**James Thomas**

**Whiteness in Crisis**

**Fluxx Request ID: R-2101-30264**

**Reviewer:**

1. *Does the project address an important and compelling question or set of questions? Is the question(s) framed appropriately in terms of prior theory and empirical work?*

Yes.

1. *Is the research design, the data and the proposed methodology appropriate to address the questions raised?*

Yes. My only qualm is having so many people in these interviews. Sensitive topics are more easily shared with a sole interviewer. But the benefits of including the undergraduates are, as one reviewer said, also a strength.

1. *Do the qualifications of the investigator(s) suggest the capacity to carry out the project? Is additional expertise required?*

No.

1. *What is the likely contribution of this project?*

A great opportunity to learn about the content of racial identity among a more diverse, younger white Southern cohort than we have had from other studies.

1. *Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the investigators to consider (theory, data,methods) that could potentially improve the project?*

See above.

1. *Full citations of articles referred to in your review (if applicable).*

None.

**Investigator Response**

Thank you very much for the supportive comments. I am sensitive to the fact that there will be several people in the interview setting, and that this does shape the interview process. I do think that this is outweighed by the research training opportunities provided to undergraduate and graduate students.

**Reviewer:**

1. *Does the project address an important and compelling question or set of questions? Is the question(s) framed appropriately in terms of prior theory and empirical work?*

This project promises to answer two important research questions: 1) How do whites understand their racial identity in the wake of major social events that highlight its salience? and 2) How do southerners think about their identity during a time of challenges to what it means to be southern? Both are especially important questions to answer for slightly different reasons. The first is a timely question, one that other research is likely to attempt to answer, but the early fielding of this study would mean that it could set the agenda for future work. The second is, in some ways, the more important of the two. There has been surprisingly little research on southern identity and whiteness in recent years—much of what exists is based in urban areas (two exceptions are noted in the citations to this review). While the South has always loomed large in American politics, recent populations and electoral shifts and attempts at voter suppression have rendered the region especially important in determining the direction of the country. Hence, understanding how its residents view themselves as social and political actors is a particularly important task, one that has been largely overlooked by scholars. The proposed project is well-situated in the whiteness literature, although there is surprisingly little attention paid to the effects of the Civil Rights Movement on white attitudes in the South. That, too, was a dramatic event that shook white southerners sense of themselves as racial actors and their understandings of themselves in the racial hierarchy. Thinking about how whites responded to that period of history and the nature of the backlash that emerged could be instructive.

1. *Is the research design, the data and the proposed methodology appropriate to address the questionsraised?*

Interviews are an appropriate means of assessing the contours of racial identity among white southerners. However, there are some issues around the sampling frame and site selection. One of the strengths of the study is its exploration of southern identity, something that has largely been overlooked in recent social scientific research. Although the two selected sites are in the south, they are selected primarily because there have been recent struggles over Confederate monuments, not because they are in any way representative of the white population of the South. There are ways to slightly amend the sites so that a broader swath of the southern white population is sampled, something that is especially encouraged given the relatively large sample size. Oxford’s inclusion given factors of convenience is understandable, although a fairly affluent (the income figures are low only because they include students) storied college town is quite atypical and will ideally make up a small share of the sample. Whites in Memphis are almost entirely affluent, and the rest of the city is populated almost entirely by Black Americans. Even if the sampling procedures were to turn up a handful of lower income whites, they would be very likely living around more affluent racial counterparts. There is almost no other racial diversity in Memphis (and not much in Oxford) aside from Black/white. But much of the rest of the South is experiencing a large influx of Latinos, and the Asian population is growing in many parts of it. Focusing only on Oxford and Memphis will give a skewed portrait of both white identity and southern identity. Fortunately, the Memphis metro area is quite diverse, with West Memphis having a large white working class population and a sizeable black population, and Millington having both class and racial diversity. Suburbs in Arkansas have even larger Latinx populations. In terms of the sampling frame, it is not clear why the sample will be limited to 18-35 year olds. What does it matter if people were very young when 9-11 happened? It is known that racial attitudes and racial identity can change throughout the life course— especially in response to extreme events—so why limit the sample to young people? Especially with a sample of approximately 200 people, it would be unfortunate to lose information by excluding those who might be able to compare the effects of recent events, such as the challenge to Confederate monuments, to previous racial regimes. There is minimal justification in the proposal for limiting the sample to young people.

1. *Do the qualifications of the investigator(s) suggest the capacity to carry out the project? Is additional expertise required?*

The PI is highly qualified as a race scholar. He is an experienced ethnographer.

1. *What is the likely contribution of this project?*

The project could produce a definitive analysis of white southern identity, as well as an updated understanding of white racial identity in the wake of recent social upheavals.

1. *Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the investigators to consider (theory, data,methods) that could potentially improve the project?*
2. *Full citations of articles referred to in your review (if applicable).*

Hallett MC. 2012. “Better than White trash”: Work ethic, Latinidad and whiteness in rural Arkansas. Latino

Studies. 10(1–2):81–106 Hardie JH, Tyson K. 2013. Other People’s Racism: Race, Rednecks, and Riots in a Southern High School. Sociology of Education. 86(1):83–102

**Investigator Response**

Thank you for your very constructive comments, and your suggestions. I actually think some of the concerns you note about limiting this study to Memphis and Oxford in #2 are addressed by your recommendation in #1 to pay more attention in this study to the effects of the mid-20th century Civil Rights movement. Both Memphis and Oxford played outsized roles in the modern civil rights movement, and in the white racial backlash that has defined the post-civil rights era (Anderson 2016; Dittmer 1995; Eagles 2014). Memphis is known for both its historic district of black-owned businesses, dance halls, and barber shops, as well as the site of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination at the Lorraine Hotel, which is now part of the National Civil Rights Museum. While Memphis was a majority white city at the time of King’s assassination, the population dynamics have since inverted. Oxford, meanwhile, was the site of the forced integration of the University of Mississippi, accompanied by a violent confrontation between federal marshals and white protestors (Eagles 2014). Since then, the University and the town of Oxford in which it is located has played host to one racial drama after another. Unlike Memphis, Oxford’s racial makeup has hardly changed since 1970, when just over 71 percent of its population identified as white (Social Explorer and US Census Bureau 1970). Moreover, if we think about Tennessee and Mississippi more broadly, both rank in the top-ten among all states in the nation in the growth of their Latino populations over past two decades. As I state in my proposal, attending to how white southerners ground their whiteness within these complicated, even contradictory, placed-based contexts can reveal important insights into the contours and range of diversity often missing in the sociology of race, and in whiteness studies. Moreover, examining intra-regional variation – limitations notwithstanding - in how white southerners ground their sense of their dominant racial status can provide a to-date missing analysis within racial formation theory of the dynamic relationship between race and place.

**Reviewer:**

1. *Does the project address an important and compelling question or set of questions? Is the question(s) framed appropriately in terms of prior theory and empirical work?*

This is an exciting proposal. It is more theoretical than is typical for RSF proposals -- in this case (and you won't hear me say this often) that is a good thing. It takes recent development in "whiteness" and "critical race theory" seriously and is well informed about developments in a variety of fields. At the same time, it promises very strong empirical findings on a very specific and understudied group: young southern whites.

1. *Is the research design, the data and the proposed methodology appropriate to address the questions raised?*

Yes, although the research plan is ambitious. It's a lot of interviews for the PI and a largely undergraduate team to take on -- and a lot of material to analyze. However, ambition is a good thing. And if the project gets scaled down a bit in the process, that's probably OK too.

1. *Do the qualifications of the investigator(s) suggest the capacity to carry out the project? Is additional expertise required?*

The PI has down a lot of wide-ranging work, both theoretical (I love his Du Bois and the Jewish Question article in ERS) and empirical. He has not undertaken led in a systematic study of this size before. You have to start sometime.

1. *What is the likely contribution of this project?*

How young white southerners think about race today-- hard to imagine a more fraught or interesting of important issue.

1. *Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the investigators to consider (theory, data ,methods) that could potentially improve the project?*
2. *Full citations of articles referred to in your review (if applicable).*

**Investigator Response**

I am very grateful for your encouraging comments, and your confidence in me and my ability to conduct this proposed study.

**Reviewer:**

1. *Does the project address an important and compelling question or set of questions? Is the question(s) framed appropriately in terms of prior theory and empirical work?*

This is an interesting and important project that seeks to examine how White young adults in the South are navigating their racial identity in moments of intense scrutiny of the racial hierarchy and increased racial diversity. The work is well grounded in sociology, but I continue to impress upon the PI the need to consider social psychological perspectives. For instance, Eric Knowles and colleagues have done a lot of work on the psychology of "Whiteness" and Claude Steele's identity threat concept is perfectly aligned with the general positioning of this work. In other words, the moral value of "whiteness" is currently being threatened in this historical moment.

1. *Is the research design, the data and the proposed methodology appropriate to address the questions raised?*

Yes. That said, it is an empirical question as to whether these respondents have indeed had more interracial contact than their parents. Much of social life continues to be racially segregated.

1. *Do the qualifications of the investigator(s) suggest the capacity to carry out the project? Is additional expertise required?*

Yes.

1. *What is the likely contribution of this project?*

This work is likely to offer first-hand accounts of how White young adults in the south are navigating their racial identity in the midst of so much societal change.

1. *Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the investigators to consider (theory, data,methods) that could potentially improve the project?*

Although the "Whiteness in crisis" title and construct is catchy, I hope it remains a hypothesis rather than a conclusion. That is, it is entirely possible that for these participants, Whiteness is not only not in crisis, but an identity that they now value more than ever. In other words, what is the actual conclusion of this work is that whiteness is not actually in crisis at all?

1. *Full citations of articles referred to in your review (if applicable).*

Knowles ED, Lowery BS, Chow RM, Unzueta MM. Deny, Distance, or Dismantle? How White Americans Manage a Privileged Identity. Perspectives on Psychological Science. 2014;9(6):594-609.

doi:10.1177/1745691614554658

**Investigator Response**

I take seriously your stressing of the need to consult works in social psychology. Claude Steele’s work on identity threat, for example, is absolutely work that my team and I will incorporate and wrestle with as we move forward. I also take seriously your cautioning that the title – ‘whiteness in crisis’ – remain a hypothesis. It is, indeed. A more appropriate title is ‘Whiteness in crisis?’ – the question mark indicating it requires a robust analysis in order to confirm or reject.

**Reviewer:**

1. *Does the project address an important and compelling question or set of questions? Is the question(s) framed appropriately in terms of prior theory and empirical work?*

The conception that Southern whites have of race in their lives and in their geographic area today is important and compelling, given the prominence of racial identity in contemporary political and social debates. The PI makes a strong case that the south has received less attention than is warranted, given the racial diversity of the South and given its troubled racial history.

1. *Is the research design, the data and the proposed methodology appropriate to address the questionsraised?*

The proposed sample -- 18-to-35-year-old whites who have grown up in the South and who still live there -is well justified. The five main research questions are also well justified. Nevertheless, I do have some methodological concerns. First, it will be a challenge to obtain information from respondents on deep, sensitive topics such as the significance of race in their lives today. Doing so successfully would probably require subtle probing rather than merely asking direct questions. It would require getting respondents to open up about their feelings. The main interviewers in this project will be undergraduates. One wonders whether undergraduates will be able to conduct successful interviews on difficult topics such as these with just the four weeks of intensive training that the PI will provide. I would be more confident of success if more skilled interviewers – the graduate research assistants themselves or the PI – had more responsibility for the interviews. Second, the PI plans to obtain the sample through eliciting responses to a random-address mailing to 2000 residents of Oxford, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, who will be asked to complete an online pre-screener about an unspecified social issue and will receive a $2 cash incentive. The PI will then select from the online responses a group of about 200 white 18 to 35 year olds who were born and raised and still reside in the south. If this procedure is successful, it would have the advantage of recruiting a more-or-less random sample of respondents who match the specified set of characteristics. It is risky, however. We don’t know how many respondents will actually go online to fill out the screening questionnaire (nor how many will not have the capability to go online). It could be as low as 10 or 20 percent. Moreover, Memphis, Table 2 tells us, is only 26% white, and many of the letters would reach people who are outside of the age range or who have a less firm connection to the south.

1. *Do the qualifications of the investigator(s) suggest the capacity to carry out the project? Is additional expertise required?*

The PI has experience in qualitative research, and he has written a thoughtful and well-focused proposal. He has several publications on topics directly related to the proposal. He does have the capacity to carry out the project.

1. *What is the likely contribution of this project?*

The project would help us to better understand what whiteness means to Southerners, and it would give us insight into the current debates and discussion about racial identity politics. It could be a valuable study,

1. *Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the investigators to consider (theory, data, methods) that could potentially improve the project?*
2. *Full citations of articles referred to in your review (if applicable).*

**Investigator Response**

Thank you for your supportive comments and your constructive feedback. You are correct that undergraduates on their own will have more difficulty in probing sensitive topics, in part because they lack the training and experience of more seasoned researchers. My plan to address this is to have myself and/or a graduate student accompany undergraduate researchers in their early interviews. On the one hand, this can present a challenge noted by a previous reviewer that with so many people present a respondent may be more hesitant to answer a question. On the other hand, it will provide important training opportunities for the undergraduate researchers, and will allow myself or the graduate student to ask follow up questions of respondents when appropriate in order to dig deeper into how they are making sense of whiteness and their southern identities.

Your second concern is one very well taken. In casting a wide net – particularly in Memphis which is a majority-Black city – I do run the risk of not having enough respondents who fit my criteria within my sampling frame. If this occurs, my plan is to make use of some research funds available in my home department to send additional requests to a wider sample for completion of the pre-screener. Even with a low response rate, then, this should help generate enough participants who fit the proposed criteria.

**Reviewer:**

1. *Does the project address an important and compelling question or set of questions? Is the question(s) framed appropriately in terms of prior theory and empirical work?*

Yes. This project proposed by Thomas gets at important questions that need to be answered. Whiteness is in fact in crisis and Thomas is well-positioned with the expertise needed to tackle this. I appreciate the locations, methods, and data to be used. I believe these questions about whiteness can be answered with the approach proposed. The proposal demonstrates a clear understanding of previous research and this project builds upon this work in important ways. Thomas knows what work has been done previously and is clear about how this proposed project can make significant contributions to the literature.

1. *Is the research design, the data and the proposed methodology appropriate to address the questionsraised?*

I believe in-depth interviews with young Southern whites in these locations can provide insights and new knowledge about what it means to be white today. Whiteness endures, yet as Thomas discusses in the proposal, there have been numerous social, political and economic trends and events that have disrupted the nature of whiteness. This project will allow a deep look into the lives and experiences of the respondents to better understand how they understand and experience whiteness. I also like the sampling frame, randomly selecting households from the two field sites. This feels like a good mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches, still definitely a qualitative study, but borrowing from some quantitative approaches in the study and sample design. Fair or not, some quantitative scholars, reviewers, etc. can be critical of qualitative sampling and recruiting methods. This approach, building in some random selection, can strengthen the project and help avoid some common criticisms of studies of this nature.

1. *Do the qualifications of the investigator(s) suggest the capacity to carry out the project? Is additionalexpertise required?*

Yes, Thomas has the qualifications, experience, and expertise to carry out the project. The proposed plan of including graduate and undergraduate students further strengthens the project. I believe Thomas has shown in the proposal that he can provide the guidance and training these students will need to be successful. This has the potential to be an amazing, transformative experience for these students. No additional expertise is required.

1. *What is the likely contribution of this project?*

The proposal begins with: "How do White adults living in the American South make sense of race?

Specifically, how do those who have come of age amidst large-scale economic, political, and social changes – meaning those between the ages of 18 and 35 years old - understand the American racial hierarchy and their racial group’s place within it? This proposed study aims examine how the major social, political, and economic events of the last three decades shape and influence White southerners' understanding of these ideas." I firmly believe this project can answer these questions. The proposed project, study design, data collection and analysis have the real potential to generate new insights into the meaning of whiteness for young white Southern adults. The likely contribution of this project is exactly what Thomas states. I am confident this project can answer the questions it sets out to answer.

1. *Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the investigators to consider (theory, data,methods) that could potentially improve the project?*
2. *Full citations of articles referred to in your review (if applicable).*

**Investigator Response**

Thank you very much for your encouraging and supportive comments. I am excited that you see the scholarly value and potential contributions of this project!