaying of the privilege received from being white and/or wealthy. In all of the interviews the students would share with their feelings of how social factors had an influence on their opportunities and aspirations. However, as the interview continued these influences were minimized and in some cases suggested that the participant's own hard work would have overcome the challenges presented by race and class. Belief that it was their own hard work that propelled them to success often accompanied this downplaying. The use of

ideology allowed these students to focus on individualism and minimize the influence of the social structure. In the end, the focus on individualism by these students enables them to call the election a great victory for ideology. Which implies that racial inequality and systemic wealth inequality is simply a matter of color-blindness and hard work.

Some might argue that the fact that these students are beginning to recognize the influence of these social factors is an improvement. However, I think that this is more representative of *race or class talk*. By acknowledging some of the influences that they receive from either their race or their class, these students are made comfortable talking about how others need to just work harder. In other words, by recognizing the privilege that they have received and justifying it using the election of President Obama, they minimize their advantage and suggest hard work was the key to their success.

While I am critical of these students' use of the ideology, it is apparent to me that the real issue is how these ideologies have situated themselves into American culture. I could provide anecdotal evidence to show how these ideologies are introduced and reinforced by parents and teachers. Fortunately, the students I interviewed shared evidence of this with me. One student told me that their parents had always stressed the importance of meritocracy. Other expressed that the stories of their parents and grandparents showed them the importance of hard work. In many cases, these stories were followed with fear that government intervention would threaten their own prosperity.

I am critical that the election of President Obama has, at this point, had no real influence on the perceptions of privilege. I am still optimistic about the future. What keeps me positive is the partial pattern that emerged. This pattern was represented in the way a few students perceived their achievements. While a piece of this pattern suggests

these students are acting toward reproducing their white privilege, another part of it represented an acknowledgement that things are not right. It seems somewhat obvious that the students who revealed these feelings did not feel overwhelmingly comfortable with the knowledge of their white privilege. This aside, the rest of the findings lead me to think that the election of President Obama has not had much influence on the privileged as of yet.

Conclusion

When I started this project I was interested in exploring how the election of Obama influenced perceptions belonging to the privileged. As I move forward, I am interested in understanding the ways in which ideology influences a person's perceptions of themselves, especially among white upper-class males. From the interviews, it became clear that the students rely on ideology to justify their position in the social order. It is because of the overwhelming utilization of ideology that I do not feel as though the election of President Obama has had any real influence on the privileged presently.

A few criticisms have been levied to me about this project that I want to address quickly. The first criticism is that the election is simply too fresh in our minds and that it has not had a chance to make any real change. I believe that the influence the election has had is already underway, and any real change that will come from the election of our first African American President will have roots in the current moment. Therefore, it is important that we begin trying to understand its influence on America, in this case the privileged.

Another criticism that some will have is that white college students are not an appropriate population for a study on race. In conversations with people about this study, it was

brought up that students in college today have been strongly influenced by color-blind ideology. This criticism suggests that today's youth have been raised in the era when color-blindness is emphasized. I think this is a valid criticism, but I also question its significance. Have these students been raised in a culture that promotes color-blindness? *Yes.* America is also a culture that promotes multiculturalism. This criticism leads me to look at this very contradiction in American culture today. How can Americans promote multiculturalism while insisting that the country be color-blind? This is a question for another study. In short, I do not think that the decision to interview youth, who have been raised to expect color-blindness, negatively affected this project. I believe that the students' quick reliance on color-blind ideology is more indicative of the culture of individualism and the lack of racial diversity in these privileged students lives. Finally, my findings are not generalizable to the general population. It is only representative of the twenty-two privileged individuals when I interviewed. It is also only representative of students who come from more affluent backgrounds. A similar study of minorities, or even whites in a less affluent setting might show that the influence of the election was much greater. These students, attending this well respected university are likely to become social, political, educational and business leaders. The reaffirmation of ideology that these students presented shows the power of ideology and the influence it has on policy making. If these future leaders in business, education and politics see President Obama as a token for individualism, then policy to challenge structural inequality becomes more difficult to implement.

In closing, the election of President Barack Obama was a monumental event for Americans. As we move forward in an effort to minimize social inequalities in this

country, we should use the accomplishments of President Obama to motivate those who are structurally disadvantaged. This said, we should also use the election of President Obama to challenge the ideologies that reproduce Americans' strong cultural ties to individualism. The election can and should work to highlight the fluid connection between the individual troubles and societal issues that C. Wright Mills has challenged sociologists to see. As we move forward with on this topic, we should continue to examine elites and those privileged by race, class and gender.

Appendix 1: Table 1 (Participants)

pseudonym	Gender	Race	GY	Rent/Home	Mother Education	Father Education	Family income when 16	Family income
Heather	Female	White	2014	own	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Above	150,000 or over
Erin	Female	White	2014	own	Associates Degree	Associates Degree	Above	50,000 to 89,999
Ann	Female	Asian	2013	Own	High School	High School	Average	90,000 to 149,999
Alex	Female	White	2012	Rent	Associates Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Above	Don't know
Tristan	Female	White	2012	own	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Above	Don't know
Kelly	Female	White	2011	Own	Ph.D. or MD	PHD or MD	Above	150,000 or over
Jason	Male	Black	2011	own	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Average	90,000 to 149,999
Jane	Female	White	2011	own	Master's Degree	Master's Degree	Above	90,000 to 149,999
Mathew	Male	White	2009	Own	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Above	150,000 or over
Julia	Female	White	2012	Own	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	far above average	150,000 or over
Jacob	Male	White	2013	rent	high school	high school	below average	20,000 - 49,999
Jake	Male	White	2011	rent	Master's Degree	PhD or MD	below average	50,000 to 89,999
Edward	Male	White	2012	Own	Associates Degree	High School	average	50,000 to 89,999
Kim	Female	White	2012	Own	PhD or MD	Bachelor's Degree	far above average	150,000 or over
Hannah	Female	White	2014	Own	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	above average	90,000 to 149,999
Ellen	Female	Mixed	2011	own	Master's Degree	Ph.D. or MD	Above	90,000 to 149,999
Ashley	Female	White	2012	own	Ph.D. or MD	Ph.D. or MD	Far Above	150,000 or over
Aaron	Male	Black	2011	Own	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Above	150,000 or over
Jerry	Male	White	2013	own	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Above	150,000 or over
Kristin	Female	White	2013	own	some college	some high school	Above Average	150,000 or over
Anna	Female	White	2012	Own	Some Graduate School	Master's Degree	average	150,000 or over
Becca	Female	White	2014	Own	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Above	150,000 or over

Appendix 2: Prescreening Questionnaire

You are invited to be in a research study examining perceptions of inequality in America. In order to establish your eligibility for the study we ask that you fill out this brief survey. The survey asks you questions about your socio-economic status. By filling out the survey you are consenting to be considered for participation in the study.

If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact Daniel Larsen at 484-560-5753 or dwl209@lehigh.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact to Ruth Tallman at (610) 758-3021 (email: inors@lehigh.edu) of Lehigh University's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

Pre Screening Questionnaire

1) Age _____ 2) What graduating class do you belong to?

3) Does your family own your home, pay rent, or what?

Own Rent Other – Specify _____

4) What is your mother's highest education achieved?

Some High School High School Some College Associates Degree
 Bachelors Degree Some Graduate School Masters Degree PhD or MD

5) What is your Father's highest education achieved?

Some High School High School Some College Associates Degree
 Bachelors Degree Some Graduate School Masters Degree PhD or MD

6) Thinking about the time when you were 16 years old, compared with American families in general then, would you say your family income was

far below average below average average above average far above average

7) Which is the closest to your family's annual income?

Under \$20,000 \$20,000 to \$29,999 \$30,000 to \$49,999 \$50,000 to \$89,999

\$90,000 to \$149,999 \$150,000 or over DON'T KNOW Not Applicable

8) If eligible, would you be willing to participate in a 30 to 60 minute interview

Yes No

9) If yes, what is your email address _____

Appendix 3: Interview Protocol

1. For the tape what is your name?
2. And what year are you?
3. What is your major at Lehigh
4. What race or ethnicity do you identify with?
5. Ok so now that we have that out of the way, what was it like where you grew up?
 - a. Tell me about your school or community or Neighborhood
6. From your pre-screening I have an idea of what your class positioning is, how would you describe it? What class do you identify with?
7. How did growing up _____ influence your aspirations and achievements?
8. Before you said you were [Participants identified race], how often do you think about this?
9. How has your race influenced your aspirations and achievements?
10. So you're at Lehigh, which is a great school. Some people would say that you are relatively successful. How do you explain those people have been less successful than you?

So this project is really about inequality in what people are calling a post-obama America so I am going to ask you some questions about this historical event. These are last few questions.

11. So the election of Barack Obama was a significant event to many, did you follow the 2008 election?
12. What were you thinking/feeling during the election?
13. What were you thinking/feeling during the inauguration?
14. What do you think having an African America president represents for this country?
15. What does it mean for a place like Lehigh?
16. Where you at Lehigh During the election? Did you see any changes on lehigh's campus?

17. How has having an African American President changed the way you think about your race?
18. How has it changed the way you think about your class positioning?
19. Can you identify any differences in the way people talk about race and class in America?
20. How do you perceive these differences?
21. How do you think the election of Obama has changed the way people perceive their opportunities in this country?
22. How has it affect your own opportunities?
23. So before you said that race had _____ affect on your opportunities, do you think that this perception has changed since the election?
24. So before you said that class had _____ affect on your opportunities, do you think that this perception has changed since the election?
25. How has it influenced the way you perceive your opportunities and achievements?
26. As you know this study is about inequality and the election of Barack Obama. Your responses so far have been great! What else would you like to add about the election?

Before I turn off the recorder is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 4: IRB Approval



Office of Research and
Sponsored Programs
526 Broadhead Avenue
Bethlehem, PA 18015-3046
(610) 758-3021 Fax: (610) 758-5994
<http://www.lehigh.edu/~spsr/>

DATE: November 18, 2010

TO: Daniel Larson
FROM: Lehigh University IRB

STUDY TITLE: [189109-3] Whiteness and Class Privilege in a Post-Obama America

IRB REFERENCE #: 11/041 R

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: November 9, 2010

PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE: November 8, 2011

INITIAL APPROVAL DATE: November 9, 2010

REVIEW TYPE: Full Committee Review

Thank you for your submission of materials for this research study. The Lehigh University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission. This approval is valid for one year.

This submission has received Full Committee Review based on the Lehigh University Policy on the Protection of Human Subjects in Research.

Reapproval and Progress Report: The current approval will expire on November 8, 2011. If you wish to continue beyond that time, you must submit a renewal request and progress report on the Continuing Review form via IRBNet. This protocol will be due for continuing IRB review **60 days** before the expiration date of November 8, 2011.

Informed Consent: Please remember that INFORMED CONSENT is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of subject understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and the research subject. The Lehigh University policy requires each subject receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Changes or Amendments: If during the year you propose significant changes in your approved protocol, please submit these changes for review using the amendment/modification form through IRBNet. The proposed changes may not be initiated without IRB approval (except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to subjects).

Adverse Events: All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms through IRBNet for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed. Any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to research subjects and others resulting from this study must be reported promptly to the Lehigh University IRB. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending further review by the committee.

Non-compliance or Complaints: Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

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Research Interests

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Publications

Larson, Daniel. (In process) *Whiteness and Class Privilege in a Post-Obama America*. Master's Thesis. Lehigh University.

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Scholarly Presentations

Larson, Daniel and Anna Field. February 26, 2011. "Terror Survival Guide: What makes a successful long lasting terrorist organization?" Annual Meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society. Philadelphia, PA

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Larson, Daniel and Jay Baglia. "Reproduction Technology in the News: Implications for Clinical Practice in Primary Care." 2008 Lehigh Valley Health Network Research Day.

Other Published Work

Larson, Daniel. 2010. "Race Talk with the "UCLA Girl." *This Week in Sociology*. Retrieved March 29, 2011. (<http://www.thisweekinsociology.com/?p=233>).

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