

# How Far Does Influence Go? Racialized Resistance and University Culture

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## Abstract

*In recent years, universities have found themselves in the spotlight for their approaches to grievances of racial bias and discrimination. To better understand how university culture can influence millennials' understanding and explanations of racial phenomena, I examine the ways in which students navigate issues of racial inequity. Data reveals that the culture of the examined university, created by an adoption of a racial orthodoxy, overwhelmingly leads to a system I call racialized resistance. Under racialized resistance, a student's race acts a master status and determines how they can participate in politicized civic engagement. I find students employ four strategies: strategic suppression, acceptable resistance, avoidance, and power analysis. Keywords: diversity, race, higher education, campus climate*

Youth led social movements have continually been the catalyst to social change. We have seen this in Little Rock, Birmingham, Palestine, and Wounded Knee. In the past decade, youth led social movements have brought us Occupy, United We Dream, and Black Lives Matter. In the last five years, college students have risen up and demanded change from their universities. In 2015, student protests resulted in the University of Missouri President and Chancellor stepping down. Students from coast to coast have engaged in large demonstrations that have caught mass media attention effectively bringing attention to a plethora of issues surrounding persistent inequality in the U.S. education system. What has yet to be examined is the role that university culture plays in influencing college students' racial ideologies and social justice attitudes.

Even with large scale social movements taking place and a resurgence of student activism specific to racial inequity, a large portion of mainstream society still believes that the U.S. operates in a post racial era, or that race no longer plays a key component in our everyday lives. Thus, resulting in resistance to join, support, or even condone activist efforts in this area. Specifically within the university context, how do student perceptions of university culture influence their understanding and explanations of racial phenomena? Then, how does the university's culture affect the political nature of college students' social justice attitudes and anti-racist action?

The current study provides a unique look at how these dynamics unfold as it was conducted at a predominately white institution (74.7%; Census Day Enrollment Profile, 2016) located in a historically conservative state. Idaho has a population of only 1.6 million people and is 82.5% white (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2015). I argue that the culture at Boise State University, created by an adoption of a racial orthodoxy, overwhelmingly leads to a system I call racialized resistance. This system dictates, through organizational norms, rhetoric, and actions, how dominant and nondominant students navigate issues of racial inequity at the university. While there are no official rules restricting students of color from participating in certain activities or voicing their grievances, boundaries are set, communicated, and maintained by the students themselves. Informal social sanctions from peers inform students how far they can push the envelope, what will and will not be accepted by the university community, and how far the university community is willing (or not willing) to go to ensure social justice. In other words, interactions between fellow students teaches students how and to what degree the status quo will be upheld by their peers.

## Literature Review

Since the 1980s, universities have shifted from a color-conscious approach to race to a new racial orthodoxy. A racial orthodoxy is a set of ideas, beliefs, narratives, and practices that constitute official, commonly

understood meanings of race (Berry, 2011). In an institutional context, this is the attempt at redefining the role of race by emphasizing diversity instead. Diversity discourse overwhelmingly frames white students interactions within diverse groups as marketable skills that will benefit them in the labor market and as an overall valued resource that works in favor of all students, rather than just students of color. By placing the foci of inclusion on this new racial orthodoxy, by emphasizing diversity rather than race explicitly, the university is not only neglecting contemporary racial inequality but also appealing to students by offering them another item of consumption: diversity (Berry, 2011).

The shift in higher education from race conscious approaches to diversity approaches are akin to what David Embrick calls diversity ideology. Diversity, as an ideology, works to render an establishment supportive and inclusive in terms of racial and gendered equality while simultaneously reproducing and upholding age old structural limitations on the advancement of women and people of color alike (Embrick, 2011). Embrick argues that the definition of diversity has often become so broad that issues of gender and racial discrimination are ignored. This level of inaction showcases that such policies were solely used as a shield from racial and gendered discrimination complaints.

Diversity ideologies, at their core, are an adoption, implementation, and nuanced version of colorblind ideologies, which seek to excuse and downplay racial inequality. By adopting diversity as an ideology, universities are failing to address race as a central component of everyday life, hence, greatly downplaying its salience on campus and in the lives of students of color. Masking historical and contemporary racial inequities with a faulty newfound appreciation for marginalized groups has a number of consequences for the students attending these institutions. First, when a key focus of the university is to “prime students to jump into Boise’s rapidly growing cultural scene” (Discover Boise State University, 2016), student diversity is consciously being used as a marketing tool to court white students. Second, the university is stretching the boundaries of diversity made possible by affirmative action policies. Lastly, if the university shies away from confronting racial inequality head on, students will be lead to believe issues of this nature are no longer a critical aspect of everyday life, which is a common underlying assumption of colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). These assumptions create the conditions in which a hostile and unhealthy campus environment can thrive between white students and students of color. Moreover, when an institution fails to recognize the systemic nature of race within the context of its physical space, participating actors buy into a false narrative. Thus, laying the foundation for multiple opposing sets of perceptions. Highlighted next are a few of those opposing perceptions.

While college is arguably the best and easiest place to challenge oneself and shape new beliefs, many universities miss the opportunity to teach appropriate forms of interracial/ethnic interaction. Due to these missed opportunities, there lies a deep divide between white students and students of color on college campuses. Countless studies have shown the severity of racial tensions on college campuses as consistently being reported as contradictory between white students and students of color. Increasingly, white students feel students of color’s presence is unfair, believing that they are sharing an institution solely due to affirmative action and reverse discrimination practices (Cabrera, 2014; Fischer, 2007; Lewis, 2001). Students of color report heightened tensions, superficial relationships, and noninclusive environments (Lewis, 2001; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Additionally, many students of color do not find themselves represented in overall campus life. Many college students can go a significant portion of their academic career without being taught by a person of color. Something as minor as representation can set the tone for the role that people of color occupy in higher education. The aforementioned varying perceptions of university culture have consequences that stretch from students up to administrators.

Just as with any social institution, the university community (students, faculty, and administrators) will continually adjust to their institution’s culture or opt out of the institution altogether. Knowing this, and that college students are facing large discrepancies in their race relations, then one must ask the question, how does the university’s culture influence college students’ racial ideology? Organizational culture is defined by Tierney (2016) as, “the sum of activities—symbolic and instrumental—that exist in the organization and create shared meaning. The definition of socialization pertains to the successful understanding and incorporation of those activities by the new members of the organization” (p. 85). Borrowing from Weidman, Tierney also states that socialization “is the process by which individuals acquire the attitudes, beliefs, values, and skills needed to participate effectively in organized social life” (p. 86). Tierney, specifically referring to university culture, posits that students and faculty learn the culture of an institution through a wide range of normative assumptions and behaviors, rather than individual acts or scenarios they encounter. Consequently, all who partake in the institution have the potential to be influenced by the culture, and thus, said culture should be given considerable attention.

Education scholars have documented the effect university culture has on students’ race frames and diversity discourses when they attend universities with more race conscious approaches. Warikoo and Novais find that

students who grew up in an environment that fostered colorblind ideologies had a shift in perspectives after spending at least two years at their liberal leaning university (2015). Students' overwhelmingly attributed interactions with a diverse student body and participation in diversity related events on campus to the shift in frames they use to understand the role of race in U.S. society. Students tended to lean away from a traditional colorblind frame and adopt frames that saw race as a cultural identity and the root of U.S. structural inequality.

This research contributes to the understanding of the formation and maintenance of contemporary racial projects in the university setting. Using racial formation theory, I argue that the push for "diversity" at Boise State University is a contemporary liberal racial project. A racial project is a social structure in which actors are represented and organized. Racial projects simultaneously act as an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and attempt to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines (Omi & Winant, 2014). Considering that racial and ethnic minority groups have, in the past and present, not been treated equally by the state, any attempts to treat them as such is direct maintenance of an already unequal racialized social system.

In response to a negative campus climate survey in 2008, the university in question established its first office of Student Diversity and Inclusion with the purpose to "demonstrate and promote Inclusive Excellence on campus, and when our students graduate, around the world (Welcome to Student Diversity and Inclusion, 2016)". Inclusive Excellence defines diversity as "Individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations)." The manner in which the examined university highlights race as only one of many factors that may structure a student's experience on campus, wholeheartedly diminishes the prominence that race plays in everyday life. Aligning race—along with gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, etc.—with qualities such as personality and learning style significantly contributes to the definitions, meanings, and values of race at the university, while also dismissing the systemic nature of inequality in its various forms.

Because racial projects connect what race means in particular discursive practices and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, the strategies that arise for students to use in navigating issues of racial inequity are a direct result of the racial project being implemented. Given the particular racial climate at the university in question, deduced from student experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, which I coin as racialized resistance, students and their actions—in this case their civic engagement—are assigned meaning and value. Thus, students' actions are organized, policed, and maintained accordingly. Since racialized resistance is defined by and rooted in the dismissal and minimization of racial inequity, a student's race has to be the master status largely employed when choosing how to civically engage. This master status widely determines which strategy—strategic suppression, acceptable resistance, avoidance, or power analysis—they are *able* to use. This master status is then policed and maintained by students themselves under conditions that are set in place by the university's adoption of a racial orthodoxy and are communicated to the campus community through rhetoric and organizational action. While Boise State University has adopted a racial orthodoxy, this paper focuses primarily on how this orthodoxy has continued to assign race as a master status for students of color and whites alike.

## Methods

This project took a subject-centered approach, consisting of qualitative, open-ended interviews. During interviews, respondents were asked about their civic engagement on and off campus, paying special attention to and specifically asking about racial justice issues, how they feel the university has facilitated that engagement, and finally, about their views on various race related issues from the surrounding community. As students discuss their work, the university, and their perceptions of local events, the level to which they subscribe to colorblind ideologies was analyzed. Special attention was also paid to how the university hinders or promotes racial/ethnic organizations and centers that focus on racial justice in relation to those that focus on nonracial issues.

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. Participants were limited to university students ages 18 to 30 of all ethnic backgrounds. Students over the age of 30 were excluded because they would be too far in age from traditional college students, which is the main population this research examined. Younger millennials were the ideal population for this study because they are the most racially diverse generation in U.S. history (Pew Research Center, 2014) but also still hold racist attitudes (ANES, 2012).

The researcher conducted all interviews. Each interview lasted one hour to one hour and a half. Prior to each interview, all participants were immediately assigned a pseudonym. Upon completion, each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. For the comfort of participants, all interviews took place at a location of the participants choosing. Participants were given no monetary incentive for their participation.

Civic engagement will be defined as belonging to a student club or organization, participating in campus awareness events, politically charged events, working for a center on campus that employs peer educators, mentors, and outreach personnel. Participating in advocacy work and volunteering in the community will also be defined as civic engagement.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's four frames of colorblind racism were used as an example of a racial project, specifically how racial ideologies are defined, and maintained, in the formation of racial attitudes. It is important to note that while colorblind ideologies work to recreate and uphold white supremacy, whites and people of color alike can subscribe to these ideologies at varying levels. Among whites, working class women are the least likely to subscribe to colorblind ideologies and are referred to as "race traitors." However, given support from working class white women [54 % of women and 67% non-college whites (Pew Research Center, 2016)] for the current President, Donald Trump, this may no longer be true, or could, at the least, illustrate a shift in ideologies held by this demographic. Also important to note considering support for the current president is that Bonilla-Silva has found that colorblind racism has infiltrated even the most liberal white circles (2014). The four ideological frames are *Abstract liberalism*, *Naturalization*, *Cultural racism*, and *Minimization*.

*Abstract liberalism* relies on meritocracy and equal opportunity to explain racial matters. *Minimization* is rooted in the belief that racial discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting the everyday lives of people of color, and therefore, reduces the affects of contemporary racism by comparing it to past injustices. *Naturalization* relies on the premise that racial phenomena, such as neighborhood segregation, are natural occurrences, ultimately relieving anyone of responsibility. *Cultural racism* uses a group's culture to explain racial phenomena, positing that cultural differences are responsible for inequities rather than systemic issues of power and privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

## Color-coded Strategies to Navigate Racial Inequity

While I initially intended to examine the role that racial ideologies play in a student's civic engagement or political activism, what I found was quite different. I was unable to clearly define what ideologies students were subscribing to, and student definitions of what activism is and is not also varied greatly. Instead, I found a number of strategies students use to navigate issues or racial inequity at the university. Furthermore, and the focus of this paper, I found that the strategies students choose to employ are color-coded and widely dependent on their master status: their race.

Rather than a hierarchal social ladder, students at this university have created a centric social system. This system is highly dependent on a student's level of network centrality and social and cultural capital. The more social and cultural capital a student acquires, the higher their level of network centrality. A decrease in social and cultural capital results in a decrease in social status and by default, network centrality. During data collection, a clear pattern of which students had the highest levels of network centrality arose. Overwhelmingly, white students had the highest levels, while students of color had lower levels and were positioned on the adjacent or peripheral edges of the centric social system. The core of the university's social system is a highly coveted and insulated locale. Gaining access to this space provides students with seats on student government, funding boards, and student assembly. In effect, these positions grant students the authority to shape a large portion of the student body's experiences on campus. At the university this study was conducted, network centrality is very much a proxy for race.

Below I introduce four strategies—strategic suppression, acceptable resistance, avoidance, and power analysis—that students employ to navigate issues of racial inequity at the university as well as the cost and benefit of using each strategy. Within each I will demonstrate how a student's network centrality determines which strategy they *can* use and how each strategy contributes to the maintenance of the racial orthodoxy at the university. Finally, I will show how the strategies work together to reproduce a long-standing liberal racial project while simultaneously masking its existence.

### Strategic suppression

I found that 29% (7/24) of participants employ a strategy I call strategic suppression. This includes 58% (7/12) of white students but no students of color. Students using this strategy are able to articulate the factors that contribute to large systemic inequities, so on the surface present as being what Bonilla-Silva calls a race traitor (2010). They are able to speak to the barriers people of color face in education, housing, the justice system, and even just day-to-day interactions with other members of society. Upon further discussion though, and specifically when asked about issues in their local community or on their college campus, these students' narratives shift. Their ability

to apply their working knowledge of race relations to the individual level, students on their campus, or their day-to-day lives is limited. This results in the dismissal or minimization of issues that students of color face. In effect, these students are able to absolve themselves of the “racist” label, can present themselves as progressive liberals, all while upholding and reinforcing the status quo through their actions and interactions with other students on their campus.

Students utilizing this strategy have the highest levels of network centrality. Each student employing this strategy holds a position of power in the campus community. They are student government representatives, student lobbyists, presidents of large student organizations, and hold positions on Greek life councils. While they are very active in campus activities, they are not involved in any groups or initiatives that promote or work towards racial equity. Instead, I find that these students find small ways to actively work against racial equity work taking place on campus. Moreover, these students tend to fall back on ideologies such as minimization not to excuse racial inequities but to excuse their and the university’s lack of intervention.

At the university in question, race and racial inequity is limitedly acknowledged but continually denied explicit legitimacy, and thus, concrete action. In the context of a liberal racial project, this type of meandering and abstraction of individual events from the larger historical context is precisely what maintains a racialized social system rooted in inequality. Below I will highlight how students at Boise State University employ strategic suppression to maintain the status quo at their university.

When asked about his feelings of affirmative action being used in higher education, Justin, a 21-year-old white male and student lobbyist, replied:

I think at one point in time, there was a time for that, but I also think it is [pause] I know, that it is 2016, and I think that a lot of this generation...all of this generation is not responsible for the actions that require affirmative action. I am a firm believer in equal opportunity, not outcome, for sure not outcome...I think along those lines there is no place for affirmative action.

Here, Justin is abstracting the need for affirmative action in higher education from the historical structural inequities that called for it in the first place. Justin also lobbies for equitable funding in higher education. When asked if he would support a MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) backed initiative that pushed for in-state tuition for DACA students, he replied with a staunch, “Absolutely not.” This response highlights that his lobbying efforts are reserved for certain students under certain conditions. DACA students did not qualify.

Another student, Rosalind, replied in the following manner when asked why her committee had denied a proposal that asked to officially change Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s day on the university calendar:

If the goal was to share their emotions, than they did that. But if the goal was to have the university respect it and change something, that [the student’s proposal] was not the means to how the goal would be accomplished.

In this statement, Rosalind is enacting racialized resistance. While she stressed that the committee fully backed the changing of the holiday name, they ultimately chose to deny the proposal because it “was too emotional,” and therefore, was not something they could put their name on. In the end, the students re-submitted the proposal and the committee signed off on it. Here, students who are elected and entrusted to be the voice of the student body are effectively policing the behavior, ideology, and action of their fellow students.

When asked if she feels the university encourages student involvement with multicultural clubs or clubs that aim to fight for racial equity in one way or another, Jessica, a 22-year-old white female, who is also a member of student government, responded:

Well yeah I mean every event they’ve wanted to put on or anything that they’ve wanted to change, I feel like it’s always at least a conversation. Like, they’re never ignored. They don’t always get the results that they want and they don’t always get the results that we want but I feel like they’re heard. It’s just a matter of what you do about it. So they’re encouraged to get involved, they’re encouraged to throw events, it’s just like when the social issues come up, that’s when it seems to be a blockade because no one really knows what to do.

Jessica shows that students of color are tolerated. They are not denied the physical space they take up and on paper they have rights to everything that any other student would. However, when they have distinct issues, those that she calls, “social issues,” nobody knows how to deal with them. Unfortunately, the university itself echoes this.

This narrative is one that is symptomatic of a diversity ideology. A diversity ideology allows institutions to claim they support racial and gender equality when in fact they do not (Embrick, 2011). Under a diversity ideology, this strategy is one that is accepted, encouraged, and rewarded by the university. By failing to provide a critical approach to race, the university is priming white students to maintain the meanings of race at the university. In turn, students are doing the work of the institution. As long as student leaders are symbolically cutting their peers off at the knees, the university, as a complicit party in the maintenance of an unequal social system, cannot be vindicated. The university is free to stand behind their diversity statements and Inclusive Excellence language to shield themselves from student grievances. Narratives put forth by students employing strategic suppression reinforce the silencing of marginalized voices, gives weight to dominant student voices, contributes to the division between student groups, and ultimately creates a culture of suppression.

## Avoidance

Twelve percent of students—16% (2/12) of white and 8% (1/12) people of color—employed a strategy I call avoidance. Each of the students using this strategy avoids issues of racial inequity at the university or in their work and subscribes to traditional colorblind ideologies showing little to no nuance in the four frames of colorblind racism laid out by Bonilla-Silva (2010). The civic engagement and social justice attitudes of the students employing this strategy do not take into account racial inequity and are consistently racially neglectful. Considering the historical weight of systemic racial inequality, any actors (or institutions) who do not acknowledge the racialized social structure are in fact preserving an unequal social system. Hence, students employing this strategy are effectively able to fly under the radar and avoid the politics of race while passively participating in the maintenance of the racial project.

For example, when asked about her involvement or relationship with groups on campus that focus on race and ethnicity, Amber, a 21-year-old white female, admitted to the invisibility of students of color: “I think that people don’t really recognize multicultural groups. We know that they’re there but they’re just there. They’re just not really recognized.” Later, she also expressed her limited support for affirmative action policies, stating that she was okay with them being used only if, “it’s not taking away from another student group,” meaning white students, the students that she herself has expressed are already represented in campus life.

Another student, Sabrina, a 20-year-old white female who is very active in the community but does not participate in any racial justice work, does not believe universities should be responsible for ensuring their campuses are racially diverse. In speaking of this, she expressed her opposition to affirmative action policies: “I don’t think that you have to [have affirmative action] but I think everyone deserves the opportunity to go to college. I don’t think that that should be their [the university’s] responsibility.” Statements and ideologies like this drastically minimize the systemic nature of racism that permeates U.S. institutions. This statement relies on a meritocratic reward system that the U.S. falsely operates under. Hanging onto the technical presence of “equal opportunities” for racial and ethnic minorities is one of the many ways to secure white privilege while simultaneously justifying one’s racial views. Studies of whiteness show that individuals are content mainly with a multiculturalism that protects white superiority, normalizes whiteness, and maintains the racial status quo (Hikido & Murray, 2015; Cabrera, 2014). Students at Boise State University subscribing to this strategy are no different.

Just as all participants in this study, these students are attending a university that is actively attempting to portray itself as a diverse metropolitan research institution in a vibrant cultural city while simultaneously suppressing marginalized student voices. In the wake of this, students employing this strategy have chosen to opt out of the conversation of race at the university altogether. They avoid speaking of racial inequity in very similar ways that the university as a whole does. This particular university equates personality types with race in its definition of diversity, a symptom of the adoption of a racial orthodoxy. Therefore, affirming that racial inequity is not an issue that carries enough weight to be comprehensively addressed. Students who are content with this notion and who are not interested in questioning it, even when presented the opportunity, are the covertly ideal student in the eyes of the university. By avoiding race relations in their civic engagement work and their overall social justice attitudes, these students continue to benefit from and reproduce an unequal racialized social system, thus maintaining the racial project.

## Acceptable resistance

While a significant portion (58%) of white students employed a strategic suppression strategy, a significant portion of students of color employed a strategy I call acceptable resistance. Seventy-five percent (9/12) of students of color use this strategy whereas only 4% (1/12) of white students do. Similar to students who use strategic

suppression, students here are able to articulate how and why racial inequities occur. Whereas most of the students using strategic suppression are white, most of the students who use acceptable resistance are students of color. Because they have a marginalized identity, they tend to understand the complex nature of issues that affect their individual communities. However, most of these students had a tendency to trivialize the issues of other racial, ethnic, or marginalized groups, their reactions to racial inequity, and the strategies they used to combat racial inequity.

Students who employ this strategy find themselves in a peculiar position. They do not have the high levels of network centrality that students who employ strategic suppression have. Many of the students using this strategy come from low-income families and are first generation college students. The social and cultural capital that these students enter the university system with does not match that of their white counterparts. Excited to take advantage of the full college experience, these students became active in students organizations, university centers, and social issues. Soon though, they came to the realization that the path to the inner circle of elites on campus—consisting of those who make decisions, speak for the student body, and have the ear of upper administration—is not an easy one. The informal rules governing how one gains access to the inner circle is not up for deliberation. Students are expected to conduct themselves in a certain manner: do not protest but raise awareness, ask for change politely and through predetermined channels, do not call too much attention to oneself or the university. Those with the highest levels of network centrality, in this case those employing strategic suppression, communicate these rules to the student body through informal and formal social sanctions and interactions. Without full support and backing from the student body elites, many students who want to push for institutional change or even start conversations about racial inequity on their campuses are denied avenues to do so. Consequently, students using this strategy find themselves straddling a line between going against the culture of their institution and calling attention to issues that often affect their communities.

In response to the structural limitations they are presented with, students rely on what Tara Yosso calls navigational capital. Navigational capital refers to the skills that communities of color acquire that allow them to maneuver through social institutions that were not created with them in mind (2005). Using their Navigational capital students of color perform socially acceptable forms of civic engagement that overwhelmingly raises awareness about issues without asking for institutional change. While many of the students using this strategy showed a tendency to police other students' actions, the context in which this is taking place is worth further examination. As marginalized students who have an agenda to create change, operating within the social system and abiding by its restrictions allows them to maximize their work and position within the institution.

These students are members of groups or initiatives that are related and entwined with racial equity but do not require a direct action of the university, city, or state. They put on cultural or social events (A Night in Latin America), raise awareness for issues (Students for Prison Awareness), host movie screenings (Generation Action), or other related events. Any direct action associated with a group's initiatives would equally benefit the university as much as it would the intended audiences. For example, in an attempt to alleviate anxiety about leaving home and making college seem more attainable to Latino students, Project Dream for Tomorrow brings 80 high school juniors and seniors to the university each year for tours and meetings with students and faculty. This project provides invaluable benefits to the high schoolers involved while providing Boise State with an opportunity to recruit students and facilitating their need to meet their diversity claim without expending resources of their own. The university receives an added bonus because any recruits would be students of color. In addition, Boise State University's Admissions office uses this student-led project to further their message of being a diversity hub.

Just as the students who employed strategic suppression, by policing students' actions and behaviors, these students in turn police other marginalized students who are not engaging in acceptable forms of civic engagement or activism. For example, Manuel, a 22-year-old Mexican-American student, who is a leader in an organization that promotes higher education for Latino students, replied in the following manner when asked about Black Lives Matter and their tactics:

I feel like you're kind of stooping to whoever's level. You're trying to call attention to you. I feel a more effective route would be kind of, for lack of a better word, a more professional sense, just being more educated. But like, hosting events, something as simple as hosting an awareness event, things like that and inviting whoever you're trying to protest. That'll show them that you're improving society rather than kind of... you know...something else.

Manuel's comments imply that those who participate in civil disobedience are uneducated, unprofessional, and ineffective. Instead, Manuel suggests they engage in activities that will prove their worthiness for the change or treatment they are seeking, rather than participate in direct action. Manuel's resistance to students and groups who

participate in direct action along with his suggestions for their participation in ‘acceptable’ forms of activism highlights this group’s intended or unintended support and reinforcement of the racial orthodoxy that the university has adopted. In turn, students employing this strategy are of benefit to the university as their civic engagement, events, and even at times presence can be used to demonstrate the university’s commitment to diversity without actually expending resources to address racial inequity itself.

## Power analysis

While many of the participants are in one form or another participating in various forms of civic engagement that reproduce the racial orthodoxy on their campus, I found that 16% of respondents do not and employ a strategy I call power analysis. Sixteen percent of white students as well as students of color take a structural approach to their explanations of racial phenomenon, campus climate, and their civic engagement work. Each of these students continues to actively acknowledge the complexities they witness or experience in their day to day lives and express conscious action to defy traditional racial ideologies and to work to undo structural racism in its various forms. In addition, these students are very active on campus and in the community in a number of different ways. These include but are not limited to: employed at or consistently volunteer with local organizations that are highly active in antiracist work, plan and lead rallies at the state capitol, started campaigns on their campus that pressured the university to divest from sweatshops, and direct events such as Tunnel of Oppression that bring uncomfortable topics to the forefront at their PWI.

Students employing this strategy have the lowest levels of network centrality. Oftentimes, these students were removed from the campus community. Many reported coming to campus solely to attend classes, did not have many fellow student friends, and were not members of on campus organizations. These students found refuge in their own communities or local organizations. Students employing a power analysis strategy were very much on the margins of campus life. This is evidenced in comments made by Benjamin, a 20-year-old student of color:

As a queer person of color I have to always be aware of what my surroundings are. I’ve learned not to associate myself with people or have friends on campus because I cannot control when I expose myself to them. I cannot control what part of my identity they will accept and what part they won’t...the interactions that I do have are just full of microaggressions. In the community I surround myself with people who have my safety and my comfort in mind. That is never the case on campus.

In addition to feelings of severe marginality on their campus, many students had strong critiques of their institution’s diversity rhetoric and were vocal about it. This can be seen in comments made by Anthony, a 27-year-old white male:

Multiculturalism allows the university to pay lip service to the idea of diversity without actually following through or committing to diversity. So [the university] is perfectly willing to support symbolic gestures or symbolic affirmations of diversity as long as they don’t interfere with the university’s profit line or create some sort of controversial public relations presence or something like that.

In this statement, Anthony acknowledges the university’s adoption of a diversity ideology that widely masks racial inequities, maintains status quo, while still paying “lip service to the idea of diversity.” Due to the strong critiques that these students present to the university, they do not have a positive relationship with university administrators and the campus community.

In effect, students employing power analysis break the rules of the university. They do not entertain respectability politics, and they challenge administrative and student leadership. The low levels of network centrality these students possess is directly associated to their refusal to adhere to the code of the institution.

## Conclusion

The goal of this project was to examine the role that a student’s racial ideology would play in their civic engagement or political activism. This was a particularly unique perspective given the setting of the study: a predominately white institution in a historically conservative state with miniscule racial diversity. Rather than racial ideologies playing a prominent role in a student’s civic engagement, I have shown that a student’s race is the master



status that will determine what kind of civic engagement or political activism one can engage in if hoping to maintain or advance their network centrality on their university campus.

I show here that diversity discourse and the adoption of a racial orthodoxy has structured the way students interpret race-related issues on their campus and in their community. The masking of racial inequities and celebration of diversity as a cultural artifact to be consumed erases the structural barriers that marginalized groups face. Hence, leading to the denial and ultimate dismissal of such issues by many students. This collision of ideology and lived experiences between students, which is not challenged by the university, is an underlying basis for the four strategies students use to combat issues of racial inequity on their campuses.

Three of the four strategies presented work together to ensure the maintenance and invisibility of the racial project. Strategic suppression and acceptable resistance are effectively two sides of the same coin. Neither of them challenge or fully accept the status quo. Students using both strategies simultaneously acknowledge racial inequity and minimize its salience. To be successful, each strategy is one that requires a high level of network centrality, which is gained only through various channels, behaviors, and embrasure of institutional social norms. In attempts to sustain their network centrality, and the privileges that come with it, students using these two strategies continually negotiate personal ideologies and university politics. Neither strategy has shown to bring institutional change thus providing a valuable benefit to the institution as a whole: security of the status quo. Strategic suppression ultimately works to exonerate the university from mishandling many race-based issues or student grievances. Acceptable resistance provides the university with visible and engaged “multicultural students” and allows the university to satiate marginalized students hunger for recognition while absolving the university of institutional change. Avoidance denies structural inequities altogether. Each of these strategies constructs a system of reward and punishment and encourages marginalized students to play into the politics of respectability. Each interaction, negative or positive, subtle or overt, reinforces the meaning of race within the university setting and ultimately ensures the longevity of the racial project.

One strategy, power analysis, stood in direct contrast to racialized resistance. Students using this strategy rejected navigating university politics in most cases. In light of the rigid system of rewards and punishment that has been put in place, they were very much rejected from the overall campus community. The experiences that students employing this strategy reported are a testament to the strength of the racial orthodoxy and social order at Boise State University. Students going against the grain—in ideology and action—are metaphorically neutralized. Given the geographic and political context of this study, students genuinely are negotiating their overall success at the university when deciding whether or not to politically engage.

Research that examines ways in which millennials actively or passively resist colorblind ideologies and other forms of bigotry will only grow in importance given the harmful rhetoric that fueled the 2016 presidential race and the political climate that it left the U.S. in. Because political engagement in its various forms has historically proven to be a powerful tool to enact social change and because many students in my study had a level of complacency when it came to racial inequity, future research should focus on the circumstances that push millennials to exercise their political voice despite the possible ramifications.

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