

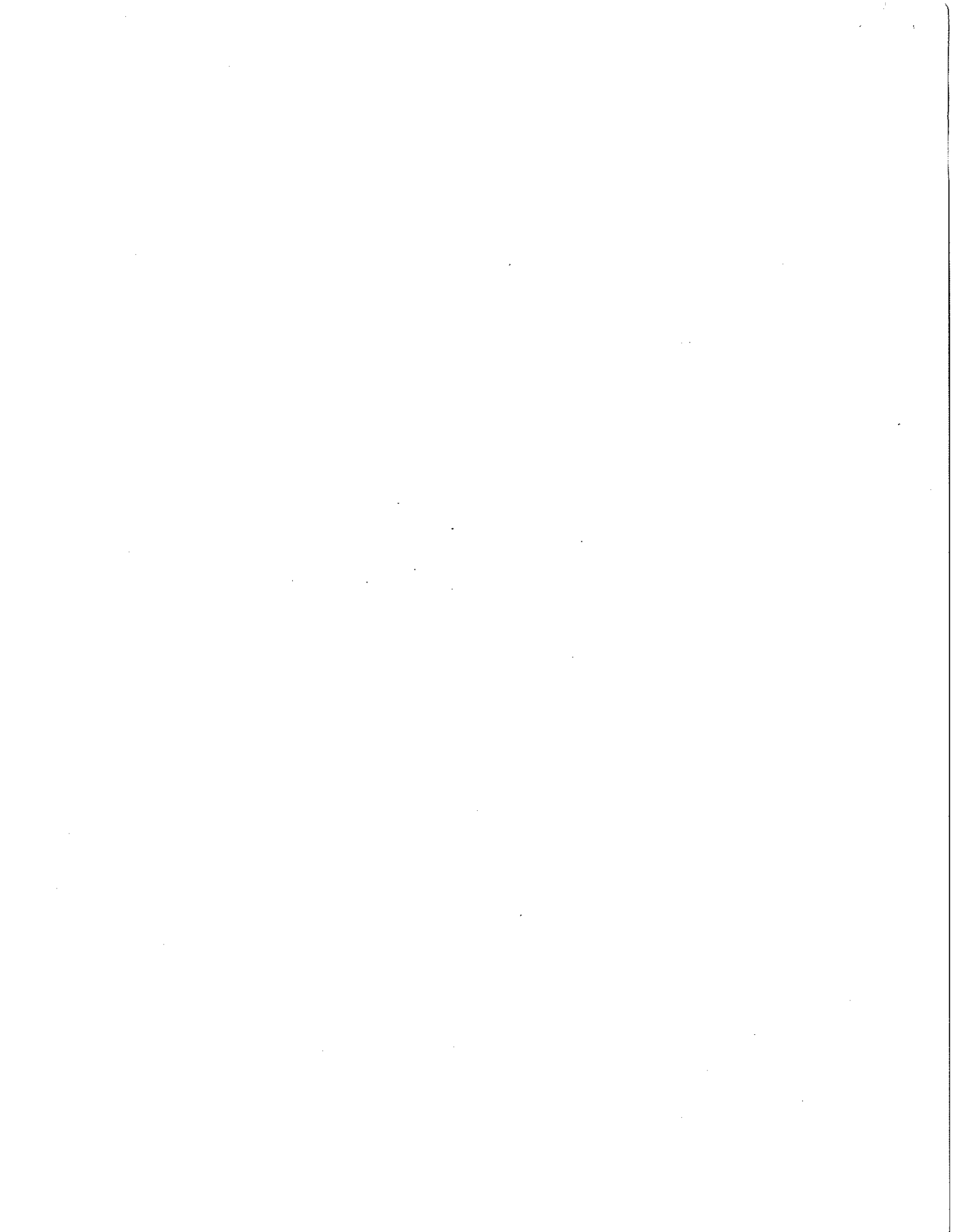
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE RACIAL  
ATTITUDES OF WHITE AMERICANS

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# Factors that Influence the Racial Attitudes of White Americans

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*This paper explores the relationship between one's racial attitudes and six independent factors, including: income, sex, political views, exposure to diversity in childhood neighborhoods, number of childhood friends one had of another race, and number of people one has dated of another race. Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that politically progressive, working class women from the most diverse neighborhoods and who had participated in friendships and romantic relationships with people of another race are the most racially progressive. Through survey research studying Luther College students, important trends were observed that did not always support the hypothesis. The study found no statistically significant relationship between racial attitudes and income, level of diversity in neighborhoods growing up or number of childhood friends one had of another race. This was not supportive of the hypothesis. There was a statistically significant relationship between racial attitudes and sex, political ideology and number of people one has dated of another race. Those respondents who are women, politically progressive and had dated someone of another race were more racially progressive.*

## **Introduction**

Racism is a detrimental aspect of American society that has been present since the beginning of this country's history. While it has taken on many different forms, it has always had negative consequences on different groups of people in society. Many studies have explored

different factors which contribute to racism, prejudice and discrimination. As researchers learn more about racism, it will be easier to understand how society can change racism.

## **Background**

Institutional racism, prejudice and discrimination can be overt or covert. Bonilla-Silva (2003) theorized about color-blind racism, which describes contemporary racial inequality as the product of non-racial dynamics. He argues that whites justify the social, political and economic status of people of color as a result of market dynamics, cultural boundaries and natural occurrences. As Bonilla-Silva describes, this ideology de-emphasizes and even hides institutional racism, thus taking the responsibility for changing a racist society from whites.

Scholars have explored interactional solutions as a means of solving racial inequality. The contact hypothesis asserts that interactions between people of different races can decrease stereotyping and increase understanding and empathy (McLemore *et al.*, 2001). Further research suggests that firsthand inter-racial contact and experience leads to positive feelings towards another racial group (Powers & Ellison, 1995). Other researchers have specifically examined how inter-racial contact can lead to a transformation of whites' attitudes, and a new understanding of themselves as whites versus the life circumstances of non-whites (McKinney 2006). Most of these turning points are reached when a white person first comes into continual contact with a person of another race through friendships, romantic relationships, vicarious victimization or being in an unfamiliar environment. In his study of color-blind racism, Bonilla-Silva examines individual's racial attitudes. He describes a person's racial attitudes through an assessment of their opinions about affirmative action, inter-racial marriage, and the prevalence and extent to which discrimination is a problem in American society today. He found that most

of the people he defined as racially progressive had grown up in diverse settings, whether that meant diverse neighborhoods, schools or churches (2003).

Researchers have also explored the effects of residential and social segregation of whites from blacks, which results in a socialization process referred to as “white habitus” (Bonilla-Silva, Goar & Embrick 2006). They argue that homogeneous interactions in all white environments cause whites to develop positive feelings associated with themselves and negative views about those of different races. In segregated neighborhoods, whites develop an in-group sense of solidarity in which whites understand their white lifestyle as correct and normal. According to the authors, this white habitus creates and conditions their views, attitudes and ideas of beauty.

Jackman and Crane’s (2001) research did not completely support the contact hypothesis, but rather found socio-economic status to be an indicator of racial attitudes. They found that personal intimacy with blacks only affected whites’ racial attitudes some of the time. Whites’ racial attitudes were more progressive when they had black friends of a higher socio-economic status. The authors assert that this suggests that difference in socio-economic status can counterbalance the status differences that are rooted in race. When examining income, Bonilla-Silva (2003) found that those from the working class were most likely to be racially progressive. He argued that although all whites enjoy white privilege, that not all whites enjoy equal wages. Therefore, white workers are more likely to relate to minorities in terms of receiving lower resources.

There is another, different school of thought regarding income and racial attitudes. A study found that prejudice decreased between 1972 and 1985 and attributed this reduction to an increased per capita income for whites (Quillian 1996). The authors explain the group-threat

theory, which says that as whites feel more security in their economic position, they exhibit a less aggressive attitude towards blacks.

Gender has also been explored as an influence on racial attitudes. Kirkpatrick Johnson & Mooney Marini (1998) found that women are more willing to interact with people of another race, such as have friends of another race, live and work with people of a different race and encourage their children to associate with people of another race. They suggest that these differences occur because females focus more strongly on interpersonal connection and have a greater concern for others. A study exploring secondary students' responses to fictional social scenarios involving racial prejudice found that males of all grades were more likely to show prejudice than females (Wilkinson 2000). Mills, McGrath, Sobkoviak, Stupec and Welsh (1994) also found that women tend to express less racial prejudice and greater acceptance of others than men.

Political ideology was found to be an indicator of whites' racial attitudes. Bonilla-Silva (2003) found that political progressives were among the most racially progressive people in his study. He attributed this to progressives' ability to make connections between racial oppression, patriarchy and social class.

Based on previous research, it seems that one's racial attitudes are affected by income, sex, political ideology, level of diversity in childhood neighborhood, number of childhood friends growing up of a different race and number of people one dated of another race. An exploration of these variables may suggest that working class women who are politically progressive, grew up in diverse neighborhoods and had friendships and romantic relationships across the color line are the most racially progressive.

## Methods

Survey research was used to explore how one's racial attitudes are affected by several independent variables, including socio-economic status, political views, sex, level of diversity in childhood neighborhood, and the number of romantic relationships or friendships one has had with someone of a different race. This research was conducted as part of a larger class project. A close-ended survey was administered to the target population, Luther College students. The total sample size was 211 respondents. The survey was administered using three different methods. Two thirds of the sample was a systematic stratified random sample derived from a list of all current students at Luther College. The surveys were administered to the systematic stratified sample via campus mail and door-to-door delivery, where the surveys were picked up from the students' dorm rooms. One third of the sample was a convenience non-random sample. Students were asked to fill out the survey outside the cafeteria, a very populated place on campus. Overall, we had a 60 percent response rate.

The sample represents the Luther College student body fairly closely. Women were slightly over-represented in the sample. Also, seniors were slightly under-represented and sophomores were slightly over-represented. A limitation of the sample is the small number of students of color. Because the Luther College student body is only eight percent students of color, our sample did not include a large enough number to draw any conclusions about non-whites as a group verses whites. Therefore, for the purpose of this research I eliminated students of color from my sample. I also eliminated any of the students who omitted any of the questions I used in my analysis. After taking out these respondents, my sample size was 196.

An ANOVA, or analysis of variance between groups, test was used to determine whether given the sample size, there were statistically significant relationships between the dependent and independent variables.

### *Measures of Independent Variables*

This study intends to understand the relationship between students' racial attitudes and six independent variables: income, political views, sex, level of diversity in childhood neighborhoods, and number of friendships and romantic relationships with individuals from another race.

Respondents were asked to describe their socio-economic status by picking a category that described the annual income of their primary household. We wanted specific values for income, instead of asking what social class they were in. Due to the middle-class bias, we would have had no way of knowing exactly what each respondent considered to be middle class, working class, upper class and lower class. A potential problem with the income question is that many students may not know the exact salary of their primary households. Therefore, some students may have estimated their income level.

In order to obtain information about the respondents' sex, we asked respondents to identify themselves as either male or female. This could be a potential problem for those respondents who identify as transgender. Traditionally, American society assigns individuals into either a male or female gender category. I am interested in knowing how experiences growing up as male or female in this society have shaped the respondents' racial attitudes. This is important because statuses as male or female determine distinct opportunities and experiences in American society.



We asked respondents to choose a label that best describes their political views from one of the following categories: very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, very conservative or don't know. The "don't know" category may seem ambiguous. We allowed this as an option for those who did not want to place themselves into just one category, or for those who perhaps do not know enough about politics to place themselves into a political category. The scores on the race index for the moderate and don't know categories were comparable. Perhaps respondents used the "don't know" category as a middle category, similar to moderate.

To describe their inter-racial friendships, respondents were asked: "Of your five closest childhood (pre-college) friends, how many were of a different race/ethnicity than you?" I wanted to know a specific, concrete number of *close* friends the respondents had of another race. As Bonilla-Silva (2003) describes, a part of color-blind racism is someone saying they are not racist because they "have a friend who is black." Often times, these friendships are not close or significant. I was also specifically interested in the respondents' behavior, not just attitudes towards having friends of a different race. I didn't want to know if they would have a friend of another race, but whether they actually had engaged in close, meaningful cross-cultural friendships.

In order to measure levels of diversity in neighborhoods, respondents were asked to describe the number of non-whites in their neighborhoods growing up. They articulated these numbers through both percentages and descriptions, such as: few, a few, some, many, or almost all. I used words and numbers to guide the respondents in their responses in order to eliminate confusion about the relativity of terms like "some" and "many". Obtaining official residential statistics on race would have been the ideal method of determining the levels of diversity in the respondent's backgrounds. Unfortunately, these statistics would be very difficult to obtain given

the numerous communities Luther College students grew up in. Asking respondents to describe the diversity in their neighborhoods growing up was the next best way to measure these variables. Because both percentages and words described the categories, the respondents' estimates of diversity in their neighborhoods should be accurate enough to be comparable.

To determine the number of people respondents had dated of a different race, they were asked two questions. They first responded to the question, "How many people have you dated since middle school?" and then were asked "How many were of a different race?" For this study, I was most interested in the total number of people respondents had dated who were of a different race. Based on the respondents' answers to this question, I divided the responses into three categories: zero, one and two or more. I made one large category including all those who had dated two or more people of a different race, because there were not a large number of people who fell into that group.

### *Measures of Racial Attitudes*

Racial attitudes are measured by respondent's opinions about three issues: the extent to which discrimination in American society today is a problem, affirmative action and inter-racial dating. Bonilla-Silva (2003) uses these measures in his work to define what he calls a "racially progressive" person. Using these three questions, I created a race index in which each respondent was assigned a score between zero and eleven. Zero represented the least racially progressive answers to all of the questions, while 11 represented the most racially progressive answers to the questions. The response categories for the three questions were each assigned a value that represented the level of racial progressiveness each answer entailed.

To assess the respondent's views on affirmative action, they were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement: government action is needed to counter-balance the impacts of racial inequality and discrimination. I decided to word the question using "government action" instead of "affirmative action" because it seems that there are often negative feelings associated with affirmative action, as well as misconceptions about what exactly affirmative action programs entail. Instead of assessing the respondents' perceptions about affirmative action, I was more interested in measuring their level of agreement with the idea that racial inequality is such a problem that government action is needed to counter-balance it. Those who supported affirmative action were considered racially progressive. The values assigned to each response category are as follows: Those who answered "Strongly agree" were given a four, "Agree" were given a three, "Neither Agree Nor Disagree" were given a two, "Disagree" were given a one, and "Strongly disagree" were assigned zero.

To measure respondents' perceptions of the significance and existence of discrimination, they were asked to describe to what extent they thought racial discrimination is a problem in our society. The most racially progressive were those who recognized that discrimination does exist and viewed it as a large problem in American society. The values assigned to each response category are as follows: Those who answered "large problem" received three, "moderate problem" received two, "small problem" received one and "not a problem" received zero<sup>1</sup>.

In order to measure respondents' opinions about inter-racial dating, I asked the respondents to state their current willingness to date inter-racially. Willingness to date inter-racially was considered to be racially progressive. Those who responded, "Very Willing" were given a four, "Willing" were given a three, "Indifferent" were given a two, "Hesitant" were

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<sup>1</sup> This question has a three point scale because there were only four response categories. The other questions had five response categories, therefore they had a four point scale. This was not intended to undervalue racial discrimination.

given a one and “Very Hesitant” were given a zero. There was an “indifferent” response category offered, which can be confusing when interpreting the respondents’ answers to the question. Respondents may have viewed the category as “I don’t care what race someone I date is, therefore I am indifferent.” On the other hand, the respondent could have viewed it as a middle category in which they were unsure of their willingness to date inter-racially. In interpreting the data, one can infer that the “indifferent” response was perceived as a middle category because of where it was placed within the response categories. In future research, the response categories could be worded differently as to avoid confusion.

Survey research by questionnaire can be limiting in that respondents must place themselves into a category without being able to explain his or her opinion. Interviews would have been very helpful in fully assessing whether one could be considered racially progressive or not. Specifically regarding complex issues like affirmative action, it is hard to understand the respondent’s entire opinion on the subject based solely on one question. Wording of the questions was carefully chosen in order to be as clear to the respondents as possible. However, in further research on this topic, it would be helpful to ask a series of questions about each of the dependent variables.

## **Findings/Results**

In comparing the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, some interesting findings were observed.

### *Neighborhoods*

There was not a strong correlation between amount of diversity in one’s neighborhood growing up and his or her level of racial progressiveness. Those respondents from neighborhoods

with 11-100% non-whites had the highest mean score on the race index. Those from neighborhoods with 2-10% non-whites had a .57 point lower mean score on the race index than those from the most diverse neighborhoods. Respondents from neighborhoods with 0-1% non-whites had a mean score on the race index that was in between the scores from the other two categories. This suggests that having a small group of non-whites in a neighborhood slightly changes whites' racial attitudes. With my sample size, these differences are not statistically significant. This information is contrary to the hypothesis that those from racially diverse neighborhoods are the most racially progressive.

How many non-whites were there in the neighborhoods that you grew up in?

	Number of respondents	Mean score on Race Index
Very few (0-1%)	109	6.8716
A few (2-10%)	49	6.5102
Some or more (11-100%)	36	7.0833
Total	194	6.8196

### *Income*

In examining the race index scores of respondents from specific socio-economic classes, my data does not support the hypothesis that those from the working class are the most racially progressive. There are a few notable trends about those from the highest income categories. Respondents from families with yearly incomes of \$200,000 and above had the lowest mean scores on the race index. The mean score for this category is nearly one point lower than all of the other income categories. Those from families with yearly incomes of \$100,000-\$199,999 had the second lowest mean score on the race index. Those from families with yearly incomes of \$70,000-\$99,000 scored highest on the race index on average. However these observations are not statistically significant with my sample size.

What is the annual income of your primary household?

	Number of respondents	Mean score on Race Index
Under \$40,000	20	6.8500
\$40,000-69,999	49	6.9388
\$70,000-99,999	40	7.1750
\$100,000-199,999	65	6.7385
\$200,000 and over	13	5.7692
Total	187	6.8289

### *Political Ideology*

There was a strong correlation between political ideology and level of racial progressiveness. Respondents who identified themselves as very liberal had the highest mean score on the race index. This mean score of 8.7 is nearly three points higher than those respondents who identified themselves as conservative, which is the category which had the lowest mean score on the race index. Those respondents who answered "don't know" had a similar mean score on the race index as those who identified themselves as moderate. This suggests that respondents used "I don't know" as a middle category. By looking at the mean scores on the race index, one can see that the more liberal one identifies him or herself, the higher the mean score on the race index. Also, one can see that those in the very liberal and the conservative categories had the largest difference in means with the other groups. These trends are statistically significant, with a 99.9% level of certainty. This supports the hypothesis that those who are politically progressive are more likely to be racially progressive.

Which label best describes your political views?

	Number of respondents	Mean on Race Index
Very Liberal	18	*8.7222
Liberal	54	*7.1481
Moderate	69	*6.6522
Conservative	38	*5.7632
Don't Know	15	*6.8000
Total	194	*6.8196

\* indicates statistical significance

### *Inter-racial Dating*

There is a positive correlation between the level of racial progressiveness and the number of people one has dated of another race. Those respondents who had dated two or more people of a different race had the highest mean score on the race index. The largest difference in mean scores, 1.61, was between those who had dated two or more people of a different race and those who had not dated someone of a different race. This supports the hypothesis that those who have dated inter-racially are more likely to be more racially progressive. There also was a .79 mean score difference between those who had dated one person of a different race and those who had dated two more people of a different race. These trends are statistically significant, with a 99.5% level of certainty.

How many [people you have dated since middle school] were of a different race?

	Number or respondents	Mean score on Race Index
0	154	*6.6104
1	28	*7.4286
2 or more	9	*8.2222
Total	191	*6.8063

\* indicates statistical significance

### *Inter-racial Friendships*

There was not a statistically significant pattern between level of racial progressiveness and the number of friends one had of a different race growing up. There are a few notable differences in mean scores of respondents in different categories. Respondents who had three or more non-white friends growing up had a mean score on the race index that was nearly one score higher than those respondents who had zero non-white friends growing up. There is not a clear, positive correlation between the number of friends of a different race one had and his or her level of racial progressiveness. The mean scores vary within different categories. This does not support the hypothesis that the more friends one has had of a different race, the more racially progressive he or she is.

Of your five closest childhood (pre-college) friends, how many were of a different race/ethnicity than you?

	Number of Respondents	Mean score on race index
0	105	6.6667
1	48	7.1250
2	29	6.6897
3 or more	10	7.6000
Total	192	6.8333

### *Sex*

This data supports the hypothesis that females tend to be more racially progressive than males. Females had higher mean scores on the race index than males. The mean score on the race index for females was .7 higher than the mean score for males. With the sample size, this is statistically significant. With a 99.1% level of certainty, we can conclude that females at Luther College are more likely to be more racially progressive than males.



What is your sex?

	Number of Respondents	Mean score on race index
Male	65	*6.3385
Female	129	*7.0620
Total	194	*6.8196

\* indicates statistical significance

*Profiles of the Most Racially Progressive Groups and the Least Racially Progressive Groups*

After running mean scores on the race index for all categories, I compiled a table of the three groups of respondents who had the highest scores on the race index, as well as a table of the three groups of respondents who had the lowest mean score on the race index.

Least Racially Progressive Groups:

Category	Mean Score on Race Index
Conservative	5.7632
Annual Income of \$200,000 and over	5.7692
Male	6.3385

Most Racially Progressive Groups:

Category	Mean Score on Race Index
Very Liberal	8.7222
Dated 2 or more people of a different race	8.2222
Had 3 or more friends of a different race growing up	7.6000

The groups of people who had the highest scores on the race index were those who were very liberal, with a mean score of 8.72. Those respondents who had dated 2 or more people of a different race had the second highest score, 8.22. The third highest mean score, 7.6 were those who had 3 or more friends of a different race growing up.

The group with the lowest mean score, 5.76, on the race index was those who identified themselves as conservative. Those from a family with an annual income of \$200,000 and over scored second lowest on the race index, 5.77. Males had a mean score of 6.34, which was the third lowest score on the race index.

## Discussion

The findings of this study did not completely support the hypothesis that working class females who are racially progressive, grew up in diverse neighborhoods and had inter-racial friendship and romantic relationships across the color line are the most racially progressive. However, some very important findings were observed. Some of the independent variables had a strong relationship with being racially progressive. Other independent variables did not show a statistically significant relationship with being racially progressive.

I did not find a statistically significant correlation between neighborhoods and racial attitudes, income and racial attitudes and the number of inter-racial friendships and racial attitudes. Those from the most diverse neighborhoods did have the highest mean score on the race index than all of the other neighborhood categories. Those from neighborhoods with 2-10% non-whites had the lowest mean score on the race index, while those from neighborhoods with 0-1% non-whites had a slightly higher mean score. It seems that there is something about a few non-whites in neighborhoods that changes whites' attitudes. The group-threat theory may explain this trend. Those with annual family incomes of \$200,000 and above had a mean score that was nearly one point lower than all of the other income categories. But those from the working class were not the most racially progressive, as Bonilla-Silva found in his study (2003). Those from families with yearly incomes of \$70,000 to \$99,999 scored the highest on the race index. Since my sample included only college students, there may not have been a high number of respondents from the working class, since it is very expensive to attend a liberal arts college such as Luther College. These findings also show more support for the group threat theory. Respondents who had three or more friends of a different race while growing up had a mean score on the race index that was one point higher than those who had zero friends of a different

race while growing up. Since this data was not statistically significant, it does not support Bonilla-Silva's findings.

There was a statistically significant relationship between racial attitudes and sex, racial attitudes and political ideology, and racial attitudes and the number of people one has dated of another race. According to my findings, females are much more likely to be racially progressive than males. Perhaps this is because females are disadvantaged by sexism, so they may understand the feeling and consequences of being underprivileged. Those who dated inter-racially are more likely to be more racially progressive. This supports Bonilla-Silva's findings and the contact theory. As he points out, those who share the same spaces and same set of experiences, such as discrimination, develop a sense of understanding and community (Bourdieu 1980). Those who identify themselves as politically progressive are much more likely to be racially progressive. This also supports Bonilla-Silva's hypothesis.

My comparison of the respondents' scores on the race index is particularly interesting. The least racially progressive groups of people were male conservatives with an annual income of \$200,000 and above. The most racially progressive groups were liberals who had dated two or more people of a different race and had three or more friends of a different race growing up. According to these findings, the most racially progressive characteristics were related to political beliefs and behavior, experiences and interactions, such as participating in friendships or romantic relationships across the color line. The least racially progressive characteristics are related to political beliefs and status in society; rich white males were the lowest scoring. This makes sense that those who enjoy the greatest privilege in society would be most interested in upholding the institution of racism. They are the least likely to recognize racial discrimination as a large problem in American society and support affirmative action.

This finding that rich white men are the least racially progressive is an inverse of Bonilla-Silva's (2003) findings that white working-class women are the most racially progressive. My study found a much stronger correlation between political ideology and racial attitudes than Bonilla-Silva emphasized in his work. Those categorized by their political ideologies, either very liberal or conservative, were the highest and lowest scoring, respectively, on the race index.

This data gives important information about factors that influence the racial attitudes of white American college students in Iowa. This is important to understand in order to combat racism in the United States. Future studies should examine if these patterns are true across other age groups and regions of the United States. Further research could explore why some people are more likely to date or have friends across the color line. Finding a way to encourage more rich white males to engage in friendships and romantic relationships with those of another race could also be important in changing their racial attitudes.

## Appendix A

How many non-whites were there in the neighborhoods that you grew up in?

1. Very few (0-1 %)
2. A few (2-10 %)
3. Some (11-30 %)
4. Many (31-94 %)
5. Almost all (95-100 %)

How many [people you have dated since high school] were of a different race? \_\_\_\_\_

Which label best describes your political views?

1. Very Liberal
2. Liberal
3. Moderate
4. Conservative
5. Very Conservative
6. Don't Know

Of your five closest childhood (pre-college) friends, how many were of a different race/ethnicity than you? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your sex?

1. Male
2. Female

What is the annual income of your primary household?

1. Under \$40,000
2. \$40,000-69,999
3. \$70,000-99,999
4. \$100,000-199,999
5. \$200,000 and over

Do you agree or disagree: Government action is needed to counter-balance the impacts of racial inequality and discrimination.

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

To what extent do you think racial discrimination is a problem in our society?

1. large problem
2. moderate problem
3. small problem
4. not a problem

Rate your current willingness to date interracially:

1. Very Willing
2. Willing
3. Indifferent
4. Hesitant
5. Very Hesitant

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