

The Experience of “whiteness” Among Canadian University Students: Invisibility, Guilt, and Indifference

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### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines issues surrounding race, ethnicity and, most specifically, whiteness. Beginning with an examination of the relevant theoretical perspectives and research related to whiteness, the project shifts to an empirical study examining actual experiences of white individuals in a given social context. 16 self-identified white students at the University of Victoria from varying disciplines voluntarily participated in interviews pertaining to their experience of university-life. Many themes were elicited and discovered. Among them are: expressions of invisibility, guilt, and most significantly, indifference, along with common discussions of privilege, power, and interactions with other groups on campus. The paper ends with a brief discussion with a non-white observer who gives his perspective on the themes elicited by the white student interview participants, and some concluding implications.

Supervisor: Dr. P. Morgan Baker (Department of Sociology)

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The focus of this research is the perceptions of race and racism among white students at the University of Victoria. The purpose of studying this particular group is to continue an examination of the role of whiteness in the shaping of the lives and experiences of white people and ultimately to begin to understand how recent emphasis on the nature of race affects current notions of whiteness. Racism is popularly believed to be a problem of individual attitudes, which indicates a misperception of the depth and extent of the problem of racism in Canada. As Kincheloe (1998) suggests: “ A critical foundation of this pedagogy of whiteness involves monitoring the white reaction to the identity crisis; and a central feature of that reaction involves the attempts of whites over the last couple of decades to position themselves as victims”.

The research presented in this thesis examines the impact of racial identity on the university experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The premise here is that majority groups are impacted by their race thus reflecting upon their experience of university life. In order to evaluate the validity of this premise, the research has three main goals: 1) To examine issues of plurality and diversity with students who, as members of a majority culture, may otherwise not explore this aspect of university experience; 2) To explore ways in which white students feel the field of whiteness studies could be incorporated into existing areas of academia and academic life; 3) To add to the body of knowledge that challenges racial hierarchies of knowledge, privilege, and power.

In focusing on a particular group of white students at a university in Western Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, my areas of interest are threefold: 1) The role of whiteness in everyday-life inside the university setting; 2) The perceived importance and integrity of race and ethnic studies in university; 3)

The perceived role of whiteness studies as an addition to the curricula of studies in race and ethnicity and social justice as a whole. This study, involving a selection of students from a particular group, serves as a lens with which to see how students of a majority group perceive themselves and others.

The purpose of the research is to develop an understanding of the experiences of a small sample (n=16) of self-identified white students at the University of Victoria, with regard to their experiences of university-life through the lens of their “whiteness”. In this project, I will communicate the results of my qualitative research by first giving a brief review of the relevant literature, and then describing the methods by which I obtained, analyzed, and reported the data.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Background on Whiteness*

Human beings have always clustered themselves in groups -- families, clans, tribes, ethnic populations, nation states, etc. -- and these groups have regularly been the focus of discrimination and violence (LaRocque, 1996). It seems that an us versus them mentality starts on every playground and extends into every neighbourhood, society, and government. Since human beings appear to require a sense of identity, and since identity is partially constructed by defining whom you are different from, it may be that the politics of difference will never be erased from human affairs. From the inception of what is now the Western society, race has been an organizer of power, although white colonizers did not think of themselves as raced. Colonists conceived of race as a quality of the other. Consequently, whiteness was defined by absence or negation, particularly of slavery, synonymous in the minds of 18th-century US whites with blackness<sup>1</sup> (Herndon, 2003:225). Following Enlightenment philosophies of

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<sup>1</sup>I find it appropriate here to provide some definitions of problematized terminology surrounding the study of race, ethnicity and culture. These standardized definitions, and the number of different variations for each term, illustrate the discrepancies within the area of racial discourse are pertinent to the understanding of different perceptions of race and ethnicity, and are important to acknowledge.

Defining the terms of racial discourse: excerpts from the Random House Unabridged Dictionary (1995 ed.)

**"white"** : adj. 1. of the color of pure snow, of the margins of this page, etc.; reflecting nearly all the rays of sunlight or a similar light. 2. light or comparatively light in color. 3. (of human beings) marked by slight pigmentation of the skin, as of many Caucasoids. 4. for, limited to, or predominantly made up of persons whose racial heritage is Caucasian: a white club; a white neighborhood. 5. pallid or pale, as from fear or other strong emotion: white with rage. 6. silvery, gray, or hoary: white hair. 7. snowy: a white Christmas. 8. lacking color; transparent. 9. (politically) ultraconservative....13. Slang. decent, honorable, or dependable: That's very white of you. 14. auspicious or fortunate. 15. morally pure; innocent. 16. without malice; harmless: white magic....n.20. a color without hue at one extreme end of the scale of grays, opposite to black. A white surface reflects light of all hues completely and diffusely. Most so-called whites are very light grays: fresh snow, for example, reflects about 80 percent of the incident light, but to be strictly white, snow would have to reflect 100 percent of the incident light. It is the ultimate limit of a series of shades of any color. 21. a hue completely desaturated by admixture with white, the highest value possible. 22. quality or state of being white. 23. lightness of skin pigment. 24. a person whose racial heritage is Caucasian.

**"Black"**: adj. 1. lacking hue and brightness; absorbing light without reflecting any of the rays composing it. 2. characterized by absence of light; enveloped in darkness: a black night. 3. (sometimes cap.)a. pertaining or belonging to any of the various populations characterized by dark skin pigmentation, specifically the dark-skinned peoples of Africa,

humanity, the prevailing notion of whiteness came to mean universality and normality while refusing to acknowledge any racial character (Friedman, 1995). By the 20th century, whiteness was redefined and policed by court battles over segregation and immigration law. Changing census categories currently appear to offer more freedom to redefine one's race, but nostalgia for an imagined white core of American, and other Western societies', identity<sup>2</sup> lingers (diLenardo, 1994:166). Whiteness has become the standard against which all else is measured, consequently becoming a pillar in the politics of difference.

Why is Negro blood so much more powerful than any other kind of blood in the world? If a man has Irish blood in him, people will say, 'He's part Irish'...But if he has just a small bit of colored blood in him, BAM! 'He's a Negro!' Not, 'He's part Negro.' No, be it ever so little, if that blood is black, 'He's a Negro!' Now that is what I do not understand --why our one drop is so powerful...Explain it to me (Hughes, 1951).

Many racialized identities are developed partially based on one's association with the dominant race, ethnicity, and culture, of whiteness. The acknowledgment that whiteness plays such a crucial role in not only the formation of societies (including hierarchical positions within society), but in the formation of the individual, has contributed to the development of a relatively new area of study referred to as whiteness studies (Dyer, 1997; Roediger, 1994; Thomas, 1997; Omi and Winant, 1994;

Oceania, and Australia. b. African-American. 4. soiled or stained with dirt: That shirt was black within an hour. 5. gloomy; pessimistic; dismal: a black outlook. 6. deliberately; harmful; inexcusable: a black lie. 7. boding ill; sullen or hostile; threatening: black words; black looks. 8. (of coffee or tea) without milk or cream. 9. without any moral quality or goodness; evil; wicked: His black heart has concocted yet another black deed. 10. indicating censure, disgrace, or liability to punishment.

<sup>2</sup> Western society and its communities is a non-hegemonic group; it should not be assumed that all white groups, or individuals, have or have had the same life experiences of whiteness. I would thus like to emphasize that this is not an attempt to generalize experience in this sense.

Giroux, 1997; Hartigan, 1997). As a natural and universalizing category, whiteness has, until now, not received much theoretical attention, but the de-centering of its subject position has begun to force a specific enunciated position (Wood, 2002). Emerging partly as a response to the call from people of colour for white scholars to turn the microscope on themselves rather than examining the 'other', and partly as a result of white anti-racist scholars feeling a need to understand their own role in society as a dominant group, whiteness studies are finding a place among many traditional disciplines, such as English, Psychology, Anthropology, History, Geography, Women's Studies, and Sociology. Given its breadth and applicability, its main concepts often become (mis)interpreted by various groups. This has unfortunately resulted in a conglomeration of ideas, sometimes lacking direction.

### ***Theorizing Whiteness through Research***

Many concepts surrounding the area of whiteness studies are highly contested in terms of definition, and interpretations<sup>3</sup>, and much of the literature reflects this (Frankenberg, 1994, Weis and Fine, 1996). As such, there is a significant lack of social-scientific literature conducive to specific areas of research. Much of the literature includes a strong theoretical and somewhat philosophical slant, which is, in itself, an important element of any research surrounding this topic. There are, however, some studies that explore the area of identity formation and whiteness from angles which do not concentrate solely upon the philosophical issues surrounding the definition of problematic terms.

In her article about the dismantling of whiteness, Herndon (2003) gives an historical and contemporary account of the emergence and importance of whiteness studies. She explains how African

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<sup>3</sup> It is important here to acknowledge that language is a highly contested terrain. On this note, I would like to emphasize the fact that labels such as visible minority, non-white, white, aboriginal, native, indigenous, culture, race, and ethnicity, along with many other terms, are problematic. However, given the lack of any viable alternatives, some of these terms are used interchangeably throughout my text. In my own writing I will tend to use "race" rather than ethnicity depending on the context in which I am writing. Conducive to James' (2003) definitions, I perceive ethnicity to refer to a "group of people who identify themselves, or are identified, as sharing a common historical and ancestral origin", whereas race to refer to "individuals who are identified by particular physical characteristics, for example, colour of skin, which come to represent socially constructed meanings and expectations that correspond to their ascribed status within the social hierarchy" (27). I have not, however, altered the choices of other authors cited in my text, nor the students interviewed, with regard to their individual choices, including uppercase/lowercase, etc.

American writers have represented and analyzed whiteness for over a century; such analysis has been necessary for social and physical survival (202). Only within the past couple of decades have white scholars heeded the call to interrogate whiteness as an ethnicity and to come to terms with its accompanying benefits of power, privilege, and cultural dominance. Herndon emphasizes her understanding that whiteness studies “examines race as performance, perception, ideological category, and social reality, acknowledging that while race is a biological fiction, the lived experience of race is shaped by very real existing structural and institutional inequalities” (229). She proceeds to explain that many whiteness theorists therefore argue for the abolition of the white race and its accompanying racial privilege and domination. They call for treason to whiteness through solidarity and anti-racist forms of white identity.

Dyson (1998) suggests that when we talk about whiteness in the context of race and racialization, we talk about “whiteness as identity, whiteness as ideology, and whiteness as institution”(as quoted in Chennault, 1998:300). These are obviously not exclusive categories and much overlapping is inevitable, but they can nonetheless help us, as categories of analysis, get a handle on the vast manifestations of whiteness. Dyson argues that white identities have been developed unconsciously and hence, for the most part, invisibly within the structures of domination in American society.

Some research has shown that white Americans, for example, do not experience their ethnicity as a definitive aspect of their social identity (Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990). Waters (1990) found that whiteness was perceived as “dim and irregular” and that white respondents found their own ethnicity “flexible, symbolic and voluntary”(21). White respondents felt free to choose from among the varied strands of whiteness, exercising what she refers to as an “ethnic option” that was not possible for non-whites. Other research, like Frankenberg (1993), although non-contradictory to this research, find that ethnicity does play a strong role for white people in their everyday lives.

Ruth Frankenberg (1993) discusses white privilege along with the complexity of whiteness as a racial identity in the everyday lives of women. Frankenberg posits that the term whiteness “signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage” (237). In her extensive interviews with white women, Frankenberg finds that racially tolerant, well-meaning white women may come to perpetuate racism and racial inequality and privilege by internalizing discourses of power and colour, consequently never really progressing to what she refers to as a “race cognizant perspective” (15). Frankenberg's definition of whiteness states that it is a “location of race privilege and of structural advantage; it is a standpoint from which white people look at ourselves, others, and society as a whole; and finally, that whiteness refers to a set of somewhat unmarked and unnamed cultural practices” (1). Although it could be argued that some terms used in Frankenberg's definition of whiteness can be construed as contradictory and may themselves demand clarification, this definition provides a guideline to the construction of whiteness. Its importance lies in its emphasis on the shifting of the definition of racism from overt blatant acts of hatred toward a racialized group, to an acknowledgment of the overall privilege afforded to white people due strictly to their membership in the dominant racial group.

David Wellman, in the 1970's and 1980's, studied the racial identity involved with being white by interviewing male and female informants in the USA about their contact with and connections to ideas about race. His findings indicate that race does in fact play an important role in the lives of white people. Wellman's narrators demonstrate an awareness of race prejudice, but lack an awareness of how whiteness creates an advantage in their own lives. “By removing themselves from the system of racial organization” as whites they are allowed to assume racial invisibility<sup>4</sup> (Wellman, 1980:212).

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted here that when, throughout my text, *invisibility* is discussed with regard to white people feeling invisible, I am referring to them considering themselves invisible to themselves (ie. white people feeling invisible to other white people). This is an important distinction as undoubtedly people of colour will argue that white people, even in environments of majority, are anything but “invisible”!

Hughes and King (2003) incorporate a more specific research area of racial identity formation. They examine whiteness using a theoretical approach that conceives of racial identity as an awareness of having ideas, feelings, and interests similar to others in the same structurally defined racial status. Their study examines the significance of white racial identity for understanding variability in racial attitudes in the US with data from the American National Election Studies. The findings indicate that race is a far less significant component of personal identity among whites than it is among blacks, and that the impact of racial identity on social and political attitudes is stronger for blacks than it is for whites. In communicating these findings, Hughes and Kind suggest that whites occupy a structural position that makes racial identity less important for whites than it is for racial minorities.

Jackson and Heckman (2002) find similar results in their qualitative approach to understanding perceptions of white racial identity. This study takes a qualitative stance to understanding perceptions of white student identity in response to a racial hate email circulated to minority students throughout a predominantly white university campus community in the US in 1999. Results indicated that although white students did not feel the need to identify themselves as white because of its sense of normalcy, they still enjoyed and expected the privileges of being a member of that race. There is also a sense that their whiteness is perceived as a negative attribute that now places them at a perceptual disadvantage in society.

In her work on on white identities, Shirley (2003) examines the gendering of whiteness as it pertains to the "hierarchical boundary work whites do to distinguish themselves from one another" (212). To understand how gender interacts with race and class to produce varying white identities, she analyzes over forty in-depth interviews of rural, southern whites in the United States. She explains how rural southerners have been described by many "negative" namings of whiteness, such as "rednecks" and "white trash." These labels are not only racialized and class-based but gendered as well. The term "white

trash" gets applied to both men and women but particularly to women and families as a whole, which connects to the finding that the cultural failings of "white trash" are linked to traditional expectations of femininity (eg, personal appearance/cleanliness, taking care of children, domestic cleanliness, sexual morality). Understanding how people can hold both privileged and marginalized positions will help uncover the complex ways that race, class, and gender operate in our society.

### *Canadian Literature*

Although an acknowledged gap can be found in Canadian research on whiteness in particular, many important studies have contributed to the literature surrounding the topic of race and ethnicity. With Canada's push to be hospitable to a multicultural environment, there has been a national attempt to encourage individuals to maintain ancestral ethnic and cultural ties while simultaneously feeling a part of Canada. One way to look at such issues, as suggested by Renaud and Badets (1993) is to explore the self-perceived ethnic identity of Canadians. Ethnic identity<sup>5</sup> refers, in this context, to an identification of oneself as belonging to and feeling a part of a particular community of others. This identification can occur on a symbolic, or behavioural level both simultaneously, and/or separately. Symbolic ethnic identity would involve feelings and emotions of being attached to one's ethnic group, whereas behavioural ethnic identity would include outright expressions of this ethnic identity (Kalin and Berry, 1994).

Perhaps one of the most important examples of a Canadian study of ethnic identity among Canadians is a survey conducted by The Angus Reid Group (1991) which included measures of symbolic ethnic identity. Respondents were asked to select from a list of descriptors including Canadian, Hyphenated-Canadian (eg. Greek-Canadian), and Ethnic Origin only (eg. Greek). It was found that, in general, Canadians identify more strongly with being Canadian than with their ethnic

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<sup>5</sup> The term ethnic identity varies in its use and is contested as to whether it can be used only in reference to ethnic minorities or for all groups. In the present context, I will use it to include any ethnic group in Canada.

origins. These results suggest that for most Canadians, ethnic origins are not a strong part of identity. It is, however, important to note that these findings are at the symbolic level of ethnic identity and not behavioural. Although many Canadians may have weak symbolic ethnic identities, it is unclear what their behavioural ethnic identities may be (Weinfeld, 1994). Therefore, the level of and relationship between symbolic and behavioural ethnic identities is an important issue which requires future research.

Ethnic tolerance is another key area of research interest in Canada. Many Canadians pride themselves in their presumed tolerance of diverse cultures and their lack of prejudice (Reitz and Breton, 1994). Ethnic attitudes are diverse, and difficult to measure. Perceived comfort in interacting with members of another group is an important aspect of ethnic attitudes and was measured by Berry and Kalin (1995). Respondents were asked to indicate their comfort level being around members of 14 different ethnic groups thinking each member as being born in Canada, and then as being immigrants to Canada. Results were generally favourable in that the comfort levels were quite high in most cases. Of particular interest, however, is the finding that respondents reported less comfort when around members of a visible minority group.

Many Canadian studies surrounding ethnic identities emerged in the late 1970's and early 1990's. Such studies are particularly common to the field of social psychology. Throughout those past 30 years, many researchers continued to examine Canadian issues such as multicultural and ethnic attitudes (Kalin, 1984; Kalin and Berry, 1982; Lambert, Mermigis and Taylor, 1986) and second language use (Lambert and Holobow, 1984; Lalonde and Gardner, 1984; Gardner and Lysynchuk, 1990; Young and Gardner, 1990), and Berry, who has probably been the greatest proponent of multicultural research in Canada, has continued to research acculturation (Berry, 1987; Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok, 1987; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, and Bujaki, 1989), and issues related to multicultural pluralism (Berry, Kalin and Taylor, 1977; Berry, 1986). In addition, Aboud has examined ethnic self-constance (Aboud, 1983; Aboud and Skerry, 1983), as well as ethnic identity development (Aboud, 1987). Other

than Morse's (1977) study on the national identity of university students, there has been nothing specifically related to Canadian identity as a whole. And despite the wealth of research on these various Canadian issues, there has been little to no attention paid to the investigation of whiteness as it pertains to Canadian identity<sup>6</sup>

### ***Reflections upon the Literature***

The theme common to the literature most strongly related to my own research calls for the acknowledgment of whiteness as a race and developing a new positive white identity. In order to build an anti-racist, anti-sexist environment within academia, one of the first steps is for white academics to deconstruct whiteness by examining and acknowledging all that it entails (Monture-Angus, 2001:29). This is key to the understanding of the research surrounding the study of whiteness as it pertains to individual racial identity.

In order to understand the work of previous researchers, it must be understood how racial identities (white or non-white) shape how people perceive and are perceived in their daily lives. Every member of society is exposed to ideological constructs of race, and the pervasive nature of this ideology leads to its internalization through socialization from social institutions, such as educational systems (Omi and Winant, 1994). As Kincheloe has suggested, "A critical foundation of this pedagogy of whiteness involves monitoring the white reaction to the identity crisis; a central feature of that reaction involves the attempts of whites over the last couple of decades to position themselves as victims"(Kincheloe, 1996). Richard Dyer (1997) argues that making whiteness visible works to "dislodge them/us from the position of power"(2) without constructing ourselves as victims. It appears that it is this assumption that now governs much of the interrogation of whiteness in academic discourse (Wiegman, 1999:117).

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<sup>6</sup> Given the time constraints of this project more recent literature has not been included. In the year after the initial research of literature was conducted, 2003/4, numerous studies and theoretical projects have been published. The findings of these projects will most definitely be included in future re-workings of this project and the implications as such considered.

This brings up some interesting questions. For example, how can one study and communicate ideas about whiteness without essentializing white people as privileged people? As whiteness can be linked to numerous oppressive social practices, it can simultaneously be negotiated on an individual level. In this sense, differences within whiteness as a whole may serve to undo, or deconstruct whiteness as racial supremacy, helping to reproduce “indeterminate, and anti-racist forms of white identity” through whiteness studies (Wiegman, 1999:145).

One of the main criticism of whiteness studies is that it has “sometimes failed to recognize that its greatest problem is the lapse into essentialism” (Kincheloe, 1999:167). The discrepancies in these types of racial classifications indicate the ambiguities of racial grouping and the attempt to “force heterogeneous racial configurations into a single category around similarities in skin tone, hair texture, and eye shape” (Keating, 1995). Many of the traditional sociological methodologies of inquiry into notions of identity seem antiquated when we consider that in today's postmodern society individuals are forced to associate themselves with several differing identities as they move between different social and cultural locales (Fleras, 2000:120).

In learning the methodology behind research, students are often encouraged to follow the scientific paradigm which considers the researcher's “knowledge of and experiences in the setting as sources of bias that they hope to get rid of” Direct experience is often less valued in social science disciplines, and emphasis is placed on theory, grand theory and previously published materials (Kleinman et al., 1996:3). This view of experience leads to the fragmentation of actual lived experiences and potentially even misrepresentation of the research participants. The meanings of the experience become less truthful in such cases and meaning is an inextricable part of lived ex[perience] (Riessman, 2001:22).

This is not to under-emphasize the importance of quantitative research, but merely to point out that qualitative research can in fact raise issues that highlight a need for further quantitative research, just as some quantitative studies can point to a need for further qualitative inquiry. There are also very few reputable pre-existing data bases with which to work and to acquire one of my own would prove far too arduous and time consuming given the financial and time constraints of my research.

The preceding literature review highlights three significant gaps in previous studies of whiteness and academia. The first gap is that very few of the current studies use qualitative data collecting techniques. The actual perspectives, as individual as they may be, and experiences of students seem to be over-generalized through use of more positivist traditions in research. Secondly, few of the studies actually deal with postsecondary education with regard to white students. Lastly, there is a lack of Canadian studies pertaining to whiteness; the literature and research surrounding this topic is predominantly American. As I examine the actual, lived experiences and perceptions of such students at UVic, the qualitative nature of my research, including use of only illustrative or descriptive statistics to identify important areas, along with my direct collaboration with white students in a Canadian university, aims to begin to fill these gaps.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The dynamics between subcultures and majority cultures are exemplified by the fact that the basic values of a given society are transmitted through education. Thus, the “Canadian educational system has usually been given the task of molding students to conform to the patterns of behaviour that the majority of people find acceptable” (Burner and Palmer, 1989:103). Although universities are generally meant to be more progressive and accepting of plurality, we still see this conflict prevailing between dominant and minority cultures (Mehan, 1998:252). By highlighting whiteness and making its subjective position visible, we run the risk of constructing whiteness as a fixed objective category<sup>7</sup>.

There have been exhaustive recommendations that the education system needs “to reconsider *traditional* ethical frameworks that are grounded in Eurocentric value systems” (Mitchell and Kumar, 2001:47, *italics mine*). By examining these dynamics and developing more of an understanding of how particular ethnic groups function in academia, I have hopes of making steps toward future policy recommendations pertaining to the ability of universities to allow for a more substantial focus and integration of whiteness studies into the educational curricula. In a society of accelerating globalization, identities have become increasingly fluid, and such a discussion is essential to the future of identity politics (Wood, 2002).

Common to the interpretivist position, my focus of interest is in the way in which different people experience, interpret and structure their lives (Burgess, 1984:3). It has been indicated (Burgess, 1984; Rudestam and Newton, 2001; Babbie, 1995; Silverman, 1985) that much research of this kind involves a somewhat phenomenological perspective whereby the researcher attempts to understand the

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<sup>7</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the theoretical problems surrounding the concepts of cultures and plurality, as they pertain to Canada and Canadian identity, see Bannerji's (2000) [The Dark Side of the Nation](#).

meanings of circumstances and events for individuals in particular situations. Symbolic interaction has also been one of the major theoretical influences on this type of research with its emphasis “on understanding the actions of participants on the basis of their active experience of the world and the ways in which their actions arise from and reflect back on experience” (Burgess, 1984). This is indicative of Blumer's remarks concerning the study of action, and the nature of social research:

In short, one would have to take the role of the actor and see his world from his standpoint. This methodological approach stands in contrast to the so-called objective approach so dominant today, namely that of viewing the actor and his action from the perspective of an outside, detached observer... the actor acts toward his world on the basis of how he sees it and not on the basis of how that world appears to the outside observer (Blumer, 1966:542).

My overall methodological direction for this project, then, was informed by phenomenology and symbolic interaction. The study itself does not pretend to be of pure phenomenological or symbolic interactionist research, but merely draws from some of the main principles of each. These two traditions have questioned the dichotomy of the researcher and research subject, emphasized the ethical aspects of research, and have expressed the relative and conditional nature of social research (Patton, 1990; Feldman, 1995; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984; Gubrium, 1988). These areas are crucial to the acquisition of the data specified in this research. In light of the nature of my research, I found it appropriate to chose a somewhat flexible method of investigation instead of committing to one specific, conventional technique. The following brief, descriptions of each of the aforementioned methods of inquiry have been included solely to demonstrate the particular areas of each from which I have drawn most heavily in my own research.

Following the tradition of Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, since society is internalized within us, and that “man is a social product and society an objective reality,” it becomes apparent that “an analysis of the world that leaves out any one of these assertions will be

distortive” (Lemert, 1993:423). Schutz, in his book, The Phenomenology of the Social World (1932), emphasizes that sociology should look at the way “individuals construct the social world”. In this work, he develops the philosophical ideas of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology into a sociological perspective (Lemert, 1993:498). Schutz argues that the only phenomenon that we can be sure of is that we are “conscious, thinking beings”; therefore, we should study phenomena around us in terms of the way(s) in which we consciously experience them. This examination, he also argues, “should be free of preconceptions and causal ideas” (Turner et al., 1998:394). This leads us to the phenomenological method of research, which I used in my research. In short, I examined some of the ways in which white students perceive their social setting, namely university, and how these perceptions affect the construction of their social reality. Symbolic interaction also offers many important perspectives relevant to my theoretical approach.

Symbolic interaction was developed most explicitly by C.H. Cooley (1902), George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert George Blumer (1969). It has, as its main vision, the goal to study the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations and the ways in which they go about their everyday-lives and activities in conjunction with others (Prus, 1996:10). Community life is also central to this position. Individual actions and interactions cannot be fully understood separate from the community context in which people live. Symbols and languages are developed and guide individual life: “people not only think, anticipate, act, interact, assess and adjust.” and it is therefore, at times, unproductive to attempt to “explain human behavior by invoking 'factors', 'variables', or 'structures’”(Prus, 1996:14). Blumer (1969) argues that “social theory is conspicuously defective in its guidance of research inquiry,” and that it is too set on devising research problems and connecting different types of data to one another. He sees this as a consequent “divorcement from research” and “divorcement from its empirical world” (142).

In order to accomplish a phenomenological research investigation informed by symbolic interaction, I aimed to understand and describe the experiences of the research participants as free “as possible from theoretical or social constructs” (Rudestam and Newton, 2001:39). By taking such a stance, I created a collaborative narrative with the subjects by analyzing their experiences of university life. Consequently, I was less concerned with what causes the particular outcomes and experiences of the education system for these students, and more concerned with what those experiences mean to the students themselves.

Since I was not concerned with producing an objective record of university life as an event or state in itself, the phenomenological tradition allowed me to explore individual personal perceptions or accounts of that state or event. My goal was not to accomplish a complete phenomenological study, as all that this would entail involves more than time and economic constraints allowed me, though the phenomenological and symbolic interactionist research encompasses what I wished to achieve in my process, since they both attempt to “describe and elucidate the meanings of human experience” (Rudestam and Newton, 2001:38). Like ethnographic and hermeneutic research paradigms, these traditions allow for a descriptive and interpretive nature of knowledge in a generally less structured format than other, more positivist paradigms. I looked for patterns in the experiences communicated in the interviews I conducted, however I did not enter with an entirely preconceived notion of what I might find. Unique to the qualitative tradition, and characteristic in phenomenological research as well as symbolic interaction, is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the informants. This is a more collaborative relationship where the researcher is almost inevitably the co-creator of the narrative(s) (Rudestam and Newton, 2001:39). I accept Douglass and Moustakas' (1985) notion of phenomenological research as a 'discovery':

The process begins with a question or a problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer which is personally meaningful in terms of understanding the relationship between oneself and world and has social significance”

Although I did not enter the data gathering process with preconceived notions of the experiences of the particular white students I would be interviewing, it was inevitable that I bring my own perceptions and experiences to the interview table. As such, I had some guesses as to what the students might say when asked to share their opinions and experiences. Consequently, I developed some thoughts and notions as to the outcome of the study, although they did not intentionally inform my analysis of the data collected. The main hypotheses<sup>8</sup> tested indirectly through the interview processes were that:

- Given the diversity of course material among different disciplines, there will be differences in the responses and perceptions of students from different areas of study (eg. Engineering versus Anthropology). Students in the Social Sciences will be more racially tolerant than students of vocational trades, and so-called Hard Sciences.

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<sup>8</sup>The interview questions and the themes elicited by the responses were not by any means based on these postulations. The hypotheses-like expectations were not formally “tested” in the study. This type of project is not conducive to the “testing” of hypotheses. With this in mind, one of the premises of qualitative research is the inclusion, or at least acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality. Within this is included an inevitable set of preconceived notions, expectations and so on. These obviously influence the outcome of studies regardless of one's attempt to avoid bias. To state these in the write-up of a project in fact partially minimizes this degree of influence. These were just in the back of my mind before the data collection and I thought it best to say so. In short, these were included only to show the reader, or audience, some of the thoughts and expectations with which I entered the project.

- Should I have the opportunity to interview students from various age categories, those students who have returned to school after having spent time in the work force and/or have lived life outside of the education system for a significant period of their lives, would have a somewhat less tolerant view of other racial groups, while simultaneously being more aware of their own whiteness on campus.
- Female participants will be more willing to acknowledge, and/or accept and discuss issues of privilege as white students on campus.
- Students with more recent backgrounds of immigration (ie. 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation) will perceive language and nationality as most pertinent to their racial and/or ethnic identities on campus.
- Based on my own experiences as a white student and as a white individual, the students interviewed, although volunteers, will be, or at least appear to be, unaware or indifferent to their privilege and power in their university- and everyday-lives.
- Based on much of the literature surrounding the area of whiteness studies and other areas of race and ethnic studies, as well as a pilot study of my own work, students will feel racially invisible in certain social and classroom settings on campus.
- Based on the same literature and pilot study, some students will express feelings of guilt when discussing their experiences and perceptions as white students.

Given the nature of this qualitative research, the aforementioned hypotheses were not used to structure the interview schedule and no direct attempt was made to probe students in any given direction based on these hypotheses. They are mentioned here only to point to some areas of interest on my behalf based on my own experiences as a white student and interaction and informal discussion with other white students as well as students of colour (see footnote 8).

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### *Instrumentation*

I used the described method(s) to access my data through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. This enabled participants to provide a fuller, richer account than a less flexible instrument. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to introduce relevant information, ideas and concepts that I, as interviewer, may not have thought of during the question selection. As noted by Sewell (1999), there are many advantages to using qualitative interviewing. First, it allows the participants to describe what is meaningful or important to him/her by using his/her own words rather than being restricted to predetermined categories. This in turn left the participants feeling more at ease. Most importantly, this method allows the researcher to ensure that the questions are being properly interpreted by each respondent. Finally, and of extreme importance to my study, the researcher has the flexibility to “use their knowledge, expertise, and interpersonal skills to explore interesting or unexpected ideas” or themes raised by participants (Sewell, 1999:5). This instrument also proves advantageous as it allowed myself, as interviewer, considerable flexibility in accessing and probing interesting areas and patterns which emerged. Although some of the main questions were anticipated, I did not have an exact set of interview questions, only some key prepared questions so that I was able to elaborate them when it is appropriate, or necessary as the interview progressed.

In order to account for fidelity in such a loosely structured research format, the interviews were taped audibly, and then transcribed so that I could return to them when needed. I subjected them to phenomenological analysis by eliciting key themes in the dialogue. These were combined with other data collection methods, such as the use of a personal research journal, which allowed me to note emergent themes discovered during the interviewing process.

### ***Disadvantages of semi-structured, open-ended interviews***

Although there are many advantages to asking open-ended questions there are also disadvantages. There are some fairly obvious disadvantages such as the fact that as sole evaluator/researcher, I decided which quotes or specific examples to use, thus making for a rather subjective form of reporting. Also, analyzing and interpreting qualitative interviews is much more time-consuming than analyzing and interpreting quantitative interviews. There are also, however, some other concerns regarding the kinds of data collected.

First, open-ended questions are ambiguous. This did occasionally pose a problem in the research when I interpreted the response in a different way from the meaning intended by the participant. The questions posed in the semi-structured interview frequently produced feelings of uncertainty on the part of the interviewee who had not experienced this role. Just as Kadushin (1990) explains, “for such an interviewee, open-ended questions give him little structure, little guidance about what he is supposed to talk about and how he is supposed to talk about it” (Kadushin, 1990:184). In the research, however, I attempted to alleviate such potential problems by re-stating questions, with the use of a set of probes, until I was convinced that the participant had completely understood. I also attempted to be aware of my own predispositions at all times, while putting the participants at ease and appearing non-judgmental.

In this type of research, there is also the danger of participants sharing more information than they had intended and later regretting having done so. In order to diminish this problem, I explained, both verbally and in the written consent form, that the participant(s) could withdraw at any given time with no questions asked. They were also informed that, should they have chosen to end participation, either before, during, or after their interview, any data already collected would not be used.

### ***Sample Description/Selection of Participants***

The study was restricted to students at the University of Victoria (UVic) as the resources were both financially, and chronologically accessible, because I, as researcher, am a student at this university. In order to identify and locate willing, self-identified, white students at Uvic, I acquired a selective sample; this is known as “criterion sampling” (Rudestam and Newton, 2001:92). Through the use of mediators within the departments of Anthropology, Biology, Chemistry, Computing Science, Economics, Engineering, English, Mathematics, Psychology, and Sociology at UVic, I was able to communicate my research goals to a large segment of students within the university. Departmental secretaries were first contacted and asked to relay, via email, my request for aid in recruitment to faculty and staff in their department. Many kind faculty and staff members responded to my request and agreed to give out recruitment material to students in their classes. Potential participants were given my contacts and 16<sup>9</sup> chose to respond voluntarily. I received responses from each department with the exception of Mathematics.

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<sup>9</sup> Of the original 17 students who responded, only one (who would prefer not to be identified by department), chose not to participate after having read the consent form.

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate interpretations of whiteness among white university students, all participants needed to be self-identified white students. A balance of students from various disciplines was also very important as the perceptions and experiences of students in diverse fields should prove far more interesting as well as representative, although not generalizable, of the student body at UVic. Since this is not a purposeful sample through which generalizable data are to be acquired, there was no restriction on who may participate other than the aforementioned selection criterion and as such participants ranged in age, ethnic background, class, gender, etc.

### ***Disadvantages of Volunteer Non-Random Sampling***

There are of course many potential biases and disadvantages to using a non-random sampling technique. These include the fact that the resulting data are not statistically representative of the stakeholder group. If the population is “self-identified white UVic students”, these few volunteers only provide examples of the experiences of the “average white student”. This is a very small sample. This study could be considered 16 case studies of “whiteness”. A major bias with volunteers is that they are likely to be more concerned with the social and personal issues of whiteness than a “typical” student.

However, non-random sampling can help to achieve better representation of diversity in the group, and the stakeholder group is not well enough defined to select people at random as how one perceives one's own ethnicity is a self-defining issue. Further, I did not analyze the data with parametric statistics and so a random sample was not of utmost importance.

### ***Researcher's Role/ Positionality***

Commonplace now to the field of social research is the scrutiny of the researcher and the research process as well as the research subject. Questions arise, and rightfully so, about where the researcher stands in relation to her research topic (Shahidian, 2001:55). How the researcher conceptualizes and responds to the tools, concepts, challenges, ethical dimensions, and definitions of the research process become of primary importance. As such, I follow Wolcott (1994) by acknowledging that “the biases of our careers, our personalities, and our situations constitute essential starting places for our research attention” (408). Unlike in long-standing, conventional scholarship, where “objectivity must necessarily entail the separation of the 'word' from the 'self’” (LaRocque, 1991:xxi), throughout this research, my voice, as researcher, interviewer, student and author are present.

My own experience as a white graduate student, and past experience as an undergraduate student inevitably shapes and guides my analysis in conjunction with the other participants. It is consequently inevitable that my own interaction with the participants influences the direction of the research and the experiences relayed to me by the interview participants. My own perceptions similarly influenced the way the data is analyzed and as such the analysis is not an authoritative account of these experiences, but rather my own interpretations of their accounts. I, as a result, asked each participant if they would like to see my analyses of their own interview data and consider their perspectives in my final report. The results of my analysis were not altered in the case of a participant's disagreement with my representation of their thoughts and experiences, but it is noted in my report that certain (2) individuals disagreed with my analysis.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Through the use of the previously mentioned mediators, as well as explanatory consent forms read and signed by all participants, the subjects were effectively alleviated of concerns of trust. The proposal of this project was of course examined and approved by the UVic Human Ethics Committee prior to initial contact with the participants. This is a low-risk study although complete anonymity and confidentiality are impossible to guarantee in this form of research. The identities and distinguishable characteristics of each participant are, however, omitted, as much as is possible, from all transcripts or quotes presented to others. As sole researcher, I am the only person able to link specific data with individual participants. The subjects were also verbally briefed by myself, and assured of confidentiality. In addition to this, participants received detailed information regarding possible areas of concern through an informed consent form. (See Appendix A).

### *The Interviews*

A semi-structured interview guide facilitated the data collection (see Appendix B). Interview questions were framed to encourage elaboration and expansion of participant response. The general areas of inquiry included: a) interpretations of and experiences of race and ethnic studies in a university setting; b) perceptions of how whiteness affects certain aspects of the university experience of participants. Students were asked questions about how they perceive race, ethnicity, other racial groups, and whiteness. They were also asked questions pertaining to how frequently they think about their race at university, and how they think their whiteness affects their classroom and/or social life at university. I also inquired as to whether and how they felt if they had felt competing self-concepts at university, felt pride or shame of their whiteness at university, or been misclassified at university as a

member of another race. Another area of inquiry was explored in another section of the interview pertaining to race and ethnic studies in university. Here the students were asked questions about their experiences of courses they may have taken that dealt either directly or indirectly with issues of race and ethnicity. In this section they were also asked to share their thoughts on the prospect of whiteness studies and the role they might play as an addition to existing areas of race and ethnic studies.

The interviews had a duration of one to two hours, depending on the amount of detail each individual was willing to provide. Permission from each participant was requested to contact them again if elaboration or clarification was needed with regard to their initial responses. The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed thematically, and not in their entirety. Although every effort was made to transcribe the interviews accurately, transcription is inevitably only partial: "in any specified notation system, some aspects of speech are included while others are excluded" (Arvay, 1998:2). Consequently, I kept an interview journal with notes regarding things such as body language, tone, and environment of each interview in order to provide additional context and depth to the analytical process. In this journal I also included additional notes on my own interpretations and thoughts throughout the interview and reflections post-interview. This encompassed the areas of positionality and reflexivity characteristic of qualitative research methodologies, as such methodologies emphasize that the processes of data collection, interpretation, analysis and even the writing of results are not to be separated from each other (Cresswell, 1994; Rudestam and Newton, 2001). The interviews were conducted on campus during the months of December, January, and February of the year 2003/4, in various locations in environments comfortable to the participant and at an agreed upon time convenient for both myself, as interviewer, and the interviewees.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

#### *Data Analysis*

Since there is no in-depth research dealing specifically with whiteness as it pertains to the university experience, this study was exploratory in nature. The data analysis, then, did not involve predetermined themes or patterns. It was also limited by the small number of cases and the lack of a random sample. Although the themes elicited are based on questions asked during the interviews, not all responses or questions are addressed in this analysis. The reason for this is that some of the questions, as anticipated, elicited little response from students and were consequently skipped over, or deemed insignificant in the process of transcription and analysis.

As mentioned above, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed thematically in order to portray an accurate account of the individuals' experiences. The transcribed data was coded systematically for in-depth analysis. I highlight the similarities and differences in identified themes and patterns that emerge. As Luborsky (1994) explains, thematic analysis of in-depth interviews allows for adequate representation of experiences, descriptions and perceptions of individual participants as well as insight into cultural values and beliefs that influence such experiences. As such, in relation to developing an understanding of how white students perceive whiteness in academia, such thematic analysis allowed for an in-depth analysis of emergent themes and opposing viewpoints, while simultaneously allowing for comparison of how the participants' perceptions are in accordance to or oppositional to the dominant model of perceived whiteness as outlined in much of the literature surrounding this area of study. Once numerous sub-themes were identified, they were linked in order to develop larger themes thus avoiding

fragmentation and emphasizing the similarities and differences of the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Categories that did not fit within the established, dominant themes were also explored in order to allow for analysis of divergent views. The thematic categorization of the data was not, however, mutually exclusive as I was interested in understanding these experiences as a whole opposed to merely exploring individual elements of the phenomenon. The students tended to use the terms race, ethnicity, and culture somewhat synonymously, and since this chapter aims at communicating the significant findings of the interviews, it should be noted that they were usually referring to race and just looking for what they felt to be more “appropriate” terms. I have not altered their choice of terms in any case. Discussions of definitions and meanings of these words were not used in this analysis but definitely merit further exploration in future studies.

### ***General Reactions to Race and Self-Concept on Campus***

The general reaction to encouraged discussion about whiteness in my research had many parallels to Frankenberg's (1993) study. In my interviews, I found participants to be racially tolerant, well-meaning white students. The interviewees of this research expressed no direct/blatant acts of racism in their rhetoric on whiteness; rather, they tended to communicate an internalization of discourses of race, power and privilege. There is a definite theme of *recognition* found in the interview transcripts in that most of the white students admitted to some form of subconscious privilege afforded white people at university.

Most students claimed that they responded to recruitment efforts because they were pleased to have a chance to discuss their race—an opportunity none of them had previously experienced. The general perspective was that white people are not given the chance to express themselves regarding their racial identity(ies), whereas people of colour are being asked to share their thoughts with great frequency. Given that this is one of the points raised in the existing literature

surrounding whiteness studies and consequently one of the reasons I chose to explore this area of research, I found this majority response to be rather encouraging.

Interestingly enough, however, once the interviews begun, most students were at a loss for words. What possible questions could I have for them about themselves? They were eager to discuss other groups but had apparently never looked at themselves in this light. At the beginning of each interview, without exception, the participants appeared quite confused as to the merit of discussing *their* racial identity, and expressed a preference for discussing their perspectives of *other* racial identities. When asked about how they perceived their race as affecting their academic and/or social experiences, many responses were of utter disbelief that such a question need be asked. It was quite apparent that literally none of the students interviewed had thought about how their race could affect their lives on campus. This was seen as something that concerned other racial groups. This is not to say that the response was a negative one, and many respondents appeared quite intrigued after they began to think about what their race might actually mean to them. There were, however, some differences in the responses to the questions pertaining to academic effects and those pertaining to social effects. Some differences also arose among respondents who study in the social sciences, business and sciences, and vocational trades<sup>10</sup>.

When asked to give their views on how, and if, race affects their academic lives, the responses were quite varied. One 32-year-old English student, for example, reflected that her race effects her academic achievement because there are not many other races who study English, as a major; consequently, competition is quite stiff. After further probing, it became apparent that by this she was meaning that if there were more students of ethnic minorities, for instance, who major in English – assuming that their first language is not English – that she, and other white students –assuming that

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<sup>10</sup> Since the number of students from each department ranged from only 1-2, this analysis deals only with specific perspectives relayed to me as interviewer and no direct comparison need be made between students from different disciplines until further research with much larger response rates can be conducted at a future date.

other white students have English as their first language as well –would have a distinct advantage over students of ethnic minority. It is at this point, and as it can be seen in other responses, that it became quite clear that race and language can be quite stereotypically linked. This is not to assume that the particular students with whom I spoke are in the majority in their thoughts, or that there is any sort of malicious intent to any of their responses, only that some common themes surrounding race and language arose in the perceptions communicated to myself as researcher. Not all students thought first of language in their initial responses to this line of question; many mentioned competition as the foremost reality of white students. One 22-year-old Engineering student, for example, relays his thoughts about how his race affects his academic experience of university life:

*The only thing that I can think of where my race is even an issue is that it's hard to get jobs for us when other people come in and try to take them. I guess this is the same in school 'cause, like, you still have to compete for other things, like grades and stuff.*

Some of the students visibly thought about this question and the impression was that through this thought process, their minds were actually changed. Long pauses were followed by a well-thought out response that seemed almost contrived with words that are drilled into many-a-student, often without knowledge of their real meanings. For example, two students, one Sociology major and one Anthropology graduate student replied that they have an advantage because of their race in their academic standing because international students have a harder time with certain complex course materials because of their language barrier. Also, they thought that because most of the teachers are white that it may be easier for them to relate to their teachers than for someone of ethnic minority.

From these particular responses, it can be deduced that the main emergent theme related to questions surrounding the influence of race on academic achievement is that being white can either be detrimental or beneficial. Some students tend to make more of an attempt to appear “politically correct” in their responses in that they are phrased in a way that gives the impression of conscientious, non-racist, educated perspectives. Some students, on the other hand, appeared to feel less of an obligation to say the “right” thing, and were more eager to express their concerns for the competition between white people and people of other races for employment and education opportunities. An interesting point here is that in *each* case the discussion turned to other groups or “minorities” and these groups were used as a basis for comparison to whiteness rather than a discussion surrounding whiteness on its own.

Conversely to the two differing kinds of responses from students with regard to whiteness as an influential factor in academic life, when asked about how, and if, being white affects social life on campus, the responses were quite similar from all respondents. The responses seemed to have no relation to the students' individual areas of study at university, but instead related to their social circles. The general consensus seems to be that race *does* in fact play a rather important role in the social lives of students. The posed questions and probes were not followed by such an air of confusion and deep thought as when before and, in fact, most students seemed quite enthusiastic about this area of discussion. Two main themes emerged in this discussion: 1) feelings of belongingness with other white people and 2) perceived lack of students of other races to socialize with.

Most students expressed that they feel most comfortable socializing with other white students because they feel they have more in common with them. Many of the students I spoke with are from predominantly white towns, attended predominantly white schools and hence grew up with predominantly white friends and family. It is not as though they initially sought out these particular social ties, only that they have become used to these circles and they have shaped their identity to the

extent that they feel nervous, or “*funny*” approaching some students of colour. Generally, the respondents also expressed that they see groups of other races “*stickin' together*” so that it seems “*pretty normal to stick with each other*”. Some students were quick to defend their positions, as though there were something wrong with the opinions they had just voiced. They were thus quick to point out that they would never exclude someone of another colour from their social clique, just that this seems to be “*the way things work*”. One student commented that she is friends with an Indigenous student but that,

*[she is] totally white. You know what I mean? Like she doesn't act Native at all. She even talks the same. She was raised by white parents, so. She'd rather hang out with us 'cause we have more in common. I don't even consider her Native and sometimes forget.*

Comparable to these findings, Sleeter (1994) argues that, “people need affective bonds with each other, and given the segregation of society, the strongest bonds are usually with members of our own race”(36). Perhaps this can account for some of the approaches of the students with regard to their own race and choice in social ties at university.

This also applies to other facets of one's background as six students pointedly brought up that you can tell by looking at someone what their background is and whether they would make potentially compatible friends. Things like clothes, hairstyle and mannerisms also affect one's perceptions and as one Biology major comments, “*race just happens to be part of that*”. The only exception to this pattern lies with a 20-year-old Anthropology student who feels most comfortable with students of colour:

*It's not like I don't, like, get a long with white people. It's just that, well, I think other people are just more interesting... I'm not racist, I just don't really like white people... they're just too, I don't know... boring I guess*

This appears somewhat contradictory when we look at the second theme in that students claim first to socialize with other white students for the most part because of a feeling of commonality, but then claim that they would socialize with students of colour were there more of a “selection”:

*I guess because of the generation that I grew up in, that diversity was looked upon as such a positive thing, that umm. It doesn't matter if you're Greek, or Spanish, or Mexican or Asian, or you know what I mean? You're gonna find your group of friends regardless of what race you are.*

When asked what race most of this particular respondent's friends happen to be, she reluctantly acknowledges that they are in fact all white, but that this is because there really “*aren't any African Americans in my programme*”. In almost every discussion surrounding social life on campus, students brought up their observation that there seem to be very few people of colour on campus. It is apparent that many of the respondents feel that the reason they have more white friends, and in some cases *only* white friends, is that most of the other students on campus are also white. A 19-year-old Computing Science major comments:

*I mean, statistically speaking there's no real chance to make friends with other people. I mean, there's none to choose from.*

Also of interest is the apparent perception of certain races as being more or less “coloured” than others. For example, the perceived lack of racial diversity on campus is commented upon and based solely on the lack of Black people. For example, while discussing the number of international students on campus, one student comments that,

*Asian people don't count, they're kinda just like their own category. Ya know? I mean that there's just no black people and stuff on*

*campus, that's what I mean by colour.*

One area of questioning in the interviews that I had initially thought would lead to numerous interesting discussions, was that surrounding conflicting, or competing self-concepts at university. Interestingly enough nearly all of the students responded negatively to my asking whether they had ever experienced conflicting self-concepts. Regardless of ethnic history, or background, the respondents seemed to have a consensus that they never feel anything other than white with regard to racial identity. Surprisingly only two exceptions to this trend surfaced. Even more surprisingly, they both identified themselves as Greek-Canadians. One student responded quite eagerly to this question and shared his experiences as a Greek-Canadian at university. He indicated that he quite frequently feels that his being white and his being Greek never seem to feel as though they co-exist: he feels *either* Greek *or* white depending on the circumstances. Since the focus of this study is on university-life, we tried, sometimes unsuccessfully, to remain concentrated on his relaying to me some specific incidents on campus where he has felt these conflicting identities. Many of his friends on campus are Greek, he said, and many of them refer to white people as “whiteys”, excluding themselves from this group. In other words, many of his friends do not consider themselves to be white. When asked why he thinks this may be the case he responded as follows:

*It's just that it's kinda fun, I think, to see people's reactions when they see us deny that we are white. Plus, I think it makes me feel like I have more, like, culture or something when I get the chance to say that I'm Greek. Nobody asks us what we are because we look normal, and this gives us a chance to let them know. We're proud to be Greek.*

Interestingly, the second respondent to discuss this idea of competing self-concepts, also a Greek-Canadian, felt much differently, and feels very white and rarely Greek:

*If somebody asked me 'what are you?' I say 'Greek'. If they ask 'what race are you?' I'd say 'white'. But nobody says 'what are you?' That'd be rude. The only time I feel Greek is off campus when me and my family go to a Greek function or something*

This perspective is linked to the social aspect of university life; with regard to the classroom setting, it appears that such competing self-concepts play no role in the academic experience for these particular individual.

### ***Nationality***

Interestingly and importantly, not one respondent brought up nationality and its role in self-concept until I raised the question as to what role nationality plays in life on campus. Even with the question being posed, interest remained minimal. It seems that being Canadian is important for most respondents in the classroom, but not so relevant in the social realm of university. By this they mean that in class it is nice to have the professor include some Canadian material, and that when this happens, they feel proud to be Canadian; however, when they read something by a white person, it does not necessarily make them feel proud to be white. As one engineering students explained:

*It's just fun when some big accomplishment is done by a Canadian and we get to read about it, or our instructor tells us about it. It's like it gives you something to look up at. As if it makes any difference when the person is white or not, just Canadian.*

The interesting thing about this is that one most often does not know the race of any given theorist or author of any given text unless one can look at a photograph, and make judgment based on that. On the other hand, a quick glance at the publishing information can tell us if something is Canadian.

Consequently, when reading material for a university course, white students often assume the author is white, so they do not feel any increased degree of attachment to most material, according to these students, unless it is Canadian. In this sense then, the Canadian identity of the respondents seems to be more salient than their whiteness, at least in the university setting. Nationality as a component in self-identity, does however, resurface numerous times throughout the interviews, and most specifically when discussing other racial groups on campus.

### ***Other Racialized Groups***

The second section of the interview schedule was meant to be aimed at the discussion of attitudes toward groups of other races. Although this had come up indirectly while discussing other issues, this was meant to be a chance for participants to voice their opinions, experiences and perceptions directly as they are asked to reflect upon how they relate to other racialized groups at university. Only two groups were brought up with frequency in the short time allocated for this discussion and hence only these groups are discussed here. I will refer to these groups as the respondents did so as not to take away from their shared meanings. These groups are referred to as: 1) "Asian" 2) "Native Indian". I will briefly examine the perceptions of each group in both an academic social context by eliciting themes most commonly found in the interviews. This is not meant to be an exhaustive look at the perceptions of the interviewees, as minimal time was spent in each interview on this subject. I have included it merely to demonstrate some of the perceptions of the white student participants.

Perhaps because of a large visible presence of Asian students on campus at UVic, 13 of the 16 respondents brought up Asian groups as the first group they chose to discuss with relation to their own ethnic identity as white students. In these discussions, a few themes were elicited quite rapidly and

quite similarly between individuals, regardless of discipline. Firstly, many of the students expressed companion-like regard for their Asian classmates, and some even denoted endearment in rather interesting ways. A Sociology student reflects:

*They're just so cute! Especially the girls. They always sit together, and chat real quiet, and are always super nice. I've never met a mean one! I wish white people were so nice! (laughs).*

Conversely, some students identified their frustrations with these particular groups with the implication that certain habits, whether culturally significant or not, have potential for aggravation:

*It's not that I have any problem with them; it's just that they all walk together in these huge groups on campus, like in the hallways and stuff and they never look where they're going, and stuff like that. Not to sound rude but their voices kind of bug me too when they're all talking at once, super fast.*

*they are definitely the most segregated group in my department. Not really on my behalf... this is going to sound really racist... they kinda keep to themselves. I mean I see them off campus and recognize some from my classes and they have no idea who I am... mostly because they're comfortable that way*

*when it comes to the Asian groups in my department, I don't... I don't relate to them at all.*

The final common theme in the discussions surrounding perceptions of white students of Asian students is that of general competitiveness. Many students, specifically those male participants, shared their envy of the fancy vehicles that Asian students are seen as frequently having. This envy is most frequently declared with apparent underlying animosity; an attempt has obviously been made to justify their competitive thoughts. Male Asian students are consequently being labeled as “*show-offs*”, and “*making up for what else they lack*”. On a more academic level, Asian students are generally perceived, by the

white students interviewed, to be very intelligent, especially in the sciences, computing sciences and business. This too is seen as threatening to some students which in turn leads to feelings of competition and envy.

The second group to be discussed by numerous students is the indigenous student population. Unfortunately, the vast majority of discussion surrounding this particular group appeared to be rather negative in nature. It seems that most of the attitudes toward and perceptions of Aboriginal students reflects the common complaints of white Canadian society as a whole. Most of the issues that were deemed as being of some concern, for instance, revolve around the issue of perceived inequity of distribution of resources. In the university setting, many of the respondents remarked on how they see it to be unjust that Native students have access to different resources than white students, or other students in general. Issues such as tuition, scholarships, bursaries, building projects and much more were raised by well-over half of the students interviewed. This perception is exemplified here as a Psychology major told his opinion:

*...[Native students] get way more than any of us and it's like they don't even know it because you hardly see any of them around the university. They get all the special stuff like what was that friendship house or something they just built... why can't we have something like that? Seems sorta lame if you ask me. I think they get free tuition too from the university*

The stances of some of the interviewees on Native students was also touched upon in the context of *pride* and *shame* and is thus further discussed in the next section.

### ***Emotional Responses to Whiteness***

One of the major themes that emerged during the data collection process surrounds the feelings of pride and shame. Respondents were asked whether or not they had ever felt proud or ashamed to be white in any academic or social setting at university. Most of the responses were surprisingly negative in that participants expressed little if any pride in their whiteness. Given the responses to previous interview questions regarding, for instance, the perception of the respondents on other racialized groups on campus, it seemed as though the discussion of pride and shame would reflect the same tone. It would seem appropriate for students to suggest feelings of pride, prestige and perhaps even power when given the direct opportunity to describe these perceptions. This, however, was far from the case. Without presuming causal factors for the reactions of the students interviewed I will turn the focus instead to the themes that emerged during the interviewing process. The three themes that were elicited in this section of the interviews, were feelings of 1) invisibility, 2) guilt, and 3) indifference to being white students.

#### **Invisibility**

Invisibility, or sense of, was among the most discussed themes throughout the interviews. Of the 16 students interviewed, 11 pointed out that they most often feel invisible with regard to their race on campus. While discussing the issues of pride with the white student respondents, it was brought to my attention by one student that in a university setting, where diversity is pushed as being a great thing and even something to strive toward, students aim to set themselves apart from others by any means possible:

*people don't want to be boring you know. Look at how different people are on campus compared to off campus. You can't stand out too much but you need to at least be an individual you know?*

I had been under the impression that students, especially younger students such as this one, would rather not stand out in any setting, but instead blend in. This student's comments were, however, confirmed by most of the perspectives conveyed to me by the participants. In particular, numerous students mentioned their various attempts to be unique, so as not to “blend in” too much with the masses of other white students on campus. The students were also, however, quite clear in pointing out that they did not wish to be *too* different, only to stand out as having something unique to offer the university setting. It is clear that specific talents, hobbies, musical tastes, and even clothing styles can take precedence over race in the identities and self-concept of many of the research participants. A recent Anthropology graduate explained his view:

*I try to not be too boring, you know? Like, I'm pretty boring to look at, being a white guy n' all. I like to think that my music sets me apart. I don't think my whiteness makes any difference. I just blend in with all the other white faces here at Uvic. None of us really stand out I don't think, unless it's in some other way, you know? People know me because of my band and not my race. How funny would it sound to be like: 'hey I know him he's that white guy!' Like anyone would know who the hell they were talking about!*

In a university setting, especially one such as UVic where the visible majority of students are white, racial consciousness is usually of some relevance. Students are exposed to ideas of equity and diversity on a fairly regular basis through campus magazines and newspapers, equity forums, or at the very least advertisements for them. Institutions such as UVic attempt to appear just and equitable in their operations and students are consequently inevitably exposed to some sort norm of diversity. As a result, according to those interviewed, white students feel as though their positions surrounding race and racial issues are of little importance in the realm of diversity on campus, both in and outside of the classroom.

Walking around they feel like the norm, or invisible racially, and consequently look elsewhere to distinguish themselves as unique individuals. Many students commented that people of colour look or seem “*so much more interesting*” and that they would “*like to be interesting too*”.

As Rosaldo (1993) observes, it is common for our language to be shaped by the concept of some individuals being perceived as having culture and others seen as lacking in culture. For instance, words like “we”, “us” and “our” are used to refer to those without culture, or those who are culturally invisible. Similarly to the Delpit (1988) argument of the perceived invisibility of culture, Drieger (1989) notes that white people tend to be quite aware of skin colour as means of classification of others, yet when describing themselves, as members of the dominant population, tend to remove race, or skin colour, as one of their main characteristics. This helps in establishing a context for examining students' experiences with regard to their perception of race, ethnicity and culture, which they frequently used interchangeably.

## **Guilt**

Another common theme established in the interviews was that of guilt over being white. Many of the students interviewed expressed a guiltiness, which is often tied with feelings of shame, of their whiteness, particularly when discussing the colonial history of Canada and other countries<sup>11</sup> in classroom settings:

*It totally sucks to be white when we're studying Canada's history and other countries too. It's kinda embarrassing 'cause we've done some much... shitty stuff (laughs) to everyone. I can see other [white] people, not just me, getting skirmish in their seats when that stuff gets brought up. I hate classes like that!*

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<sup>11</sup> Much of the discussion surrounding the theme of guilt ended up shifting to issues not pertinent to university-life, but rather to everyday life outside the university setting. As such, for fear of tangentiality, it has not been included here so as to keep the focus directed at the aims of this particular research.

The common view is that white people are deemed, whether justly or unjustly, responsible for much of the exploitation, violence, and discrimination in global history as well as, more specifically, on campus. A prevalent concern was the impression that indigenous students have a great deal of resentment toward white students. It is generally felt, by those students interviewed, that when they are in a situation whereby they find themselves among Native students, that those students are looking at them with disdain and animosity. One student's reflection is indicative of numerous other students' standpoints:

*I can feel it you know when I like walk up, or toward a crowd of them and they all stare at me. I get sort of scared and just try to keep my head down and not make eye contact. I think it's mostly the girls that try to intimidate us and the older they get the nicer they seem for some reason. I feel super bad about what happened to their ancestors. But that's not us. That was then, this is now. I still feel guilty though because white people have done that same kind of thing to lots of people.*

When asked whether they had ever spoken with a Native student about these concerns, the consensus was that all but one student had never voiced their concerns to anyone other than other white students.

Several students also brought up the racially fueled streak of crime, mostly in the form of vandalism<sup>12</sup>, on campus at UVic in September of 2003. Apparently tension was felt between white students and students of colour in the classroom in the few weeks following these incidents. The participants felt ashamed that their fellow (white) students could be capable of such actions and articulated feelings of guilt resulting from a fear of being clumped together with the perpetrators:

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<sup>12</sup> In the Fall of 2003 numerous incidents of racialized graffiti and vandalism occurred on campus at the University of Victoria. Incidentally, some of the welcoming festivities for incoming students were forced to be cancelled and the university requested any information from students about these crimes. Ironically enough, these incidents proved problematic in my recruitment of participants for this project; the request for white students was a tough thing to approach tactfully!

*I felt kind of stupid being white at that time because it's obvious that white people would be the only ones to do that kind of thing. But, it was like the non-white students in our classes were pissed off at everyone [white], not just the people who did that stuff... we just kinda kept quiet when it was brought up and stuff.*

As whites in general, and particularly young white people, gain an awareness of the racialization of their identity, some may feel guilty about their own association with a group complicit with racial oppression. There are many other possible reactions to this awareness. Often some guilt-laden whites will develop a sense of self-denigration, and conceptualize non-white cultures as superior to white culture; this often includes assumptions that other races are more “natural”, authentic, or sacred (Kincheloe, 1999:168). Many may react in a completely opposite manner and claim that a conspiracy against white culture has been manifested and created by non-white cultures and “multiculturalists” that has caused a repression of white expression and identity.

### **Indifference**

Some of the students alleged neither guilt, nor invisibility, and instead focused on indifference. Though not in the majority of students interviewed, three students-- a significant number when we consider that n=16 in this study-- communicated feelings that held neither of negative, nor of positive connotations regarding pride or shame of their whiteness. These students appeared to consider their whiteness as a mere reality that “*just is*” with no meaning, or perception of importance:

*I've never felt proud to be white. But... I've never felt ashamed either. It's just how I am I guess... white. I've never really thought about it. I mean what difference does it make really?*

*Am I supposed to feel proud? Don't get me wrong I don't feel guilty either. I just don't really care that's all. There's way more important things at school to think about. I don't go around thinking about my skin colour. Wouldn't that take away from my work? (laughs)*

Realizing that race is perhaps not something that what white students think about frequently, and given that one of the main premises of this project was that members of a majority or privileged group may not examine certain aspects of their lives until challenged to do so, I pointed out that even if this is not something they think about often that they should at least attempt to reflect on this for the interview and that perhaps they would think of something that they have not before.

I did not count how many times I heard responses such as “*I’ve never really thought about that*” or “*what difference does that make?*” or “*should I feel that way?*” or “*why should I care about that?*”. These students were not meaning to be rude -- in fact most times these comments were followed by a “*sorry*”-- they were just being honest. Even with a significant amount of probing, these particular students were very keen to move on from this section of the interview. They convinced me that they had nothing to say on the matter. I found this “nothing” to be quite something:

*No seriously, I don't feel anything but just myself. I sure don't feel guilty. I don't think I ever have really. Why should I? I've never done anything wrong to Black people or anything. Proud? No not that either 'cause I've never done anything special for white people. That's really all I have to say about that! (laughs)*

I did not wish to force any specific answer from any of the interview participants and I found their responses to be quite intriguing. Although in this particular section only three students suggested this sort of indifference, in almost every other section of the interview, numerous students displayed elements of this perspective in their answers. Occasionally the respondents would act indifferent and then become more aware of their own experiences as the conversations progressed, and occasionally topics were dropped because of a seeming lack of interest. Much of this is material that is not able to be communicated in this report as it involved mere glances and shrugging of shoulders which cannot be transcribed thematically with specified conclusions. Suffice it to say that I took this concept of indifference as one of the biggest themes to have emerged in the interview process.

## **Privilege**

Like the avoidance patterns seen in discussing race and its role in the university-life of white students, the interview participants tended to deny, justify and/or defend their privilege. The role that race plays in the construction of privilege on campus was undermined by other factors seen as contributing further to the distribution of equity and hence privilege: gender and class appear to be stronger identifying factors in the students' discussions of privilege. Power was also strongly linked to, and at times equated with, privilege. These patterns are best communicated through a look at some excerpts of some of the most common stances relayed by the participants:

*I don't think that, as a queer woman, that I experience the same kind of privilege that everyone assumes white people have. White men, I think, are the only ones who really experience and reap the benefits of their power.*

*I sure don't get any privileges at UVic because I'm white. I mean I have huge student loan debts you know?! I don't get free or cheaper tuition like some people of other races. I'll be lucky to finish at this rate. I don't think that's privilege you know?!*

*There's no way I have privilege at school. Maybe outside of school, but not here. We have to give up stuff that we'd might be good at 'cause somebody else gets it 'cause they're minority or whatever. Someone said it's called equity something or other... policy maybe ... but I think that sounds like... like... like privilege to me.*

*I don't know. If I say I'm privileged, it seems like I don't deserve how well I do or something like that. Like, I just got a chance to go away and work overseas and I worked hard to get accepted and, like, if it's because of my privilege that I went there I'd feel cheated and like I don't, like, deserve it. I still have to work so I don't think it's fair to say we get stuff because of our privilege.*

Perhaps as Delpit (1988) argues, “individuals with power are frequently least aware of – or at least willing to acknowledge -- its existence” (282). Sleeter (1993), Phoenix (1997), and Rosenberg (1997) found that white people find difficulty in constructing and talking about themselves in racial terms, while minority or racialized individuals tend to construct and talk about themselves more freely in this way. Given reasons for this vary from denial of power to the “lack of recognition of historical and political relations” (James, 2003:29).

There are, of course, exceptions to these perspectives. Although only a couple of participants made reference to an acknowledgment of privilege, it must not go unmentioned. Students indicated their awareness in different forms, the following two excerpts most concisely exemplify the viewpoints:

*We cannot deny our privilege. All you have to do is look at the numbers. Like, how many white people go to this university? What kind of programmes do they go in to? How many of the teachers are white? Seriously, to say we have no privilege, on or off campus, would be super lame, not to mention ignorant.*

*I guess you could say I'm privileged. I'm not sure why but I know I am. We're taught that.*

As the latter comment alludes to, the university is a place where diversity is supposedly more apparent and students are made aware of social issues that they may not be exposed to so readily in life off campus. Diverse communities like a university should, by deduction, be an environment more conducive to interactions with members of groups other than one's own (not just in race but also in class, ability,

sexual preference, and more). It is consequently not surprising when one considers that people bond together based on such groups and tend not to stray too far from their comfort zones, wherever and with whomever they are. This is very common among the student participants of this study.

Language was also brought up by numerous students with regard to privilege. Interestingly enough, many students diverted the questions of race by tending to equate it, or at least replace it, with comments relating to language and mother tongue. Privilege, according to many of the students, is only obvious in a classroom setting with students whose primary language is not English. Some express a form of pity when commenting on the perceived struggle of these students in following course materials. An Economics student explained her perspective and exemplified that of many others:

*With Asian people I feel like I have the upper hand because they have such a hard time with explaining themselves, their asking questions with profs, or being able to just write a test, like understanding the wording of a question.*

### ***Perceived Importance of Race as Area of Study***

Similar to findings of James (2003) where participants of a seminar on race had a common tendency to “equate talking about or naming race with a display of prejudice or racism”, it was found in the interviewing process that many students felt uncomfortable or defensive when using the term “race”<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, when asked if they perceive race and ethnic studies to be an important area of study at university, many of them again questioned the terminology. Many demonstrated defensiveness by emphasizing that they did not in fact “*see peoples' race*” or that they “*look at the person first, not*

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<sup>13</sup> Since the student participants felt more comfortable using ethnicity as a term denoting race, so as not to imply meaning other than that intended by the participants, and since this research is not meant to dissect the contested terrain of language but to understand the experience(s) of those interviewed through their own lenses, I adopt this use of terminology and will thus use the terms race and ethnicity interchangeably in this following discussion of race as an area of study in the university. It would be very interesting, in a future study, to explore white students' understanding of ethnicity and race as separate topics of discussion. However, in the name of brevity and due to the time constraints involved in the research and writing of an M.A. thesis, these issues will be left for a later date.

*their skin colour*". Also, and perhaps most pertinent to the discussion of race as an area of study, numerous students indicated that race is in fact a word that only surfaces in discussions about racism or prejudice:

*I think that we've been taught that race is a racist word and that we should be using ethnicity instead" Is it okay to use the word race, then? As a white person?*

The present-day situation with regard to economic restructuring and the transnational migration of capital and labour make for a unique context for the siting of race, racism and whiteness. The constant changes have had an inevitable impact on racial identity formation, consciousness and of course politics. The notion of colour-blindness is wide-spread as an "ideal" way to be, and sometimes a mere suggestion of race or racial consciousness is deemed *racist*. To speak of people as though they were raceless, however, could prove even more racist, for there can be no way to deal with race without taking race into account. The massive influx of new immigrant groups to North America has "destabilized specific concepts of race, led to a proliferation of identity positions, and challenged prevailing modes of political and cultural organization" (Omi, 1996:14).

When asked whether they had in fact enrolled in a course specifically geared at studying different races, ethnicities, or cultures, however, most students answered that their disciplines were not really conducive to that line of study. On the other hand, many courses had at least one section devoted to the study and understanding of other cultures. Most of these sections pertained to globalization on an economic level, in that it dealt mostly with "how not to offend people of a different culture" and "universal language of the globe". These courses were most often required for the completion of certain components of a degree or programme.

When asked to think of some topics that they would deem the most important to address in

such courses, students most frequently brought up “*language barriers*” and “*equal rights*”.

*Learning how to give most people the benefit of the doubt, or put yourself in their shoes. You don't see enough of that because it's not taught. The only way for it to be more of a world-wide thing is if it's taught, you know what I mean, like, to have open discussions in class and to be able to hear other people's opinions.*

For the most part, very accepting attitudes emerged in the process of the conveying of answers to this line of questioning. Every student admitted that this is in fact an important area of study and that they would be interested in taking (more) courses if they were offered:

*I think this area of study is so important. To understand where people are coming from... knowing a bit about that person's history, or knowing how they might have been raised kinda helps you deal with people a bit better.*

### **Perceived Relevance of Whiteness in Race and Ethnicity Studies**

According to Omi (1997) the racialization process for whites is “evident on many college/university campuses as White students encounter a heightened awareness of race, which calls their own identity into question”(253). The Institute for the Study of Social Change released a study of focus group interviews with students at the University of California, Berkeley, which exposed many of the issues of white identity such as: the invisibility of and absence of a clear and distinct culture, a perceived disadvantage of being white for the distribution of resources, and the problem of being perceived as the “oppressors of the nation”(Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991:37).

The reaction of the student participants to my proposition of incorporating whiteness studies into general studies of race and ethnicity was generally positive in that they all seemed quite keen

on the idea. Most students liked the idea of having the opportunity to study whiteness. Many expressed enthusiasm to learn about their own racial history as well as the role it plays in the present. Three students even communicated an acknowledgment of the need for white people to study whiteness:

*I think a lot of people need to open their eyes and look at themselves before they go out there and look at others.*

*I think we need to better understand ourselves. Actually this interview has helped me to think about myself and my race a lot already! It's cool though. Maybe we need more stuff you know?*

*It'd be cool to have a class full of whiteys studying whiteys!*

On the other hand, most students assumed that whiteness studies would be an area of study whereby only people of colour learn about white culture(s). This take indicates a return to the issue of equity in that these particular students saw whiteness studies as a way for people of colour to study white people just as the white students have studied people of colour and cultures other than their own:

*I think it needs to be equal with every other ethnicity because if you are teaching a course in another part of the country, it totally needs to have totally equal weight. If I'm willing to be accepting and learn about other ethnicities, they should in turn be willing to learn about me.*

*Well yeah! I don't know why they don't have that yet. If they did then maybe people would understand that we're not all a bunch a racists!*

*Sure, they should study us. We might be kind of boring though! (laughs) I doubt it would be a very interesting class!*

*Do you think they'd actually take it? I think they know us pretty well already.*

*What would it be about? There's so many different kinds of white people to learn about, you'd think they'd need quite a few classes to make it encompassing enough. Maybe it should be a new field instead.*

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### *Analysis of basic assumptions /“hypotheses”*

Although the basic postulations previously mentioned did not essentially inform my analysis of the data collected, they were nonetheless inevitably in the back of my mind during the interviewing process, and are consequently worth mentioning. These areas could prove interesting as areas for future, more extensive research of quantitative nature.

With regards to the first set of personal assumptions surrounding independent variables such as age, gender, and discipline, the data collected did not clearly test this assertion. Although the single participants from each discipline did vary in most cases with participants from the social sciences and humanities appearing more racially tolerant, the one student whose age bracket was above 30 appeared more aware of racial differences on campus, and related them to her work off campus, female students appeared more tolerant than males students, and the two students interviewed who declared themselves as 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Greek-Canadians seemed more aware of their race, or at least ethnic identities on campus, there was no way, given the small number of participants, to decipher whether this was based on these variables, or any other factor(s).

The second set were much easier to test (without formal testing tools), regardless of the small sample size. Since these assertions dealt with predictions of general reactions to the interview material rather than independent variables, it was easier to examine the occurrence of these particular reactions. As predicted, and as explored in the thematic sections of the data analysis chapter above, many of the students interviewed expressed feelings of racial invisibility in both classroom and social

settings on campus. Some students also expressed feelings of guilt when discussing their experiences and perceptions as white students. Finally, and most importantly, the majority of students appeared to be unaware and mostly indifferent to their race and consequent privilege and power in their university experience. This most significant theme of indifference becomes most clear in the following discussion with a non-white student.

### *Perspective of (one) “other”*

It becomes quite difficult to decipher meanings from the findings of this research. As previously mentioned, one must be very careful not to undermine the importance of the individual perspectives conveyed by the participants. After speaking with my friend and co-worker, Sidig (Sid) and gaining some of his perceptions on the experiences and conceptions of those students who participated, I did, however, find some questions that merit consideration. I believe his input to have been crucial to the scope of this project.

Sid is from Sudan and has been a Canadian citizen for five years now. He works two jobs and studies part-time at UVic. He is married to a white woman and they have an 8-year-old daughter. He did not attend high-school and has not attended post-secondary school besides the courses he takes to improve his English. He works as a dishwasher in two restaurants and sends money from his second job home to Sudan to support his immediate family of 32 members. Unlike the students interviewed, Sid has not come from a background of easily accessible education or high-status occupations and as such, his reactions reflect class as well as race in our discussions. Sid was kind enough, and surprisingly eager, to offer his positions on this research and is aware of the themes elicited in my interviews. I myself was keen to hear his perspectives as a part-time UVic student of English as a Second language (ESL) who sees the classroom and social setting of our university through a non-white lens.

The main topic of interest that came up in my conversations with Sid surrounded the question as to why these, like many other, white students attempt to deflect discussion of their whiteness, or do not discuss their racial selves as being part of their identities as a whole. This was encountered throughout the interviews and I wanted to know what Sid thought of this. We spoke of how, during my interviews, I frequently had to remind the participants that we were talking about them, their race and their identity, as they tended quite often to turn the discussion to other groups and seemed to feel uncomfortable talking about their own race(s). The theme of indifference is crucial to this understanding; students continuously acted indifferent and even unaware of their race in countless social and academic settings at university. This is without a doubt the biggest theme discovered in this project as it has potential to exemplify the perspectives of white students in general in a university such as UVic. Until they are faced with questions aiming directly at exploring these issues, such students, and their privilege, remain unchallenged and often unacknowledged. It was brought to my attention that there are many other questions surrounding this main area of inquiry that are difficult to address or to find answers. Sid speculated about some of the possible reasons for the students' lack of responses:

*They say that because whites are equal. It is equal for them so they think it is equal for everyone.*

*Maybe they are trying to pretend not to think about this? Maybe they know what it means to know they are white, like you do know, but are scared to know? Maybe they have never had to think about this? Maybe they only think people like me have a race[... ]because I look like I have a race?*

Sid said that he and his non-white friends frequently discuss white people and how they see themselves. In general, he said, the impression that they get from white people at university, and outside of university, is of apparent arrogance. He said that he feels forced to act more forward and abrasive

than he would normally be in order to “fit in” or “get along with” or “be accepted” by most of the white people he encounters (apparently myself included!) This was not to say that he, or his friends, dislike white people, just that they feel a little overwhelmed by us sometimes. When asked why he thinks that might be the case, the issue of power and privilege rang the strongest in his remarks:

*I no meant to say that I think it's anyone's fault or things like that. I think [white] people are just brought up to be more confident. Confident is easy to mix with arrogance you know. I see it in my daughter too. I like it in her. I'm proud of her. Her [white] mother has done well you know, but I think it comes from a lucky background. That's why [white] people seem that way. They have been lucky in life and they don't know it. Or if they do, they don't show it you know. They can do whatever they want and they sometimes end up angry because they are lazy and say things are not fair. That's the power they have and do not know.*

Like the white students, Sid brought up the linkage between university and the work force outside of university. Employment equity was frequently brought up by many of the interview participants and themes such as equal distribution of resources in the educational institutions was often equated with that in the employment sphere. Many of the interviewees expressed concern with the competitiveness of the job market and linked this to competition on campus. Sid shared his standpoint:

*living in white society everything is there. Job application, everything. When you have education you have job. I'm pushing my daughter to have education. When you have education you get chance. That's the only way for people to get ahead. Especially for people who not white, you know what I mean?*

*I work hard in my life and never get more than minimum wage, nothing more than that because I have no education and second my colour.*

*You [white people] go kindergarten: white people. You go middle school: white people. You go high-school, you go university: always white, white, white. When you start to feel about another colour... usually at university more coloured people than other places... when people start to be, to be, exposed to more colour they get uncomfortable and jealous, or competition with us.*

*That's where racism starts. They would have no reason to be racist if they didn't think they could win something for it".*

Also discussed was the common trend of students in the interviews bringing up language as a factor denoting or at least presumptuously linked to race. Sid explained that he experiences this on an almost daily basis both on and off the university campus. He was also very quick to emphasize that he does not “*hold this against them*” because he feels that one has to look at how people have been socialized societally and through our families and experiences.

*“Why I talk you?” “Oh! You speak English” All shocked, you know, that I speak English. And I speak French too but nobody gets to know that about me because they would approach someone else first. Like for example, on campus I see people, you know, asking for time. I wear a huge shiny watch that everyone can see but they walk past me and ask somebody else instead. Oh well, I'm usually in a rush anyway! I don't have the time for you to ask me for the time! (laughs)*

Some students remarked that the division of labour between white people and people of colour is created as a result of language barriers and the lack of ability of certain people of colour with regard to English language skills. To this Sid remarked that it is not language. He explained how he sees many white immigrants come from non-English speaking backgrounds and have other languages as their native tongue who have accents just as strong as his but who seem to get more opportunities on campus with regard to academics as well as social bonds:

*Somebody like me come from a different country and need a job but cannot have a job because of colour. It's not language because white man can come from Sweden and speak no English but still get a job much easier than me because he's white. He might even get more respect in the classroom. Most of my teachers are great about this but the students are not always good. They talking all the time to the Swedish guy, you know?*

Our final area of discussion involved Sid relaying his concerns and his support for the study of whiteness in university.

*The more people have education the more things will change*

*I teach my daughter to be proud of back home, proud of her colour and strong. I think everyone should feel proud of their history even if they are white. When they be confident they be not so racist. At school people be racist because they feel threatened and don't respect.*

*90% white here in Victoria. 10% colour, Asian, Black, all different kinds in one group of 10%. So really for us it's like 1% colour, our own colour and 9% other colours and 90% white. That's lots of white people. For sure study them otherwise what we study?*

Sid feels that the study of white people should be taught by people of colour regardless of his opinion that white people should not teach about other races. When I asked him why he holds this seemingly self-contradictory stance, he retorted that he thinks that people of colour, especially those who live in countries or communities comprised of a white majority, have a better understanding of whiteness than do white people themselves. Here he explains his view:

*That's wrong for white people to teach about other [colour] cultures, or countries. They don't know about the country. You know why? Even if they've been there, or even lived there, still different for black people than for white people, you know what I'm saying? They haven't lived as a black person so they can't teach about that. They only teach what they see. Not always real what they see.*

*The black person who lives in Sudan knows each little thing about each family, and tradition and everything in general and how it works in our culture. Even if you are a rich black man you still know about the poor black people in and how they live because you know them. All the white people are rich and don't talk to the black people everyday, only when they want to. I have only three white friends back home.*

*For example in my country we have Big Fest, you know Big Fest? After Ramadan we party. Each family say hi you bring your food outside, everybody comes out to eat in the street, you can be poor too and bring no food but still eat. White people don't share like that. They'll give money at Christmas time but they would never share their fork with someone who was poorer than them.*

*To teach about white people different because Black people, or coloured people, know you white people better than you do. We've all tried to fit in to your culture so we have to know the culture pretty well. You live in it every day and don't notice details like we do.*

I asked Sid if he would like to share anything else about his overall experience of life at university and how he associates with white students. I was wondering whether there were any specific things that he experiences with frequency and that he feels exemplifies his experience as a non-white student at UVic. Two commonplace incidents stood out in his mind:

*Because not supposed to drive BMW. Where'd you get the money? They think we stole it. When I wear my jewelery they think I'm a pimp or a drug-dealer. Even at university some people think that. People always ask 'what do you do?' when I'm dressed up in my suit jacket and jewelery.*

*You watch when you're with a group of white people at university, when you walk away, always someone says something about you. I can still hear them. Not always bad thing, but always something. Never just say 'goodbye', always talk with each other about me after I leave.*

After listening to countless stories of usually subtle racist treatment at university, and much more blatant acts outside of university, I commented that if I were black I would be protesting any racist treatment that I came across. I claimed that I would be on the phone to newspapers complaining about shop owners, and bank tellers and police, etc. And I would-- if I woke up Black tomorrow after having lived as a white person. Sid made me see that I can only say that because I'm white, and that these would seem like isolated incidents and would make me angry, but that people of colour live everyday with things like this. He feels that as a Black man, he cannot afford to waste all of his energy protesting everything, otherwise he would have no time for his jobs or the important things like school and family. The only way to make a difference like that, Sid said, is to just live and grapple with the everyday little things and keep standing. That in itself is a form of protest. Otherwise one could devote one's whole life to the cause, which is commendable, he said, but not an option for people who are not rich to begin with. Sid's philosophy helps him concentrate on the important things in his life:

*If you respect me I respect you, that's my way I do now. If not, black or white, who gives a shit. Right? I don't live my life for the negative people any more.*

### *Toward an Understanding of Whiteness Studies*

Whiteness studies attempts to trace the economic and political history behind the invention of “whiteness”, to attack the privileges given to whites and to analyze the cultural practices (in art, music, literature, and popular media) that create and perpetuate notions of whiteness. The purpose of whiteness studies is to expose this fiction, to make visible the history and practices of white supremacy as found in social life, the law, literature, music, politics, and every other realm of our civilization. Such a liberation project can be strengthened by deconstructing the notion of a white race and criticizing the cultural preference given to images of whiteness. Whiteness studies owes a great debt to the work done by generations of non-white writers and thinkers, as well as to critics from many other ethno-racial groups, and feminist theorists. Whiteness studies are no substitute for these other fields of study, but a necessary complement to them (Fleras, 2001:106).

There is always a danger of whiteness studies being misunderstood as just a gimmick for keeping the focus on white people, or as another attempt to put white people back in the position of privilege, or another way of avoiding the challenges presented by non-white perspectives. Unless we are very careful and reflexive, it can still end up privileging the white, middle-class man's, or woman's need for self display (Scott, 1995:11). In criticizing past representations of race, moreover, whiteness studies risks merely recirculating the very ideas and images it hopes to eradicate. At its best, whiteness studies will avoid the pitfall of reproducing racism, though like any controversial intellectual endeavor it will surely make mistakes. Newitz (1999), for example, has placed much emphasis in her own research on questioning the “self-congratulatory mode that enables whites to critique themselves before anyone else does” (149). From her perspective, an effective counter-strategy would seek to disaffiliate white

identity from the institutions of white supremacy.

Race must be seen as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it (Omi and Winant, 1994). Every member of society is in at least some way exposed to such ideological constructs of race, and the pervasive nature of this ideology leads to its internalization through socialization from social institutions, such as the educational systems, and, of course, mass media (Slauner, 1989, Feagin, 1993, Omi and Winant, 1994). Richard Dyer (1997) argues that making whiteness visible works to “dislodge them/us from the position of power”(2). It appears that it is this assumption that now governs much of the interrogation of whiteness in academic discourse (Wiegman, 1999:117).

This makes for a difficult predicament: how can one go about studying and communicating ideas about whiteness without essentializing white people as privileged, rational, people? Different white people will inevitably negotiate their own association and relationship with whiteness in many different ways. One of the main criticism of whiteness studies is that it has “sometimes failed to recognize that its greatest problem is the lapse into essentialism” (Kincheloe, 1999:167). The discrepancies in these types of racial classifications indicate the ambiguities of racial grouping and the attempt to “force heterogeneous racial configurations into a single category around similarities in skin tone, hair texture, and eye shape” (Keating, 1995). Many of the traditional sociological methodologies of inquiry into notions of identity seem antiquated when we consider that in today's postmodern society individuals are forced to associate themselves with several differing identities as they move between countless different social and cultural locales (Fleras, 2000:120).

So, as whiteness can be linked to numerous oppressive social practices, it can simultaneously be negotiated on an individual level. In this sense, differences within whiteness as a whole may serve to undo, or deconstruct whiteness as racial supremacy, helping to reproduce “indeterminate, and anti-racist forms of white identity” through whiteness studies (Wiegman, 1999:145).

One of the most interesting points in the study of whiteness, is its focus on an object of study whose power and privilege it hopes to critically undo (Wiegman, 1999:134). As Apple (1998) points out in his foreword to White Reign, an anthology of critical perspectives on whiteness, “what sets Whiteness Studies apart is its placing of the spotlight of critical scrutiny, not on the 'racial Other', but on the power of whiteness and how it can be interrupted, interpreted, and transformed” (x).

To some readers, the issue of whiteness may seem overly theoretical or just one more “trendy” topic that has somehow found its way to the surface of the critical educational agenda. But to view it this way would be an unfortunate mistake. What counts as “official” knowledge consistently “bears the imprint of tensions, struggles, and compromises in which *race* plays a substantial role” (Apple, 1993:32). Whiteness studies and research about whiteness, and all of its inherent positions, could at the very least succeed in destroying the negative meanings associated with white identities. With further awareness of whiteness and its inherent power and privilege hierarchies, it is possible that a new, more positive, identification could emerge complete with a deeper understanding of race and racism. Whiteness need not be perceived as constantly allied with domination.

Through this brief examination of some perspectives of white students at the University of Victoria, discussion of some other related social research, and with aid from a non-white student, it becomes apparent that whiteness indeed plays a role in how we as individuals construct our lives. Individuals tend to essentialize and homogenize white identities because whiteness has inarguably been a “consistently malevolent force in a great number of cultures over a long period of time”(Chennault, 1998:320). Clearly, like other factors in identity, whiteness, like Blackness, and other ethnic, racial, or cultural identifications, is heterogeneous. The brave students who were willing to participate in this project all have unique individual perspectives and as such, no privileges, disadvantages, or opinions will be experienced in the same way. Only through social research can we begin to get a picture of how

different people are living with whiteness and how whiteness impacts their everyday lives, and the lives of those around them.

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## APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA  
 OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH  
 HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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### Consent Form

#### University Life: A Look into the “White” Experience

##### Introduction

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled University Life: A Look into the “White” Experience that is being conducted by Jade Norton. I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. You may contact me by phone at 250-384-4558 or by email [jadeno@uvic.ca](mailto:jadeno@uvic.ca) if you have any further questions.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for Master’s degree in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Morgan Baker, a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. You may contact my supervisor by phone at or by email at [bakerpm@uvic.ca](mailto:bakerpm@uvic.ca) if you have any questions or concerns. You may also contact the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4362.

##### Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research project is to examine how ethnic identities of white university students inform the experiences they relay about meaning in their university lives. This project will be looking at how self-awareness about one’s ethnic identity shapes the experiences of white students at university. Research on ethnic identity is important because of the difficulty some people may have finding meaning in their own ethnic identity, especially as members of a privileged ethnic group. Societal views of white identity are usually negative in that a white identity is often associated with racist attitudes. A university setting is of particular interest as a multicultural, ethnically diverse environment that encourages diversity. As a result, it is important to document the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of white students so that knowledge of various ethnic identities can be communicated to other university students and to society as a whole. Often, privileged groups do not examine or challenge what contributes to their privilege until they are questioned or challenged to do so.

##### Procedures

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your first-hand knowledge and experience of university life through the lens of a white student.

Data collection will occur through the completion of a semi-structured, in-depth interview about 1-2 hours in duration. During this interview, you will be asked to relay your perceptions, opinions and experiences to myself. You will be encouraged to describe yourself, your university life in light of past and present experiences with anything related to racialization and ethnic identity. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the

study your data will be destroyed. However, with your permission the data gathered prior to your withdrawal will be used in the analysis. In order to assure myself that you are continuing to give your consent to participate in this research, during each individual interview that is conducted the consent process will be reviewed.

### Risks

The only inconvenience associated with your participation in this project is the time that is required to complete the interviews. In addition, there are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

### Potential Benefits

Research on self-identity as it pertains to race and ethnicity is important because your participation in this study would include an opportunity to let your voice and opinions be heard as part of the student community at the University of Victoria. As such, you will have an opportunity to contribute the general knowledge surrounding perceptions and attitudes of students on their own race and ethnicity. Also, if you wish, upon completion of this research, I will provide you with a copy of the transcripts during which you communicated to me your perceptions on your ethnic identity and university life, and/or a summary of the findings of the cumulative interviews of all participants.

### Confidentiality and Anonymity

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected. No material will bare any identifying information and your anonymity will be protected using pseudonyms, or fake names, and by disguising any potentially revealing information. Your name will not be attached to the results and it will not be possible to identify participants in the thesis or in any presentations or publications from it. Only the researcher, Jade Norton, will have access to the tapes. Any data collected in this study will remain confidential: interview transcripts, tapes, and other research materials will be kept in a locked room in the Sociology Department, University of Victoria. Any electronic files will be stored on disks in the same filing cabinets and any electronic information on hard-drive will be protected by password. Upon the completion of the research, all of the original audiotapes will be erased once they have been transcribed. The transcripts made from this study will be kept by the researcher for possible use in future research endeavors with the understanding that the appropriate research and ethics committees will approve any research projects using these transcriptions.

### Uses of the Data

The data will primarily be used in the writing of my Master's Thesis; however, the findings from this research may also be used to generate journal articles and academic presentations.

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Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

---

*Name of Participant*

---

*Signature*

---

*Date*

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

## APPENDIX B

### ***B) QUESTIONS PERTAINING TO THE ROLE OF WHITENESS IN UNIVERSITY<sup>14</sup>***

1. If I were to ask you what race you are, how would you respond?
2. If I were to ask you what ethnicity you, are how would you respond?
3. Do feel that you have some competing self-concepts at university (ie. Canadian, Greek, white, etc.)?
4. How do you feel you relate to people of other racial groups at university?
5. Have you ever felt proud to be white at university? Ashamed?
6. Have you ever been “mis-classified” at university as a member of an ethnic group that you feel you do not belong to?
7. Do you think about your race/ethnicity frequently at university? How often?
8. How do you think your whiteness affects your classroom university life? Social university life?

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<sup>14</sup> Let it be pointed out here again that the terms race and ethnicity were used by student participants interchangeably. Using the term *ethnicity* to describe race and racial identities was almost exclusively most common and the phrasing of the interview questions reflect this.

***C) QUESTIONS PERTAINING TO RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES IN UNIVERSITY***

1. Do you think that race and ethnicity are important areas of study in university?
2. Have you ever enrolled in a course in university that was specifically aimed at the study of race and/or ethnicity? Why or why not?
3. If so, was this course chosen by you or was it a requirement for a program of some sort?
4. Can you remember what you liked and disliked about the class?
5. What was your interpretation of the course materials? Was there anything that you felt was missing?
6. How did you feel as a white student studying other ethnicities?
7. How well did you relate with the other students?
8. How did you find the instructor dealt with the core issues? Was s/he white?
9. If you have not taken any such course, have you dealt with issues of race as a section of any other course you have enrolled in? If so, describe your experiences of this particular section.
10. If you have not enrolled in and completed any course geared in some way to race and ethnicity, have any such issues come up in any of your other classes? Elaborate.
11. What specific topics do you feel are important to address in such courses? Have they been addressed in your experience of course content?
12. Do you think a discussion of whiteness as a race, or ethnic group, would be a just addition to courses aimed at race and ethnicity? Why or why not?