"Why Do People Think I'm a Racist When in my Heart I know I'm Not?": A Search for Answers

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For many White Americans, few things cause greater indignation than the idea that someone might label them "a racist." Even the word racist incites images of slavery, lynchings, and large burning crosses. All things that, to them, are part of ancient history – a past long forgotten. The idea that they can go to schools, churches, the workplace, and every other social sphere and see people that don't look like them, is proof enough that racism is dead. In their minds, racists that exist today are just bad apples who have yet to let go of the age old rhetoric passed down from generations of uncaring bigots. In this sense, since racism is a thing of the past, they believe there is no reason for anyone to worry about becoming antiracist. The problem with people like this is their inability to look deeper at the issue and become aware of the racist impact of systemic forces. This level of innocence, based on perceived

racial neutrality, is the very thing that ultimately enables the kind of racism haunting us still to persist.

The research agenda of our project is two-fold. First, we seek to inquire into the ways in which student sociologists at the college level might acquire a more complex understanding of systemic issues, and develop a more robust sociological imagination, Second, we intend to elicit from knowledgeable research participants suggestions about how to promote an antiracism perspective in the American mind more effectively. We believe this research is incredibly significant in that we hope to achieve a concise and digestible way of bringing an antiracism message to the public. Ultimately we aspire to do our part to try to fight for antiracism and against processes that uphold a still-racist society.

Literature Review

Public Sociology, Praxis and Social Change

Expanding sociological knowledge beyond the typical academic settings, such as institutions and classrooms, is imperative when trying to foster social change. Confining research results and in-depth sociological knowledge to only academic scholars restricts members of the public from gaining valuable information. Expanding sociological ideas and knowledge outside of academia and into society, primarily through teaching and discussions, is known as public sociology or liberation sociology (Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015).

The purpose of public sociology involves going beyond conducting research to include efforts of scholars to change the social world (Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015). Within the United States, public sociology has focused on issues such as education, health care, racial and class diversity, and the environment (Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015). Public sociologists emphasize *solutions* for the public, rather than just illuminating the problems (Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015).

In general, the objective of public sociologists is to create discussions, both simple and complex, among other sociologists, as well as among the public to achieve change (Cooky, 2017). Burawoy (2005) identifies two different types of public sociology – "traditional" and "organic" public sociology. Traditional public sociology includes books and articles written by sociologists that are often read by the public and subsequently, engender discussions. In contrast, organic public sociology involves working with the public directly in an informed way to cause social change (Cooky, 2017). Public sociology should act as a "translational mechanism for advocacy, social justice, and social change" (Cooky, 2017, p.1).

Cooky (2017) discusses Michael Burawoy's distinctions between four different types of sociology: professional sociology, policy sociology, critical sociology, and public sociology. Public sociology is both connected to and distinct from the other three types of sociology. Professional sociology is known as the foundation of public sociology, which includes the production of sociological theory and empirical findings (Cooky, 2017). Policy sociology refers to a type of sociology that involves a "client", someone or something sociologists seek to help (Cooky, 2017). Critical sociology involves analyzing the foundations of sociology, such as the research produced by professional sociology (Cooky, 2017). In general, public sociology promotes social change through academic engagement with the public (Cooky, 2017).

Scholar activism, "raising consciousness, creating a vision, and strategizing toward long-term social change", is at the heart of what public sociology hopes to accomplish (Destine & Katz-Fishman, 2018). In raising the consciousness of members of society, public sociologists pave the way for individuals to overcome socially constructed barriers structured by race, class, and gender. However, this can be a struggle.

According to Hill Collins (2000), it is difficult for most people to recognize, let alone deal with, the social ambiguity created by

intersecting modes of oppression (Hill Collins, 2000). "Differences in power constrain our ability to connect with one another even when we think we are engaged in dialogue across differences" (Hill Collins, 2000, p.458). Understanding differences in power and privilege is important, but for Hill Collins, empathy is the key that might inspire public sociology. Empathy enables us to transcend barriers erected by race, class, and gender, and by using these separate forms of oppression as the catalyst to form a connection across our differences, Hill Collins (2000) believes that we might be able to address social inequality more effectively.

As Wortmann explains in her article in the online database *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, praxis is a term critical theorists use to talk about the process by which the oppressed might employ theory and research to transform their world for the better. In this sense, praxis is public sociology, employing sociological principles in practical ways to address social problems.

A challenge of public sociology is how best to take the pedagogy of oppression, emanating from the traditional classroom and other more traditional educational venues, into the public domain successfully (Szrot, 2019). For Freire (1999) the answer is praxis. Accordingly, knowledge evolves as it unveils race, gender, and class disparities within academia. Public sociology unfolds as academic knowledge is transformed into a reality by activists merging it with the lived experience of the oppressed. According to Freire (1999), this kind of praxis allows for a further transformation of their lives into permanent liberation.

Antiracism and an Antiracist Perspective

In the struggle against racism, few Americans see the need to go beyond a "not racist" mentality. For many of them, racism is a thing of the past, as society has now reached a new post-racial, post-Jim Crow era (Elias & Feagin, 2016, p. 1-2; Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 129-130; Feagin,

Vera, & Batur, 2001, p. 2; Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p.17; Feagin, 2014, p. 143). According to Coates (2017), the mistake in this thinking is the failure to go beyond the level of the individual and look at how racism remains to operate at the systemic level. Because of this, "Few national liberal politicians have shown any recognition that there is something systemic and particular in the relationship between Black people and their country that might require specific policy solutions" (Coates, 2017, p. 81). This lack of awareness can make it appear that there is no longer a need for racism to be addressed.

In fact, many people question that racism even operates at the systemic level. They have become desensitized to the existence of social inequalities because these disparities are embedded into everyday practices. Consequently, because racism is a part of society's woodwork, it goes unnoticed by many, but especially majority group members, and this stymies the development of an awareness of the impact of social structure as a whole. In sum, racism endures without critique, as the sociological ignorance of the colorblind, 'I'm not a racist, but …' perspective remains undaunted. Elias and Feagin (2016) question whether it is possible for racial inequality to be amended when so many in the public remained unconcerned and unaware of the potentially liberating knowledge of social science.

When conversing about the meaning of race and the definition of racist, dominant group members often believe that by denying they are prejudiced it will absolve them of being labeled a racist. However, when confronted with the fact that their colorblind neutrality actually is supportive of a racist status quo, they often become defensive, fending off the implication by uttering phrases such as 'I am not a racist' or 'Some of my best friends are Black.' According to Bonilla-Silva (2018, p. 81) this kind of posturing has become a standard response of those accused of being racist, which ironically often occurs right before or directly after they have said something that is racially insensitive.

Bonilla-Silva suggests this posture acts as a way people attempt to mask their complacency about the negative consequences of persistent racism. Further, these same people will fail, despite their adamant claim of not being a racist, to offer up support for any policy or idea that is meant to address institutionalized racial privilege. For example, Bonilla-Silva & Forman (2000, p. 55) found that 65 percent of White respondents "disagree with occasionally providing special consideration to Black job seekers," 51 percent oppose reserving openings for Black students in colleges and universities, and 36 percent "indicate that they would support a proposal to eliminate affirmative action programs in their locality." This stance against antiracism, according to these scholars, allows racist policies and practices to continue operating unabated.

Scholars dedicated to a more robust definition of antiracism and antiracist practices assert that it is important to inform the public that it is inaccurate to believe that America is a "post racial" or antiracist society. These scholars propose instead that we must impress upon Americans that institutional and systemic racism prevails (Kendi, 2019, p. 9; Elias & Feagin, 2016, p. 1-2; Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p.17). According to them, a post racial society is not a relevant descriptor or even a desired outcome in a fight against racism. Instead, we should be coming together around values-based political projects that include racial justice and outright acceptance of our many differences (Warren, 2010, p. 231). In sum, for the scholars mentioned above and us, it is imperative to promote a good sociological understanding of systemic racism and this is what, in the end, will advance racial equity most effectively.

Another notion White people harbor that obstructs the development of antiracist behavior and policy is a perception that life works like a zero sum game. Accordingly, for those who believe in the zero-sum approach to understanding race relations, minority members can only make gains in resources if majority group members lose resources (Schaefer, 2019, p. 106). In reality, this notion is often

exaggerated and made without evidence to support it. In response to White people who were afraid a kind of reverse discrimination might affect them, Omi and Winant state:

> "White concern with the supposed discrimination against them was in any case a complete red herring, since extensive research - exploring such matters as returns to education and racial 'steering,' looking at employment and housing rental practices via audits - showed that traditional patterns of White racism continued largely unabated in the 'post-civil rights' era" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 219).

In fact, these concerns have been blown out of proportion, and for the most part, this perspective serves as a way for White people to avoid accepting that their White skin has afforded them social and economic advantages (Daniel, 2017; Hill Collins, 2000). Accordingly, the issue of systemic racism cannot be solved by taking a colorblind approach, but instead, involves a process that requires the White majority to recognize the reality of White privilege and to accept some responsibility in the perpetuation of a racist structure.

According to Kendi (2019, p. 9), taking "race out of it" always serves the interests of the dominant group. It is they who have been benefiting from their Whiteness, and it is up to them in large part to adopt a more antiracist outlook if racism is to be addressed. Indeed, to complicate the situation even more, Fitzgerald (2012) asserts that even sociologists do not explicate White privilege well enough in some cases. Based on a content analysis of some of the most popular sociology textbooks on the market, she argues "the omission of a substantial discussion of White privilege [in sociology textbooks] is problematic and, in fact, perpetuates White privilege with its absence" (Fitzgerald, 2012, p.345).

The scholarship cited above indicates that the duplicity associated with a White person's claim of being 'not racist' – taking a posture of innocent neutrality without supporting antiracist policy – in no small part allows racism to persist. This is an important point to be made by scholars like Ibram Kendi, who asserts that there is no neutrality in the struggle against racism. He points out that, "The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not racist.' It is 'antiracist'" (Kendi, 2019, p. 9). According to Kendi, an antiracist must endorse the notion that a racial hierarchy creates racial inequality and advocating a colorblind or neutral posture is not 'not racist.' "There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist.' Otherwise, the claim of 'not racist' neutrality is a mask for racism (Kendi, 2019, p. 9).

In her call for the importance of empathy in the struggle against racism, Patricia Hill Collins says,

> "For example, in order for those of you who are White to develop empathy for the experiences of people of color, you must grapple with how your White skin has privileged you. This is difficult to do, because it not only entails the intellectual process of seeing how Whiteness is elevated in institutions and symbols, but it also involves the often painful process of seeing how your Whiteness has shaped your personal biography" (Collins, 2000, p. 461).

Once this fact is addressed, it is important to be able to accept the sacrifice that is required to adopt and promote such antiracist practices. In many heavily debated discussions on affirmative action, opponents claim that affirmative action causes "reverse racism". According to Steinhorn & Diggs-Brown, these reports are often inaccurate and contextualized in a way that promotes opposition to a progressive ideal. "They [the supporters of affirmative action] must make the case that the sacrifice involved may not serve the individual good of affected Whites

but does (2000) serve the common good of all Americans" (p. 245)," if dominant group members are ever to get on the antiracist bandwagon.

Sociologists have also pointed to other examples to highlight the importance of everyday people adopting this kind of antiracist practices. According to Feagin, Vera, & Batur (2001, p. 218), "In both South Africa and the United States the struggle of ordinary people to resist systems of oppression has been a recurring source of societal change." For them and scholars like them, when we are able to highlight effectively the problems associated with systemic issues, we are better able to advocate for the need for people to shun the complacent, "not racist" stance, in favor of a more productive antiracist approach.

To end on an optimistic note, Joe Feagin says in his book, *Racist America*, that current oppressive patterns regularly generate resistance and organized opposition. He then states that, "These oppressive patterns have occasionally been altered to some degree by antiracist movements in the past, and they can conceivably be changed again if the effort is great enough   Because of this, in the long term, no hierarchical system is permanent and must be constantly reinforced by those who uphold that system" (Feagin, 2014, p. 268).

The Sociological Imagination in Service of Antiracism

When attempting to understand the world around us, our knowledge is often limited to the small sphere within which we live. Consequently, we mistakenly assume that we are behaving in ways that are unrelated to societal, institutional, and historical influences structuring our world. C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) recognized the shortsightedness of this perspective and thus, created the concept of the sociological imagination to identify those not bound by it. According to Mills, successfully attaining this perspective allows individuals to see the connection between the broad stream of historical events and the personal experiences of every person in their everyday lives. "It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations

to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relation between the two" (Mills, 1959, p.7). For Mills, the ability to comprehend that private troubles are rooted in public issues is enlightening, advancing one's ability to focus on changing the things that actually cause problems for individuals in the first place.

In his effort to discuss how to stimulate the sociological imagination, Mills (200) notes that the sociological imagination is not easily acquired but happens as the result of good research practices that inspire attention to sociological detail. As for our research project, the sociological imagination can be employed as a factor in our attempt to inquire into the social forces that compel individuals to devalue others because of their race or ethnicity. Coates (2017) asserts that many people with racist tendencies fail to get past the individual level when contemplating everyday actions and consequently, fail to understand the power of social institutions to sustain racism at a structural level. Elias and Feagin (2016) agree, arguing that many people struggle to see how racially based social inequalities are both systemic, causing different lived experiences. In his research, "The Study of the Negro Problems," Du Bois insisted social issues are entrenched in the social structures and extend well beyond an individual's sociocultural milieu and the concept of the sociological imagination helps explain why much of the general population has trouble grasping systemic racism. (Green & Wortham, 2018).

Hardee & McFaden (2016) suggest that it is possible for individuals to make connections between personal narratives and societal forces – to gain the sociological imagination – and it is the intent of this project to inquire into the pedagogical processes that stimulate this process. Further, based on our research, we hope to take our message to others, promoting an antiracist perspective by way of public sociology. "Public sociology's purpose is to promote the sociological imagination in various publics, to provide translational research or

scholarly engagement and is a sociology in the service of social change" (Cooky, 2017, p.6).

The UCA Antiracism research project will, therefore, attempt to answer three research questions. First, how did the participants in the study come to apprehend the sociological imagination? Second, how did their sociological awareness affect their perspective on social problems, including institutionalized racism? Third, what instructional methods have the participants discovered and used in their lives to help them (1) talk about race with others effectively and (2) explain what being antiracist means?

The literature informs our knowledge of how the sociological imagination can lead people to a more complex understanding of the obstructive capacity of things like White privilege and systematic racism. The antiracism literature in particular indicates that being neutral or colorblind and passive about the impact of racism further enables racism to endure. We also learned from the literature that public sociology can effectively change peoples' minds. The purpose of this paper is to inquire into the research questions above and then, employ what we have learned to change the world.

Methodology

The Antiracism Research Project employed a qualitative methodology to gather the information necessary to inquire into our research questions. As the principal investigators of the antiracism research project, we assembled a team of sociology majors and minors volunteers to help with the collection of data. Subsequently, we acted as team leaders for the project, supervising team members as they performed tasks necessary to the data collection process. The process included conducting qualitative interviews, transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews, synthesizing and coding interview data.

In preparation for the interviews, we solicited faculty advisors and professors with expertise on collecting qualitative data to conduct workshops (see Appendix A). In all, research team members attended three workshops – one on qualitative interviewing techniques, a second specifically designed for instruction on making use of the research project's interview schedule (see Appendix B), and a third devoted to synthesizing and coding interview data.

Before initiating the interviews, we recruited a sample of sociology majors and minors from the University of Central Arkansas to discuss with us topics associated with the research agenda. Some interviewees were current students, while others were recent graduates. We utilized purposive sampling in the recruitment of potential interview participants. By using this technique, we hoped to build a sample of participants who had advanced knowledge of the role that the sociological imagination might play in understanding social processes, including institutionalized racism. We assumed that because of their sociological training, the recruited participants would be better equipped to give us insight into how they acquired the sociological imagination and how they have applied it effectively to develop and promote an antiracist perspective. Our recruitment efforts were successful as we assembled a diverse group of 18 interviewees knowledgeable on the topic, who we interviewed in December 2019 and January 2020.

Early in the process, we submitted an IRB application for the project. Once the UCA Research Compliance office approved the project's IRB, the interviews and data collection commenced. The interviews lasted approximately 15-30 minutes and were recorded. After all the interviews were completed, the research team met and transcribed the interviews verbatim. Once transcribed, team members content coded the interviews for themes prominent in our discussions.

As for the coding specifically, all research team members were instructed to code one of the interview transcriptions independently. Later the team met and engaged in a workshop to standardize the coding process as much as possible. After establishing some basic coding guidelines, team members coded the remaining interviews on their own and later relayed the coded interview data to the research team leaders. Subsequently, we read and reread the interviews, synthesizing the data thematically into codes until the data was saturated and all codes relevant to the analysis identified. Based on our interpretation of the information emerging from the interviews, we created the coding scheme employed in the analysis below. We are the authors of this paper and responsible for this project report.

Results

<u>Genuine Conversations and Developing Rapport</u>

The analysis of the interviews suggests that the most prominent theme focused on the efficacy of genuine conversations with friends and acquaintances when discussing sensitive issues like race and racism. Virtually all interviewees talked about the process by which they came to embrace an antiracist mindset. In their opinion, maintaining an open and honest conversational approach was the key in a successful deliberation on a sensitive topic such as this. Several participants pointed out that not everyone was going to understand the nuances of systemic racism, and therefore, the participants thought it was more effective to introduce to the uninformed some of the more harsh sociological realities gently. One participant said, "I just think it helps me do it more in an intelligent way rather than in like an aggressive way, because it helps you understand not everybody is going to be sociological about issues." Other participants used words and phrases such as empathetic, self-reflecting, 'in a civilized way' to talk about their

approach to prompting others to think about race in a more knowledgeable way.

Another facet of taking part in a Genuine Conversation emphasized gaging the mood of the conversation. According to many interviewees, it is super important to know when it is okay to continue the discussion and when it might be time to slow down or stop. Again, when focused on such a sensitive issue, people might get defensive, emotions might flare up, and feelings hurt. One participant stated, "You know when to speak, you know when not to speak, you know?" It became clear in our interviews that the participants understood that keeping a Genuine Conversation going depended on keeping it calm – open and honest yes, but still gracious and tactful. "So it's not confrontational, it's very lax, and if the conversation needs to be cut short, you can cut it super short." Another participant noted "I didn't even bother arguing with him." At this point, the participant knew the conversation was losing balance as a classmate made a stereotypical comment about her race. At this point, she knew if she were to continue, the conversation might only escalate unproductively.

Another feature of the Genuine Conversation theme related to the need for building rapport with people. One participant offered cogently the following reflection. "I mean the guy I was talking to, we hung out, I mean we liked to go fish together, we played ball together, we lifted weights together, he was my roommate. We hung out." But the participant could not broach to the roommate the topic of their racial differences and race in general. According to the participant, it was "because I don't know him, and he doesn't know me. He doesn't know what my intentions are, he doesn't know if I'm trying to come off hostile." As sociologists assert, White Americans especially are unlikely or unwilling to think about race until confronted with the topic, and once confronted, if they do react, they are likely to deny the continuing significance of race or deflect the conversation (Elias and Feagin, 2016;

Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Schaefer, 2019). Several of our participants concur, stressing that if you do not have a certain rapport with people, a conversation about race can get ugly quickly.

It is clear to us that when the participants discussed the importance of Genuine Conversation, they linked the evolution of their antiracist perspective to the evolution of their sociological imagination. Many recognized that it was their sociological training that helped equip them with the conversational skills needed to teach others to be antiracists effectively. We can see in the data evidence to support this contention, as our participants overwhelmingly were able to sociologically convey to us in their interviews well the problems they faced successfully and unsuccessfully when promoting antiracism specifically, and the sociology of racial and ethnic relations in general.

Sociological Ignorance

Criminologists often refer to a legal principle found in common law that states "Ignorance of the law is no excuse." What this means is that being unaware of the law, does not mean a person can break law and not face prosecution. Similarly, according to a number of our interviewees, many people they have talked to about race are flat out ignorant of the ongoing consequences of institutional racism, and that this kind of ignorance is difficult to deal with and difficult to excuse.

In fact, our analysis of the interview data revealed that several participants recognized the counterproductive impact the sociological ignorance of race could have on the development of an antiracist perspective. Project participants often mentioned that many of their friends and acquaintances struggled to grasp sociological concepts that might give them a better understanding of the impact of racist sentiments and structures. One interviewee stated, "They're ignorant and therefore they may say racist remarks even though in their heart they're good people." Another interviewee, when speaking about himself, said before I took a sociology course "I didn't realize I was

actually being racist by being ignorant, and in reality, that's what I was."

For most of the interviewees, sociological ignorance was seen as a significant obstacle to the development of an antiracist perspective in the public mind. Many suggested that in order for one to truly grasp systemic racism, and the importance of embracing antiracism as its antidote, one had to be open to adopting a sociological imagination. Whether ignorance of the sociological law about race is excusable or not, according to the results of this project, sociological ignorance is something that must be addressed if we are to advance racial unity and justice in this country.

<u>Put Education into Practice</u>

According to Susan Wortmann, cited in the online database *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, "Praxis is most commonly associated with the ability of oppressed groups to transform their economic, political, and social worlds through a process of reflecting and acting on theoretically-informed knowledge." Our interview participants in their own way affirmed the need for putting education in practice – engaging in praxis if you will - to address racism. Well over half of our participants suggested that education was key to development of the sociological imagination and ultimately, an antiracist perspective. One interviewee stated that their development of the sociological imagination was a "gradual process where, along the way, college has really kind of helped me blossom into much more of a robust sociological imagination." Another interviewee said that they "really came to be conscious about stuff when I took my first sociology class."

Clearly, education put into practice was an important factor in the decision of many of our participants to aspire to go beyond the neutrality of a colorblind "I'm not a racist" mentality and adopt an antiracist perspective. In fact, many participants went further to suggest that their attempts to educate friends and acquaintances on the causes

and persistence of racial inequality were greatly improved by the knowledge they acquired at UCA. We, in the Antiracism Project, do not take this finding lightly. We agree with our interviewees, and the sociologists and activists before that came before us that engaging in praxis or public sociology – applying what we have learned through research and scholarship to push others toward racial justice – should be part of the sociological enterprise.

<u>Hidden Privileges</u>

Several participants discussed how their attitudes about race in America changed dramatically when they became aware of structural problems like institutional racism and White privilege. Once made aware of the power of social forces to shape the world at the structural level, they realized racism did not require overt prejudice and discrimination to persist. The fact that racial privileges are embedded in cultural practices and social institutions pushed them to openly oppose the neutrality of a colorblind ideology. Their discussion of the need for consciousness raising among the sociologically disinclined became another prominent theme in the interviews.

One participant said, "You're not just looking at how it's impacting you, but you're looking at how all these social, economic, and political issues are affecting everybody." Other interviewees admitted that they had been blind to the inflexible nature of social structure before they took sociology courses. Speaking of his "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality, one participant noted that hearing other people's sociological views expressed clearly in class helped him change his opinions over time. Several other participants mentioned that gaining insight into concepts like woodwork or institutional racism was enlightening, and part of the process by which they acquired a sociological imagination. For one student, having diversity in the classroom helped him understand racial privilege. "And I think that's really what helped me more than anything, was hearing their sides of

the story and hearing what they [minority group members] had to say about the situation."

Participants often noted that a broadening of their sociological knowledge was followed by a heightened awareness of the need for remedial action. One participant emphasized changing society at the structural level, saying "It's not the individual, it's the overall societies and things like that [that we must change]." Another participant talked about affirmative action as the means to address institutional discrimination. "That's cool that you think you're not racist, but are you actually doing anything to help people? Are you fighting for equal rights?" As reiterated in the literature review, White people especially must learn to accept the realities of White privilege, and then act on that knowledge. The U.S. social structure was built by people that looked like them, to privilege them, and scholars like Hill Collins (2000) believe little progress in racial equity can be made until the dominant group agrees that systemic privilege must be confronted and weeded out.

An Outsider's Perspective

Although we did not ask interviewees to reveal demographic features, almost every participant who identified themselves as non-White asserted that their status as a minority group member, as an outsider, was a factor that aided the development of their sociological imagination. These participants were raised by people with less opportunity to control their lives, and most pointed out that their lived experience made it easier for them to comprehend the consequences of institutionalized processes like racism. When asked to talk about their sociological conversion experience, inevitably they suggested that just being raised a minority group member and living in a minority community made the sociological nuances of power and privilege easy to comprehend. One interviewee suggested that he didn't necessarily have a conversion experience. "Me, being a minority male in society, you know, going to school at a predominately White institution, I want

to say that [the sociological imagination] was something I was always very aware of."

Another interviewee stated that talking to other minority members about racial inequality was not much of a problem either. Racial disparity is "easier to understand because they experience a level of racism as well." Our data indicate that possessing an outsider's perspective made acquiring the sociological imagination much less difficult. In addition, aided by the sociological language they learned in college, many of our participants became adept at teaching others about the enduring legacy of racism.

Conclusions

An analysis of the emergent themes in our research indicates that the potential power of the sociological imagination to fuel public sociology is unmistakable. While evidence of any change in the structure of racial privilege in our society is slow to materialize, we find that it is changing for the better nevertheless. The participants of our study have engaged in praxis to make racial equity real and their experiences inform and inspire our research.

As for our research questions about apprehending and employing the sociological imagination to better understand society, the participants in the Antiracism Project made it obvious that gaining a better understanding of the persistence of systemic issues, like institutional racism, was the direct result of getting a sociological education. As C. Wright Mills (1959) suggests, once people are able to gain insight into the capability of macro-level social institutions to structure the daily lives of everyday people, they have attained the sociological imagination. As Mills predicts, unlike the sociologically disinclined, the participants in our study were able to grasp well the connection between the private troubles of individuals like themselves with consequences of public issues like systemic racism.

Accordingly, the evolution of our participants' sociological imagination led them to perceive the static nature of social problems and thus the static nature of social change – another facet of their sociological awakening. We conclude that this process heightened their concern for racial justice. In addition, the findings of our study indicate that minority group members derive this sociological awakening earlier and easier than most. As an outsider, their lived experience raised their sociological game inevitably. We believe that this is an important finding when thinking about how to form more effective coalitions devoted to racial justice. For some of the White participants, a key factor in their sociological development involved listening, really listening to minority group members speak about racism introspectively. These personal stories changed their viewpoint. If dominant group members can learn from minority groups members and come to a shared commitment to antiracism, creating multiracial platforms for genuine discussion might push the antiracism message out into the public faster and stronger.

Another important objective of the research project, specified in the third research question, was the inquiry into the instructional methods that the participants believed help them explain to others what racism involves and what it means to be antiracist. The analysis identified three mechanisms common to the approach advocated by our participants: (1) having heartfelt and genuine conversations with people on the meaning of race in America, (2) building rapport with those in conversation to create open to honest deliberations on racial inequality and (3) engaging in praxis – that is putting sociological principles into action advancing antiracist action.

As outlined in the analysis, virtually all project participants mentioned the importance of having genuine, honest discussions as a means to explicate an antiracist perspective successfully. In fact, our participants insisted that a calm, yet serious conversation was the key to

opening up others to reflect on the difficult issues surrounding racial discrimination and institutional racism. According to our research, many in the public, but especially White Americans, find it difficult to accept the notion that having no racial prejudice and harboring no malice is not enough. Therefore, the interviewees assert and the research confirms that convincing White Americans that colorblindness does not make one antiracist is not easy. It takes genuine, sociologically informed conversations. If the conversation isn't difficult and uncomfortable, it may not be the right conversation to have (Hill Collins, 2000).

Secondly, for project participants, conversational successes and failures in raising the consciousness of friends and acquaintances hinged on building rapport. Difficult conversations can be made impossible when the people in the discussion are grossly ignorant of the sociology of race relations. Again, to endeavor to impress upon the sociologically disinclined the fact that racism is still a thing and that colorblindness is not enough to correct racism takes patience and a tactful approach. The minute the discussion gets emotional and dissolves into an argument, the discussion becomes unproductive, according to interviewees. As Coates (2017) argues, people fail to go beyond the individual level to fully see how racism is constructed in society, and this makes it difficult to get to the place of understanding. According to our data, the removal of barriers caused by ignorance is unlikely to happen in emotionally charged situations. In sum, when amicable connections are made and rapport established, antiracist messages become less threatening and thus, more amenable to people, including White Americans, as an ideal worthy of support.

Destine & Katz-Fishman (2018) talk about scholar activism as a form of public sociology that works to create opportunities for everyday folks to transcend socially constructed barriers linked to race, class, and gender. Putting education in practice emerged as the third mechanism

to promote positive social change mentioned by our participants. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of their college education in the evolution of their sociological imagination. According to these participants, whether it happened inside or outside of the classroom, in discussion with professors or classmates, sociologically smart discussions informed and advanced their worldview greatly. It was in this manner they acquired a fuller understanding of the plight of the oppressed – a pedagogical phenomenon referred to any number of scholars (Freire, 1999; Hill Collins, 2000; Szrot, 2019; Warren, 2010) – and took their message of racial justice to their friends and acquaintances more effectively.

In sum, our study maintains that properly orchestrated public sociology can be an extremely beneficial way to teach and guide others to become antiracist. Indeed, we feel that future research should focus on effective ways to use information about addressing racial inequality, such as what we have gathered, to write policy and to develop pedagogy for and with the oppressed. We are optimistic in our hopes that pushing an awareness of social problems like racism into the American mind can lead to change and the more research we can do as scholars to unveil the need for antiracism, the more people we can reach.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix A
Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis Workshops
Qualitative interviewing workshop, facilitated by Dr. Stacy Lom, UCA
Assistant Professor

The Antiracism Research Project team posed this poster throughout campus and on the UCA Alpha Kappa Delta Sociology Honors Society social media page. While this workshop was intended as instruction for our research team specifically, we opened the invitation for any other UCA student who might appreciate the chance to gain information on conducting qualitative interview techniques from Dr. Lom. The workshop was well attended with every member of our research team present.

Instructional Workshop on Conducting Antiracism Project Interviews
with Jared Flemens and Cally Mars Facilitating
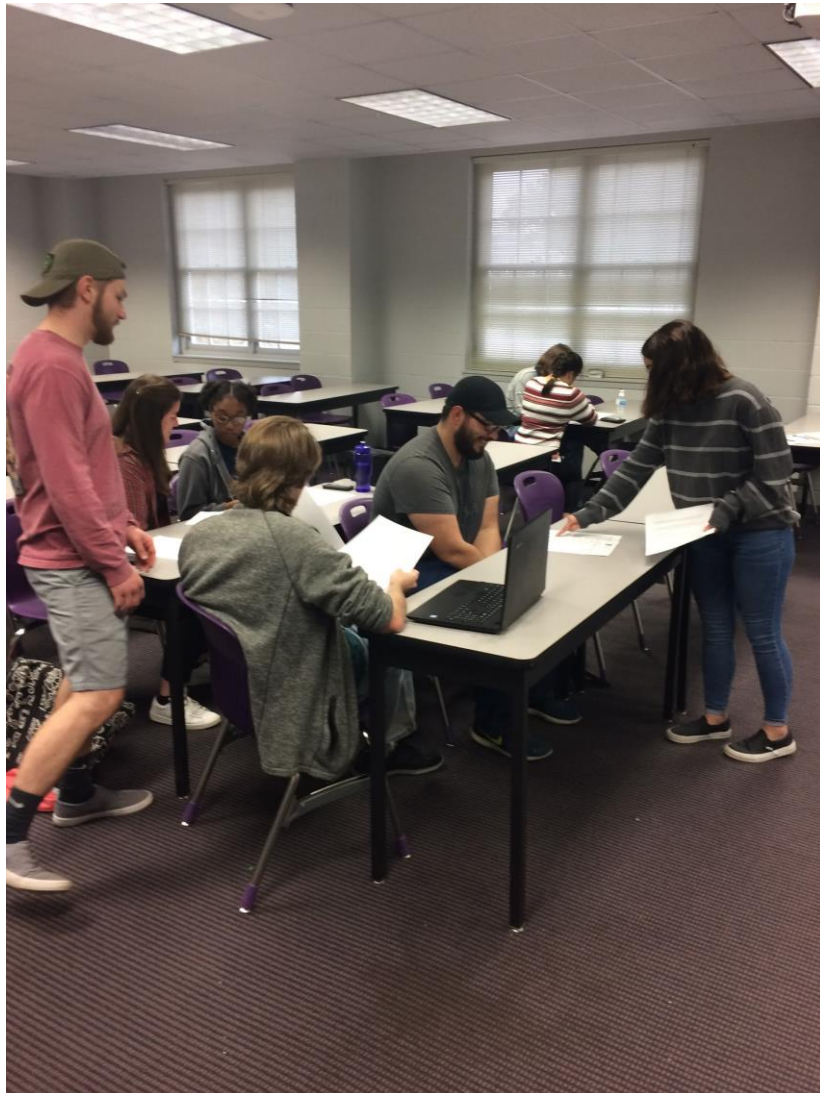
On November 21, 2019, Antiracism Project Team Leaders Jared Flemens and Cally Mars (standing) facilitated a workshop specifically designed to give research team members practice conducting interviews, using the project's interview schedule. (Team members sitting left to right in picture: Madison Mack, Ikina Kanu, Jordan Pepper, Dany Murillo, Dr. Matthew Moore, adviser, Lisha Wilson. Not pictured: Christoni Key and Dr. Douglas George, adviser).

Appendix B
Interview Schedule for Antiracism Project Interviewers
The following Interview Schedule for the Antiracism Project interviews provided the interviewers with questions and potential prompts to be employed in the project's semi-structured interview format.

1. Please talk about the process by which you came to a clear understanding of the sociology of social life and consequences of the social construction of society. In other words, talk about your sociological conversion experience and how you came to have the sociological imagination!

2. How has the development of a sociological perspective helped you assess critically social problems and proposed solutions to those social problems?

3. Now specifically thinking about the evolution of an antiracist perspective in your mind, please identify and talk about the instructional methods or experiences that you have had in school that really helped you acquire a clearer understanding of the ongoing realities of systemic/institutional racism?

      Possible prompts for interviewees:
        A) What drew you to sociology, what was your ah ha! moment?
        B) How did you come to understand _____
            a) The impact of socialization to structure our lives
            b) The meaning of ethnocentrism and its consequences
            c) The power of culture and norms to create conformity/obedience, and to block social change
            d) How social structure determines our lives; shapes, facilitates, and limits our opportunities
        C) How do you take what you've learned in the classroom to explain "sociology to others?

D) Based on your experiences as a sociology student, what approach might you take to inspire a more tolerant, antiracist perspective in the minds of others?
E) Talk about examples of systemic/institutional racism you talked about in class the helped clarify an antiracist perspective. Like examples involving policing, drug laws, segregation, schooling and higher education, housing, politics, the criminal justice system...