Original Research Article

AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Sociology of Race and Ethnicity
1–14
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DOI: 10.1177/2332649215584829
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Visibly White: How Community Policing Activists Negotiate Their Whiteness

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Abstract

The invisibility of whiteness has been a foundational concept in whiteness studies since the late 1980s. *Invisibility* refers to low levels of racial self-awareness among whites, who generally consider their race to be irrelevant to their actions and perspectives on the world. Scholars have examined how biographical experience limits or heightens white racial self-awareness, but little is known about how whites enact their whiteness in racially charged contexts or situations. The author reports findings from an ethnographic study of two "positive loitering" groups operating in multiracial Chicago neighborhoods. The members of these two groups negotiated their whiteness in systematically different ways. One group (the "Northtowners") acknowledged positive loitering as a racially charged context, engaged critics, and successfully bridged black-white racial divides. A second group (the "Lakesiders") seemed oblivious to the racially charged context, dismissed critics, and arguably deepened black-white racial divides. The author discusses implications for the study of white racial practice, racial self-awareness, and the racial dynamics of community policing.

Keywords

whiteness, invisibility, ethnography, racial identity

The "invisibility" of whiteness has been a foundational concept in the surge of whiteness studies since the late 1980s. As a default, whiteness is "invisible" to most whites most of the time. *Invisibility* is a misleading term, because it does not refer to an optical phenomenon but to low levels of racial self-awareness[1]: white Americans generally consider their race to be irrelevant to their actions and perspectives on the world (Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1988). Instead, for many whites, whiteness serves as an implicit point of comparison for what is normal in America, a mode of thought that feminist writer Adrienne Rich (1979) referred to as "white solipsism." Whiteness is a relational category; it is defined against those physiological and cultural characteristics that nonwhites—African Americans, Native Americans, and others—are assumed to exhibit. However, conceptions of whiteness usually remain implicit and thus "invisible."[2] Many scholars have found the concept of white invisibility to be a useful point of departure for studies of whiteness in a multitude of contexts. In particular, scholars have examined how biographical events and trajectories make whites more or less aware of their racial category (e.g., Blee 2002; Frankenberg 1993; McKinney 2005).

At the same time, the contexts and situations that disrupt white invisibility and impose racial self-awareness more or less independently of individual dispositions have not received much attention (but see McDermott 2006). We know little about how whites act when their whiteness becomes contested. For developing a comprehensive understanding of whiteness, this is a crucial

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problem. As ethnomethodologists have shown particularly in the area of gender, the enactment of threatened or vulnerable identities has much to tell us about those identities in general (Garfinkel 1967; Schilt 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987). In order to understand whiteness, we must understand *contested* whiteness.

In this article, I report findings from an ethnographic investigation of two "positive loitering" groups operating in two multiracial Chicago neighborhoods. Positive loitering is intended to secure public space by providing a presence of law-abiding citizens who may deter street crime and disorderly activity. Positive loitering groups constitute rich cases for the investigation of contested whiteness. Particularly in multiracial neighborhoods, the issue of street crime ties into a complex web of racial meanings. Racialized perceptions of crime (Quillian and Pager 2001), gentrification and racial turnover (Anderson 1990; Smith 1996), and the issue of criminal justice bias (Alexander 2010; Western 2006) inject public safety activism with—potentially explosive—racial meaning. Given events such as the shooting of black teenager Trayvon Martin by a neighborhood watch volunteer (Barry et al. 2012), white safety activists may be perceived as bigots driven by racial prejudice. Nonetheless, there is nothing inherently malign about civic efforts to fight or prevent crime. Safety constitutes a public good that all law-abiding residents desire. Public safety groups could potentially unite diverse neighborhoods around a shared goal (Kelling and Coles 1996). Conceivably, positive loitering groups could therefore have positive as well as negative effects on multiracial community. These complicating factors make whiteness all the more salient, as positive loiterers may have no choice but to position themselves in relation to these racial issues.

How do white positive loiterers deal with the potential of confronting racial contestation in this charged environment? How do they respond when others contest their whiteness? Do different enactments of whiteness shape whether positive loitering divides or unites multiracial communities? Answering these questions for two very different groups, this study expands the whiteness literature by providing unique insights into the practice of whiteness in situ (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Because many of the key contributions to this field have used methods that offer mediated access to social life, such as interviews, focus groups, and written narratives (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993; McKinney 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007), it is important to complement them with studies of social action in context.

WHITE RACIAL SELF-AWARENESS

The literature on whiteness has grown rapidly over the past two decades (for reviews, see McDermott and Samson 2005; Twine and Gallagher 2008; for theoretical statements, see Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004; Roediger 1999). Scholars have addressed a wide range of issues, including the historically shifting boundaries of whiteness (Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1999), the manifestations of white privilege (McIntosh 1988; McKinney 2005), and the particular experience of working-class whites (Hartigan 1999; McDermott 2006). Whiteness research has also touched upon the factors that influence white racial self-awareness, but rarely have these factors been at the center of scholarly projects. I thus review the literature by synthesizing findings that pertain to this question. Categorizing these findings, it appears that two factors matter: individual dispositions and the sociopolitical context. I add a third factor that scholars of whiteness have largely overlooked, but which microsociologists and ethnographers recognize as a central determinant of identities and their enactment: interaction in specific social situations (e.g., Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Lofland and Lofland 1995). In practice, all three factors overlap, but it is useful to separate them for analytic purposes.

A first group of factors revolves around individual dispositions. Biographical trajectories generate cognitive lenses (Schutz 1967; Zerubavel 1997) that make individuals more or less likely to consider their racial category problematic in social life. These factors produce a spectrum that ranges from very low to very high levels of racial awareness (Croll 2007; Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll 2009). Racial self-awareness is high among members of groups that explicitly engage in racial politics (Winant 1997) and who are therefore trained to see race operate in social life. Studies of the far right as well as antiracists show that whites in such groups are acutely conscious of their racial category, although they associate very different meanings with it (Blee 2002; Hughey 2012; Warren 2010). Antiracists regard their whiteness as a moral imperative to struggle for racial justice, whereas far right groups believe that whites are systematically disadvantaged in the contemporary United States and are therefore primed to perceive "reverse racism." The biographical circumstances that lead activists to develop these forms of consciousness

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are well explored. Blee (2002) and Warren (2010), for example, offered rich accounts of how whites join racist or antiracist movements and the changes they undergo in this process.

However, scholars have found that most whites have low levels of racial self-awareness (Frankenberg 1993; McKinney 2005). About two-thirds of whites do not find their racial identity very important (Croll 2007; Hartmann el al. 2009). Even when participating in social struggles that overlap with racial politics such as feminism, whites often exhibit low levels of racial awareness (Schilt 2005). To understand how racial awareness works for the majority of whites and how they move into and out of a sense of racial invisibility, factors beyond the level of the individual must be considered. Strong contextual or situational triggers may be required to make them racially self-conscious.

Second, in some sociopolitical contexts, whiteness is unusual or conspicuous, which may heighten whites' racial self-awareness. For instance, being in the minority in a particular place highlights whiteness. McDermott (2006; see also Hartigan 1999) conducted participant observation at a convenience store in Boston and an Atlanta gas station. In Atlanta, McDermott found that working-class whiteness was a marked identity because white workers constituted a demographic minority. Being white and working-class signaled personal deficiency, the failure to achieve middle-class status. Whites were therefore quite self-conscious about their racial category. By contrast, being white and working-class was considered normal in Boston and thus did not disrupt whites' sense of racial invisibility. In addition to their being in the minority, I show in this study that engaging in a racially conspicuous activity—such as positive loitering—can make whites racially self-conscious.

Finally, social interaction constitutes a third factor. Actors can compel racial awareness when they bring up race in interaction and make whites account for their whiteness. I refer to such actions as "racial challenges." Racial challenges include charges of racism but also more moderate actions, such as requests to account for the fact that a group is all white or that the syllabus for a social theory class includes only white writers. Although individual dispositions (the first factor) set a general cognitive threshold of racial awareness for any given individual, and sociopolitical contexts (the second factor) can variously lower or raise this threshold, racial challenges produce racial self-awareness more or less independently, because they make whiteness an objective aspect of the ongoing interaction.

Whiteness scholars have largely overlooked the importance of racial challenges, probably because their analyses have often been based on interviews and narrative accounts, while the study of racial challenges ideally requires observational data. Occasionally, challenges and the responses they elicit are discussed on the side. For example, on the basis of retrospective narratives, Picca and Feagin (2007:115–23, 184–89) reported how some whites reprimand other whites for racist jokes and other derogatory utterances. However, we know little about how whiteness is contested in concrete social situations and how whites act when this occurs. Examining the negotiation of whiteness in situ is important to complement and extend previous work on the visibility and invisibility of whiteness that focuses heavily on dispositions. Individual dispositions surely have real effects, but these effects materialize in specific interactions that are embedded in specific sociopolitical contexts. The two positive loitering groups I observed for this study offer strategic sites to analyze how racially charged contexts and situations shape white racial practice.

METHODS

I draw on data collected for a broader project examining the racial dynamics of community policing. Between the summer of 2011 and the spring of 2014, I conducted three and a half years of fieldwork in three community areas on Chicago's Far North Side: Uptown, Edgewater, and Rogers Park. The two positive loitering groups I analyze here were among a number of community groups I studied. Inductively, it became clear early on that these two groups provided a good analytic contrast for each other.

Positive loitering is a strategy of community policing (Rai 2011; Skogan and Hartnett 1997), which has been conducted on the Far North Side for at least five years. Locally, the practice has become a well-known strategy to fight street crime. There is no precise definition of positive loitering, but residents tend to think of it as a form of neighborhood watch. Together as a group, neighbors loiter on street corners or conduct walks to deter crime and report suspicious activity to the police. I rely on data gathered at positive loitering events as well as a wider set of observations of community life. In total, I participated in 73 positive loitering and many more directly related events, such as community policing meetings. I also conducted in-depth interviews with 78 residents and local experts, 23 of whom had participated in positive

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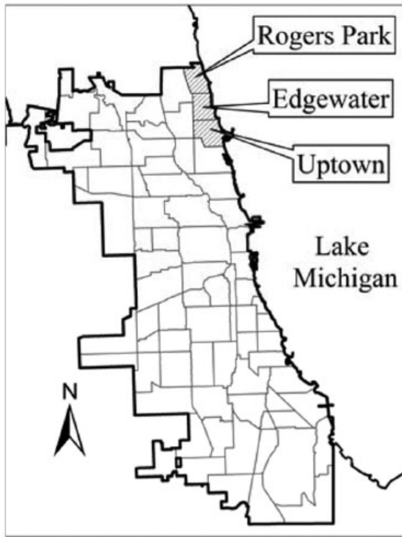

Figure 1. Chicago's Far North Side community areas.
Source. Author.

loitering. Furthermore, I analyzed newspaper articles, blogs, and organizational materials.

When joining positive loitering events, I partook in group activities just like any other group member. I made small talk, walked the block, and scrutinized the urban environment. Occasionally, I asked questions to learn how participants interpreted a given situation. As an obvious outsider—a white foreigner with a European accent—it was relatively easy for me to take this role: subjects found my ignorance understandable and generally shared their experiences freely. I was open about my status as a researcher, although I was somewhat vague about what exactly I studied. To my knowledge, participants interpreted my presence as an interest in the efficacy of positive loitering, and I did not contest this interpretation. By extension, I did not initiate conversations about race. Even when conducting interviews, I addressed racial issues only indirectly. Because my goal was to study the effects of the sociopolitical context and interactions on the enactment of whiteness, bringing up race myself would have produced the very outcome I wanted to study as a naturally occurring phenomenon. Consequently, my findings provide more insight into action than experience, because I could not always ask about the latter.

I wrote down extensive field notes after returning from the field, and I repeatedly read and coded my notes. First, I identified and classified all negotiations of race I observed within each group. I then further developed my understanding of particular situations and the two groups by making within-case and across-case comparisons (George and Bennett 2005). These comparisons helped me think about the groups and relevant incidents with more analytic precision.

RACE AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF POSITIVE LOITERING

The Far North Side is located along the lakefront of Lake Michigan, just north of a set of wealthy neighborhoods stretching north from Chicago's downtown area (see Figure 1). On its northern edge, Rogers Park borders the city of Evanston, home of Northwestern University. Over the past two decades, the Far North Side has become a desirable destination for middle-class households. The Far North Side is noteworthy in that it constitutes a racially integrated area (see Table 1) in a city otherwise known for its high levels of residential segregation. Because of gentrification, however, minority populations have shrunk, while the white population has grown. Nonetheless, the area still houses a substantial number of poor residents, many of them African American and Latino. In combination with the influx of new middle-class residents, this leads to a certain socioeconomic polarization, which is racialized insofar as most of the incoming homeowners are white, whereas many of the low-income renters are African American or Latino (for studies of these processes on the Far North Side, see Berrey 2015; Brown-Saracino 2009).

Police statistics indicate that the three community areas are relatively safe, but each of them contains areas that black—and, to a lesser extent, Latino[3]—street gangs claim as turf. For residents, the gang presence can entail encounters with loitering men and teenagers, drug dealing (mostly small amounts of marijuana), some of the aggressive demeanor associated with the "code of the street" (Anderson 1999), and occasional shootings, which pit rival gangs or warring factions against each other. Sometimes innocent bystanders are hit or even killed as well.

Street crime represents a "hot-button" issue on the Far North Side. Residents of all backgrounds tend to agree that the gangs pose a problem, but they do not always agree on what should be done. Often, their disagreements reveal deeper tensions over the course of neighborhood development. Residents critical of gentrification argue that complaints about crime first and foremost reflect the desire of white middle-class residents to speed up

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Table 1. Demographic Profile, Far North Side Community Areas and Chicago.

Variable	Edgewater	Rogers Park	Uptown	Chicago
Total population	56,521	54,991	56,362	2,695,598
Non-Hispanic white	55%	39%	52%	32%
Black or African American	14%	26%	20%	32%
Latino	16%	24%	14%	29%
Asian	12%	6%	11%	5%
Families below poverty level	12%	20%	21%	17%
Median family income	$64,963	$51,211	$58,195	$53,338
Index crimes per 1,000 residents	28	38	36	56

Sources. U.S. census (2010), American Community Survey (2008–2012), Chicago Police Department 2010 annual report.

gentrification and racial displacement. Among some residents, such concerns mesh with distrust of the police and the criminal justice system. This perspective endows positive loitering with racial meaning. Participating in positive loitering, whites enter a sociopolitical context in which their racial category can be a moral liability. Positive loiterers must accept the fact that they operate in a racially charged context, whatever their motives may be. In this difficult terrain, whiteness is conspicuous and can quickly become racially contested.

Before continuing, it is important to note that although my analysis focuses on whiteness as a potential liability in this specific context, this is not to argue that whiteness did not confer significant privileges. Most crucially, whites could conduct positive loitering without being mistaken for a criminal gang. Because they were white, they were "obviously" not gang members. They did not have to worry about the police searching or questioning them. Throughout my fieldwork, this never occurred; a black group of positive loiterers might not have been able to rely on this.[4] The white loiterers also did not have to worry about being mistaken for a gang by other gangs. Occasionally, persons who were not gang members were shot or killed during drive-by shootings, but these victims were invariably black—they simply had the bad fortune of resembling a targeted gang member or of loitering in a spot where gang members often stood. In other words, being white provided a modicum of safety that, in more than one way, made positive loitering feasible in the first place.

THE NORTHTOWNERS

The Northtowners[5] were founded in a dense area of about eight city blocks. The local housing stock consisted of rehabbed condominium buildings, some low-income rental towers, and a few scattered-site public housing structures. Before the onset of the recession, real estate had been booming and many white residents had moved into this neighborhood. A black street gang had been active in this area for many years, but its presence was cyclical.[6] Undercover police operations sometimes suppressed the gang presence, but the gang reclaimed its territory as incarcerated gang members returned from jail or new members were recruited.

One summer, gang activity spiked as a group of young gang members began to deal drugs in the area. Several shootings occurred, one of which killed one of the gang members. Led by a white, long-term resident named Nina, several residents decided to form a positive loitering group. The Northtowners convened once a week on the corner of a busy neighborhood thoroughfare. The bright streetlights and the steady stream of cars made this a bad location for dealing drugs and other kinds of illegal activity. However, from this location, the positive loiterers could monitor an area down the block that often served as a gang corner.

Like Nina, some of the group's seven core members had been active in the local block club and community policing. Five of them were white condominium owners, but two African American women, Wanda and Erica, also regularly participated. Wanda lived in a subsidized townhouse and Erica rented a small unit in a rental building. Collaboration between the black women and the white positive loiterers never appeared to present an issue. Like the rest of the group, Erica and Wanda felt comfortable working with the police to combat gang activity. In fact, Wanda was much more outspoken in her disdain for the gangs than the white Northtowners.

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The Northtowners lacked any signs of belligerence. Participants often brought baked goods that they shared with one other and passersby. Some homeless people became so used to their presence that one would occasionally walk up to them and ask for food. The Northtowners also maintained relatively open group boundaries, trying to foster conversations with pedestrians. I should add, however, that the Northtowners nonetheless constituted and regarded themselves as a community policing group. The Northtowners hoped that the loitering events would discourage illegal activity, and they called 911 when they saw groups of teenagers congregating whom they believed to be gang members. They also collaborated with the alderman and the police to support arrests and evictions.

The Northtowners and the Sociopolitical Context of Positive Loitering

The Northtowners were quite aware that positive loitering could be perceived as a racial practice. Race frequently came up without someone prompting the Northtowners to talk about it. In fact, I learned that the group's white members considered their whiteness to be politically meaningful even as I negotiated my access as a researcher. The first Northtowners I met were Sarah and Eric, a white couple in their 50s. After having introduced myself to Eric during a community bike ride, I called Sarah about the possibility of joining the Northtowners. Sarah was skeptical. She told me that she did not want to deal with people with an "agenda." To explain, she invoked a work-related experience she once had, organizing a seminar for the residents of one of Chicago's infamous public housing projects. In this context, a journalist had challenged her: "And she was just so rude! 'What are you white people doing here, coming into this neighborhood?'" In telling me this, Sarah informed me that she did not want me around if I was simply out to frame her as a bigot. This shows that she was aware that participating in positive loitering highlighted her whiteness. Although Sarah and Eric eventually accepted my presence, they remained suspicious. Eric declined to be interviewed for this study. And during an unrelated community event, Sarah reached for my field notes in order to browse through them. I was sure to let her—the notebook did not contain any sensitive information.

The other white Northtowners were less defensive but nonetheless concerned about how their whiteness might be perceived. Nina, the organizer, stressed the importance of having black participants, because she worried about the political symbolism of an all-white group. She said,

> I've joked about it to Wanda and Erica and they totally acknowledge that it's an issue, and I say to them all the time, you know, "I don't want this to be just a bunch of worried white people standing on the corner."

Nina thus attributed significance to the group's composition, which demonstrates that she perceived positive loitering as a racialized or, at least, racializable practice. Being "just a bunch of worried white people" in this context would have been racially suspect. Instead, the Northtowners thought that the group should unite residents around the goal of safety. Nina said,

> Okay, there's like this crime-fighting element to [positive loitering], but I also just feel like making those connections between blacks and whites—I feel that's pretty much all that we got. Because then everybody can trust each other a little more.

Corresponding to this goal, the Northtowners reached out to other groups and residents. Perhaps most importantly, the Northtowners created a tie to a local violence prevention program (VPP) that was well known and respected among African American residents.

One night, two of the VPP's violence prevention workers, Deon (African American) and Juan (Latino), came across the seven Northtowners, and the two groups started talking about the gang problem, the VPP, and positive loitering. That evening, a white man named Jim joined the Northtowners for the first time, after previously having loitered with a different positive loitering group. Jim told Deon, "This is actually my first time here. The group I usually go to is actually all white." With a giggle, he added, "For some reason." Deon said that positive loitering could be a good thing and continued, "And it probably works better when it's a little diverse." This interaction shows that Jim, like Nina, considered the composition of positive loitering groups to be racially meaningful, an assessment that Deon validated.

The Northtowners and the VPP workers then talked about the importance of overcoming racial divides. Referencing past conflicts in the community over crime and gentrification, Nina said, "You know, it's actually just the past few years that we've gotten people to accept that there's a [gang]

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problem. That this is not just a bunch of white people pointing fingers." Deon told the group that the VPP had just recently been implemented in the neighborhood and that his supervisor was looking for ways to connect with the white middle-class population. As an opportunity to do so, Sarah invited the violence prevention workers to set up an info table at an upcoming block party. The VPP accepted the offer and sent Deon to join the event. I hung out with Deon for a good part of the afternoon to see how residents would respond. Indeed, Deon was able to introduce the program to a substantial number of white middle-class residents. The VPP appreciated the Northtowners' support, and Deon and Juan occasionally returned to participate in the loitering events, which further increased the group's racial heterogeneity.

These data show that the white Northtowners did not feel racially invisible when participating in positive loitering. Clearly, the group's members anticipated that their public safety work might be perceived through a racial lens. The issue of race repeatedly arose as an actual or potential dividing line in the neighborhood. In particular, having a diverse group was highlighted as an important means of communicating benign intentions.

The Northtowners and Racial Challenges

The actions I described in the previous section could be described as cautious efforts to prevent racial challenges. Vetting me as a participant-observer, having black participants, and reaching out to black organizations such as the VPP would appear to reduce the chance that the Northtowners would be challenged on the basis of their whiteness. The Northtowners nonetheless did not entirely escape racial challenges, but this section shows they were willing to discuss their critics' complaints when such situations arose.

Mimi, a white woman in her 30s, was once volunteering in the kitchen of a homeless shelter together with an African American woman when Mimi's involvement in positive loitering came up. The woman told Mimi that positive loitering merely "drives a bigger wedge." According to Mimi, she said, "What good can a group of white people standing around do? What could they possibly know, when so many of the neighborhood's problems are rooted in race and poverty?" This challenge demonstrates that Mimi's coworker regarded positive loitering as a racial practice. The woman had not actually met the Northtowners, but she believed that they *had* to be a group of white people, because positive loitering was for whites only. Although the charge was incorrect, Mimi maintained that her coworker "had a strong point." Mimi agreed that, after all, the Northtowners were still *mostly* white and might therefore be perceived simply as a group of white people. Mimi tried to convince her coworker that positive loitering was conducted with good intentions and eventually just "agreed to disagree" with her—rather than dismissing her challenge as unfounded, which she could have done.

The Northtowners encountered another racial challenge in the aftermath of yet another shooting that killed a young black man. Some black residents organized a vigil, but the police interrupted it, telling the gathered crowd to disperse. One of those present was Leticia, an African American community activist in her 40s. I knew her through her involvement in an organization that was highly critical of gentrification and community policing. Leticia told me that the vigil's participants interpreted the police response as "a race thing. Because we were black, you know." Leticia decided to go to a community policing meeting to complain about the police response. At that meeting, Nina had just advertised the Northtowners' positive loitering events, when Leticia spoke up, sounding indignant:

> To piggyback on what [Nina] said about positive loitering. There's been a couple of shootings, so we were out there last Wednesday in response to that. The police pulled up and told us we had to leave. So, can you tell us what would be the difference between responding to a shooting in your community, and trying to take back your streets and positive loitering?

Leticia's question constituted a problem for the Northtowners. Given her interpretation of the police response as a "race thing," Leticia insinuated that the reason the vigil had been interrupted (but positive loitering had not) was that vigils were for blacks and positive loitering for whites. Responding to Leticia first, the police sergeant suggested that the officers had probably worried about gang members targeting the vigil, an explanation that Leticia eventually accepted. Additionally, Nina assured Leticia that she supported the vigils and asked to be informed about future events so that the Northtowners could participate. She also invited Leticia and her fellow activists to join the Northtowners. Indeed, Leticia joined the Northtowners for their next positive loitering,

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which surprised me, because Leticia's community organization explicitly charged that community policing and positive loitering were strategies of gentrification. I interviewed Leticia to find out how she experienced her contact with the positive loiterers. She said,

> I expected to get there and sort of feel like an outsider, or sort of get like "What is *she* doing here?" You know, and actually I didn't get that at all. I got: "Thank god, we need more diversity out here!" I think they know they are being perceived as us-against-them. And I think they appreciate other people, you know, bringing diversity to the group so they won't be perceived that way.

Like Mimi's coworker, Leticia had perceived the Northtowners as a racially exclusive group, but her experience convinced her that this was incorrect. She agreed with the Northtowners that divisions between black and white residents had to be overcome and that it would take interracial collaboration to make the neighborhood safer. She even became sympathetic of the racial awkwardness that positive loitering entailed for the white Northtowners. She understood that the Northtowners wanted black residents to attend positive loitering so that their community activism would not be perceived as racially aggressive "us against them."

Mimi's interaction with her coworker and Nina's efforts to accommodate Leticia show that the Northtowners were willing to discuss racial challenges, even when those challenges were uttered with a certain degree of hostility and when they were based on incorrect assumptions. This suggests that more than trying to simply deflect racial challenges and thereby reassert a sense of white racial invisibility, the Northtowners genuinely wanted to facilitate interracial dialogue and create new ties.

THE LAKESIDERS

The Lakesiders were founded by residents living along two blocks of a residential side street on the Far North Side. Walking this street and close-by blocks, one would not expect the area to suffer from any substantial problems. The houses, most of them typical Chicago "six-flat" buildings, appear well maintained, and the sidewalks and fenced yards are free from litter. The Lakesiders too had previously thought of their immediate neighborhood as a quiet and peaceful space, and those who had lived in the area for some time said that it had steadily grown safer over the past decade.

One summer, however, a black street gang increased its presence in the area, as some self-identified gang members moved into units along this street. Allegedly, the gang members dealt drugs from one of the units and from nearby street corners. Because of a gang conflict, several shootings occurred on this street and nearby over the following months. In the aftermath of one shooting, which killed a non-gang-affiliated black man, a number of residents formed a positive loitering group, the Lakesiders. The core group consisted of eight members, all of them white, but heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, and class. Bob, a retired working-class man in his mid-50s, organized the group together with Steve, a young and well-educated professional.

The Lakesiders arranged the group's first event through an Internet forum on which they had debated the drug dealing and the shootings. Initially, the group scheduled two or three loitering events per week, with each event lasting as long as three hours. A few times, events began at midnight and continued into the early morning, reflecting the participants' sense of urgency. The Lakesiders felt that the neighborhood was rapidly deteriorating around them, and much of their conversation revolved around how often they had to call 911. In the interest of securing attention from the police and the alderman, they encouraged one another to call the police as frequently as possible.

Corresponding to their anxiety about the neighborhood, the Lakesiders created an aggressive style of positive loitering. Most important, they developed a practice they called "cat and mouse." When playing cat and mouse, the Lakesiders would stand across from groups of (usually adolescent) black loiterers and stare at them. If that group then moved to a different corner, the Lakesiders sometimes followed them to continue with the game. This practice came to define the group: it was what the Lakesiders expected to do together. In playing cat and mouse, the Lakesiders aimed to disrupt drug deals and other illicit activity. They knew that the cat-and-mouse game was risky—they were in fact threatened a few times—but the participants also felt exhilarated by the power that the group conferred them.

For example, one night, six of the Lakesiders loitered after a shooting occurred in the neighborhood. The Lakesiders repeatedly called the police about groups of black teenagers walking through the area, because they felt trouble was brewing. As

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two black teenagers were approaching us on the sidewalk, one of them asked, "Are these the people that are calling the police?" The other one answered, "Yeah, that's them bitches." As they walked past us, he looked at us and loudly imitated the sound of gunshots—"pow, pow, pow." The Lakesiders remained silent until the two had disappeared but were visible shaken by the experience.

A few minutes later, an unmarked police car stopped by, presumably in response to the group's earlier calls to 911. Rita, an older white woman, told the officers about the threat and asked whether the Lakesiders had to worry about retaliation. One officer said, "I don't want to say that nothing could ever happen to you. But if something were to happen to anyone of you, it would be over for them and they know it." The Lakesiders seemed reassured. The officer also said that he could arrest and hold the two teenagers overnight, if one of us was willing to file a complaint. Steve volunteered and the officers drove off in search of the teenagers. As this incident shows, the Lakesiders were sometimes able to exercise power over public space.

The Lakesiders and the Sociopolitical Context of Positive Loitering

For a few months, the Lakesiders were not subjected to any racial challenges that forced them to account for their whiteness. Unlike the Northtowners, the Lakesiders did not consider their whiteness as a risk of encountering racialized tension. Of course, this is not to say that the Lakesiders were not aware of race. For example, the Lakesiders certainly recognized that their cat-and-mouse game opposed racially homogeneous "teams," the white positive loiterers and the black groups of presumed gang members. Once, as a group of black teenagers left a location across the street from us, Britney, a woman in her 30s, said, "They must be so confused by us just standing here." Rita laughed and responded, "I know! 'What are all those white people doing out there?!'" However, the Lakesiders never talked about the potential of facing opposition from anyone but the gang itself, and when such opposition first materialized, they were both surprised and exasperated—I describe these events in the next section. I found no evidence suggesting that the Lakesiders perceived positive loitering as a racially contestable practice. In other words, positive loitering did not seem to make them racially self-conscious.

Perhaps the clearest evidence I have for this inference is that I did not have to overcome any concerns to gain access. Comparing my rapport with the two positive loitering groups, the situation was ironic. As I discussed earlier, at least two Northtowners, Sarah and Eric, never quite became comfortable around me—worrying what I might write about them—even though the Northtowners were multiracial. By contrast, the Lakesiders, who were all white and much more aggressive in their practices, showed no signs of apprehension about my presence.

The Lakesiders and Racial Challenges

As the Lakesiders became more widely known in the neighborhood, the group acquired a certain notoriety among left-leaning social workers, community organizers, and residents. As a result, the group and its whiteness became contested, although there initially was interest in working with the positive loiterers. For example, an umbrella group of social workers focusing on the reintegration of ex-offenders invited Steve and Bob to one of their meetings to talk about the Lakesiders. I did not attend this meeting, but I witnessed how Steve and Bob reported back to the group. Steve said, "I felt—and Bob agrees with me—that we were being cross-examined." Bob stated that after Steve and Bob had described the Lakesiders, the meeting's black facilitator had commented, "So, you are basically a group of white vigilantes!" Bob continued, "Steve and I looked at each other and we got up and left!" I cannot say how Steve and Bob described the Lakesiders and how this racial challenge was made. However, it is clear that Steve and Bob rejected the charge of vigilantism and the suggestion that racial resentment was at play. They left the meeting, refusing to discuss this accusation.

Complaints about the group also emerged on the street. Of course, the groups of teenagers that the Lakesiders scrutinized were obvious candidates for challenging the positive loiterers. One warm summer evening, the Lakesiders and I were again standing across from a group of suspected gang members. The group in question consisted of five or six young African American men and women, who were engrossed in conversation. The Lakesiders, tonight a group of nine, and I lined up under a row of shady trees, while the young people stood out in the open, under a streetlight. For some time, they ignored us and kept talking, but, as we continued to scrutinize them, they began to look over. Ultimately, one of the men walked up to the curb on his side of the street and started shouting "Trayvon Martin!" increasing in volume and

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assertiveness as he repeated his exclamation three times. He then turned on his heels and walked back to his friends, who cheered him and gave each other high fives. They demonstratively resumed their conversation, making it a point to ignore us. In shouting "Trayvon Martin," the young man communicated that he believed the Lakesiders to be thinking about him and his group as criminals. Furthermore, he charged the group with racism, given that the Trayvon Martin incident has become a symbol of (deadly) racial stereotyping in the context of neighborhood watch.

None of the Lakesiders responded, and we continued to stand in silence for a short while. Finally, we quietly walked off. Five minutes later, I asked Bob why we had left. I saw that the other positive loiterers were listening with interest. Bob replied, "They weren't going to move. They were digging in their heels." This answer neutralized the attribution of racism that we had just been subjected to. Bob suggested that we had moved because it had become clear that the teenagers were not going to disperse—not because the young man had shouted "Trayvon Martin." Most importantly, Bob's statement implied that the teenagers *should* have moved. Consequently, he defended the fact that we had categorized the teenagers as gang members.

Black residents were not the only ones to make racial challenges. Once, the group hosted a sidewalk barbeque. Standing a bit removed from the group, I was chatting with Steve, when a mustachioed, white, 30-something man stopped his bike next to us. He told us that he found the positive loitering group "confrontational": "I look at this group and it is all white. And this is a gentrifying neighborhood so I think it's really problematic what you are doing." Staying calm, Steve replied, "Well, it seems like you have made up your mind." Sharply, the man responded, "No, I have done the *math*." He again pointed to the negative symbolism of an all-white positive loitering group. In contrast to the "white vigilante" and "Trayvon Martin" charges, Steve decided to discuss this racial challenge. He said, "It's not exclusionary. Anyone can join us. Mostly, positive loitering is just about getting neighbors out so they can get to meet each other. Part of the reason why I moved here is *because* of the diversity." Through his levelheaded response, Steve was eventually able to calm the man down, although he insisted that the Lakesiders become more diverse because African Americans were going to perceive the group as aggressive. After he had left, Steve turned to me and said: "Phew! That could have gone either way! It seemed like it was going the one way, so I decided to try and take it the other way."

Accounting for the group's whiteness, Steve claimed that the Lakesiders were an inclusive group that appreciated the neighborhood's diversity. Drawing on the rhetoric of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2003), his response rejected the racial challenge without acknowledging that there might be anything wrong with positive loitering or the group in its current form. Of course, this assessment—that nothing was wrong with the group—was also why the Lakesiders had ignored or dismissed previous racial challenges, such as the ones I invoked above. Furthermore, Steve ignored the fact that, as I will show now, black residents did not perceive the group as welcoming. Overall, therefore, the Lakesiders dismissed racial challenges without seriously engaging the concerns that were brought up.

Fractured Ties

In some way or another, all of their critics' complaints were rooted in the Lakesiders' racial composition. The charge of "white vigilantism," for example, only made sense when wielded against a white group. Even the invocation of Trayvon Martin would have been relatively implausible had the Lakesiders been multiracial. Thus, recruiting black members could have been a useful strategy for preventing racial challenges. It would have reduced the racial conspicuousness of the white positive loiterers.

As a default, the Lakesiders argued that their race did not say anything about the group. When someone criticized the Lakesiders on a blog for their racial composition, Bob wrote, "Race is not a part of [positive loitering]! We will welcome anyone that wants to join us. . . . As far as the RACE [caps in original] card is concerned—it is a 'card' that doesn't need to be pulled." As the racial challenges continued, however, Bob decided that it would be helpful to have black participants. About a year after the Lakesiders launched the group, Bob explained that having black participants "would help us lose the title of white vigilantes." By that point, however, the group had already alienated those black residents who had initially been interested in working with the Lakesiders.

Although the Lakesiders started out as an all-white group, opportunities to incorporate black residents occurred just as the Lakesiders were beginning to be subjected to racial challenges. When their immediate neighborhood quieted down after several arrests and evictions had been made,

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the Lakesiders temporarily moved their positive loitering events to a different part of the neighborhood. There, several black women joined the Lakesiders for some time. Furthermore, the Lakesiders came into contact with the local team of the VPP that the Northtowners collaborated with. However, all of those ties eventually dissolved, because the Lakesiders were unwilling to address black participants' concerns.

As an example, consider the Lakesiders' contact with Margaret, a black senior, as well as the VPP. After VPP staff members and the Lakesiders chatted during a positive loitering event, Pete, an African American VPP worker, set up a meeting with Steve and Bob. Pete told me that he saw working with the positive loiterers as an opportunity to introduce white residents to some black teenagers. Pete thought that white residents, who were concerned about the gangs, should learn more about the teenagers so that they would come to understand that most teenagers were not involved in gangs, although their clothing and style might make them look that way to untrained eyes.

However, when Pete suggested that the group adopt a more communicative approach in order to engage some teenagers, the Lakesiders refused. In the aftermath of this disagreement, the relationship between the VPP and the Lakesiders became very strained. When a black man was shot and killed in the neighborhood, the VPP organized a prayer vigil, but the Lakesiders decided that they did not want to endorse the VPP by participating. Consequently, none of the Lakesiders attended—except for Margaret, the black senior. I had not seen Margaret in a while and used the occasion to catch up with her. As it turned out, Margaret had spoken with Bob about the vigil earlier that day.

> [Bob] didn't even want to come over and do the prayer vigil! So what I'm saying: If you're going to do all this stuff, have walks and try to keep the community safe, you got to get rid of that racism.

Margaret felt that refusing to support a black initiative, such as the VPP, was racist. She explained that it was important for the entire community of law-abiding residents to support the full range of public safety work in the neighborhood, including the VPP. Margaret was frustrated that the Lakesiders rejected the vigil. Other black residents had similar experiences with the Lakesiders. Thus, with rare exceptions, the positive loitering group remained all white.

DISCUSSION

Marshaling ethnographic data from two positive loitering groups, I have examined whiteness in action with a particular emphasis on self-conscious enactments of whiteness. These data reveal how whites position themselves in relation to their racial category in racially charged contexts and situations. The first group, the Northtowners, perceived positive loitering as a racialized social context in which caution needed to be exercised in order to avoid division and racial challenges. The group incorporated black residents and created an inclusive style of positive loitering by sharing food and maintaining relatively open group boundaries. When nonetheless faced with racial challenges, the Northtowners engaged their critics rather than dismissing their charges.

The second group, the Lakesiders, appeared to be oblivious to the sensitive context of positive loitering and the possibility of encountering racial challenges. They developed a style of positive loitering that some residents perceived as racially aggressive, including the practice of staring down groups of black teenagers in order to disperse them. They also failed to incorporate black participants. When they encountered racial challenges, the Lakesiders either dismissed or ignored those challenges. They tried to reestablish their white racial invisibility, avowing that race had nothing to do with positive loitering.

These findings illuminate how racialized contexts and situations shape white racial awareness and practice. Entering racially charged contexts can, but does not inevitably, make whites racially self-conscious. As the case of the Lakesiders demonstrates, whites do not necessarily anticipate any potential for racial tension when operating in contested social contexts, such as conducting positive loitering in gentrifying neighborhoods. By contrast, racial challenges *always* create racial self-consciousness, because they explicitly problematize whiteness. However, whites have the option of engaging or dismissing these charges. Using the two groups to think about what racial challenges accomplish, these findings are ironic and, from the normative perspective of anti-racism, worrisome (e.g., Kendall 2006). The Northtowners, who were already quite attuned to race as a social cleavage, were prepared to discuss race and bridge racial divides, whereas the Lakesiders were unwilling to do either, although the racial challenges they encountered were arguably more justified. This may imply that whites that are already committed to racial justice are relatively responsive to racial

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criticism, while racially conservative whites are more resistant.

In the sociopolitical context of positive loitering, challenges often revolved around group composition. Both the Northtowners and the Lakesiders faced opposition primarily on the basis of residents' perceptions that positive loitering was a white, racially exclusive practice. This finding adds an interesting perspective to the literature on group composition and homophily (for a review, see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Researchers in this field investigate how demographic constraints and individual preferences result in racial patterns of networks and groups. However, this literature overlooks the emergent political properties of group composition. Group composition can be taken as an indicator of a group's political leanings. Having black participants can help a group signify that it is not pursuing goals that are detrimental to blacks. For example, this helps explain why black Republicans, although they constitute a small group, are heavily represented at Republican conventions (Fields 2012).

This study complements and expands work on whiteness that focuses on the dispositional factors of white racial awareness (Frankenberg 1993; McKinney 2005). Neither the Northtowners nor the Lakesiders adhered to radical racial ideologies that entail more or less permanent awareness of race and whiteness in social life. Instead, contextual and situational factors variably highlighted their whiteness and thereby engendered self-conscious white racial practice. Of course, this is not to say that individual racial dispositions did not matter. The importance of different political beliefs about race, for instance, is revealed by the fundamentally different ways in which the Lakesiders and the Northtowners responded to racial challenges. The Lakesiders seemed to be deeply influenced by the ideology of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2003), while the Northtowners acknowledged race as an important social dividing line that could and needed to be discussed.

Because I had to exercise great caution in gauging racial attitudes, findings about the interaction between dispositions and racially charged contexts and situations must be considered tentative. This is also why I do not attempt to explain *why* the two groups were so different from each other. Answering this question would require substantial information about participants' dispositions and past racial experiences that I could not gather. Methodologically, this shows that interview and observation-based studies must complement each other (see also Lamont and Swidler 2014). Observation provides valuable data of action in situ, but since interviewing is often a one-time intervention, interviewers can afford to ask questions that ethnographers may have to avoid.

Another limitation of this study is that all racial challenges were made by (or on behalf of) African Americans. The relationship between blacks and whites is much more contested than those between whites and most other ethnoracial groups. Consequently, whites probably react more strongly to racial challenges that are rooted in charges of racism against African Americans. One open question is how whites might respond when other ethnoracial groups, such as Asians or Latinos, contest whiteness. Future studies should examine such configurations. They will become more and more important as the U.S. racial system continues to evolve (Craig and Richeson 2014; Lee and Bean 2007).

Finally, this study begins to address how strategies of community policing, such as positive loitering, influence racial divisions. Scholars have occasionally commented on the potential effects of community policing on multiracial community, both optimistically (Kelling and Coles 1996) and skeptically (Skogan 1988). A full analysis of the racial dynamics of community policing is still needed. Nonetheless, on the basis of the two cases discussed in this study, it is clear that community policing can both unite and divide multiracial communities. The Northtowners' willingness to discuss race and to engage their critics facilitated the production of new interracial ties, while the Lakesiders' stoic colorblindness alienated potential black collaborators. Thus, different styles of whiteness and negotiating race clearly matter (see also Emerson 2006; Lichterman 2005). Future research should examine the interrelations of race and community policing in more detail.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their comments on previous versions of this paper, I would like to thank Jeffrey Denis, David Engel, Joshua Garoon, John Levi Martin, Nicole Marwell, Japonica Brown-Saracino, Kristen Schilt, Nitasha Sharma, Forrest Stuart, and Richard Taub.

FUNDING

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation (SES-1303625).

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NOTES

1. I use the concepts of racial "self-awareness" and "self-consciousness" simply to describe situations in which whites believe their racial category to be meaningful in the sense that it is contested or contestable. In other words, the concepts denote the opposite of feeling racially "invisible." However, they do not necessarily entail racial consciousness in the sense of embracing a specific political conviction, for example, in the way that Black Power signals a form of black racial consciousness.
2. It is important to note that whiteness is rarely "invisible" to nonwhites. White privilege and racial exclusion may be difficult to see for whites but easy to see for nonwhites (Frankenberg 2001). African American scholars have written about whiteness for more than a century (see Roediger 1998). And although, for example, the fact that a gathering of some kind is all white may not mean anything to a white person, it is often regarded as meaningful by nonwhites (Lewis 2004).
3. The Latino gangs were not a major issue of concern for most residents. There were two main reasons for this. First, unlike the black gangs, the Latino gangs rarely dealt drugs, at least not in public. Additionally, on the Far North Side, the Latino gangs hardly ever became involved in fights or shootings, which took place almost exclusively between black gangs.
4. Chicago's stringent antiloitering ordinance, designed to suppress gang activity, was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1999 (Greenhouse 1999). Since then, the police cannot arrest individuals simply for loitering outside of specifically designated zones, such as the blocks adjacent to a neighborhood school. However, it was widely known that the police frequently "asked" suspicious loiterers to disperse.
5. All names of individuals and organizations have been replaced with pseudonyms.
6. My account of the gangs and their activities is based on information obtained from the police, social workers who worked with gang members, the aldermen's ward office staff members, residents, and my own observations.

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