

OXFORD



Mark R. Warren

Fire in the Heart

How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice

Fire in the Heart

Recent Titles in
OXFORD STUDIES IN CULTURE & POLITICS
Clifford Bob and James M. Jasper, General Editors

Fire in the Heart: How White Activists

Embrace Racial Justice

Mark R. Warren

MARK R. WARREN

Fire in the Heart

How White Activists

Embrace Racial Justice

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2010 by Mark R. Warren

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Warren, Mark R., 1955–

Fire in the heart : how white activists embrace racial justice / Mark R. Warren.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-975124-2; ISBN 978-0-19-975125-9 (pbk.)

1. Unites States—Race relations. 2. Race discrimination—United States.

3. Racism—United States. 4. Whites—United States—Attitudes.

5. Social action—United States.

I. Title

E184.A1W256 2010

305.800973—dc22 2010009517

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To my father, Russell,

To my partner in life, Roberta,

To our daughters, Sade and Imoh,

With love and hope for a better world

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get back, when brown can stick around, when yellow will be mellow, when the red man can get ahead, man, and when white will embrace what is right.

—From the benediction delivered by Reverend Joseph Lowery
at the inauguration of Barack Obama as the first African American
president of the United States, January 20, 2009

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xv

CHAPTER ONE	Introduction: From White Passivity to Racial Justice Activism	i
CHAPTER TWO	Starting Down the Road: Seminal Experiences and the Moral Impulse to Act	23
CHAPTER THREE	From Do-Gooder to Deeper Commitment: Relationships with People of Color	55
CHAPTER FOUR	Getting to the “Want To”: Moral Visions and the Purposeful Life	81
CHAPTER FIVE	Working with White People: Challenging Racism in the Context of Inclusion	113
CHAPTER SIX	Multiracial Collaboration: Creating “Right Relationships” under the “Weight of History”	149
CHAPTER SEVEN	“Where Do I Fit?”: Building New Identities in Multiracial Communities	183
CHAPTER EIGHT	Conclusion: Winning Hearts and Minds	211

<i>Appendix: The Telling and the Told: Notes on Research Methods and Data</i>	235
<i>List of Activists and Their Organizational Affiliations</i>	247
<i>Notes</i>	251
<i>References</i>	271
<i>Index</i>	285

PREFACE: “EMBRACING WHAT IS RIGHT”

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past, are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

—Barack Obama¹

I STARTED THE WRITING of this book the week before the 2008 Iowa caucuses, where a majority of white Democrats cast their ballot for an African American man for president of the United States. I finished writing the book in the week before Barack Obama’s historic inauguration. While Obama did not center his platform on racial justice, he spoke eloquently about healing America’s racial wounds. His election was widely seen as a step forward for racial justice. Indeed, endorsing his candidacy represented support for racial

justice as part of a larger vision Obama articulated for a better America. As such, Obama's campaign shows the possibilities for tens of thousands of white volunteers to take action for racial justice and for millions of white Americans to take positive steps to vote for a better future that includes greater justice.

Obama's white supporters "embraced what is right" at that historic moment. In other words, they did not work or vote for Obama because they felt that they *should*. Rather, they *wanted* to do so. They responded to Obama's call for a more perfect union and saw it in their own interests. I do not wish to exaggerate the meaning of Obama's election for racial justice. People likely had multiple reasons for voting for Obama, but in a very important way many white Americans embraced this step toward racial justice.

I started the research for this project several years before Obama declared his candidacy. I first heard Obama's name from Madeline Talbott, a Chicago community organizer I was interviewing for this project. She told me one reason she held hope for progress in racial justice lay in the white support she saw for Obama's effort at the time to win the Democratic nomination for Illinois senator. I returned home from the trip to the news of his success and began to follow his career more closely. Yet at the time few people would have believed that white Americans would vote for a black man in numbers sufficient for him to win the presidency.

Obama had barely finished giving his acceptance speech when some pundits began declaring that America had entered a postracial era. To them, Obama's election meant that racism was a thing of the past. Yet, a few days before finishing the book, on New Year's Day in 2009, a white Bay Area transit police officer shot an unarmed African American in the back and killed him. Thousands of young African Americans and others outraged by the shooting of Oscar Grant III demonstrated in the streets of Oakland. Many denounced the killing as part of a pattern of police violence against young black men. Some vented their anger by vandalizing hundreds of cars and businesses.²

While Obama's election represents a historic step forward, the struggle for racial justice continues. Certainly, people of color will continue to work against the systems that trap poor African American men like Oscar Grant. However, further progress also depends, as Obama's election did, on the active support of large numbers of white Americans. In Barack Obama we have a very powerful story of individual success. How might white Americans come to be engaged in efforts to deal systematically with the racial injustices experienced by Grant and millions of other people of color like him?

As Obama's presidency began to implement its agenda in health care reform and other areas, the headiness of his election victory was transformed

into the day-to-day grind of pressure politics and compromise necessary to pass specific legislation. While it's important not to exaggerate the significance of white support for Obama's election, we should also not lose sight of the optimism and possibility that historic event offers. Indeed, we need to learn the lessons of that movement to understand the conditions under which white Americans can be moved to support racial justice efforts, a subject to which I return in the conclusion to this book.

I began this project with a puzzle in mind: How do people who are not themselves victims of discrimination come to develop a commitment to act for racial justice? I decided to seek some answers to that question by interviewing white people that had become activists for racial justice. In this book I present the findings of my interviews with fifty such activists from across the country.

While studies of white racism might fill a small library, the studies of white antiracism, if you will, could fit in a small bookcase. Perhaps this is as it should be in the sense that white racism has outweighed antiracism throughout history. Yet if we are interested in the possibilities of social change, we need to understand both the processes that perpetuate racism and those that lead in the direction of racial justice. This is a book about the possible.³

It turns out that, throughout U.S. history, many white Americans have been activists for racial justice. They participated in large numbers in the abolition movement against slavery and in the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties, among other efforts, yet their stories are not well known. I hope this is changing. Yet when I asked white students at Fordham College, where I used to teach, to name white people who inspired them by their commitment to racial justice, they could not list a single person. So I have continued to ask students who expressed concerns about racism the same question. Occasionally someone names John or Robert Kennedy and once in a while Morris Dees from the Southern Poverty Law Center, but that's about it.⁴

In fact, it might be fair to say that white racial justice activists are held in some suspicion both by white Americans and people of color. John Brown represents a potent symbol of this suspicion, at least by whites. Brown was a militant white abolitionist who led the armed assault on Harper's Ferry, which helped precipitate the Civil War and the eventual end to slavery. Yet what was the scholarly consensus about Brown for the next hundred years? White scholars declared Brown mentally deranged. They pointed to his fiery evangelical rhetoric. However, even to this day we are not short of religious firebrands, whose mental capacities have remained unquestioned. Neither are we short of black Americans who led violent slave revolts and whose rationality is

respected. Yet it seems that something must be wrong with a white American who is militantly antiracist.⁵ Meanwhile, many people of color can be suspicious of white activists. Black scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote a biography of John Brown, held him in high regard, but other white abolitionists were often criticized for paternalism. Young whites came south to support the civil rights movement in the sixties, but controversy surrounded their role as well. Black activists in more militant groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) worried about white domination of the movement and eventually asked whites to leave the organization. Some black friends of mine, when I told them I was writing a book on white racial justice activists, laughingly declared that it must be a short book.⁶

Actually, it's not a short book. In fact, I had no trouble finding many committed activists to interview for this study. Nonetheless, the jokes reveal something of the unease that continues to surround the white activist. Some may even worry about my intentions as a white person. Will I write a book that promotes the idea that white people are the saviors of people of color? I hope that this book contributes to a change in attitude and to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the role that white people can play and are playing in efforts to promote racial justice—not as “saviors” but as serious collaborators with activists of color.

I felt the time had come for this kind of broad study, a comprehensive examination of white racial justice activists across the country. I have been inspired and stimulated by some earlier work. Becky Thompson interviewed white activists in order to paint a sensitive and nuanced history of racial justice movements from the sixties through the nineties. Eileen O'Brien's pioneering work examined white activists working primarily with two organizations, an anti-Klan group in the Midwest and trainers with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond in New Orleans. Meanwhile, white authors like Tim Wise began writing accounts of their lives full of insight and advice for other whites concerned about racism.⁷

Indeed, I began to meet more and more white students alarmed about racism at Fordham and then later at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where I now teach. These students struggled for ways to help advance the cause of racial justice. Yet I was troubled that most of the attention was being paid to questions of white privilege and white identity. Whiteness studies in the academy, in my view, focused too exclusively on what it meant to be white and on white identity development. These are important issues, but I worried that white people might spend all of their time in introspection and never actually do anything. I wanted to study people who were committed to taking action for racial justice.⁸

As a work of scholarship, this book contributes to our understanding of the processes that lead some whites to an awareness of racism and a commitment to combat it. In addition to my scholarly purposes, I also hope the book inspires and helps white students at places like Fordham and Harvard and people like the white volunteers in Obama's campaign to deepen their commitments to racial justice and activism. The road to commitment has not been an easy one for the activists I interviewed, as we will see. The work for racial justice continually challenges them, as does the struggle to build truly collaborative relationships with people of color. But participating in the struggle for a more just society has given white activists tremendously fulfilling lives and, like the Obama volunteers, a place in history.

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE ORIGINS OF this book as a research project go back several years. However, I have been struggling with the ideas in this book ever since, as an emerging young adult, I realized I was different from the other white kids with whom I grew up. My father played a big role in that. I dedicate this book in part to my father because he was the first person who taught me that racism was wrong. A New Deal Democrat through and through, my father was a Teamster Union activist in his younger days and strongly supported the civil rights movement as it rose to national prominence in the sixties. Through the years we talked constantly about politics, and my father never lost his faith in the possibility of building a better world. I only regret he was not with us to celebrate Barack Obama's historic election.

During those years I became a political activist myself. For many years I worked mainly with other white activists as progressive circles seemed to mirror the segregation of the larger society. We were against racism for sure, but we did not have our feet planted very firmly on the ground. Eventually I was fortunate to find a multiracial group of talented and committed activists. I built close relationships with African American organizers who taught me about the black experience as we struggled to build a caring community dedicated to changing the world. I would like to thank all of the friends and activists with whom I worked during those years, many of whom are named here, for helping me start to understand what it takes to work hard for racial and social justice.

During those years I met and fell in love with Roberta, my partner in life. Her experience growing up as a black person in London gave her a determination and enduring passion to fight poverty and racism. Together we

have raised two beautiful daughters. As we have built a family together, the struggle against racism has become a deeply personal matter to me. At the same time I have been inspired by the possibility for new kinds of relationships and the hope that children bring.

I hope that these brief comments will help readers set this book in the context of my own life journey. Eventually I became a scholar, and I undertook this project as a carefully designed piece of sociological research. I draw upon the data I collected, that is, the interviews I conducted with fifty activists, to make arguments and build theory. I wrote this book to contribute to knowledge and understanding. However, I also wrote it to help all Americans, including my family and my activist friends, who are struggling to find ways to cross over the color line that has so deeply divided us.

Many, many people contributed to the ideas that find their way into this book and gave me the practical support and encouragement I needed to write it. First of all, I would like to thank the activists I interviewed for this book. I am inspired by their commitment and learned tremendously from their thoughtful reflections about the workings of race in American society. Some of them also discussed the ideas in the book or commented on parts of the manuscript. For their thoughtful comments, I would like to thank Perry Perkins, Susan Sandler, Madeline Talbott, Chester Hartman, John Heinemeier, Christine Clark, and Tony Fleo.

I discussed the ideas in this book with many friends and colleagues. For their insight and assistance, I would like to thank Lory (Tomni) Dance, Karen Mapp, Phil Thompson, Dayna Cunningham, James Bernard, Marshall Ganz, Xavier de Souza Briggs, John Diamond, Mica Pollock, Larry Bobo, Lani Guinier, Helen Haste, William Julius Wilson, Robert Putnam, Theda Skocpol, Charles Payne, Margaret Weir, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Mil Duncan, and Jose Calderon. In addition, a number of people read and made helpful comments on drafts of the manuscript. I greatly appreciate their effort to make this work stronger and better. I would like to thank Roberta Udoh, Chris Winship, Michele Lamont, Rick Weissbourd, John Rogers, Abby Ferber, Tommie Shelby, Jane Mansbridge, Omar McRoberts, Malia Villegas, Jim Jasper, and one anonymous reviewer for the press. I talked about this project early on with Tomni Dance, and her enthusiasm and support have been wonderful to me.

I presented parts of this work at the following venues and received helpful comments from participants: the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, the Civic Engagement Workshop at Tufts University, the Donald Bouma Lecture Series at Calvin College, the Institute

for the Study of Social Change at the University of California–Berkeley, the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, the Everyday Antiracism working group at Harvard, and sessions at annual meetings of the American Sociological Association and the American Education Research Association.

I was fortunate to have many wonderful students help me as research assistants. I would like to thank them not only for their terrific work but also for their excitement about the project and their contribution to the ideas contained in this book. This group includes Soo Hong, Malia Villegas, Cynthia Gordon, Jennifer Mott-Smith, Justin Draft, and Margaret Richardson. I am indebted to Soo, in particular, for helping me through so many stages of the project, during which she became a valued friend.

Many others helped with practical and technical matters. I would like to thank Ray Maietta and Cheri Minton for help with the data analysis software. For efficient and cheerful assistance I would like to thank the research librarians at Gutman Library: Kathleen Donovan, Carla Lillvik, Marcela Flaherty, and Leila Kocen. My staff assistant, Melita Garrett, has helped me in so many ways, big and small. Faith Harvey and Pat Varasso helped with financial accounting. Finally, I'd like to offer a special thanks to librarian Bob Rogers for his support, encouragement, and inspiration.

Institutional assistance has come from many sources. I would like to thank Henry Louis Gates and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University for offering me a fellowship that enabled me to design this project. The Russell Sage Foundation financially supported my research, as did the Mark DeWolfe Howe Fund at Harvard Law School. The Graduate School of Education at Harvard University also supported the project by providing both research funds and leave time. More generally, I would like to thank the graduate school for offering me a supportive environment in which to conduct this project. Dean Kathy McCartney and Associate Dean Daphne Layton helped me with concrete assistance at various points, which I truly appreciate.

Meanwhile, I have been fortunate to work with Karen Mapp and a group of doctoral students in the Community Organizing and School Reform research project at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. I have received warm support and great encouragement from this community, and our work together has taught me many things that have informed this book. Thanks go to Mara Tieken, Kenneth Russell, Carolyn Leung, Thomas Nikundiwe, Meredith Mira, Anita Wadhwa, Ann Ishimaru, Cynthia Gordon, Paul Kuttner, Mandy Taylor, Helen Westmoreland, Connie K. Chung, Keith Catone, Soojin Oh, Soo Hong, Roy Cervantes, Zenub Kakli, Phitsamay Sychitkokhong, Sarah

Dryden-Peterson, Tiffany Cheng, Kerry Venegas, Sky Marietta, and Dulari Tahbildar.

Rick Weissbourd and Avery Rimer opened up their Vermont home to me for concentrated periods of writing. I don't know whether I could have completed the project without those getaways. Rick, as my office mate and friend, provided steadfast support and enthusiasm for this project all through its trials and tribulations. I would also like to thank Rick's mother, Bernice Weissbourd, for her interest in and support of this project, in memory of her late husband and his social justice values. John and Kathy Campbell, Linda Tubach, and Bob McCloskey also opened their homes up to me for periods of writing as well, and I appreciate their generosity.

My editor, James Cook, shared my vision for this book from the moment he saw the manuscript. I have valued his enthusiasm, assistance, and support throughout the publishing process.

My friends and family have been a terrific source of support through the years of working on this project. I would like to thank my mom, Elena, my sisters and their families—Cindy, Michael, Nancy, Russ, and Jarrett—my late mum, Florence, and my brothers- and sister-in-law David, Adam, and Frances. My mum Florence was a special inspiration to me, a woman who reached out warmly across the color line when it was very hard and dangerous to do so. I seem to have so many friends who have given me loving support and encouragement. In addition to those mentioned earlier, I would like to thank Bernard and Nancy Duse, Barbara Wallen, Gary Paraboschi, Bob Halperin, Johanny and Melusi Hlatshwayo, James Bernard, Margarita Choy, Nancy Love, Marshall Moore, Ricardo Guthrie, Shawn Thomas, Ranjay and Anu Gulati, John, Julie, Becky, and the entire Wilson family, Tony and Colleen Fleo, and Mabel Thompson among others. I would also like to thank my friends in England: Andy Harris, Venkat Nilakantan, Marie-Helen and Duncan Kerr, Melanie Curtis, Vivian Stachin, Steve Desborough, and Al Martin.

Roberta Udoh has been my partner and soulmate throughout life. She has believed in me and supported this project wholeheartedly; without her help I would never have been able to write this book. I dedicate this book to her as well. As primary caregiver to our daughters, she has taught me how to raise a new generation of healthy young people who care deeply about social justice. Roberta more than anyone else has taught me this. Racial and social justice is not a cause "out there." It concerns how we live our lives on a daily basis, how we relate to people with dignity and respect, and how we work with others in big and small ways to fight oppression and build healthier human communities. Roberta personifies the passionate and caring life—the fire in the heart—and for that and everything else I thank her.

Our daughters, Sade and Imoh, have grown up with this book. In fact, I doubt they can remember a time when I wasn't working on it. To Imoh I owe thanks for suggesting the title. I dedicate this book to them and their future as well. For my part, I have enjoyed watching them grow into beautiful, young women who care about others and have minds of their own. They are also, like their mother, great dancers and a lot of fun.

This page intentionally left blank

Fire in the Heart

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

From White Passivity to Racial Justice Activism

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

—Edmund Burke

THIS BOOK IS about how white people can move from passivity to action in response to racism in America. It is a book about the possible—and the necessary. Indeed, I believe that further progress in racial justice depends on many more white Americans coming to an understanding of racism and developing a commitment to take positive action.¹

In my view, white passivity is the primary obstacle to further progress in achieving racial justice. Most whites do not want to keep people of color down; they do not work intentionally to do so. Rather, they remain passive—or apathetic, as Tyrone Forman has argued—in the face of continued racial inequality in the United States. In fact, most white Americans believe that racism is largely a thing of the past and therefore requires little action.²

Certainly important progress has occurred since the Jim Crow era. Legal segregation has ended, and opportunities have opened up for many African Americans. The black middle class has grown significantly since the sixties, with the proportion of black workers in white-collar jobs climbing from 11 percent in 1969 to 26 percent by the turn of the century. Meanwhile, the black poverty rate fell dramatically in the sixties and seventies, from nearly 60 percent to 30 percent. As I finished writing this book manuscript, Barack

Obama was elected to the nation's presidency, an inconceivable event forty years ago, perhaps even a few years ago.³

Yet racial inequality remains significant and in many ways quite persistent. African Americans earn, on average, about 57 percent of what whites earn and face twice the unemployment rate of whites at all levels of skill. The black poverty rate has remained mostly flat since the seventies; at nearly 30 percent, it is three times that of whites. Meanwhile, more than a third of all black children grow up in poverty in the United States, while 10 percent of white children live in poverty. If we consider low-income families to include those living on less than 150 percent of the poverty line, or \$21,000 per year for a family of four, then more than half of all black children grow up poor or nearly poor—more than half.

Wealth disparities are particularly striking. Middle-income blacks have about 15 percent of the wealth of middle-class whites; in fact, the highest-income blacks control financial assets similar to those of the lowest-income whites. In addition, 61 percent of black households have no financial assets at all. About 47 percent of blacks own their own home, while nearly 75 percent of whites do so; although this represents an increase from the 40 percent of black homeowners in the sixties, the gap between blacks and whites has actually increased since that time.⁴

For low-income blacks and Latinos concentrated in our nation's cities, conditions are truly dire. Far greater proportions of African Americans and Latinos than whites live in high-poverty neighborhoods that suffer from multiple problems, from crime and violence to environmental degradation and blight. Residents of these neighborhoods lack access to good jobs, good housing, and good schools. The consequences for the young people growing up under these conditions can be extreme: Nearly half of all black and Latino youth fail to graduate from high school on time. At the same time fully 30 percent of black males in their twenties are in the criminal justice system—in prison, on probation, or on parole.⁵

I have stressed the particularly difficult circumstances of poor African Americans. Some have debated whether racism or economics has more to do with inequality today. Undoubtedly, class and race are profoundly interconnected. Indeed, racism has historically been so intertwined with economic exploitation that it has never made sense to dichotomize the two. Was slavery a system of racism or of economic exploitation? The choice is a false one. Racism remains centrally implicated in economic and other forms of inequality faced by African Americans today. Moreover, studies consistently show profound inequality between blacks and whites at similar income levels and demonstrate the persistence of racialized dynamics in housing, employment, the criminal justice system, and other areas.⁶

White Passivity in the Age of Institutional and Color-Blind Racism

In the face of such clear evidence of racial injustice, why don't whites care? In part, many white people remain ignorant of the continued existence of racial inequality. Fully 81 percent of whites believe that blacks have as good a chance to get a job as whites, 79 percent think black children have as good a chance as white children to get a good education, and 86 percent say that they have the same chance as whites to get affordable housing. In a national survey sponsored by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 61 percent of whites said they believed African Americans had equal or better access to health care, half thought educational levels were the same or better for blacks, and nearly half thought the average African American had an income that was similar to or better than that of the average white person.⁷

This ignorance finds its roots in part in continued segregation. Despite some early gains in residential integration in the sixties and seventies, racial segregation has entrenched itself in American life. Many poor blacks are "hypersegregated" into urban neighborhoods that are almost entirely non-white. Furthermore, after some initial gains in the sixties and seventies, our schools are, in fact, more segregated today than in the late sixties. As a result, whites live in racial isolation from blacks, many living in virtually all-white communities. Only 15 percent of whites have even one close friend who is nonwhite. Whites may be less knowledgeable about racial inequities because they do not know people of color who experience them. They may occasionally hear statistics like those quoted earlier, but these statistics remain just that: numbers, not real people whom they know.⁸

Racial segregation also reinforces continued group identity by race. People of any group tend to care more about others whom they consider to be like them. We know that racial groups are not rooted in biology; rather, they are socially constructed. Yet these social inventions and group differences remain quite powerful when developed over hundreds of years of legal codes and social customs. As a result, even whites who recognize the existence of racial discrimination may feel that racism is not their immediate concern. Although some scholars have questioned how much of a white identity exists, most white Americans appear clear at least that they are not black. In a now well-publicized experiment, Professor Andrew Hacker asked his white college students how much money they would demand if they had to change from white to black. The students asked for fifty million dollars or one million dollars for every year they had to be black.⁹

White passivity may also be related to the nature of institutional racism today. Scholars have shown how contemporary patterns of racial inequality become perpetuated through institutional processes that do not require racist intent or overt prejudice on the part of individuals. For example, a key cause of educational injustice lies in the fact that low-income African American children attend school in aging buildings with fewer resources and lower proportions of qualified teachers than white children. Why do they do so when segregationist laws no longer exist? To summarize a complicated set of historical processes, a variety of racially discriminatory government housing policies, combined with white flight, worked to concentrate poor black families in inner-city neighborhoods. At the same time, financing schools through local property taxes ensures that inner-city school districts have fewer resources to provide for education than more affluent and whiter suburban communities. As a result, low-income black children receive an inferior education with highly unequal outcomes compared to most white children. Yet contemporary racial intent is not necessary to explain this inequality.¹⁰

Institutional racism is harder to recognize as racism. Recent research on “cumulative disadvantage” has showed how racial disadvantage builds up over time through the interactions of institutional processes like those briefly discussed. White Americans may not easily comprehend the historical and structural causes of inequality, but they can readily see its effects in crime, drug abuse, and broken homes. As Michael Brown and his associates have pointed out, “This phenomenon of selective perception is understandable in a sense, because the causes—the fundamental social processes that led to the symptoms—tend to be relatively invisible in the present, while the symptoms are all too visible.” Blaming cultural deficits in communities of color becomes easier than taking positive action to change structures.¹¹

Sometimes forms of prejudice operate within institutional racism and work to perpetuate it. For example, one reason low-income black families remain trapped in inner-city neighborhoods is that real estate agents continue to direct black families away from more affluent white communities. Meanwhile, studies have shown that police stereotyping of young black and Latino men contributes to their higher rates of arrest. Job discrimination falls particularly hard on less-skilled black men from inner-city communities, as employers’ stereotypes make it more difficult for them to get decent-paying jobs. The individual and the institutional are related in complicated ways. After all, individuals act within institutions: Some can passively follow normal institutional practices; others can challenge them.¹²

However, racial prejudice today is more subtle and complex and in that sense is not always appreciated as racism. Many people understand racism

only as intentional prejudicial actions perpetrated by individuals—overt racism if you will. This form of blatant racism, while more dominant before the civil rights movement, has now declined. Surveys of white attitudes document this dramatic shift. While 68 percent of white Americans supported segregated schools in 1942, only 7 percent did so in 1982. The percentage of white Americans who believe that whites should receive preference over blacks for jobs dropped from 55 percent in 1942 to 3 percent in 1972. In other words, whites broadly reject the ideas of legalized segregation and open discrimination, as well as the inherent inferiority of blacks to whites.¹³

Racial prejudice mainly takes a cultural form today by blaming black failure on a lack of effort or care rather than attributing it to biological inferiority. Consequently, whites can hold ambivalent views about people of color, sometimes expressing prejudice and other times egalitarian views. How whites act appears to depend on the situation and on a confluence of factors about the particular person of color in question. In some circumstances whites treat people of color with respect and as equals, voting for Barack Obama for president, for instance. At other times, they judge blacks on the basis of stereotypes, such as when they cross a dark city street when a group of young black men approaches them. Whites appear to judge low-income blacks in more stereotypical ways than middle-class African Americans, but even more affluent blacks face discrimination as well.¹⁴

This kind of racial prejudice fits well into the dominant color-blind ideology of our era. With the demise of legal segregation and the rise of legal protections for civil rights, people of color now, formally at least, have equal opportunity. Under this dominant ideology, whites can explain continued racial inequality by reference to the cultural deficits of African Americans. White Americans are also strong believers in the American dream—that in the United States anyone can achieve and that success depends on hard work and merit. Accepting the reality of racial inequality and discrimination runs counter to these deeply held beliefs and may be resisted for that reason as well. White Americans can find consistency in their beliefs in the American dream by locating the causes of racial inequities in the cultural deficits of people of color.¹⁵

Media portrayals continue to reinforce stereotypical images and cultural explanations for racial inequities. For example, television news programs focus on black crime and poverty far out of proportion to the reality of black lives. At the same time, primetime television shows overportray successful black professionals. On the one hand, that practice could be seen as racial progress, normalizing black success. However, studies show that, since these black characters typically exist in a largely white world, whites perceive them

as unrepresentative of their race. Indeed, whites interpret these examples of individual success as proof that anyone can make it in the United States through hard work and merit, thereby reinforcing cultural explanations of black poverty. Meanwhile, since most whites live their lives segregated from people of color, particularly from poor blacks and Latinos, they have little direct experience with the operations of institutional racism.¹⁶

Because whites no longer view black inferiority as biological and turn to cultural explanations for patterns of racial inequality instead, many do not recognize some of their own attitudes as based upon prejudice. In other words, police officers may believe that young black men deserve special scrutiny because they are more likely to commit crimes. Teachers may believe that black kids work less hard at school because their parents do not value education or because they live in poverty. Most white Americans like these claim they are color blind and no longer discriminate. Indeed, white Americans often resist when confronted with evidence of their own racist thinking. Of course, from the point of view of persons of color who are being judged—and mistreated—because of the color of their skin, these actions are by definition racist.¹⁷

Whites may continue to be passive in the face of racism because it aligns with their structural position in American society. By that I mean that whites benefit, relatively speaking, from their position in the racial hierarchy. A long line of sociological research has demonstrated that people at the top of a social system are likely to adopt beliefs or accept an ideology that justifies their position in society. White Americans' views about race may be no different.¹⁸

There has been an outpouring of research and writing on the concept of white privilege. If people of color are disadvantaged by racism, then whites must be advantaged by the same system. In other words, racism indicates a relationship among racial groups, that is, a racial hierarchy with whites on top. These advantages can be quite material, for example, when whites have access to better-paying jobs and higher housing values. They can be powerful in perpetuating white advantage, for example, in the ability to send one's children to good schools. However, privilege can also lie at the more personal or status level, as in the ability to shop without being suspected by store staff. Some scholars have stressed that one of the primary privileges of being white is simply the ability to take whiteness for granted. White culture is "normal," while other so-called subcultures are judged against it.¹⁹

The concept of white privilege, however, is not without its problems. One might not think of these benefits as "privileges" but more as rights or forms of social provision that everyone should have. Moreover, the term masks

important class differences among whites. In other words, not all whites are equally privileged. Poor and working-class whites lack many of the privileges that more affluent whites enjoy. Nevertheless, the poorest white person can still experience the psychic benefit of feeling superior to a person of color. Finally, whites may have a broader or longer-term interest in joining with people of color, which trumps any short-term advantage to white privilege. I discuss this particular issue in greater depth later in this book, but suffice it to say at this point that the concept of (relative) white privilege helps us understand why whites might remain passive and less likely to acknowledge the operations of racial discrimination or injustice.²⁰

The Failure of Political Will

The concept of white privilege helps shift the burden of explaining racial inequality away from the cultural deficits of people of color and toward the practices of the dominant society. Long ago W.E.B. Du Bois critiqued American society for targeting African Americans as the “problem.” Black Power advocates in the sixties, for their part, asserted that the “problem” lay in the morality of the dominant white society, which at worst sought to perpetuate racism and at best stood passively by, turning a blind eye to racial discrimination. From this standpoint, white Americans have a particular responsibility to address persistent racial inequity and injustice. The Kerner Commission issued a political and moral challenge to Americans in the wake of the riots of the sixties, calling for a “massive, compassionate, and sustained” assault on the crisis of the inner city. However, as the civil rights movement receded in the seventies and a new consensus settled in, Americans largely failed to address this challenge. We are now left with that legacy.²¹

Understanding the workings of institutional racism and the legacy of historic discrimination sheds a spotlight on the need for positive action to achieve racial justice. Unless positive action is taken, the so-called normal workings of the system will continue unabated. In other words, although positive intent to discriminate is not necessary to perpetuate racial inequities, positive intent to act is necessary to rectify racial injustice.

Action, of course, needs to come both from white people and from people of color. Certainly organized action by people of color themselves will continue to play a critical role in working to advance the cause of racial justice. However, since whites continue to dominate the positions of power in American institutions, progress toward racial justice will require moving whites from passivity to action against racism.

Yet, in the face of all of the factors reviewed here, it is perhaps not surprising that most whites remain passive in the face of continued racial inequality. Although scholars have done a good job of analyzing the persistence of racism, we have by contrast very little understanding of how to build a consensus for action. Consequently, we face the following pressing question: How can white Americans come to care enough about racism to take action against it?

A New Movement?

Certain factors may help in moving whites from passivity to action. Although I have described the force of color-blind ideology, which supports the persistence of racism, it would be wrong to see this ideology as monolithic. In fact, American racial ideology contains important contradictions and alternative currents. First of all, there is a strong consensus that racism is wrong and unacceptable. Few whites will defend discrimination on the basis of race.²²

Second, many white Americans remain troubled by the persistence of racial inequality. They may be swayed by the tenets of color-blind ideology to look for cultural explanations, and they may not normally be alarmed enough to move beyond passivity. However, many remain concerned. White Americans, for example, were widely repulsed by the treatment of African Americans in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, the fact that the phrase “driving while black” has entered the American vernacular indicates recognition of the continued reality of racial discrimination and a sense that it is wrong.²³

Indeed, there is growing interest among many white Americans in addressing racism. The last ten years has witnessed a small but rapidly expanding literature by white activists and commentators specifically directed toward white people. These include *White like Me* by Tim Wise, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel, and *Lifting the White Veil* by Jeff Hitchcock, among others. There are now conferences devoted to the subject, like the annual white privilege conference sponsored by the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, which drew more than one thousand attendees at its 2008 meeting. A number of racial justice or antiracism training programs and manuals directed at white Americans have emerged as well and have helped build networks of white activists across the country.²⁴

The tens of thousands of white volunteers for the Obama campaign suggest the new possibilities of our time. Yet it would be too much of an exaggeration to call this emerging phenomenon a movement. White racial justice

activism remains fragmented into localized efforts. Moreover, it is little studied. We have limited understanding of how some white Americans come to be concerned about racism and develop a commitment to act for racial justice. The purpose of this study is precisely to advance that understanding.

Design of the Study

Much new scholarship on race concerns itself with what white people think or how they identify themselves. I take a different approach. I start with action. As we have seen, whites can state a belief in racial justice and yet remain passive in the face of continued inequities or participate perhaps unintentionally in the perpetuation of institutional racism. In this study I start with whites that are active in working for racial justice and work backward, so to speak, to identify the processes that shaped their commitment. I also explore the understandings they have developed through these processes and through their activism.²⁵

I decided to examine these issues by conducting in-depth interviews with white activists. As discussed later, I reviewed a wide range of relevant literature to help guide the study. This review helped me shape the interviews by identifying some of the issues to explore with activists. However, I did not have specific hypotheses or propositions to investigate with my subjects. Rather, I saw this as an exploratory and largely inductive study. In other words, I expected that the themes and analysis would arise from exploring issues at length with activists and then carefully analyzing the interview material. In-depth interviews would bring rich new information about a largely unexplored field of human endeavor. I could then look across the interviews to identify patterns and themes that would help us understand how some white Americans develop an understanding of racism and a commitment to act for racial justice.

Each interview lasted about three hours. I asked the activists to tell me about their lives. How did they initially become concerned about racism? How did they become active in working for racial justice? I sought to find out how their understanding of racism and their commitment changed over the course of their activism. I asked a series of questions intended to identify and explore the sources of their beliefs, the influence of their experiences and relationships, and the kinds of historical events and social settings through which their activism developed.

While the first part of the interviews focused on constructing this kind of life narrative, the second part of the interviews explored the activists'