Superposition strategies: How and why White people say contradictory things about race

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Due to the centrality of race and racism in social, economic, and political life, coupled with the racially privileged position of White people, the assessment of White racial attitudes is an ongoing concern. There is a great deal of survey-based, quantitative work that demonstrates a compelling case of White attitudinal polarization—a grouping of authoritarian, racist attitudes versus another alliance of progressive, antiracist attitudes—an increasingly racialized culture war. However, other studies, largely qualitative and open-ended, demonstrate the heterogeneous, shifting, and hypocritical nature of White discourse about race. To resolve this paradox, I refrain from the assumption that White racial "attitudes" are essentially bifurcated, while I also refuse the contention that White people produce spontaneous narratives whole-cloth. Rather, I argue that with sustained attention to time, context, and triangulation, we can better understand how and why White people speak of People of Color in positive ways one moment and negative the next, marshaling both to defend, rationalize, or improve their racialized subject position. I argue that these contradictions are—à la Schrödinger's famous thought experiment—"superposition strategies." Both racist and antiracist attitudes are simultaneously alive and dead in the same individual or group. Contradictory White discourse helps maintain a sense of self-efficacy and coherent White racial identity within conflictual and politically supercharged social situations, as well as within racially unequal social structures.

attitudes | bifurcation | identity | race | Whiteness

In 2017 I spoke with "James," a 46-y-old White man who held a graduate degree, identified as an independent, and worked as a construction manager. Sitting together in a suburban café near Washington, DC, James offered a racist stereotype to defend the sparsity of Latino employees in his firm. "Latinos are lazy," James quietly told me, "I mean, my experiences tell me … they don't want to put in the work. There's always an excuse. Everything is 'mañana, mañana, mañana'." Yet, only 20 min later James reversed himself. After expressing frustration with employee motivation to accomplish unpleasant tasks, James stated, "Latinos will do the difficult jobs. They don't complain about getting down and dirty … White employees will push back. Not the Latinos, though. They do the tough work."* Such drastically oscillating attitudes were echoed by "Abby," a 35-y-old Democrat with a graduate degree who worked as a high school teacher. Speaking outside of Jackson, Mississippi, in 2019, Abby outlined her distrust of "Asians": "They're a closed-off culture … they stick to themselves … I get a sneaky vibe, you know?" Only moments later, however, Abby altered tack: "I'll give it to them, they work hard to assimilate, they get good grades … I see why they're called the 'model minority.'"† How do we make sense of such divergent and contradictory, if not hypocritical, statements?‡

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*Interview with the author. July 2007; see ref. 1. University of Virginia Institutional Review Board (IRB) #2005-0330-00 and #2005-0334-00.

†Interview with the author. October 2019. This statement comes from a larger study of White organizations in the United States and the United Kingdom (University of Connecticut IRB #H19-056).

‡Throughout this article I use statements culled from my own research on Whiteness, which are for illustrative purposes only. All participants provided informed consent in research approved by the University of Virginia IRB #2005-0330-00 and #2005-0334-00 and the University of Connecticut IRB #H19-056 and #H15-331. Per IRB stipulations, transcriptions of interviews and fieldnotes are not accessible to others.

The centrality of race in social, economic, and political life, coupled with the still racially privileged position of the ethno-racial group of White people, makes the assessment of White racial attitudes an ongoing concern for social scientists (2–5). Much has been written about the complexity of White racial attitudes; there exist a host of assessments of White peoples' views on residential segregation, policing, health care, voting preference, friendship and marriage patterns, stratification beliefs, and more (6–12). On the surface, results indicate a compelling case of attitudinal polarization. Bookending a spectrum of responses to questions on race, authoritarian and racist attitudes on the right occur alongside progressive and antiracist attitudes on the left. This Janus-faced orientation reflects a politically fractured and dichotomous view of White attitudes in specific, if not White-dominated society writ large. The evidence is seemingly all around us: White worldviews on racialized matters have ossified into rather stable, if not intractable, political positions.

But what if this tale of two positions is oversimplified? As the aforementioned examples of "James" and "Abby" indicate, White people can speak of People of Color in positive ways one moment and negative the next, marshaling both to defend or rationalize their own racialized position in relation to employment, cultural belonging, policing, and more. Until qualitative and quantitative social scientific approaches take into account such a holistic model, the value and relevance of "attitudinal" research on race will remain blunted, if not exaggerated.

In my years of ethnographic analysis among all-White organizations in the mid-Atlantic, deep South, and New England of the United States, as well as in the United Kingdom, I have gained in-depth and sustained access to a chorus of White people that reflect diverse gendered, classed, political, and economic backgrounds. I certainly found the two camps of antagonistic attitudes to resemble a nouveau "culture war." But I also found evidence of rapidly changing attitudes, worldviews, and narratives that destabilize claims of a coherent, bifurcation of White racial attitudes. Moreover, the dominant theoretical approaches to White racial attitudes are ill-equipped to address why and how there is such fluidity, change, and contradictions within the same White individuals and groups, as well as how White identity formation serves to rationalize structural racism.

In what follows, I argue that the dominant approach to White racial attitudes—as reflections of anchored worldviews, predictions of future behavior, and as methods for gauging behavioral intervention—are unjustified. By pursuing a holistic approach of sustained attention to time, context, and triangulation, we can better understand how and why White people simultaneously speak of People of Color in positive and negative ways, marshaling both to defend or rationalize their own racially privileged status. I argue that these contradictory discursive positions are—à la Schrödinger's famous thought experiment—"superposition strategies." Both racist and antiracist attitudes are simultaneously alive and dead in the same individual or group. The relationship between discourse and White racial identity formation is key. Contradictory White discourse helps maintain a sense of self-efficacy and coherent White racial identity within conflictual and politically supercharged social situations, as well as within racially unequal social structures.

Research on White Racial Attitudes

The lion's share of work on White racial attitudes comes from survey research.[§] Over the 20th and into the 21st century, much ink has been spilled in attempts to plumb the depths of such White racial opinions, their causes, their variations, and their trends. One method, often favored by political scientists and sociologists, is a direct approach that measures racial attitudes via the presence of negative racial stereotypes. Included in instruments like the American National Election Study and the General Social Survey (GSS), rather candid survey questions inquire about the intelligence or laziness of "most Black people" (13–17). Following suit, other surveys ask respondents to rate their feelings toward different ethno-racial outgroups (18, 19).

There are also several indirect approaches. A growing cadre of social scientists assess White racial attitudes as reflecting a rise in "subtle," "color-blind," "laissez faire," or otherwise "modern" or "symbolic" forms of racism (13, 20, 21). Symbolic racism—defined as "a blend of anti-Black" affect and the kind of traditional American moral values embodied in the Protestant Ethic" (22)—explains White peoples' increasing support for abstract principles of racial equality, while also addressing their simultaneous opposition to policies to achieve that equality. This is appropriately called the "principle–policy" gap.

Another approach decidedly rejects the symbolic racism camp and argues that ostensibly "nonracial" politics, human nature, and moral orientations toward liberty and individualism guide White opinions (8, 23, 24).[¶] In this approach, one measures White racial attitudes through a combination of explanations for racial disparities and feelings of resentment over government assistance to Black people (e.g., questions like "Should Black people work their way-up without special favors?"): what are often called "racial resentment" items (22, 25–28). As Sniderman and Carmines wrote in *Reaching Beyond Race* (17), "debate over racial policy is driven primarily by conflict over what government should try to do, and only secondarily over what it should try to do for Black people." Similarly, drawing from Blumer's notion of "prejudice as a sense of group position" (29), others contend that "White people will oppose affirmative action not so much because they see a race-based policy as contravening their loftiest values or because they have learned a new, politically relevant set of resentments of Black people; but rather because they perceive Black people as

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[§]With roots in late 19th century British and American social reformer activism, the US government adopted survey methodology by the 1930s in order to document economic and social conditions, race figuring prominently among these. In the same decade, survey research entered the mainstream with attempts to predict voting behavior. *Literary Digest* conducted a survey of potential voters in the presidential election of 1936 (Alf Landon versus Franklin Roosevelt). *Literary Digest*, with a small sample size, predicted a lopsided Landon win. However, George Gallup publicly criticized the methods of *Literary Digest* and nearly guaranteed a large win by Roosevelt. Advertisers and academics soon seized upon surveys for both marketing and research on mass media, although modern survey research has only recently been able to rely on complex samples. As Michael Ornstein wrote, "The first standard texts on survey sampling appeared in the 1950s . . . but the practical methods for estimating errors in complex samples only came into view in the 1970s . . . and they were not incorporated in standard survey analysis software until the mid-2000s (11). See also ref. 12.

[¶]For example, after asking the following question, "On the average (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people. Do you think these differences are . . ." the GSS then offers a range of options, from societal explanations (e.g., "Mainly due to discrimination?") and genetic explanations ("Because most have less in-born ability to learn?") to structural explanations (e.g., "Because most don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty?"), and individualist explanations (e.g. "Because most just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty?").

competitive threats for valued social resources, statuses, and privileges" (30).

Scholars working in the "social dominance theory" tradition favor a different approach altogether. They contend that White people easily map racial animus onto more general dynamics, such as in-group favoritism, ethnocentrism, or group superiority. This approach emphasizes the psychological drive toward domination and the sociological factors that legitimate racial inequality. Recently, a revised version of the social dominance scale shows that White beliefs in dominance correspond to harsher prejudice measures and policy attitudes, while the beliefs in inequality or antiegalitarian beliefs correspond with more subtle levels of prejudice (31, 32).

Research on "implicit bias" largely abandons direct measurement of White racial attitudes in favor of studying how latent cognitive prejudices and affective mechanisms drive both discriminatory speech and actions (19, 33–37). Scholars have documented that White people generally have more positive associations with both the color white and White-racialized phenomena, from neighborhoods to potential romantic partners, than the color black and Black-racialized phenomena (38–41).

What's With the Attitude?

Despite no accepted convention that integrates its definition and measurement, the concept of the "attitude" is a social science staple.[#] This was not always the case. In the 1920s there were tensions between the functionalist examination of society as the sum of institutions that meet people's needs and the operationalist analysis of society in which every concept must have an empirical referent (43, 44). Attitudinal surveys emerged as a compromise; attitudes could be used as reflections of both utilitarian impulses and observable behaviors (45). Hence, Louis Thurstone's 1928 paper, "Attitudes can be measured," proposed "a method whereby the distribution of attitude of a group on a specified issue may be represented in the form of a frequency distribution" (46). Now classic studies on attitudes indicate an early quest to forecast White responses to racialized phenomena. For example, Stouffer et al.'s study of 1940s White military troops' orientations toward the integration of the armed forces or the immense measurement of White responses toward "the Negro problem" within Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (47, 48).

Survey research on White attitudes has grown increasingly sophisticated since the 1940s, as the aforementioned section details. Particular insights have been gleaned in the study of racial attitudes and voting behavior, as well as in laboratory studies that isolate discrete variables (49, 50). Yet, several untenable conclusions remain common place. First, each decade of research indicates that the ability of White attitudes to predict racialized, if not racist or discriminatory, behavior is murky at best. Using attitudes as a crystal ball for divining the future behavior of White people, especially when related to racialized issues, is notoriously unreliable (51–53). Second, there is little justification for reifying White racial attitudes as coherent predispositions. High rates of "response instability," various "biases" (recall, observer, attention, expectation, and so forth), and "measurement effects," may stem from the fact that many White people do not possess the kind of stable and persistent

racial attitudes assumed (54–58). Moreover, the ever-shifting and contested boundaries of who counts as "White," alongside the hyperpoliticized and morally supercharged debates over White racial prestige and power, make for uneasy conclusions. The assumption of a secure constellation of attitudes about race is a retreat, especially within sociology, from a focus on the external causes of action and order toward psychological dispositions as "residues of experience" (59).[||] Third, those wishing to intervene in White racial behaviors deemed prejudicial, discriminatory, or racist may assume a theoretical orientation in which attitudes must change before behavior does. This tendency may itself stem from racism. Historically, White behaviors are assumed rooted in intellectual, cognitive mechanisms, opposed to the causality afforded to People of Color's supposed cultural dysfunctions and pathological bodies. Simply put, many assumed the mind governed White people's actions while backward cultures and inferior biology drove People of Color's behaviors (63–65).

I intend neither to explicate the differences among competing definitions and measures of attitudes nor to claim that studying White racial attitudes *ipso facto* is misguided. Rather, I caution the normative overreach of interpretation concerning attitudes. In turn, I urge a stance of epistemological and methodological humility so as to recognize antagonistic discourse as a process of White racial identity formation which in turn helps legitimate racial inequality.

Alteration, Bifurcation, and Contradiction amid White Racial Attitudes

The miscellany of White racial attitudes themselves reflect the aforementioned diverse scholarly evaluations. White opinions on racial matters have become seemingly more sophisticated, heterogenous, and perplexing, which is made all the more curious by their oscillation between established trends and seemingly arbitrary changes or reversals. For instance, in 1972, less than 15% of White people in the United States supported school integration, but a sea change was witnessed by the mid-1980s, whereby more than 90% of White people came to support school integration (66). In 1990 only 10% of White people said they agreed with living in a neighborhood where "half of your neighbors were Black people." By 2018 that number rose significantly, but only to 28%.[**] And while White support for Black Lives Matter swelled from 2017 to early 2020, it began to decrease in late 2020 and has kept declining through 2021 (67).

Increased attention is now paid to growing attitudinal polarization in general, and White racial polarization in specific (68–72). Across the varied scholarly camps, many now assert that White attitudes reflect two polarities of decidedly "racist" and "antiracist" worldviews that correlate with political party affiliation, media preferences, gun ownership, education level, and a host of other variables (73–78). The narrative of White polarization has become a social schema in its own right. For example, social geographer Alastair Bonnett writes that "the story of anti-racism is staged with melodrama, the characters presented as heroes and villains: pure anti-racists versus pure

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[#]Consider that there are a plethora of competing definitions and rationales for measurement. For example, one attempt to survey just one aspect of social attitudes (stereotyping) contained more than 15,000 references (42).

[||]This point recalls Herbert Blumer's claim that the "attitude" concept "presupposes a fallacious picture of human action" and George Homans view that social scientific claims are often little more than "psychological propositions about the behavior of men rather than about societies or other social groups as such" (60–62).

[**]GSS Data Explorer (https://gss.norc.org/get-the-data).

racists, good against evil" (78). Sociologist Jack Niemonen remarks that we often "paint a picture of social reality in which battle lines are drawn, the enemy identified, and the victims sympathetically portrayed ... [distinguishing] between 'good' whites and 'bad' whites" (79). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, former president of the American Sociological Association, argues that social scientists often employ a dichotomous framework to sort their data: "Hunting for 'racists' is the sport of choice of those who practice the 'clinical approach' to race relations—the careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans" (21).

Extant literature on White racial attitudes does well in theorizing how and why race remains such a salient issue among White people, with particular attention to White prejudicial and discriminatory words and behavior. Yet, these approaches rarely advance holistic accounts for rapid attitudinal changes or the simultaneous expression of attitudinal contradictions and inconsistencies. Moreover, most scholarship claims that White racial social groups reflect a White racial "culture war": two stable and coherent social polarities with antagonistic worldviews. Yet, that same scholarship cannot account for when, how, or why both White individuals or groups may shift and change to simultaneously express heterogenous—even bluntly contradictory—attitudes and political positions. These changes, possible duplicities, ideological ruptures, or strategic choices, are not well-captured by surveys, questionnaires, and sampling techniques that allow for quantitative generalization to a larger population.

Superposition Strategies
I do not reject the existence of polarized White orientations. Dichotomized attitudes certainly do exist. But they are a small part of the story. These contradictory positions might be called "superpositions," based on Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment: that is, antagonistic positions exist within the same White individuals and White social groups. Greatly oversimplified, Schrödinger wanted to know when a quantum system (like an atom or photon) stopped existing in "superposition" (or contradictory states) and began to behave in a more conventional manner. Schrödinger imagined a cat, a bottle of poison, and a decaying radioactive atom unobserved inside a box. Once the atom decayed it would trigger the bottle to break, releasing the poison and killing the cat. Schrödinger argued that since the decaying atom was in superposition, so was the cat; the cat must be assumed simultaneously alive and dead (80).[††] Schrödinger's analogy is still referenced in situations involving problems of measurement. Here, it serves my purpose to direct attention toward how White peoples' perspectives on race might occupy two seemingly opposite positions at the same time. Apropos Schrödinger, White racial discourse may exist in superposition.

We can refrain from the assumption that White racial attitudes are established and stable, as well as refuse the contention that White folks produce spontaneous narratives wholecloth. Moreover, we must not examine White people's stories or survey responses to questions regarding labor discrimination, affirmative action, or integration as reducible to atomized choices. Rather, we can approach such expressions with attention to the identity performances and social context in which they are voiced; discourse is constitutive of the identities that bespeak them and the contexts that host them. Hence, I contend we can examine White discursive changes and simultaneous inconsistencies as superposition strategies in the ongoing accomplishment of White racial identity, rather than misunderstandings of the methodological instrument, as data coded into "n/a" or "other," or as "outlier" responses destined for the land beyond two SDs.[‡‡]

I suggest three areas of attention essential to understanding this dynamic. When investigating how White people form opinions or attitudes on racialized matters, key questions must be addressed. First, has the researcher spent sufficient, sustained time with them? Second, has the researcher observed the subjects across varied social contexts? Third, has the researcher purposefully and appropriately triangulated their observations?

Time. In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote derisively of "car-window sociologists" (83). His less than subtle metaphor critiqued the tendency to quickly pass by a particular social formation, rather than stopping and engaging a social setting for an extended period of time. Studies with such fleeting and limited data collection fail in "unravelling the snarl of centuries" as Du Bois put it (83), yet are wrapped in the patina of science and objectivity. While there have been sufficient advances in the social sciences, and particularly incisive critiques of reductive and racist pseudoscience, there still exists a tendency (and financial incentive) to prefer quick, one-time passes in race-related research over temporally protracted research. As Theda Skocpol wrote of modern social scientific research, there remains a substantive "push toward atemporal correlation that we see in many survey-based statistical studies" as well as a "nearly exclusive focus on deliberate, short-termed individual maneuvers encouraged by game-theoretical approaches" (84).

Some phenomena are slow-moving, either in outcome or causal roots. Shaped by generational replacement, repercussions of policy shifts or economic conditions, interpersonal and organizational tensions, or the building of mass consensus and movements, there may not be a singular flashpoint undergirding behaviors and attitudes. Conversely, some White racial phenomena develop quickly and can appear sporadic and haphazard without sustained attention. With substantial time spent with research participants, we can view behavioral and discursive patterns, whether consistent or contradictory, as both "positive" and "negative" feedbacks in which people and groups either align or depart, respectively, from previous speech and behavior.

Regardless, without sustained attention, there are important long-term processes we fail to recognize. And what we do see, we misunderstand in our search for atomistic, temporarily isolated, moments of causality. For example, in a study of a White Nationalist organization in the mid-Atlantic United States, members not only pursued racist fantasies of an all-White America, but also often identified as victims of a politically correct, multicultural, anti-White culture. These emerge in what I have prior called a discourse of "white panic" (1). Sometimes this panic is attributable to one of many possible actors: from "Blacks," Democrats, government, "Hollywood elites," and "homosexuals," to immigrants, intellectuals, Jews, Muslims, and more. Other times, a completely

[††]Schrödinger's cat was not meant a promotion of superposition but rather an analogy *reductio ad absurdum*. However, the superposition critiqued by Schrödinger has since been advanced by some physicists, such as Albert Einstein, who wrote to Schrödinger, "your cat analogy shows that we are in complete agreement . . . a statistical ensemble that contains both systems with live cats and those with dead cats" (81).

[‡‡]For a germinal expression of this approach, see Hughey (82).

different actor, including White people perceived as "race traitors," is identified. Depending on the moment in which one surveys the group, one reaches very different conclusions.

However, when analyzed over time, the censure of particular "others" correlated not with media spectacles, generational cohorts, or economic conditions, but with what clique inside the organization was winning a status competition. Within that White Nationalist group, there was an ever-shifting claim over which person or faction performed "the right type of Whiteness as intersubjectively understood by others" (1). This idealized White racial performance was marked by the successful symbolic distance from both the supposed pathologies of "People of Color" and other White people who were thought either too sympathetic or similar to People of Color. Winning these status games resulted in sustained changes to the organization's specific policy orientations, the accepted or preferred forms and styles of activism, and who was recruited or pushed away. Otherwise contradictory statements and disorganized quarrels, when observed over time, were transformed into superposition strategies to pursue a specific ideal of White identity within a coherent and structured interaction order.

Varied longitudinal methods (e.g., panel studies, cohort studies, and retrospective studies) can often replace sustained contact. When we take only quick glances at the remarks or behavior of people, we can too easily calcify these singular moments of time, which we then aggregate and assemble as a skeleton, discarding those parts that we believe atypical or foreign, on which we hang the meat of our interpretations.

Context. The social sciences have attempted to either mitigate the role of context by controlling for context effects or used context as a variable on which to select cases for comparative analysis. Varied terms, such as culture, frame, schema, situation, worldview, and more are used in lieu of "context."[§§] Regardless of the nomenclature, the subject–context distinction is increasingly questioned in the wake of the postmodern turn: from neopositivist arguments that the meanings of social phenomena are essential to the objects themselves and can thus be examined, aggregated, and reported unproblematically, to more radical assertations, such as Deleuze and Guattari's contention, that social objects are little more than "assemblages" of heterogeneous meaning that have neither a cohesive center, nor a coherent direction, and are intractable from their already unstable contexts (88, 89). While there are a host of approaches, one cannot simply jettison the distinction between subject and context.

To document empirically how White superposition strategies unfold, it is necessary to prioritize the dynamics of White normativity. The dominance of Anglo-assimilative cultural norms, as well as the normativity of racial segregation, inequality, and discrimination, are part and parcel of the context of modernity: the "color-line belts the world," as Du Bois once put it (90). While rather obvious to some, the contextual dynamics of not just inequality or separation—but racism—can be nearly invisible to others, even as they dominate our investigations and structure the behavior and speech of the White racial subjects we examine. "Rather than something extraordinary or rare, racism is akin to the water in which fish swim" (91).

The relative inability, or unwillingness, to reckon with White normativity leads many White people to generate contradictory statements about race. For example, across varied ethnographic sites wherein I examined the processes of White racial identity formation, I repeatedly observed White people of all economic stripes, political classes, and educational levels voice the unsettled comment that People of Color are "taking over everywhere" or that White people are in cultural, social, and/or demographic "decline." Yet, these statements are often coupled to, sometimes only moments later, dejected remarks that they "just can't find any People of Color to hire," passionate wishes that their workplace, volunteer associations, or places of worship would "just admit one or two Black people" because we "need some diversity," and befuddled queries as to "Why don't Black people join our group?" or "Why don't Latinos want to move into our neighborhood?"

How can People of Color simultaneously be everywhere and nowhere? Such contradictions are a function of agnoiological dynamics. Ignorant of the continued significance of racial segregation (92–94), by inflating the presence of People of Color (especially African Americans in contexts of resource competition) (95, 96), and in fetishizing and tokenizing People of Color as objects for White racial credentialization (97–99), White people lift themselves out of material context and elevate themselves as the center around which all other racial subjectivities circulate. As Charles Mills wrote in "White ignorance" (100), such racialized worldviews are:

*... **difficult to escape, since it is not a matter of seeing the phenomenon with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things through the concept itself ... .** the concept is driving the perception, with whites aprioristically intent on denying what is before them [emphasis in original]. **So if Kant famously said that perceptions without concepts are blind, then here it is the blindness of the concept itself that is blocking vision.***

The primary conceptual assumptions undergirding the formation of White racial selves is knowledge of, and entitled control over, the context. But because they are unencumbered by the actual contextual realities of race, superposition strategies allow White people to place themselves both everywhere and nowhere, enabling the performance of a nimble and responsive identity. Depending upon the demands of the particular social situation, White people can advocate for and against integration or pine away for a racially diverse workplace and bemoan People of Color's "takeover." Researchers attuned to the racial dynamics of context will be better able to make befitting interpretations of what White people are doing with contradictory discourse. As Urpo Kovala stated, "Interpretation is always interpretation of something, and dualism is hard to evade ... context theories are always »there«, and if we do not tackle them, they may and will have the kinds of influence on us that we would not like it to have" (101).

Triangulation. Building on C. Wright Mill's advocacy for developing a "sociological imagination" (100), and Fredric Jameson's appeal for an "aesthetic" of "cognitive mapping," (102) we can embark on the attempt to construct a holistic account of racial

§§For more on the complexity of, and arguments about, "context," see refs. 85–87.

phenomena; to "'see it whole'—especially when that 'whole' is far from seamless, contradictory, or even, as Adorno would have it, untrue" (103). This is easier said than done. However, I offer some pragmatic steps toward that goal, especially when studying the "contradictory" statements of White people, which Du Bois referred to as "playing above their actual words an obligato of tune and tone" (104).

A large part of the issue with which I contend is the form of empiricism that undergirds many of theories on the bifurcation of White racial attitudes. Having anointed survey methodology as the sine qua non of social science, White racial attitudes are studied in longitudinal fashion to indicate trends, clusters, and correlations to make causal inferences with a host of demographic variables. Through the logic of sampling, they afford us with conclusions generalizable to the larger population. But descent into such methodological rigidity can yield both a tendency to address only those social problems that fit our conventional methods and underlying analytic suppositions, as well as an obsession with reliability and predictability over understanding, what C. Wright Mills derided as "abstracted empiricism" (105).

In 1959, psychologists Donald Campbell and Donald Fiske argued for "methodological triangulation" as an alternative to "the *single operationalism* [emphasis in original] now dominant in psychology" (106). Their approach, which they called the "multitrait-multimethod matrix," emphasized attention to the validity of analysis by measuring the same phenomena with different methods, such as the simultaneous use of surveys, interviews, focus groups, fieldwork, and more: what is today called "mixed methods" and is frequently understood as synthesizing elements from both qualitative and quantitative traditions. But the crux of the matter transcends methodology. As Howard Becker stated, "Methodology is too important to be left to methodologists" (107). Accordingly, decades later, sociologist Norman Denzin argued that methodological triangulation was "only one form of the strategy" and that researchers should "conceive of triangulation as involving varieties of data, investigators, and theories, as well as methodologies" (108).

This approach could quickly morph into an unwieldy project. Following Denzin's approach to just one case with two datasets, two researchers, two theories, and two methods, we have at least 16 perspectives. If there are 5 cases, we have 80 evaluations. With 50 cases? 800 possible angles. This seems to miss the forest for the trees. The point is not to robotically examine every possible overlap in the cells of this matrix, but to try to make sense of the apparent contradictions in what is socially observed.

For example, in the context of sustained ethnographic fieldwork, I interviewed "Kylee," a 43-y-old White woman who owned a small business and who was a fierce defender of the Democratic Party and progressive politics. Speaking near Hartford, Connecticut, in the fall of 2016, Kylee gleefully expressed her rationale for supporting "Black Lives Matter": "Black people are being murdered by the state for nothing. Walking, driving, smoking, the police make anything into a crime if you're Black." Twenty minutes later, Kylee unraveled her previous statement: "Maybe if Black people weren't so belligerent with the police … a lot of African Americans have bad attitudes … maybe if Blacks were better educated they could avoid confrontation … I mean, 'All Lives Matter,' too."¶¶ Are Kylee's words evidence of the critical

race theory tenet of "interest convergence" in which White people often support Black equality only when they see how they too can benefit (109)? Or are her words an example of the principle–policy gap in which incongruous attitudes reflect a discrepancy between an abstract principle of racial equality and the specific implications of a racial policy (110). How do we conceptualize Kylee? Is she "progressive" or "conservative"? Does she harbor racially authoritative attitudes or not? Rather than engage in a battle over which researcher, theory, method, and dataset is superior over others in a particular time and context, one can catalog which theories, which methods, and which datasets best explain the larger social situation in which the cases are embedded. The noted sociologist Erving Goffman put it well (111):

The trick, of course, is to differently conceptualize these effects, great or small, so that what they share can be extracted and analyzed, and so that the forms of social life they derive from can be pieced out and catalogued sociologically, allowing what is intrinsic to interactional life to be exposed thereby. In this way one can move from the merely situated to the situational …

Without triangulation embedded in social situations, we can quickly become unmoored from empirical reality, adrift in a sea of competing theoretical claims and methodological strategies.

Conclusion

I argue that the normative view of White racial attitudes, as reflections of stable worldviews, harbingers of future events, and prescriptive avenues for behavioral intervention, are unjustified empirically and theoretically. By pursuing a holistic approach inclusive of time, context, and triangulation, we can reveal the everyday discursive paradoxes and inchoate stratagems of White people as evidence, not simply of antagonistic "attitudes," but of a process of White racial identity formation. "Identities are thus strategic social constructions created through interaction, with social and material consequences … At the most basic level, the point is simply that people actively produce identity through their talk" (112).

I conceptualize White racial identity formation as a two-fold process: "1) through positioning those marked as 'white' as essentially different from and superior to those marked as 'nonwhite', and 2) through marginalizing practices of 'being white' that fail to exemplify dominant ideals" (113). Varied superposition strategies are used to defend and legitimate the White self through this two-fold process, which in turn serves to accrete status, privilege, and normativity around Whiteness writ large. In this sense, White racial identity is the brick-and-mortar of structural racism. White racial identities, as the dominant actors in society, serve as key mechanisms in the reproduction of a racially stratified and segregated society. Racism is not only the providence of big, bad, bigots, but also of the gentle, good, and generous. And by throwing the label of "racist" at one individual or group at the expense of another, we treat racism as individuated or politically derived, instead of systemic, normative, and constitutive of varied forms of "attitudes." We can ill afford to disregard how seemingly benign, antagonistic, or paradoxical discourse may reproduce

¶¶Interview with the author. September 2016. This statement comes from a larger study of White organizations in New England. University of Connecticut IRB #H15-331

racial inequities and White dominance under both the best and worst of times and intentions.[##]

Data Availability. Data cannot be shared. (The full data used in this work comes from previous ethnographic research approved by an IRB. Per the IRB stipulations, transcriptions of interviews and fieldnotes are not accessible to others.)

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[##]With apologies to Charles Dickens.

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