


# The Role of Race, Racism, and Group Relevant Social Issues

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## Abstract

Communication research posits that white individuals historically express opposition to various racialized social issues (e.g. immigration and welfare), and this disapproval is often associated with negative attitudes toward racial minority groups. Investigations of this nature are warranted, given the history of systemic and institutional discrimination targeting racial minorities. Yet, an examination of these beliefs, solely among white individuals outside of a dual racialized perspective, lacks. Applying assumptions from critical whiteness studies, social identity, and self-categorization theories, the current study, using a cross-sectional adult sample ( $n = 143$ ), examines the relationship between racial identity salience among white individuals and judgment towards non-racialized social problems. Results suggest that highly-identified, compared to lowly-identified white people, implementing multiple regression and hierarchical regression analyses, exhibit harsh judgment toward social issues, absent racial context. Also these outcomes are more prevalent when controlling for education and political identification, but not class status. Implications of the results are discussed in terms of group identification and protective mechanisms exercised to protect identity and promote social comparisons. Lastly, outcomes refute claims that white racial identity is insignificant among all white people.

## Keywords

Identity, Social Identity Theory, Self-categorization Theory, Critical Whiteness Studies, Social Issues, Race

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## 1. Introduction

The complex nature of race in general and white racial identity is vastly explored from an intergroup perspective within communication, demonstrating competition for resources, displays of harsh judgment towards non-white individuals,

and the collective downward social comparison between white and non-white groups (Hogg, 2016). Yet, the intricacies of these actions, solely among white individuals outside of a dual racialized perspective, are lacking (Stamps, 2020). The addition of such literature may highlight that race is only one consideration regarding social judgment among white individuals. Accordingly, perceived threats to identity may be an additional provocation that drives inclinations among highly identified white individuals to protect group identity. The current investigation's primary goal is to address this gap by exploring the relationship between white individuals' adherence to racial identity, discriminatory beliefs, and opposition to general group-relevant social issues. The current work demonstrates that competition for resources and resistance to general social problems exist outside of interracial environments and that adverse judgments may exist absent of racialized outgroup members.

To address the study's objectives, a survey was conducted among a cross-sectional adult population assessing the relationship between racial identity, adherence to discriminatory beliefs, and opposition to various non-racialized social issues. This work collectively advances knowledge regarding racial majority group members rarely examined quantitatively from an intragroup perspective (Knowles & Peng, 2005). The current study offers a review of relevant literature about white racial identity's complexities, including literature on bias and group-based judgment. This follows insights from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, 1985), and critical whiteness studies (Applebaum, 2016). Lastly, results along with a discussion of implications regarding intragroup dynamics among white individuals are presented.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. White Racial Identity

A vast selection of research across varied domains, including critical cultural literature and social psychology, posits that white racial identity as unacknowledged among white people may not be accurate (Knowles et al., 2014). White individuals' perception of their racial identity is recognized when whiteness is documented as oppressive (DiAngelo, 2011) or among white individuals seeking to protect status and power (Jackson & Heckman, 2002). Scholars contend that white racial identity is also known among white individuals to preserve racial distinctiveness and group-centered socialization practices (Moon, 2016). Conversely, according to Knowles and colleagues (2014: p. 595), "whites' unique structural position ... serve to safeguard the group's place at the top of the intergroup hierarchy". Meaning that the lack of interrogation, not recognizing white racial identity, allows the group to enjoy power by claiming a nondescript group identity. Collectively, this body of work draws a distinct argument that white individuals are aware of their racial identity and may draw on an implicit commitment to minimize the acknowledgment of racial identity to protect the group. However, research is limited regarding the strength of adherence to racial

identity and if the variance is related to variables outside a racialized context.

Within communication literature, an empirical understanding of white racial identity is interrogated within critical, rhetorical, and qualitative analyses (e.g. Jackson & Heckman, 2002; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) work probes racial labeling and identity perceptions among white individuals. Their findings acknowledge white peoples' choice to identify or ignore racial labels as personal preferences and avoid and deny strategies depending on various circumstances and social contexts. For example, when everyone in a room is white, the concentration does not exclude people of color, but the diversity of other identities, such as political or gender identities. This maneuver of redefining diversity allows white individuals to assume claims of inclusion, which continue to privilege whiteness within these spaces.

Similarly, scholars pursue comparable lines of examination, exploring white racial identity and white individuals' devotion to group distinction (McIntosh, 2007). Within this collection of work, white people recognize that their racial existence lacks explicit interrogation and is situationally immutable due to the reinforcement of their racial identity as the primary representation of society at large (Feagin, 2013). Due to this overwhelming representation as the majority group, white individuals can create and redefine their racial identity (Jackson & Heckman, 2002) and prioritize their comfort and fragility in interracial social spaces (Jackson & Crowley, 2003). These examples acknowledge that white people typically characterize themselves as "universal insiders", suggesting that their experiences, no matter the situational context, are regarded as standard and typical (Mills, 2007).

Moon (2016) addresses the process of embracing a white racial identity via the exploration of racial enculturation practices. Moon's analysis reveals two themes that demonstrate the devotion to white racial identity as a direct byproduct of group advantage. These findings include white individuals' recognition of immediate family and friends "performing whiteness" and acknowledging privilege and authority displayed by other white people within various social spaces and institutions. To illustrate both performance and privilege, white family members reinforce expectations of white purity by discouraging interracial dating and befriending people of color. Moon's research exhibits how white people may draw on specific discursive strategies designed to encourage group members to internalize a white racial frame and institutional performances of racial privilege (e.g. meritocracy). These actions often help extend, refine, and reinforce white racial identity (Feagin, 2013). Collectively, white racial identity exists as a social identity that white individuals may actively protect to uphold favorability and esteem. To further address white racial identity, its protection among white individuals, and its role in establishing group membership, insights from social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) are discussed.

## 2.2. Social Identity

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that indi-

viduals embrace specific characteristics to bolster their self-concept, and this derives from groups with shared identities. Moreover, individuals create and maintain a positive identity by likening the desirable characteristics attributed to their group and distancing themselves from unfavorable characteristics of non-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These strategies, adopting and upholding desirable characteristics and disparaging unfavorable attributes, are used to distinguish group members from non-group members to protect and bolster self-esteem (Hogg, 2016).

SIT's application within communication research demonstrates its utility, explicating racialized group identity evaluations as a mechanism to uphold group favoritism. Mastro (2003) argues that racial identities may impact individuals' attitudes and judgments as recognition of racial identity may exacerbate group comparisons when presented as explicit examples. A robust body of research supports these claims, specifically regarding ingroup and outgroup comparisons. However, McKinley and colleagues (2014) acknowledge intragroup comparisons, specifically among highly identified white group members. Accordingly, white individuals favored group narratives, which increased positive evaluations, including enhanced likability and perceived individual success among participants. These outcomes cautiously support social identity assumptions regarding preference for supporting group identity. Yet, this work solely assessed increases in positive group perceptions, missing potential consequences related to unfavorable responses among group members such as decreases in the perceived success or distancing from negative observations (Knowles et al., 2014).

In addition to minimal examinations of white individuals' relationships to adverse subject matter aligned with their racial identity, it may be assumed that white people, as a homogenous group, will favor one another and seek to maintain authority. Yet, this typical pattern of preference toward one's group based on a unified and cohesive group identity may not always be the case (Hains et al., 2006). Individuals may strive to seek a positive self-image and affirmative appraisals through various mechanisms, which may differ depending on the salience of racial identity (Hogg, 2016). In other words, racial identity is not necessarily prominent across all individuals within a group as there exists variability among white individuals (Knowles et al., 2014).

Research explicitly concentrated on intragroup dynamics among white individuals within communication research is limited. Yet, suppose SIT is correct in suggesting that among individuals, threats to salient identities should be related to negative judgments of those uncertainties; this should apply to white individuals. Accordingly, identity-based frameworks and empirical evidence outside of communication literature suggest that highly identified white individuals express increased judgment toward perceived issues that negatively impact the group (Hogg, 2016; Knowles & Lowery, 2012). In that case, it should be expected that a difference in judgment (i.e. positive or negative) from perceived threats among white people should be related to the level of racial identification and the framing of the situational context (i.e. positive or negative).

Research states that white individuals' feelings about their group impact intergroup behavior, typically to protect group interests and shield white racial identity from scrutiny (Lowery et al., 2006). Moreover, this is generally demonstrated more so for highly identified white individuals who tend to respond unfavorably when their social dominance is questioned, their group's power and status are challenged, or their core values are seen as vulnerable (Morrison & Ybarra, 2008). This collectively suggests that group membership is experienced differently for white people. Highly identified white individuals are more likely to exhibit different judgments than individuals whose racial identity is less prominent. These patterns suggest that the group's perceptions vary where highly identified individuals express different bias viewpoints than lowly identified group members. As a result, highly identified white people may attempt to enact inevitable hostilities as a means of protecting the group's values and social position (Hornsey et al., 2003). Here, the underlining difference between highly identified and lowly identified white individuals is best explained by self-categorization theory.

### 2.3. Self-Categorization Theory

Self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) focuses on the social and cognitive processes that promote identity categorization. Individuals place themselves and others into categories, and each represents a set of attributes that distinguish one group from another. SCT assumes that individuals define their social identity by classifying themselves and others as members of a group, leading them to develop a shared group identity (Tajfel, 1978). This shared group identity regulates whether individuals conform and expect others to conform to specific norms or behaviors (Jetten et al., 2000). Self-categorization ultimately depersonalizes, or strips individuality, among individuals to adhere to a preferred image representing the group. Likewise, depersonalization emphasizes how individuals appear to hold similar attitudes, behaviors, and feelings, which are typically treated as normalized and what is considered distinguishable from members of outgroups (Hains et al., 2006). Self-categorization has additional effects on individuals, including producing stereotypical expectations and encouraging stereotype-consistent behaviors (Hogg, 2016). Meeting expectations to produce acceptable behavior, the category must be psychologically salient, meaning individuals must adopt the groups' attitudes and behaviors in varied contexts or settings. When individuals are categorized, they conform to the group and are perceived as ideal members depending on how well they embody those acceptable characteristics (Hains et al., 2006).

Hains and colleagues (2006) recognize that self-categorization also affects intragroup behavior via prototype-based depersonalization. For example, for a racial group, there are specific behaviors and group norms deemed acceptable by group members, and as individuals commit to these expectations, individuality becomes less salient. Moreover, self-categorization among group members pro-

duce a sense of belonging, group loyalty, and favoritism (Hogg & Reid, 2006). For racial minorities, this is acknowledged within the literature, yet the salience of these characteristics among white individuals is vague (Sullivan & Winburn, 2010).

The similarities recognized within groups, including visible appearance (i.e. race) and comparable attitudes and behaviors, may attenuate uncertainty regarding individual differences. Prototypicality then becomes the critical attribute of a group such that those who lack prototypical traits and who may be viewed as atypical may be harshly judged. In contrast, those who encompass prototypical characteristics are likely held in high regard (Marques et al., 1998). Because individuals may adhere to normative behaviors and actions, they may also become more sensitive to and observant of group deviance or threats (Marques et al., 1998).

The notion that group deviants attract adverse reactions from group members because they threaten the group identity is supported by social categorization research (e.g. Branscombe et al., 1999; Jetten et al., 2000). For example, Johnson and colleague (2013) demonstrate that individuals report specific social judgments (e.g. empathy) for more prototypical group members than less prototypical members. This pattern of favoritism was established because prototypical (compared to atypical) group members were perceived to be more closely identified with the overall favorable perception of the group (Johnson & Kaiser, 2013). According to SIT and SCT, group members are attentive towards intragroup differences because they are motivated to establish and uphold a positive identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Yet, an investigation seeking to clarify how racial identity and judgment operates among a group with an influential social standing, which lacks explicit interrogation, requires a constructive discussion. Here, critical whiteness studies provide a lens to interpret this relationship.

#### **2.4. Critical Whiteness Studies**

Critical whiteness studies examine how white racial identity is socially constructed and often positioned as normalized while maintaining social dominance in varied spaces (see Feagin, 2013). CWS calls attention to how white racial identity explicitly and implicitly produces marginalization in many ways—perhaps the most interesting is its operation as a non-color environmental entity (Garner, 2007). Within CWS examinations, white racial identity goes unmarked in society, yet it is insidiously influential and provides deniability to those who benefit from it (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). In the context of this investigation, white racial identity is a social location that allows highly identified white people to demonstrate adverse judgment toward social issues that challenge the groups' social standing. These issues align with the group, showcasing how protection is adopted among highly identified white individuals to protect the group even amid non-racialized contexts. Moreover, an investigation of this nature supports meaningful dialogue addressing how these actions may be unrelated to com-

munities of color and more so aligned with bias or judgment related to different identities (e.g. class) among white persons.

At first glance, the application of CWS within this investigation seems misplaced. However, historically, the lack of explicit acknowledgment of white racial identity acts as a means to justify and propagate racial hierarchy and arguably ignores how this action may disenfranchise white individuals (Lipsitz, 2006). Nakayama and Krizek's (1995: p. 294) work challenges this notion by encouraging society to "identify and critique the assemblage of whiteness" and in doing so, create an awareness of how white individuals maneuver about society maintaining invisibility all the while lacking interrogation into those same tactics that allow the group to exist unconstrained. Scholars across paradigms have called for establishing a foundation "to map the representational particularities of how whiteness deliberately functions", and the application of critical whiteness studies allows for such an evaluation (Griffin, 2015: pp. 149-150).

Even with the call-to-action to quantitatively examine white racial identity in communication research, little is known about this relationship in various contexts, specifically in non-racialized settings. Moreover, slight evidence is available regarding if outcomes would result regarding the degree to which the relationship between racial identity and judgments outside of racialized context exists. With this in mind, social issues are introduced within a non-racialized context to assess how high versus lowly identified white individuals express opposition to group members' social problems.

## 2.5. Social Issues and White Racial Identity

Past research acknowledges that white individuals typically express opposition to various racialized social issues (e.g. affirmative action and welfare; Gilliam Jr., 1999; Ramasubramanian, 2010). This body of work demonstrates that various stereotypical depictions of communities of color are associated with negative attitudes toward race-related social issues, including the practices related to prison reform and punishment (Dixon, 2006) and immigration (Mastro et al., 2014). Investigations of this nature are warranted, given the history of systemic and institutional discrimination targeting racial minorities. However, attention concentrated on white people and their attitudes and beliefs associated with social issues outside of the dichotomy of interracial engagement would add clarity regarding the attributes among white individuals (i.e. adherence to white racial identity) that may also drive these judgments. Accordingly, it could be assumed that perceived threats to the group may impact this relationship outside of discrimination or group bias toward non-white groups. Research suggests that the motivation to uphold a positive group identity may explain adverse judgment regarding social issues perceived as threatening to the group's well-being (Lowery et al., 2006; Unzueta et al., 2008). Whether it is the reality of scarce resources or unfavorable group perceptions, the role of perceived threats should relate to white individuals even in the absence of communities of color. The

driving force of these outcomes may be related to adherence to racial group identity. This gap presents the opportunity to explore the affective dimensions of intra group dynamics among white individuals, the role of racial identification, and white persons' attitudes towards non-racialized social issues. As such, the protection mechanisms that are suggested based on SIT and SCT should result as challenges to white racial identity dominance are presented. Social problems are one particular type of challenge and may be suitable for examining the relationship between identity and opposition to perceived threats to the group.

## 2.6. Racists Beliefs

In addition to the role of white racial identity as relevant among some white individuals, previous research examines the role of racist attitudes among white people and its relationship to unfavorable attitudes directed at racial minority groups (Mastro et al., 2008). On its surface, racism is applicable regarding examining white individuals' attitudes toward people of color, as observed many times (see Awad et al., 2005). However, communication research associating racism from an intragroup perspective among white individuals is arguably absent. Yet, examining discrimination, or unfavorable judgments and bias, based on racial identity within sole non-white populations exist. For instance, research has shown that intragroup threats such as perceptions of immigrant status or stereotypes such as criminality cause Latinx individuals to distance themselves or reject other Latinx community members (Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro, 2019). If this is true, attributes among individuals, including traits aligned with social dominance, might be present among white people. In other words, the belief in superiority and supremacy, which is generally associated with racism, may exist among highly identified white groups. These same attributes may influence the relationship between opposition to general social issues related to white people and not solely towards communities of color.

According to Henry and Sears (2002: p. 57), racists express "antagonism, resentment, and anger" towards others and despise groups that threaten resources that individuals feel entitled to. Research adopting racism or racist beliefs typically seeks to understand white peoples' implicit and explicit feelings towards outgroups, mainly Black people (Stamps & Mastro, 2019). However, it is argued that at the root of racism is a group-based conflict that is often associated with a perceived threat or individual self-interest (Bobo, 1988). These threats, which may be for the scarcity of resources or challenges to group perception, may also be present exclusively within a group. For example, atypical white individuals, such as those associated with various identities including sexual minorities (i.e. lesbian, gay, bi-sexual) or drug addicts, and associated social issues, may threaten group identity, depending on how they are presented in social contexts (e.g. white people in need of drug rehabilitation). In that case, atypical individuals and those related social problems may be viewed as challenging the group's legitimacy and may be treated similarly as threats from outgroups (Marques &



Yzerbyt, 1988).

According to Knowles et al. (2009), white individuals engage in ideological shifts when, as a joint function of their attitudes toward hierarchy and current awareness of threats to their group, they are motivated to adopt assumptions that serve their sociopolitical interests. Moreover, white people can shift their positionality—even when counter to previous self-interest, if it suits intended goals that benefit the group (Zingher, 2018). This action may include reprioritizing identities, including, but not limited to class, gender, or geographic location. Thus these actions, disparaging people or social issues, may render the same outcome, similar to displays of racism among group members (Hogg, 2016). Anecdotally, activities such as dismissing group members have presented themselves politically and socially among white people who hold their racial identity in high regard. These examples include the current social climate and conversation around social movements related to gender (e.g. #MeToo) and protecting masculinity (Haider, 2019).

### 3. The Current Study

The theoretical frameworks mentioned allow for investigating the relationship between racial identity and opposition to general social issues. As stated formally, there is an expectation that resistance to social problems exists outside of a racialized frame for highly identified white individuals. This resistance may contribute to an underlying need to protect the group, uphold group favoritism, or avoid aligning with threats from group members who may be viewed as associated with unfavorable social issues. To address the proposed relationships, the following hypothesis is offered:

**H1:** A positive relationship will exist between racial identification and racist beliefs among participants and opposition to general social issues, such that as racial identification and racist beliefs increase, resistance to general social problems will also increase.

It is hypothesized that highly racially identified white participants will express opposition towards generalized social problems. This assumption is derived from previous literature addressing white individuals' self-awareness and directed attention at preserving group favor and identity (Lowery et al., 2012). However, the assumption that white participants are a homogeneous group, absent of distinct attributes and characteristics (e.g. class status, level of education) is debatable (Murray, 2019). Literature based on quantitative queries investigating the intersectional identities and varied group attributes among white people is limited. To aid in parsing out this matter, the following research question is posed:

**RQ1:** Will the relationship above remain between racial identification, racist beliefs among participants, and opposition to general social issues (e.g. drug addiction, mental illness, healthcare) when controlling for education, political identity, and class status?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

A total of 190 participants were recruited on a voluntary and anonymous basis via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants were informed that they would be taking part in a survey concerning individual identity and perceptions of social issues. The study took place online, and participants were provided with an online debriefing statement following the study's completion. Participants were predominately white ( $n = 143$ ), followed by Asian ( $n = 11$ ), Black/African American ( $n = 11$ ), Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 7$ ), multiethnic/multiracial ( $n = 9$ ), Native American ( $n = 3$ ) and 6 participants did not report race. Three attention check questions were implemented in the survey. Participants who did not correctly answer attention check questions or who failed to complete the survey were removed. Six participants did not fully complete the survey and were dropped, leaving 184 remaining participants. Given the intended goals of the study, non-white participants were also removed from the final analyses. Of the remaining participants ( $n = 143$ ), 43% were female, 56% male, and 1% did not report gender identity. Eighty-nine percent ( $n = 127$ ) reported having attended some college or more, and 82% ( $n = 117$ ) reported an annual income of \$50,000 or higher. Twenty-four percent ( $n = 34$ ) identified as Republican, 45% ( $n = 64$ ) as Democrat, and 31% ( $n = 45$ ) as independent or "other". The average age of the sample was 35.39 ( $SD = 9.97$ ).

### 4.2. Procedure

After approval from the human subjects review board, participants were recruited online, agreed to a consent form, and were informed that their responses were anonymous and that they could quit the study at any time. After accessing the link to the survey hosted by Qualtrics, participants answered survey questions assessing racial identity, race-based beliefs (i.e. racism), attitudes regarding various social issues (e.g. homelessness, immigration, pollution, and civil rights), and demographic questions (e.g. gender, race, and income) in a randomized order. After answering questions, participants were presented with a debriefing page detailing the purpose of the study.

### 4.3. Measures

**Racial Identity.** Mastro and colleagues' (2008) racial ingroup identity scale and Hains and associates' (2006) social identity/self-categorization scale, was utilized to assess the level of adherence to racial identity. The combined nine-item measure of racial identity included statements such as, "I strongly identify with my racial group" and "I have a strong sense of belonging to my race". Participants rated their agreement or disagreement on a 7-point scale Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = all the time;  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). Higher scores indicated an increase in racial identification.

**Racist Beliefs.** Henry and Sears's (2002) modern racism scale was used to determine the level of racists beliefs among participants. The seven-item measure included statements such as, "Over the past few years, African Americans have gotten more economically than they deserve". Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = all the time;  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ). Higher scores demonstrate a stronger level of racists beliefs among participants.

**Demographic Variables.** Closed-ended questions asked participants to mark their gender identity (i.e. male, female, non-gender conforming), racial identity (i.e. white, Black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American, mixed-race), and age. Participants also answered questions regarding their education level, political ideology, and annual income. Education level included five options: some high school, high school graduate, some college, college graduate, and earned an advanced degree. The political ideology question offered five options: conservative, conservative-leaning, moderate, liberal-leaning, and liberal. Lastly, the annual income question offered five options: less than \$20,000; \$20,001 - \$50,000; \$50,001 - \$75,000; \$75,001 - \$100,000; and \$100,000 and above.

**Social Issues.** Questions were amended from previous literature examining support for various social issues (Ramasubramanian, 2010; Saleem et al., 2016). See **Appendix** for a list of questions. The social issues examined were based on Gallup's survey research and included topics such as drug addiction, mental illness, and healthcare (Most Important Problem, 2019). The sixteen-item measure included statements such as, "Drug addicts should not have access to government benefits including healthcare", and "I prefer my tax dollars not be used for social services for mentally ill persons". Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = all the time;  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). Higher scores demonstrate increased opposition to social issues.

## 5. Results

To combat multicollinearity, variables were mean-centered before data analysis. Multiple regression and hierarchical regression analyses were used to test the relationships between variables. The first hypothesis predicted that a positive relationship would exist between increased racial identification, racist beliefs, and opposition to general social issues. Results show that both racial identification ( $\beta = .69$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and racist beliefs ( $\beta = .10$ ,  $p < .047$ ) significantly predicted opposition to general social issues,  $F(2, 140) = 124.45$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .640$ . The proposed hypothesis was supported, suggesting that highly identified white participants, compared to lowly identified white individuals, exhibit increased racist beliefs and opposition to general (i.e. non-racialized) social issues.

The research question asked will positive relationships remain between increased racial identification, racist beliefs, and opposition to social issues when controlling for demographic variables, including education, political identity,

and class status. Hierarchical regression was utilized to examine the proposed research question. The three predictors: level of education, political identity, and household income (i.e. class) were dummy coded before entering the first block (see **Table 1** for dichotomized coding). Collectively, the variables significantly contributed to participants' opposition to general social issues,  $F(3, 139) = 5.33$ ;  $p = .002$ ,  $R^2 = .103$ . Specifically, participants that did not attend college were more likely than participants that reported attending "some college" or more to express opposition to general social issues ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Participants that identified as conservative or conservative-leaning expressed more opposition to general social issues than liberal or liberal-leaning participants ( $\beta = .54$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Lastly, class status (i.e. income) was not correlated with opposition to general social issues ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p = .247$ ). Adding racial identification and racist beliefs to the regression significantly improved the model,  $R^2$  Change = .68;  $F(5, 137) = 58.08$ ;  $p < .001$ . However, only racist beliefs was a significant predictor among white participants, when controlling for level of education, political identity, and class status, ( $\beta = .66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), racial identification was non-significant ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $p = .116$ ). See **Table 1** for a summary of the regression analysis. Outcomes related to the proposed research question demonstrate differences among the sample of white participants, including those related to political identity and education—those present variance regarding group identification and opposition to general social issues.

## 6. Discussion

The current study acknowledges a relationship among highly identified white individuals, and opposition to general social issues absent a racialized context.

**Table 1.** Summary of hierarchal regression analysis addressing opposition to general social issues ( $n = 143$ ).

Variable	B	$R^2$	$R^2$ change	SE
Block 1		.10**	.084	1.08
Education	.51**			
Political Leaning	.53**			
Class Status	.21			
Block 2		.67***	.668	.652
Education	.16			
Political Leaning	.44***			
Class Status	.29***			
Racists Beliefs	.66***			
Racial Group Identification	.07			

Note. Education (some high school, high school graduate = 1, some college-earned advanced degree = 2); Political Leaning (conservative and conservative leaning) = 1, (liberal leaning and liberal = 2) class status (Less than \$20,000 to \$50,000 = 1, \$50,000 and above = 2) were dichotomously coded. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Even cautiously, results suggest that highly identified white participants are *not* unmoved or indifferent to social problems relevant in society and associated with group members. Likewise, these individuals may sometimes express a lack of support for social issues, and the group members impacted by those circumstances.

Within previous research, highly identified white individuals demonstrate harsh judgment toward social issues such as equity in education settings due to those being viewed as benefiting racial minorities (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Lowery et al., 2006). To extend this claim, results suggest that highly identified white people may demonstrate opposition toward social issues, not solely due to their association with racial minority groups, but also because of the benefit to individuals, including white people, demonstrating a perceived scarcity of resources. This outcome suggests that race may be one of many aspects that may be culpable in driving opposition to general social issues among groups in general and white individuals in particular. These conclusions insinuate that among the sample population, the lack of support for social problems outside of a racialized context may be steeped in an array of circumstances from distancing from atypical behaviors that threaten the group's image such as drug addiction or competition for resources, even among the group. However, continued investigation is necessary to parse out these relationships. Possibly, highly racialized groups demonstrate adverse judgment based on perceived threats in *any* form, including those from the group and non-group members. The catalyst may be self-perceptions and disdain for non-racial identities, including class, sexuality, or other attributes. Yet, there may be self-loathing or insecurities among individuals that may speak to these relationships as well.

Critics of CWS argue that this theory's application assumes white individuals are a homogenous racial group, thus erasing the lived experiences and identities (e.g. gender and class) that individuals occupy (Murray, 2019). Also, among white individuals, non-racial identities (e.g. education level) may be valued more than racial identity. In considering the role of racial identity, this research situated white racial identity, racist beliefs, and the degree to which each is related to increased opposition to social issues. Likewise, the study considered demographic attributes to deconstruct aspects of the group. Specifically, the level of education, political identities, and income or class status were examined to gain a greater understanding of attributes that may contribute to such outcomes. Findings cautiously support critics' concerns labeling white people as homogeneous. For example, class status was not significant among white individuals in disentangling the relationship between identity and judgment directed at social problems. In other words, the level of income or wealth may be a salient identity that deserves additional testing as white individuals lacking access to financial means may hold differing views outside of a racialized context. Being poor may speak to a different but important relationship between sensitivity in judging social problems that supersede racial identity among white individuals. Additional examination is needed to flesh out these ideas.

The relationship between racial identity and adverse judgment of social issues highlights how staunch topics create polarization. For example, a group member who is viewed as associated with social issues such as gender and sexuality (transgender individuals serving in the military), or as a drug addict, maybe rejected among the group, particularly among highly identified racialized group members (see [Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988](#)) even though there exist a shared racial identity. However, traits outside of racial identity may be viewed as stereotypes attributed to non-group members, and sympathy is attenuated due to negative perceptions as individuals are considered non-group members. Consideration of social identity threat ([Branscombe et al., 1999](#)) and identity denial ([Cheryan & Monin, 2005](#)) would further clarify these outcomes.

Results from the current study warrant further consideration for several reasons. First, previous literature suggests that white individuals are less likely than racial minorities to recognize and express importance regarding racial identity ([Hartmann et al., 2009](#)) as white racial identity “remains largely invisible and unspoken” ([Chidester, 2008: p. 158](#)). Second, the normalization of white racial identity in society allows supremacy and privilege to arguably assume that white racial identity is bland and, at times, render it unappealing to investigate or critically examine. This study argues that these considerations could not be further from the truth. As with previous work, white people can recognize their racial identity, which may be attributed to judgments outside of a racialized frame ([Knowles et al., 2014](#)). Likewise, the narratives of white racial identity as generalizable and lacking interrogation uphold hierarchy and continue, in vast and implicit ways, to oppress and disenfranchise, and not just racial minorities, but white people alike—results from the current study attempt to engage in dislodging these claims.

## 7. Conclusion

The current study’s goals were to examine and demonstrate relationships among white racial identity and opposition to general social issues, absent of an explicit racialized context. As with any empirical examination, this study is not without limitations. The results from this study and the generalizability of the findings should be interpreted with caution. First, there was a reliance on self-report assessments, which may be biased by participants’ inability to report on their opinions truthfully. Likewise, participants may be unaware of shifts in mood, and various forms of affect might influence questions. Steps to address these issues in future research should be considered, such as longitudinal studies where affect may be examined. An additional limitation was online data collection. While this form of data collection allows for anonymity, participants’ mental focus during the data collection process, including a concentrated effort on answering questions, may have been thwarted due to participants’ multi-tasking during the study. Moving forward, having participants in a controlled lab may address this issue.

Lastly, as with numerous correlational and cross-sectional studies, results are unable to establish cause-and-effect. Both racial identity and judgment were measured simultaneously, and while aspects of the relationship were significant, the direction of influence is somewhat ambiguous. Participants who strongly identify with their racial identity may be driven to harshly judge social issues that they deem unpopular, dismissible, or wasteful. However, introducing these social issues could influence participants' collective racial identity, potentially encouraging the need to galvanize the group to defend their likeness. Future investigations should consider research designs that include experimental application.

Despite the limitations, this study offers essential preliminary insights regarding white populations and judgment toward non-racialized issues. This work also sheds light on white individuals, recognizing that it is imperative to counter the invisibility as Lipsitz (1995: p. 369) notes, whiteness “never has to speak its name and never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations”. More importantly, this work acknowledges that adherence to white racial identity among white individuals plays a role in society; and should be comprehensively explored within various identity-based communication scholarship.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Appendix A

*List of measures amended from previous research to examine judgment of non-racialized social issues.*

- 1) Drug addicts are a drain on society.
- 2) Convicted drug addicts should lose benefits such as government sponsored healthcare, housing, and education.
- 3) Drug addicts should not receive federal government support due to their lack of will power and criminality.
- 4) Individuals dealing with mental illness should not be shown compassion.
- 5) Individuals dealing with mental illness should not be given a second chance.
- 6) If possible, I would prefer my tax dollars not be used for social services for mentally ill persons.
- 7) Federal aid should be not provided in communities where mental illness hinders communities.
- 8) The federal government should not play a larger role in improving healthcare for individuals in the U.S.
- 9) It is not a serious concern that all Americans do not have access to quality, affordable healthcare.
- 10) The government should not mandate health insurance coverage for individuals who work full-time for any organization.
- 11) The federal government has more important things to do than deal with societal issues such as criminal justice reform.
- 12) The federal government should stay out of efforts aimed at improving criminal justice reform for individuals in the U.S.
- 13) The federal government is not responsible for addressing efforts to acknowledging the disparities in criminal sentencing of different racial groups.
- 14) Gender identity solely between a man and a woman should be recognized by organizations.
- 15) Anyone, regardless of gender identity, should be able to serve in the military (reverse coded).
- 16) Gender workplace diversity is unimportant.