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DIVERSITY REGIMES

How University Diversity Initiatives Shape White Race Consciousness

JAMES M. THOMAS

WHAT DOES IT mean to be race conscious? I define race consciousness as the recognition of race's continued significance in social, political, and cultural life. Race consciousness is not an inherent disposition. The social sciences are now largely in agreement that we do not come into this world *seeing* race. We learn race's meaning and significance through interactions and interactional contexts. For many racial and ethnic minorities, race consciousness becomes a core part of their identity as they enter adulthood and are forced to confront the realities of a racialized social structure (Banton 1997). Many whites, meanwhile, are often blind to these realities precisely because of the advantages they derive from their position within the racialized social structure (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Doane 2014). These advantages are so commonplace that many whites accept them as normal.

Nevertheless, there are race-conscious whites (DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post 2011; Taylor 2011). So, what accounts for their race consciousness? In this chapter I focus on white race consciousness within the university setting to theorize how a university's diversity initiatives shape white race consciousness. In previous work, I theorized the rise of *diversity regimes*: a set of meanings, practices, and actions that cultivate benign celebrations of difference but do little to fundamentally challenge racial inequality (Thomas 2018a). Here, I emphasize the organizational and interactional contexts of

diversity regimes in structuring white race consciousness. My analysis identifies five hegemonic race-conscious archetypes that arise from a university's diversity regime: the Privilege Checker, the Problem Solver, the Cool Consumer, the Distant Observer, and the Pessimist. While not exhaustive, my typology helps map the cultural terrain produced by a diversity regime and provides a framework for discerning how the organization and deployment of diversity produces complacency and contradictions.

Benign commitments to multicultural ideals are a hallmark of contemporary racial discourse (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2011; Hartmann 2015). These commitments provide important cultural resources from which whites construct and enact race consciousness (DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post 2011; Hartmann and Bell 2011). Yet it is unclear whether cultural resources derived from benign commitments to diversity and inclusion help dismantle racial rule or reproduce it. By attending to the relationship between diversity regimes and whites' race consciousness, my analysis helps reveal how the cultural resources for combatting white supremacy become co-opted for its maintenance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary racial ideology is defined by and through the paradigms of color blindness and hollow, or trivial, multiculturalism (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2013; Forman 2004). Meanwhile, scholarship on contemporary diversity ideology (Embrick 2011) has shown how it perpetuates race-based inequalities by condensing race with less meaningful forms of difference, thereby minimizing race's role in shaping race-based outcomes (see Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001). While multiculturalism, color blindness, and diversity ideology are not synonymous, they are products of a similar discursive shift whereby racial inequality is fashioned as a particular kind of problem to be solved by symbolic and public commitments to abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism (Melamed 2011). This new language of race does not challenge unequal relations between differently defined racial groups. Instead, unequal outcomes among racialized groups are framed as moral matters (Melamed 2011; Myers 2005; Ryan 1976). As this new language of race materializes, it restitches the significance of race into the social fabric of our society, from racial discrimination in housing, education, and employment to increasing wealth inequality between whites and nonwhites (Desmond and Gershenson 2016; Dettling et al. 2017; Reardon and Owens 2014; Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro 2013).

The new language of race and our social order are mutually reinforcing. Race's meaning "is defined and contested in both collective action and personal practice" (Omi and Winant 2014:61). Collective action transforms, destroys, and then reforms racial categories, investing meaning into those racial categories and their relationships (Omi and Winant 2014:64). People use these meanings to craft their understandings of the world, including how they fit into it. Thus, race is an important tool through which people forge their sense of self and marshal themselves toward the worlds in which they live.

For several decades, scholars have examined the themes, frames, ideas, and imagery whites use to marshal race and a sense of self (Giroux 1997; Hartigan 2008; McDermott and Samson 2005). The anthropologist Ruth Frankenberg found that white women draw on color-and power-evasive discourses to "describe and comprehend their positions in the racial order" (1993:20). Elsewhere, the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva finds several dominant frameworks through which whites explain away race's continued significance (Bonilla-Silva 2013:8). Meanwhile, the sociologist Eileen O'Brien (2001) illuminates the organizational schemas that whites within two antiracist organizations draw on in fashioning their antiracist praxis and their sense of self. These analyses fit a trending focus on whiteness as a situated activity "whose meaning is imparted by the particular context in which white actors are located" (McDermott and Samson 2005:249).

My analysis serves as a complement. I frame the American university as a key organizational context that provides its members with cultural and symbolic resources to (1) invest meaning in racial categories and their relationships with one another and (2) craft their understandings of the world, including how they fit into it. Colleges and universities are well recognized as important agents of socialization. Over the past forty years, colleges and universities have increasingly endorsed the ideals of multiculturalism. Today, the American university is a "cosmopolitan canopy" where people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds often coexist in the same living spaces, learning spaces, and public spaces (see Anderson 2012). Yet the university is also a site where whiteness is entrenched within the very fabric of the institution and where whites continue to hold disproportionate levels of power and decision making relative to their populations (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). Studying this particular context where multicultural values and whiteness are simultaneously ubiquitous can help us better understand the limits of the former for dismantling the latter.

Diversity initiatives are now commonplace among American universities. Many, however, fail to fundamentally challenge racial inequality (Thomas

2018, 2019). If the dominant way of talking about race today minimizes or dismisses its significance in structuring people's everyday lives, then this approach likely affects antiracist praxis, including how whites construct race-conscious selves. I argue that a university's *diversity regime* creates the cultural and discursive conditions for hollow race consciousness (see also Ahmed 2012).

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

My analysis draws on two years of ethnographic fieldwork at an institution I'll call Diversity University (DU), a public, flagship university in the American South. As a university with a history steeped in racial conflict, DU is similar to many other American colleges and universities in that the legacies of white supremacy remain inscribed in its traditions and its campus landscape (Wilder 2013). DU's recent investments in diversity infrastructure situate it squarely within a larger trend within American higher education (Sturm 2007). DU shares many of the same conditions common to other large, public, flagship universities, including public disinvestment, rising tuition costs, the increased difficulty in securing federally backed student loans, and the pressure to recruit "high-dollar" students and increase overall enrollment (Newfield 2011).

From December 2013 to the spring of 2016, I attended over thirty meetings, campus workshops, events, and activities in which diversity and inclusion were the focus. I also conducted twenty-six formal interviews with students, faculty, staff, and administrators plus dozens of field interviews and informal conversations. In campus workshops and other events I observed many well-meaning whites engage their nonwhite peers in discussions on power, privilege, and inequality. Interviews with diversity workers on campus helped me better understand their challenges in performing diversity work on a campus whose student body is approximately 76 percent white. These insights are the empirical material from which a typology of whites' race consciousness emerged.

My analysis follows a grounded approach (Charmaz 2006). I began by reviewing field notes and interview data to identify how social actors, and whites in particular, attempted to make sense of the continued significance of race in social, political, and cultural life. I then began to formulate codes, themes, and categories that helped give order to my observations. Subsequent field notes and interviews helped establish patterns in my data, while disconfirming others. Over time, a story emerged that revealed a typology of white race consciousness and its connections to my concept of a *diversity regime*.

THE ARCHETYPES OF WHITE RACE CONSCIOUSNESS

In what follows, I sketch the five race-conscious archetypes I developed: the Privilege Checker, the Problem Solver, the Cool Consumer, the Distant Observer, and the Pessimist. My typology approximates a particular range of whites' race consciousness within the college setting. These archetypes help explain how a diversity regime gives rise to hollow, or trivial, multiculturalism.

The Privilege Checker

The Privilege Checker is committed to contesting the racialized social structure, yet they understand it almost entirely through a lens of privilege: as something that confers to whites certain benefits and advantages over non-whites. Consequently, the Privilege Checker seeks to hold other whites accountable for their lack of race consciousness. They invoke the platitude "Check your privilege" in order to police the racial indiscretions of others, such as when a white student or colleague seeks to minimize or deny the persistence of everyday racism. Policing racial indiscretions reinforces the Privilege Checker's own sense of race consciousness and demonstrates their "wokeness" in comparison to other whites. Yet because Privilege Checkers view the racialized social structure mostly through the lens of privilege, their race consciousness is confined to personal and interpersonal contexts. The Privilege Checker struggles to understand white supremacy's locus of power: a set of historical and social processes—or racial projects—that over time consolidate racial power and racial meanings (Strmic-Pawl 2015; see also Omi and Winant 2014).

Pamela is a black woman and assistant director for DU's Department of Residential Life. She also adjuncts as an instructor for DU's required freshman experience course, of which there are dozens of sections offered each semester. In our interview Pamela discusses how she incorporates diversity and inclusion into her classroom:

As part of our curriculum, [DU] gives you a standard outline and they do want you to do something on diversity and inclusion so I had two days set aside. I brought in [a guest speaker] and we did some work with her. And then I brought in one of my graduate students and we did the privilege walk lesson.

The privilege walk consists of having students line up next to each other in the middle of a classroom with plenty of space to move around. They start

out holding hands, and then the instructor reads several statements aloud. If the statement applies to the student, they take one step forward or backward according to the instructions. These statements include the following:

- If you are right-handed, take one step forward.
- If English is your first language, take one step forward.
- If you constantly feel unsafe walking alone at night, take one step back.
- If you have ever been profiled by someone else using stereotypes, take one step back.

After all of the statements are read aloud, participants take stock of where they are in the room in relation to others and take stock of the advantages they maintain relative to others.

I asked Pamela how students responded to this exercise: “I had a student, a white young lady, she said this is the most she’s ever learned about race since she was born.” Pamela continues:

We talked a lot about privilege and class as opposed to race. Race came up a couple of times because I had them read the book about the atomic bomb. I can’t remember the name of it and I had them do presentations and I broke them up in groups. One of the topics was about women during World War II and one was about minority women so basically black Americans, Asians, and all that. And I had a few people up there crying during their presentation which was not my intent but they had realized how bad it was and how people had to live and what they had to go through and what women couldn’t do during that time. I was like well that’s the whole point of this project: for you to get it.

Privilege is centered in Pamela’s classroom. Yet this centering of privilege comes at the expense of consideration of power, and the consideration of racism as a *structuring* phenomenon. The privilege walk frames disadvantages from racism as “interpersonal” and flattens those disadvantages alongside human differences disconnected from structural inequality. Without emphasizing race, the privilege walk conveys *some* awareness of race. Yet students’ reactions to discussions of privilege suggest a limited ability to make connections between discriminatory practices of the past and the present. Students cried, according to Pamela, because of “what women couldn’t do *during that time*” (emphasis mine).

From workshops on implicit bias to a curriculum that includes exercises like the privilege walk, DU's diversity efforts discursively represent racism as something seated at the individual level. This "personalizing" of racism has dire consequences. There is no evidence that implicit bias training or exercises like the privilege walk have improved retention rates for black faculty, improved recruitment and retention rates for black students, or redistributed power and decision making toward minority faculty, staff, and students. The focus on teaching white students to recognize, or "check," their privilege fails to properly diagnose the underlying conditions that maintain racial inequality. The idea of checking one's privilege functions to obscure, rather than clarify, white supremacy as a political, economic, and social order.

The Cool Consumer

Writing in mid-nineteenth century Paris, Charles Baudelaire describes the *flâneur* as a particular type of character belonging to its emergent cosmopolitan scene: "For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite" (1995:4 and 9). Later, the German intellectual Walter Benjamin theorized Baudelaire's *flâneur* as a late-capitalist consumer type semidetached in their engagement with the crowds and commodities of the modern metropolis (Benjamin 1997, 2002). The *flâneur* reflects important shifts in the political economy, self-regulation, new modes of communication, and the growing commodification of social relationships (Featherstone 1998; Giulianotti 2002; Harvey 2009).

Like the *flâneur*, the Cool Consumer is semidetached from the realities of everyday racism. Their partial detachment is a reflection not of their lack of personal investment in reducing inequality but rather of their self-investment. The Cool Consumer seeks casual knowledge of everyday racism. This casual knowledge functions as cultural capital. The Cool Consumer is only race conscious insofar as an awareness of everyday racism can be exchanged for opportunities and advancement. Remaining semidetached, the Cool Consumer can stroll in and out of diversity programming without having to commit to doing the work of dismantling white supremacy. For the Cool Consumer, opportunities for multicultural competency represent opportunities for self-advancement.

Following an incident of racial violence on its campus, the outgoing director for diversity and multicultural affairs within DU's student government

penned an editorial reflective of the Cool Consumer archetype. In it, this white male student argued for diversity's importance, stressing that "it is essential we learn to communicate with people from other cultures if we expect to compete in the global job market . . . General Electric, Boeing, Walgreens, and Bank of America know that creating inclusive environments can improve the bottom line." Though racial violence serves as the backdrop to this editorial, the author uses it as an opportunity to reimagine cross-cultural contact as an investment opportunity for entrepreneurial students seeking to strengthen their individual market positions. Diversity is fashioned into an intangible asset that facilitates new modes of sociality. Social interactions with nonwhite students are reconfigured as human capital acquisitions (see Thomas 2019). Superficial diversity allows for the Cool Consumer to remain semidetached from the material consequences of existing racial inequality and oppression yet overwhelmingly benefit from the opportunity to leisurely stroll through the university's "marketplace of difference."

The Problem Solver

The Problem Solver is a pragmatist who seeks to distill the complexity of racial inequality into easy-to-recognize and easier-to-fix sets of problems. The Problem Solver acknowledges everyday racism yet remains only ever focused on the present moment. Attempts to place racial inequality in historical, institutional, or global contexts are eschewed. Instead, the solution to everyday racism is in improving "race relations."

In 2012, DU elected its first black woman as student body president. Two weeks later, a white student confronted her with racial slurs in the downtown entertainment district. She filed harassment charges and initiated DU's student judicial process. During this process, a white administrator encouraged her to follow a reconciliation model with the perpetrator because the judicial process could result in his expulsion and would do little to "open his mind." She ultimately dropped the charges and pursued reconciliation, with the white administrator serving as mediator. This event was a watershed moment, as DU soon shifted its organizational framework for dealing with racial harassment—later termed bias incidents—toward a reconciliation model. The student judicial process remains intact. Now, however, victims of bias incidents are encouraged to meet with the accused and help "open their minds."

DU's institutional embracing of racial reconciliation reduces racial harassment and racial violence to isolated interactions and advocates finding common ground with perpetrators. The factors that give rise to racial violence

and conflict are minimized and cast as irrelevant or counterproductive to achieving reconciliation. Indeed, during a panel discussion on racism across campus, one panelist dismissed an audience question on power's relevance because "power is too vague of a concept and doesn't give us any practical ways to solve our problems here on the ground." Their response reflects both the archetype of the Problem Solver and the tendency within diversity programming to embrace the Problem Solver model.

The rise of chief diversity officers (CDOs) in higher education is well documented (Gose 2006) and reflects colleges' and universities' tendency to embrace the Problem Solver model. While some CDOs have academic backgrounds, most are practitioners. At DU, for example, there is significant emphasis on logic models that convert everyday racism into a set of operationalized problems to be solved through increasing students' intercultural competencies and raising their awareness of "minority issues." Elsewhere, we see universities embracing "bystander antiracism" as an "essential element of antiracist social policy" (Nelson, Dunn, and Paradies 2011:264). Bystander training asks individual students, faculty, and staff to "change the social norms toward the intolerance of racism" (Nelson, Dunn, and Paradies 2011: 265).

The Distant Observer

Distant Observers fancy themselves above the fray. While their structural position in the racial hierarchy affords them such a vantage point, their membership in the academy enables naive objectivity. Distant Observers are social scientists in training. Their analysis of everyday racism diagnoses the racialized social structure but offers little in the way of a prescription. Indeed, once the problem is revealed, the Distant Observer is only ever likely to recommend its further study. Calls for more resources to study that which is already known by men and women of color square neatly with the university's mission to promote free inquiry. Like the Cool Consumer, the Distant Observer is semidetached from everyday racism. Yet while the Cool Consumer's detachment enables them to capitalize on casual knowledge of everyday racism, the Distant Observer's detachment enables a posture of objectivity that enhances their self-righteousness.

At the end of the academic year DU's chancellor gave his State of Campus report to the full faculty body. He mentioned a violent racist incident from the previous year and the steps the university was taking to ensure that nothing similar ever again transpired. He characterized the event as isolated. Upon the conclusion of the meeting, three women social scientists—two of whom are African American—approached him and challenged his

characterization. They pointed to the disproportionate service they give to minority students who are confronted with everyday racism. One of the women described her own personal encounter with racism on campus. The chancellor's response was incredulous: "Prove it."

An elderly white man telling these three women to prove their lived experiences is expected given DU's organizational context. The chancellor is aware of DU's institutional data showing disproportionate retention and degree completion rates for African Americans compared with their white peers. He is also aware of institutional data showing minority underrepresentation across faculty ranks. Embodying the Distant Observer, however, the chancellor insists that the problem is far from fully understood. He can call for further study in perpetuity because doing so fits squarely with the mission of the university as a purveyor of knowledge.

The Pessimist

The Pessimist is the most tragic of white race-conscious archetypes. Unlike the Distant Observer, the Pessimist eschews the pretenses of value-neutral objectivity and willingly steps into the "Darkwater" of everyday racism. Yet once submerged in the Darkwater, Pessimists become overwhelmed (see Du Bois 1999). Their earnest attempts to reckon with the complexity of the color line in the twenty-first century often lead them to conclude that racial rule is unbending. How can a university openly committed to diversity produce this cynicism?

The organizational structure of diversity work diminishes its capacity to address racial inequality (Thomas 2018). Diversity work is often organized in a way that exemplifies what I term *decentralization* (see also Weick 1976, 1982). Decentralization entails a combination of five structural features:

- a lack of coordination or slow coordination;
- relative absence of regulations or the inability to properly enforce existing regulations;
- unresponsiveness;
- poor observational capabilities; and
- a shared belief that no matter what organizational actors do, the same outcome persists.

These features need not be impediments to organizational goals so long as those goals have a degree of clarity and consensus. The problem is that attaining clarity and consensus within an organizational setting is never a straightforward process. Organizational actors have to work out agreements

and understandings in response to the everyday contingencies of their social settings (Hall 1987:6). Yet there is little consensus on what diversity means, and the lack of clarity affects how diversity is put into practice.

Decentralization is both an organizational context *and* a set of actions that reproduces that context—a dialectic between the negotiated order of social actions and the contexts within which those actions unfold. The end result is confusion, frustration, and even defeatism. As Gail, the director of DU's Institute for Racial Justice, conveyed, "One of the biggest obstacles on this campus is that everybody assumes nothing is being done. So nothing begets nothing, and people are tired and become instantly fatigued when they think they have to start from zero." Time and again, diversity workers spoke of "uphill battles" with the administration and of feeling that their efforts were undervalued and often futile. Decentralization, then, bears responsibility for the Pessimist's understanding of everyday racism. Decentralization produces fatalism as race-conscious whites try to chip away at the existing power structure with little to no guidance or support from their institution.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY DIVERSITY REGIMES AND HOLLOW RACE CONSCIOUSNESS

My analysis identifies five archetypes of white race consciousness: the Privilege Checker; the Problem Solver; the Cool Consumer; the Distant Observer; and the Pessimist. The differences between these archetypes are matters of kind, not degree. While these archetypes are by no means exhaustive, they are hegemonic—they shape the central qualities of all race-conscious identities and practices within the university setting.

Yet these archetypes cannot be understood outside of the organizational context within which they operate. Contemporary racial ideology exists in a dialectic relationship to social structure: it is socially constitutive of social structures and categories while at the same time shaped by and constrained by the very things it constructs (Fairclough 1993:64). The late sociologist Peter Hall reminds us that social organization cannot be understood apart from how it is enacted. Meanwhile, its very formation conditions that enactment (Hall and McGinty 2012:423). Diversity regimes are the result of larger discursive and social forces that minimize, deny, and subsequently reproduce the racial order within organizational spaces. Consciousness is not independent of social structure and action; it is constituted by it. In a vicious cycle, diversity regimes lead to hollow forms of race consciousness that minimize, evade, or deny existing racial inequality, ultimately entrenching it.

How can universities and other organizations committed to the ideals of multiculturalism and inclusivity avoid producing hollow race consciousness? First, universities and other organizations must reorganize their efforts around contesting racial inequality rather than around the more abstract principles of diversity and multiculturalism. This requires redefining diversity from a matter of generic human difference to one of racial equity. Second, there needs to be a fundamental realignment of departments, divisions, and resources, and racial equity must be centralized. Each department and division should be held accountable for demonstrating its steps toward racial equity. My research and the research of others finds that minority women and men perform a disproportionate amount of diversity work. Centralizing diversity work can lead to a more equitable division of labor as units with fewer racial and ethnic minorities can no longer “outsource” this labor or place its burden on one or two people of color.

Diversity programming also needs to reject benign celebrations of difference in favor of meaningful discussions on how power, resources, opportunities, and decision making are distributed. Instead of opportunities for human capital investment, diversity programming should offer opportunities for full campus involvement in realigning resources in order to meet the goals of racial equity. Universities can also tether their general education modules on multiculturalism to service-learning requirements, putting the ideals of racial equity into practice within the university and its surrounding communities. These suggestions can reorient the actions of faculty, students, and staff toward a critical race consciousness that recognizes the centrality of racial inequality in everyday life and also provide opportunities to contest it in everyday practice.

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