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Colorblind Racism in White Women's Education Activision in the South

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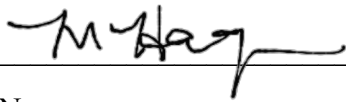
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Colorblind Racism in White Women's Education Activism in the South

By

Emily Tingle

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Shackouls Honors College

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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Table 1. Participants Demographics

Type of School Attended	Private School (k-12)	Public School (k-12)	Combination of Both (k-12)
	2	3	3
Home State	From MS	From Outside MS	
	7	1	
Lived Outside of MS	Lived Only in MS	Lived Outside MS	
	5	3	

N=8

Table 2. Participants' Highest Level of Education

Bachelor's Degree	Graduate/Professional Degree
4	4

N=8

Table 3. Participants' Children's Schools

Private School	Public School	Combination of Both
0	6	2

N=8

Table 4. Participants' Children's Schools (Public Only)

	Under 20%	21-50%	51-75%	75%+
Free and Reduced Lunch	1	3	2	2
Minority Enrollment	0	1	3	4

N=8

INTRODUCTION

Although white women in the South are often understood as playing a background role to their husbands when it comes to political involvement, white women have always played a large role in shaping politics in the South. One area of political participation that white women have historically engaged in is education activism. For example, during the Jim Crow era, white women were political actors who worked to establish policies such as censoring textbooks, endorsing candidates, and writing newspaper columns against desegregation. Through these forms of political engagement, white women worked to maintain structural inequality and white supremacy (McRae 2018). Indeed, historically, white Southern women's political participation was often under the guise of maintaining gendered and racialized notions of womanhood (i.e. white womanhood) and the existing racial order (McRae 2018).

Today, although some white women continue to advocate for policies that reproduce racial inequality, other white women in the South have taken more progressive measures when it comes to education. Specifically, some white women are committed to advocating for equal funding for public schools and are extremely critical of the charter school movement specifically and the neoliberal move for the privatization of public schools more broadly. These efforts are at least in part structured around the ideal of *all* children having an equal educational experience.

As race scholar Bonilla-Silva argues, the post-Civil Rights Era racial structure of the United States focuses on the “covert nature of racial discourses and practices” which leads people to avoid using “racial terminology” and contributes to the “invisibility” of structures used to reproduce racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 18). Sociological research documents extensively the ways that white people today think about racism as being a feature of the past or no longer a pressing concern in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Gallagher 2003). Research also documents that white mothers, in particular, do not speak openly with their children about race, and when they do, they avoid talking about racism, racial oppression, or racial power (Hagerman 2014; Underhill 2017; Vittrup 2018).

Given existing research on the dominance of colorblind ideology, how do white women education activists in the South think about race and racism in the context of their work? Little is known about how white women who advocate for equal schooling in the South today think about racism in schools. Do their efforts to advocate for “equal” schools for all include challenging existing policies and practices that research demonstrates contribute to the perpetuation of racial inequality? How do these women think about race and racism with respect to schooling in America—and how do these understandings influence their activism? Do these women embrace critical perspectives on race, or do they engage in dominant racial ideologies like that of colorblind racism? And in particular, do white women public education activists in the South challenge practices like tracking or school segregation, which are well-documented catalysts for the persistence of unequal racialized outcomes and experiences (Frankenberg and Orfield

2012; Lewis 2003; Oakes 2005; Tyson 2011)? This project seeks to begin to explore some of these questions.

Although this project closely examines grass-root organizations, this project is about far more than political organizing around the topic of education. This study is centrally concerned with questions of how modern-day racism shapes contemporary politics—and how even people who view themselves as progressive political activists might engage in ways of thinking and acting that perpetuate inequality. This study, thus, elaborates on existing scholarship about new patterns of racism—and contributes new data that supports theories of how racial ideology and social structures mutually reinforce one another.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

The question guiding this research is:

To what extent do white women involved in public education advocacy confront the roles that race and racism play in the educational opportunities and outcomes of youth in the South?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Race in America

The United States is, and always has been, a country where race has deeply impacted “one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and indeed one’s sense of ‘identity’” (Omi and Winant 1994, 1). As the famous sociologist W.E.B. du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (1903). Race is a fundamental organizing principle of American society, and where one is situated within the racial hierarchy shapes opportunities, lived experiences, and outcomes (Bonilla Silva 2001, 37).

Although in our society people constantly talk about race, it is important to define what sociologists mean when they use this term. As Cornell and Hartmann (2007) state, “Races, like ethnic groups, are not established by some set of natural forces, but are products of human perception and classification. In short, they are social constructs” (24). While racial categories have no inherent significance, they do have meaning, but only because people give them meaning (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 24). Race is constantly changing as earlier in U.S. history Irish and Italian immigrants were originally viewed as “nonwhite” and called “an inferior race” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 33-34). However, in the latter half of the 20th Century and into the present, they are viewed as white. This is one powerful example that demonstrates how race is a social construct and subject to change to what people wish to give meaning to.

Because race is socially constructed, this means that race is “constantly being transformed by political struggle” (Omi and Winant 1994, 55). Indeed, the racial order in the United States can be described as an “unstable equilibrium” where racial conflict exists at every level of society but varies over time (Omi and Winant 1994, 84-85). The state itself is “penetrated and structured by the very interests whose conflicts it seeks to stabilize and control” (Omi and Winant 1994, 85). From the famous inter-racial movement known as Bacon’s Rebellion onward to the present day, race has been something Americans have struggled with that is ever evolving.

Before Bacon's Rebellion, race was not a significant factor in social division (Tatum 2017, 653). While the colonies’ labor force was made up of white and Black indentured servants along with slave labor, it was becoming consistently harder for former indentured servants to obtain land due to land monopolization by the colonial elites (Buck 2017, 166). In addition to land monopolization, the landed elite made up the dominant group of the Virginia Assembly and had the power to pass legislation to protect their interests (Takaki, 62).

The inability of the lower classes to obtain land or work their way out of poverty paved the way for Nathaniel Bacon to lead a rebellion. Bacon was able to assemble two groups to rebel against the colonial elites: one was excluded aristocrats and the other “consisted of farmers, former indentured servants, and enslaved African Americans” who wanted an equal society (Tatum 2017, 655).

To separate Blacks and whites of the lower class, the elites initial legal attempts to separate class based on race did not work, but "racist ideology started with the elites and

was only accepted by working-class whites once slavery separated black workers from white workers materially" (Tatum 2017, 654). The institution of slavery was established to transform Blacks "into a racial undercaste so that White workers would no longer empathize with them" (Tatum 2017, 654). The lasting impact of Bacon's Rebellion is that it created a racial divide that helped "prevent biracial uprisings against the government" (Tatum 2017, 654). The result was that most of the white lower class lost "class consciousness" (Tatum 2017, 657).

The legalization of race led to a "coherent system of discrimination against blacks that proved that they were not full citizens of the United States" (Roberts, 11). The legal construction of race provided the necessary tools to sustain ideology through law being "both a system of behavioral control and an ideology" (Lopez, 79). Laws provided reasoning to discriminate against certain groups of people such as establishing a "correlation between race and citizenship" which still exists ranging from the case of Bhagat Singh Thind to more modern cases of enforcing consequences of US immigration policy (Lopez, 83-84). Ironically, much of the legal system changed drastically throughout time to fit the ideology of whites.

Following the Civil Rights Movement, political forces sought to rescind the gains of the Civil Rights Movement (Omi and Winant 1994, 113). Many Americans felt resentment towards providing for the "underprivileged" and felt that minorities were receiving "preferential treatment" (Omi and Winant 1994, 113). The racial reaction that developed in response to the gains of the 1960s was one where racism had to be rearticulated and pushed forward the vision of a "color-blind" society where race was

never to be considered in decisions (Omi and Winant 1994, 117). This helped shift the view of racial injustice victims from minorities to white males claiming to be hurt by policies designed to help even the playing field for minorities and women (Omi and Winant 1994, 117).

Overall, while the history of race in the United States extends beyond this brief discussion, these examples illustrate not only the socially constructed nature of race and how law constructs race, but also the kinds of racial contestation and struggle that have occurred over time.

Racial Ideologies

Racial ideology is the “segment of the ideological structure of a social system that crystallizes racial notions and stereotypes” (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 43). Racial ideology also provides how people rationalize “social, political, and economic interactions among the races” (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 43). Racial ideology is highly subject to change and may be expressed as loosely/tightly or overtly/covertly as society dictates (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 43).

After the Civil Rights Movement, racial ideology had to shift as Jim Crow practices and explicit racist behavior fell out of favor in American society (Forman and Lewis 2006, 178). However, that did not mean that racism simply vanished into thin air. Instead, racism faced a shift in the ways that people maintain privilege and ultimately white supremacy (Forman and Lewis 2006, 178). This has led to great debate among

scholars as “traditional conceptualizations of prejudice do not allow us to fully capture this new development in the racial landscape” (Forman and Lewis 2006, 178).

Although many people in the United States claim that we live in a “post-racial” society, that is simply untrue. Post-civil rights movement, complicity with racism and being a “good, moral person” became mutually exclusive in the eyes of Americans (Diangelo 2018, 71). To the modern American, racists “were mean, ignorant, old, uneducated, Southern whites” (Diangelo 2018, 71). While racism now being associated as “bad” is generally a step in a more positive direction this “good/bad binary” has resulted in making it “impossible for the average white person to understand-much less interrupt-racism” (Diangelo 2018, 72). Instead of eradicating “racist phenomena,” it helps perpetuate it (Diangelo 2018, 72).

Except for white supremacist organizations, very few whites claim to be “racist” in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 1). Instead, a new, more subtle brand of racism has emerged. The idea that most whites are “colorblind” emerged in the 1970s but has significantly gained traction since the election of Barack Obama (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 17). Whites tend to associate racism “in color consciousness and find its absence color-blindness”, but through this, they “see the affirmation of difference and racial identity” among people of color as racist (Omi and Winant 1994, 70). The idea that America has become “post-racial” since the election of its first black president has been popular despite it being severely untrue (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 17). Instead, new practices on how to express racism have emerged (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 17). Although these practices are more subtle, they are just as effective in the maintenance of whiteness as the old, more

overt ones (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 17). This new “covert nature of racial discourse” is characterized by the “avoidance of racial terminology”, the claim that whites experience “reverse racism”, and the “invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 18). Bonilla-Silva dubs this new brand of ideological racism “Color-Blind Racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 53).

Colorblind Ideology consists of four frames. The first is “abstract liberalism” which uses ideas affiliated with political liberalism and economic liberalism to explain issues of race (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 56). By using the ideas of “equal opportunity” whites are able to “justify” themselves in “opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 56). The second frame “naturalization” is used by whites to explain “racial phenomena” as “natural occurrences” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 56). The third frame, “cultural racism” uses “culturally based arguments” to explain a racially stratified society (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 56). The fourth frame “minimization of racism” claims that “discrimination is no longer a central factor in affecting minorities’ life chances” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 57). These four frames allow whites to engage in the maintenance of white supremacy without sounding overtly racist (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 74-75).

For whites, color-blind ideology makes it harder to address racism. Even for those who believe color-blind ideology is a “well-intentioned strategy for interrupting racism” its use has caused a denial of “the reality of racism and thus holds it in place” (Diangelo 2018, 42). However, color-blind ideology is not the only form of racism that more well-intentioned people exhibit. “Aversive racism” is also used where within a

white person there is “a denial of personal prejudice and unconscious negative feelings or beliefs” (Gaernter et al 2004). “Aversive racism” is also used by people who identify as more progressive or educated and allows them to be able to “maintain a positive self-image” since this form of racism “exists under the surface of consciousness” due its confliction with “consciously held beliefs of racial equality and justice” (Diangelo 2018, 43).

Aversive racism is even more puzzling as it allows “deep racial disdain” to be used throughout daily discourse but does not allow the user to admit it since it conflicts with the user’s professed beliefs (Diangelo 2018, 45).

Another frequently unseen due to its subtleness aspect of more modern racism is white solidarity (Diangelo 2018, 57). White solidarity is an “unspoken agreement” between whites that focuses on not causing other whites’ discomfort through the confrontation of racial issues and is used to protect “white advantage” (Diangelo 2018, 57). White solidarity allows for whites to tacitly agree “to remain racially united in the protection of white supremacy” (Diangelo 2018, 58). When whites “break rank” in upholding white solidarity, they often receive penalties from fellow whites, but when they uphold white solidarity they are rewarded with social capital (Diangelo 2018, 58).

Even the way whites talk about race amongst themselves and others is significantly different in comparison to people of color. A big difference is that white people “don’t view things in terms of race, while people of color normally do” (Sue 2015, 9). Many whites fail to see their whiteness as “whiteness in terms of race is just invisible to them because it represents a default standard from which to compare everything else” (Sue 2015, 10). Whites are more uncomfortable talking about race and

often go at great lengths to avoid the topic or to appear free of bias lest they are accused of being biased or racist (Sue 2015, 13-14). However, this form of avoidance around the topic of race has severe consequences as it maintains “the superficiality of race talk and implicitly suggest that racial discussions are divisive and deviant” (Sue 2015, 15). Whites have high levels of anxiety and fear concerning talking about race and often exhibit “denials of personal bias, prejudice, and discrimination” as well as denials of societal bias (Sue 2015, 134-140). Whites also exhibit not only a “fear of owning white privilege”, but also a fear “of taking personal responsibility to end racism” (Sue 2015, 154-159).

As racial segregation still plays a vital role in American society, racial isolation has fed into the “prominence of prejudice in white public opinion on matters of race” (Kinder and Mendelberg 1995, 419-420). When whites are in very little contact with blacks than there is little opportunity for whites to not overturn their prejudices and instead rely on “conventional stereotypes” (Kinder and Mendelberg 1995, 420). This is extremely problematic as prejudice is a “major ingredient in white public opinion on matters of race” (Kinder and Mendelberg 1995, 421). By maintaining de facto forms of segregation in order to preserve whiteness, whites also become less likely to overcome their prejudice and instead white public opinion continues to hurt blacks through modern racism.

In summary, racism is alive and thriving in the United States. Whites have changed the popular racial ideologies used to maintain white supremacy and privilege to more subtle forms like colorblind ideology, aversive racism, white solidarity, and frequent denial of white privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2018, Diangelo 2018; Gaernter et al

2004; Sue 2015). It is important to study racial ideologies since many whites use them to avoid admitting to their own racism and biases. In turn, whites use racial ideologies to maintain and justify white supremacy.

Tracking

Although sixty years post *Brown v. Board* schools are assumed to be fully desegregated, this is certainly not the case. While much focus is paid to how schools are even more segregated today than they were during the height of formal desegregation, practices of segregation also persist within schools. Specifically, “racialized tracking has made it possible to have desegregation without integration” (Tyson 2011, 6). Even among schools that are racially diverse, tracking acts as a barrier separating races and reproduces racialized notions of which kids are “smart” or “high achievers” and which kids are not. A plethora of scholarly work has been conducted around the topic of tracking, and although tracking has been viewed as “race neutral,” this is just not be the case. At the end of the day, whether one disagrees with tracking or not, tracking serves to “maintain[n] special privileges for some students and denying them to others” (Loveless 1999, 3). In addition, tracking helps contribute to high levels of classroom segregation and has been historically used to avoid integration (Tyson 2011, 7).

A school’s racial composition does not determine a classroom’s racial composition (Clotfelter 2004, 126). Studies have also found that classroom segregation rises as the percentage of blacks in a school increases but falls within schools that maintain a significantly higher black population than white (Clotfelter 2004, 132).

Schools with the racial composition of between 30-60% black showed the highest rates of classroom segregation (Clotfelter 2004, 132). One of the most dangerous results of classroom segregation is that black youth are taught is the “idea that race and achievement are linked” which is something they learn in schools (Tyson 2011, 4). Students begin to equate whiteness with achievement because of the school structures (Tyson 2011, 6).

The problem with tracking is that tracking separates students based on biased ability that puts some students at a severe disadvantage. Tracking consists of a combination of test scores and evaluations that sort students into tracks based on supposed ability (Oakes 2005, 11). The problem with using test scores as criteria is that “test scores are often racially and culturally biased since the language and content of test questions mostly align with the experiences and knowledge of white middle class children” (Oakes 2005). Teacher recommendations are also faulty due to the volume of students that teachers have and how accurately a teacher can write them (Oakes 2005). Between biased test scores and the inaccuracy of teacher recommendations, many students are often put at a disadvantage and fall through the cracks. Tracking has become more of a “symbol of class and social status” than a measure of academic talent. Ultimately tracking allows for privileges based on social class to continue and be reproduced instead of attempting to even out unequal opportunities.

Sorting students based on biased measures undermines the purpose of education as a public commodity giving opportunity to all. In addition to tracking being largely based on demographic factors such as race or socioeconomic status, tracking by placing

students in “homogenous” classrooms does not benefit students overall. Not only does tracking have dangerous consequences for “students’ sense of self” it also has consequences for the “curricula they receive” (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 107). Lower expectations for black and Latinx students mean they are more likely to be placed in lower tracked courses and subsequently also be provided with a less rigorous educational experience (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 107).

Multiple studies have concluded that “no group of students have been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogenous group” (Oakes 1985, 7). Detracking creates a more equitable education environment within schools for all children, ends unmeritocratic measures of class sorting, and engages in “instructional potential of student-to-student interactions” (Oakes 1985, 208-209). Most importantly detracked classrooms have been shown to have higher achievement on tests than tracked classrooms (Oakes 1985, 261-262).

Parenting and Privilege

While schools intend to create policies for collectives, parental interests are not focused on the collective whole of the school but rather are “focused instead on protecting the interests of specific children: their children” (Loveless 1999, 81). Although tracking is less based on ability, it is apparent that tracking and opportunity are strongly linked (Wheelock 1992, 15). Thus, when parents play an active role in policymaking surrounding their children’s school, “tracking was likely to occur (Loveless 1999, 80). Although administrations are responsible for the overall policy implementation, “parents

are the political actors with a differentiating influence on tracking” (Loveless 1999, 82). While reforming the use of tracking in schools has clear benefits, reform of tracking involves risks which has resulted in predominately poor and low achieving schools to embrace tracking reform (Loveless 1999, 3). One of the reasons for this is that the main opponents against tracking are parents of higher socioeconomic status who use their cultural capital to maintain privileges for their children. This is seen as a form of what sociologist Tilly describes as “opportunity hoarding.”

Opportunity hoarding causes “durable inequality” when “agents incorporate paired and unequal categories at crucial organizational boundaries” (Tilly 1998, 9). Many people who benefit from inequality that are involved in the creation/sustaining of such inequality “rarely set out to manufacture inequality as such” (Tilly 1998, 11). Rather they seek to solve “other organizational problems by establishing categorically unequal access to valued outcomes” and often try to secure rewards “from sequestered resources” (Tilly 1998, 11). These forms of “organizational improvisations” lead to “durable categorical inequality” (Tilly 1998, 13). Durable inequality forms “because people who control access to value-producing resources solve pressing organizational problems by means of categorical distinctions” (Tilly 1998, 7-8). Organizational improvisations lead to durable inequality by “providing exclusive opportunities for the next generation” (Tilly 1998, 13). A distinctive network that can sequester valuable resources and create beliefs and practices “that sustain network control of the resources” participate in opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998, 155). Sequestered knowledge also plays a role as it “bestows advantages” often relying on “scripts, local knowledge, and interpersonal ties that

members of a network carry over from other experiences” (Tilly 1998, 158). Durable inequality forms within the structure of education as a distinctive network of upper-middle/middle-class parents (often white) can sustain a network within their social class to provide exclusive educational opportunities for their children through opportunity hoarding. An example of opportunity hoarding can be taking advice from friends about which schools have the most resources before deciding what school district to move to. Ultimately, opportunity hoarding means taking advantage of knowledge or connections in order to get one’s child ahead.

For parents, tracking is “an intense competition over scarce goods and resources” (Tyson 2011, 170). Among more affluent parents, tracking “reflects a competitive, individualistic attitude toward the purpose of schooling” (Wheelock 1992, xiv). Therefore, parents fight to secure advantages for their children through tracking and gifted programs “without regard for the children who are left behind” which undermines public education’s larger goals (Tyson 2011, 171). When educators and administrators attempt to detrack a school, they are met with strong resistance by those same elite parents that have access to cultural capital (Oakes 2005, 275). Tracking is often used to provide privileges (often in the form of higher tracked classes) for children in exchange for their parents’ political and sometimes economic support (Oakes 2005, 275). As with almost all schools, a higher track means more opportunities, resources, and advantages that meet elite parents’ preferences (Oakes 2005, 275). Parents of higher tracked children go as far as to argue that their children are disadvantaged by too many resources being diverted to lower tracked students while it is obvious that higher tracks almost always

receive better education, resources, and opportunities (Oakes 2005, 275). These parents believe that their children are entitled to more simply because they may be more “talented” or “intelligent” (Oakes 2005, 277). The problem with their argument is that it completely ignores the role the parents play in providing advantages in life that lead to other academic advantages to their children. Another irony is that many elite parents hold powerful occupational positions that work toward equity and democracy, yet they expect their children to be given advantages (Oakes 2005, 277).

A further issue is that these parents “know how to pressure the school into responding to their children” (Wheelock 1992, xiii-xiv). These parents have access to power that allows them to manipulate the decisions of both teachers and administrators. When affluent parents pressure schools to keep tracking, administrators worry that detracking measures will lead to “lower enrollment of children from the most advantaged families (Wheelock 1992, xiv). Therefore, educators fear the prospect of white flight with elite parents having the option of leaving the school unlike less advantaged families (Oakes 2005, 278). This pressure has led to many educators straddling “the fence between pleasing powerful parents and giving low achieving students more access” that has led to only very benign changes such as reducing the number of tracks (Oakes 2005, 284). The problem is that the essence of the tracking structure is still being highly maintained as a result of these parents’ intervention. Even as these policies only support a small number of elite children, intervention by parents of lower tracked children is not always effective. As one superintendent puts it, “Rich people have clout. Poor people don’t have clout.” (Oakes 2005, 285). When it comes to parental intervention in schools,

elites with both cultural capital as well as economic capital clearly have the upper hand. Instead of ensuring democracy, elites use education as a means “to secure more advantageous places in the occupational and social structure for themselves and their children” (Sadovnik 2007, 7).

Instead of using education as an equalizer, education is now being used as a commodity that can be bought and sold to maintain the status quo and keep those already in power in the positions leaving little room for any mobility among those who were born into disadvantaged communities. Instead, tracking allows for students that are deemed “gifted,” though not necessarily deserving, to receive better resources and opportunities (Roda 2015; Kozol 1991). Often, those same resources are not available to the students that are impoverished and most in need of assistance (Roda 2015; Kozol 1991). Tracking has become more of a “symbol of class and social status” than a measure of academic talent. Ultimately tracking allows for privileges based on social class to continue and be reproduced instead of attempting to even out unequal opportunities.

Even when parents do not come in the schools or directly intervene, “just the idea that they might” has a powerful effect on both teachers and administration (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 91). Often a school’s staff relies on outward characteristics such as race to indicate whether a student’s parents possess cultural capital thus leading whiteness to be a form of symbolic capital that allows white students to receive advantages and resources over black students in an already highly racially divided structure (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 91-93). When a staff also relies on demographic characteristics such as

race, they act according to their instincts surrounding whiteness and cultural capital causing “more or less perceived pressure” (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 93).

Despite this, “diversity” is often cited as what makes a public school a good public school by more “progressive parents” (Posey-Maddox 2014, 79). Some white parents believe that their children can benefit from “exposure of those from different racial or cultural backgrounds” (Posey-Maddox 2014, 79). However, when white parents discuss the association between material resources and diversity, they often emphasize the resources their children are not receiving and are often concerned that their children are not being academically challenged (Posey-Maddox 2014, 83). Their concern is to provide supplements to their children’s education to make sure that their children’s education experience is similar to other affluent children in other schools (Posey-Maddox 2014, 83). More “progressive” parents often state that diverse spaces allow their children to be exposed to different skills and experiences leading to potential growth (Hagerman 2018, 52-53). However, even parents devoted to confronting inequality don’t always see how they reproduce the inequality they sought to disrupt (Hagerman 2018, 54). These parents often provide their children with extensive opportunities not available to their child’s classmates to achieve what their children are “missing out on” by not attending other schools which can contradict “their stated intention of supporting equal public educational opportunities for all” (Hagerman 2018, 55-59).

Even when parents choose for their children to attend “diverse”, urban schools, their privilege plays a major role within schools. Communities that have expressed a commitment to diversity often tolerate consistent patterns of tracking (Lewis and

Diamond 2015, 89). Instead of tracking becoming a concern, de facto segregation at the classroom level is considered to be a norm and does not spark outrage (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 89). Even among white community members that engage with diverse schools, it is a “widely acknowledged fact that the upper-level courses provide a stronger educational experience” (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 108). “Race does not necessarily matter less than it did in the past. It just matters differently” (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 84). As schools are structured around tracking it conveys to students that “this is the way it is” as well as “this is the way it should be” which contributes to structural inequality by telling the students where they belong in a highly stratified hierarchy (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 112).

While white parents often give diversity as a reason for choosing for their children to attend racially and economically mixed schools, they still express concern over “protecting the educational quality for their children” which often means fighting for tracking (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 121). The irony between choosing a school due to its diversity is that the classrooms their children are a part of are highly segregated and may parents convey “deep ambivalence or outright hostility” about the possibility of detracking and the loss of their children’s privileges (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 121).

Social class also tends to work toward elites’ advantages in securing resources as class status often “shapes the resources” that parents can use when interacting with teachers or other personnel (Lareau 2000, 2). Social class also “has a powerful influence on parent involvement patterns” where more elite parents’ involvement is typically more valued by teachers (Lareau 2000, 3). However, social resources must be “activated” by

parents in order to “yield a social profit” (Lareau 2000, 10). However, parents’ do often activate these resources to secure advantages as more elite parents are considerably more likely to be directly involved in their child’s schooling than their working-class counterparts (Lareau 2000, 10-15). Elite parents often view an “interconnectedness” between home life and school life as parents are a visible part of their child’s education through monitoring schoolwork, intervening in their child’s classrooms, criticizing teachers, and supplementing their child’s educational experience (Lareau 2000, 61). Elite parents also do not “express self-doubts” when interacting with teachers as their college education helps them view teachers as equals rather than superiors (Lareau 2000, 112).

The professionalization of parental involvement and the sway of Parent Teacher Organizations/Associations also contribute to the maintenance of white privilege. The structural conflict between a PTO and administration is common even though they often have some shared goals they still had different priorities (Lareau and Munoz 2012, 201-202). When conflict arises between the two, parents often resort to no longer “asking” for a principal’s cooperation, but instead demanding it (Lareau and Munoz 2012, 208). Often school administrators are uncomfortable with the significant demands placed on them by PTOs leading to more conflict and having their authority challenged (Lareau and Munoz 2012, 209-210). However, the world of PTOs and parental involvement is radically changing as it no longer simply consists of loosely coordinated bake sales or box tops. Now more affluent educated parents “work to bring in grants and initiate new programs” for their children’s schools (Posey-Maddox 2014, 95). In these organization white parents, particularly white mothers, make up the majority of the members (Posey-

Maddox 2014, 96-98). This was largely due to the advantages of middle and upper-middle-class parents who had the experience and professional skills to write grants and the connections needed to pass proposals or secure resources for the school (Posey-Maddox 2014, 101). However, these skills also give these parents considerable power over others as they were more likely to be able to determine “what resources would be brought to the school and how they would be distributed” (Posey-Maddox 2014, 103). Privileges like these often show how in later years these parents have greater political influence within schools to sway decisions around tracking.

When schools are “privilege-dependent organizations”, teachers often work harder to “appease these parents even when doing so contradicted stated goals” (Calarco 2020, 1-2). When white “helicopter” parents help provide critical resources to their child’s school, teachers are willing “to grant those parents and their children” exceptions to the rules (Calarco 2020, 2). When parents of higher socioeconomic status offer financially supplemental support to schools such as using PTO money for classroom technology or materials as well as logistical support through in classroom parent volunteerism, schools have more of a vested interest in those parents and their children due to their reliance on donations and support (Calarco 2020, 7-8). Appeasing those elite families becomes a higher concern as if those parents leave the school, the school could potentially face consequences through reduced donations, volunteers, and even lowered test scores (Calarco 2020, 8). Therefore, a school’s dependence on elite families can result in inequalities not only from individual behaviors but also from “organizational processes” (Calarco 2020, 16). This results in organizations such as school administration

demonstrating “bias not only against people from marginalized groups but also in favor of people from privileged groups” (Calarco 2020, 16).

Mothering and Education Policy

When looking at women’s roles in the political realm, women have had a longstanding role in shaping education policy. One of the ways that women were able to move outside of the private sphere and into the public sphere was through the role they played surrounding education. White women first made their move into the public sphere through the concept of “Republican Motherhood” that developed during the American Revolution (Kerber 1980, 36). This new ideology allowed for women to engage in political behavior which did “not threaten the domestic domain” (Kerber 1980, 36). Post the American Revolution, the political theory at the time advocated for an educated citizenry to maintain the Republic (Kerber 1980, 189). To fulfill this need, mothers would need to play a crucial role in educating their children to become decent citizens for this new Republic (Kerber 1980, 200). Thus, women were brought into the public sphere through the realm of education.

Over 140 years later, the same idea of “Republican Motherhood” was performed by women in the South. Women became political actors in the public sphere by viewing schooling as an extension of the home (McRae 2018, 14). However, segregationists instilled the idea that “good” womanhood meant performing whiteness and used that ideology to continue varying degrees of racial segregation (McRae 2018, 14). To maintain the white supremacist order of society, white women focused on school board

decisions, local political campaigns, college scholarships given for essays on maintaining racial segregation, rewriting textbooks that upheld white supremacy, and supporting de facto segregation (McRae 2018, 18). Republican motherhood has opened the door for women to be able to justify their involvement in political policy in a patriarchal society. However, that same door has been used by white women in order to maintain their own privileges and white supremacy.

Even today educational involvement is typically gendered and associated with mothers rather than fathers. Parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and PTO events are still typically dominated by mothers rather than fathers (Lareau 2000, 39). While contemporary fathers tend to be more active in their child's lives than their own fathers, women tend to be the primary caretakers of children and are generally seen as responsible for their child's success in education (Lareau 2000, 83-84). Even when fathers are involved in schooling, their involvement is still typically "organized, coordinated, and monitored by mothers" (Lareau 2000, 85). Many fathers view themselves as "supportive" rather than "active" often seeing that as the mothers' responsibility (Lareau 2000, 86-87). When work became a conflict for a father's involvement in their child's educational experience, fathers often believed that "their work obligations precluded them from spending more time on these tasks" despite the mothers also working (Lareau 2000, 89). So, despite two centuries past the original placement of educational responsibility on mothers through Republican Motherhood, little seems to have changed moving into the 21st Century as mothers are still seen as primarily responsible for their children's education across all race/class groups.

Women and Community Work/Activism

One demographic that has the power to help with the issues of racial inequality within and among schools may be through women's community work and activism. Moving forward past the Civil Rights Movement and into the 21st Century, grassroots movements that are generated by women often use their role as mothers to become involved in politics and the public sphere. Relatively little academic work has focused on female community work/activism with the link of separate spheres. While discriminatory policies/practices often act as "catalysts" for mothers' activism, "community-based struggles around basic needs" often draw women into activism and is essential to long term sustained activist work (Panitch 2008, 5). While maternalism often provides reasoning for activist work, many female activists were often not recognized or are dismissed from their role as activists (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011, 10). Often women's action even in grassroots organizing is seen as "an extension of their domestic responsibilities rather than legitimate political activity" (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011, 10). Despite this, many mothers use "maternal nurturance" to justify their activism (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011, 18). Many women activists often cite how their activist involvement stemmed from their role of being a mother (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011, 24). Many female activists do not always start out wanting to "change the world" rather their activism is grounded and motivated by their identity as mothers in "trying to secure better services for their children" (Panitch 2008, 6). Activists often use rhetoric such as "We're only a

few moms who love our children” as a way to strategically use their mothering roles to promote their agendas (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011, 23). Even if their activism is more likely to be dismissed as illegitimate political activity, this narrative does still fit into the ideas of maternalism and “the normative behavior of being a ‘good mother’” (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011, 24). Religion also provides reasoning for some women to become involved in grassroots community work as religious traditions “predate all other paths to work on behalf of the poor” (Naples 1998, 88). Many women often emphasize connections between their community work and religious values (Naples 1998, 88). Many mothers often do not like politics being associated with their community work (Naples 1998, 110-111). Women engaged in community work often use the term “politics” as having a negative connotation and often view politics as “dirty” or deceitful (Naples 1998, 110). Often these women construct a boundary between politics and their political activism by emphasizing the community aspect of their activism (Naples 1998, 124-125). These women do not define themselves as being “political people” or as political actors, but rather as people acting to protect their communities in order to maintain the existence of separate spheres (Naples 1998, 125; Panitch 2008, 74). Women also tend to downplay their contributions or achievements while simultaneously recognizing their authority within a movement (Panitch 2008, 148). Female activism is also highly gendered as many males in positions of power typically use gendered reprimands designed to keep female activists in their place (Panitch 2008, 156). This can lead to women being more likely to question their qualifications for even being considered to be activists (Panitch 2008, 157). Through religion, not wanting to be

associated with “politics”, discrimination against activist mothering; women’s roles in community work/activism are often overlooked or not taken seriously despite the political power and privilege that they have.

Women’s activism is often associated with personal growth, the action of “becoming activists”, the use of women’s spaces, and networking (Panitch 2008, 24-26). Women activists often recount experiences of personal growth noting forming new relationships, “enhanced political awareness”, and assertiveness (Panitch 2008, 24). Women’s activism also does not always inherently rise out of a “feminist consciousness” as many women “become activists” through addressing the needs of their community out of a “gendered obligation” (Panitch 2008, 25). Likewise, women’s activism often uses traditional “women’s spaces” where the public sphere is often now included in the private sphere as many women often locate the home as “a site of resistance” (Panitch 2008, 25). Networking is one of the most critical aspects of the success of women’s activism (Panitch 2008, 26). Women often come together in less conventional groups such as through places where women carry out their daily activities (i.e. parks, stores, schools, etc.) as many women feel more comfortable meeting in less formalized groups (Panitch 2008, 26). However, they can create “strong webs” through these networks that lead to considerable social action (Panitch 2008, 26-27).

However, among political activism, those of a higher socioeconomic status often have a stronger ability to be a part of the political arena. The declared interest in politics rises with education level as well as one’s “position in the social hierarchy, age, and size of town” (Bourdieu 1984, 406). Those who are most likely to say that they discuss a

political party's ideas, take part in demonstrations, join a political party, or donate money are those in higher professional careers (Bourdieu 1984, 407). When thinking about who engages in formal politics it's important to remember who has "a sense of being entitled to be concerned with politics, authorized to talk politics, by applying a specific political culture" (Bourdieu 1984, 409). Similar to the advantages of the upper middle class in securing resources for their children through tracking and other mechanisms, women of higher socioeconomic status are also more likely to be "entitled" enough to enter the political arena in general.

Summary

In summary, the United States has always been a racialized society that has depended on structures and ideologies that uphold them in order to maintain white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Omi and Winant 1994). After the Civil Rights Movement and into the 21st Century, dominant racial ideologies are expressed in subtle and covert ways in a seemingly race neutral society (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Diangelo 2018; Forman and Lewis 2006; Mueller 2017; Sue 2015). This includes policies like tracking that appear to be race neutral on the surface but provides a way to maintain a subtle form of segregation and continue to privilege whiteness (Clotfelter 2004; Kozol 1991; Lewis and Diamond 2017; Oakes 2005; Roda 2015; Sadovnik 2007; Tyson 2011). While detracking schools appears to be the most obvious answer, that is unlikely to happen when white elite parents are determined to hold onto their children's

privileges (Calarco 2020; Hagerman 2018; Lareau 2000; Lareau and Munoz 2012; Lewis and Diamond 2017; Posey-Maddox 2014).

This Project

In this project, I explore the dominant racial ideologies of public education activists in the South who are white women. I explore how practices such as tracking are furthered or challenged by white activist mothers who claim to advocate for equal education for all.

Although white women's activism surrounding public education and the maintenance of whiteness had been studied in the past, there has been almost no research conducted on this group since the civil rights movement, particularly in the South. There has also been only a small amount of scholarship conducted on those with political power and their use of colorblind ideology. This research intends to look at a deep root of the problem between tracking and the maintenance of white privilege by looking at those who hold the most amount of parental privilege within schools due to their political power within public education activism. Since maintaining white privilege has become increasingly complex since the civil rights movement, it is important to look at those that maintain the highest position of privilege within school structures as schools are one of the main institutions where inequality is reproduced and students face some of the first institution forms of racial stratification. However, it is also important to look at the role mothering and female activism plays and how that is intertwined with the use of colorblind ideology while also maintaining a progressive stance for "equality". This

project plans to investigate this previously neglected demographic and look at the intersection between whiteness, mothering, activism, and education policy.

METHODS

I chose to use a qualitative approach to this project in order to examine my research question. The point of qualitative research is “to describe a system of relationships” and to understand how people construct meanings about aspects of their everyday lives (Becker 2001, 319). Qualitative research has value in its of developing rich descriptions that are able to produce a full picture to answer research questions with deep understanding (Becker 2001, 326). This research project is focused on exploring how “progressive” women think about race in their education activism, and this question would be almost impossible to answer through the use of a survey or with brief answers. Qualitative research is especially good at finding the answers to more complex questions as well as describing or explaining social and political processes (Lofland et al. 2005, 2-3). Qualitative interviews are also more natural as they are extensions of “ordinary conversations” which allow for both more authenticity and understanding (Lofland et al. 2005, 12-13). This style of research also allows for valuable follow-up questions when further explanation is needed (Lofland et al. 2005, 13). Qualitative research also has a deeply ethical aspect as it allows actors to express their viewpoint themselves (Becker, 321).

Following IRB approval, participants who met the study's inclusion criteria (being a woman and a member of and preferably on the board of) an education political

action committee or campaign (or other relevant organization) were contacted through a snowball sampling technique starting with contacts that I had in various organizations from previous intern work as well as meeting some at public education events. These potential participants were presented with a recruitment script via email that I had access to as a former intern of one of the groups. I informed my potential participants that I was interested in interviewing them and getting their opinions on public education policy due to their involvement in a grass roots organization. When I was given a new potential participant by another participant, I would often use the same script in a Facebook message when I did not have access to their email. Eventually, I was able to find participants that the starting participants of the study did not personally know.

Participants in this phase of the study were limited to Mississippi. This was done in order to only engage in differences in Mississippi's women's participation in education policy from the 1950s-1970s to the present. Once consent forms were signed, I scheduled face-to-face interviews at a place of the participant's choosing, often in coffeeshop or office. Interviews were conducted and lasted between 60-110 minutes, depending on how much the participant had to say. Initially, my intention was to interview 20 participants. At this stage in the project, however, I have gathered data from 8 participants. I plan to continue this project in the future and continue building on this thesis research. The results presented in this thesis are from these 8 interviews.

My eight participants were all white women with ages ranging from their early forties to mid-fifties. Most of the participants had 2-3 children either in high school or in college. Seven of the eight were originally from Mississippi and only two of the

participants had ever lived outside of the state. The majority of the participants described themselves as independents who “vote based on the candidate not the party”. However, the participants were about even in conservative/liberal leanings. Most of the participants grew up in rural areas, although 50% the participants currently live in an urban area and the other 50% in more rural areas. As far as the participants’ education, over half attended private school or some combination of public and private schools for their k-12 education. Of the eight participants, only two had their children ever attend a private school. One sent her children to a Montessori school for elementary school before transferring them to a public high school. The other had her oldest child attend a private, Catholic school for religious reasons at her spouse’s conviction before moving her children to public schools. The participants came from three main groups. However, there was some overlap as some were involved or had loose ties to multiple groups. One group “Moms’ Lobbying for Kids” was the oldest organization that two participants were involved in where members were registered lobbyists. “Raise the Bar Mississippi” was a social media-based group with an established think tank and board that two participants were actively involved in. The other four participants were members of “Advance Mississippi” a political action committee. While all these groups had different purposes: funding candidates, lobbying, or social media influence; all focused strictly on education policy with their main focus being on education funding. There was strong interaction between all groups with the participants all being familiar with the other groups even if they were not a member/participant of one.

Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder. In order to establish rapport and build trust, I began the interview by asking “small talk” questions, such as questions about the participants’ children, community, or summer plans. Interviews consisted of questions about their perspectives on the hierarchy of organizations, what led them to becoming involved in public education activism, what policy agendas they support, and whether demographic characteristics like race and gender play a role in maintaining inequality within schools. The interview guide as well as charts related to the demographics of my participants is included in the appendix of this thesis.

All interviews were transcribed and coded using MAXQDA. I coded my data using the strategy of “open coding” wherein I systematically went through all of my interview transcripts and identified “categories that make sense in terms of...relevant interests, commitments, literatures, and/or perspectives” (Lofland et al. 2005, 201). The primary codes included “Race,” “Mothering,” “School Involvement,” “Mississippi Politics,” “School Choice,” “Education System/Policy,” and “Tracking.” I then developed subcodes within each of these codes in order to better organize the information and identify patterns. All identifying information was removed and replaced with pseudonyms.

My own social position as a white woman impacted this study in ways that are important to acknowledge, especially as I approach this study from a feminist epistemological perspective. First, as noted by Harding (1987) the best analysis is done when the researcher is “placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter” (Harding 1987, 9). This study also meets the requirements of Chafetz as this study seeks

to challenge the current status quo of women's lack of serious involvement in politics and grassroots organizing, regularly problematizes gender inequality, and is written actively for women as a critique for their improvement in challenging their role in a racialized society not merely just about them (Chafetz 1988). Therefore, as a white woman interviewing other white women, trust may have been established easier, and the participants were probably be more candid in their conversations, especially when we discussed race. I had a sense that many candidates were honest with me during the interviews as they seemed to relax as the interviews went on and communicated more like we were having a conversation than a formal interview. I also detected sincerity as many women, when asked more difficult questions, often said something to the effect of "well a perfect activist would say this but I think" or end their answers with "You know?" signifying that they felt I understood their position whether or not internally agreed or disagreed. Certainly, to my participants, in some ways I was an insider: I am also white, female, and from Mississippi. Having attended school all my life in Mississippi was probably the greatest benefit to this project as I already had significant background information of the socioeconomic/racial makeup of the schools that the participants referenced, being familiar with the legislation, policies, and political actors they discussed, and coming from the angle of someone who has been impacted by some of the issues they seek to help. As my own mother is also an activist in education policy and politics (although more focused on my home county's politics), many women were more open to talking to me as they knew my mother or had friends/acquaintances in common. However, I was also an outsider given that I am not a mother and younger than

the women interviewed and still in college. Overall, my social position made this project possible in terms of data collection, and I engaged in critical reflection throughout the process about how my own lens might shape the analysis of the data and the interpretation of results.

Certainly, there were some methodological limitations to this study. As my study was done during an election year, it was significantly harder for participants to make time for this study, and I faced challenges with scheduling interviews. In addition, it was also hard for participants to commit to a date being interviewed. Many were interested, but few effectively communicated with me enough to settle on a date/place for the interview. One of the reasons why I probably got less responses during this time period is due to potential participants' concern about potentially sharing confidential information about candidates during the election year, though I had assured them that the interview was more focused on their personal involvement with education policy.

Finally, this study is also limited with respect to the data collection time frame. I had hoped to collect more data, but I learned a great deal about the challenges of conducting qualitative research and the time required to complete this type of project. I hope to continue working on this project in the future so that I can more fully develop my ideas.

RESULTS

Joining the PTA/PTO

Parent Teacher Associations or Organizations (referred to as PTA/PTOs from this point forward) play a vital role with respect to how these women became public education activists in the first place. All participants, except one who was an educator rather than a parent exclusively, referenced PTA/PTO work as serving as a gateway into their involvement in statewide education policy. These women's concerns about education policy, particularly public education funding, grew out of PTA/PTO involvement for most of the participants. For example, Amy, a mother in a rural school district and member of *Advance Mississippi*, recalled how her interest in schools/education began when her children began attending school and when she joined the PTO. As she puts it, "When my kids started school then of course you're opened up to the world of the school otherwise you don't have a reason to interact with the school... but as far as the work of education [activism], it's just...that's not your area or your time in life [prior to having kids in school.]"

As Amy made clear, once she became more aware of the problems and how they impacted her children, she began to think more about what she could do to help as a volunteer. Amy suggested that prior to having school-aged children, participation in education activism was not on her radar or in her sphere.

Amy later explains how she started to recognize other problems once she got involved in the PTO at her children's school. She explains,

"Then you start to recognize okay in PTO, what are your parents being asked to provide? ... It prompts the question of, "What if this is something, they should be able to afford already? ... And so, then you start to see a bit of what's lacking.

What resources the schools are relying on volunteers to do for them. ...we're providing for our schools but where's it coming from? Volunteers. So, our schools are doing all the right things but it's coming from these volunteer efforts instead of being given legitimate state resources that they need. (emphasis added)"

Amy emphasizes that once she became involved in the PTO when her children went to school, she became aware of what legitimate resources the schools were not being provided by the state. Instead, she realizes that many resources are being provided by parents/volunteers when those resources should be funded by the state.

Sandra is a member of *Advance Mississippi*, and organization with a focus on campaigning for public education advocates in the Mississippi House and Senate. Sandra's children attend a rural school and she made comments similar to those of Amy. As she put it, "I got involved as a PTO mom the first time my child went to Kindergarten, and I could see the differences in resources, you know, that immediately was apparent to me." In this case, Sandra indicates that almost immediately upon her children entering school, she began to notice "differences in resources" more than before she had kids in school.

Christy, a member of *Moms' Lobbying for Kids* whose children attend a suburban school, made similar comments. As she put it,

"I began to be very involved in the PTOs of my children's schools and one year I was President of one of them and of course with that, you are privy to information that most people aren't. I didn't honestly realize until that point that we were not

raising money for extras. We were raising money to subsidize what the state was giving. And I got mad to be honest with you.”

Christy points out how through her high level of PTO involvement was how she became aware that even her more affluent suburban school was having to subsidize their budget through PTO funds. Christy notes how it made her “mad” leading her to channel her anger and later take a more active role in education policy through working as a full-time lobbyist.

Diane, a member of *Raise the Bar Mississippi*, even went as far to connect the actions of PTA/PTOs with having inspired grass roots activism around education policy in Mississippi. She notes,

“And you know *this is the PTO of this day* you know? I don’t have time to bake the cookies...for the raffle or whatever. *But I can get involved in something like this where my voice is heard and go to the Capitol once a year, meet, you know talk with likeminded people about our thoughts and throw out good ideas. I think it’s the PTA of this generation.* The PTA’s were always run by the moms.”

Diane describes the type of education activism that these organizations are doing as the PTA/PTO of this generation. To Diane, these organizations allow for women who work fulltime or with less flexible hours to make their “voice...heard”. Rather than working on smaller things like “bake the cookies for the raffle” Diane can help with structural change through influencing legislation or advocating for pro public education candidates.

Overall, one major theme that emerged in my data was that almost all of the women connected their PTA/PTO involvement with their interest grassroots organizing

for education change across the state. These women discussed how their PTA/PTO involvement shaped their perspectives on Initiative 42¹ or other statewide legislation. And, this interest in improving education in the state of Mississippi, initiated by their PTA/PTO involvement, led to the formation of all three organizations.

Race and Gender Composition of Organizations

Another theme that emerged from the data was that despite the fact that these organizations claim to bring people interested in education policy together from all over the state, these organizations are all majority white, if not all white and primarily composed of white women. While almost all the participants admitted that they wished for/wanted more “diversity” in their organization boards, these women also relied on their own personal networks when recruiting members. These networks were usually situated in racially and socioeconomically diverse communities, but the networks themselves were almost always made up of only white, upper middle-class women. Indeed, no group included more than two women of color. *Advance Mississippi* had one Asian American woman; *Mom’s Lobby for Kids* had two black women that were a part of the staff and *Raise the Bar Mississippi* was all white. Even despite the lack of men, in comparison to women; white men were more represented than black women. Despite recruiting from white social networks as a primary strategy of finding new members, many of the women seemed mystified as to why there was a lack of diversity. For instance, when discussing the racial makeup of the board of *Advance Mississippi*, Anne, whose children attend a highly diverse public school, seemed to have no clue as to how

the board lacked diversity. As she put it, “I think we’re trying. I don’t think it’s intentional at all. I don’t think there’s anybody who doesn’t want it to be diverse. I think it’s just that we have some “go-to” people. We’ve chosen some really awesome people that are part of the PAC um and we’ve been looking.” Instead of talking about how privilege and whiteness play into networking and resulting in their organization makeup, Anne suggests the whiteness of the organization is a mere coincidence and quickly shifts the focus of the conversation with me back to the work of their current board. When Anne talks about the board’s “go-to” people she’s referencing upper-middle class white women. By emphasizing that the “go-to people” are just “really great” Anne diverts away from the issue of the lack of diversity through insisting that the talents of the current board make the issue less of a problem. By shrugging off the lack of diversity as a coincidence Anne seems to engage with the Naturalization frame of Colorblind Ideology and takes on a stance of “That’s the way it is.” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 64-65). Her avoidance of talking about the issue of diversity in her organization is a common strategy used by whites. As noted in the literature review, whites are very uncomfortable talking about race and often take great lengths to avoid it (Sue 2015, 13-14). Certainly, this seems to be the case for Anne and others in the study.

Although Anne believes the racial composition is a coincidence, Amy talks more directly about how this racial pattern emerges. Amy explains,

“I think one thing that’s probably hindered is that we are all in different locations across the state, you know? So, in some ways, *we’re relying on our own networks to draw people in*, and it is hard to, you know, we have—there’s a few

opportunities there have been across the state to meet other public education advocates.”

While Amy acknowledges what may be the root of the lack of representation of people of color in these organization, she doesn't see a way to resolve the issue within her own networks. In this sense, Amy also takes on a naturalization stance of Colorblind-racism interpreting the situation of it just being “that's the way it is” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 64-65). Instead, Amy portrays the whiteness of her grassroots group as an outcome of lack of organization of advocates across the state. As networking seems to bring women together to create these organizations, if their networks only consist mostly of other women they know through the PTA/PTO and through other parts of their communities, it is unsurprising that these organizations are composed of mostly white, upper middle class women. When those are the demographics of the organizations they are drawing from, it is unlikely that they will achieve more diversity in their organizations.

Although the racial compositions of these groups are important to interrogate, at first, I noticed that these groups represented a gendered space. Specifically, all the organizations had boards and working groups of about 8-12 people; however, out of the of organizations included in this study, there were only 3 members who identified as men within the higher levels of these organizations. *Moms' Lobbying for Kids* had one young member who was a man on staff in charge of graphic design. *Raise the Bar Mississippi* had a large steering group of 12 people with three men and nine women. Meanwhile, *Advance Mississippi* only had two of the same men from *Raise the Bar Mississippi* loosely involved in their decision-making group that was also overwhelmingly composed

of women. However, it did not appear that any of these groups were purposefully trying for their group to be a space for women. Instead it appeared, that the gender demographics of the groups grew out of the longstanding gendered association of education being a “women’s topic”. This dates back to the ideas formed by the mothers of massive resistance where women were responsible for helping shape education policy as they were “protectors” of their children and the concept of the “Republic Mother” which placed education as a mother’s responsibility for raising good citizens (Kerber 1980; McRae 2018). Like the results found by Logsden-Conradsen where women often downplay their own roles in activism by calling themselves “just moms”, many referred to themselves as just “being a group of moms” (Logsden-Conradsen 2011).

When I asked the participants why there were not more men involved in educational political activism, many women relied on biologically based, essentialist views of gender. As women continue to perform traditional versions of their gender, gender becomes naturalized and a necessary part of reality (Butler 1988). Many of the participants felt like women were “naturally” more inclined to participate in this work. When talking to one participant, Christy, a member of *Moms’ Lobbying for Kids* she explained how her job is to reach out to local communities and help them get involved with education political activism. However, who was interested in getting involved was very gendered. When Christy begins explaining why the people she interacts with about education policy are usually women, she responded,

“I know exactly why that is women want to fix things. You know? I just think women want to make things right. Not that some men don’t there are men that are

very involved in this fight, but *I think the nurturing quality of a woman somehow lends itself to this.*”

Christy follows gender norms in how she rationalizes why men do not play an active role in shaping education policy. Christy emphasizes the “nurturing quality” she believes that women have biologically that men lack. However, when both men and women are buying into gendered norms these spaces are likely to stay highly gendered.

Similarly, two members of *Raise the Bar Mississippi*, relied on essentialist understandings of gender in explaining the gender composition of activist organizations. Diane, a mother of three, also states that, “it’s just *a natural instinct for us* with the children. The men don’t have that instinct.” Diane also relies on gendered norms to explain the lack of involvement by men. Her belief that women have a “natural instinct” also points to a belief that that gender and instinct are somehow correlated leading to women being more involved than men in their children’s lives and thus, education policy.

Heather, a mother of two, believes that men are not involved very much in schools in general unless it has to do with sports. As she explains,

“Um.....a lot of men are just not (laughs) they didn’t enjoy school when they were there, and they just really don’t care. They just really don’t care. If it’s not with a football team or a basketball team or a baseball team for them to go cheer for, a lot of them just really could not care a less.”

Heather believes that men are less likely to “enjoy” school than women also leading to their lack of interest. In addition, Heather also points to school involvement being highly

gendered with men more involved in athletics and women more involved in issues like funding, academics, and resources.

However, while this viewpoint was common, many of the participants also connected the lack of involvement of men in these organizations to a lack of men being involved in schools or their children's education in general. This appears to line up with Lareau's conclusions on fatherhood (Lareau 2000; Lareau 2011). Lareau's findings are that mothers generally are "more active than fathers in ancillary events" and "more invested in children's activities" (Lareau 2011, 115). Both at school and within the home, monitoring children's school activities is done "almost exclusively by mothers" (Lareau 2000, 8). When talking to Anne about how the founding members of the board of *Advance Mississippi* were all women, Anne believed that the lack of men on the board was due to men believing schools were not part of their role. As Anne puts it,

"I think women just get the job done. I think they're passionate. They're in the schools, *involved in PTO, so they see first-hand the deficiencies in funding* or whatever the issues are with state testing, and not that there aren't men like- my husband is very and he knows he could talk to you way more about the politics of it than I can, but in most cases the men don't keep up with, with the ends and outs of what's going on at school."

Anne, at first, starts with that women are "passionate" and "get the job done". The idea that women are "passionate" whereas men are not also reinforcing traditional gender norms. In addition, the idea that women "get the job done" and that they see issues within

the school also places the responsibility of the well being of the school on women rather than men keeping men away from public education policy.

Similarly, Amy and Cheryl also related the issue back to men's lack of PTO/PTA involvement, associated with later getting involved in education policy, to gendered assumptions and stereotypes. When discussing why more men are not involved despite the children also being theirs Amy, a mother of three, believes stereotypes keep men from being more involved. As she phrases it,

“I don't know it's especially frustrating. (sighs) I think some of it is that um there is a strong narrative sort of around the 'PTO Mom'. You know there's a real strong persona of that the volunteer aspect of that kind of lends itself to making it seem like it's women you know? Although every one of us works. You know we all have jobs. We're not all housewives. So, it's not like we have all this time to do that. There's nothing wrong with being a housewife I'm just saying....”

Amy notes how there is a stereotype of the “PTO Mom” that leads to men not being involved. Amy, a freelancer who runs her own business, also becomes defensive towards the stereotype emphasizing how most of the women in public education advocacy also have their own jobs/careers. Amy wants to make sure that people understand that you can have a career and be involved in public education advocacy. Despite many women being involved also having careers, Amy believes that the stereotype still has a strong hold as men do not really get involved.

Meanwhile, Cheryl notes that in her opinion Dads do care, but that the stereotype still keeps a lot of them from being involved. Cheryl explains, “Mmhhh. And they're

very interested they care very much, Dads do....I guess.. the *PTA for whatever reason has...there's a stereotype* that it's women and so I think the *people who naturally [gravitate toward the PTA get involved]*." Cheryl while grounding her argument in people who get involved in the PTA do so "naturally" also explains the reason behind that being due to the stereotype of women and the PTA. This is also leads to the reinforcement of that stereotype as Cheryl also describes the PTA makeup as being "natural" rather than due to the enforcement of gendered stereotypes.

In this segment of the interview, both Cheryl and Amy draw on the stereotype of the "PTA mom" as one of the reasons that limits gender diversity. The "PTA mom" stereotypes also helps reinforce the stereotype of women, particularly white women, as being the main ones involved in education policy.

Perhaps most importantly, however, I found that for all my participants, their political identity was also wrapped up in their identity as a mother. As mentioned in the literature review, results from Panitch, Logsdon-Conradson, and Naples found that many female activists political identity is wrapped up in being a "mother" (Logsdon-Conradson 2011; Naples 1998; Panitch 2008). When participants in this study such as Cheryl or Christy claim that the instinct to change education policy or be involved in schools is "natural" it also draws on their "maternal" identity which is simultaneously used in order to justify their activism. Similarly, to Panitch's results, many of these women did not start out as activists but became activist out of addressing the needs of their communities surrounding their children's schools (Panitch 2008, 25). This also influences how

education activism becomes a gendered space when it stems from the “maternal activism” of helping the community’s schools.

“We Educate Everybody”: Participants’ Portrayals of Racism in Public School Activism

Despite the lack of racial diversity in their makeup, all three groups focused on achieving a more equitable public education system for Mississippi. All three groups focused primarily around supporting the Mississippi Adequate Education Program and seeking to fully fund all public schools that the state of Mississippi has been neglecting¹. All three of the organizations are anti-charter schools and anti-voucher programs that they believe, if put into place, would raise inequality among schools and lower the already dwindling funds for public schools. Participants from all of the organizations were strong advocates of the notion that every child deserves a good education no matter their family or where they are born. Christy, whose job is a public education lobbyist explains how she believes everyone should be invested in public education due to the high amount poverty in Mississippi. Christy had spent a good portion of the interview talking about the ties education has to economics. One of Christy’s concerns is that the state of Mississippi’s economy will continue to fall unless something is done about public education. She explains,

“(exasperated noise) I’ve never understood somebody who’s not got a child in public schools that would not want to make public schools better *because everyone wins if they succeed in some way or another*. So, I don’t know why somebody would turn a blind eye especially in an area where poverty is so

rampant...that just goes back to the *whole public school thing. We educate everybody.*”

According to Christy, “everyone wins” if more of the population succeeds through education. Christy explains how she does not understand why people do not support public education in a high poverty state like Mississippi if it helps the area. She reasons that being a good aspect of public schools in that they “educate everybody” and are part of helping the economy of the state.

Anne, a heavily involved mother of two in her children’s schools, reinforces Christy’s view that people need to support public education since it “educates everyone. She says,

“Um I think *we need to help every student*, it doesn’t matter demographics, it doesn’t matter the situation, *we need to provide an equitable education system*. It doesn’t matter whether you live an affluent neighborhood or whether you live in the Delta, you know a community that’s struggling. You have-the have- *children should have the same opportunities* regardless of their zip code.”

Anne strongly states that she believes the state of Mississippi needs “to provide an equitable education system”. She even goes on to say that “children should have the same opportunities” even further stating her commitment to educational equality.

Although these women agree that it is important to think about advocating for the education of everybody, how these women understand racial inequality and racism in education varies.

Racism is a Problem

Some participants openly acknowledged that race must be central to thinking about education policies and education reform. For example, when I ask Lisa whether she believes that issues concerning racial inequality and education policy should be discussed within her organization, she responds, “I think we...yeah I think that’s kind of a given, yeah and when you are um...yeah I think we’re all aware of that and *that’s kind of part of the reason we are all involved.*” Lisa’s struggle to talk coherently about race is part of the style of Color-Blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 91-94). Throughout the interview Lisa was a highly articulate and intelligent woman. However, even though she expressed that race was central to her and her organization’s advocacy, her speech instantly became awkward showing she was uncomfortable with the topic.

On the other hand, Heather also struggles to talk coherently about race, but acknowledges that racism does exist. Heather begins by explaining that she does believe racism exists but is unable to coherently express her views. Heather seems uncomfortable by the question and struggles to coherently express her views. Instead Heather puts it,

“Um (sighs). In-In a perfect world [race doesn’t matter.] In more truly urban school districts, I don’t think it does. Um unfortunately, [there are] parts of the country where there is still systemic, endemic racism. And I don’t care-I don’t care who says that [race] doesn’t [matter], it does. And uh sometimes it’s intentional on the parts of teachers and administrators and law makers and sometimes it’s unintentional—that’s where that endemic [comes into play.] That’s where it’s not something that’s being done consciously [but rather] it’s

very passive. But [racism] does happen and it and unfortunately it does it-it happens everywhere and yes it tends to happen more to minorities but in places where Anglo-Saxon are in the minority it happens to them as well.”

While Heather does believe that racism remains a problem, she is unable to coherently express that it is and remains uncomfortable during the explanation. Instead of clearly stating her views, her response almost incomprehensible even as she struggles to say that racism does exist “in some places”. However, her view that in “truly urban school districts” that racism does not exist is very problematic since race still impacts the education that a child receives even in very progressive districts.

It's not race, it's class.

Although some participants like Heather spoke openly about the reality of racism, some participants argued that inequality has much more to do with poverty and socioeconomic status than race. Cheryl, whose children attend a racially diverse school in a more affluent area avoids the topic when I ask her if race influences the education a child receives. Instead she responds, “Yeah I do-well I think for the-well in places. *It's really more about poverty than race* but unfortunately those things corollate.” Cheryl acknowledges that race may affect the education of a child in some “places”, before shifting the conversation to be about economics rather than the uncomfortable topic of race. Likewise, Amy, who lives in a diverse rural community where her children go to a school that's 70% minority, does acknowledge that the statement that race affects the education a child receives is correct, but in “Mississippi”. As Amy puts it,

‘I think yes that in Mississippi that statement is yes more pronounced because poverty lines tend to fall along racial lines in Mississippi. Now nationwide that may not be the case in other areas but if you look historically at poverty rates and education like school ratings, you’ll see that they align. That lower ratings tend to be in more-in poorer districts.’”

Amy believes that in Mississippi, race may affect the education a child receives, but shifts the conversation to be more focused on poverty rather than on the topic of race.

However, while talking about race Amy mentioned that there are some “lingering affects” of race. Amy says, “For decades the goal was to maintain power by refusing to educate African Americans. That’s just our history.” In this part of the conversation, Amy acknowledges that African Americans faced racial discrimination that extended to education and later says that there may be some lingering effects. However, she reverts back to her view that poverty plays a larger impact than race and therefore race is not as important of a factor anymore. As Amy puts it,

“The way the funding works in Mississippi that it’s predisposed to...put poor districts at a disadvantage which aligns along racial lines often...and so I don’t know that you could just blanket say...“Black folks don’t get as good of an education.” I don’t think like if you’re talking about poverty....”

Amy does acknowledge that race has impacted educational inequality through the deep roots of white supremacy. However, she suggests that has a very small effect today and that poverty is a much more important factor. When poverty is suggested to be something more important to talk about, it neglects the role that racism still plays in educational

inequality and contributes to the “minimization of racism” where whites buy into the idea that there is a “declining significance of race” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 70-71).

“It depends”

Meanwhile other comments were very vague suggesting it depended on the area and was more due to certain places/people rather than a structural issue in the United States. When talking about if race has an impact on a child’s education, Christy responds, “...my first comment is that it shouldn’t. Now what is reality, *I cannot speak for every school district but um, but I just have to say I hope not.* That’s pretty sad.” While Christy believes that race should not affect the education that a child receives, she merely says that she “hopes” it does not. This seems to indicate that Christy does not believe that race happens in her school district or where her children attend schools. Instead, the focus is on more overt racism that she does not see happen around her leaving her oblivious to overt forms of racism.

Likewise, Anne believes that racism can potentially happen, but also says that it depends on the people or situation. Anne explains, “*I think it probably depends on the school, it probably depends on the teacher,* but I think it can. Unfortunately, though it shouldn’t. I think here in the South and in Mississippi in particular it probably does.” Anne also comments that race should not impact the education that a child receives but believes that it depends on certain factors like a teacher rather than racial inequality being a structural issue perpetuated in schools. However, Anne believes that racial inequality within schools may be more prominent in the South rather than a more nationwide

problem. Both Christy and Anne also contribute to the minimization of race when they minimize the effects of racism because they personally “don’t see racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 70-71).

This is problematic as by taking away the view of race as a structural issue in society, these women are less likely to see and challenge the ways race impacts a child’s education whether they go to the most progressive school or not. In addition, these women seem to think of racism as being more overt actions that were popular with the Jim Crow era rather than more modern covert forms of racism. This removes them from thinking critically about the schools that their children attend may perpetuate racism. While poverty is an important factor in educational inequality, by shifting the conversation away from race, these women neglect the role of racial inequality in schools.

Overall, when it comes to how these women portray their attitudes about race in education reform, it is clear that they think about the salience of race differently. These women also struggle to speak coherently about race and often seem to think of race as a faraway topic that does not impact their lives. Many of these women seem to think that a teacher or a school district may potentially be racist, but that the overall education system does not promote racism within or among schools.

Tracking

All of the women in this study strongly emphasized their belief in fully funding public schools in Mississippi and ending the growing movement of privatization in public

education such as the introduction of charter schools and vouchers. The women in this study were very deliberate in their statements about how they believed every child should have an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of their demographic background.

However, all of the women became flustered once the topic of tracking was introduced. Tracking, as discussed in the literature review, is one of the key mechanisms that schools use to reproduce racial inequality and has led to racial segregation of classrooms even in racially diverse schools (Clotfelter 2004; Kozol 1991; Lewis and Diamond 2017; Oakes 2005; Roda 2015; Sadovnik 2007; Tyson 201).

While most of the interviews had previously featured strong statements promoting equity in public education, that changed when I brought up the subject of tracking. For instance, while advocating that every child should have a more equal experience in public education and critiquing white flight to a nearby suburban school, Anne instantly became agitated upon the issue of tracking. I asked Anne if she felt that tracking divided children by race in schools and she hesitantly responded at first by saying: "...Um...I have *mixed emotions* on that because *I can certainly see* where it does um *but my children are in a very diverse district where they're in the minority.*" While Anne does acknowledge that tracking can divide children by race, she justifies tracking by claiming that her children are in the minority so even if they are in mostly white classrooms it's fine. Anne becomes more defensive and agitated during the conversation saying, "They are in advanced classes, AP classes, so to me that's important for them and I may be biased there because my children are-*I want my children to have every opportunity to be in the same situation as the kids in [nearby suburban school].*" To Anne, her children benefitting from unjust

racial inequality is justified since her children are losing out by attending a more diverse school instead of a nearby suburban school with better resources. She later notes that, “Even the honors classes and the AP classes are still pretty darn diverse. But um I can see that argument.” Anne admits that she “can see” the argument but does not seem to see that it applies to her school since those classes are more diverse than other schools nearby. However, that does not justify the racial inequalities that result from tracking.

Lisa, who’s children previously attended the same school also became flustered when asked if tracking divides children by race responding with, “Yeah. Yeah. I don’t know personally if...*I really don’t know enough about that.* I have heard that happens, but I really can’t I don’t have a good answer but....” While Anne responded quickly by defending her view, Lisa, who was very adamant about equality throughout the interview, suddenly had nothing to say about the topic. Her responses changed to short, choppy, and ambiguous; claiming not to be informed enough on the topic.

Heather, who’s children attended a high school that was over 75% black and latinx had a very similar response. During the interview, Heather recalled that while her children were in high school, their school was being investigated by the Office of Civil Rights due to the lack of minorities in their AP and Honors classes and how she felt that was untrue and fought against that judgement. When talking about the Civil Rights Investigation, Heather mentions, “*Well it was bogus. ...anybody can sign up for an AP-in theory.* Anybody can sign up for Honors or AP at the time of registration.” Heather believes that as long as anyone can sign up for classes that tracking does not divide children by race even if the result is a mostly white classroom in her children’s

predominantly black school. Heather later mentions that, “AP classes have thresholds. *They have limits. They have certain criteria* that they have to have...surpassed in order to get into that more rigorous curriculum and um I read a lot of the reports *I wrote some of the rebuttals to those reports.*” Heather focuses instead that AP and higher tracked classes have limits and certain criteria meaning that not everyone can handle the rigor or deserves to take those classes in her eyes. Heather even mentions that she, herself, wrote rebuttals to the arguments that tracking was race based in her children’s high school.

However, when asked later in the interview more directly if tracking divides children by race, Heather later follows up with, “Yeah, I disagree because again if it’s done strictly by students that meet a standard to go into a more rigorous program then (sighs) you’re not. It’s not done by race.” Heather believes that tracking is definitely not impacted by race and instead claims that it is only done by students meeting a “standard” even if the result is that one race is overrepresented. Heather then proceeds to bring up how affirmative action gives “automatic slots” saying, “Now on the flip side of that you have *affirmative action* which ensures that people of nonwhite diversity *have automatic slots.*” Heather switches the conversation of racial inequality around to claiming that minorities have more opportunities sometimes through affirmative action. Heather also wrongly believes that affirmative action is similar to quotas giving minorities “automatic slots” which is illegal and does not happen. Heather then places the responsibility of unequal tracking on the school staff. Heather mentions,

“(sighs) you have to *look at the person who’s in charge* of that process and *are they truly being impartial.* And are they true to the process and are they....

unfairly stacking the decks so to speak. But no, it shouldn't. It should not but unfortunately it still does. Especially in this part of the country."

In this part of the conversation, Heather believes that any racial inequality that happens through tracking is due to the school personnel rather than a structural problem that is kept in place by a variety of factors. Throughout the interview, Heather acknowledges that racism can be a factor in tracking but feels that it's an individual issue rather than a structural problem. Heather has also acted against detracking efforts and only says she would support it if there was some potential benefit for her children (aside from racial equality) who were enrolled in higher tracked courses when they were in high school. Like Anne, Heather claimed throughout the interview that her children were missing out on benefits that children that attended majority white schools had and that they were already giving up some privileges for diversity and that they deserved the privileges they received.

However, different strategies appeared to be used by the women whose children attended whiter, higher ranked school districts when justifying tracking. A successful businesswoman, Christy, who left her old job to work full time for a public education organization, made it clear throughout the interview that she fully recognized the role one's parents' income plays in the education they receive. Christy was also one of the most vigorous advocates for fully funding all public schools. In the same school district as Anne's children, Christy's children attend a very privileged, mostly white suburban public school, but Christy's children were not enrolled in AP or Honors classes.

However, when asked the same question, Christy's response also did not advocate taking

away tracked classes claiming, “Not every child’s going to ultimately react well to it. ... I guess what I’m saying is I want everybody to have a chance to be tested for um to go into these classes or to go into these classes. I don’t want to say, ‘oh well you can’t do that.’” It is obvious that Christy wants to stick to the script of saying, “well everyone should be equal”, but she diverts from that by saying that there should still be AP classes. She believes that everyone should have an opportunity to take a test to enter an AP class which avoided the question. However, when Christy and I were talking about how it appears that there are mostly white children in AP and Honors classes, Christy comments saying it’s mostly just due to a child’s family’s home life,

“Okay so if you aren’t doing well on the map test, okay so that goes back to what’s going on at home. Were you read to as a child, do you have a computer at home, do you have internet access at home, do you have two parents at home? Do you have one parent that is helping you with homework? You know even an upper-class white woman may not help her child with homework...So, it goes- there are lots of different examples of what might be going on with that child with the map test to start them on that track. And it most often is probably a minority, but like I said I know plenty of white parents who don’t sit down and do homework with their children or read to their children.”

Although Christy openly admits that there are more white children in AP classes, she defends tracked classes by saying it’s a parent’s responsibility on how their child performs in assessments. She compensated her argument by saying that some white parents also do not succeed in that responsibility. However, like Anne, but for different

reasons Christy does not advocate for getting rid of higher tracked classes, but suggests just making sure every child is tested for them.

Likewise, one of Christy's colleagues Cheryl uses similar strategies. Cheryl whose children also attend a prominent suburban school that has a similar high graduation rate, but with a mixed racial enrollment also is relatively vague while still supporting tracking. When asked the same question, Cheryl responded, "...our experience in our school district is.... fewer minorities in those higher level classes yes. It's self-selection, they sign up for those classes it's not like somebody did that but...the result is the same." Cheryl also relies on the idea that since there's "self-selection" that removes the possibility that racial inequality can result from tracking even though she has noticed that the higher level classes have fewer minorities and do not reflect the racial makeup of the school. When asked if her organization should promote detracking, Cheryl responded saying that,

"It's really hard because you want you do want to provide opportunities for...students. You want everybody to be challenged. You know you want your kids who are *really high achievers in really challenging classes* and so it's hard to not...see some tracking when you offer those things. *But...if you also encourage other kinds of activities they can still have interaction with one another. ...you know what we need to be doing with pre-k and if we do a really great job on the full spectrum, with tracking on the high school level we wouldn't see as much disparity. ...we're just not doing well enough.*"

In this case, Cheryl's response is similar to Christy's in that she does acknowledge it happens, but chooses to avoid the topic of racial disparity by claiming if children had all the resources they needed in lower grades, then you would not see a racial disparity in tracking. Cheryl also places the needs of "high achievers" above the possibility of achieving better racial equality. However, the view that Cheryl, Christy, and Heather take where tracking is merit based also contributes to colorblind ideology. This takes on the frame of "abstract liberalism" where whites rationalize "racial unfairness in the name of equal opportunity" (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 58-60).

Meanwhile, Sandra and Amy, whose children attend a more rural school with minority enrollment of 70%, take different approaches to the others. Amy responds while not arguing against tracking, not really arguing strongly for it either. As she puts it,

" I think yes to a degree that is true....There is an achievement gap and sometimes it does fall along racial lines but more than race it falls on poverty lines. ... but I think there is conversation [happening] about that and there is effort and recognition that you want your full community represented in all of those areas not just a white, affluent part of your community, you know?"

While Amy agrees that tracking can divide children by race, she puts limitations on that statement by again by mentioning that poverty plays a larger role than race. However, when asked if her organization, Advance Mississippi should promote detracking Amy became a little more flustered with her answer. Amy responds,

Hmm...I don't know. I haven't really thought about it that much um I think that's challenging because um you know when you look at public schools and their

position within a whole community for example you know you're looking at um a comm-a public school becomes a selling point for a community. [However] you want your full community represented in all of those areas [higher tracked classes] not just a white, affluent part of your community, you know?

Instead of focusing on how tracking contributes to racial inequality, Amy is more focused on how her school district may lose some of its' "selling points". Amy is concerned about possible white flight due to a lack of "selling points" if her school was to completely detrack. However, she is also concerned about making sure that not just affluent whites are represented in higher tracked classes and is far less attached to tracking than the other women had been. However, Sandra, another mother in the same school district, took a different approach when asked if her organization should promote detracking. Sandra responds,

"(sighs) that's such a hard question um.....I wish there was a way to do *a little bit of both*. A little bit of um...some classes that are designated by ability [and some] that are where everybody's together where it's not tracked by ability. Some of the research that is out there where C schools-*where there is more of a mix of higher performing and lower performing students* that they do a better job of teaching their lower performing students than actual higher performing schools do."

Sandra takes the middle ground in advocating for some forms of tracking, but also some forms of detracking. Sandra also points to research on mixing higher and lower achieving students together to draw upon her answer.

However, the most radical viewpoint came from Diane, an educator in a over 75% minority rural school. Diane talks about how research shows that children learn best in environments of mixed ability and responds to asking if schools should detrack by saying, “I think that would be a great thing. I think that um wouldn’t work on adults. Adults wouldn’t want to do that um I think.” Diane shows that she believes detracking would be good, however her only concern is that parents would not agree to it which does seem to be likely.

When discussing tracking, all of the women except for Diane took on the “yes and no” strategy of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 84). While many of the women said “yes” that tracking could result in the overrepresentation of whites in advanced classes, they also said “no” by advising against detracking policies or suggesting a compromise (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 84-85). Many of these participants used buffer statements like “I don’t know” or “That’s a hard one” to safely express their reservations or opposition to tracking falling in line with this strategy of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 84-85).

Like findings from existing research, women like Christy and Cheryl whose children attend whiter, more suburban schools, did not show as tight of a grip on keeping tracking programs in place. However, participants with children who attended schools with the highest ratio of minorities, Heather and Anne, held on the tightest to tracking. This is the opposite of studies conducted by Clotfelter where schools that are predominantly black have the least amount of tracking. However, this may be since this study was focused on the perspective of white mothers, it is more likely that they would

fight more for tracking in order to maintain their children's privileges. Meanwhile, others whose children attended more evenly mixed schools, Sandra and Amy, were open to the possibility of reducing tracking. In this sense, it seemed that whiteness definitely played a role in their opinions. The women whose children attended predominantly black schools were the most adamant against detracking. These women are more likely to express resentment towards detracking policies because it is they who are being asked to give up an undeserved privilege. They felt like they had sacrificed their children's education for diversity and felt that in exchange their children deserved privilege. However, those whose children attended mixed or predominantly white schools were much less adamant about keeping tracking.

CONCLUSION

The central research question guiding this study was: To what extent do white women involved in public education advocacy confront the roles that race, and racism play in the educational opportunities and outcomes of youth in the South? Participants in this study were progressive, in the sense that they were advocating for public schools to receive better funding and be put on an equal playing field. However, they failed to acknowledge the role that racism shapes the education that a child receives and how their own privilege perpetuates racial inequality within schools. When asked if race affects the education a child receives, many of the participants contributed to the minimization of racism by switching to talk about how poverty is more important than race, thereby minimizing the impact of race on educational inequality. While advocating for equal treatment for all children, they are unwilling to give up the privileges their own children receive by their placement in advanced classes. In order to justify this, almost all of the participants engaged in “yes and no” strategy of Color-Blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 84-85). While most of the participants acknowledged that they “could see” how tracking results in the overrepresentation of whites in higher level classes, they advised against taking a detracking stance therefore contributing in the perpetuation of racial inequality. While these women have successfully combated structural inequality in the field of education through their advocacy for equal funding and anti-privatization, they have failed to fix their own blind spots when it comes to acknowledging the privilege they maintain within schools.

The potential impact of these women's racial blind spot is that while the racial gap in education may decrease if these women succeed in their goals, there may also be further use of colorblind ideology in regard to tracking if all public schools are equal. This could lead to many white advocates failing to critique their own privileges and continuing to use strategies of Color-blind racism to continue to justify maintaining privilege and racial inequality within schools. This study reflects the obvious need for white women to think critically of how their children's' successes were aided by the women's own privileges and intervention in order to better provide an equal playing field within schools. One of the ways that this could potentially be helped is if these women could potentially work harder to network outside of traditional PTA/PTO groups where there's only women of similar background to them. If these women could include more women of color on their boards, they would also get more views about racial inequality that may cause them to take other policy routes.

While this study provides a glimpse into how white women that engage in public education activism consistently use colorblind ideology, it does have its limitations. This study had a limited number of participants due to time constraints and it being conducted during an election year. However, if this study was to be repeated and potentially include other organizations, that would provide a more accurate representation of white women in public education advocacy. In addition, this study is limited to Mississippi. While Mississippi does provide a very interesting context considering its deep history of massive resistance towards integration and maintaining an equitable education system, it would be useful to conduct this study in other states such as Georgia, Texas, Tennessee,

or Louisiana that have seen a similar rise in grassroots education activism and compare and contrast those results. Furthermore, I believe it is also important to conduct this study in states like Indiana, Wisconsin, or Nebraska. Many of the women in this study acknowledge potential racism due to the strong history of white supremacy through Jim Crow laws in Mississippi. Therefore, I think it may be potentially important to see if women in Northern organizations mention if de facto forms of segregation such as redlining have an impact on racial inequality in their public education system. As tracking is a nationwide problem, it would be interesting to look at if white Northern women use similar patterns of justification for tracking and other issues of racial inequality within schools. In addition, Mississippi is a very conservative state where traditional gender norms are expected to be followed. This has had a significant impact on this study as men are often discouraged from involvement in the education system, and the responsibility to intervene often falls solely on women due to traditional gender norms. Gender intersects with race in this activism which has led to white women holding a prominent position in education activism. In the future, it would be important to see if that same intersection of race and gender applies in Northern education activism.

Across the country, Mississippi is commonly associated with racism due to its horrific past and ardent focus on maintaining white supremacy. Mississippi also usually ranks last in education. With the rise of public education activism, Mississippi has the chance to reconcile two of its greatest faults by using this opportunity to combat tracking and begin to lead the country toward a racially equitable public-school system. Although the task seems challenging, states across the country have become educational

battlegrounds for funding between charter and public schools. Mississippi is already ahead of the curve through its ability to have fought off gaining more charter schools and avoiding a voucher system despite a Governor that supports it. Mississippi has the ability to lead by example if it would also enter into the fight against tracking and recognizing that racial inequality exists even in “diverse” schools.

ENDNOTES

1. Initiative 42 required that the state government of Mississippi “to establish, maintain and support ‘an adequate and efficient system of free public schools.’” Initiative 42 did not require a specific method other than the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) formula. MAEP was designed in 1997 to “ensure every child in the state receives a quality education whether they live in a wealthy or poor community” (Briggs 2018). Since 1997, MAEP has only been fully funded twice meaning in the last 23 years the legislature has only twice fully funded public education.

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APPENDIX A
CONSENT AND ASSENT FORMS

Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research for Exempt Research*

IRB Approval Number: 19-163

Title of Research Study: Grass Roots Organizing and Education Activism in Association with White Womanhood

Researcher(s): Dr. Margaret Hagerman, Mississippi State University.

Reason for Participation: You are invited to participate in this research study since you meet the requirements of identifying as a white woman and participating in a public education activist organization in the south and have been referred to the research team.

Procedures: If you participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a 30-75-minute interview depending on how much you have to say. This interview will be recorded with a digital audio recorder. Following the interview, all recordings will be transcribed and then subsequently destroyed. Pseudonyms for all people and places will be used in any published writing or oral presentations of research in the future to protect the confidentiality of all participants. All information collected from the interview will be kept on a flash drive and contained in a locked box in Bowen Hall of Mississippi State University.

Questions in this interview will consist of the topics of the organization structure of your organization, policy concerns, current issues in the public education system, and the purpose of education.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Margaret Hagerman at mah1125@msstate.edu.

Voluntary Participation: Please understand that your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Investigator Signature

Date

*The MSU HRPP has granted an exemption for this research. Therefore, a formal review of this consent document was not required.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening Script:

Hi, it's so nice to meet you and thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. I'm really excited to learn more about your organization and your personal perspective on education policy. First, I have a consent form for you to sign; this interview will be completely confidential and although I am recording it, all evidence will be completely destroyed and any names, organizations, or locations will be replaced with pseudonyms to keep any information you choose to share private. If you have any questions feel free to ask me before, during, or even after the interview. If you feel uncomfortable, we can stop the interview at any time or skip a question just let me know.

Turn on recorder.

Section A. Rapport Building

1. We will start with some warm up questions. Can you start by telling me a little bit about your education background such as what types of schools you've attended?
 - a. Could you tell me a little bit about the race/gender makeup of the schools you've attended?
 - b. Around what years did you attend these schools?

2. Can you tell me a little bit about why you became interested in education policy?
 - a. Do you have a child/or have had children in public school and did this influence your interest in education policy?
 - b. How did you decide what school your child/children should attend?
 - c. How would you describe the race/gender makeup of your children's schools?
 - d. Why did you become interested in supporting public education in particular?

Section B. Organization Structure

3. Now we are going to talk a little bit about the structure of your organization.
 - a. How long has your organization existed?
 - b. How long have you been involved in your organization?
 - c. Could you describe the environment of your meetings?
 - i. What types of places are your meetings located at?
 - d. Does your organization have any recruitment events or local events for your organization to talk to your/other members' communities?
 - i. How would you describe those events?
 - e. What is the main policy your organization is trying to change and why?
 - i. How is your organization currently working to change this policy?
 - f. Does your organization endorse candidates?
 - i. Does your organization contribute campaign funds to candidates?
 - g. Are there ever policies that many people in the organization disagree on and how is that handled?
 - h. What has been your organization's biggest accomplishment so far?
 - i. What types of people does your organization generally want to recruit?
 - j. How would you describe the racial/gender makeup of your organization?
 - i. (only if they mention a lack of male representation) Why do you think more women are involved in your organization?
 - ii. You're very passionate about public education. Does your partner feel the same way/is he involved?
 - iii. Why not?
 - k. Some of the women in your organization have explained not having many women of color in your organization through the statement, "We're really trying to get more diversity, but we want people to help us fix it; not fix it for them." What are your thoughts on that?

Section C: Democracy

- What do you believe the purpose of education is?
 - i. Do you believe your organization's advocacy reflect that?
- Does our education system encourage more civic participation?
 - i. If not, should it?
 - ii. What types of children need to be encouraged to participate in civic duties?
- Does our education system reflect a strong democracy?
 - i. Why types of people need to be well educated in order to reflect a strong democracy?
- Is education linked to having a higher income?
 - i. Is education more linked to having a higher income or is one's income more linked to one's race?

- Does education help provide a better or worse workforce?
 - i. What types of people does our education system need to help in order to provide a better workforce?

Section D: Racism

- Do you believe that race affects the education that a child receives?
 - i. Do you believe that issues concerning racial inequality and education policy should be discussed in your organization?
 - ii. In the past, have there been any disagreements over race in your organization?

- Some people say that tracking (dividing students into basic, honors, or AP classes) divides children by race in schools. Do you agree or disagree?
 - i. Should grass roots organizations like your own promote de-tracking?
 - ii. Would you be willing to give up some of the privileges your child has (if that child is enrolled in higher tracked courses) in order to achieve better racial equality?

- Some studies have found that children of color receive more discipline from teachers than white children. What are your thoughts?
 - i. If you agree, why do you think that is?
 - ii. Do you think it is important for your organization to address this issue?

Section E: Gender

- Do you believe that gender affects the education that a child receives?
 - i. Do you believe that issues concerning gender inequality and education policy should be discussed in your organization?
 - ii. In the past, have there been any disagreements over gender in your organization?

- Do dress codes cause unequal disciplinary actions in schools?
 - i. Do girls or boys face more punishments from breaking a dress code?
 - ii. Should your organization discuss addressing this issue?
 - iii. Do girls of color face more punishments from breaking a dress code than white girls?
 - iv. Why do you think that is?
 - v. Should your organization also be addressing this issue?

- States like North Carolina have faced disagreements over bathrooms for transgender students. Do you think your state has the same disagreement?
 - i. Should your organization address this issue?

Section F: Demographic Questions

Now I'm going to ask a few demographic questions, like the rest of the interview this is confidential.

-How would you describe your race?

-How would you describe your gender?

-What is your age?

-If you generally identify with a specific political party what party would that be?

Section G: Wrap-up Questions

-Only a few questions left. Do you think that it's important to include grass roots activism in research about education policy?

-Is there anything else you really want to make sure I know? Any other thoughts you want to share?

Okay great! Thank you so much for participating!

Turn off recorder.

Additional Participants:

If there are any other people you know that participate in organizations around education policy that you think would be interested in participating in this study please let me know.