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Problem Statement

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.

In the late twentieth century, neoliberal restructuring affected nearly every dimension of social, economic, cultural, and political life. Wealth inequality widened (Piketty 2017), while the quality and availability of public services were increasingly privatized and subsequently declined (Lobao, Adua, and Hooks 2014). These factors damaged the social fabric of community and family life (Black 2020). This restructuring precipitated a new century that, to date, is marked by significant turmoil and upheaval. We have witnessed the declaration and global scaling up of the War on Terror, the domestic expansion of the War on Drugs and the carceral state, and the social devastation and accompanying racial politics wrought from Hurricane Katrina. We have suffered an economic collapse from which many households have yet to recover and the emergence of a White nationalist populism that has transformed the racial dog whistles of the Reagan era into full-blown racist foghorns. Finally, we're living through a global pandemic that has devastated economies, disrupted schooling, and served as a significant wedge issue in our politically polarized climate (NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll 2020).

At the same time, the first two decades of this new century have made racial diversity more visible than ever. Whites who have transitioned into adulthood during this period have navigated schools, workplaces, and other environments more racially diverse than those of their forebearers (Anon 2018). The media and popular culture they consume is more racially and ethnically diverse than that of their parents or grandparents (Drake and Henderson 2020; Iton 2010). At the same time, they have been exposed to more regular, more public, and more critical challenges to their dominant group status (Alcoff

2015). In one of the most recent examples, Whites along with the rest of the nation are bearing witness to wave after wave of protests against police violence toward Black communities. These protests, which include calls for anti-racism and abolitionism, further scrutinize the American racial hierarchy and Whites' place within it.

What *is* that hierarchy, though, and what is the place of White people within it?

As the protests in summer 2020 declared, the continued disproportionate use of police violence against Black people in the United States reveals the uninterrupted power of the American racial hierarchy. But overt state violence is not the only axis on which the American racial hierarchy operates. The neoliberal restructuring previously mentioned has fundamentally solidified Whites' material advantage, and Blacks' material disadvantage, while Whites continue to enjoy greater access to medical care, and consequently lower rates of morbidity and mortality, than their Black counterparts (Williams and Rucker 2000; Brown 2018; Sewell 2016). Whites' life expectancies remain significantly longer than that of Blacks, even after controlling for social class (Franks et al. 2006). At every income level, Whites are more likely to receive preventative health care and more likely to receive higher-quality care than Blacks (Gould and Wilson 2020; Hogue, Hargraves, and Collins 2000; Weinick, Zuvekas, and Cohen 2000). Persistent labor market discrimination and segregation, as well as segregated kinship and friendship networks, provide Whites with greater and more advantageous employment opportunities than their Black counterparts (Royster 2003; Spalter-Roth 2007). Today, the median net worth of White families is eight times greater than that of Black families (Bhutta et al. 2020). Greater access to stable jobs, better wages, and employment benefits are all key drivers in the persistence of this racial wealth gap.

For the purposes of this study, **whiteness is defined** as a historical and political system that confers material, psychological, and social advantages to people socially defined as White (Du Bois 1999; Lipsitz 2018; Roediger 2007). As the normative system of racial classification, whiteness not only gives these advantages, but also helps maintain and reproduce the system of racial stratification operating today

(Bonilla-Silva 1997). However, while whiteness has historically been the default cultural standard and therefore often unnoticed among Whites (see Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003), there is an underlying tension in the current sociohistorical moment.

In *The History of White People* (2011), historian Nell Painter remarks, "Being White these days is not what it used to be." Painter's observation is rooted in the anxiety many White people appear to feel toward their whiteness. The aforementioned social, economic, and political shifts has solidified Whites' material advantages. At the same time, the media attention drawn to police killings and the subsequent protests have led to increasing scrutiny of whiteness's underlying ideology, so much so that an entire book industry built upon 'interrogating whiteness' has emerged and now dominates the best-seller lists (e.g. DiAngelo 2018; Kendi 2019; Oluo 2018). Yet, the critique issued by these popular works often replicate whiteness's power by obfuscating or ignoring whiteness's engagement with and reliance upon capital, and the control of labor (Phruksachart 2020). These contexts make this moment ripe for sociological examination of how White people think about and make sense of the American racial hierarchy and their place within it.

To date, we know very little about how Whites make sense of this apparent contradiction between their enduring material advantages and the increased scrutiny toward whiteness. Many scholarly works offer insights into Whites' attitudes toward other racial and ethnic groups (Lewis 2004), and some more recent research examines what Whites think about their own group's status (Jardina 2019). Yet the bulk of this scholarship says little about the contexts and processes affecting how Whites understand whiteness today.

We also know very little about how Whites who matured into adulthood amidst the backdrop of these significant changes – Whites between the ages of 18 and 35 – root their understanding of whiteness within these historical contexts. For instance, this age cohort includes both those who experienced the tragic events of September 11, 2001 as high-school teenagers, and those who have never known a world

before 9/11. Finally, there is a two-fold need to examine how Whites make sense of their whiteness within the context of place. How does place—both the shifting contexts of the contemporary United States, and the specific cultural regions within the US—ground the racial sense-making of Whites today (see McDermott and Samson 2005; Hartigan, Jr. 2005; Hoelscher 2003)?

This proposed research centers the role of place by examining how White southerners, specifically, understand what it means to be White today against the backdrop of the shifts that have marked the new century. The American South, more so than any other region, has shaped our collective understandings of America's color-line: from its origins in chattel slavery and Indian removal, to the state-sanctioned violence and terror of Jim Crow, to its resistance to integration during and following the legislative gains of the Civil Rights movement, and now in the ongoing drama over Confederate iconography in public spaces (Hoelscher 2003; Lechner 2018; MacKethan 1999). Because the American South's color-line has been drawn so brightly, and because its racial dramas have played out in such graphic form, the region holds special significance for illuminating the overlooked relationship between whiteness and place (Bonnett 1997, 2016). By bringing into sharp focus the contexts and experiences White southerners draw upon when making sense of whiteness, this study offers an important, necessary, and missing contribution to our understanding of the color-line in the twenty-first century.

Specifically, this study asks the following research questions: **(RQ1)** How, in an era where Whites' dominant status is increasingly scrutinized, are White southerners making sense of their dominant racial group status? And, **(RQ2)** what are the contexts and experiences that White southerners draw upon when making sense of their dominant group status? To answer these questions, this study proposes conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with White southerners between the ages of 18 and 35 years old, across two locales: Memphis, Tennessee, a majority-Black southern city; and Oxford, Mississippi, a majority-White southern college-town. Focusing on how Whites root themselves in these locales when making sense of whiteness can generate important insights into the contours, contradictions, and

complexity in how Whites think about the American racial hierarchy, and their place within it today.

Background

The Sociology of Whiteness

For nearly three decades, the study of Whiteness has attracted the attention from scholars across fields as diverse as history (Roediger 2007), sociology (Gallagher and Twine 2014; Hughey 2012), literature (MacKethan 1999), and education (Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll 2009:404). To date, most of this scholarship examines whether and how Whiteness serves as the unspoken, yet centered, norm of social life (Wray and Newitz 1997). Studies abound of the ideological practices Whites use to minimize, acknowledge, deny, embrace, or express guilt about their dominant status (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Lipsitz 2018). Within sociology, the focus is overwhelmingly on the extent to which Whites display colorblind attitudes, including ignorance of how institutions structure inequality, and how Whites benefit from such relationships (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Burke 2018; Maly and Dalmage 2016).

To date, there is a rich body of social scientific research on how whiteness shapes American social life. This research reveals, for example, how the norms of whiteness are learned, internalized, institutionally reproduced, and then performed (Hagerman 2018; Lewis 2003; Randolph 2012). Other studies examine how the beliefs and ideas that comprise Whiteness intersect with those about gender, class, and nationhood (Frankenberg 1993, 2001; Twine 1996). As a whole, the sociology of whiteness reveals the extent to which Whites are ideologically and materially invested in maintaining whiteness (see Liptsitz 1998; Twine and Gallagher 2008). Yet critics have argued that, with few exceptions, sociology treats the category of White "as an immutable, bounded, and cohesive category" and one that is explicitly associated with racism and discrimination (Niemonen 2010:64). This has produced a tendency to empty whiteness of any varied cultural or social importance beyond that which is socially destructive (McDermott and Samson 2005).

But some scholars such as Duster (2001) urge us to conceptualize the category of White, and the system to which it belongs, as fluid, shifting, and transformational. Still, few works heed this call to consider whiteness as a complicated, conditional, and even contradictory phenomenon (for exceptions see Hartigan, Jr. 2005; Hartmann et al. 2009; McDermott 2020). More commonly, sociological research centers Whites' racial attitudes and opinions, especially those attitudes and opinions toward non-White groups (Lewis 2004), with an overwhelming focus on Whites' colorblindness. This focus on colorblindness often fails to consider other, confounding findings about Whites' racial attitudes. For example, Jardina (2019) examines data from the American National Election Studies surveys, revealing that Whites' in-group attitudes are not synonymous with prejudice, and that a strong sense of in-group White identity does not lead to strong out-group attitudes. Indeed, many Whites that identify strongly with their racial group do so without feeling strong prejudice toward out-groups. Jardina's (2019) scholarship helps throw into sharp relief how Whites' dominant group status shapes a range of attitudes Whites hold about themselves and their relationship to non-White groups. Yet, there remains a need to examine whether and how Whites root their understanding of large-scale social, political, and economic transformations and their dominant group status within their immediate contexts, including where they live (see McDermott and Samson 2005).

The Absence of Place; or, Grounding Whiteness

Following Gieryn (2000), this proposed study defines **place** as having **(1)** a geographic location, **(2)** material form, and **(3)** investment with meaning and value. Place stabilizes and gives durability to social structural categories, differences, and hierarchies; arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction; and embodies and secures cultural norms, identities, memories, moral judgments, and values (Gieryn 2000).

However, despite its clear role in shaping social life, place is often given curt treatment by sociology. This is in part due to the general concern that "the particularities of discrete places might

compromise the generalizing and abstracting ambitions of the discipline" (Gieryn 2000:464). The

prevailing belief seems to be that place is either a confounding factor that should be controlled away, or a

benign backdrop on which decidedly more important social processes play out (Griffin 2001; Robinson

2014). The first assumption has led to a scarcity of theorizing on place. The second has produced an

excess of sociological research within urban centers like Chicago and New York, at the expense of non-

urban places and locales, including much of the American South.

The relative inattention given to place within these studies extends to the sociology of race and to

whiteness studies. Sociologists often speak of whiteness in broad terms, e.g. "White racial attitudes"

(McDermott 2011; Quillian 1996). More recent research has begun to map the intersections between

Whites' racialized experiences and other axes of difference (Isenberg 2017; Newitz and Wray 1996). Yet,

with few exceptions these studies fail to examine the extent to which White experiences exist outside of a

static, racially monolithic context (Lewis 2004). Yet as George Lipsitz writes, "opportunities in this

society are both racialized and spatialized" and "the interconnections among race, place, and power in the

United States have a long history" (2007:12). Historically, violent conflicts have broken out around where

one lives, where one works, what schools are available, and where someone is allowed to be (Mills 1999).

And local understandings of whiteness vary, reflecting the "racial ecology of a community or region"

(McDermott and Samson 2005, 247). This is why sociological research needs to examine how Whites

understand their place in the racial hierarchy through their relationship to those communities and regions

(Bonnett 1997; Hoelscher 2003; Roediger 2002).

Some recent scholarship focuses on Whites living in urban areas (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Lamont

2000; McDermott 2006). Yet few of these studies actually interrogate the role of place in how Whites

make sense of their racial subjectivity. Furthermore, with few exceptions, contemporary sociological

research on Whiteness has ignored the American South altogether (see Shirley 2010). The lack of

contemporary sociological attention to White southerners is troubling given the region's racial legacy and

its current racial landscape (Shirley 2010; Griffin 2001). For many scholars and laypeople alike, the 'South' exists only "as a region in our collective imaginary, a metaphor that obscures as much as it reveals" (Kelley 2017:4). Yet the American South is both the nation's most populous region as well as its most racially diverse. Consequently, the economic, political, and cultural events of the new century have played out in sharp relief within this region. We have seen increased and public violence at the southern border by the federal government (and protests against that violence), and witnessed the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, as well as the continued failure of federal and local government to respond to Katrina's aftermath. Precisely because – ultimately and tragically - the American South has profoundly shaped national conceptions of racial differences, the region continues to serve as the nation's crucible of race (Hoelscher 2003, 663). For these reasons, the American South is the place where sociology must turn in order to understand modern racial formations, including whiteness (Hale 1999; Hoelscher 2003; Williamson 1984).

Theoretical Framing

Scholars of race and racism generally agree that, as social phenomena, racial categories are produced by, and respond to, historically specific social systems (Fredrickson 2015; HoSang, LaBennett, and Pulido 2012; Omi and Winant 2014). Likewise, the contexts in which Whites are situated influence how they think about and make sense of their racial subjectivity (Allen and Perry 2012; Hartigan, Jr. 2005; McDermott and Samson 2005). The economic, political, and social transformations of the new century, the relationship these transformations have to Whites' ongoing racial formation, and the relationship between that racial formation and place, are all of considerable scholarly interest in their own right. The ambitious goal of this proposed study, however, is to describe and explain their intersections. To do so, this proposed study draws upon the theoretical tradition of **racial formation theory (RFT)** to advance what the PI terms **'whiteness-in-crisis'.**

Racial Formation Theory

For racial formation theorists, race operates at the crossroads between social structure and experience. Race is both historically determined and continuously being made and remade in everyday life. In this sense, race is simultaneously a part of everyday life, as well as historically embedded within our social structures and institutions (Omi and Winant 2014). RFT, then, is an appropriate theoretical framework for examining how race assumes a given reality, or significance, in a specific moment and social setting (Omi and Winant 2014). Briefly, RFT posits that race consists of an "unstable and de-centered complex of social meanings constantly transformed by political struggle," (Omi and Winant 2014, 68-69). A **racial formation** refers to the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed," (Omi and Winant 2014, 55). Racial projects are the building blocks of racial formations. A **racial project** is simultaneously "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines," (Omi and Winant 2014, 56). Racial projects connect what race means to how social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon those meanings.

Whiteness-in-Crisis: A 21ˢᵗ Century Racial Project

Whiteness-in-crisis is theorized as a specific racial project of the new century. According to RFT, at any particular time there is a dominant form of whiteness that shapes how Whites 'do race' (see Lewis 2004). The new century is one marked by increasing economic and social instability, as well as political struggle, including ongoing social movements centered on challenging the dominance of whiteness. This proposed research theorizes that this instability and political struggle is creating a crisis that shapes how Whites 'do race.' This crisis consists "precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass" (Gramsci 1971:276). It is this

confluence of instability, struggle, and ongoing contestation of whiteness as neither as normative or as positive to Whites in particular, that makes this moment ripe for analysis.

Whiteness-in-crisis is grounded in five social facts. **First**, whiteness in the twenty-first century is neither as normative or as positive as in previous eras. Due to the advent of new media technologies, including social media, White people today appear to be feeling the gaze of their non-White peers with increasing intensity (Alcoff 2015). Likewise, these technologies aid in increasing social scrutiny on the events, policies, legal constructions, and informal social arrangements through which Whiteness "has come to secure a synonymy with power" (Noe 2020:293). As Whites' hegemonic status comes under such scrutiny, Whiteness is characterized more and more by an awareness of its own internal contradictions (Newitz 1996:133). These contradictions manifest in intra-racial conflict (e.g. White trash), fears of becoming strangers in their own land (see Metzl 2020), and a severe sense of guilt caused by the acknowledgement of White racism, including Whites' complicity in it (Newitz 1996).

Secondly, the extent to which whiteness confers advantages in the new century, material or otherwise, is mediated by other phenomena more so than in previous eras. This is not to suggest that White material advantage doesn't exist, or that White material advantage is declining. Yet Whites' experiences with whiteness are context-specific, making Whites' access to the 'wages of whiteness' uneven. So the extent to which White people enjoy similar advantages is a relational matter that, to date, is too easily dismissed or undertheorized (see Duster 2001).

Thirdly, Whites' implicit or explicit expectations for segregated neighborhoods, schools, or even cityscapes are decreasing as the boundaries that demarcate traditional Whites-only spaces are blurred in some instances, and completely recast in others. Today, Whites are more, rather than less, likely to have interracial contact than in previous eras, rendering the idea that whiteness might remain the unmarked, invisible norm "bizarre in the extreme" (Frankenberg 2001:76).

Fourthly, recent patterns in racial classifications and identifications complicate how Whites

understand the concept of race, including their dominant status within the racial hierarchy. For example, Latinos increasingly choose to identify as White (Stokes-Brown 2012), and racial classifications shift to incorporate previously excluded groups (Miyawaki 2015). When this happens, these racialized people bring with them ideas about their old and new racial categories that affect how each is understood, both more broadly and in relationship to one another.

Finally, whiteness is a locally contingent experience fundamentally grounded in place (Bonnett 1996; Hartigan, Jr. 2005). Yet the 'local' dimension of whiteness has received relatively little attention within the sociology of race. Instead, the sociology of race speaks of whiteness in broad terms that reproduce essentialist understandings of racial categories, even as the field explicitly rails against essentialism (see Hughey 2012). While some research examines how Whites' racialized experiences intersect with other categories of difference (Frankenberg 1993; Isenberg 2017), there remains a dearth of understanding regarding the relationship of race to place.

As a specific racial project, **whiteness-in-crisis** examines the significant moments and events that mark the new century - from the Wars on Terror and Drugs, to an economic recession and slow recovery, to the emergence of White nationalist populism, and now a global pandemic. These events represent a series of "social, economic, and political forces" that have disrupted and challenged Whites' everyday, or common-sense, understanding of America's racialized social structure, including the hegemonic status of whiteness (see Omi and Winant 1994). As challenges to whiteness, these moments have coincided with increasing economic change and insecurity, as well as the restructuring of the racial/ethnic demography of the United States. This includes but is not limited to the emergence of new Census-defined racial and ethnic categories, and contestations over the meanings of those new categories (see Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003). Today more than ever, "as Whites respond to the identity vacuum, to increased (and politicized) encounters within institutions, and to general challenges to White domination" it is possible to observe a growing self-awareness among Whites of their whiteness (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003, 16;

see also Gallagher 1995; Saito 1995). What this study proposes is an examination of *how* they are coming to terms with their whiteness amidst these large-scale disruptions.

To summarize, the instability and political struggle that defines the first decades of this new century calls into question the underlying ideology of Whiteness, and subsequently shapes how Whites are 'doing race' today. Moreover, how Whites 'do race' today is, in part, rooted in the places they inhabit (Hartigan, Jr. 2005; Hoelscher 2003). Local understandings of Whiteness vary, and reflect the "racial ecology of a community or region" (McDermott and Samson 2005, 247).

Research Design

This proposed study aims to put flesh-to-bone to **'whiteness-in-crisis'** as a specific racial project of the new century. Through in-depth, qualitative interviews with young White southerners between 18 and 35 years old residing across two distinct southern locales, this study attempts to answer the following research questions: **(RQ1)** How, in an era where Whites' dominant status is increasingly scrutinized, are these White southerners making sense of their dominant racial group status? And **(RQ2),** what are the contexts and experiences that White southerners draw upon when making sense of their dominant group status? In-depth qualitative interviews are an ideal method for this proposed study, in that such interviews can identify the range and diversity of understandings young White southerners have toward their dominant group status. They also allow for respondents to elaborate on their experiences, and identify those experiences that are most important in how they make sense of their whiteness. Moreover, in-depth interviews can help illuminate the cultural and ideological structures that condition, constrain, and define respondents' ideologies and world views (Hartmann et al. 2009; Stinchcombe 1986).

Sampling Procedures

This study proposes a purposive, non-probability sampling design that aims to maximize the diversity and

range of White southerners' contexts and experiences that shape how they understand their racial status. To begin, the PI will construct a sampling frame of ~2,000 randomly-selected households from two southern places – Memphis, Tennessee and Oxford, Mississippi. Each household will receive a mailed invitation to complete a short online pre-screener about an unspecified "social issue." To increase participation, the invitation will include a $2 cash incentive. This pre-screener will gather key demographic information, including respondents' year of birth, gender, race, marital status, number of children, education, religious affiliation, political orientation, and political ideology. It will also ask respondents to identify their geographic place of origin, and length of residency in their current location. This will allow for the PI to construct a sample of Whites born, raised, and living in the American South, rather than just Whites who happen to currently reside in the American South.

Responses to the pre-screener will be used to build a sample approximating the distribution of Whites across those pre-screened characteristics (see Bruce 2020). To encourage continued participation, those invited to participate in interviews will receive $25 in compensation for their time. While the total number of interview respondents will not be known until the sampling strategy is complete, the PI anticipates a large interview study ($N > 200$) in order to capture the full range and diversity of the contexts and experiences that shape young White southerners' racial subjectivity.

Participants for this study will reside in one of two locales: Memphis, Tennessee and Oxford, Mississippi. These two sites were selected based upon their convenience, their distinct socio-demographic contrasts, and recent anti-racist mobilization around their respective Confederate iconography. Memphis is a majority-Black urban city in the southwestern corner of Tennessee. Oxford is a majority-White southern college town in northwest Mississippi, approximately 70 miles southeast of Memphis. The PI lives and works in Oxford, and has consistent access to, and a strong familiarity with, the city of Memphis.

While the two sites offer important socio-demographic contrasts, they also offer interesting

comparisons (see Appendix, Table 2). 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 reversed. 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 have 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). Most

recently, multiracial coalitions involving a significant number of young White adults have mobilized in

both Memphis and Oxford against the continued presence of Confederate iconography in public spaces.

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 in how White southerners ground their sense of their dominant racial status can provide a to-date

missing analysis within RFT of the dynamic relationship between race and place.

The Need for a Two-Year Study

This project aims to collect data over the course of two years. Each spring semester the PI teaches an

Honors-level, advanced undergraduate course entitled "The Color Line in the Twenty-First Century"

through the University of Mississippi's Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC). This

course will serve as the basis for teaching and training undergraduate students in social scientific research

design, data collection, and data analysis. A two-year design is pragmatic, allowing for this project to

maximize data collection and data analysis. The proposed budget includes support for two graduate

research assistants. These researchers would assist in the training of undergraduate researchers in data

collection, analysis, and dissemination of the research findings, gaining their own mentoring experience

while also receiving training and mentoring from the PI. In this way, the two-year study design promotes

advanced training, professional development, and mentorship for both undergraduate and graduate

students.

Interview Methodology and Schedule

Once a sample is achieved, the PI and student researchers will proceed with in-depth qualitative

interviews. Such interviews are an ideal method for understanding how young White southerners think

about and process their sense of racial subjectivity, as well as for demonstrating both the intersections and

the paradoxes between ideas and cultural frames (Pugh 2013).

The interview schedule will include five sections. The first section consists of questions

concerning respondents' sense of their southern identity. What is the extent to which they think of

themselves as Southern? What does that identity means to them? And how do they think about it in

relationship to other identities they may have, including their racial identity? The second section consists

of questions aimed at probing respondents' memories and experiences of significant events over the past

two decades, including but not limited to: September 11th, the Wars on Terror and Drugs, Hurricane

Katrina, the Obama presidency, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

The third section consists of questions about the respondents' 'life history' with the race concept.

To what extent did they talk about race while growing up, in school, or with friends? And what they can

recall about these conversations? Many of these questions will center on localizing respondents' life

history with the race concept, asking them to talk about the extent to which these discussions were rooted

in particular understandings of place (see Bevan 2014).

The fourth section consists of questions about the respondents' present experience with the race concept. What are some recent experiences and conversations they have had about race, or where race played a major role? What happened, who was involved, and what they can remember about how race was talked about? Again, emphasis will be put toward the localness of these present experiences, including recent local events where race takes center stage. The final section of the interview schedule focuses on respondents' reflections on the significance of race in their life today. What, if any, significance they give toward their group's dominant racial status? How does the significance they give toward their group's dominant racial status align with how they think about what it means to be southern?

Data Collection

Students researchers will be paired in teams of two at the start of each semester. Following roughly four weeks of intensive training in research design and interview methods, each team will be assigned a sub-section of the sample of interview respondents. Teams will spend approximately 6 to 10 hours per week interviewing respondents. The PI and two graduate student researchers will assist undergraduate teams in their interviews. The PI anticipates that each spring semester will yield a minimum of eight (8) teams, that each team will complete at least one interview per week for the remaining ten weeks of the semester, and that by the end of the semester each team will have completed at least ten (10) interviews. At this pace, each cohort of undergraduate students should yield a total of approximately 80 completed interviews. The PI and two graduate students will interview participants throughout the year.

Data Analysis

To facilitate data reduction without sacrificing analytic rigor, the analysis of interview data will involve NVivo QDA software, and use a 'flexible coding' strategy. Flexible coding entails three types of code:

attributes, index codes, and analytic codes. Attributes are the salient personal characteristics of respondents: the "demographic and structural independent variables that [are] posited to shape the qualitative topic of study" (Deterding and Waters 2018:17). Index codes represent large chunks of text and correspond to the topics within the interview schedule and key concepts under examination. Index coding is key for data reduction of large *n* qualitative datasets, and allows for the construction and application of more fine-grained codes to sections of each interview. Finally, analytic codes integrate emergent findings with previous scholarship, and represent the concepts to explore in a single article-length manuscript.

The first step is to set up the database within NVivo that will house the interview transcripts, and connect each transcript to our list of attributes. Once the interview transcripts are complete and the formal NVivo attribute database is set up, the PI, students, and research associates will collectively read the transcripts for the 'main stories' in the data. We will begin coding by applying index codes to the text. We will write respondent memos and cross-case conceptual memos. We will also begin to discuss and develop ideas about the transcripts. Indexing and memo-writing in this stage will generate a list of concepts and relationships between them help to describe multiple cases, and the contours of conceptual relationships. We will begin to develop hypotheses about the relationships between our White respondents' attributes, and the contexts and experiences they draw upon when making sense of their own racial subjectivity.

Initial thematic memos serve as the basis for analytic codes. From the initial index, analytic codes will be applied to the dataset for analysis. The index code will display relevant sections of the transcripts, allowing for the research team to apply analytic codes one or two at a time. This will help maximize the purchase of each analytic concept across the dataset. The PI, undergraduate students, and research associates will use the query functions in NVivo to identify what if any typologies can help further organize and reduce the data. Creating typologies will help to generalize from concrete cases by

constructing a common core within a set of cases (Weiss 1995).

Once hunches about the stories are built into the data (indexing), and once analytic codes are applied across the body of the data, the final stage of analysis involves examining just how deeply the stories are grounded in the data. NVivo facilitates this final stage of 'flexible coding' by helping to identify trends across cases, investigate alternative explanations, and also locate disconfirming cases and evidence that help refine the theoretical explanation (Deterding and Waters 2018:24).

Throughout the coding process, the PI and students will note those sections of interview transcripts where respondents are especially eloquent. We will apply special codes to these sections for easier data retrieval later. By using the query function in NVivo, we can identify the overlap of these moments with analytic codes. These then become the basis for deciding which quotes to include in our analysis.

Flexible coding helps to construct an account of the data that meets the threshold for theoretical validity (Deterding and Waters 2018:23). Respondent-level and cross-case memos in the first stage of analysis generate hunches about what investigators see as the important stories in the data. After applying analytic codes across the entire body of interview data, the PI and students will be able to use NVivo to examine how grounded the stories are in the dataset. The PI and students will be able to query trends across cases, systematically consider alternative explanations, and systematically locate disconfirming evidence. Flexible coding, then, provides a more complete way of accounting for spectacular events without overly stressing them; and ensuring that the PI and students do not discount data that diverges from the patterns (Lamont and White 2008). Finally, flexible coding also facilitates data transparency, and provides ample opportunity for secondary analysis.

Challenges and Limitations

Training undergraduate students in research design and methods, conducting in-depth interviews, and interview analysis are all time-consuming endeavors that require patience and precision. The proposed

study's aim to accomplish all three of these goals for two separate cohorts of undergraduate students is ambitious. Challenges notwithstanding, there are two reasons for believing such an ambitious research proposal is feasible.

First, the PI has taught Honors-level experiential learning courses for three consecutive years. In these courses, students receive hands-on instruction in research design and methods, collect original data using interview methods, and analyze that interview data as a group. To date, the PI has taught these courses without the benefit of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), and without the support of full-time graduate research assistants. The proposed budget includes funding for a QDAS program the PI has used for previous research and publications. This program will improve the efficiency and rigor of interview coding, especially given the proposed number of interviews for this project. The use of QDAS will also improve undergraduate teaching and learning by facilitating more intense collaboration throughout the entire coding process. The proposed budget also includes funding for two graduate students to assist the PI in the training of undergraduates, and in the collection and analysis of interview data. Having a team of research associates dedicated to this research project will undoubtedly improve both the training and teaching of undergraduate students, the systematic collection and analysis of interview data, and the professional development of the graduate students.

A second reason why this proposed study is likely to succeed is the support available to the PI through the PI's home institution. The PI has a number of affiliations across the University of Mississippi, including its Center for the Study of Southern Culture, and the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC). The Center for the Study of Southern Culture provides an intellectual haven where the PI can, sharpen their own analytical focus on the role of the American South in rooting Whites' sense of their own racial subjectivity. Meanwhile, the mission of the SMBHC is to prepare citizen scholars committed to the public good and driven to find solutions to our most pressing problems. Students enrolled in the PI's course are overwhelmingly SMBHC undergraduate students. These students are high-

performing: for the past two years the incoming freshmen cohorts have averaged a 31 ACT composite

score and a 3.95 High School GPA. The SMBHC's explicit focus on community engagement, combined

with the intellectual rigor of its student body, strongly suggest that students enrolled in the PI's course will

possess the requisite work ethic and commitment required to make this proposed study successful.

Dissemination Plan

The PI anticipates the findings from this research will result in the publication of one book-length

monograph, and several research articles in academic, peer-reviewed journals. The PI has a strong record

of scholarly publication, and of translating their research for non-academic audiences. The PI has written

for such mainstream outlets as *The Washington Post,* and has had their research featured in popular press

outlets like *The New Yorker, Pacific Standard, Slate,* and *Inside Higher Ed*. The PI is currently a

contributing columnist for *The Mississippi Free Press,* where they write on the intersections of race,

politics, and culture. The PI anticipates that over the course of this research project they will share their

analysis through these more mainstream outlets. Along with the dissemination of findings, the PI is

committed to making the data collected for this study available for secondary analysis. Data in the form of

de-identified interview transcripts with attribute and index codes will be made publicly available through

Open Science Framework at the end of the two-year study.

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Appendix

Table 1: Proposed Work Plan

I am requesting support for research that will take place over two years, from January 2022 through

December 2023. Below is a detailed work plan.

	2022	**2023**
January	• Honors-level seminar begins • Train first cohort of students on research design and methodology	• Honors-level seminar begins • Train first cohort of students on research design and methodology
February-April	• Eight teams, of two students per team, engage in fieldwork and data collection • Transcription of interviews • Set up NVivo attribute database	• Eight teams, of two students per team, engage in fieldwork and data collection • Transcription of interviews • Upload transcripts and respondent information to NVivo database
April-May	• Indexing of interview data • Memo-writing • Development of initial analytic codes	• Indexing of interview data using flexible coding • Memo-writing • Refinement of analytic codes; development of additional analytic codes based on new data
June-August	• Independent study option for undergraduate students • Data collection and analysis ongoing with undergraduate and graduate student researchers • Identification of common case typologies through application of analytic codes • Identification of trends across cases, alternative explanations, and disconfirming cases	• Independent study option for undergraduate students • Data collection and analysis ongoing with undergraduate and graduate student researchers • Refinement of case typologies • Continue to identify trends, alternative explanations, and disconfirming cases and refinement of theoretical explanation
September-December	• Independent study option for undergraduate students • Data collection and analysis ongoing with undergraduate and graduate student researchers • Drafting of first manuscript for submission to peer-reviewed journal, in collaboration with graduate student researchers. • Submission of first editorial to mainstream press outlet based on research findings	• Independent study option for undergraduate students • Finalize data collection and analysis with undergraduate and graduate student researchers • Drafting of second manuscript for submission to peer-reviewed journal, in collaboration with graduate student researchers • Submission of second editorial to mainstream press outlet based on research findings • Preparation of book manuscript prospectus and sample chapter for consideration with university press • Upload interview dataset with attribute and index codes to Open Science Framework for secondary analysis

Table 2: Socioeconomic Characteristics of Oxford, MS and Memphis, TN

ACS 2019 5-Year Estimates	Oxford, MS	Memphis, TN	USA
Total Population	26,962	651,932	324,697,795
Share of population that is:			
White, non-Hispanic	68.9%	25.7%	60.7%
Black or African American	24.4%	63.8%	12.3%
Hispanic or Latino	2.1%	7.2%	18.0%
Median Household Income	$44,283	$41,228	$62,843
White	$52,500	$60,782	$66,536
Black	$26,886	$32,779	$41,935
White-to-Black HI Ratio	195%	185%	159%
Poverty Rate	30.2%	25.1%	13.4%
White	27.4%	14.1%	11.2%
Black	40.4%	29.9%	23.0%
White-to-Black Poverty Ratio	68%	47%	49%
Near-Poor (under 200% FPL)	45.2%	48.6%	30.9%
Child Poverty (under 18 years)	22.2%	40.8%	18.5%
Educational Attainment			
Share of population with:			
Less than HS	6.2%	14.3%	12.0%
HS Diploma	37.5%	59.5%	55.9%
Bachelor's or Better	56.3%	26.2%	32.2%
Unemployment Rate	6.0%	8.7%	5.3%
White	4.2%	3.9%	4.5%
Black	10.9%	11.6%	9.5%
White-to-Black UE Ratio	38%	34%	47%