

A Racial Reckoning of a Progressive Ideology in Public Discourse

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Applying racial formation theory, this research argues that when the political progressive ideology becomes the status quo, it loses its focus on “reform” and “progress” toward equity. Critical discourse analysis of media texts reveals how the ideology evolved into a “racial project” perpetuating institutional racism. When a moment of racial reckoning is presented to challenge the hegemonic politics in this case study, politicians, journalists, and engaged citizens employ discursive strategies to uncover privileges, call out (dis)trusting relationships, and reclaim the dominant narrative around what reform and progress look like. This work demonstrates how political communication unfolds when a progressively maintained infrastructure is revealed to be a system of oppression and where digital platforms allow for a substantial challenge.

Keywords: race, digital technologies, discourse, political communication, progressive, media, trust

Reform of institutions and an interrogation of power abuse, social inequities, and political fraud serve as bedrock for the politically “progressive” ideology, still practiced more than a century after its formal birth (Aldridge, 2007; Schafer, 2001). Since the 1890s, progressives have championed improvements to public schools, government safety nets, labor laws, and the environment based on advancements (aiming for “progress”) in thought and practice. Race in particular has long been a topic of discussion in politically progressive circles, although some have criticized the stance for being racist because of its insistence on reform of existing institutions rather than revolution (Schafer, 2001; Snyder, 2015). Central to the practice of progressivism, a vibrant public sphere demands interrogation of failings, an articulation of identification always in flux, and a constant dialogue around how progress might be made through trusting relationships (Boggs, 2001; Goodnight, 1982; Habermas, 1989).

This work explores political communication in public discursive spaces such as journalism and social media within a setting dominated by progressive ideology. This exploration arose from deep inquiry into

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how places that identify as progressive—politically, historically, culturally, administratively—talk about race in public. The case of Madison, Wisconsin, and Dane County was chosen because of long-standing progressive roots, proud civil rights histories, and present-day mottos of “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” In addition, the city had a moment at which change could come about—a racial reckoning confronting city leaders and its hyperengaged citizens. The year was 2013 and a report called “A Race to Equity” revealed the county to be the worst in the country in its racial achievement disparities across all metrics from unemployment to high school graduation rates. The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families unveiled the report at the YWCA Racial Justice Summit and sent copies to all of the local policymakers and news outlets.

This midsized city in the Midwest was used to talking—a lot—about race, but generally in more episodic events such as budget decisions and new proposals. But now this report, widely dispersed, had aggregated all of that talk into real data points that collectively showed a significant fissure in the way Madison saw itself. The report indicated noxious systems of oppression, and I was eager to see how the report might be characterized in public discourse: Would Madison live up to its stated commitment to reform when faced with the irrefutable facts of its progressive-maintained-but-broken structures? Would that dialogue be productive? Would digital social platforms help or hinder that discourse be more or less progressive? This research uses as its theoretical framework a racial lens in lieu of a political one to answer these questions. Racial formation theory argues that race remains a central organizing influence over political ideology (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 3). An analytical framework of a critical discourse analysis guided the research.

Building on my recent book (Robinson, 2018) about how power and privilege play out in progressive communities, this work seeks to understand so-called antiracist projects at the meso level. The way that this community conversation unfolded demonstrated how civic dialogue adheres to an inevitable racial formation that characterizes progressive politics in the digital age in liberal places that have long civil rights histories in the United States and where progressiveness had become the status quo. Central to the argument here are the varying dimensions of trust and distrust that played out: not only the idea that reporters assumed a high-level of trust for foundational institutions like school systems, but also that citizens of color adopted a narrative of distrust for these same institutions. This work adds to the literature on political communication by demonstrating how racial formation is revealed in the exercising of (dis)trusting relationships as well as expressions of privilege, and the reclaiming and repairing of public narratives within the information exchange. In addition, it offers a detailed example of the kind of “White fragility”—that is, the defensive way in which White people react when confronted with their innate racism—that Robin DiAngelo explained in her 2018 book. As such, this article offers White journalists, policymakers, and other community leaders an understanding of why they feel the way they do when trying to legislate racial disparities and an appreciation of the inherent flaws in the structures they champion.

The Case: A Progressive Enclave

Madison, Wisconsin,² claims itself the birthplace of the Progressive Party, launched back in the early 1900s (Buenker, 1998; Thelen, 1972). Dane County has voted reliably liberal; in 2016, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton got 72% of the vote. The midwestern city of 250,000 people retained a formally organized party dedicated to the political ideology—Progressive Dane, which still campaigned for candidates. I consider *progressivism* to mean an ideology that purports the “reform of” institutions and policy toward an advancement in civilization through the address of inequities, fraud, or other problematic situations. Its early roots associated the ideology as a “movement” meant to make policies around transportation, environment, education, labor laws, and social security more egalitarian for those citizens without power (Filene, 1970), but it has always been a hotly contested idea and differentiated practice with many nuances (Fortune, 2007; Freedman, 2014). At its heart, progressivism has been about “radical *progress*” via public institutions (Muller, 2001, p. 60).

In Madison, I argue that this progressive political stance had become a core identity for citizens in such a way that other ideologies suffered nearly complete obfuscation in public talk. Furthermore, this construct worked at all discursive levels of the society—macro systems, meso-level institutions and organizations, and micro individual actions. For example, at the meso level, historically progressive institutions such as Progressive Dane and the Madison Teachers Inc. union influenced both policy and citywide elections; one education reporter around the time of this study analyzed the past school board elections and found that the union-endorsed candidate won 70% of the time (DeFour, 2012).

Progressivism was even a strong thread through the news media ecology of the city. One 100-year-old company named *The Capital Times* even touted its connections to William Evjue who founded the paper to serve as a progressive option for constituents of Senator Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette during the early 1900s. *The Progressive Magazine* still ran its national offices in downtown Madison. Other parts of the ecology included more mainstream outlets such as the statewide newspapers the *Wisconsin State Journal* and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the online Channel 3000, the left-leaning *Madison Magazine*, a handful of ethnic media such as the *Madison Times* and *Capital City Hues*, and a proliferation of blogs (most of which—but not all—were liberal and run by local politicians and activists) and public social media groups such as “Stop the Charter School Bill” on Facebook.³

If we apply a racial lens to all of this, we note that very few Black or Brown journalists contributed to public discourse,⁴ very few policymakers were Black or Brown, and the elections, although often inclusive

² This project entailed four other case studies (Evanston, Illinois; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Cambridge, Massachusetts) to see how the findings transferred to other progressively oriented communities; the findings of only one case are detailed so that I could dive deep into the data.

³ It needs to be stated that all of these publications had experienced significant cutbacks over the last 15 years, with some newsrooms down as much as 60% from more prosperous times.

⁴ This number is probably zero as I could not find a single mainstream piece written by a Black or Brown journalist in Madison during the time of study on racial achievement disparities. However, no formal records are kept of this at the city or even county level.

of Black or Brown candidates, generally ended up with White winners. In 2012 and then again in 2016, Madison had the opportunity to elect two different persons of color school board candidates who promised reform of the system. Both candidates lost to White people with deep connections to the progressive-entrenched power infrastructure. It should be noted that Dane County's population comprised about 85% White people, with only about 5% African Americans in stark contrast to the majority-minority situation of the local schools (U.S. Census, 2010). This constant rejection for people of color in the city nurtured generations-old distrust for the place's institutions, including government and media.

Progressiveness and Whiteness

Despite all best intentions around being truly "progressive," this hegemonic identity that informed this city for more than 100 years performed in fundamentally racist ways as mediated through public discourse. This statement, although it would be met with alarm and denial by many White progressives in the city, rings true for most ethnic-studies scholars studying progressive politics (see Aldridge, 2007; DiAngelo, 2018; Schafer, 2001; Snyder, 2015; or anything by W. E. B. Du Bois). In racial formation theory, we understand that all politics are racial (Omi & Winant, 2014). This means that "we make our racial identities both individually and collectively, but not under conditions of our own choosing" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 138). One must consider the state in conjunction with the civil society and all the social interactions that help entrench hegemony. Race is "an element of social structure, rather than as an irregularity within it" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 112).

Ongoing and episodic "racial projects" both systemic and/or individual in nature are methods that racially orient citizens. Some of these "projects" over time have included explicit ones such as voter identification laws, housing discrimination, or standardized testing. More latent projects also proliferate; for example, education-policy critiques show how teachers embed their instruction routines with norms organized around race yet advocating color-blind practices (Du Bois, 1997; Gillborn, 2005). These teachers practice what is referred to as "Whiteness."

Whiteness has a whole body of scholarship explaining it; researchers suggest that Whiteness "reveals the ways in which Whites benefit from a variety of institutional and social arrangements that often appear (to Whites) to have nothing to do with race" (Bush, 2004, p. 15). Zeus Leonardo (2002) defines Whiteness as a social concept that can be characterized by "an unwillingness to name the contours of racism," "the avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group," and "the minimization of racist legacy" (p. 32; see also Gillborn, 2005). In essence, Whiteness "functions as part of a broader dynamic grid created through intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The way these identities work in concert gives them their true social meaning" (Lipsitz, 2013, p. 97). Lipsitz (2013) gives an example of how this played out in politics in the 1980s in the United States with President Ronald Reagan when he blamed the civil rights, gay rights, women's rights, and other social movements for the feeling of deficit among middle-America White men. According to this literature, politics in the United States cannot help but be guided by an ideology of Whiteness delineated by a racialized duality, oscillating between egalitarianism and color-blindness as well as privilege and normalized oppression (Winant, 2004, p. 5; but see also Du Bois, 1997; Lipsitz, 2013; Powell, 2012). Winant (2004) noted how political movements such as the Far Right resisted challenges to White supremacy and Neoliberals and the New Abolitionists set out to rearticulate Whiteness

into a more egalitarian society. However, when called out for its racism, Whiteness prevents White people, who become defensive to the point of anger and inaction, from changing (DiAngelo, 2018).

Journalists have been complicit in perpetuating Whiteness throughout time, from rampant stereotyping to constant reinforcement of White status quos and authority structures (Reid-Brinkley, 2012). As a result, scholars have examined how little marginalized people have trusted the news media (Brants, 2013). News media, essential to a thriving democracy, strive for the trust required for authority to tell the days' stories through a codified set of norms such as objectivity, transparency, and accountability (Cook, 2005; Tuchman, 1972, 1980). When trust is absent, the legitimacy of necessary political information becomes questioned, knowledge suffers, and systems based on collaboration like democracy destabilize and can no longer function (Hardin, 2006; Misztal, 1996).

Ostensibly, the progressive ideology has always been about pushing the envelope on Whiteness and the racial formation of institutions by calling for reform in order to shore up democratic structures. However, something nefarious happens when a reform movement becomes the political status quo over time. In Madison,⁵ progressive policymakers had been in charge for a century. Yet, their schools at the time of this research still enacted racial conditions that prevented Black and Brown students from opportunities to thrive as White students did. These disparities in Madison, as outlined in the "Race to Equity" report (Nelson & Winn, 2013), meant that half of Black kids graduated from high school on time, compared with 85% of White kids, with huge gaps showing in everything from third-grade testing to differences in the college-ready ACT exams (70% of Black students in high school were not even taking the ACT exam). Instead of heading to college, Black teens were six times more likely to be arrested than their White counterparts. Yet, when Black and Brown leaders called for change, little real reform was enacted.

It is my argument in this article that progressivism became so entrenched in this city that it served as a long-standing racial project of Whiteness whose articulation ebbed and flowed in the public discursive response (within journalism, blogs, social media) over time. Journalism and digital interactive spaces provided a key stage to witness how the dominant actors of the progressivism as "racial project" navigated the counterforces of an "antiracial project" that was the "Race to Equity" report. Within production spaces, we see articulations of trust as it ebbed and flowed, revealing power dynamics at work. Furthermore, the ideology becomes both challenged and repaired within the public discourse through revelations of privilege, the enacting of both trusting and distrusting relationships, and reclamations of narratives.

Race as Part of Political Ideology Via Public Discourse

One of the ways in which racial formation becomes an innate structure in any community is through a variety of public discursive practices (Urban, 2000; van Dijk, 1991, 1993) such as journalism, speeches, civic meetings, blogs, and social media. To answer my research questions, I collected all the public mediated texts around the "Race to Equity" baseline report from October 2013 until December

⁵ As well as in all of the four other cities we looked at. In fact, in Chapel Hill, a liberal enclave surrounded by a red state, city officials we interviewed could not remember the last time voters had elected a Republican to municipal office.

2016. In this article, I investigate this discourse at three different levels of talk: the primary source of the report itself, the mainstream journalism about it (e.g., the newspapers, the weekly *Isthmus*, *Madison Magazine*, Channel 3000), and finally the citizen-produced coverage in news forums, in blogs, and on public Facebook posts such as those by school officials, community leaders, and local activists. Using the keywords *race to equity* in Google, Lexis Nexis, and all of the news organizations' websites, I found a voluminous body of material: 129 articles and Facebook posts from journalists and more than 1,600 blog posts, Facebook updates (revealed by looking at the public pages of community activists, leaders, and politicians, as well as through Facebook searches) and comments from citizens within the posts, as well as on blogs and news websites. I supplemented these data with in-depth interviews with 48 key communicative players, including one of the report's authors, journalists, bloggers, frequent commenters, and community leaders involved in the conversation. I asked about their roles in the information exchange around politics and race, thoughts on both racial and political dialogues in the city, description of Madison's identity, and level of trust for journalists, activists, and public institutions, as well as their attitudes toward social media political content.⁶

I drew specifically from Teun A. van Dijk's (1995, 2006) work around discourse analysis as ideological. For van Dijk (2006), "ideologies" can be defined "as foundational beliefs that underlie the shared social representations of specific kinds of social groups. These representations are in turn the basis of discourse and other social practices" (pp. 120–121). Both cognitive and social in their form and formation, ideologies are foundational, represent interdisciplinary perspectives, and make up in-group attitudinal differentials and out-group cohesion. Finally, they are gradually acquired and, thus, generally stable but not static. For van Dijk (1995), ideologies are best understood through critical discourse analysis, which pays attention not only to syntax and sentence complexity, but also to lexicon, any assumptions of knowledge, use of euphemisms, metaphors, particular historical references, and absences (of source, of perspective). Most important in an ideologically informed critical discourse analysis are the links one sees between the texts and superstructure (i.e., the framing of the topic in such a way that a particular ideology is privileged as a fundamental world view). This approach offered the advantage of understanding what, how, and who manifested in the discourse from an ideological standpoint. Obviously, an understanding of progressivism as an ideology informed the analysis, but I sought primarily to replace that political understanding with the racial dynamics of that ideology.

Soon into this analysis, during the first of three rounds of critical discourse analysis coding, I noted that the racial aspect of the progressive ideology as it had evolved in this city was manifesting in several schematics: (1) as assertions of privilege, (2) as articulations of (dis)trusting relationships at the micro–meso–macro levels of this community's information flow, and (3) as reclamation narratives, which are the counterstories that get told to contradict other more formal or "official" versions. Following a deep dive into this tripartite of racial formation, I discuss the implications of how this public discourse played out in new engagement tools such as social media platforms during a time of what could be ideological challenge, if not upheaval.

⁶ The four other case studies included an additional 2,479 pieces of content from these cities' public discourse around race and interviews with an additional 49 people.

A Moment of Racial Reckoning?

Policymakers, teachers, administrators, activists, and others had worked on the city's racial disparities for generations with task forces, reports, and programs. But the opportunity debts continued to grow and, with them, more Black people unemployed, on welfare, and in jail. Mainstream news covered each new proposal or report, but rarely engaged in an interrogation of systemic failures. The "Race to Equity" report by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families in October 2013 asked the city, its policymakers, community leaders, and citizens—especially White people—to have that racial evaluation:

Sooner rather than later, this nexus between risk factors and race has to be severed. The status quo is toxic for the future of the African American population and, by extension, for other communities of color in Dane County. But it is also poisonous for the county as a whole. Failure to alter the current imbalances in opportunity, well-being, and outcomes will ultimately corrode Madison and Dane County's reputation for an enlightened and progressive commitment to social justice. It will discourage some families of color from coming or remaining here. And, perhaps most importantly, the continued marginalization of communities of color will undermine the region's cultural vitality, economic competitiveness, and overall quality of life in a world that increasingly values and demands racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion. (Nelson & Winn, 2013, p. 15)

The report weighed in at 82 pages and included dozens of statistics and data points showing the disparities between White people and African Americans in Dane County. It touched on demographics, income and unemployment, incarceration, K-12 education, health and health care, insurance, mortality, welfare and social programs such as the foster care system, geographic segregation, public transportation, birth rates, and housing. It implied that Madison was in crisis, as a community, and that it would need to fundamentally transform the schools, prison systems, and other structures:

In short,

success in this challenge will demand real change, but unless we make some significant and strategic employment-related reforms [emphasis added], there is little likelihood we are going to make real progress [emphasis added] in narrowing our significant income disparities or in reducing the intergenerational disadvantages that poor parents too often, despite their best efforts, pass down to their children. (Nelson & Winn, 2013, pp. 16-17)

Note here the use of the words *change*, *reform*, and *progress*, which are all rhetorical keyword devices for the progressive political ideology. One of the authors told me in an interview that they very intentionally framed the report to appeal to the progressive sentiments of the community:

I was more worried that people in this progressive, intellectual place would want to say, "It has nothing to do with us or our behavior, or the situations. . . . It's the corporations. It's the Republicans. . . . It doesn't have anything to do with how we as a community are functioning."

They released the report as a way to “call out” Dane County for the dichotomy of progressive politics against apparent systemic oppression, the coauthor said in the interview. Every major news outlet in Dane County covered the report’s publication in some way, although none as substantially as was hoped by the report’s authors, according to the interview.

The Privilege of the Status Quo—And Its Calling Out

The first way in which this racial project seemed articulated in the public discourse was through both the exercising of and “calling out” of privilege, not only White privilege but also a privilege that comes from being part of a dominant societal structure. This makes sense given that the success of any prevailing ideology entails assertions of privilege, defined here as representations of those benefiting from institutional status quo. This privilege circulates in public discourse and its exercise allows an ideology to thrive, often through taken-for-granted norms and routines that perpetuate domineering thought. Privilege in public, mediated deliberative spaces reflects the power structure of U.S. institutions and policies (Althusser, 2014; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2008). In these long-time progressive enclaves, a “privilege of Whiteness” permeated the discourse as it manifested in news articles, public hearings, and digital outlets. In these data, reporters lost a chance to reveal the hierarchal structure of the ideology as the status quo, while local politicians and those in charge deflected blame. However, in digital forums, commenters lay bare the privilege and asserted their own authority over the city’s story.

Almost all mainstream media outlets covered the report and referred to it consistently, even years after its release. On the whole, their stories neglected to incorporate a multitude of perspectives and failed to do the work of empowering citizens toward action. Rather, reporters themselves (both individuals and as an institutionalized industry group) exercised multilayers of privilege: of being in a media-saturated environment, of being in a place where the values of the power elite reflected those of progressive news outlets, and of being White and middle class with the same kinds of experiences as those in power. To wit, they linked to databases and the report, sourced experts from those with institutional credentials, relied on public hearings for material, and referenced their own past coverage. They fell back on “he-said, she-said” binaries to navigate what one called “sticky” and several called “sensitive” racial tensions. As one example, in the city’s largest (and only daily) newspaper, a senior (White) reporter was asked to fill in for another reporter when the report was released. She told me the release “was literally a daily story for me.” She could not go to the YWCA Racial Justice Summit where the report was unveiled because “I could either go to the conference or spend my time reporting the story,” an organizational constraint that nonetheless meant she did not collect experiential stories from a large group of affected people. In this perspective, her reporter privilege—the ways in which all of those practices of objectivity had developed in the political institution of the press (Sparrow, 1999)—privileges a particular way of “reporting,” which was to use the report as the news hook for more binary reporting with sources commenting on the report rather than on the community problem it revealed. Had this reporter adopted a racial lens, she might have enacted a different approach to “reporting the story.” Furthermore, although the news accounts detailed the disparity statistics, they largely failed to note that a majority of minorities populated the schools. The reporters missed an opportunity to amplify the Black presence as part of the Madison identity for readers. This was another

exercise in privilege: No one expected there to be a Black presence⁷ necessarily in this mainstream public discourse: neither their editors nor their majority White audiences. The account also did not quote any of the narrative in the report. Instead, they quoted officials who called the report “alarming” and “important” and then reified the progressive commitment to equality, as in the following article quoting a White public official:

Dane County Executive Joe Parisi acknowledged the numbers are “alarming” and the challenge daunting. “It confirms my observation that a rising tide does not lift all boats,” Parisi said. “This report is important because it confirms that and quantifies that.” But Parisi said there are “nuts and bolts” solutions that leaders and the community can implement to shrink the gap, some of which he is proposing in his 2014 budget. One example is a \$350,000 program to be paid for by United Way and Dane County that includes home visits to families of children ages 0 to 3 in the attendance areas of Westside Elementary School in Sun Prairie and Sugar Creek Elementary School in Verona. The program’s goal is to support family stability and ensure children are ready for school. Other initiatives include a \$250,000 partnership with Operation Fresh Start to operate a year-round Youth Conservation Corps in the county parks and a \$65,000 expansion of the Gardens for Empowerment program in which young people who are at risk of failure work in community gardens. (Hall, 2013, paras. 17–21)

Note here how none of these initiatives address reform for the city’s infrastructure, indicating a rather essential foundation of trust in the status quo. All of the proposals center the causes for the disparities on the Black communities and “young people who are at risk of failure” rather than on, say, the K–12 educational system, police training implemented by the state, or racially problematic policies. Yet, the causes are couched in a well-known trope of progressives: the dismissal of the conservative mantra that a rising tide lifts all boats (that is, when people at the top prosper, so will people at the bottom—i.e., trickle-down economics of Reagan). By citing mostly White officials, not including the stories of people of color, and failing to report on the structural root of the problem, politicians and journalists privileged the White status quo.

Citizen commenters posted counternarratives to the dominant identity on the websites of news organizations. In these spaces, commenters (both Black and White) sought to assert a different kind of privilege—that of lived experience in the city as being truly “expert” and authoritative: “It was so eye-opening for me to live in Madison as part of a multi-racial family. Most of the time we just experienced ignorance about other cultures—but we also experienced real hate and violent racism.” This directly challenged the city’s identity. Furthermore, in public Facebook pages run by activists, people worked to expose White privilege. Consider this response to a Facebook post that asked, “Do parents need an ally when meeting with school officials???” after Board of Education member Ed Hughes suggested that Black families did not need a lawyer to meet with school officials: “My guess is that none of Mr. Hughes’ children

⁷ Here I do not mean that they did not cite Black sources, per se. Almost all of the stories included at least one African American community leader. I am talking more about a fundamental Black presence that would permeate the story as part of an innate framing for the stories, in other words, written from Black perspectives, with a racial lens.

have ever needed an advocate so his presumption that students don't need them is way off base." Hughes, who is White and upper-middle-class, enjoyed privilege that most Black students did not, the commenter implied. Hughes himself visited the post to clarify his statements, demonstrating that these spaces were subject to oversight by the power structure. It needs to be noted that in this Facebook thread, Hughes reasserted that all kids were treated equally in the schools, denying privilege existed, reifying the progressive position, and repairing the dominant ideological formation in the discourse. After he commented in this space, no one else posted and the conversation ended.

Trust and Distrust in a Discourse of Progressiveness

A second mechanism through which the racial formation of Madison was being debated occurred in the expression of trust and distrust. A healthy public discourse in any community provides space for trusting relationships to occur among the various interlocutors because it needs to offer allowance for different ideologies to flourish. Defining trust has proven elusive, but most use the words "willingness to be vulnerable" and "positive expectations" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Researching work groups, Kramer, Hanna, Su, and Wei (2000) noted that "when individuals find their status within a group problematic or uncertain, trust based on group identification becomes problematic" (p. 175). Certainly, we can extrapolate to community groups in which members do not feel part of the dominant group-based ideology, as in Madison. For trust to occur in public discourse, a number of qualities must be present in the exchanges: flexibility, forthrightness, engagement, heedfulness, respect, competence, personal regard for others, benevolence, and integrity (Asen, 2015; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mayer, David, & Schoorman, 1995). Asen (2015) argues that trust cannot happen in the absence of engagement on the part of all participants. Of course, this is difficult when the discourse involves varying levels of power and, thus, vulnerability on the part of the participants (Young, 2000).

In its beginnings, the discourse of the Progressive Party articulated a paradigm of distrust toward government, assuming that most of its operations could be subject to reform reliably (Buenker, 1998). Yet, one could argue that the very assumption that reform is possible indicates a fairly fundamental trust in existing institutions (e.g., revolution was not called for). Indeed, in the news articles, (White) reporters assumed a high level of community trust in Madison's government and its institutions, including the schools and news media in town. This was evidenced throughout the copy with constant links to government databases and reports, quotes from experts within those institutions, and stories framed around official meeting procedures. Reporters legitimated those authorized to speak on behalf of institutions, such as the superintendent, and gave them space to espouse their messages. As such, reporters left little room in their stories for alternative conceptions of power in the city. Yet, the journalists expressed distrust of activists—"most of whom have an agenda," said one reporter—as well as of parents and others who refused to allow their name to be used in publication.

Another level of (dis)trust was at work as well: a distrust that community members would not give the reporter the benefit of the doubt in coverage of race issues. One (White) reporter said,

The core truth is we are White people writing about Black people and you are aware of all of these assumptions being made. I think the intentions have always been good, but if you say something wrong you can throw . . . any *progress* you have made is gone.

Note again the word *progress*, suggesting to fully commit to a racial lens would impede progress. Furthermore, White reporters shy from delving into racial tension because they worry their motivations will be questioned and their connections to the community will be shattered. This indicated the absence of several of our needed qualities for a trusting relationship in public talk, including the positive expectation that their audience members will approach their journalism with a flexibility of mind. The reporters sense the community's distrust—and reciprocate distrust.

School officials, established bloggers with strong progressive ties, and others who enjoyed a sense of belonging in Madison also reported that they relied on each other, other officials and administrators, the heads of local nonprofits in town, and experts in the academy for the information they authored for public consumption. Interviews indicated that trusting relationships developed behind the scenes among the major information-exchange players. For example, the (White) superintendent organized editorial board meetings with the local news media; she said in an interview: "The trust-building with the media is helpful because when there is a story that we may have problems with, . . . we feel like we've got a strong enough relationship that we can share our concerns" (interview,)By meeting in private—a circumstance not afforded to most citizens—the institution of the schools can help craft the publicly mediated message and perpetuate the dominant ideology of progressivism in the process. This networking also built trust between the two institutions.

Online, those authoring content in public spaces about achievement disparities contested levels of trust for media, the government, and each other. Distrust reigned for both the local media and the schools. In this comment about a *Capital Times*' article that suggested it would let the community lead the race discussions, a writer responded, "'When we're ready?' There's a statement that drips with the same paternalism underlying your whole approach." In another exchange in which an African American activist posted about how he declined to help a national news team interested in reporting on Madison's disparities after the journalists refused to put in writing the gist of the story, commenters from Black communities heralded him: "You cannot trust the media," wrote one. Many posters related how the schools failed to listen, ignored their children, and did not seem to want their participation in racial dialogues. The rampant sarcasm, lack of respect, questioning of competence, and general absence of heedfulness on behalf of commenters toward the city's institutions dismissed the official versions of the city collective. The city's institutions, these citizens asserted, failed time and again to take positive action in relation to racial relations. In the absence of meaningful engagement, trust could not be achieved.

Finally, these online citizen contributors cautioned each other about individuals with an expressed interest in the topic of racial achievement disparities. For example, one Black activist described an encounter with a White former principal from a local school, now retired and interested in helping the cause. The activist asked on his Facebook page what questions he should ask him. Wrote one, "I'd ask him what has he or others in his trusted circle already done or is doing to promote change

(is this a commitment or a project)?” Another wrote, “I know he is 70 . . . but he is in this for the long haul? What is his motive? . . . Remember the enemy does not want this to come to pass . . . don’t let him get a foot hole [*sic*].” In other words, what action would this gentleman take to build trust in the community, given his outsider status? Through these expressions of distrust online, challenges to the White majority in this city emerged. If the reporters and the school officials were painting a portrait of a competent, fair, and equitable system, these comments countered with alternative understandings. Using anecdotes, emotive expressions, and sarcasm, commenting citizens suggested that a more inclusive progressiveness meant one in which participants commit to “the long haul,” take into account personal experience, and take action.

Narrative Reclamation in Progressiveness

Finally, this discourse revealed negotiations over what narratives for the city would prevail after a report like “Race to Equity” challenged the historic frame of progressivism. In the years to follow the report, White progressives in power “explained” the disparities while reifying the identity they had worked hard to implement. In one blog post first published in *Isthmus* (Johnson, 2014) and reposted to Progressive Dane’s website, the cochair of the group started out suggesting that

Madison and Dane County have turned their focus to uncovering the causes of troubling racial disparities that are plaguing our communities. However, taking a look at how our own policies produce racial and economic disparities rather than blaming the problem on mere prejudice would better serve the discussion.

But very quickly it became clear he was lamenting the competition of start-up transportation companies Uber and Lyft, concerned with “transportation equity” and lack of regulations. Toward the end of the column, he sharply rebutted the “Race to Equity” report:

And yes, even those who fashion themselves as leaders of communities of color need to avoid the insidious fatalism that begins to manifest as inferiority and low expectations. The truth is, there are half a million more black men in college than there are in prison; more than half of all black men graduate from high school in four years; and black men make up the same proportion of the college population as they do the general population.

Notice here the positive twist on the original report’s facts, a twist that implies no need for reform.

In one story at the anniversary of the report in 2016, the mayor of Madison, Paul Soglin, outright refuted the report in a piece headlined “We Are Not the Worst: Paul Soglin Releases His Own Report on Madison’s Racial Disparities” (Becker, 2016). Soglin, who is White, initially came to power as a young mayor aged 28 in 1973 as a hero of the civil rights movement and quickly instituted reform in hiring practices, elderly housing, and the city’s bus system. He was reelected in 2011 after decades as a blogger, lawyer, and activist in the city. Using city-specific data (as opposed to the county data of the report) and only a couple metrics (as opposed to the aggregation of all of the statistics in the report), Soglin reported at a

municipal meeting that not only was it “absolutely false” to claim the county was the worst in the nation, but also he wrote in an e-mail distributed to reporters and published in a *Capital Times* article,

a review of economic progress in the last five years shows that we are probably among the best, if not the best in the United States, in terms of improving both household income as well as lowering the number of families who are living below the poverty line. . . . That has a stigma to it which is very difficult to shake and can slow down our progress if people believe it to be true and consequently act upon it.

Here, again we see continued volleying over the word *progress* and an assertion that any counternarrative would inhibit progressives’ mission. The reporter also quoted an author of the original report as well as the obligatory third source—oft-cited community leader and African American Michael Johnson, CEO of the Dane County Boys & Girls Club. Journalists pitted Soglin against the authors of the report in a who-do-you-believe framing rather than analyzing the numbers, making clear Soglin’s position in the power structure, or a more communally helpful discussion about why two such different versions of the truth were being circulated.

In their coverage of the report, journalists fell back on common tropes, repetitive sources, and traditional American narratives: If there is a problem, the community will solve it via government infrastructure already in place. Their insistence to get “both sides” belied a political lens with a game frame rather than a racial analysis. The story of this response was documented by reporters via the public officials entrusted to protecting the city’s identity. For example, instead of focusing on the structure that caused the disparities, one PBS reporter in the wake of the report told the story of Black people being helped by the government safety nets. The last line, citing two prominent African American men, read, “Both Reverend Gee and Noble Wray are optimistic that addressing the thorny issue of racial disparity here in Wisconsin could become a template for other communities around the country.” Madison and its American values of industriousness could serve as a role model to other cities in this journalism, despite the evidence showing no improvement at all. Thus, journalists reinforced these structures.

For some commentators committed to a view of Madison as a highly livable, welcoming city, the idea that something was wrong pointed to the problems or “culture” of Black communities as opposed to the system. Victims of the disparities were repeatedly framed as “other” in these public textual spaces. Under a news article, this person wrote in May 2014,

I don’t dispute for a moment that the root of the problem . . . is racism. However, the situation has evolved over a long time such that removing racism tomorrow would not solve the issues that exist in Black communities.

Here, we see a common meme in the sample’s community spaces, particularly under news stories. The writer “admits” racism may have been responsible for the issue in the beginning, but now the “problem” resided firmly in the Black community. These commenters urged the community to not assign blame (i.e., to not undermine the progressively built and operated structures propping up the idyllic identity).

Meanwhile, on activist Facebook pages and news sites, people rejected this discourse of progressiveness and called it out as an ideology that had evolved into being not about reform but rather about power, the status quo, and Whiteness. Gloria Ladson-Billings, a nationally renowned African American professor of education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, noted in a 2014 op-ed piece that

if you decide not to notice anything that contradicts your narrative, chasms can very easily develop. The problem with not noticing is that we all are diminished by decisions by the mainstream to put its head in the sand over racial inequities. (para. 2)

Ladson-Billings and others described “two Madisons,” as this commenter wrote,

Man . . . stay AWAY from Madison, if you’re Black and male. . . . They don’t want us there . . . except to farm us into their jails and state prisons. The few who are USED by them . . . will soon be marginalized once they start speaking up louder . . . left to suffer slowly under alcoholism, drugs, and depression.

White people then are portrayed as evil masters; note the use of the word *farm* evoking slavery and an oblique reference to the *New Jim Crow* book by Michelle Alexander that had been making the rounds in Madison at the time that argued that White people had turned the criminal justice system into a new kind of slavery to keep Black people in check. These online interlocutors countered the stated values of industriousness with a commitment to children and talk about fundamental needs: “If we don’t take care of our own, we will all eventually suffer,” wrote another. This group worked to reclaim the progressive narrative and tried to refocus the discourse around collective action:

We don’t have any time to play games or be a part of a charade. Our aim is to get our babies and adults educated, and our parents and adults life-sustaining career ladder jobs. We are not interested in the conversation; we are interested in the action.

Social media platforms offered a chance for direct identity subversion. For example, in a Facebook post, Reverend Alex Gee, an African American community leader, anointed a new group of “community fathers”:

I just attended the Public Policy Forum of Greater Madison. . . . The audience was brilliant older (and one younger) Black men who challenged, cautioned and celebrated my #JustifiedAnger work. . . . #CommunityFathers is what I call these kinds of men!!

Here, Gee elevated this group of minorities to “community fathers,” a term typically referring to a town’s (usually White male) founders credited with the original identity formation of a place. These new city architects in their “challenge” could redesign Madison through their articulation of the place’s values even as they also “cautioned” Black people from involving White people in fixing the systems. These contestations of assumed value systems in public community spaces undermined the citywide dominant ideology practiced as progressive politics.

Conclusions

In this article, I contend that progressivism had become a racially problematic status quo in Madison, Wisconsin. A political ideology stained with an enduring Whiteness has racially formed this place such that what should have been a model of egalitarian practice had become a racial project perpetuating discrimination. Furthermore, we can see how even at this opportunity of racial reckoning, those engaged in bolstering the progressive dominance of the politics in the city reified Whiteness via the public discourse. The mechanisms for this formation were revealed to be assertions of privilege, expressions of trust in local institutions, and a reclamation of the progressive narrative that was under attack in public discourse, while the mostly White journalists, policymakers, and political operatives as part of the teachers' union, Progressive Dane, and other influential organizations enacted long practices routines to "explain" away the "Race to Equity" report. This discourse that dominated took seriously the call to action but only in terms of "fixing the Black community" rather than reforming the progressive-managed institutions such as the criminal justice system or the schools. Policymakers and others instituted an invisible foundation of Whiteness through ignoring the report's references to systems of oppression, relying on government reports and experts associated with the very organizations responsible for the disparities, and changing out the racial lens the report employed for a political one to justify past and present inactions toward true reform. These were some of the discursive strategies used to prop up the status quo and reiterate an enduring trust in government institutions and the news media's authority to report on them.

However, in digital spaces, a counterdiscourse emerged that supported the report as an antiracist project: calling out privilege, revealing chasms of distrust, and offering alternative narratives. Citizens in these places reapplied the racial lens of the report and worked to undermine the dominant message that reinforced the racial formation of Madison. In these dialogues, we witnessed an unsettling of the Whiteness paradigm. As such, this article enhances our understanding of how Whiteness' insidiousness is being countered in digital spaces.

One major takeaway of these findings is for content producers—professional journalists and citizens—in progressive enclaves to resist the paradigm of Whiteness when counter-racial projects offer opportunity for real advancement in race relations. It is my hope that these findings alert progressives to the insidious nature of Whiteness as it is operating within these progressive institutions, take steps to recognize innate racism, and work against it. Journalists might recognize when their reliance on local institutions perpetuates a narrative in the city that hinders progress and introduce an intense questioning of the systems as part of coverage. In addition, this article contributes to the scholarly conversation around Whiteness by documenting the process of racial formation occurring within one public discourse. Future work might take a more macro view of how national antiracial projects such as #BlackLivesMatter infiltrate into these local microcosms and shift public discourse. An understanding of the long tentacles of Whiteness through time and across a community's institutional spaces can produce more comprehensive and holistic scholarship and inform recommendations more grounded in reality.

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