

Privilege at a PWI

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Introduction

Society is often fascinated in exploring persons, places, and things that are different from the majority. For example, in the 1700s white scientists were eager and fascinated with Black bodies and are still interested in exploring more about the ins and outs of the Black anatomy. This claim is evident in the story of Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman and how the “unusual” nature that was her body was displayed for tourists and others to observe in Europe. Many were fascinated with her body mainly because it was not the norm among white people. Moreover, people were able to continue sexualizing her body based on the white dominance that was placed over her, a Black Woman. Straight white men are considered the “norm” in American society. Dating back to the rise of the patriarchy, cis white men are engrained at the top of the social hierarchy and continue to perpetuate normalcy. The notion of the "mythical norm" is produced through the intersecting and interlocking of oppressions. The discourses of "normalcy" and "cultural paradigm" that arise relative to these dynamics are productive of a raced, classed, gendered and sexually oriented archetype against which all other models are measured and judged as somehow "less than." (Sefa Dei & Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004) . As a result of the hierarchical power structure, marginalized groups who aim for equality aspire to be equivalent to the straight white male because this group possesses the most power, and benefits most in society. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, normal is “conforming to a type, standard, or regular pattern”. It can be argued that this definition is flawed based on the fact that “normal” or the “regular pattern” is socially constructed. A social construct is an organized way of engaging and seeing the world based on ideological struggle. Seeing that normalcy in itself it difficult to define is evident of the fact that it is man-made. The consequences to the social

construction of the social hierarchy is that it has become institutionalized in society, and has become difficult to uproot.

The privilege that is associated with being a straight white male in the United States is evident in all aspects of human living. White privilege occurs in almost every aspect of daily life, including shopping, traveling, seeking medical or legal assistance, purchasing a home, watching television, finding professional mentors, and sending one's children to schools, where the academic curriculum primarily focuses on whites achievements (Boatright-Horowitz & Macarinni & Harps Logan 2012). Straight white men benefit from privilege in all aspects, despite of whether or not they are cognizant of it. Keeping the social hierarchy and privilege in mind, I wanted to research the straight white male experience at a predominantly white institution and how the remnants and the effects of the social hierarchy is institutionalized in the college experience. I wanted to further explore and understand the idea of normalization and the social hierarchy, and understand the experiences of straight white men, and what makes it so different from my own identity as a straight cis Black woman.

Literature Review

Straight white men have continued to be normalized and have become the focal point when discussing equality. As a result of that, it has become institutionalized in the United States that straight white men are the ultimate people. This affects the way people see white men and how white men view themselves, regardless of if they are aware of it or not. Specifically, in predominantly white institutions, white men tend to benefit from whiteness and privilege, both academically and socially. In the classroom, they reap the benefits of being at the top of the hierarchy, and the privilege associated with it. They often dominate the conversation and are not

afraid of the repercussions of being at the top of the class. Socially, white men who partake in fraternity life are granted better opportunities than men who are associated with Divine 9 Fraternities and are able to be more comfortable in any social setting whereas Black men may not. For reference, the Divine 9 are collaborative organization of historically African American, intercollegiate Greek lettered fraternities and sororities. For this ethnographic project, a study will be done about the experience of a white male at a predominantly white University. The following contents of this literature review section will discuss and summarize articles that allude to the role that straight white men play at predominately white institutions, both academically and socially.

To appropriately address race on college campuses, it is important to acknowledge how white students view race and how it affects them. A study through the department of psychology at the University of Rhode Island was taken at the University, evaluating the effectiveness of racism by white students (Boatright- Horowitz, 2012) . The scholarly article is entitled, *Difficult Times for College Students of Color: Teaching White Students about White Privilege Provides Hope for Change*. The article (Boatright- Horowitz, 2012) gives context about race on university and college campuses and the effects of racism on students of students of color. It also discusses the methodology of the study and the results of how race and white privilege is used and acknowledges on campuses where the racial climate is at an all-time high. This article gives insight on how white students view race, especially since many do not have to dwell on it every day. This information is beneficial to my research because it provides background as to why the interlocutor in question may analyze privilege in the manner he does. If privilege will be discussed, it is important for it be defined, as well as whiteness. Chapter four of the journal article, *Playing the Race Card: Exposing White Power and Privilege* goes into depth about these

terms and provides insight on the subject matter. (Sefa Dei & Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004).)

From a social standpoint, white men who partake in Greek life benefit more from their universities than Black men in Greek life. The scholarly article entitled, *The Two Different Worlds of Black and White Fraternity Men: Visibility and Accountability as Mechanisms of Privilege* written in the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (Ray & Rosow, 2012) discusses the numerous advantages that white fraternities have over Black fraternities. The article articulates the lack of funding that these Black fraternities receive over white fraternities, as well as the overwhelming amount of monitoring that they receive, whereas white fraternities are able to get away with many activities that would normally be frowned upon. The article also discusses how being in a Black fraternity translate into their academic lives and the hurdles Black men have to jump over at PWIs as well as deal with the multiple stereotypes associated with Black fraternities. This article benefits the main research about white males at PWIs for the subject in question is involved in Greek life, and after the interview, confirms the points raised about Black fraternities and white fraternities.

Seeing that the research includes Greek life, it is only fitting to include articles surrounding fraternities. The ethnographic study (Kiesling , 2001) published in the American Anthropological Association entitled, *Stances of Whiteness and Hegemony in Fraternity Men's Discourse* discusses how white men reaffirm and display their hegemonic social position through in-group discourse. The article articulates how the white fraternity brothers use non-white identities to construct their own form of whiteness. (Kiesling , 2001) In conclusion, white men have a vast amount of benefits and privilege in society. This can be seen at a University level

both academically and socially. It is evident in the articles and can be witnessed first-hand at these universities.

Masculinity is also a term that plays a role in my research. The article, *The Social Organization of Masculinity* (Connell, 1995, 2005) discusses masculinity and the power dynamic associated with gender. Power is a frequent theme in this project and the article does provide insight from a gender standpoint.

Methods

When approaching this research, I tried to be as sensitive and strategic as possible. When designing the project, I approached it from a perspective that seemed like I was attacking the subject. But after many class discussions and examining the format of other ethnographic projects, I learned that one must not manipulate the research participant when approaching research. With that being said, I wanted the interview to be more of a conversation and it ended up being just that. The interlocutor and I met in the Bender Library at American University and had a conversation surrounding his upbringing, dating at AU, the social scene, and the effects of the competitive academic and extracurricular environment at American University.

To collect data, I read a few peer reviewed articles and scientific journals regarding predominately white institutions, the experience and opportunities white men have over other students of color. This was in all aspects of the collegiate experience; academic, social, spiritual, etc. A topic of study that had come up in this discussion with Dominic(the subject) , as well as in some of my other classes, is the idea of dominance and how white men tend to be dominant in most situations. In this case, classes, and most social settings. Keeping that in mind with my own research, I was curious as to what could be concluded after observing my participant in a

classroom setting. The focal point of my research was Dominic Greene. Dominic is a twenty year old sophomore by class, junior by association, in the school of public affairs studying an interdisciplinary program by the name of CLEG (Communications, Legal Institutions, Economics, and Government). He is originally from a suburb just outside of Chicago and is actively involved both on and off campus. Some of these commitments include ballroom dance, students for free expression, a member of the Residents Hall Association, and member of Beta Thi Phi Fraternity Inc. Dominic also interns on Capitol Hill.

Dominic is a member of the School of Public Affairs leadership program and is required to take a course on Leadership Development. The program is a four-year certification program that requires him to plan and implement a social action project relating to some form of public policy. At the end of his four years at American University, Dominic will receive a certificate in advanced leadership studies. Dominic and I have worked together on different academic platforms and are very cordial. After explaining my assignment he was very eager to be a participant in my research.

On the day of observation, I entered the classroom in the Don Myers building on east campus and began to socialize with other classmates of mine, explaining to them my work and my ethnographic project. I proceeded to sit at the end of the third row in the lecture style classroom in the Don Myers building . The chairs in the classroom were the ones that swivel at the seat and move on wheels. I remember the professor getting ready to begin class and Dominic not being present. Dominic strolled into class right as the professor was beginning to facilitate class discussion. He entered class wearing a suit and tie, eating Chinese food. I assumed he had just come from his internship on Capitol Hill, as he expressed in his interview. He proceeded to sit in the first row in the middle of the long table, giving him a perfect view of the board and the

professor. There were clearly seats further away, but he chose to sit in the front. After class, it was made known to me he sits in that seat all the time, to make sure that he was attentive to the class and the information being presented.

The professor began the class by asking where students had seen good or bad forms of leadership being presented in the media. A student brought to the class's attention the subject of the college admissions scandal involving celebrities and their children. To provide context, celebrities were paying companies to make sure their children had a high chance of attending top colleges. Their children's pictures were photoshopped to give to admissions teams and students were being paid to take the SAT's in place of their children to ensure that they received a high score, guaranteeing them entrance in the school. Students, including Dominic, expressed their concerns about the scandal. The conversation then shifted to a discussion about an article Sylvia Burwell, president of American University wrote about this current generation of college students and the issues they either do or do not face. The article discussed mental health in colleges and students growing up in a post 9/11 society, and how that impacts the ways students thrive in college and the obstacles that this may have for them.

I noticed that every time Dominic spoke, he made sure to rotate his spiraling chair and speak to face the class of about forty students. He spoke articulately, with great enthusiasm, and seemed to be extremely comfortable stating his opinions about the discussion topic, despite whether or not they were controversial. The class lasted for about an hour and fifteen minutes. Throughout the class, he seemed very laid back. He would lean back in his chair with his hands cuffed behind his neck as he listened to the lecture, participated, and, what it seemed like, facilitated the discussion. He was not afraid to ask questions and make his presence known in the classroom.

There have been several studies showing that women often times do not feel comfortable speaking in the classroom because men often times dominate the conversation. I believe that this observation was evident in the fact that white men often feel as though they have power and tend to dominate the class discussion, whether or not they are aware of it. I could see that often times when a woman spoke, Dominic would be quick to belittle the opinion or disregard anything that was said. One could clearly sense some “fun shade” being thrown between a specific girl in the class and Dominic. They would often clash in their ideas and engaged in multiple back and forth’s during the class period. I also noticed his demeanor and body language in the class, specifically how he was so laid back as if this class came easily to him. I feel as though this speaks to how white men feel as though they are on top, just as the social hierarchy deems them to be. Also, how white men often times do not have to worry about how others will perceive them due to their role in society and how historically speaking, they have been normalized and experience vast amounts of privilege.

Discussion

White privilege is an ideology that is difficult for many who benefit from it to acknowledge. I say difficult because when someone is groomed to think they are on top socially, it is not necessary for them to think about the ways in which they are oppressed. Straight, white, and male are all aspects of someone’s identity that fail to be affected by any forms of oppression. As a result, they may be reluctant to acknowledge their own identity as it is not something they have to be cognizant of. When speaking specifically about race, one such beneficial effect comes to light in the ability of white people to proceed without a conscious reading of their own racial positioning - that is, until they place it in relation to another person's race. Until those moments

of "racial collision," the privileged have the luxury of interpreting race as something that other people have - they do not see it unless they have to. (Sefa Dei & Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004) In the interview, I asked Dominic about his stance on white privilege and if he ever thought about his our racial identity in relation to others. He responded by saying, "I've had a really hard time, understanding that concept, I think I have come to a workable understanding but prevalent, like I know it's there, I don't really understand it but like people who I trust believe it's here so I guess I believe it's there...Do I benefit? I don't think that I don't, I don't see that I do but people that I trust say that I do so I must." Dominic's response to this question is a testament to the lack of acknowledgement of privilege and why it is such a difficult and touch conversation to have with those who benefit from it. It has been argued that deep down, in places that they don't want to talk about, white people, they feel that privilege, but acknowledging these "freedoms" would require that they recognize and take responsibility for their participation in the continuance of social injustice and the relational impact that their liberty has on the oppressive existence of others. (Sefa Dei & Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004) The fact that that privilege could not be acknowledged or understood is evident of the invisibility created. Wildman (1996) points out that "the invisibility of privilege strengthens the power it creates and maintains". This point can be seen in the participant observation in the classroom. The way in which the participant acted in the classroom in terms of comfortability and complacency in the classroom is evident of the power dynamic and privilege is may or may not want to acknowledge. This could have been the reason he was able to dominate the classroom with ease. Dominic stated, " So I am very willing to speak up, raise my hand first, um I have gotten the criticism that I dominate classroom... I do not think it is my responsibility to

mute myself to give other people a voice but I can't see myself numbering the amount of times to speak for any person who was to take it over.”

The dominance that is seen here is not only impacted by race but as a product of gender. In the article, *The Social Organization of Masculinity*, it is suggested that the term masculinity assumes that one's behavior is a result of who someone is. (Connell, 2005) The social construction of gender has a 3 fold model to its structure. The models consists of power, production, and cathexis. Power consists of the subordination of and the dominance of men.. In other words, the patriarchy. The normative way of thinking could easily be seen in Dominic and how he conducts himself normally.

Dating at a predominately white institution for students of color is particularly hard. It can be especially hard for women of color. Because of racism in America, most black women experience institutional obstacles on their journeys to experience happiness regularly.(Williams 2018) African-American women are structurally positioned to experience shame a more frequently than others.. This reality is even greater for darker skinned women of color. Just how in the article, black women retreated to Jamaica to find a sense of belonging, black women at PWI may feel more welcomed at school's with a higher population of people color; in American University's case. Howard University, a historically black college in DC. The interlocutor and myself touched upon dating at American. His thoughts were, “So, my first semester freshman year, I met the girl I am dating today. So we started dating... our anniversary is October 20 something... so that happened quickly for me and I haven't gone back since so I would in no way say I am an expert on it.” I then proceeded to ask Dominic his opinions about race in the dating scene. “The women I grew up around were like white western women, which is a very specific type. There is a song... I don't really remember much.. But the lyrics are like “tall brown boots,

long black hair” it's a song that came out in like 2004 and for some reason, I started to get that idea of like , that what women are and it's a very whitewashed version of it combined with my experience and everyone who I have ever dated have been white. I had never really been around colored women. I don't think there were any.” The preference Dominic refers to is evident of the Eurocentric standards of beauty that linger in society and the narrow minded images of women of color that continue to manifest in society and perpetuate stereotypes. Many media illiterate people are influence by these depictions, which then has an influence on the way they perceive other people. This is unfortunate because black women negotiate a sense of triple consciousness-awareness that racialized, gendered, and nationalized oppression influence not only their access to various forms of power but also how they see themselves. (Williams, 2018)

White men who partake in Greek life benefit more from their universities than black men in Greek life. The scholarly article entitled, *The Two Different Worlds of Black and White Fraternity Men: Visibility and Accountability as Mechanisms of Privilege* written in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Ray & Rosow, 2012) discusses the numerous advantages that white fraternities have over black fraternities. Dominic is involved in Greek life at American University. I had asked him questions revolving his fraternity experience and he responded saying that he has had a wonderful time. In black fraternity life, especially, at American, these organizations are subject to the most monitoring, not only by the university but outside sources as well. Black fraternity events tend to get shut down at a higher rate than white ones, and white fraternities historically tend to engage in more illegal activity during their events. White fraternities also have the power to deny entry into their events without repercussions. When asking the interlocutor about this, he made it clear that it was unacceptable, and his fraternity tries hard to not engage in such activities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the straight cis white male has been dominate for as long as the social hierarchy has been constructed. The power this identity holds has been institutionalized in all aspects of society as his groomed at a very young age. At predominantly white institutions, this is extremely prevalent in all aspects; academically, socially, etc. The privilege that they hold is evident in all aspects of the college experience and I was made aware of that through my research. My interlocutor obviously does not speak for every straight white male at American University, and I obviously do not speak for every woman of color, but after researching about this topic, it was made clear that this ideology does exist in one way or another and is evident in many cases. If I were to expand my research, I would have liked to observe and interview more men who identify this way, as well as expand it amount different predominately white campuses in different regions to see how the power dynamic shifts in different areas. If I had to recreate my project, I would do more than one participant observation, not just in a classroom setting but a social setting as well.

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