me of the Lowercase Variety: Reflections on the American Dream, Power, Privilege, and self

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me of the Lowercase Variety: Reflections on the
American Dream, Power, Privilege, and self

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational and Organizational Leadership

by
jared m. halter
December 2016

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This critical qualitative, autoethnographic research project explored how I came to understand the American dream through stories shared with me during semi-structured interviews, scholarly literature, and my own lived experience. I utilized critical reflexivity to examine the ways in which race, gender, and class appear in a person’s understanding of their life and the American dream. Critical whiteness theory, critical race theory and critical race feminism, and structuralist constructivism guided my understanding of the American dream and how it influences the ways in which individuals and I understand our lives. Through what I learned, I discuss how the American dream affects education and the way we understand our lives in the United States. These lessons include ideas such as what are the American dream, meritocracy, social mobility, equity, privilege and oppression, and how to achieve success. Impacted areas include conceptions of equity, equality, race, privilege, gender, class, education, success, family, career, and personal values/beliefs.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the nineteen people who shared their lives and perspectives with me. Thank you for honoring me with the belief that I was worth your time.

My work is, and will always be, dedicated to disrupting privilege and oppression.
i want to thank my parents for creating me almost 35 years ago. Without this monumentous event, i would not be here today. i want to thank my partner, friends, family, and others who have supported and believed in me. i want to thank my chair Dr. Michelle Boettcher. Your time and energy is greatly appreciated, and will never be forgotten. i want to thank Dr. Ysaaca Axelrod for her dedication and support of me during this project. Without you and your guidance, i would not have made it. i want to thank Dr. Julie Martin for her mentorship and belief in my ability. You have inspired a confidence in myself and my ability that i did not know i had. Lastly, i want to thank Dr. Matthew Boyer for his mentorship. For all the individuals who supported me i have not named, you are not forgotten, you have touched my life in a way i can never fully acknowledge.

i must also acknowledge Fifa and my Xbox for keeping my brain from rotting from all the information i had to stuff into it over the last five years 😊
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SECTIONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. SCHOLARLY FOUNDATIONS</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literary Foundations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Foundations: my Positionality</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. THE AMERICAN DREAM: FINDINGS</strong></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Dream and Success: Education and Hard Work</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope and Personal Responsibility: Privileged (Re)Created Through the American Dream</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriarchy and Heteronormativity (Re)Produced Through Family and Work</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How i Understand Race and Class in the American Dream</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. IMPLICATIONS THROUGH PARABLE</strong></td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Parable About Baseball: Equality and Equity</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tale of the Angry White Men</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDICES</strong></td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Interview Questions</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Recruitment Letter</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C: Information About Being in a Research Study ........................................ 171
REFERENCES ........................................................................................................... 174
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.1 Participant Demographic Information .............................................. 75
SECTION ONE

SCHOLARLY FOUNDATIONS

This section is the scholarly foundation for the study. It shows that I can do doctoral and scholarly thinking and work. It discusses history and literature, theories used in the study, and the methods that guided how the study was completed. These three chapters together build the frame, give me the colors to paint with, and provide me the brushstrokes to paint this masterpiece.

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever think about the American dream? Do you think about what it means? Do you think about whether the American dream does what it says it does? Do you think about the ways the American dream maintains and reinforces systems of privilege, power, and domination instead of creating opportunity and upward social mobility? Do you think about education’s role in the American dream? Do you think about how the American dream affects you? Do you notice how the American dream is present in your daily life? I know before this study I did not, but after careful examination of the American dream and its affect on our lives, I now do.

The American dream is one and many; there is endless possibility of interpretations and expressions of it (Bourdieu, 2014; Bourdieu, 1989). At the same time, there is one American dream that is being conveyed to individuals and us as a society. This American dream is a meta-narrative or grand story told in the United States as part of the country’s larger socialization process (Canon, 2003; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2014). This meta-narrative helps to shape each person’s understanding of themselves, country,
society, community, lives, and the world (Johnson, 2014). The American dream is made up of a few core principles: an open and meritocratic class system, hope, opportunity, education, and social mobility (Abowitz, 2005; Adams, 1931; Atwater, 2007; Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Choo & Tan, 2007; Cullen, 2003; Hochschild, 1996; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Wallechinsky, 2006).

The American dream is the United States’ dominant ideology (Johnson, 2014). It is a grand story or meta-narrative whose ideas are intricately woven into the core of the United States, and it inspires the US’ national spirit (Abowitz, 2005; Cullen, 2003). It captures hearts and minds, regardless of social position (Hochschild, 1996), from the President of the United States (Atwater, 2007), to college students (Abowitz, 2005), to working class citizens (Hochschild, 1996), as well as educated and middle class citizens (Johnson, 2014).

The American dream arouses hopes and dreams of a better future. It creates expectations of being able to achieve a better life. It “…lurks as a backdrop to many lives. Whether the Dream is bitterly rejected or wholeheartedly accepted, it is ever present” (Cannon, 2003, p. 552). The American dream is a belief, beating deep in the hearts of those who live in the United States, and it unifies the country together (Johnson, 2014). It affects one’s life within each day, within each moment. It dramatically shapes decisions, policy, and practices in the United States (Cannon, 2003; Hochschild, 1996; Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003), and impacts our educational system (Wilson, 2011). This connection to education and policy is important because many in the United States believe education is the “Great Equalizer” (Johnson, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate,
If you live in the United States, you hear the American dream story from the time you are young, until the time you pass away (Canon, 2003; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2014). This story, which is used to cement the legacy of meritocracy in this country, tells tales about hard work, individual success, earning what you have, and the opportunity to move up or enhance your social position (Abowitz, 2005; Adams, 1931; Atwater, 2007; Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Choo & Tan, 2007; Cullen, 2003; Hochschild, 1996; Johnson, 2014; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2014; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Wallechinsky, 2006). The American dream moves and inspires a nation through its allure of an individual being able to overcome any circumstance or situation. It moves individuals by providing hope that tomorrow will be better than today if you do the “right things” and follow its rules.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

Education is believed to help people overcome obstacles and support meritocracy in the United States by generating greater opportunity for social advancement (Johnson, 2014; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2014). That said, there is a gap in the research related to how education within the context of the American dream affects our lives and the role education plays in (re)creating the society in which we live. If we believe and use education as a key to leveling the playing field for inequities related to social identity, then understanding education and the American dream are crucial to achieving equity in this country.

Johnson’s (2014) research is one of the few qualitative studies on the American
dream. In the study, Johnson (2014) argued the American dream contributes to stratification and a non-meritocratic society. When a country is stratified it means there are distinctly different class levels, with most of the money and power residing with those at the top. When this happens, people in upper locations typically work to solidify their position to prevent any loss of power/money, which in turn makes it more difficult for people not located at the top of the strata to make it there. This creates a non-meritocratic society because a person’s location or position in society is not necessarily based off their talents, potential, and capabilities. Instead, social positioning is influenced and determined by social location and the unearned advantages or unearned disadvantages associated with one’s positionality. From this qualitative study that interviewed over 200 families, Johnson (2014) found family wealth played a powerful role in determining a person’s life chances. Participants conveyed that they believed education was key to eliminating societal inequality. This belief in education’s role in reducing inequities and promoting meritocracy makes the intersection between education and the American dream important to research.

In an attempt to fill this gap in the research, this study explored how the American dream affects individuals’ understanding of their lives. Specifically, I investigated how the American dream touched different aspects of an individual’s beliefs and ways of seeing the world that included personal values, success, education, family, career, and ideas about equity, privilege, oppression, and meritocracy. I asked for participants’ perspectives and understanding about the American dream. This exploration of participant perspectives and understanding influenced how I understood the American
dream, power, privilege, and myself. In exploring how the American dream affected one’s understanding of their life, my project was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the American dream affect an individual’s understanding of their life?

2. How do race, gender, and class intersect and affect the way an individual understands the American dream?
   a. How does an individual’s understanding of the American dream intersect with and affect the way they understand race, gender, and class?

3. How is my understanding of the American dream affected by the way participants understand and use the American dream to explain their beliefs about life and the United States?

These questions formed from the overarching purpose of the study, to examine the American dream and its use of race, gender, class, and education to raise critical consciousness and awareness of how concepts and ideology affect individual beliefs, actions, speech, and choices. This work is important to me because I desire to change how individuals think about the American dream and the United States.

I believe ideas shape beliefs, and beliefs subsequently shape actions, speech, and the choices we make. Through these, we unknowingly express ideas, views, and beliefs that perpetuate and support systems of power, privilege, and oppression. I believe the greatest impact I can have in the struggle to increase equity is by changing how we see ourselves and the world because I believe the ways in which we view our lives informs
and guides the way we vote, act, speak, and participate in society. Many research projects focus on recommending policy, curriculum, or other forms of tangible action. While I do that in this project, I believe critically informing how an individual understands the ways in which their life is affected by the American dream and systems of power, privilege, and oppression is important. I aim to shift beliefs and perspectives by raising critical awareness and consciousness of oneself in relation to society and the American dream. My interest lies in critically examining the ways in which the American dream affects how an individual understands the United States and their life. The goal is to evoke questions that elicit critical reflection about the ways in which the American dream and systems of power, privilege, and oppression have influenced us to see others, the world, and ourselves. I want to create a conversation where we question what we have been taught to know and believe about ourselves and others. I seek to examine how these things (re)create and perpetuate privilege, power, and oppression in the United States.

**Important Information Before We Begin**

Before we begin this journey together, you may have noticed that my name and anything referring to myself is not capitalized. This is not an accident or a mistake. I decapitalized my name ten years ago when I first began my exploration into understanding the ways in which my social identities affect my life. This continuing examination and understanding of myself in relation to others and systems of power, privilege, and oppression has led me to this research project and life’s work. The reason I decapitalized my name and any references to myself was to serve as a reminder that I am capitalized by the system from the privilege I am given as a white, heterosexual, middle-
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

class man. This dissertation serves as one piece of my perspective and the way i view the world and self. While i do not address my name specifically throughout the text, the entirety of this text is about my shift in perspective and understanding that led me to decapitalize myself.

This dissertation utilized autoethnographic methods to analyze the data and finish the text. The use of autoethnographic methods brought a split in the text between traditional scholarly writing and the way that i write and make sense of the American dream. The tension from this dialectal created the need to divide the text into two halves. The first half (section one) contains scholarly foundations –literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology. In the second half of the text (sections two and three), i am still doing scholarly work, but the writing occurs in ways that are more natural for me – parable and reflexivity.

In the next chapter, i begin to lay the groundwork for the dissertation by reviewing the history and literature. This chapter serves as one piece of the foundation for our voyage into what i learned about the American dream and systems of power, privilege, and oppression during this study. After the literature review, i will discuss the theories that framed the study in chapter two and the methodology that guided how i did the study in chapter three. Once i have discussed these three key components, i will move to the second half of the dissertation to talk about what i learned from participants, reflexively examine personal experiences and memories, and discuss the importance of what i learned.
CHAPTER ONE
LITERARY FOUNDATIONS

This chapter from my dissertation reviews scholarly sociological literature on the American dream. In the dissertation, I used critical whiteness theory (CWT), critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism (CRF), and structuralist constructivism together to formulate my theoretical framework. I describe the American dream as a social system that reinforces and (re)creates values and beliefs by shaping socializing processes. What sets the American dream apart from other socializing forces in the United States is its preeminence in shaping US culture and ideology—it is the grand metanarrative in the United States (Johnson, 2014).

This chapter covers relevant literature that provided the foundation for the study. I overview the history and evolution of the American dream and discuss the tenets of the American dream: opportunity, social mobility, meritocracy, race and class, and education. I also examine the connection of the American dream with education, wealth, and housing. Once the context of the American dream has been painted, the theoretical foundation will be explained in the following chapter to frame my approach for the study.

The American Dream: The Great US Promise

The American dream has endless individual interpretations and expressions (Bourdieu, 2014; Bourdieu, 1989). Yet, there are common threads in this meta-narrative that connects these different conceptions that are largely accepted as social fact. These social facts affect the way each person in the United States sees themselves and the world (Canon, 2003; Johnson, 2014). The American dream says the United States is a
meritocracy where each person has the opportunity to achieve upward social mobility through education, hard work, determination, and perseverance (Cullen, 2003; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2014). Seider, Gilmore, & Rabinowicz (2010) described the American dreams as one of the “most firmly entrenched memes in American culture” (p. 5). Its entrenchment and centrality to the United States makes the American dream an extremely important topic of study, and one that has largely gone ignored in research until the last decade (Johnson, 2014).

The American Dream Defined

So what are the specifics of the story of the American dream? Hochschild (1995) defined the American Dream as “the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it—material or otherwise—through their own efforts” (p. 6). Given its importance to US culture and ideology, the American dream is the great promise in the United States. This promise says that each person has the opportunity to pursue what they most desire and that their achievement is based solely on individual merit determined by their individual talent and work ethic. In the United States a person is socialized to believe their level of individual determination decides the fate of their lives and wealth. This idea that anyone can make it is deeply embedded within this nation and its culture (Seider et al., 2010). It socializes individuals to believe that they have hope for a better life as long as they play by the rules of working hard and being determined (Liu, 2011).

Hope and social mobility. Hope for a better life through upward social mobility is the great promise of the American dream, and are vital to how most people believe life
is supposed to work in the United States (Abowitz, 2005; Adams 1931; Atwater, 2007; Carver & Baird, 1998; Choo & Tan, 2007; Cullen, 2003; Hochschild, 1995; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Wallechinsky, 2006). This hope that you are able to create a better life and future for you and your family via increased wealth drives the American dream. Through the idea of hope and social mobility we are taught the United States is “a place of unbridled opportunities where anyone with will and gumption can make a better life” (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 427). Thus, we are told there is always hope, because there are ever-present opportunities for us to find to build a better life and accrue greater wealth within the United States. McNamee and Miller (2014) described upward social mobility as the opportunity to obtain greater wealth and income than one’s parents had, thereby elevating one’s social standing. Most people in the United States believe that a college degree leads to a higher paying job and guarantees upward social mobility (Liu, 2011; Souto-Otero, 2010).

The belief that upward social mobility is possible for every person reflects the belief that the United States is an open and meritocratic class system (Abowitz, 2005; Adams, 1931; Atwater, 2007; Beach, 2007; Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Bullock & Lott, 2011; Choo & Tan, 2007; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Johnson, 2014; McNamee & Miller, 2014; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Wallechinsky, 2006). It is also the bedrock for hope. The American dream (re)creates and reinforces this belief. It says every individual is responsible for their place in society, and thus makes the effect of systematic, cultural, and environmental factors invisible. Through the belief that success and wealth is open to anyone forms the basis for individuals to believe that the
American dream and the United States is a place they can make a better life through upward social mobility and increased wealth.

**Wealth.** The American dream says our choices drive whether we achieve success and wealth (Fass, Dinan, & Aratani, 2009). This idea points the focus directly at the individual and makes the promise of the American dream strikingly poignant, because it says ingenuity, determination, and a strong work ethic are the only things required to achieve upward social mobility. The Economic Mobility Project (2009) found that despite “the Great Recession”, individuals in the United States were still optimistic that they and their children would achieve upward mobility. This belief is powerful given the American dream’s centrality in shaping US culture and individual beliefs that each generation should have a better life than the previous one (Corak, 2013; Hanson & Zogby, 2010; Urahn, Currier, Elliott, Wechsler, Wilson, & Colbert, 2012). In the United States we learn that economic stagnation and inequity results from individuals who do not work hard enough, are not determined enough, or did not do what they needed to do to get out of poverty (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Ladd & Bowman, 1998; Mantsios, 2003; Schwarz & Volgy, 1992; Stuber, 2006).

Hanson and Zogby (2010) found “considerable evidence that systems and structures work to the distinct advantage of some and to the disadvantage of others” (p. 581). Despite this, individuals in the United States overwhelmingly believe poverty results from individual failure stemming from a lack of motivation, talent, effort, and self-control (Feagin 1975; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Howard, 2008; Seider, Gilmore, & Rabinowicz, 2010). One example of this belief is that two-thirds of people in the
United States blame Blacks for the wealth gap between whites and Blacks (Hanson & Zogby, 2010). This belief shows the power of the American dream’s influence on views about how wealth, achievement, and upward social mobility work in the United States. Despite evidence that says otherwise, people believe individuals are the ones who determine if they are poor or rich. Therefore, the individualistic understanding of how society works in the United States that the American dream advances has serious and dangerous implications.

**Privilege.** The idea that individuals are responsible for their own wealth or poverty is only a part of the role of the subtext of privilege in the American Dream. Believing we can overcome any challenge allows us to ignore effects from the historical legacy of systematic privilege and oppression across social categories like race, gender, and class in the United States (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Howard, 2008). Ignoring these effects results in policies and laws that claim to treat people equally but actually increase inequity.

When a policy or law does not disrupt privilege, it preserves it. This preservation of privilege results in the maintenance of an inequitable distribution of wealth that is exemplified in the effects of childhood poverty, the connection of school quality to home values, and how access to higher education is connected to family SES. All of these factors combine to not only limits access to a college degree and the American dream, but they also to contribute to unequal treatment under criminal law (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).
**Social mobility.** Fass et al. (2009) defined economic mobility as “the ability to move up or down the economic ladder during one’s lifetime and across generations” (p. 3). Wagmiller and Adelman (2009) pointed out that this concept is at the heart of the American dream. I use the term social mobility to encompass economic mobility and the social aspects of class. Urahn et al. (2012) defined wealth by the following equation:

\[
\text{wealth} = (\text{income} + \text{assets}) - \text{total debts.}
\]

Assets that increase your wealth include: money, home ownership, stocks, businesses, and retirement funds (Shapiro, 2009). Inheritance and other transfers of money help families to build wealth (Johnson, 2014). Together, wealth and income form the resources used to achieve upward social mobility and enhance social class. The hope and possibility of increasing wealth among those who have little wealth is endemic to the American dream.

Intergenerational social mobility is a child’s ability to accrue greater wealth and income than her parents to achieve upward economic mobility (Johnson, 2014). Wagmiller and Adelman (2009) describe it as “a key indicator of the degree of equality of opportunity in society” (p. 1). The American dream is premised on the idea that every child (and person) has the opportunity to be better off than their parents if they are determined, work hard, and persevere (Cullen, 2003; Fass et al., 2009; Urahn et al., 2012). This promise of a meritocratic class system that promotes intergenerational mobility is at core of the values the United States was founded upon and how it is believed to operate.

**Meritocracy.** It is impossible to separate privilege, wealth, and access to higher education from the American dream. The result of this meta-narrative is the great promise
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

of a meritocratic society where hard work and determination determine an individual’s level of success.

“The ideal that all Americans have equality of opportunity regardless of their economic status at birth is the crux of the American Dream and a defining element of our national psyche” (Urahn et al., 2012, p. 1). The American dream says that every person in the United States has the ability to achieve their wildest dreams (Abowitz, 2005; Fass et al., 2009; Johnson, 2014). That is, the American Dream describes the country as a meritocratic society where we achieve wealth and upward mobility through our work ethic, determination, and educational attainment (Souto-Otero, 2010; Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009).

Meritocracy is a social system where “individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities” (McNamee & Miller, 2014, p. 2). Moore (2004) explained meritocracy as a system where people “achieve social status by virtue of their actual abilities and contributions rather than having it merely ‘ascribed’ by accident of birth” (p. 39). The United States is supposed to have an open class system in which talent, educational attainment, and effort determine our social mobility and social class (Liu, 2011). Our faith in education is one of the keys to our belief that we live in a meritocracy (Johnson, 2014). We believe education can subvert any circumstantially created inequity a person may incur in their life (Collins, 2009; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006).

Cullen (2003) wrote that the American dream depends on the idea it is available to everyone. In other words, equality of opportunity for achievement must lay the
American dream’s foundation if its promise is to be a real possibility for every person. From this perspective, every person who believes in or strives for the American dream has to believe in equality and meritocracy in some fundamental way. This dependence on everyone’s ability to attain the American dream, regardless of social position and circumstance, is central to the belief that the United States is a meritocracy (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). If the United States is not a meritocracy in which every one of us has the ability to achieve what we desire and are willing to work for, then the American dream as it is premised, cannot exist.

The American dream is vital to the national identity and existence of the United States, because it is the overarching meta-narrative (Johnson, 2014). If the American dream were a myth it would strip the country’s identity as the land of opportunity (Abowitz, 2005; Adams 1931; Atwater, 2007; Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Choo & Tan, 2007; Cullen, 2003; McNamee & Miller, 2014; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Wallechinsky, 2006). It would shatter what the majority of individuals believe about how life works in the United States. Questions about whether every person has the opportunity for upward social mobility could cause massive upheaval and revolt because the American dream is so deeply embedded at the heart of the United States. Despite these disruptions, upheavals, and revolts, this is what I seek to do in my work here.

**Social Entrenchment of the American Dream**

The entrenchment of the American dream makes it one of, if not the most important aspect of US culture, and part of the larger socialization process in the United States (Hughes & Kroehler, 2011). Through its prominence in US culture, the American
dream shapes the nation’s education, legislation, and policy (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). Johnson (2014) found the American dream is vital to what an individual in the United States believes and values in their life. Therefore, the American dream has great influence on an individual’s understanding of the ways in which meritocracy, social mobility, and equity operate in the United States. Adams (1931) had this to say about the American dream:

The American dream, that dreams of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement…. A dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position…. (p. 404-5)

This idea serves as the foundation for my work as it provides a definition and context for the meta-narrative i seek to explore and disrupt in this study.

The American dream shaped US culture and this nation long before it was called the American dream (Cullen, 2003). In fact, tenets of the American dream predate the Declaration of Independence, originating from the Protestant ideology of European settlers in the 1600s (Abowitz, 2005; Beach, 2007). John Truslow Adams coined the term in 1931 in their book Epic of America (Choo & Tan, 2007).

Following Bourdieu (1984), i recognize that socialization is a reciprocally created process in which the individual and social constructs influence one another. i view the American dream as racialized, gendered, classed, and heternormative (Dyer, 2008;
Evans-Winters, 2010; Owens, 2007). I believe the American dream, race, class, and gender converge to influence an individual’s understanding of these constructs. This intersection then informs the ways in which individuals understand their lives and the United States.

The American dream and its ties with social systems. Social systems are interconnected patterns of relationships that exist between individuals and institutions to form society (Harro, 2000; Hughes & Kroehler, 2010; Johnson, 2001). The American dream is constructed from general ideas and notions that become social facts and truths. These social facts influence what each person believes about themselves, others, and the world around them. In summary, it is my contention, building on the work of Harro (2000) and others that the American dream affects individual belief systems, values, choices, actions, preferences, and behavior, which simultaneously affects the meaning and understanding of the American dream.

The American dream cannot be physically touched, but the effects on individual and society can be felt. Giddens (1984) discussed that social systems structure (organize/influence) society to create social norms. The American dream is the main influencer on ideas about meritocracy and social mobility in the United States. These ideas then become social facts that create social norms that inform beliefs and expectations for how a person achieves their place in society. These beliefs have serious implications for how equity and justice are understood. Simply stated, the American dream is a social system that influences how individuals view the world and limits
individuals’ choices within that system through its importance to US socialization processes.

**Does Everyone Have the Same Opportunity?**

Given everything highlighted in the previous section, what are the opportunities that exist for individuals in the United States? In this section I explore the connections of race and family SES with the effects of childhood poverty on opportunity for upward social mobility.

**Race.** Scholars have found race is extremely salient to levels of family wealth and income and to intergenerational social mobility (Lipsitz, 2006; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Shapiro, 2009; Shapiro, 2006 Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). The Federal Reserve (2013) reported the median income of families of color was $33,600, while white families’ median income was $55,800, a $22,200 gap in median income. While this seems substantial, the wealth gap between white families and families of color were even more substantial. White families’ median net worth (wealth) was $142,000. The median net worth of families of color was $18,100. This gap of $123,900 in wealth is enormous, and represents the difference between being able to pay for a range of things including a college education, a down payment on a home, legal help, and an emergency.

**Inequality and poverty.** Corak’s (2013) research on intergenerational mobility found that family background and socioeconomic class were more important to where a child ends up as an adult than individual work ethic or determination. Similarly, Wagmiller and Adelman (2009) wrote that children born into families with the highest incomes have the greatest chance of earning the highest level of incomes as adults. In
Urahn et al.’s (2012) study on economic mobility they discovered that people in the United States who were “raised at the bottom and top of the family income ladder were likely to remain there as adults” (p. 1). Fass, Dinan, and Aratani (2009) reported that, “42% of children born to parents in the bottom fifth of the economic distribution remain in the bottom as adults and another 23% rise only to the second fifth” (p. 3). Conversely, they found that 62% of children born into families at the top of the economic distribution would end up in the top two levels as adults. The phenomenon these studies describe is known as stickiness at the ends.

**Childhood poverty.** Fass et al. (2009) found that more than 70% of Black children were living in poverty, with 25% of these children living in poverty for at least 75% of their childhood. By comparison, only 28% of white children were living in poverty and only three percent of these children have lived in poverty for 75% of their childhood. Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins’s (2008) report on economic mobility found white children were more likely to experience upward social mobility than Black children relative to their family wealth and socioeconomic class.

Growing up in poverty has negative effects on a child’s health, cognitive, emotional, and social well-being, as well as their success in school (Fass et al., 2009). Wagmiller and Adelman (2009) list four major disadvantages children who grow up in poverty or in low-income families endure that wealthier children do not:

1) More likely to experience multiple family transitions, move frequently, and change schools.
2) The schools they attend are less well funded, and the neighborhoods they live in are more disadvantaged.

3) The parents of these children have fewer resources to invest in them and, as a consequence, their homes have fewer cognitively stimulating materials, and their parents invest less in their education.

4) The stress of living in poverty and struggling to meet daily needs can also impair parenting. (p. 1)

**Poverty and education.** The inability to invest large amounts of money into education may be one of the most powerful reasons that children in poor families cannot achieve the social mobility the American dream promises. Duncan and Murnane (2011) reported that low-income families’ annual expenditures increased by 55% to $1,300 per child while high income families’ annual expenditures increased by more than 150% to just under $9,000 from the 1970s to the mid 2000s. As Corak (2013) writes, the college completion gap between children from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds has widened enormously in recent decades. College graduation rates increased roughly four percent for children from low-income families compared to children born in the 1960s (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

Conversely, college graduation rates for children from high-income families increased by 20%. Belley and Lochner’s (2007) analysis of educational outcomes discovered that family income and socioeconomic status’ influence on college attendance and completion doubled during this same time period. By controlling for cognitive
ability, they showed that the socioeconomic status of the family into which a child is born predicts their likelihood of attending and completing college more than their intelligence.

Cahalan and Perna (2015) found that family income was important to a child’s chances of attaining a bachelor’s degree and upward social mobility. Hoxby and Avery (2012) found that family socioeconomic status is the primary determiner of where a child applies to college. Children from families with greater wealth applied to selective institutions more often than children from low-income families across all ability levels, an imbalance attributed to the skyrocketing amounts of money wealthy parents spend on their children’s education (Corak, 2013). The supplementary resources afforded to children from higher socioeconomic families that are not available to children from lower socioeconomic families provide huge advantages to a child based on where they are born, not their work ethic, talent, or drive.

The Great Promise That Fails to Deliver

The American dream influences our actions, speech, beliefs, and expectations (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 2014). This section introduced literature that challenges the American dream and instead purports that what the American dream tells individuals is a lie. From the literature, it is evident that inequality is rampant in the United States (Collins, 2009; Lipsitz, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011). Children, especially children of color, who live in poverty, face enormous barriers to getting ahead because of their family’s SES (Isaacs et al., 2008). If the United States were a meritocracy where hard work, determination, and perseverance were sufficient to end poverty, the SES of a child’s family of origin would not determine their class position when they grow up.
Therefore, I am left to believe the American dream is a great promise that fails to deliver. This leaves open the question as to why so many people, including those it has spectacularly failed, still believe in it? In the next section I explore one reason why people believe that meritocracy and the American dream are true in the United States—education. The examination of this literature reviews how education is believed to give any person, regardless of their circumstances, the chance to achieve social mobility and the American dream.

**Education In The United States**

Education is believed to be essential to achieving the American dream. It is the vehicle that allows an individual to bypass obstacles or challenges related to their societal positionality. As Johnson (2014) wrote, “Parents repeatedly insisted education makes the American Dream possible for every child, not just that every child has a chance, but that the playing field is level, that education is the Great Equalizer, and that the competition is fair” (pp. 137-138). Education equalizes social inequalities by providing pathways for social and economic mobility for anyone who works hard in school. It helps to support the belief that the United States has an open class system (Hochschild, 1996), which allows a person to move up through their hard work, determination, and perseverance.

This belief is false (Abowitz, 2005; MacLeod, 2014; McNamee & Miller, 2014; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). A huge number of scholars and studies have found that not all groups have equal access to opportunities for upward social mobility because of the racialized (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Lipsitz, 2006; McNamee & Miller, 2009; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995), gendered, and
classed (Bourdieu, 1984; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Lipsitz, 2006) ways the United States operates (Collins, 2009; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Johnson, 2001). That said, before dismantling the notion of education as “the Great Equalizer”, it is essential to first understand the circumstances and history that created the belief that it is a foundational piece of the American dream.

**Genesis of the Education Myth**

The role of education in social mobility in the United States is as old as the country itself. Cullen (2003) discussed the founding fathers’ belief in upward mobility and how achieving a better life should be based off merit. In Adams’ (1931) formal naming of the American dream, merit played a pivotal role in defining and explaining it. In the United States’ current landscape, we believe and use education to create the belief that this country is a meritocracy (Johnson, 2014).

Education is supposed to provide opportunity, if you work hard and do well in school, to overcome inequalities woven into the United States and erase any disadvantage a person may be born into (Collins, 2009; Johnson, 2014). Rose (2012) discussed the connection between a good life and job prospects through the ways education is increasingly being viewed with an economic lens. Policy makers and parents consider education as a vehicle to provide economic gain for people and their children (Rose, 2012).

Connecting education more to economics and financial prosperity has minimized the importance of other outcomes of learning. Yet, understanding the connection between education and economic prosperity helps to understand why education has become so
vital to parents, and the American dream. According to Johnson (2014), parents believed the best way to achieve the American dream and social mobility is through education and schooling. This has played out in numerous ways; one being the great lengths parents went to ensure their child attended the best schools possible (Johnson, 2014). K-12 and a college education are core components of achieving the American dream (Atwater, 2007).

**K-12 education.** Through hard work in education each person is able to achieve anything they desire. MacLeod (1995) found high school students were taught that an open class system and achievement ideology exists in the United States. This message flies in the face of the statistical data regarding who graduates college across different social economic statuses (Belley & Lochner, 2007; Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Corak, 2013). High school students exposed to this message are more likely to believe individuals pursue the American dream under equitable circumstances.

Johnson (2014) found that parents believed education alleviated disparities from different social, economic, and political starting points and obstacles such as socio-economic status or race. Education is presented by the American dream as the “Great Equalizer” (Johnson, 2014), an institution that levels an uneven playing field. This part of the American dream ideology prevents the ability to see the structural/societal reasons people of color and people from lower SES backgrounds are left behind whites and individuals from middle-upper SES in this “race to the top” (Collins, 2009; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).
Issues of race and socio-economic status not only affect individuals, but also have a significant impact on educational settings. Where you go to school matters to the quality of education you receive (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Kozol, 1991). Studies have stressed that in the past 25-30 years schools are becoming more racially segregated than at any other point in modern history (Dorsey, 2013; Hawley, 1988; Orfield, 1988; Orfield & Lee, 2007; Schofield, 1989; Vaught, 2008). Kozol (1991) found that schools with high numbers of students of color are underfunded and under resourced. In this study, the funding of schools in New York city were looked at, revealing inner-city schools that were predominantly students of color averaged $5,000 of funding per student, whereas suburban, predominantly white schools received close to $15,000 per student. This finding that there is a disparity between funding levels of schools that are predominantly children of color or white children has been reinforced by multiple recent studies (Dorsey 2013; Orfield & Lee, 2007; Vaught, 2008).

Integration of schools from Brown v. Board of Education led to white flight from urban to suburban neighborhoods (Dorsey, 2013; Taeuber, 1990). Banks (1991) found that Blacks comprised 12% of the population in the United States, but 21 of the 22 most segregated schools in the country are over 90% African-American. McKenzie (2004) found that Blacks attended schools in Memphis that were heavily African-American (90%). This is important because of the funding and resourcing of schools, which is directly tied to wealth and home values. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) and Johnson (2014) found schools marked as urban (Black) are seen as less desirable than schools marked as suburban (white). This is directly tied to the lack of resources and funding.
found in schools that contain higher percentages of students of color (Dorsey 2013; Kozol, 1991; Orfield & Lee, 2007; Vaught, 2008).

Parents, regardless of race or social class, are strongly committed to the idea of getting the best education for their children (Johnson, 2014; Lareau, 2011). In MacLeod’s (2014) study, Blacks were more motivated to become educated and achieve the American dream than their white counterparts (both groups were from lower class families and backgrounds). This study counters the typical story told by media and society.

This literature informs the work i am doing here. When looking at the data available, i am forced to question why we so strongly believe that schooling is something that helps to level the playing field. The American dream and its messages of meritocracy make it clear our current neo-liberal, economic, capitalist system is in place to maintain and (re)produce itself. This equates to reproducing unearned advantages for the privileged that (re)creates unearned disadvantages for the oppressed. When schools are funded through property taxes and use curriculums, textbooks, and pedagogies centered on whiteness (Collins, 2009; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006), education serves to perpetuate white privilege and dominance. This makes it difficult for systemic change to occur because schools reinforce systems of power, privilege, and oppression that disproportionately advantages whites. These are the ideas that my study seeks to build upon, examine, and reveal in new ways.

**Standardized testing as a gateway to higher education.** Standardized testing has been considered part of the college entrance process for almost a century. The SATs were created by Alfred Binet and instituted in 1926 (Zamudio et al., 2011). What most
people do not know is that Binet was an overt racist that wanted the exclusion of people of color, Jews, along with many other people who were not white (Rousseau, 2006; Weissglass, 1998). Binet promoted the theory that people who were not white were of lesser intelligence. Weissglass (1998) found the SATs were intentionally created to exclude people who were not white.

Kidder and Rosner’s (2002) study of Educational Testing Services (ETS), the organization that oversees the SATs, found ETS removed SAT questions that African-Americans scored higher on than whites. In addition, the tests themselves are not predictors of success in higher education. According to Delgado and Stefanic’s (2001) study, SAT scores are not correlated with first year success in college.

As has been discussed, education and a willingness to work hard are essential elements to success according to the American dream. The findings of the studies in this section focus on how people are set up for success (or not) through the education pipelines. These findings provide crucial historical and educational context for the work done in this dissertation.

**Higher education.** While it may be argued that parents instill the value of K-12 education, as students move into higher education, they begin to more independently make meaning of their own experiences and beliefs. Abowitz (2005) found college students understood a college education to play a vital role in elevating one’s social status. The belief that an individual must get a college degree or obtain some sort of educational credentials makes the importance of education to the American dream clear (Abowitz, 2005; Atwater, 2007; Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006, Cullen 2003;
Hochschild, 1996; MacLeod, 1995; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Wallechinsky, 2006). In Abowitz’s (2005) study, college students’ were found to overwhelmingly believe in a differentiated class system, and that social mobility is dependent on the willingness to work hard. This contradiction in what individuals believe in comparison to statistical data about the United States means schools should pay attention to what is being articulated to students.

Students’ investment in higher education is based on social and cultural reinforcement of the value of this experience in terms of social mobility. Having access to college and universities is important because of their role as gatekeepers to social mobility and class position (Bell, 1973). Moore (2004) talked about the role of education in a system founded on the American dream when he wrote, “In a meritocracy, social status becomes increasingly dependent upon an individual’s level of education” (p. 384).

But is the American dream’s idea that the United States is a meritocracy truly based on the notion of hard work, and is it open to all? Not according to Dixson and Rousseau (2016), who suggested that to think higher education serves anyone beside people already at the top is to be hoodwinked by meritocracy and the system. In fact, scholars have stressed the system of higher education is designed to allow only some people in, while actively excluding others (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 2009). Different variables—wealth, high school location, social class, race, ability, financial aid, and parental involvement—have been found to restrict opportunity for participation in higher education (Geiger 2002; Hossler, Braxton, Coopersmith, 1989; Liu, 2011; McDonough 1997; Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004).
Bedworth, Colby, and Doctor (2006) found that higher education had transformative effects for those who obtained a college degree. Unfortunately, despite the benefits of a college degree in the American dream and upward mobility, roughly 50% of students who entered the ninth grade ever enrolled in college, with only 33% having received a degree (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006). This means the American dream becomes more difficult for 67% of eighteen year olds. What is even more troubling is that lower SES students graduated from college less than 15% of the time (one in seven). This means that 85% of low-income children have had their pursuit of the American dream obstructed or potentially denied because they did not get a college degree. All of these pieces combine to provide an effective counter-narrative to the American dream. Instead of the idea that hard work will help you achieve your dream, the role of race, socio-economic status, and other identities combine to move one toward or away from the dream.

Race, Class, Housing, and the American Dream

The United States is centered on whiteness, white privilege, and their use in the marginalization of people of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Lipsitz, 2006; Shapiro, 2006; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011; Vaught, 2008). Previous scholarship has identified numerous unearned advantages to being white in the United States. These include examples from something as simple as being able to buy a Band-Aid that matches your skin color (McIntosh, 1990), to having access to better funded schools (Kozol, 1991; Orfield & Lee, 2007; Vaught 2008), to being more likely to be able to secure a loan for a
house (Lipsitz, 2006), to the accumulative advantage of whiteness for a white family being $136,174 of value (Shapiro, 2009).

The United States provides unearned advantage through the possessive investment in whiteness and maintaining/increasing its value through laws and policies that historically have benefited whites and their families (Lipsitz, 2006). In the (re)production of the structural and societal advantage of being white, the United States has built a hierarchical society that lifts up whiteness and values things connected to it. This hierarchical construction creates stratification and different spaces that one is more likely to occupy based off ascriptive traits (Allan, 2010; Bourdieu, 2014; Collins, 2009; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011).

**Economic Benefits of Whiteness in the United States**

The average white family out earns the average Black family by a ratio of 5:3 and out owns Blacks by 10:1 (Lipsitz, 2006). This means the average Black family earns 60 cents to every one-dollar the average white family earns (Lipsitz, 2006; Feagin, 2000); and the average Black family owns one-tenth of what a white family does. In a similar study, Shapiro (2009) found the average Latinx family owns 11 cents to every one-dollar a white family does, and Blacks own seven cents for every one-dollar (white family).

It is important to realize that earnings and property ownership have an impact well beyond a single individual. Johnson (2014) found intergenerational transfers of wealth play a large role in class position and ability to achieve social mobility/better education. These transfers of wealth from other family members (parents and grandparents) occurred most often in white families. Intergenerational transfers of wealth
were often used to pay for unexpected expenses, afford houses in better school districts, and/or pay for tuition at private schools (Johnson, 2014). This is important because the United States uses education as the tool to create equity and equality in the opportunity to achieve the American dream (Johnson, 2014; Lipsitz, 2006; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2014).

**Myth of home ownership.** A key element to the American dream is the notion of being able to purchase a home. Not surprisingly, one of the largest economic benefits to being white is home ownership (Zamudio et al., 2011). Buying a home has historically been open mainly to whites through discriminatory and racist lending practices of the federal government, banks, and Federal Housing Association (FHA). These lending practices have given whites access to home ownership at a rate that other races have not had (Lipsitz, 2009).

Such lending practices have also denied people and families of color access to building individual and generational equity and wealth. Home ownership is extremely important to building wealth in the United States (Zamudio et al., 2011), denying families of color access to building individual equity and wealth that would have increased generationally. In looking at the FHA’s lending practices, Blacks have been denied over a trillion dollars in equity and wealth (Lipsitz, 2009).

The Homestead Act of 1863 was one of the first legislative acts to prevent Blacks and people of color access to land ownership. This act awarded 98% of land to whites, blatantly ignoring Blacks and other people of color (Lipsitz, 2006). In the 1940s and 1950s, the FHA promoted white flight (Taeuber, 1990) by privileging housing loans for
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

newer suburban neighborhoods over older inner-city homes (Lipsitz, 2006). These practices have led to Blacks missing out on incredible amounts of equity and wealth when home values doubled in the 1970s (Zamudio et al., 2011).

Closing the Loop: Education, Race, Class, and Home Ownership

Schools, and the quality of school one attends, are directly tied to the economic value of the neighborhoods and homes a person lives in (Dorsey, 2013; Kozol, 1991; Johnson, 2014; Wainer, 1993). Within the American dream and liberal ideology education is viewed as the “Great Equalizer” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Johnson, 2014). As outlined above, when access to good schools is limited by access to more expensive housing, which is limited by transgenerational wealth that is limited by law, policy, history, politics, race, gender, class, and other issues, the concept of the American dream is called into question. This is the basis for my work.

Concluding Reflections

The concepts discussed in this chapter framed my investigation of the American dream to critically examine it and potentially dismantle its myths. I am doing this to increase critical consciousness and awareness of how power, privilege, and oppression are perpetuated through the American dream. Its influence shapes beliefs that guide choices, actions, and speech. By raising critical consciousness and awareness of how the American dream is implicated in (re)creating individual speech, choices, and actions, I aim to change how individuals in the United States understand our lives and the way the United States works. In the next chapter, I discuss the theories that helped me to critically question the American dream and examine the ways in which it intersects with race,
gender, and class to (re)create and perpetuate privilege, power, and oppression. These theories are the basis for the critical lenses that formed my framework for this dissertation.
CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: my POSITIONALITY

The theoretical lenses I use are important because they influence and shape how I see and what I see when looking at the world and myself. Autoethnography is examining my knowledge and lived experience to understand how I understand a specific phenomenon (Denzin, 2013). For me, what I know and how I understand are tied to what I have learned in the formal classroom and in the informal classroom (my life and lived experience). What I have learned and understand also includes this research project and the perspectives participants shared with me about the American dream. Thus, my theoretical framework is a reciprocal relationship between my informal academic knowledge (who I am and personal experiences) and formal academic knowledge (theories and research project). These work together simultaneously to affect what I see when I look at myself and the world around me. This shapes what I know, and what I do not know.

In this study, the specific phenomenon I examined was the American dream, which I examined through critical lenses. During this chapter I discuss the theories that framed this study. These theories provide the lenses through which I examined the American dream and the tools by which I begin to dismantle it. These theories include critical whiteness theory (CWT), critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminist theory (CRF), and structuralist constructivism.
Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Feminism, and Critical Whiteness Theory

As a scholar who is influenced by critical race theory, it means that I examine history, events, texts, and other things for inequity and inequality, hoping to create a more informed, just, and equitable society. West (1995) identified critical race theory as:

An intellectual movement that is both particular to our postmodern (and conservative) times and part of the long tradition of human resistance and liberation. On the one hand, the movement highlights a creative – and tension ridden – fusion of theoretical self-reflection, formal innovation, radical politics, existential evaluation, reconstructive experimentation and vocational anguish. But, like all bold attempts to reinterpret and remake the world to reveal silenced suffering and to relieve social misery, Critical Race Theorists put forward novel readings of a hidden past that disclose the flagrant shortcomings of the treacherous present in the light of the unrealized – though not unrealizable – possibilities for human freedom and equality. (p. xi-xii)

The tension West (1995) referenced speaks to both the personal and the political – the individual and the systemic. Similarly, Yosso (2005) said, “CRT is a framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses” (p.75). This definition of CRT, while narrowly focused on race, is important because it calls for seeing the implicit and explicit impact of social identity on society. The exploration of race’s influence in the United States led me to realize that looking at race is not enough to understand the
American dream and its effect on the United States. This realization led me to read further and deeper.

**Critical Whiteness Theory**

Critical whiteness theory focuses primarily on uncovering the ways whiteness influences and affects an individual’s life (Applebaum, 2005; Owens, 2007; Sue, 2004). CWT examines systematic privilege and oppression through the experiences of people who are white (Owens, 2007). As a white man CWT is vital for me to analyze and understand my experiences and privilege when doing an autoethnography.

When you are white, being white is often something we (i) do not notice or is part of our primary conscious framework (Tatum, 2000). It is one of the largest reasons, if not the reason, why people who are white often do not recognize that they have a race or that race affects their life (Applebaum, 2003). Typically, as a white person, i only recognize race when it is in relation to someone else’s race that is not the same as my own.

Frankenberg (1993) described this phenomenon, “Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those who it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it,”(p. 228). Thus, the race that is not excluded or seen as different is the race that is the standard. When your race is the race that society is constructed from, it makes it extremely difficult to see your race (Fine, Weiss, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Reason & Evans, 2007; Tatum, 1997; Willie 2003).

Critical whiteness spotlights the relationship between unearned advantage and oppression and unearned disadvantage. Bailey (1998) said, “Any understanding of
oppression is incomplete without recognition of the role privilege plays in maintaining systems of domination” (p. 98). Because society and our lives are centered on whiteness and other privileged identities (male, heterosexual, and middle to higher SES), this makes critical whiteness important for my exploration of the American dream as a white, heterosexual, middle-class man. CWT analyzes my experience and positionality. If I only used critical race theory and critical race feminism I could avoid claiming and analyzing my privilege and the way systematic privilege is responsible for oppression in the United States. I use CWT to make sure I focus on my racial privilege, and to remind me that I need to examine the ways in which all my privilege affects my life.

Critical whiteness points out how things seen as normal are centered on whiteness because whiteness serves as the norm in the United States (Dyer, 2008; Owens, 2007). Typically, we notice things that are different in relation to what we usually see and what we know (Johnson, 2001). Anything we take for granted or do not notice is something that is normal. This idea can be extended from CWT to view dominance and subordination similarly with gender and class.

**Critical Race Feminist Theory**

Critical race feminism was born from the need for a lens that considered more than the needs of white girls/women and boys/men of color (Evans-Winters, 2005). CRF combines tenets from critical race theory and critical feminist theory to consider how race, class, and gender work together and affect the experiences of individuals. Critical race feminism extends from critical race theory (Few, 2007). As Ladson-Billings (2004) put it, CRT “incorporates scholarship from feminism, continental social and political
philosophy postmodernism, cultural nationalism, and a variety of social movements” (p. 57). This makes the inclusion of CRF in the theoretical influences for this study natural.

CRF historicizes the present to construct a context to see and critique how race, class, and gender intersect to shape society and culture (Evans-Winters, 2005; Wing, 1997). In the context of my work, CRF helps me to see the ways in which the race, class, and gender intersect with the American dream. CRF’s insistence on considering how race, class, and gender work together makes it an extremely valuable tool for analyzing the American dream and how it affects society and individuals.

Wing (1997) identified CRF as a theory to understand the experiences of Black girls and women. I did not study Black girls’ and women’s experiences specifically, but I used CRF to inform my knowledge of the ways in which race, gender, and class can affect someone’s life who is from a marginalized and oppressed group. These experiences and stories helped me to better understand the way I am privileged, and how that privilege works together with the American dream to shape different individuals’ lives. CRF also increased my knowledge about the experiences of the two Black women in the study to a limited degree.

Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010) outlined the tenets of CRF:

1. Critical race feminism as a theoretical lens and movement purports that women of color’s experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women.
2. Critical race feminism focuses on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression;

3. Critical race feminism asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color (i.e., anti-essentialist).

4. Critical race feminism is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth.

5. Critical race feminism calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression. (p. 20)

These tenets establish each person’s lived experience as different and unique based on their race, gender, and class. This idea is important to remind me that my experience in life is different than women and people of color. I cannot generalize the way my experiences or how I have achieved success to anyone else besides myself. Sure there may be conceptual commonalities, but the context that these concepts play out are drastically different depending on your social identities. Thus, in understanding the American dream and race, class, and gender, I must remember that my social identities affect my past interactions with these constructs, as well as my present and future interactions and understanding of them.

CRF helped inform the way I see the world to see how the United States and the American dream (re)create, reinforce, and maintain white male patriarchy. It influenced me to establish a baseline expectation that I pull from many different fields of scholarship. This interdisciplinary approach pulled from fields such as critical race theory, critical race feminism, critical whiteness theory, history, sociology, and
education. Through these fields, especially CWT and CRF, I came to understand the American dream as something that seems good, but actually reinforces demarcation based on social identities (Harro, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Yosso, 2005). Thus, privileged social identities like white, male, and middle-upper class provide unearned advantages that help an individual succeed and achieve the American dream. Conversely, oppressed social identities provide unearned disadvantages that make it more difficult for an individual to succeed and achieve the American dream.

**Researcher Positionality Related to CWT, CRF, and CRT**

It is important for me to consider my social identities and how they affect what I experience and how I see those experiences. I was socialized in specific ways because I am a white, heterosexual, middle-class man. Current US culture is based on whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality (Collins, 2009; Johnson, 2001). The ways in which I am socialized are rooted upon images, history books, curriculums, stereotypes, and implicit biases that convey positive images of my social identities (Harro, 2000). These positive images and centering of culture and history shape my knowledge and understanding of self in relation to the world by making me feel like life revolves around the way I have experienced it. As we will see during this dissertation, the American dream and its narrative work in ways that privilege myself and other individuals who have similar social identities.

Typically, theoretical frameworks discuss a theory or theories used by the researcher to guide their study. While I do this, I am going to do it slightly differently because this dissertation is about the way I see the American dream in relation to others,
the United States, and myself. A few things to keep in mind about my beliefs as you read through this chapter and document are:

1. I do not understand anyone else’s experience or life except my own. In fact, I am not sure how well I even understand my own experience and knowledge. I believe all knowledge is situated and uniquely created, with infinite possibility of its expression and what we know (and do not know) about it.

2. I am a white, heterosexual, middle-class man. As you will hear me say frequently, I am privileged. I do not understand what it means to be systematically oppressed or marginalized by society. Having a suitcase crammed full of privilege works against me in three ways that have a significant impact on society and my role in it: 1) understanding that I am not the center of the universe; 2) seeing my privilege; and 3) understanding how my privilege affects me. Society centers its culture and the way it socializes people on my social identities, this means I must practice humility, shutting up and listening to stories different than my own, critically reflecting on these stories, and then coming to grips with the fact that privilege causes oppression. Only once I put those ways of understanding into play will I begin to be able to understand my privilege and how it affects me.

3. Social identities affect the way an individual experiences US society and culture. As a white, heterosexual middle-class man I have been treated differently than others who do not have the same positionality as me.
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

4. I am provided privileges and unearned advantages by society that others do not experience because the United States is based on a white, heteronormative, patriarchal, middle-to-upper class center. There is nothing I can personally do to prevent myself from receiving these unearned benefits until US culture and social systems are changed to not advantage me based on my ascribed social identities. (DiAngelo, 2010; DiAngelo, 2011; Johnson, 2001; Tatum, 2000)

5. The fact that I cannot stop from receiving unearned advantages based on my social identities does not mean I do not have a responsibility to interrupt and dismantle systems that privilege some, and oppress others. The fight for equity and justice is the responsibility of every person, not just those who are marginalized and oppressed.

To study how people understand and use the American dream in their daily lives, I drew from critical race theory and critical race feminism, critical whiteness theory, and structural constructivism. I merged these distinct theoretical perspectives to explore how race, gender, class, education, and the American dream intersect to affect our values, beliefs, perspectives, and lived experience. I utilized this framework to inform and guide my investigation into the American dream and its use of education in (re)creating and reinforcing systems of power, privilege, and domination in the United States.

The American dream acted as the vehicle through which I examined race, gender, class, and education because it is the dominant ideology of the United States (Johnson, 2014). It plays a central role in shaping the present and future direction of this country by
influencing decision-making, policy, and practice (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). As the underpinning ideological tenet it plays a large role in the formation of the understanding of ourselves in relation to others and the world. This makes the American dream and how it effects on individuals and social structures important to study.

**How CRT, CRF, and CWT affected me.** The nature of my work required me not only to use lenses to examine how others experienced and made meaning of the American dream, but for me to turn those same lenses on myself. Growing up my parents and I rarely discussed race, and if we did, we did not discuss it in relation to how my race affected me. Instead, conversations about race were based on the other—people of color who were different from me. I was never asked to consider how being white affected the way I was treated by teachers, schoolmates, neighbors, church members, and others. At the dinner table we did not discuss our skin color. Whiteness was not a topic of conversation, nor was it a part of my consciousness.

The first time I was asked to consider my racial privilege was when I read scholars from CRF, CRT, and CWT. This process, which began 10 years ago this fall, was the beginning of my path to recognize and accept my privilege. I began to understand that as a white male my position and achievements in life are not questioned. I have not been asked to explain or justify anything I have achieved in my life. I have never been asked to justify my knowledge. There were many times in my career where an individual entered into an office where I worked and walked 20 feet past a person of color or woman to ask me a question. Often, even when I walked the person back to the woman or person
of color who had the knowledge to answer the question, the person continued to defer to me despite my lack of expertise.

Before I read literature from CRT, CRF, and CWT, I did not notice these incidents, nor did I connect them to my race, gender, or class. I must pay homage to authors of color such as Gloria Anzulúñ, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Kimberly Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, W.E. Dubois, and Derek Bell, and white authors such as Allan Johnson, Barbara Applebaum, Marilyn Frye, Alison Bailey, Ruth Frankenberg, Richard Dyer, Neil Altman, and David Owens who have influenced the way I see the world. These authors, and others, took a naive white, heterosexual, middle-class man who was unaware of his privilege and helped him to evolve into someone who is more self-aware of how race, gender, and class are part of systems of privilege, power, and oppression that shape the United States.

From reading CRT, CRF, and CWT, I am now able to engage in conversations about privilege, power, and oppression. Recently, I had a conversation about privilege and marginalization of children in schools with my mother. We were discussing how children of color are treated differently based on their race, when I said; “All children are treated differently based on their race.” Now, on the surface this statement may not seem particularly powerful, but it is because it recognizes that white children are treated differently based on their race. It recognized that white children were the apples to which children of color were being compared. Through my exposure to CRT, CRF, and CWT, I now have a heightened sense of awareness that is revelatory and transformative for me. In fact, that transformation is what has led me to this dissertation.
i was not taught that white children are treated differently because of their race. Whiteness is the standard in our society; people of color are viewed as different and measured against whiteness. From the knowledge and perspectives of the authors in CRT, CRF, and CWT i am now able to see whiteness in this conversation. This is important because often discussions about equity, equality, and oppression fall short of naming and including privilege. Typically, neither the conversations nor the critiques are focused on both whites and people of color. Whiteness’ role in oppression and marginalization goes unnoticed. We cannot solve oppression and marginalization without (re)solving privilege –these three go hand in hand (Collins, 2009; Johnson, 2001).

Critical whiteness theory. i cannot unknow what i know. In the fall of 2006 i took two graduate courses at Syracuse University, one on Critical Feminist Theory and the other on Critical Race Theory. These two courses flipped the way i see the world as a white, heterosexual, middle-class man. It was the greatest educational accident i have ever experienced, and the knowledge i learned altered my sense of self in relation to others. This new way of seeing the world are also the guiding force through which i live my life and completed this study. These courses marked the beginning of a journey that culminates today with the finishing of my dissertation and PhD.

Critical race theory and critical race feminism inform how i see the world, but they are not how i experience or know the world. While i believe you do not have to be a person of color or a woman to benefit from the knowledge of CRF and CRT, i do believe that a white, heterosexual male could usurp the theories for his own advantage. This is not how i want to use CRF or CRT. i do not have the lived experience to construct
knowledge from a marginalized social position, but i believe the knowledge created by individuals from these social locales is extremely important for me to hear and consider in shaping my very privileged perspective. In many ways CRT and CRF are the tools i use to dismantle not only the American dream, but also my own ways of knowing about my own lived experiences. Knowledge from CRT and CRF provide me counterpoints to critically question my knowledge and experiences in ways that help me to see my privilege and the ways in which privilege and oppression work together to create inequity.

So the question then becomes, if i am critically examining race, gender, and class, how do i do this given my own identities? i believe that privilege does not exempt me from understanding the effect that social identities have on society and my life. In fact, i firmly advocate and believe that an individual like myself should work harder than those who do not carry privilege on their awareness of how privilege affects their life because of how privilege and power operate to create marginalization and oppression. There seems to be a prevailing myth among those with privilege that the problems of the oppressed are their own or their own fault. i rebuke the idea that someone like myself does not have a duty and responsibility to be critically conscious of privilege and its affects in the United States. i believe every person should be critically aware of the ways in which gender, race, class, and sexual orientation influence the ways in which US culture and society operate.

i am not asked to examine or be aware of how my social identities shape or impact my life because US culture and society are centered on whiteness, patriarchy,
heterosexuality, and middle to upper class ideology (Johnson, 2001). Individuals from
oppressed and marginalized groups are much more aware of how social identities affect
culture and society (Dubois, 2008). Without the scholars i cited and mentioned in this
section from CRF and CRT, i would not be aware of how privilege and oppression work
in my life and the lives of others. i owe them an endless debt of gratitude for providing
me vital pieces of their lives, experiences, and knowledge. The work i do is possible
because of the marginalization and oppression they endured and critiqued. While i work
hard to critically examine my position and privilege, it is these individuals who have
suffered from these deleterious conditions. i merely want to be a part of the cause to
provide every person the privileges i have benefited from during my life.

my unearned privilege. People who hold my identities are given more privilege
and opportunity than women, people of color, people from middle-upper SES, and people
who are LGBT+. This does not mean i believe i am more valuable than someone whose
social identities are different than mine. What it does mean is that US society and culture
values me because of ascribed characteristics that have no bearing on my talent, personal
quality, and merit. i unequivocally disagree with the idea that my body and being should
be valued more because of my race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Critical race
and feminist scholars, as well as critical whiteness scholars also agree upon this idea
universally. It is from this location and perspective that i use CRT and CRF to
supplement me as a critical scholar. i consider myself a critical feminist and race scholar,
because i critically examine how race, gender, and class affect society and influence how
myself and others understand their lives and the United States.
As a critical scholar of race and gender it is important to be upfront about where I do my work from because of the privilege I carry. I must also continuously challenge myself to examine how this affects my life and knowledge. I did not grow up thinking about my race or gender. I do not have to think about my race or gender if I do not want to think about them (unless I am forced to).

For women and people of color this is not the case. White men like me do not have to be aware of the affects that social identity has on our lives. This is one of the reasons it is important for me to critically study race, gender, and class. Systems of power, privilege, and oppression cannot be interrupted if the individuals who benefit from them and possess the greatest positions of influence and power are not aware of how the system advantages them and disadvantage of others.

*my race, gender, and class: The need for more than my own knowledge.* This work stems from the fact that the United States is a nation that has deep-rooted hierarchies from gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and race (Collins, 2009). These hierarchies have evolved over the course of the US’s history to influence how and what individuals who are socialized here see. Our experiences and beliefs are molded by beliefs and values from these hierarchies that help to structure society and the socialization process (Bourdieu, 1984; Harro, 2000; Johnson, 2001). Thus, race, class, and gender are a very powerful part of US socializing processes that intricately shape who we are, what we believe and value, and what we see and do not see.

These hierarchies have persisted and evolved over the United States’ history, and help (re)create the country we live in today (Collins, 2009). The culture we each
experience is built upon deeply entrenched beliefs about race, gender, and class. The existence of these hierarchies means institutions, structures, and our lives are racialized, gendered, classed, and heteronormed (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Johnson, 2001). Since, all parts of our lives are racialized, gendered, classed, and heteronormative, this means the American dream should be as well. For this reason, critical race feminism (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010) and critical whiteness theory (Owens, 2007) are important to examine the American dream to see how it is raced, classed, and gendered, and the ways in which this affects and influences society and our lives. I utilized CRF and critical whiteness together because “any project that seeks liberation of all who are imprisoned by racial oppression must be grounded on an explanation of the reproduction of whiteness” (Owens, 2007, p. 205). Owens (2007) discussed how critical whiteness theory attacks white privilege much like critical feminist theory attacks patriarchy. CRF gave me a lens to see the intersection of gender and patriarchy that appeared in the American dream.

I experience unbridled systemic privilege. This means I must own my privilege and positionality. I do this by using CWT to claim my privilege and work to dismantle it through the exploration of how it affects my life, sense of self, and experience in different ways that provide me unearned advantages. One example of how I did this for this study was by reading CRF, CRT, or CWT literature and then reflexively considering the ways in which my social identities position me, and the ways in which this positioning affects myself and my life.
While the racialization of the American dream and the lives of those in the United States is something on which I am focused, I am also concerned with gender, and class. This makes critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness inadequate because their primary focus is on race (Evans-Winter & Esposito, 2010; Owens, 2007). Theorists from CRF have worked hard to develop a theoretical frame that sees how race, gender, and class work together. Being able to discuss the American dream and my life in this way fits with my belief that individual experience and social identities cannot be understood in essentialized ways. From reading CRF I have come to believe the way we understand our lives must always be done intersectionally. This made the CRF work of Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), Wing (1997), and Collins (2000) transformative to my ways of knowing, and essential to my work in this dissertation. CRF, which stresses that race, gender, and class cannot be essentialized from each other, but must be considered together, has been extremely important to developing my ability to critically examine the American dream and the way it influences my life and the United States.

Similarly, while critical whiteness cannot stand alone in a study of how our intersecting identities impact our abilities to achieve the American dream, CWT serves to identify things that perpetuate white privilege and cause the oppression of people of color. It provided a microscope through which I could analyze and critique my whiteness. As such, it served to supplement critical race theory and critical race feminism. CWT in effect held me accountable to honoring and acknowledging the contributions of CRF and CRT scholars such as Adichie (2009), Bell (1973), Collins (2009; 2000), Delgado (1995), Delgado and Stefanic (2001), Dixson & Rousseau (2006), DuBois (2008), Gutiérrez-
Jones (2001), Evans-Winter and Esposito (2010), Hochschild (1995), Ladons-Billings and Tate (2006), MacLeod (2005), Solorzano and Yosso (2005), Tatum (2000; 1997), Wing (1997), Yosso (2005), and Zamudio, et al. (2011). I attempted to use these lenses to deconstruct the American dream without usurping the knowledge of people of color for my own benefit. CWT is extremely important because I am a white man. I cannot speak to the experiences of women and people of color, or know what it is like to walk in their shoes. I do believe I can advocate for the dismantling of privilege and oppression that would create an equitable United States and American dream.

**Is it okay that I use CRT and CRF?** The purpose of this study is to understand how the American dream and race, class, and gender work together to (re)create beliefs and perspectives that perpetuate privilege and oppression in the way (i)ndividuals understand themselves and their lives. That said, as a scholar I have had to reflect on the choices I have made throughout this process. This reflection has included careful consideration of the lenses I have used, the theory I have utilized, and the space I have taken up.

**Using CWT.** CWT has been an obvious and somewhat less controversial choice for my work—at least for me. I am white. I believe in unpacking the unearned privilege and acknowledging the benefits this culture has given to me as a white bodied person. I believe I have a responsibility in the fight for equity and for dismantling systems of privilege and oppression. As a person who has a suitcase full of unearned advantage and privilege, I am complicit in the existence of oppression. While I did not create oppression or the privileges associated with my identities, I do have the opportunity to try and stop it.
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

To do this I believe I must work to become increasingly aware of how privilege affects my life, and how privilege and oppression affects others’ lives. I then believe I should then take this awareness and share it with others, especially those who share the same privilege as I do.

Critical whiteness demanded I pay attention and analyze how whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy affect the United States (Ahmed, 2007; Altman, 2006; Applebaum, 2003; Applebaum, 2005; Dyer, 2008; Lipsitz, 2006; Owens, 2007). As a white, heterosexual, middle-class man this means I need to be aware of how my social identities affect what I have been taught and how I have been taught in the construction of my understanding of self, others, and the world. Therefore, I must unpack the distinct ways I have been socialized by the American dream, race, gender to understand the way my privilege shapes me.

Using CRF. And then it got more complicated. In what ways should I impose myself on CRF? In what ways could I use that theory without appropriating it to my own ends? Again, this process has required a great deal of reflection and self-examination. As a result, I have sought to employ the work of those who came before me to examine my lived experiences and the cultural mythology of the American dream. In order to honor the work done by Evans-Winters, Esposito, Ladson-Billings, Yosso, and others, I was compelled to utilize CRF. To fail to use their work would once again erase the work of women and people of color – especially women of color.

Critical race feminist theory demanded I pay attention to issues of race and gender in the context of the American dream, as CRF’s focus is to analyze how race, class, and
gender influence each other (Evans-Winters, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Few, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Wing, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

To clearly reiterate: There is a question that has lingered throughout this chapter, should i be able to use CRF or CRT in my research? i believe critical scholars of race and gender are needed from all positionalities. CRF helps to inform my knowledge about the experiences of individuals from marginalized and oppressed groups. It supplemented my analysis and use of CWT because i cannot know what it is like to be oppressed. These stories and this wisdom helped me to better understand both sides of systems of privilege and oppression. They provided examples of how oppression occurs that helped me to spotlight the occurrence of privilege. They also highlighted for me the fact that every time oppression or privilege occurs, the inverse simultaneously happens. As i receive privilege, my peers – women and people of color – are oppressed. Each time one of them is oppressed, i am unwittingly, unintentionally, and significantly further privileged.

i recognize that white men have taken from women and communities of color throughout the history of the United States. i do not want to steal the knowledge of female scholars and scholars of color. my consciousness of my privilege is because of the scholars from CRT, CRF, and CWT. i hope to pay back what i have learned from their lives and knowledge by using my awareness of my privilege in ways to create the same benefits i receive for every person in the United States (and world).

Critical race feminism is not a theoretical place i believe i can occupy or claim as my own. i used it to better understand how race, gender, and class work together to affect individuals in the United States. It is a body of knowledge that helped me to see outside
of my own privileged experience (Applebaum, 2005; Sue, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2012).

This mitigation does not mean I was able to overcome the effects of privilege. CRF helped me further unpack my privilege. It certainly didn’t eradicate it.

I consider myself a critical scholar of race and gender, but I do not know what it is like to be a woman or a person of color. For me, this means that I need to listen and feel the stories shared with me by those from oppressed and marginalized groups to see the effects of privilege and oppression. CRT, CRF, and CWT are important to keep me from merely re-centering what I learn in dominant paradigms and ways of knowing. They insist I continually critique how what I am saying and doing maintains and reinforces systems of privilege and oppression. I believe any theoretical lens should help me to understand how each of us is wholly socialized and influenced by society to understand ourselves, our lives, and the American dream. The tenets of CRF and CWT called for me to critically reflect on myself, and to be considerate of the way society positions me because of my identities, and how that positioning affects not only me, but others as well.

**Structuralist Constructivism: The American Dream as Social System**

The previous sections focused on my self-analysis, self-examination, and self-criticism as revealed through the lenses of CRT, CWT, and CRF. Given that section’s focus on society’s impact on the self, it is now time to flip the script and focus on the impact of the self (individuals) on society. Structuralist constructivism is concerned with how society and the individual affect the construction of one another’s meaning and understanding (Bourdieu, 1989; 1984). It helped me to see the ways in which the
American dream affects values, choices, speech, and decision-making. It also helped me see how we affect the way the American dream is understood and conceptualized.

When the American dream is examined through the eyes of structuralist constructivism (Bourdieu, 1989; 1984), it becomes a dialectical dynamic between objective realities (meta-narratives and societal constructs) and subjective reality (habitus). Bourdieu (2014) stated, “The habitus is both the generative principles of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification of these practices” (p. 985). More simply put, habitus is the culmination of who we are and how we understand ourselves expressed through actions, beliefs, values, choices, preferences, and tastes. Our habitus is shaped by social systems, social structures, and socialization. Thus, when understanding the American dream through the eyes of structural constructivism, it becomes not only a structure of society, but also a structure of individuals.

The American dream is constructed from general truths that individuals and society deem as social facts. This generalized American dream means there is one American dream. But, the American dream also exists as infinite because each person distinctively understands its generalized axioms differently based off their unique life experience and personality (habitus) with which it is constructed. Thus, the American dream is individually understood and constructed differently within each person (habitus).

The American dream has both shared construction and definition and individual construction and definition. The classifier becomes the classified, or in the light of structure, the structurer becomes the structured (Bourdieu, 2014). It takes a reciprocal
relationship between structure (field) and individual (agent) for either to exist. Bourdieu (2014; 1989; 1984) found that language was the way in which we think, which means language is the way in which we structure. Therefore, it is through language that we think (conceptualize and understand) about the American dream, and that language influences the shared meaning of the American dream, while the American dream simultaneously influences the language used to shape what it means and how it is understood.

The American dream is language and power (McNamee & Miller, 2014) The American dream gains power because it is recognized and given symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989). This power comes from individuals and society recognizing the American dream as valid and legitimate—and true. It is important to note that in receiving symbolic power, the American dream then becomes something that is not only classified, it becomes something that is used to classify (Allan, 2010; Bourdieu 2014; Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu, 1984). This happens both in the objective parts of society and the subjective iterations and understandings of society and the American dream within individuals.

An example of how this may work within someone is the idea of hard work and achievement in connection to the American dream. Here, a person who “achieves” the American dream is classified as someone who has worked hard and has earned what they have. However, for a person to be classified, the person classifying that person also simultaneously classifies themself as well. In the eyes of Bourdieu (2014), to classify, one must possess the knowledge and language of classification. When someone uses tenets or pieces of the American dream to view how life is supposed to work in the
United States, they are performing classification while classifying themselves as someone who knows and believes in the US’ national credo and foundational ideology. Thus, classification classifies the person who is classifying as someone who has the intimate knowledge of what they are pronouncing to exist.

Bourdieu (1989; 1984) wrote that the world and people are always systematically ordered to create class positions. This occupation and expression are influenced by four different capitals, which are economic, social, symbolic, and cultural. Bourdieu (1989; 1984) stated that capital is a resource that we use to obtain and create more capital.

Economic capital, which Bourdieu (1984) believed class position creates, is related to income and wealth. Summary: you have to spend money to make money. Social capital is about the networks and people you know and with whom you are connected. Summary: It’s not what you know; it’s whom you know. Symbolic capital is the capacity to use symbols to create or solidify physical and social realities. Summary: The most powerful symbols are the ones we forget were created. Lastly, cultural capital is formal and informal social skills, habits, linguistic styles, and tastes of a person. Summary: we express who we are through our speech, behavior, choices, and preferences. Remember, “classy” is about class. Cultural capital is expressed through what Bourdieu (1989) calls habitus.

Habitus can be thought of as our soul, our essence, it is what we may call the “who we are” inside. It is our personality and predispositions, our preferences and tastes, it is in everything we do and do not do. Habitus is the subjective side of Bourdieu’s theory and how he allows for the genesis of structure to structure without being
structurally constraining (Bourdieu 2014; Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu; 1984). It is from
habitus the ability to spontaneously generate and express ourselves outside of objective
social structures occurs. This is done through what Bourdieu (1984) called tastes and
distinctions. Tastes are the distinctions of our preferences: how we prefer to dress, the
type of cars we like, or the type of house we would want to buy. It also can be something
like personal preference for speech and non-verbal expressions.

Tastes play a significant role in how the American dream is internalized and
expressed. Bourdieu (2014) said, “Through taste, an agent has what he likes because he
likes what he has, that is, the properties actually given to him in the distribution and
legitimately assigned to him in the classifications” (p. 989). Tastes are what people have
(or desire) and people have (or desire) what they like, which means the things we possess
or buy and the way we deploy these possessions in the world are part of our expression of
class position.

Bourdieu (1984) believed that people, through the various capitals, act out their
class position through habitus and tastes to create one’s lifestyle. These interact together
to create who we are and who we express. The American dream influences the way
people understand themselves, understand the world, and express those understandings.
A person’s class position influences these understandings and expression, which is
influenced by the American dream and the way it defines success.

The American dream is both structuring and being structured. It has objective
realities that act as truths in the United States, structuring the country and its people. At
the same time, the American dream is being structured within people through habitus,
helping to classify others and the person who is classifying those others. By me writing about the American dream, i am classifying it and the people i am interviewing, but at the same time, i am classifying myself as someone who occupies a social position that has knowledge of the American dream. Also, i am abstractly thinking about and discussing the American dream, meaning i am classifying myself as someone who is educated and probably does not need to worry about basic physiological necessities (i.e. when and where my next meal is coming from –even though i do not have a lot of money, i have enough to afford food). Finally, i am classified outside of any action or choice of my own by the structure, by the American dream based on my achievements in that context.

What this means is that the American dream, for Bourdieu (2014; 1989; 1984), would be both one and many, that the American dream exists as an objective structure, but at the same time is being understood and expressed in millions of different ways. The American dream should probably be written American dream(s) to recognize and express the one and infinite number of ways it is being understood and lived.

This infinite number of ways the American dream interacts in people’s lives led me to explore and utilize critical race feminism and critical whiteness. CRF and critical whiteness fills a gap in structuralist constructivism by helping me to recognize the different ways race and gender work with the American dream to shape how we understand and live our lives. As we will see in the next section, the American dream is extremely complex and necessitated this multifaceted framework that allowed me to explore it from multiple vantage points.
Socialization: Social Systems & Social Identity

In the previous sections we discussed how I used critical race feminism, critical whiteness, and structuralist constructivism together to form my theoretical framework. These three lenses helped me to see how structural aspects of society affect our lived experience and how those structures and aspects are racialized, gendered, and classed. This critical stance is paramount to my ability to examine the way the American dream, race, gender, and class as social systems influence how our lives are constructed. Tierney (1993) defined a critical lens as “an attempt to understand the oppressive aspects of society in order to generate societal and individual transformation” (p. 4). Thus, I believe social identities (i.e., race, gender, and class) are salient to how we are socialized because they are connected with power, privilege, and oppression. During this section, I will discuss social identity, social systems, and socialization, and their connection with power and privilege.

What Is A Social Identity?

Society is a shared culture among a group of people. Culture is something we learn from messages about how to act, feel, and think (Hughes & Kroehler, 2011). Society and culture influence our identity formation and how we understand ourselves (Bourdieu, 2014; Collins, 2009; Erikson, 1968; Feldman, Otto, & Christiansen, 2000; Moffit, 2005; Stiles, 2008; Tatum, 2000). Together they teach us what is valued and not valued by society, and these values inform the type of people we should be, in other words how we express and understand ourselves, or our identity (Bourdieu, 1989; Harro, 2000).
The formation of our individual identity is embedded in the social, cultural, and historical context it is developed within (Tatum, 2000). Erikson (1968) explained the process of how our identity is formed:

We deal with a process “located” in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture…In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges themselves in the light of what they perceive to be the way in which others judge them in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them (p. 22, italics emphasized in original text).

What Erikson meant by this is that the environment(s) in which we construct our identity largely influence who we are and who we become. Our surrounding environment is made up of culture, communities, institutions, organizations, and people who make up social systems and our sphere of influence. These socializing forces then work together to send us messages about how society perceives us (and how we see ourselves) from the way it categorizes us based off our social identity (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.).

So why is this important? Because there are unearned advantages or disadvantages associated with differing social identities in the United States (Altman, 2006; Applebaum, 2003; Bailey, 1998; Bourdieu, 2014; Collins, 2000; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dyer, 2008; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Frankenberg, 1993; Frye, 1983; Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013; Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; McIntosh, 1990; McNamee & Miller Jr.,
Positionality is connected to privilege and oppression because social systems (re)create hierarchies in society that give some social identities preference and advantages (Harro, 2000; Johnson, 2001). Social identities have no biological connection to a person’s level of talent, drive, or capability (Hughes & Kroehler, 2011). How social systems set up society to (re)create privilege and oppression is what interconnects race, gender, and class with achievement, opportunity, access, and equity.

**What Is A Social System?**

With all of that said, where do social identities come from? What makes an identity social? Social systems, sometimes referred to as social structure, are formed from interconnected patterns of relationships that exist between individuals and institutions to form society (Harro, 2000; Hughes & Kroehler, 2010; Johnson, 2001). These patterns and relationships work together to create how society is structured, which in turn influences what we experience and learn through socialization. Owens (2007) defined social systems as being “constituted by social practices where ‘the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome’ of those practices” (p. 207). Giddens (1984) discussed how social systems and the way they structure (organize/influence) society create social norms and are also reproduced by those norms being performed. Thus, social systems are simultaneously and reciprocally (re)created through our performance of the beliefs, values, and ways of seeing that the systems imprint on us.

This prominence makes the American dream the most important socializing force that shapes US culture and structures its society (Johnson, 2014). Race, class, and gender
are important because society structures them in inequitable and unfair ways that (re)create differential levels of power, access and opportunity in the United States (Johnson, 2001). These four social systems are important because of how they effect socialization and what we are taught by this process. In this study, I use the American dream, race, gender, and class to examine how they interact and influence each other in how individuals understood their lives and the ways in which the United States operates.

**Socialization, Why Social Identity Matters**

Socialization is the “process of social interaction by which people acquire the knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors essential for effective participation in society…socialization is the process of becoming a social being, a process that continues throughout one’s life” (Hughes & Kroehler, 2010, p. 68). The values and beliefs we are taught have a very powerful effect on how we act, think, and see the world (Applebaum, 2003; Harro, 2000; Johnson, 2001).

The lessons we learn cause us to view some issues as more important than others, which influences the policy and laws passed that shape how the United States works (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). In the case of this study, what we learn from the American dream shapes how we see the world, the values and beliefs we hold, and subsequently the choices we make and actions we take. Our values and beliefs reiterate notions of the American dream and our ability to achieve (or not) that dream in turn affects how we see ourselves.

Social systems and other individuals socialize us as we go through life. What we see in our lives and believe to be true is shaped by values and beliefs we learn from
socialization (Harro, 2000). From the process of socialization we learn to “name things and people, to value one thing or kind of person above another, to distinguish what’s considered ‘normal’ and acceptable from what is not” (Johnson, 2001, p. 78). It is through this process that our identity is formed, including our understanding of our race, gender, mental and physical ability, class, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation (Tatum, 2000). Thus, the learning of what is valued and what is not by society and others occurs “in relation to other people, especially in terms of inequalities of power” (Johnson, 2001, p. 79).

Again, relating this specifically to my study, these concepts form the foundation for how our identities and what we value as a society feed into one another. The roles of race, gender, ability, and class are privileged or oppressed by the American dream.

**The role of race.** Depending on whether you are a person of color or white, you have a race, but only one of these two is actually taught about their race (Altman, 2006; Dyer, 1997; McIntosh, 2005; Owens, 2007; Sue, 2004). Whites are taught about race not in relation to themselves, but in relation to the other, in this case any person of color (Applebaum, 2003; Dyer, 2005). Because of how society is based on whiteness, people of color are aware of not only their race, but also what it means to be white (Dubois, 2008). Whiteness is important to the socialization process and what we learn about race because it is the standard (norm) from which society operates and exists (Dyer, 2008; Owens, 2007; Sue, 2004).

When I have spoken with a person of color about whether society is fair and just around race, they almost always unequivocally say no. In stark contrast, when I go home
or talk with a white person about their race and whether the United States is racially fair and just, the vast majority of the time the person says yes. So is the United States racially just and fair, meaning it is equitable? My study seeks to examine this and other questions by juxtaposing socially constructed identities within the context of the American dream. During the next chapter, I explain the methodology and methods I used to examine the American dream in this dissertation study.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

“Methodology is the bridge that brings epistemology and method together” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010, p. 2). In this study I used a critical, interpretative, qualitative methodology grounded in critical whiteness theory (Applebaum, 2003; Owens, 2007), critical race feminist theory (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Yosso, 2005), and structuralist constructivism (Bourdieu, 2014; 1989; 1984). Qualitative work is never intended to be generalizable, so that was not my intent in doing the work. Despite this, the work here does help get us closer to the truth of how the American dream affects the way individuals in the United States construct beliefs and expectations about their lives. What the participants shared during their interviews and what I report in these pages are our truths. These truths are affected and shaped by socialization, and also affect these same socializing processes that affect our truths. Thus, the knowledge learned and discussed in this dissertation is transferable and helpful in understanding the American dream and the way it intersects with privilege, power, and oppression.

From my framework I conducted this research study with the following assumptions and beliefs:

6. Racism, sexism, and classism are an inherent part of US society and culture (Applebaum, 2003; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 2000; Delgado, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; DuBois, 2008; Dyer, 2008; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Frye, 1983; hooks, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Lipsitz,
2006; McIntosh, 1998; Tatum, 2000; Yosso, 2005; West, 1993; Wing, 1997; Zamudio et al., 2011).

7. Knowledge is power (Bourdieu, 1989).

8. Truth is many and influenced by the socio-economic-political landscape (Sipe & Constable, 1996).

9. Objective realities exist that influence the way i construct what i believe to be true. This construction then influences those same objective realities and help to determine what they mean. Thus, society and i simultaneously affect each other’s meaning and understanding. (Allan, 2010; Bourdieu, 1989)

These beliefs and assumptions, which were informed by my theoretical framework, literature review, and lived experience, guided the development and implementation of this interpretive autoethnographical guided project. During the study, i examined how the American dream and race, class, and gender intersect to influence individuals’ beliefs and values about themselves and the United States. What was learned from this examination was then investigated to explore the ways in which it was connected with systems of power, privilege, and oppression. i then analyzed these connections in relation to my positionality as a white, heterosexual, middle-class man. This was done to better understand how my understanding of self is affected by the intersection of my positionality and the American dream. Therefore, i performed this autoethnography by (re)interpreting my past and current biography with what i was learning from participants and the research project.
Autoethnography aligned with my theoretical framework because both believe language and stories are important and valuable to understanding the world (Bourdieu, 2014; Denzin, 2013; Evans-Winter & Esposito, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Autoethnography, CWT, and CRF assert that positionality affects meaning making and one’s experience. Through the analysis of myself and how I understood the way others understand the American dream and race, class, and gender, I was able to critically look how these intersect and inform each other. Thus, I used autoethnographic methods to explore how the American dream influenced participants’ understanding of their lives and the United States. This understanding then influenced the construction of my understanding of these phenomena.

The study was set up to provide windows to see into individuals’ lives by asking about values, beliefs, and philosophies around success, education, and the American dream. This helped me to understand the places where the American dream affects a person’s life and beliefs. I then used what I learned from participants to analyze and reflect on my own personal stories that elicited the different ways in which I now understand the American dream. In this sense, participants became teachers, because their stories and perspectives were an active part of how I constructed my understanding of the American dream. Therefore, the interviews and what I learned from participants were a part of this autoethnographic study by helping me to freshly understand and see my stories and biography.

While participants acted as co-constructors of my knowledge, I must acknowledge that ultimately I held the power to dictate the “what” of the analysis, findings, and
implications for the study. Participants were not included in the analysis and development of discussion and implications. In an ideal world, I would have been able to have a much more collaborative relationship where participants played a more active role in these stages of the research.

I examined how the American dream influenced understanding and was used to create beliefs about expectations of one’s life in the United States (Crotty, 1998). My interpretive autoethnographic process was a co-constructed window that examined the ways in which the American dream perpetuates ideas and beliefs that support systems of privilege, power, and oppression. This examination aligned with my goal of doing critical work about how privilege, power, and oppression are (re)created through socializing processes and the American dream.

Autoethnography is a self-narrative. It examines the self and one’s own lived experience within the context of society (Reed-Danahay, 1992). Spry (2001) said, “Autoethnography is a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context” (p. 710). Life experiences and what I learned from participants were the units of analysis (Denzin, 2013) that I used to examine the American dream and my positionality and privilege.

CRT, CRF, and CWT provided me a way to see my positionality and its effects on my lived experience. These three theories helped me to see the ways in which race, gender, and class appear in how an individual understands the American dream. I used structuralist constructivism to see ways in which the American dream affected beliefs and understanding, while those same beliefs and understanding affected the meaning of the
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

American dream. Together, i used these frames to examine how systems of power, privilege, and oppression are (re)created and perpetuated by individuals through ideologies and ideas (the American dream).

my Autoethnographic Process

i reflected on what i learned during coding and analysis process by writing code memos that were the foundation for my findings and analysis. These code memos are my sense making of interview transcripts to capture what i learned about the American dream from participants. This process was done to probe my understanding by problematizing and questioning what i believed about the American dream through what individuals said during interviews (Denzin, 2013). The result of this autoethnographic process is presented in section two.

Through reflexive questions i reexamined past events to create new understanding and knowledge. This was done for final chapter and piece of this dissertation, Tale of Two Angry White Men. In this chapter, i (re)examined an event between my father and i that occurred 10 years ago to see the ways in which it looked different now that i had interviewed and learned from 19 different individuals about the American dream. This chapter, coupled with a parable based from my experience and knowledge with baseball, serve as the culmination of what i learned about the American dream and the way it intersects with race, gender, and class to (re)create and perpetuate systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

Interpretive autoethnography helped me to take into account my biography as a writer, as well as the culture, history, discourse, and ideology of the topic (Denzin, 2013).
This research project was driven by a basic question: How does the American dream affect an individual’s beliefs and lived experience? My process to answer this question merged Denzin’s (2013) interpretative autoethnographic approach with the tenets of my theoretical framework to create interpretative biographic work. I did this by examining participant responses, literature, and my own experiences in a critically reflexive manner.

Critical examination means I historically situated the American dream and what I learned during the study. History provided a context to connect how positionality (race, class, and gender) is connected with systems of power, privilege, and oppression. This connection helped me to see the ways in which the American dream and these systems are interconnected and work together to (re)create privilege and oppression. Thus, in this project I aimed to increase awareness of the ways in which the American dream and race, class, and gender (re)create values and beliefs that perpetuate social injustices from systematically created unearned advantage. I worked to create knowledge and practices that empower individuals from marginalized and oppressed groups by critiquing and spotlighting privilege and power.

According to Denzin (2001) interpretation uses the cultural, historical, and biographical conditions that shape current understanding and knowledge. Autoethnography views epiphanies and life experiences as the subject matter of study. Thus, I examined my life and what I have learned about the American dream and race, class, and gender from interviews with participants. In this process of learning about the American dream and examining my life, I considered the influence and importance of
class, race, and gender in the ways we interact with the American dream and the
American dream interacts with us.

This process aligned with my theoretical framework because I accounted for the
privileged ways society has positioned me as a white, heterosexual, middle class man. I
believe that texts, knowledge, and our lives are racialized, classed, and gendered from the
racist, patriarchal, and classist ways social systems structure and construct society and
socializing processes.

This localized and relational consideration of positionality is important for
autoethnographic work. Elbaz (1987) described this relationship:

Autoethnographic texts are always written (and performed) with an “other” in
mind. The presence of an other in autobiographical and biographical texts means
that they are always written with at least a double perspective in mind: the
author’s and the other’s. The eye of the other directs the eye of the writer, (p. 14).

We are each positioned by society based on our social identities. Our social locale is
created in relation to others’ social locales. I considered how the American dream
interacted with me and others in relation to our positions with the American dream and
with one another. Thus, I relationality is created by positionality, and positionality is
created by relationality.

Examining this phenomenon and how others and myself understand it is the crux
where my autoethnographic work originated and is created. More specifically, I examined
the ways in which the American dream and race, gender, and class work together to
influence how individuals and myself understand our lives. The autoethnographic process
required that I privilege emotion, emphasize narrative truth, use language that is reflexive and centered on self, and write based on biographical meaning making and events, not just from citations from scholarly literature (Denzin, 2013). These requirements guided how I inserted myself into the written dissertation by analyzing my knowledge and lived experiences through the new things I learned from the perspectives participants shared with me during interviews (Anderson, 2006). Autoethnography helped me to critically examine the space where method and praxis meet. By using interpretative autoethnographic method I was hopefully able to build a meaningful discussion with you the reader that is evocative, reflexive, and critical (Denzin, 2013).

**Methods**

The research questions for this study are:

4. How does the American dream affect an individual’s understanding of their life?

5. How do race, gender, and class intersect and affect the way an individual understands the American dream?
   a. How does an individual’s understanding of the American dream intersect with and affect the way they understand race, gender, and class?

6. How is my understanding of the American dream affected by the way participants understand and use the American dream to explain their beliefs about life and the United States?
Participants

This study included 19 participants. The participants were solicited through Facebook advertising, face-to-face recruitment, and snowball sampling. The focus of the interviews was to understand the ways in which the American dream affected individuals’ beliefs about their lives and the United States.

I used levels of educational attainment as the primary category for differentiating individuals who were interviewed. Educational attainment levels were chosen as the category because education is a key piece to the American dream and the way social mobility is operationalized in the United States (Johnson, 2014). Using educational attainment as the primary categorizing mechanism for participants allowed me to examine how individuals with different educational levels understood the American dream.

The different educational levels included: two-year degree student (2YR); four-year degree student (4YR); graduate student (GRAD); straight to work (S2W) – a person who did not go to college and went straight work; and college to work (C2W) – a person who obtained a college degree(s) before working. Two-year, four-year, and graduate students were recruited from a technical college (Bolden Technical College) and a large, public research university (Zips University) located in the Southeastern United States. Straight to work and college to work were not recruited from a specific company or place of employment. They were recruited through snowball sampling and voluntary sampling done via Facebook advertisements. These advertisements occurred via Facebook posts.
that were shared on my timeline and also shared by other individuals to their timeline on Facebook.

Below is a table of participants’ demographic information to provide information about who was in the study. All information is reported as given by the person with the exception of education, which I choose the words to describe it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>SES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Millie</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>C2W (BS)</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>C2W (PhD)</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>2YR</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>4YR</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>4YR</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonya</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>GRAD (PhD)</td>
<td>Long Term Partnership</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>GRAD (PhD)</td>
<td>Married - Kids</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>S2W: then (A), (B), (M)</td>
<td>Unmarried – Kids</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>S2W</td>
<td>Unmarried - Kids</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timmy</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>C2W (M)</td>
<td>Married – Kids</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinnie</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>C2W (M)</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donnie</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>2YR</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>2YR</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>4YR</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
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<td>Man</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>S2W: then (A)</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Participant information and demographics (A=Associate’s Degree, B=Bachelor’s Degree, M=Master’s Degree, and PhD=Doctoral Degree)
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

Data Collection

The study has two different sources of data that was collected. For the first source of data i conducted semi-structured interviews. During these interviews individuals shared stories and perspectives about their lives and the American dream. i choose to do interviews because they provided windows into people’s lives and understanding about the American dream (Glesne, 2010). The second part of my data collection consisted of my memos, reflections, and critique of self and lived experience. Analyzing myself was important for the study so that i furthered my awareness of the ways in which my positionality influences the ways in which the American dream affects me (Denzin, 2013; Owens 2007; Tatum, 2000).

Interviews. Data from the interview portion of the study was collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. i utilized this interview structure to give participants more ability to guide what they shared about the American dream and their lives (Glesne, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask probing questions to unexpected responses to gain deeper insight into participants’ answers and perspectives (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Probing into responses also gave me the opportunity to further explore not just what was said, but how something was said.

Interviews were designed in two parts (Interview questions is included in Appendix A). The first part focused on personal stories about aspirations, family, role models, education, career, success, and education. In the second half of the interview, i asked participants about the American dream specifically. This helped me to hear how
participants understood the American dream and how it resonated (or not) with their own experiences.

Interview questions were constructed to foster a space where individuals shared stories about their lives and their experiences related to the American dream. The order of interview questions was deliberately designed to build off previous answers to craft a larger and more connected narrative.

One unique aspect of the interview questions specifically dealing with the American dream was that participants were asked questions in ways that provoked creative thought processes (ie. If you were making a movie about the American dream, what would the title be and what is its plot line?). These questions were inspired from an Emerging Qualitative Methods course I took in the spring of 2014 to design questions that elicited story telling and narrative. During this course I read Hesse-Bieber and Leavy (2010, p. 4), “emergent methods are about methodological innovation for the purpose of enhancing knowledge building and advancing scholarly conversations.” While I do not consider my methodology innovative, the use of questions to promote different thought processes that result in narrative or stories about the American dream aligns with CRT and CRF tenets (Glesne, 2010; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

**Interviewee recruitment.** Participants were recruited through email, word of mouth, face-to-face, and Facebook. After having only one out of 15 recruited individuals follow through on the interview, I shifted my strategy to focus on social media. From the IRB approved documents at my institution, I crafted a Facebook post that described the study and posted it to my timeline. The vast majority of the individuals who responded
via Facebook message or post comments were individuals with whom I was connected on Facebook.

**Autoethnographic process.** In the second source of data, I examined my lived experience and what I was learning during the study about the American dream (Denzin, 2013). The events I reexamined included things such as interactions with my family, TV and movies, podcasts, school and classes. These forms of data were selected because my knowledge and understanding are influenced by multimodal mediums (Denzin, 2013; Dicks, Flewitt, Lancaster, & Pahl, 2011).

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and then coded using a priori and emergent codes (Saldaña, 2013). A priori codes were identified from the literature review and theoretical lens. These included American dream, personal responsibility, education, race, gender, hope, and class. Emergent codes found were American=success. I used values coding technique and thematic analysis to analyze transcript data. Values coding technique was used to explore participants’ beliefs, values, and attitudes connected to their perspective or worldview (Saldaña, 2013). I used thematic analysis to find themes about participants’ beliefs and attitudes that were connected to the American dream, race, class, and gender. All transcripts were coded using NVivo.

Once initial coding was completed, I exported coded excerpts into code excerpt memos. I read these memos and further coded by making annotations. These annotations were organized into one document and read along with the code excerpt memos to make sure notes matched what was said by participants. I then reflexively reviewed annotations.
and code excerpts memos to write analytic memos for each code about what i was learning from interview transcripts. These analytic memos are found in section two, where i took what the memos and inserted supporting quotes for what i had learned. This process aligned with autoethnography methods because the interviews and study are part of my lived experience and influenced my knowledge of the American dream and self.

**Trustworthiness**

Flick (2002) found triangulation is not a form of validation, but a way to enhance the trustworthiness of your study. Informed by Flick’s (2002) study, i used multiple ways of finding data to create triangulation. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) agreed with Flick (2002) when they wrote that multimodal research creates better triangulation in data and findings. i did this by utilizing different sources of data in constructing my knowledge and understanding of the American dream. When coding and forming themes, i checked what participants said with other participants to see if and how they were similar or dissimilar.

During the coding and analysis process i went back to literature from CWT and CRF, as well as my literature review. i did an expanded literature search based on preliminary findings in conjunction with CWT and CRF. This led me to read further about family, gender, meritocracy, social mobility, and childhood poverty and family SES. From these readings, i saw new connections and patterns in the data related to how the American dream perpetuated racism and classism because of the ties between quality of education and family SES. This led me to realize that the American dream (re)created white and class privilege by insulating the belief that achievement is based on merit.
i worked to triangulate my research through the process of continually checking between themes and patterns in the data and scholarly literature. i also listened to podcasts and watched documentaries/movies related to the American dream, and listened to stories shared with me by people outside of the study. i used multiple sources of information and data, and checked with participants if i had questions about something they said. i also used scholarly literature to not only develop my knowledge and theoretical framework, but also i to double check what i learned from the data and lived experience.

Limitations

i am a white, straight, heterosexual man doing critical scholarship on race, gender, and class. i am limited by my ability to understand what it is like to experience marginalization and oppression, and by the way i am socialized to not be aware of my social identities and privilege. i discussed these further in the theoretical foundations section, but feel it is important to reiterate i am limited by how i have been socialized to not see the ways in which my identities affect my life. While this study was reflexive in nature, it does not eliminate or remove me from my privilege and its effects. This is a limitation i will always carry, but it does not mean i am not responsible for continuing to work to further understand how my privilege affects me. No matter the limitations from the affects of socialization and society, i believe i have a responsibility to be reflexive and continually grow my critical awareness and consciousness of how social systems and structures are connected to the lived experience.
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

SECTION ONE

WRAP UP

In this section i discussed the scholarly foundations for this dissertation study that included the literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology. The end of this section marks the transition from the background and framing of this study to reporting what i learned during the study. i now transition in the next section to report on what i learned about the American dream and systems of power, privilege, and oppression from participant interviews and my reflection on this interview data.
SECTION TWO

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION: INTERVIEWS AND ANALYTIC MEMOS

In this section I will discuss findings from my interview transcripts and analytic memos that had three steps: (1) coding of interviews transcripts; (2) analytic code memos done through reading and reflexive journaling about coding and analysis; and (3) coming back to critically reflect on analytic memos a month after they were completed. I critically reflected by considering the literary and theoretical foundations of the study in relation to what participants said in during their interviews. Initial memos were written as conversations with myself about what was said in interviews. They are the beginning of my (re)understanding of the American dream. Each chapter within this section is informed by the emergent themes based on participant interviews. I used this data to (re)construct my knowledge and understanding of the American dream to inform my implications for education and society.

This section serves as the baseline of what I learned in this study. While I hypothesized that the American dream was a racialized, gendered, and classed ideology, I did not know how these would be presented and play out in the way the American dream affects the formation of beliefs and is used in supporting expectations about life in the United States. This section and the chapters within it discuss what I learned about the American dream. I was surprised throughout the findings and data analysis at the nuanced ways in which the American dream supported and was used to (re)create privilege, power, and oppression.
During this section when I often use “we”. When I do this, I am using it to refer to the people within the study, and not anyone outside of the study. “We” also does not necessarily mean all participants in the study. It is used to represent that individuals generally understood the American dream or the concept in a similar fashion (but typically with unique application or operationalization).

Within Section Three there are four different chapters. The first three chapters deal directly with findings and use quotes from interview transcripts to show how participants understood and talked about the American dream. These three chapters discuss the American dream in relation to hope, family, success, education, privilege and personal responsibility, and hard work. In the final chapter, I set up the final section of this dissertation, implications of the study, by discussing how I have come to understand the American dream and the ways in which it is racialized and classed through analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AMERICAN DREAM AND SUCCESS: EDUCATION & HARD WORK

Ultimately based on my conversations and reflections: we simply believe the American dream is success. It is hope. It has taught us to believe that we can overcome anything by acting right: “working hard enough,” “putting our mind to it,” “sacrificing enough and persevering,” and having the “right mindset.” When this is done there are no odds or obstacles that can hold someone down. We believe will power and personal fortitude help a person to rise as high as they desire. The American dream says we have the freedom to pursue any dream or desire we want for our lives; that if i do it the way we
are “supposed” to, then i will have a good life. i will be happy, wealthy, and climb that social ladder.

The American dream is how we believe our lives in the United States work. It shapes our perception of the country and what we believe each other’s lives are like. The American dream has very real effects on what we believe and value individually and collectively. It affects how we perceive our own lives and the lives of others. This affects our beliefs that guide choices, actions, and behaviors that influence what we believe, what we support, the people we vote for and want to be elected, what issues we believe are important, and what experiences we validate or invalidate.

**American Dream and Success**

The American dream instills the belief that the future will be filled with success and happiness if we do certain things the way it tells us to do these things. For us to be happy and successful all we have to do is get a good job, buy a nice house (a suburban home in a good, safe neighborhood), get married, and have kids (and a dog). We attain these by getting an education and working hard. Hard work and education lead to a good paying job. Often the educational attainment that we believe allows us to have a nice house and a happy family is associated with striving to better our life and ourselves. Bettering our lives and selves usually involves increasing wealth/social class and education, and having a family.

The American dream is success, and success is the American dream. Continually, we interchanged the two or explicitly stated they were the same during interviews. The equation for achieving success boiled down to:
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

American dream = success = career + family + financial stability = happiness

A career is a good job. We get a good job by going to school and getting a college degree or – even better – multiple degrees. We move up in our job and establish a successful career through hard work as defined by the culture.

Family is composed of marriage between a woman and a man, kids, a nice house, a nice car, and a dog. Financial stability means we have enough money that i am comfortable, which is defined by being able to provide for my family. Providing for my family means they do not want for the necessities in life and over time can have access to any opportunities, services, or material items they need to help them achieve upward social mobility and status. Additionally, our children are set up for success and become successful by following the same steps to the American dream that we did. Success is measured across generations, with each new generation expected to achieve greater success than the previous.

The interesting thing about success, which we did not explicitly state, but discussed indirectly, is that it success is tied to the idea of class and social mobility. Danielle stated this clearly when she said:

You can start from nothing and become something. You’re born into poverty so you have absolutely, maybe like a dollar to your name or something, and, you’re mom’s a drug addict or i don’t know, or maybe they worked their whole life and
never made it, and that you can make it to the upper class or something along those lines and have everything that you’ve ever wanted.

Each new generation is supposed to always move upwards. Being successful means we are college educated, have a career that pays an amount of money that allows one to not have to worry. Vinnie talked about this type of success in relation to salary and raising our children to be successful and educated:

Success is not purely quantifiable by salary, but certainly your earning potential and earning a degree or a master’s degree and beyond goes up. I think, with that, you’re able to provide those things for your family. If your children can be afforded the opportunity to go to college and do those things, then I think to some extent that goes up as well.

I think without that [education], yes you can maybe have a happy home but fight through a lot of struggles whether it’s poverty or unemployment, whatever else. You can be still a successful parent and raise someone, but I think your own success is trying to provide an opportunity for your children to not go through those struggles. I think the more positioned you are to do that for your family, I think that, in my mind, would be more successful.

We believe success and the American dream means that we are completely stable and own a nice house in a good neighborhood (suburbs), have a good car, other material possessions, and are married. If we have kids, then you are able to provide our children
an opportunity for success and the American dream. Trish summed up this idea of the American dream:

The American dream is, a couple, male-female, the family, has kids, not, one kid but not like 19 kids, there are levels again, there are parameters here. The house is a good home, pottery barn inspired or pier one import, like that; it’s a good stable household. And you’re good people of solid moral character, good judgments, so probably, a Christian household, a Christian, white, heterosexual household with offspring between one and four, college educated in a good neighborhood, you’re going to the good schools and your job is probably white collar, that’s what I would think the American dream is, when you pop it in somebody’s head.

Juan reiterated these themes when he explained what achieving the American dream meant to him:

Good career, good steady career. That they, if they get out of one job, they can go into another in the same thing, and making around the same amount [of money]. A home, definitely owning a home, it’s a really big part of that. And family. I think is the three things that make it [the American dream].

**American Dream and Education**

Education is important to achieve the American dream. A college degree is believed to result in a good job, lots of money, a nice house, a nice car, and the ability to buy what we want or need. As a result, we equate (college) education with a better life. A college degree(s) is viewed as a steppingstone to a better life that is filled with success and the achievement of the American dream.
Carla discussed education and success when she talked about how someone achieves the American dream:

They got to think of success. They have to think successful, think successful person. What will it take to get them to go far? I don’t know, personally, but all I can say is it can be through experience, talent, and education.

Mille concurred with Carla’s ideas and pushed it further to talk about how she believed education is vital to the American dream and success in the United States:

I think education is one of the most beautiful things that this country has, the right to choose your area of study, the right to take that and morph the education that you’ve learned, that you’ve obtained, and make it into your dreams, and do something good with it. Education is huge. It’s a gateway. It’s a gateway to the American Dream. Everyone’s heard stories about the people that have made it rich or become billionaires without a college degree, but really in today, you need that piece of paper. You need it. It’s a gateway, and it’s going to prepare you for so many things to come in life, and not only teach you about what you’re studying. It’s going to teach you social skills. It’s going to teach you so many skills that will prepare you for the rest of your life to come post school, so education, it is, it’s necessary.

By going to college and getting a degree (or two or three), we are supposedly setting ourselves up to find a good job and attain success. Danielle explained the role she believed education plays in the American dream:
[Education is] very important, but there are some people who, want to take over their family farm, or family business, and, you know maybe their dad was an entrepreneur, and they actually don’t need an education and if that’s their definition of success then they don’t need the education.

I think it’s a lot harder if they’re an entrepreneur, now on their own, to get by without an education, but if they’re a smart, clever person and they can invent something, and they can be successful off of that, then yes.

Stephen agreed with Danielle about the importance of education, “It [education] plays a significant role, education plays a significant role in success. Somebody who’s not educated is not going to be successful.”

Throughout the interviews a running theme was: go to college and graduate, get a job, get married, have kids, and be happy. Nick succinctly said, “The American dream is to go to school, go to college, get a job, get a family.” We seemed to believe happiness was derived from these things, which we then correlated with success, or in other words, the American dream. Therefore, we believed both success and the American dream equate to happiness and happiness equates to success and the American dream.

Education is believed to be vital to attaining the American dream and upward social mobility in the United States. Bill explained the advantages a college education provides:

i just think it gives you a leg up. If you go, if you take somebody who all things consider, if you take two equal people, and the only difference is one’s got a
college degree and one’s got a high school degree or GED. And all things being equal, you like both equally, human nature is going to lean to the one with the degree because it shows that you push for it and tried harder in life to attain more, and have the ability to do more.

Education was discussed as a steppingstone or gateway to success. More specifically, we saw a college degree(s) as a key to bettering one’s life. Alicia expressed this idea when she said, “The more education you have, the better chance you have to get a decent job or to have a position where you feel like you’re fulfilled, where you feel like you’re where you need to be. Yeah, education is critical.”

We believed that achieving the American dream meant: get a college degree, get a good job, get a nice house and nice car, get married, and have children. By getting a college education, it was believed a person will get a (better) job that pays more money, which allows them to live in a better (suburban) home and have a better life. Ben described this idea:

I feel like education is vital to that and with a lot of things today you don’t have to be educated to make money, be happy, but a lot of times if you’re educated it might open the door to where you can get a better job because a lot of times they feel like you’re more educated so you’re more likely to do a better job. More educated can get you a better job, get you more options for the job you want, because, again, if you’re more educated people feel like you could do this job better than someone else or that job better than someone else, so you have a
bigger pool of jobs and a bunch of other stuff. I feel like education is really important to my future, or at least it seems to be. This then results in us being in a position to provide a better life for our children (having the resources to help them go to a better K-12 school, live in a safer neighborhood, and having the money to do extracurricular activities which play a role in getting children into good colleges to repeat the process all over again in the next generation).

Everything connected to education was related to bettering our lives, class status, and family. Brittany described her perfect life and the role education and family plays in that:

The perfect life, I would graduate in May with a job, I would start my job in July, and then I absolutely love the company and stay there for the next 20 or 30 years. Somewhere along the way I would meet somebody that I want to spend the rest of my life with and it would actually be the right person, and I would spend the rest of my life with them and we would have three kids, and be very happy, maybe ten dogs, maybe two, I don’t know, depending on how many strays need help. And just build a long and happy life.

We believe that by getting a college degree we increase the prospects for our family and ourselves. Thus, educational attainment is hugely important in achieving the American dream, and college education is believed to lead to a better life through upward social mobility and increased personal wealth.

We believed that a person must minimally attain one college degree to achieve the American dream and set their family up for success. This belief about education created
the belief that attending and graduating college is necessary in today’s United States. What we did not discuss during interviews about educational attainment is the inequitable way education occurs in the United States across race, gender, and class. We did not discuss systematic inequity within education as a barrier and that systemic inequities prevent achievement of upward social mobility and the American dream through hard work, determination, and perseverance by those who are marginalized and oppressed. Thus, educational attainment was understood and operationalized in color-, class-, and gender-blind ways.

There is a dissonance between educational attainment as a strategy to address larger social and cultural inequity and the inequities in the educational system itself. We seemed to miss that not everyone has access to the types of education (K-12) that prepares one for college and a “better” life trajectory. The way education was used to explain the American dream and life in the United States stands in stark contrast with how education actually works in the United States. Rather than helping to create an equitable playing field, education was used in ways that reinforced inequities and perpetuated the myth that every person can achieve upward social mobility.

**American Dream and Hard Work**

Getting an education was not the only thing we believed to be part of how success is achieved. We need to work hard, be determined, strive for better, and have perseverance. These three things make up the “right mindset” believed to lead to the American dream (success). When someone has these and employs them in their life, job, and education, they will be/are successful.
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

When considering what people believe the American dream/success are, it is easy to see that the United States is believed to be a place where if you do not succeed, you only have yourself to blame. Millie discussed who she believes is responsible for success or failure:

Themselves. You’re responsible for the path that you pick in life. Obviously, I totally get you had a harder upbringing, but that doesn’t define you. That doesn’t define who you are or what you could do in school. I think people can use that as an excuse sometimes, instead of saying, "You know what? I’m going to overcome this. My situation, it’s not fun right now, and I know it’s going to be really hard, but I can do this." It’s been done time and time again," so study. Work hard. I had two jobs while I was in college. Was that fun? No. I didn’t want to do that, but I had to do that, so there’s no excuses. To me, there’s just no excuses. You could rise above any situation. As long as you’re physically healthy, you can rise above anything. You really can, so there’s no excuse, in my book.

We believed the individual is personally responsible for achieving the American dream. Our work ethic produces our class status. If we have a higher class, then we must have worked hard to “earn it,” and we deserve our social position. While there was occasional recognition there are/may be obstacles, work ethic and determination were typically seen as the key to overcoming any challenge faced. Stephen discussed hard work and the American dream:

Hard work, determination and drive. The American dream isn’t something that you just get. If you really want to be satisfied and if you really want to be happy,
you need to work for it. Nobody paved, nobody paved the road for early settlers.

Nobody, if you want, if you really want to achieve your American dream, I feel like you need to work for it.

Nick agreed with Stephen as he discussed, “Obviously a lot of people have achieved the American dream, and I believe everyone with the right amount of work, dedication, and sacrifice can achieve the American dream.” Nick went on to tell a story about a friend from high school whose family immigrated to the United States and his friend’s journey to overcome the obstacles in his life:

This guy I’ve been talking about, his family is first generation immigrants to America, and they weren’t making a lot of money, and he kind of knew that it was his responsibility to make it, like he had to achieve the American dream. And I believe, like I know him right now, he’s almost done with school, like he’s going to achieve the American dream. And I think, that really watching him actually achieve the American dream is, I guess inspiring, and I believe with the right amount of hard work and sacrifice people can achieve the American dream.

The lesson taught by the American dream is that systematic inequality can be overcome by hard work, determination, education, and perseverance. We are successful and achieve the American dream, regardless of circumstances or social identity, when we work hard enough to overcome any situation we endure. Our success or failure occurs because of our work ethic and drive, not from systematic privilege or oppression. Thus, what we learn from the American dream about hard work makes the effects of unearned advantages and unearned disadvantages created by systematic inequity invisible.
Work ethic routinely came up in interviews as the key or one of the keys to achieve the American dream. It was commonly coupled with education, determination, drive, and strive. Interestingly, no one specified how hard someone had to work to achieve the American dream. Thus, I believe there are assumptions or ideas about how hard one must work that did not come out during interviews. We seemed to believe that when we work hard enough, good things happen in our life and we will achieve the American dream. Yet, no one felt a need to identify how hard is hard enough. It seems there is an unspoken or unnamed assumption about how hard is hard enough to successfully achieve the American dream.

None of the participants raised questions about someone not working hard enough until race, class, and gender were specifically asked about in relation to the American dream. When asked about race, class, and gender it was mostly believed a person of any race, gender, or class could achieve the American dream if they had the right work ethic and were determined. Millie discussed whether she felt race, gender, or class affected achievement of the American dream:

Yes and no. Obviously, women get paid less than men, and that’s not right, in my perspective. I think we’re all equals. I think maybe some races may struggle a little bit more, and probably in certain areas of the country, but no matter what hardship you’re facing or whatever label I guess you have, you got to just ignore it and say, "You know what? I’m going to show you up. I’m going to take this so-called weakness, or that you think I have, and just make it work, change people’s
perceptions," and I’d like to think we’re starting to finally as a society make progress toward accepting everyone for who they are.

Stephen explained how he felt race, gender, and class affected the American dream:

They’re obstacles, absolutely. Are they hindrances to an extent, there’s that little chestnut that says if you were born as a white, upper middle class male, straight Christian male, then the sky’s the limit. That’s probably true if you look statistically across the board at your CEOs and your successful wealthy people. But, at the same time, success and wealth isn’t indicative of the successful American dream. It’s like, if you, I think that as long as you’re always working hard to achieve a goal and can achieve that goal and set new goals, you can achieve the American dream.

Stephen was not the only person to discuss privilege in his response to race, gender, and class. Like Millie though, he believed the key was working hard, which is an individual factor, not a systematic factor like systemic privilege or oppression. Vinnie elaborated further on the idea of race and class and the American dream:

I think that people from the current socio economic statuses could do the same thing if parents framed it to their children that way. I think this is my mom and uncle’s day, I think the current generation could be coming out of those same low-income areas. Race is absolutely another factor. I think there are limitations when you get to the hiring point, but at the same time, I don’t see it as a limitation in your drive or want to, it shouldn’t be an issue, an excuse.
Interestingly, during interviews no one questioned the work ethic or determination of white, middle/upper class men. Thus, it appears there is a subconscious (and potentially conscious) assumption that white, middle-upper class men work hard and are determined. Assumptions around who works hard and has a good work ethic would then be centered on whiteness, maleness, and middle-upper class. In other words, it is assumed that individuals with certain identities work harder and have the appropriate attributes to achieve the American dream.

Hard work is positively valued, which means that white, middle-upper class men are consciously and subconsciously perceived with more value or legitimacy. While calling into doubt the work ethic of people of color, women, and individuals from lower class background, not once was a white, middle to upper class man’s work ethic called into question. Therefore, white, middle-upper class men like myself receive the benefit of the doubt that we work hard without necessarily having to prove it.

Since it is believed that individuals are personally responsible for earning their place in society, this means the American dream (re)creates and perpetuates the idea that certain individuals have earned what they have in society. Tonya discussed her experiences as a Latina:

To be able to go and do things without be asked, "How could she get there? She’s not supposed to be here. Why and how?" A lot of people say, "Who did she sleep with to get there?" Why does it have to come to that because I’m a woman? Do you know what I’m saying? My American Dream is when that’s not a question. It’s accepted for me to be able to be there, just as much as anybody else.
During interviews women and people of color discussed personal experiences like Tonya that called into question their legitimacy or validity because of their race and/or gender. White middle-upper class men and white men did not report any experiences that called into doubt their legitimacy regarding things such as what school they attended, how they got their job, or their wealth and material possessions. Thus, white middle-upper class men experience privilege and unearned advantage from their social identities when it comes to achievement, success, the American dream, and the positions they occupy. This privilege means what I accomplish and have is not questioned or doubted because of my race, class, or gender (unless I become impoverished and then I may face class discrimination).

We believed the American dream says that people can earn whatever they desire in their life by working hard, being determined, and persevering. Between this belief and the assumptions about who works hard and who does not is where dissonance occurs. If hard work is assumed to be true for white, middle-upper class men, and less true for everyone else, then the American dream does not actually tell us that every person can earn their place. It (re)creates a belief that white, middle-upper class men earn their place in society and deserve it, and everyone else has to prove it.

Success and the American dream are heavily affiliated with accumulation of wealth and upward social mobility. Wealth is distributed disproportionately in the United States—people of color hold far less than whites (Federal Reserve, 2013). When we believe the reason people accumulate wealth is because of how hard they work, then the way we use the American dream (re)creates the belief that people of color do not work
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

hard, and whites do. Thus, people of color are responsible for their class status and wealth because they have not done enough, while whites have earned their class status and wealth.
CHAPTER FIVE

HOPE AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: PRIVILEGE (RE)CREATED THROUGH THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American dream is founded in hope. In the belief that tomorrow will be better than today if we work diligently. During interviews we did not formally name hope, but spoke about it through our discussion of the better tomorrow we are promised by the American dream. Hope underpinned our belief in tomorrow, in how someday if we worked hard enough, strived enough, and got an education (or invented something), we would have it.

Hope was highly common in how people made sense of the American dream and their lives in the United States. Almost every person discussed the American dream in relation to opportunity for a better life. Donnie explained:

I guess the goal of everyone is to make a lot of money, and the way of doing that is just going back to school, bettering yourself and establishing yourself so someone can want you to be a part of their company or whatever the deal is there, just to distinguish yourself from someone else.

I basically said that because you want to have something in life. I just think that that’s everyone’s desire, is to have something in life and to be better than what your parents were. That’s one of the things that my parents always taught me. "We want you to do better and to be better, and to do things a whole lot better than what we had whenever we were being raised." Whenever you look at …
They have a house that’s paid for, they had their own jobs. Their parents didn’t give them anything; they had to work for it. That’s one of the things that they’ve instilled in me too.

The American Dream is basically the epitome of wanting a better life, wanting to be better through education, bettering yourself other than...The way I characterize that was the epitome of the American Dream was the dream of many dreams. It’s according to who you are and what you have aspirations of. It’s a belief of doing something greater than yourself and how to love each other, cherish each other, and how to hold yourself to a higher esteem.

Definitely, "the land of opportunity” [the United States]. Whenever we look at America versus China, given that America competes with China and the other ones, Japan and all the other countries, it gives you a force versus whenever you look at Africa and some of the other poorer countries that don’t have what Americans have. It lets you know that in America that you can basically have anything that you want if you put forth the efforts, go through your educational process. You can basically have anything you want in America, if you are willing to do what it takes to do that.

Donnie hit on all of the key aspects of the American dream. Continually we discussed material things in association with hope, opportunity, and a better life for ourselves. Carla
spoke about how the American dream exemplifies her hope for opportunity. From her perspective, achieving the American dream leads to a better life:

Like a pretty good, decent looking house. No, wait. The kind of house you see in California. Those ... You know, I mean, it could be almost like the ones n Beverly Hills. You’re an executive or banker, or a celebrity at least. Or a musician. You have a really, you have a good partner in life. Life partner, or husband or wife. Yeah, you have kids, you have a pet. You have a lot of cars and you have a big bank account. I think that’s what it is to me.

I was watching [the movie] "Clueless" and her dad is a politician or a banker, I think. She goes to high school, has friends of her own, and ... Driving a car, going to shopping malls, and helping other people. Helping another classmate. That’s what I think the American dream is, in my own opinion.

For people with children, the idea of your children being better off than you was a noticeable theme. Alicia said the American dream was to a “have a nice house, get married, have a family, and one day your children would be able to go and do better than you did. My American dream is for my children to be successful in their chosen fields and do well.” Maggie also expressed her desire for her daughter to succeed, “Success and to help Ellie achieve success and happiness.”

This is not surprising because part of the American dream is the notion that a better life tomorrow should happen and so it should be instilling hope for the future. An
interesting question is whether hope comes from the American dream or if the American dream picked it up somewhere else and the idea became attached to the American dream?

Hope is vital to the existence of the American dream. The American dream uses hope to reinforce its validity as the US story. Stephen said “Immediately when you say American dream, I think of one of those little covered wagons, moving west, westward expansion. I think about the Statue of Liberty in the American dream.” Simultaneously, we individually use hope to reinforce and validate the American dream.

The American dream is wealth. It is about escaping from poverty and escaping from tyranny. You come to America and you get made. Things are better. The American dream has always been about getting a leg up and open your own shop or working and making money. Hey, we’ll be wealthy and it will all be better in America. (Stephen)

This is very aligned with structural constructivism –structure structures structurer and structurer structures structure.

Education and hard work are the engine we believe turn the wheels that drive our hope for upward social mobility and wealth into a reality. Brittany summed up education’s role, “Education is the building block for your success, if we’re talking about your career, which I guess, maybe I just realized that I am basing success off a successful career.” Millie discussed hard work’s role in turning hope into reality when working to achieve the American dream, “It’s choices, it’s decisions, it’s your work, it’s your passion. You can do it. You can achieve anything you want, and I’d hope people would see that.”
Money and material wealth were core concepts in how hope was manifested in our lives. “It’s [the American dream] the suburban home with the white picket fence, the SUV in the driveway, married with kids” (Brittany). The home, the car, the white picket fence, the right neighborhood—“achieving” each of these aspects of the American dream is driven by money. The question for me is does hope create the desire for money or does the desire for money create hope? Or do they both create each other?

**American Dream and Personal Responsibility**

In the story told by the American dream, we learn to blame individuals, and ignore environment, circumstance, or any systemic factors that cause challenges or hurdles. This means that no matter the odds you face, no matter how oppressed you are, no matter how much privilege you carry, you are the master of your fate.

Yes. Anyone can achieve the American dream if they, the key word is "want" to, and want to push themselves to the limit. In terms of what society is trending towards now, it can make it tricky to achieve the American dream now. (Daniel)

I feel like maybe societally there’s more of an expectation for handouts and quick fixes and not having to work to pull yourself up by your bootstraps I think is gone. I don’t think that mentality really exists. I think when someone is successful and works for it, then it’s recognized. I don’t think there’s the thought that’s what you need to do. People expect it to be done for them [achieving social mobility and the American dream]. (Vinnie)
We have been taught that it is our fault if we do not make enough money to buy a mcmansion with a privacy fence around a huge yard that has a massive security gate.

We consistently felt the American dream is accessible and achievable by anyone, even though many admitted race/class/gender affected the ability to access/achieve the American dream.

So yes I really do believe. I really do believe that everyone can reach their dreams, that everyone can have the American dream. It’s out there, you know; if somebody’s struggling when it comes to education, go to the tutoring center. You know you’re capable of doing it, but do they have that drive to do it? (Betty)

Typically, the justification for challenges and obstacles associated with race/class/gender not preventing someone from achieving the American dream was that all one needed was the “right or proper” mindset to overcome.

That all depends on a person. And a person’s outlook on what they want to achieve and what they want to accomplish. You can be born into inner city poverty but that doesn’t mean that you’re stuck in that forever. If you have the desire, you hear stories, and you hear successful stories a lot of kids who come from very poor families that are constantly working and constantly striving to get out of whatever situation that they’re in. And you can make it out. You hear stories about folks that, unfortunately, don’t make it out.

You hear stories about middle class folks going both ways and becoming more successful or less successful. And, of course, rich kids that are born with a silver
spoon in their mouth that either run off of mom and dad’s trust fund for their entire life or pave their own path and do their own thing. It’s really a personal choice, I think. Are you going to have to work harder if you’re not born into that privilege? Yeah absolutely. You’re going to have to work hard regardless, I think, for results. (Stephen)

If someone who is oppressed works hard enough and gets a college education they can possibly achieve the American dream. What we did not notice was that when we spoke about the American dream, we associated the keys to achieving the American dream with its definite achievement until the conversation turned to people of color, women, or people who are impoverished. We switched the way we discussed hard work and education from keys that definitely achieved the American dream to keys that possibly achieved the American dream.

What this tells me is that the American dream is a phenomenon we believe that white, middle-upper class men achieve because they do the right things. It means the American dream is a construct that creates implicit bias in how we understand hard work, education, and achievement. This bias creates expectations and assumptions about who works hard, who achieves/should achieve the American dream, and who gets educated – white, middle to upper class men. In other words, it unfairly and unjustly benefits me and how individuals perceive me and what i achieve.

The slight change in the way we framed achieving the American dream showed me how the American dream is entwined with the idea that certain people definitely achieve it, while others can possibly do if they play their cards “correctly”. No one
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

mentioned anything about the possibility of white, middle-upper class men achieving it. The only time the possibility of achieving the American dream was mentioned was in relation to people of color, women, and poverty. The shift is subtle and it makes me wonder, why do we believe that hard work, determination, education, and perseverance are how we achieve the American dream if they only definitely work for a very specific demographic of people?

The idea of a person having the ability to be or do anything regardless of where they came from erases the ways in which the American dream actually works and insulates it from critique. People reinforce the belief that the United States is a meritocracy and the American dream where we achieve the American dream is determined by the individual, not systematic privilege and oppression. The American dream influences the way we see life and society, making it more likely that we blame an individual and not systems for inequity.

By socializing the belief that individuals are solely to blame and erasing systematic influence, the American dream becomes a marginalizing, privileging, and oppressive construct. The American dream is responsible for (re)creating stereotypes, negative attitudes, victim blaming, and inequitable policy and practices in the United States. Thus, there is a dichotomy within the American dream because its core tenets are premised on hope and opportunity for everyone, but, they actually (re)create and reinforce systemic workings that allow the American dream to be more easily achieved by those with privilege.
Privilege Coded as “Personal Responsibility”

The American dream is earned; it is not given or handed to someone. Continually, we discussed this idea of earning the American dream in different ways. The idea of us having personal responsibility for where we ended up came through in phrases such as: work hard, earn it, choose to achieve, have the right mindset, willpower, determination, drive, and strive. Each time we discussed the American dream and how it was achieved in these ways, we were essentially saying that an individual is personally responsible for their achievement and place in society, no matter the circumstances or background.

We seemed to recognize people of color, women, and/or people from lower SES have a more difficult path to achieve the American dream. But, the reason we mostly believed someone from these social groups does not achieve the American dream was not because of systematic obstacles – oppression, marginalization, and/or unearned disadvantage. If someone from these social groups had the right (proper) mindset – hard work, drive and determination, and perseverance – then they could achieve social mobility and wealth. We are responsible for where we end up. Thus, our choices and actions determine our social status and class, not social systems or structures.

Believing we are each personally responsible for our position in society is not an oppressive idea if everyone plays the same game by the same rules on the same field and with the same equipment. When any part(s) of the game is different in a way that creates inequity in opportunity or ability to win, then equity does not exist because both the player and the conditions of the game determine outcome. Thus, when we used the American dream in ways that expressed beliefs that we are personally responsible for the
outcomes of our lives, we ignored the unearned advantages and disadvantages from the way society (the game) works in the United States. When this happened, we also inadvertently created a narrative that blames the individual and sees them at a deficit, rather than pointing the gaze towards the system and seeing the system at a deficit – some individuals play the game of life with unearned advantages while others are forced to play with unearned disadvantages.

Additionally, we did not notice the tension between the belief that the United States is a meritocracy where every person has the chance to be successful and the fact that social identity and social group membership affected on one’s ability/chances to achieve success. This dichotomy creates an important question of why we believe the United States is a meritocracy when at the same time we acknowledge that our race, gender, and class affect one’s chances to achieve the American dream. We acknowledged there are systemic issues, yet we evaluated individual success with standardized measures that hold an individual accountable despite the ways in which the system is designed to advantage or disadvantage them. Therefore, based on how the United States works systematically, the idea someone is personally responsible for their place in society supports and perpetuates systems of privilege, power, and oppression.
The American dream was discussed frequently in relation to marriage and family. Being married and having a family was central to the American dream. The following two examples from interviews highlight the different ways participants phrased this and the similar themes that emerged from their comments.

If they have achieved the American Dream, I feel like that they have accomplished whatever they want to accomplish as a standard, whether it's … For me, I would suggest that the American Dream is having a nice house or having a nice car, having a great family, being well educated within your field of choice. (Donnie)

In Peru, I wouldn’t necessarily hear about it so much as I remember seeing about it, oh America’s like this unbelievably free place where you can, where everything is possible, and to a certain extent it is. Like the whole world has this vision where the American dream is the greatest thing ever because you own a piece of land, you’ll have a good looking wife, you’ll have a great family or something, a great job. That’s the American dream that was portrayed to us in a different country. (Juan)

Family was linked to having a (good) job, a (nice) house (with a dog and fence), kids (1-4), and a car or two. Tonya discussed the idea of the American dream and family:
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

The first thing that comes into my mind is a home in a suburban area, with a mom and a dad, a golden retriever or a Labrador, and two or three kids. At least one is a boy and at least one is a girl. With a nice little fence. Possibly two vehicles: one is a minivan, and the other one is dad’s car that he takes usually out on rides. That’s literally what I figure is the American Dream. I think everybody talks about growing up, getting a job, buying a house, having a family, having children, where it is that they would like to live. It’s such a common answer of what they say, which is what leads me to believe my first response, that that’s what the American Dream is.

A good job was associated with having a white-collar job with an income that provided a comfortable lifestyle for us/our family (middle-upper SES). Owning a nice home meant a suburban home in a good and safe neighborhood. Brittany explained the role of suburbia in relation to family and the American dream:

We are always taught it’s [the American dream] the suburban home with the white picket fence, the SUV in the driveway, married with kids. When I see this family I see a mom and dad, with two girls and a boy. The dad is in a, maybe not a suit, but nice slacks and a tie, going to work. The mom may or may not work, but I think I’ve always dreamed of moms being teachers because that was like my childhood dream. I always wanted to be a teacher, so growing up I always thought I was going to be a teacher, but obviously I am not. So that’s what I see, and I see little kids running everywhere and a golden retriever in the yard, specifically. The
income from the good job was required to set children up for success to have a better life, greater wealth and, higher class status than you had.

**Heteronormativity and Family**

One of the most powerful things to influence my understanding of the American dream is how we talked about family and who is supposed to work during interviews. Family was conceived as a heterosexual construct, and was the place heteronormativity appeared most often in the understanding of the American dream. Marriage and family life was between a man and a woman with the man working and the woman staying home or possibly working. Possibly if I had interviewed participants who were gay this would have changed our conversations about the American dream during interviews. For this study, participants understood the American dream as a heteronormative concept. Future research could explore how individuals who are gay understand the American dream and family. At the moment, the family and the American dream is understood as a heteronormative construct.

Family was understood through a heteronormative and gendered lens: “When I see family I see a mom and dad, with two girls and a boy. The dad is in maybe not a suit, but nice slacks and a tie, going to work. The mom may or may not work” (Brittany). Participants consistently used heteronormative language when discussing ideas related to family. While we may have used different examples or focused on different aspects, there were similarities between our observations. You can see how Ben’s description below fits congruently with Brittany’s explanation above.
You always see the guy with the decent sized two-story house, white picket fence, 2.3 kids. I don’t know how you do 2.3, I still don’t know, I guess they just average it out, what people say. Boy and a girl, I guess, mainly. Have a decent job. Some of the stuff I’ve already said about what I want in my life, which is interesting. They live really happy and usually in the American dream, you always notice that the gender roles are pretty established. The guy’s usually the one going out working and the mother’s more stay-at-home with the kids. It’s kind of what I’ve en-pictured as the American dream from what I’ve really seen. (Ben)

The American dream promotes an understanding that privileges heterosexuals because family is conceptualized as happening between a man and a woman. While this may seem harmless, it is harmful to individuals who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Inclusion validates a person. If your relationship is excluded because of the gender of the person you love and plan to spend your life with, you are being marginalized. The American dream is the most important narrative in the United States. To be left out of it could cause pain and difficulties for your life and relationship that someone in a heterosexual relationship does not face. The American dream perpetuates and reinforces beliefs and values that privilege heterosexual relationships and families, while marginalizing same-sex relationships and families.

**Gender and Work**

According to the American dream the man always goes to work; (2) the woman stays home and possibly works; and (3) marriage and family included a husband (man)
and wife (woman). Kids were assumed to be part of the American dream, but not everyone interviewed wanted kids. The American dream’s emphasis on work and working makes men the focal point because men definitely work and women possibly work. The interesting thing about how participants discussed family and who works was that it displayed ways in which work is understood. Achieving the American dream is done by working and accruing wealth. Every person discussed the American dream in terms of jobs and hard work. No one mentioned not having a job as a way to achieve the American dream or understood the American dream.

When someone was not married, it was believed they worked regardless of their gender. Once a person got married, gender then influenced beliefs about who worked. Women had a job and worked unless they were married and the family had kids. Once family became part of the conversation when talking about the American dream, who works shifted.

Work (and working hard) is part of achieving the American dream; yet, men are the only gender who always works when conceptualizing the American dream. Women are secondary options for making an income. Family was asked about in the first half of the interview while we were not talking about the American dream, and individuals mentioned both men and women working. But, once the conversation shifted to the American dream, work became a man’s job, while home and family were seen as a women’s responsibility. Therefore, a woman’s job could include supporting their man by making sure the kids and house are attended to, but a man’s job never included this type of work.
Staying at home was not seen as “work” and thus it is relegated to second-class standing in the American dream. In other words, maintaining the home is secondary, subordinate, and lesser than “real work.” Maintaining the home is the primary responsibility of women. Therefore, women are casted as less than men within the ideology of the American dream.

This belief raises the question of who then is the American dream really open to if men are supposed to always have a job and women having a job are optional and secondary? Do individuals view women as being able to play a lead role in the American dream? Are they always cast(e) in a supporting or subservient role in how the American dream is conceptualized? Is being able to achieve the American dream subliminally (and/or overtly) promised only to men? How does this affect the way men and women conceive themselves, their aspirations, and the path(s) they expect/desire to take?
CHAPTER SEVEN

HOW i UNDERSTAND RACE AND CLASS IN THE AMERICAN DREAM

While the previous sections focused on the contributions of participants, this chapter is work i did with myself in wrestling with the concept of the American dream. As mentioned earlier, i spent a great deal of time reflecting, journaling and writing memos related to the experiences of others and the American dream. This chapter is the result of my conversations with myself about the American dream.

During interviews participants discussed the American dream and personal responsibility in racialized and classed ways. When asked if race, class, and gender affected the achievement of the American dream, it was rarely ever discussed how being white, male, or coming from a middle to upper class affected success or achievement, especially by individuals who are white. Individuals acknowledged certain social groups (people of color, women, and lower SES) had a more difficult path to achieve the American dream. We rarely acknowledged that white, male, and middle to upper SES people had an easier path to achieve the American dream. Since it is assumed that we earn the American dream, people who are white, male, and/or from middle-upper SES are then assumed to have earned their place in society. This assumption fails to critique how the system has helped these individuals through unearned advantages/privilege.

Issues of Race in the Family

Another assumption of this unearned advantage is the way in which the American dream is racialized is through family. Whiteness, while not overtly discussed in relation to family was ever present in how family was understood. White families occupy the
majority of suburban neighborhoods as a product of white flight and FHA housing/loan practices (Lipsitz, 2006; Tauber, 1990). When people discussed home ownership and where their family should live, they discussed “good” homes and “good” neighborhoods that were tied to suburban locales. Vinnie talked about this when he discussed some of the first images that popped into his head when he thought about the American dream, “The first one that popped in my head is the standard white picket fence, little porch in front, American flag on the bannister or whatever it is, just that home.” White families and culture are the center of suburban culture. The American dream and its achievement are then centered on whiteness.

Consciously, individuals did not seem to make the connection or were unaware of how the American dream family is connected to whiteness. If how we understand family is based on whiteness within the American dream, then it creates values and beliefs about family that (re)create and perpetuate white privilege and whiteness. If family and the American dream perpetuate white notions of family, this runs counter to one of the central tenets of the American dream. It makes it explicit that the ways in which the American dream is conceptualized and operationalized is centered on whiteness, and therefore not taught in a way may make a person of color feel like it is open for them. Since the American dream is the national ideology of the United States, it means what people aspire to be is whitewashed and privileges whites. Seeing how race, gender, class, and heteronormativity affect the ways in which family, home ownership, and family are understood changes the entire meaning of the American dream and the United States for me.
Issues of Race in Social Mobility and Success

The odds are stacked against people of color in the United States. This creates greater barriers and obstacles for individuals of color than for whites. At the same time, the American dream advances the notion that any individual can overcome any barrier or obstacle if they are determined, get an education, and work hard. The idea is (re)creates the belief that if someone who faces systematic unearned disadvantage fails to achieve the American dream, it is their fault because they did not choose to do the necessary things to succeed.

Ultimately, this means that a person of color should be able to overcome the historical and current effects of racism woven into our society. Essentially, race does not hinder a person of color because the individual is able to defeat an entire society on their own. Meritocracy and the American dream are racialized ideologies because the United States is not equitable for people of color. Thus, when the American dream’s ideology is used to blame people of color for holding a disproportionate less amount of wealth than whites in the United States, it advances a racist and oppressive agenda that privileges whites.

The American dream is centered on whiteness and (re)creates white privilege. During interviews, only people of color were recognized to have potential barriers or obstacles in society based on race. Any obstacle mentioned for a white person was related to gender or class. White participants barely mentioned white privilege when race and the American dream were discussed. Race was usually mentioned in relation to how people of color may not or do not achieve the American dream. What seemed to go unnoticed in
how we answered the question of how race affects achievement of the American dream is that by not mentioning whites as disaffected, it means there is a hidden assumption that whites achieve the American dream. Thus, whites receive privilege from the unconscious assumption that they are able and will achieve the American dream.

White participants almost never recognized what causes inequitable opportunity for education and success for people of color—white privilege. We discussed (in)equity only in terms of people and children of color. The unearned advantage a white person receives from their privilege in the United States was unconsciously recognized, but not consciously recognized. People of color have to think about and be aware of how their race affects their ability to achieve the American dream and upward social mobility. Therefore, whites experience privilege from not having to think about or be aware of how their race positively affects their pursuit of the American dream.

When we use the American dream in ways that do not see racialized systematic inequities, we perpetuate racist ideas that promote the continuation of white supremacy and privilege in the United States. Whites hold greater wealth in the United States that allow them to purchase more expensive homes in suburban neighborhoods that are connected with higher quality K-12 schools. Families who have the ability to live in these homes provide enhanced opportunity for their children from the higher quality education they receive. These children have increased access and opportunity to get a college degree, especially at a selective university or college (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). Greater family wealth means better K-12 education and college degrees that lead to social networks and capital that helps land higher paying jobs (McNamee & Miller, 2014). A
job that pays you more gives you the ability to live in better school districts that set your children up for success. The disproportionate distribution of wealth and how it effects education across racial groups causes the way we use the American dream to be unknowingly supportive of racist ideology that (re)creates privilege and oppression.

Higher quality educational access leads to an increased chance to land a higher paying job. If the American dream conveys that someone’s position in society is based off their individual choices, it makes societal effects invisible. People write policy and legislation, and are influenced by socialization and the American dream. Thus, the American dream highly influences policy and legislation that is passed in the United States. This makes the effect of invisifying social systems extremely dangerous because the facilitation of privilege, power, and oppression is not done just at an individual level, but also at the institutional level. When this racism occurs at the institutional level it means the American dream is a systematically racist construct that privileges whites and oppresses people of color.

Seemingly unbeknownst to participants, the way the American dream is used to construct and support beliefs about the United States and their lives actually supports white supremacy instead of equality. The different strands of the American dream (meritocracy, social mobility, education, and hard work/determination/perseverance) work as racist constructs because of the inequitable conditions (which reproduce white privilege) in the United States. Equality is believed to exist in the United States not because it is believed to be equal, but because a person is able to overcome inequities by
working hard, having determination, and persevering to get a college degree that leads to a good paying job.

The issue is that while hard work and determination are helpful for a college degree and success, they are not the only things that influence success and the American dream. A child’s family’s SES is highly correlated with their chances at getting a college education and achieving upward social mobility (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). Research that shows this correlation smacks in the face of the idea that the United States is a meritocracy where social mobility is determined by your hard work, talent, and drive. Individuals evoke the American dream and the different strands of its narrative with the best intentions. Unfortunately when we do we use it, we (most likely) unknowingly perpetuate a vicious racist ideology that supports and advances white privilege not only societally, but also within our own individual construction and expression of values and beliefs.

The American Dream is Classed

The American dream is full of expectations that revolve around a minimum level of wealth and class. The American dream means having a nice house, a nice car, a good family, and a white-collar job. To have a good family you must be at least a middle class family that lives in a decent sized house (preferably with fenced in yard) in a suburban neighborhood. This decent sized house should be big enough to fit a family of four with a two-car garage. The cars inside those garages are not junkers because this does not fit the idea of, at a minimum, a middle class lifestyle. An individual works in a white-collar job and has a college degree unless they are an entrepreneur or inventor. Interestingly, an
inventor is considered an alternate path that the exceptional take to achieve the American
dream. The normal path to the American dream is via college and four-year/graduate
degrees.

Money, and increasing our wealth are major parts of the American dream. These
act as the measuring stick to whether a person and their family achieve the American
dream. Money and wealth are also important because they are vital to setting our children
up for success and upward social mobility. The understanding and desire for attaining
wealth and riches did not surprise me based on the literature and what is already known
about the American dream.

Going into the interviews i would have guessed that working at McDonalds would
not be equated with achieving the American dream (and it was not). What did surprise me
is how achieving the American dream meant you achieved happiness, and achieving the
American dream meant you attained great wealth. i personally would not typically
associate having large amounts of money with being happy, but as i reflected more on US
culture and the American dream, it does make sense. i am surprised the association and
interplay between money and happiness in the American dream was not critiqued during
interviews.

Why is someone poor?

The American dream is a classed concept. Research shows that stickiness at the
ends is highly prevalent in the United States. Yet, repeatedly the American dream was
used to discuss life in the United States as if every person has a chance to become rich
and famous, if that is what one desires and is willing to sacrifice and work for it. This
brings up the question, why is every person not rich? Why is it believed that becoming rich is merely a matter of will power and hard work? I have repeatedly asked myself these questions while reflecting on what I discovered in this study.

The American dream says: work hard to attain wealth and upward social mobility for yourself and your family; that we control this outcome through our decisions and actions; and the more money we have, the better. If you think about this and that the American dream is the United States most powerful socializing force, then you cannot help but to wonder why the fuck is anyone poor? The American dream socializes us to believe someone is poor because that person did not want to not be poor badly enough to do the things they needed to do to get out of poverty. How on earth does this make any fucking sense? When has anyone ever heard of someone wanting to be poor? Like you and I might just wake up tomorrow and decide, “you know what, fuck it, I want to be poor and struggle financially.” No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. NO. I would never do that, and neither would anyone else that I have ever met.

This is the most difficult part of the American dream for me to understand. We believe that people consciously choose to do things to make their lives significantly more difficult. Because let’s be honest, money helps our families and us in a lot of ways. Yes, more money, more problems, but those problems are luxuries compared to the stress from wondering if there is anything to eat, or if we will have running water, or electricity, or heating or air conditioning. Let’s also think about how parents consciously and intentionally make choices they believe will help their children achieve success later on in life. This idea is directly from the American dream, intergenerational upward social
mobility. Thus, the main goal for parents is to set their children up to do better than they did. So, I have to wonder, with all these things telling us that being wealthy is better, why would anyone choose to be poor?

The American dream, the United State’s core ideology, says we are to set our children up for a better life. To achieve a better life it is necessary to get a college education, and the quality of the K-12 education a child receives is important to their ability to get a college degree. Schools that prepare children for college are often associated with neighborhoods in and around the suburbs. The places to live in these areas require a certain amount of money and wealth to live in. To recap, the American dream says create a better life for your child, which the United States has accepted as a parents purpose, and to do this you need a certain amount of money and wealth. Yet, we believe that XX number of people and families have intentionally chosen to buck the US’s underpinning philosophy and live in poverty? That is straight up, one of the most ridiculous ideas or beliefs I have ever encountered. And yet, that is overwhelmingly the way in which individuals in the United States believe the United States works. Why...?

Class, cash, and education rule everything around us

Individuals who are middle or upper class have earned their class by choosing to work hard and do what is necessary to achieve their level of wealth. Whereas, someone who is poor, has earned there class by choosing to not work hard enough and not do what was necessary to get out of poverty. Thus, we blame individuals for being poor and make sweeping generalizations about the type of person we believe that individual to be. We also do this for middle and upper class individuals. This way of conceptualizing
individuals based off their wealth and class is dangerous and has insidious effects for us individually, as well as the United States. How do you know the quality of someone based from their class and social position? There are many individuals who are extremely wealthy, not because of anything they personally did, but because of their family’s wealth. Yet, we assume that working hard and becoming educated means you have money, and we assume that when you have money it means you have worked hard and are educated. If you do not experience questions that undermine your work ethic or determination based on your class, you are experiencing class privilege.

When we generalize and stereotype individuals in poverty by thinking they are lazy and unwilling to work for something, merely looking for handouts, we support and perpetuate a classist narrative that is both untrue and unsubstantiated. The American dream, which claims the United States is the land of opportunity where every person can attain wealth if they want to, actually (re)creates the opposite effect with the ways it uses individual responsibility to explain class. Individual responsibility is used to make the cultural, societal, and environmental effects on a person’s life invisible. It causes us to ignore the disproportionately uneven ways wealth is distributed. It causes us to ignore the effects of racial/class segregation and uneven funding of K-12 schools. Instead, we say that if a person had just chosen to live their life differently they would not be poor. Yet, parents and individuals with money act in ways that show they understand the effects of poverty and poor quality of schooling on their children. People move out of school districts or into school districts based on the quality of education, which is tied to greater levels of wealth through the way schools are funded. If parents consciously move out of
school districts because they will not set their children up for success and the American dream, why do we then blame the children who attend these schools for not being able to get a college degree and achieve the American dream?

**Conclusion**

Race and class and the American dream do not work in isolated ways to affect our lives and the way we understand them. They simultaneously influence each other and affect the ways in which we construct values and beliefs about the United States and ourselves. The intersection between race, class, and the American dream is most apparent because of the racialized ways the distribution of wealth and schooling occur in the United States. When we discuss poverty and wealth in the United States, we often do not see how they are racialized, but when looking at research it is clear that whites hold grossly more wealth than people of color. This then trickles down to affect education and schooling because they are connected to family SES.

The ways in which women were cast in subservient roles within the constructs of family and marriage was highly noticeable. It lead to women being pushed to the margins when conceptualizing achievement of the American dream by a family. The American dream is an ideology that on the surface appears to be equitable for all persons regardless of their social identity. But, as i dug deeper, i saw there are holes in the idea that the American dream works for everyone and independent of race, class, and gender.
SECTION TWO

WRAP UP

During this section I discussed what I learned from interview transcripts and analytic memos I wrote after coding and analyzing transcripts in the first three chapters. The themes included: the American dream and success, the American dream and education, the American dream and hard work, the American dream and personal responsibility, and the American dream and family. The final chapter discussed how I came to understand the ways in which the American dream was racialized and classed.

The key lessons I (re)learned in this autoethnography included:

1. Individuals believed that the United States is not an equitable country, but it is equal. People are able to overcome systematic oppression and marginalization through hard work, determination, and perseverance.

2. When the tenets of hard work, education, and determination are considered and used within the current and historical context of the United States they perpetuate and (re)create privilege, power, and oppression.

3. Further study is needed to explore how the American dream ideology supports and advances the socialization of patriarchic and heteronormative values and beliefs.

4. The American dream is centered on, and privileges white, heterosexual middle-to-upper class men.

5. The American dream is racialized, classed, and gendered because the United States operates on systems of privilege, power, and oppression.
In my work with myself, I found challenges acknowledging the following:

1. The idea that hard work is not good. I have been socialized and almost indoctrinated to believe that hard work and determination are key to success.

2. How I can be a solution and not part of the problem in the privilege and oppression from the ways in which the American dream is interwoven with, and affects, systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

3. The ways in which I am privileged that I currently do not see or notice.

In the next section, I will discuss the implications of my findings and analysis through two different pieces, *A Parable About Baseball: Equality and Equity* and *Tale of the Two Angry White Men*. These pieces expand on what was presented in this section to address what this study means for future research, education, and the United States.
SECTION THREE

IMPLICATIONS THROUGH PARABLE

In the previous section I discussed what I learned from interviews and analytic memos to describe the American dream as a racialized, classed, and gendered ideology. I now transition in this section to discuss the implications of these findings through two different chapters. The first discusses the ramifications of social and educational equality versus equity through a parable that was crafted from what I learned during this study and my experiences as a baseball player and fan. The second piece, chapter nine, is the culmination of this project. In it, I used what I learned from participants and this study to examine an interaction between my father and I many years ago. Both chapters provide real life examples that set the context for implications and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A PARABLE ABOUT BASEBALL: EQUALITY AND EQUITY

I have reviewed statistics and research throughout this dissertation that make it clear opportunity and wealth in the United States are not distributed equitably across race, class, and gender. The American dream tells us meritocracy exists because we are able to overcome inequity through hard work and a college education. It says that by buckling down and being determined, we can make it. We can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. We are responsible for our destiny. There is one issue; research shows that this is not true.
In the United States, education is the ladder that is supposed to give a person from a disadvantaged background the ability to increase their wealth and climb upwards. Family wealth’s influence on who gets opportunity and access to different qualities of education is remarkable. Wealth is distributed disproportionately, with whites holding remarkably more wealth than people of color. This leaves many children of color with a lower chance to attain skills and resources that help their educational attainment. Therefore, the education system works in ways that strikingly favors families who have greater wealth, most of which are white.

So why do most people and the participants in this study believe individual merit is what determines if someone is wealthy or poor in the United States? What I learned from interviews points to the American dream’s influence in how individuals are socialized to believe the United States is a meritocracy and education is the tool to overcome any inequity one faces. This chapter explores these ideas through a parable about baseball. In the story, which is based from my personal experience and knowledge of baseball and what I learned from this study, I discuss equality and equity. I then discuss the implications for future research and policy in education.

Before we go further, I want to provide a context to why I am approaching this section of my work the way I am. As someone who wants to bridge academic rigor and the creation of work that is approachable for everyone, I have chosen to frame this chapter in the context of the American pastime. I use baseball to walk through the idea of equality and equity, and why a level playing field does not actually allow a person’s talent, work ethic, and determination to determine success. A level playing field means
the dimensions of the field and the rules are the same for every person. In other words, everybody is treated the same regardless of social identity, background, and circumstance.

**Meritocracy and the Level Playing Field: SES & Race**

The American dream justifies inequity by saying that every person achieves success if they choose to work hard, be determined, and make the necessary sacrifices. Since it is believed the individual controls their destiny, it is then believed polices and legislation only need to treat us the same for our success to be controlled by ourselves. This ideology, when referring to race, is known as colorblindness (Zamudio et al., 2011). We can extend this idea of colorblindness to things such as gender and class as well. For the purposes of this conversation we will call this idea equality, which means to treat every person the same regardless of social identity, background, and circumstance.

Equality and meritocracy are part of the underpinning philosophy of the American dream and US policy (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Johnson, 2014; Zamudio et al., 2011). Therefore, individuals typically believe policy and legislation are fair if they are written in a way that treat individuals the same across background, social identity, and circumstance. The only issue is that any ideology, policy, or legislation exists within a socio-cultural context, and this context influences how the it it works. In other words, nothing happens like it does on paper unless the way it works on paper is happening within the socio-political context that it would occur in off of paper. The American dream and the notion of equality purported by the American dream are not equal. We need to go further with policy and legislation to push beyond equality and work toward equity.
But there are examples of individuals who have managed to overcome these barriers despite lacking race, gender, or class privilege! Yes, there are people who make it out of circumstances and conditions that are extremely dire and caused by systematic privilege and oppression. The question that persists for me is whether or not we are comfortable with race, gender, or class limiting one’s ability to achieve the American dream? Would we be okay if our chances or our child’s chances to get a college degree that is so vital to success were 40, 50, or 60 percent less than someone else’s because of race, gender, or social class? I have a feeling there is not a single person reading this that would be okay if their chances of success were lessened based on things that were not within their control.

**The Level Playing Field**

Meritocracy is a system where an individual achieves success and social status via their abilities and efforts, and not from social identities that are ascribed at birth (McNamee & Miller, 2014; Moore, 2004). If the United States is a meritocracy, the assumption is that if each person has the same field to play on than the opportunity for success depends on oneself. This level playing field is supposed to allow the hardest working and most talented individuals to perform the best and achieve the greatest success. The issue with this idea is that it neglects to account for other things that matter to performance.

Let’s take baseball for example. While talent and hard work are important to improving your ability to perform, there are other things that are also important. Things like the equipment, coaching, and the training a player has matters greatly to
performance. In our case, resources and socio-cultural factors that are systematically connected to one’s SES, race, and gender matter to the achievement of the American dream like gloves, bats, and cleats matter in baseball.

**Pregame.** So we play on the same field under the same rules of play, should we expect every player’s performance to be indicative of their ability and efforts? Playing on the same field with the same rules does influence success, but unless everyone is given the same exact resources and equipment to play the game, there are other things that do as well. Players require equipment such as baseball cleats for better traction (school funding), pants that allow a person to slide without abrasions on their legs (experienced and talented administrators and school boards), baseball gloves to catch the ball (books, labs, and other learning resources), batting gloves to improve grip on the bat (counseling and other support staff to guide students into higher education and post-high school opportunities), and bats to hit the ball when it is pitched (support in and beyond school to succeed in education). Equipment that is used to play the game is similar to textbooks, labs, and other resources used to go to school and get an education.

Players also require individuals to coach and trainers to help them grow as players to reach their maximum potential. Coaches are much like teachers, counselors, and mentors. Admittedly, some equipment and coaches probably have a greater affect on how well a player can and will performs. For example, a player who does not have baseball cleats might not be at the same advantage as if they did not have a baseball glove to play the field or a bat to hit the ball.
The question then is how do rules, equipment, and a level playing field affect a person’s ability to be successful? This question leads me to ask, if you and I played baseball on the same field under the same rules, but I got to use a baseball bat to hit with and you had to hit with a broomstick handle, would there be a difference in our ability to perform? If we had the same amount of talent and drive, but I had a hitting coach to help me and you had to figure it out on your own, whom would we expect to perform better?

Putting this in relation to the American dream and this study, if we were asked to attend a school without textbooks or qualified teachers while someone else had the newest books and most qualified teachers, whom would have a better chance at achieving the American dream—a college education first, followed by social mobility and wealth?

When I think about what the American dream tells us about how someone achieves success, it is this type of scenario that comes to mind. I think about a child who is born into a family that is poor and lives in neighborhoods where schools are severely underfunded and under-resourced. Yet, we believe that if these children work really hard and are determined enough, they can achieve the same success as a child born into a wealth family who attends the best schools. Even worse, when this disadvantaged child does not achieve the same type of success, we point the finger at them and claim that if they had been more determined and worked harder, things would have turned out differently. This notion is like me expecting you to be able to hit .300 (a really good average in baseball) with a broomstick in your hands.

These children who are educated with worse equipment and coaching (quality of school and school resource levels) are more often children of color because of how
wealth is distributed in the United States. The American dream claims these children have a chance to achieve the American dream, but yet demands these children play the game with inferior equipment and coaching than children from middle-upper class families that are typically white. We then evaluate these children’s performance (achievement of social mobility and wealth) under the same standards as the kids with more and better resources.

In conclusion, if we were watching a baseball game and a catcher came into the game and had to catch with a glove for their throwing hand that was not a catcher’s mitt, would we reasonably expect them to perform as well as a catcher who used a catcher’s mitt that was for their catching hand? Would we blame their lessened ability to catch the ball and throw runners out based on their lack of effort and determination? Or would we believe there was a different reason for their differing level of success?

**Equity Matters: The Case of Babe Ruth**

i do believe ability and effort affect an individual’s achievement, but i also believe there is more to success than just how hard a person works, their determination, and level of talent. School systems are set up so that children from families who are middle to upper class have the best equipment. These children are disproportionately white because of the historical legacy of racism (slavery, red lining in home lending practices, segregation, Jim Crow) that has created huge gaps in the distribution of wealth today (Lipsitz, 2006; Zamudio et al., 2011). This wealth provides these families the means to give their children the best resources to learn and become educated, which in turn provides these children advantages they did not earn.
These resources, akin to bats, gloves, cleats, and coaches in baseball, include things such as tutors, SAT prep courses, and schools that have facilities and curriculums that adequately prepare students for college. Children from impoverished families, who are disproportionately of color, rarely get the best equipment, and sometimes do not get any equipment at all. These children grow up without resources, education, and ways of life that are valued in the child rearing and education process by schools and society (Lareau, 2011). Yet, we hold these children accountable to the same standards of success as children who grow up with the best equipment. Even worse, we tell these adults that they are to blame for not meeting these standards and that if they had only tried harder things would have turned out differently.

Let us turn back to baseball because maybe you are not really on board with this idea yet. Babe Ruth was one of the greatest hitters to ever play baseball. He hit 714 homeruns by the time his career was over, a record that stood for decades. I think we can safely assume that a baseball bat was essential to Babe Ruth’s ability to hit a baseball. If he was forced to hit with a broomstick while others hit with baseball bats, how do you think his career numbers would have looked? I am going to go out on a limb (that I feel is pretty thick) and say his career would have turned out much differently than it did. Instead of hitting 714 homeruns to become known as one of the greatest hitters to ever live, he probably hits no or very few homeruns during his career.

No amount of hard work or determination would have helped Babe Ruth achieve all that he did if his baseball bat was a broomstick. He could have practiced hitting 18 hours every day of his life, but that broomstick would have prevented him from achieving
the success he did with a baseball bat. So, if one of the greatest hitters to ever play the
game needs a certain level of equipment to become one of the best, why is it that we
believe that children who attend inadequately resourced schools should achieve like
children who go to schools with better than adequate resources?

**Implications of the American dream in Legislation and Policy**

The American dream purports that education is a vital stepping stone for success
and upward social mobility in the United States, yet legislation and policy leaves many
children, mostly children of color, hitting with broomsticks. When I consider this
outcome, I cannot conclude the United States is a place where hard work, determination,
and talent are what decide social mobility and achievement.

Spotlighting how we are socialized and influenced by the American dream is all
well and good, but that does not solve the effects of privilege and oppression if it is not
put into action. What I learned from this study is important because it elicited critical
awareness and consciousness that advances deeper consideration of the ways in which we
support and advance legislation and policy that perpetuates inequity.

**Implications for Poverty and K-12**

It is believed that children grow up and achieve the American dream because they
work harder, have more talent, and are more determined. During interviews participants
repeatedly discussed this idea. The American dream is the preeminent socializing force in
the United States, which means these ideas affect the way we vote, and write legislation
and policy. This affect is extremely important for children who are marginalized and
oppressed, because they are vulnerable from the unearned disadvantages they endure.
Children of color spend significantly more time on average in poverty than white children, and race has been found to matter a great deal in the prospects of intergenerational mobility. A school should not be a political zone, it should be a place where we provide children the opportunity to learn how to maximize their potential and achieve their dreams. To address this issue, we must find a way to lessen the connection of a child’s family’s SES with the quality of K-12 school they attend. School funding legislation and policy needs to be not just examined, but also changed to provide currently under-resourced schools the funding needed to have adequate resource and facilities. We should examine legislation and policy to see where the influences of the American dream are present to change the way K-12 schools are funded. By doing this, a child’s hard work, determination, and talent would play a stronger role in whether they achieve upward social mobility and the American dream.

I learned that hard work and education are believed to be the keys to success in the United States. At the moment, they are not the main drivers of success. Decreasing the connection of family SES to the quality of a school would allow hard work and education to have greater effect on success for all children. We could do this by increasing access to SAT prep courses and the availability of mentors for children who are oppressed. This would provide better preparation for these children to go to college. At the moment, SATs are a standard measuring stick for evaluating a college applicant, children from wealthier families pay for courses and tutors to prepare them to take these tests. If we found ways to offer these same services to children whose families cannot afford to pay for them, it could help to increase their performance. This could be done by
states offering vouchers or coupons to lessen the cost for children whose families do not have the means to pay for them.

Participants overwhelmingly believed a college education is salient to success. If a college education is important, then boosting college attendance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds would help increase their ability to achieve the American dream. One way to do this would be to increase knowledge of financial aid and other pertinent information needed for college. This knowledge would help to raise awareness of the ways in which one has to pay for college and increase the chances for attending and graduating college. Providing college financial aid counseling sessions to help children from low SES families to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) would boost the chance that they attend college. We should make this type of program mandatory and free in all schools for children, especially those from low SES and impoverished families.

Lastly, we should educate legislators, lobbyists, and educational administrators about the ways in which the US national credo and ideology advances inequity. This awareness would elicit more informed decisions about funding practices. Participants in the study did not make the connection between systematic inequities and the American dream. This disconnect means that the ways in which participants believed the United States works is at odds with reality.

At the moment, the United States is only of three countries the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OCED) studies that spends less money on education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds than children from privileged
backgrounds. This needs to stop, and the United States needs to spend money in a way that provides equity and fairness, and does not perpetuate privilege and advantage based on class. To go along with this practice of not spending on children who need it, other OCED countries, unlike the United States, have their best teachers teach in schools where disadvantaged students attend. By switching current practice, the United States would be mirroring a strategy that high-performing education systems around the world are currently doing.

When teachers are in the classroom and teaching children, what they teach sends messages to their children. Currently, children are learning the United States is a country that is a meritocracy where an individual’s talent, hard work, and determination are the keys to success. Colleges and universities should implement requirements for students in teaching education to take courses that are grounded in critical perspectives and examine the ways in which social systems are connected to privilege, power, and oppression. The knowledge from these classes would elicit understanding that helps teachers to not perpetuate and reinforce ideas about the United States that (re)create values and beliefs that promote inequity through racist, classist, and sexist notions of how success is achieved.

**Implications for Higher Education**

Higher education (re)creates privilege and unearned advantage by perpetuating social stratification through admission policies and practices. College admissions should have equitable admissions policies and our Supreme Court should consider equity, not equality when ruling on cases that involve higher education admissions policies. If a child
has not received adequate resources in their K-12 education, they should not be held to the same standard as a child who comes from a school district that has abundant resources. SAT scores, extracurricular activities, things that are valued in the college admissions process, should be evaluated and adjusted to be equitable and fair for every child’s background. Thus, we should educate decision makers at colleges and universities about the ways in which the American dream perpetuates inequity. Increasing awareness of the ways in which privilege and oppression are preserved and advanced in current admission practices would create more informed admissions and award decisions that promote greater equity and access to individuals from disadvantaged groups.

I call on educational administrators, legislators, and researchers to find ways to push for and implement equitable admissions policies that do not perpetuate privilege and oppression, and prevent children from being able to achieve success and the American dream. To do this, we should get rid of the SATs as a requirement for college applications because of the way it privileges children whose families have greater wealth (Zamudio et al., 2011). Students from wealthier families have access to private tutoring and schools that offer more rigorous college prep curricula. These help a child to perform better on the SATs. The SATs are not a fair measuring stick, and should be eliminated if they perpetuate privilege and oppression.

Colleges and universities should advocate and work to create admissions policies that are based on affirmative action and equity. The Supreme Court has stated that diversity is an important part of higher education. The judicial system and higher education should work to increase diversity through legislation and policy that is based in
affirmative action. Raising critical awareness and consciousness of the ways in which race and class affect access and opportunity would help to change current practices. This means that educating administrators, faculty, and those working in the judicial system to see the ways in which social groups are connected with systematic privilege and oppression is important. We must not ignore the connection of race, gender, and class in shaping a child’s life chances. Universities and colleges should be allowed to take into account a child’s background and social identity when making decisions on who gets accepted. By looking at the ways in which admission policies are influenced by an American dream that supports systems of privilege and oppression, we can make more critically informed decisions that give children from all backgrounds greater opportunity for success.

Bringing students from disadvantaged backgrounds to campus is not enough though. Colleges and universities should also be educating current students on why these types of practices are important by informing students on the connections of wealth, race, and quality of education. Interrupting the narrative of equality by educating students about how systems of power, privilege, and oppression affect their lives is important to creating a welcoming and aware campus climate. Campuses should also provide support services for students who are underprepared to help them succeed and transition to college classes and life.

Colleges and universities are not educating students in ways that create critically aware and conscious people. Based on what I heard from participants with college degrees, individuals are (re)learning that success in the United States is based on hard
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

work, talent, and determination. Institutions of higher education should make it mandatory that students are exposed to courses that increase their awareness of the ways in which privilege, power, and oppression work in the United States. The knowledge and understanding learned from these classes would graduate citizens that are more critically informed and prepared to make decisions in their jobs and lives that support achievement and success in equitable ways.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should examine how the American dream affects the way policy and legislation are written and implemented. It should look for how the ideas of meritocracy and social mobility work within systems of privilege and oppression in the United States to shed light on how unearned advantage and unearned disadvantage are unknowingly and knowingly (re)created and perpetuated. This research should actively work to increase critical awareness of the ways in which equality perpetuates privilege and oppression, and how only through equitable solutions and practices can the United States be what the American dream says it is.

Future research should be asset based and not deficit based. People from disadvantaged backgrounds learn different skills and have different capital that is valuable and useful. We need to change the narrative and system that devalues people from marginalized and oppressed groups. To accomplish this, researchers should implement research that is informed by critical paradigms and theories. These lenses will help to spotlight privilege and the dominant narrative to deconstruct and interrupt it by
seeing the value in the capital and knowledge individuals from marginalized and oppressed groups possess.

Researchers should continue to examine equity, social mobility, and meritocracy in education. One way to do this would be to investigate different ways to implement college admissions policies that do not perpetuate privilege for those that come from wealthier families and backgrounds. It should also look at how gender and race intersect with class to influence and shape a child’s path to higher education. Understanding the paths girls of color from impoverished families is as important to equity as understanding the path for boys of color from wealthier families. While this study did not look at immigrants, research should explore ways to create equity for immigrants, especially first generation immigrants who are English as a second language (ESL).

**Concluding Reflections: Equity and Equality**

The American dream teaches individuals in the United States that our accomplishments and what we have attained was earned through our talent, hard work, sacrifice, and determination. We are taught that we deserve what we have because they happened from our efforts and choices. The American dream is the main driver of the idea that the United States is a meritocracy where merit determines what you earn and accomplish. This has certain affects on us as individuals and society in general.

In this chapter we focused on policy and legislation that shapes the field (system) we play the game of life. During the next chapter we switch gears to discuss the affects of the American dream on our beliefs and how those beliefs affect what we express and how we view others. This affect will be discussed through a personal story and connected to a
broader phenomenon. I call for this phenomenon to be further researched to better understand the ways in which it affects different individuals.
CHAPTER NINE

TALE OF THE ANGRY WHITE MEN

my dissertation utilized three distinct theoretical lenses: critical whiteness, critical race feminism, and structuralist constructivism to investigate how the American dream affected the way individuals in the United States, myself included, understand our lives. my analysis revealed how the beliefs and values individuals expressed about the American dream, race, gender, class, and education perpetuated privilege, power, and oppression. This final chapter is where i examine one specific even from my own life with what i learned during the study. This captures an exchange between my father and i, and makes the political and conceptual aspects of this study very personal.

Both my father and i are college educated. He has a bachelor’s degree from a small Christian college. Currently, he is blue-collar worker and a small business owner, as he owns his own business as a painting-contractor and maintenance man. i on the other hand have spent my entire adult life on a college campus. At the moment, i am finishing up my PhD. Before i arrived to Clemson, i worked in Student Activities and Leadership Programs at many different small, private liberal arts campuses on the East Coast. i have a bachelor’s degree from a state university and master’s from a private research university.

During this story, i will provide my recollection of a conversation that my father and i had approximately 10 years ago. i have gone back to reexamine this event with what i learn from this study about the American dream. After the story, i will introduce a
new idea for future researchers to explore and test, and discuss the implications of what we are being taught by the American dream during socialization.

**my American Dream**

My father’s family is devoutly Christian and strongly conservative. My mother’s family is also devoutly Christian, but more liberal than my father’s. They have largely retained the political identities to which they were born. In high school and college, i considered myself a Republican and subscribed to conservative ideologies. However, my evolving views on how race, gender, sexual orientation, class shape life in the United States has given rise to differences with my parents. I love them both. But my growing recognition of the privilege associated with being white, male, heterosexual, and wealthy has complicated our relationship, especially my relationship with my father.

My father believes that a person who works hard will succeed. He began his career as a self-employed painting contractor. My father’s father was a man who did not obtain a college. Through dedication and loyalty my grandfather climbed the corporate ladder to become a vice president for one of the largest suppliers of kitchen and bath cabinetry in the United States before he retired. He instilled the belief in my father that upward social mobility and the American dream require hard work and determination to achieve.

My father is a deeply caring man. While not demonstrative, he displays incredible tenderness to my mother, whose health has never been consistent, and bears silently the burden of caring for her physically and financially. For his sacrifice and tenderness, I deeply respect him.
REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

But, something interesting happens when we have conversations about equity, social mobility, and wealth in relation to race, gender, and class. The man I know, the one who is incredibly tender and caring, transforms. He screams. He yells. He shouts insults. He gets angry and spouts vitriol, sometimes spewing what feels like hate and venom against anyone or anything he believes violates what he believes about success and social mobility.

Much as my father’s rage shocks and horrifies me, it is a gift. Because his intensity is one of my biggest reasons for seeking to understand the American dream, particularly as it relates to race, gender, and class. My American dream is to thoroughly understand his position and that of people like him to help me be able to shift their understanding of the American dream and how the United States operates.

Our Defining Story

Outside of our conversations about issues related to race, gender, and class, my father is a pleasant man who never says anything negative or mean-spirited about anyone he knows. I have brought up conversations about privilege and oppression such as the racialized and gendered wealth gap, stereotypes and hate crimes, disparity of the quality of education individuals receive across racial groups, and why people of color and women are more likely to be poor or live in poverty. These conversations feel peculiar, as if white, heterosexual, middle-class men should not engage in them. It is our privilege that allows us to ignore these issues. When I call attention to them, it often upsets my father.
We both learned the American dream in infancy. It taught us that everyone has the opportunity to attain wealth and upward social mobility (Hochschild, 1995). It socialized us to believe that hard work, determination, and perseverance will provide privileges such as I was born into (Beach, 2007; Feagin 1975; Seider, Gilmore, & Rabinowicz, 2010). It taught us inequality and inequity exists because some people do not work hard enough or have not done the right things to earn a better life. This idea leads us to blame the individual for being poor or not being successful, ignoring the effects that systemic inequities have on a person’s chances of achieving the American dream (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Stuber, 2006). The idea that the United States is a meritocracy obscures racism, sexism, and classism—both at the individual and systematic level. The American dream converges with meritocracy to erase systemic unearned advantages and disadvantages that creates an ideology of color/gender/class blindness.

Growing up my parents taught me to treat everyone with respect and acceptance, regardless of skin color, gender, and socioeconomic class. If I treated someone unkindly or disrespectfully because of race, gender, class, or physical or mental ability I was sternly reprimanded. My parents also taught me that hard work and determination would secure economic success, regardless of race, gender, and class.

Individuals raised in the United States learn about the American Dream and reflects its influence. In reexamining an interaction in 2009 between my father and I, it has crystallized the effects of the American dream on how he and I see ourselves, others, and society. This study has taught me that we must examine these effects if we are to heal
from the deep wounds the American dream has inflicted upon the United States. When we do not talk respectfully and openly about issues of equity, race, gender, and social class, we not only hurt ourselves; we hurt others as well (Gurin, Zúñiga, & Nagda, 2013). In sharing my story I hope to increase the awareness of the grasp the American dream has on our minds and on our hearts.

**Monkeying Around**

In the fall semester of 2006 I took two courses, one on critical theory and one on critical feminist theory. During these classes, I began to explore what it meant to be a white, heterosexual, middle-class man in the United States. The way I saw the world shifted as I came to understand how social identities are connected with systematic privilege and oppression.

In the spring of 2009 things reached a boiling point between me and my father. Since President Obama took office, my father had been a devout viewer of conservative pundits on Fox News. Mass media consumption can strongly influence how we see the world (Collins, 2009; Harro, 2000; Hughes & Kroehler, 2010; Johnson, 2001), and I believe this was true for my father. He began to send me email once or twice a week. He had communicated with me little since I moved away from home, preferring to retain a connection between visits through my mother, who phoned and texted regularly. But suddenly, he began to send emails that contained racist and bigoted content about the President of the United States.

I was shocked. I never thought my father was a racist, and had never seen any evidence that he was. Initially, I ignored the email, preferring to delete and not give him
any validation. But, after a number of weeks of receiving these emails, i took action. i responded only once, saying, “If you ever send me another email like this i will never talk with you again. If you do not believe me, send me another email and see what happens.” He never sent me another email.

At least on email there was no volume. But when i visited my parents over spring break my father and i got into a heated discussion over white privilege and the oppression of people of color in the United States. i really believed i could change his worldview. i can vividly remember his steely determination and rising voice as he made comments such as these:

If “they” [Black people] wanted to not be poor, “they” wouldn’t be.

White men are oppressed; we are passed over for jobs for Blacks. My friends cannot find jobs because affirmative action has caused “them” to be hired over whites. They are receiving special treatment and perks “they” did not earn.

If “they” stopped monkeying around on the porch and worked harder they wouldn’t be poor. “They” shouldn’t be so lazy. Now, they have a president who is going to let them do even less work and get further ahead than whites.

I work hard. No one has given me anything, and “they” are given jobs whites earned and deserved.
Barack Hussein Obama is a socialist and we don’t know if he is [American]. All he wants to do is take money from hard working Americans who have earned their money, and give it to those people doing nothing but being lazy. “They” should get off their butts.

My temper flared at this last remark, which he made on the steps as we retreated to the basement from the living room. “You racist pig!” i screamed. “How could you call Blacks porch monkeys?! You are disgusting! Stop it! You know how upset that gets me!!! i AM TIRED OF YOU ATTACKING OBAMA BECAUSE HE IS BLACK! He is from the United States, how was he elected if he wasn’t?? How are you even my father??!!?!?”

In response, my father began cackling in delight, and started acting like a monkey. He danced around the room right in front of me making monkey noises, and taunting me. It was like he wanted me to attack him, like he wanted to push me so far that i had no choice but to act out. It seemed like he was reveling in how far he could push me, and how angry he was able to make me.

my fists clenched. i have never hit anyone since my sister and i outgrew childish bickering. i wanted to hit my father. The only thing that stopped me was my mother’s appearance. Hearing all the commotion, she sprinted downstairs, shouting to us to stop.

i was almost in tears. “Tell him to stop being a racist pig. He is dancing like a monkey to imitate Obama,” i appealed to my mother, unnecessarily, as my father had not stopped.
“What? I am just dancing. It doesn’t mean anything. Am I not allowed to dance if I feel like it? I thought this was a free country,” he said innocently.

Normally my father and I would not shout at each other. This exchange was intensely painful for me. The emails he had been sending had disgusted me, but I never thought he would go this far. I contemplated never speaking with him again. I could not believe he was my father. What he did went against everything I believed, and a good deal of what he had raised me to believe.

What my father could not have realized is that watching my father express racist views brought me face to face, as painfully as anything ever has, with my own privilege. During the rest of my stay at home, the arguing continued, although not nearly as combustible as this interaction. While we have continued to interact and talk, our relationship is forever marked by the difference in our beliefs about privilege and oppression.

White Fragility and my Father

For my father and I, what we value and believe affects how we see the world, which in turn affects how we behave (Collins, 2009; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Owens, 2007; Sue, 2004). When I recovered from the fury with my father, I decided to direct my energy intentionally. First, I would seek to disrupt the dominance of narratives like the American dream. These narratives teach us to categorize and differentiate human beings in ways that promote division (rather than unity), power differentials (rather than equity), and hate (rather than love). We are not born differentiating based on skin color, gender, or social class, but are taught these ideas early in life (Clark, 1963, Derman-Sparks,
Ramsey, & Olsen Edwards, 2006; Marty, 1999). Second, I would direct my energy, not my anger, at my father. I have provided him with books and other resources in the hopes of changing his mind. My efforts have been met with continued resistance and have not been very successful in changing his perspective.

**Why did my father get so angry?**

The topic of race elicits powerful and emotional responses, no matter the person’s race. Typically, whites do not even notice that they have such strong responses because we have been taught not to acknowledge our race (Dyer, 2008; Owens, 2007; Sue, 2004). DiAngelo (2011) described white fragility as an underlying cause of white people’s strong responses:

White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. (p. 57)

White fragility results from a socially constructed phenomenon called whiteness, which creates uneasiness for whites when issues involving race come up in conversation (Applebaum, 2003; Applebaum, 2005; DiAngelo, 2011). Frankenberg (1993) described whiteness as having three parts. First, it is the lens through which white people see themselves, others, and society. Second, it is cultural practices that are usually invisible and unnamed. Lastly, it is the advantage and privilege that results from historically, politically, and culturally (re)produced racial privilege in the United States. Whiteness shields white people by centering and (re)creating US culture and society in whiteness,
making white fragility possible (Collins, 2009; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Owens, 2007). my father’s behavior reflected white fragility from the discomfort my shifting perspective caused him when i called attention to our white privilege that caused inequity and oppression for people of color.

**What triggers white fragility?**

i challenged the way my father was taught to see and understand the United States as equitable and racially just. From the time he and i were young we were taught to be good people, which includes not behaving in a racist manner (Applebaum, 2005; DiAngelo, 2010). DiAngelgo (2011) identified ten different potential triggers of white fragility, the first four of which affected my father at the time:

1. A fellow white not providing agreement with one’s interpretations (challenge to white solidarity); 2. Receiving feedback that one’s behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white liberalism); 3. Suggesting that group membership is significant (challenge to individualism); [and] 4. Acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy). (p. 57)

These triggers invoke Bourdieu’s (1984; 1989; 2014) idea of habitus, our socialized subjectivity—how socialization influences our construction of dispositions that produce practices and perceptions. Based on our previous experiences and the conditions that generate habitus, it (re)produces our expressions, actions, thoughts, and perceptions. Simply stated, habitus is the conscious and unconscious performance of ourselves that influences itself while producing itself.
my father is socialized to see the United States as a place where every person has the opportunity for social mobility and to believe that hard work, determination, and perseverance can overcome any kind of inequity. Therefore, a person’s race, gender, or social class have no impact on what they achieve. The only thing that matters is whether they strive to improve their life and work hard to do it. My challenge to these ideas triggered his white fragility. It infuriated him to see a white person, his own son, invalidating them.

**The American Dream and White Fragility**

When my father claimed that Black people would not be poor if they did not want to be, he was expressing a racialized view of the American dream. He described individual responsibility and hard work as a viable way to reverse the historical legacy of the disproportionate distribution of wealth to whites in the United States. He claimed Blacks made a conscious choice to be poor and actively participated in their own poverty by not working as hard as whites. In this way he justified reality. In interviews I found that he was not unusual in his beliefs, and consequently that poor people choose to be poor.

Millie, for example, said:

I think we’re all equals. I think maybe some races may struggle a little bit more, and probably in certain areas of the country, but no matter what hardship you’re facing or whatever label I guess you have, you got to just ignore it and say, “You know what? I’m going to show you up. I’m going to take this so-called weakness, or that you think I have, and just make it work, change people’s perceptions.” I
would hope that most people that are living in this country would see the
American Dream as something that they could obtain, that they have the right to
obtain it, that it’s their choice.

Millie agreed with my father that achieving wealth is a choice. In their view,
systematic privilege and oppression play no role in determining an individual’s place in
society. And while my father’s comments are not typically viewed as acceptable to
express, Millie’s are considered socially acceptable. This makes views similar to Millie’s
potentially more dangerous because they covertly convey ideas that perpetuate systems of
privilege and oppression.

The idea a person can overcome whatever circumstances or challenges they are
born into is one of the most ardent lessons the American dream teaches. Daniel also
espoused these thoughts about the American dream:

Anyone can achieve the American dream if they, the key words are, want to, and
want to push themselves to the limit. Whatever you set your mind or your belief
firmly in, you can achieve it no matter what, or you can overcome it no matter
what.

This way of thinking about the American dream negates the effects of historical and
cultural racism, sexism, and classism in the United States. This way of seeing causes us
to pretend that the fact that the average Black family has $123,900 less wealth than the
average white family has no impact on their opportunities (The Federal Reserve, 2013). It
negates the trillion dollars in wealth and equity the Federal Housing Administration’s
racist lending practices have taken from Black families (Lipsitz, 2006). It also ignores the
$136,174 dollar value that being white gives to whites (Shapiro, 2006). The American dream teaches us to ignore the effects of wealth, even though our family’s socioeconomic status greatly affects the quality of school we attend, the neighborhoods we grow up in, and the resources that aid our development and ability to go to college (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Johnson, 2014; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

Privilege Fragility

my father’s reaction to my changing understanding of US society is his own responsibility. He also deserves to be treated with compassion and understanding because he has been socialized to believe that the individual is responsible for what they achieve during their lives. White fragility is real, and combined with his belief in the American dream they caused an incredibly tender and loving white man to become very angry when his son challenged those beliefs. This anger resulted in him acting in ways that horrified me, but many of us behave in ways that are out of character when our privilege is threatened.

Socialization is powerful in creating who we are and we must understand its influence on ourselves. But my father is accountable for expressing racism. He could have expressed his disagreement with my views differently, and we could have had a discussion (rather than an argument) to try and understand each other. At the same time, i believe we must have empathy for the difficulty of breaking the effects of socialization. Being empathetic means understanding the struggle, being patient, and remembering that at one point i thought similarly to the way he does. i have said and still say things that perpetuate privilege and oppression because of how the American dream has socialized
me. But, this does not give me an excuse to not rise above that learning. My father has not had the same experiences and education, so his worldview is informed by very different sets of knowledge. To combat this, I have tried to offer him information and resources.

This story exemplifies the insidious effects of how the American dream affects the ways in which one is socialized in the United States. My father loves me. He has always expected me to treat others better than he treated me, and with more respect than he showed for African-Americans or me. He is socialized to see the world from a white, heteronormative, male perspective and that makes it difficult for him to see the benefits his race, gender, class, and sexual orientation had on his life (Applebaum, 2003; Applebaum, 2005; Bailey, 1998; Collins, 2009; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Frye, 1983; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2004; Lipsitz, 2006; McIntosh, 1990; Owens, 2007; Sue, 2004). My views challenged that perspective and led him to behave in a way that contradicted his own values.

I used to believe the way my father was socialized about his race, gender, class, and sexual orientation were the cause of his anger. After reflecting on this memory and this study, I now see his anger is also from the American dream. When I challenged the notion that any person can achieve success through hard work it unsettled what my father believes about the United States and the American dream.

After studying others’ work and examining my father’s behavior, statements of people I interviewed, and my own lived experiences, I now believe what the American dream teaches is more powerful than I initially imagined. I also believe that white fragility does not go far enough and so I advance the idea of privilege fragility. In
reexamining this memory between my father and i, along with my experiences as a social justice educator and critical scholar, i have come to conclude that any time a person believes they are losing systematic advantage (or what appears as normal to them), they will become protective. The American dream is a large part of the process that socializes us in the United States to act in ways that are outside of what we normally would when we feel our privilege is being threatened. Through this, i see how strong a grip this ideology had on my father and has on the United States. i also now realize how disruptive it is for me to challenge the ideas upon which many believe our nation was built. When i challenged him, i was challenging our history and foundation as a country. When he lashed back, he undermined many things he had taught me.

**Implications of Privilege Fragility and the American dream for Educators**

“Privilege fragility” is a term that has emerged out of my work. While “white fragility” and “male fragility” are sometimes referenced, i am interested in the larger, more complex considerations around intersecting identities related to privilege. When a person who has systemic privilege feels threatened and actively works to protect what they feel is rightfully theirs, this is driven by privilege fragility. As seen in the story i told in this chapter, this can occur through things such as anger, shifting the burden onto the individual instead of looking at the system, and rationalizing inequity and injustice. i did not study privilege fragility, nor was it a focus of this study, but it is an idea that came from my analysis. Future research should explore individuals’ responses to their privilege beyond just race to explore whether fragility extends to gender, class, sexual orientation, and other social groups or identities connected with systematic privilege.
In the classroom, educators, especially social justice educators, should advance and advocate curriculum that raises students critical awareness and consciousness of how social systems (re)create privilege and oppression in the United States. Pedagogies that have proven to do this, like intergroup dialogue, should continue to be developed and further implemented in not only colleges, but also in K-12 schools.

My father is a college educated man, along with almost every other person in my study, the effects of the American dream were highly influential in the way these individuals understood their lives and the United States. Education is a stepping-stone for upward social mobility and achieving the American dream. Thus, it is imperative that teachers and educators are aware of the understanding and knowledge students bring with them to school, and that we are teaching them in our classrooms. We must raise our awareness of how we use the American dream and ideas of meritocracy in ways that perpetuate racist, sexist, and classist knowledge and ways of understanding. This means that educators should be reading and learning in ways that foster greater critical awareness and consciousness of how this ideology and these systems work together to influence us to teach and educate in ways that interrupt privilege and oppression.

In the classroom, teachers should be designing curriculum and using pedagogies that interrupt and deconstruct ideologies and ideas that teach us to think and know in ways that privilege and oppress. Education is vital to success within the American dream and the United States, and it is also critical to making the American dream and the United States equitable. Children go to school and grow up, they then become voters and citizens, as an educator our job should include teaching children in ways that foster
greater awareness of dangerous myths and unfulfilled promises. The American dream, much like the idea of the level playing field and equality, sound incredible and would be incredible, if they occurred in a socio-cultural climate that did not provide unearned advantages associated with certain race, gender, and classes. Education, because of its prominence in US society and the American dream, has a duty and responsibility to cultivate citizens that are critically informed and aware of how systems and individuals are connected with each other.

SECTION THREE

WRAP-UP

This study is not about whether the American dream is true or achievable. It is about the ways in which the American dream is understood, and how that understanding affects our beliefs, choices, and the way our lives and others lives play out. When the idea that the United States is a meritocracy falls apart, so do the American dream and its justifications for inequity. The belief that our success and class are earned through effort and talent is why individuals believe we control our fate and destiny. Meritocracy is how the American dream has convinced us that inequity is justified in this country. It tells us that inequity occurs because individuals did not do what they should have done. It causes us to make claims we would never rationally make under other circumstances –a person is responsible for not becoming college educated because they did not work hard enough to overcome a school that does not provide an adequate learning environment.

When we use the American dream in this sort of way it (re)creates a society that runs counter to what the American dreams says about the United States. The way we use
the American dream to explain inequity, when considered with the ways the United
States works, perpetuates racial, gender, and class privilege through the way it influences
legislation, policy, and individual beliefs/choices. This privilege subsequently (re)creates
inequity and oppression, and is why equity is so important to consider when
understanding the way the United States works. We need to be careful with how we use
the American dream, because we are unknowingly using it in ways that are racist, sexist,
and classist.

i hope that through this study and dissertation i provoked a conversation that helps
to create greater critical awareness and consciousness about privilege, power, and
oppression and the American dream. i hope that future research is done to further
examine the ways in which the American dream influences and affects our lives. i hope
that education and educators work to interrupt the ways in which the American dream
(re)creates unearned advantages and unearned disadvantages through its effects on
understanding and meaning-making. i hope that the day that every person truly has the
individual power and autonomy to determine if they achieve the American dream is a day
that i will see.

In concluding my final feelings and thoughts on this study, the American dream
says a person’s race, gender, and class do not affect their opportunity for upward social
mobility. Anyone who wants to get ahead can get ahead. This myth helps to produce a
phenomenon i coined privilege fragility, and when a person’s privilege is challenged, it
fuels fear, anger, resentment, and actions to protect that privilege.
The American dream causes us to not see a country and social systems set up on inequities that privilege some and oppress others. This issue affects all people in the United States. Every one of us needs to closely examine our lives and the world around us to better understand how the United States is not what the American dreams says it is. Instead of considering our hard work, determination, and perseverance to be the only tools to get us ahead, those whose privilege makes it easier should work on behalf of those society leaves behind. This would create a United States where all people actually have the opportunity to achieve the American dream based on their talent, hard work, determination, and perseverance.

We can look out for just ourselves, but if we do, what happens when we need help? There is no one to offer a hand to help when we need it. We need to wake up. It is time to reconsider the conditions under which success is achieved in the United States. The American dream is a beautiful idea, but it cannot happen when children start from unequal positions without equitable solutions that provide the same field, rules, and equipment. Ultimately, the level playing field needs to look different, and the angry white men must be a part of the solution to change the way the game is played.
Appendix A

Interview Questions

PART I: Background and Identity

10. Tell me a little bit about yourself?
   
   Where are you from?
   
   How do you identify (gender/race/social class)?
   
   Are there any important communities or groups you associate with?
   
   Where do you get your news? TV stations? Websites?
   
   What do you believe is the biggest issue in the United States today?

11. Tell me a little bit about your family?
   
   What were things your family talked with you about? Important messages or things they said to you?
   
   Did or does your family talk about race, gender, and social class?
   
   What are the types of things they discuss?
   
   Does your family have a religious affiliation?

12. Think about the ideal person, what values and beliefs do they have?

13. Can you describe what you want out of life?
   
   Career?
   
   What role does education play?

14. Who is someone who you believe is successful?
   
   What makes them successful?
   
   Why do you believe they are successful?
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Is their success something you would want to obtain? Why?

15. What role does education play in success?

How has your educational path helped in your success? If so, how?

16. What is/are your greatest dream(s)? The thing(s) you would like most to achieve?

17. If you were imagining the perfect life, what does it look like?

18. What would it mean to you to live a good life?

19. When you envision your life in 20 years, what do you see?

20. What do you imagine your family and family life to be one day?

PART II: American Dream

21. What is the American dream?

22. When you think about the American dream, what are some words or images that come to mind?

23. Where have you learned about the American Dream?

24. What do you believe it takes to achieve the American dream?

How does someone achieve the American dream?

25. Can everyone achieve the American dream?

Do you believe race, gender, and social class play a role in achieving the American dream?

How do race, gender, and social class affect achieving the American dream?

26. Do you believe education plays a role in the American dream? If so, how?

27. What does the American dream mean to you?
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28. If you were making a movie about the American dream, what would the title be and what is its plot line?

29. If you were making a flavor of ice cream that represented what the American dream is, what would the flavor be?

30. If you were creating a car that is the American dream, what type of car would it be?

31. If the American dream were a company, what company would it be? Why?

32. If you were creating store that represents the American dream, would type of store would it be and what would it include?

33. Do you believe the American dream impacts your life? How?
   a. How do your race, gender, and social class affect how the American dream impacts your life?

34. Do you believe the American Dream exists? Why?
Hello, my name is Jared Halter, a Doctoral Student at Clemson University. Along with Leslie D. Gonzales, Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the E.T. Moore School of Education, we would like invite you to participate in a research project entitled “American Dream: Influence and Impact” (Clemson University IRB# 2014-175).

Broadly stated, the purpose of our project is to explore the American dream and the way it influences our lives. Specifically, we want to understand how you understand and make meaning of the American dream and the way the American dream influences the way you understand your life.

You have been identified as a potential participant because you are a XXXX student. In addition, an informant may have provided your name. Please note that your participation is completely voluntary. The extent of your participation will include one interview and a group discussion with other participants. The interview will take between 75-90 minutes. The group discussion will be 75-90 minutes where videos on the American Dream will be shown and discussed. All interviews and focus groups will be video recorded. All recordings will be stored at the P.I.’s home. Following the interview, you could be
contacted via e-mail with follow-up or clarifying questions. Such an exchange would require no more than ten minutes time.

The risks are minimal in that you will be fully protected by a pseudonym and the university will be masked. Furthermore, you will be asked to engage in no physical activity. Again, all participation is, of course, voluntary, meaning that there is no legal or formal obligation to participate.

If you are willing to participate, please email jared halter at jhalter@clemson.edu. If you should have any questions, please feel free to contact Dr. Gonzales at leslieg@clemson.edu or at 864-371-0739.

Thank you for your time.
Appendix C

Information about Being in a Research Study

American Dream: Influence and Impact

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

jared halter, PhD candidate, under the supervision of Dr. Leslie D. Gonzales, Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Clemson University, invites you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the American dream and the way it influences your life.

Specifically, we would like to ask you to participate in an interview and focus group. The interview will take between 75-90 minutes and will be recorded with a video camera. The time and location of the interview will be based on your preference and convenience. Once your interview has been transcribed, you will receive a scanned copy of your consent form as well as a “raw” transcription of the interview.

The second part of the study will include a group discussion that will be video recorded and last approximately 90 minutes where you will be shown videos related to the American dream and asked to discuss them. You could also be contacted via e-mail or telephone with follow up questions or for clarification after the interview and group discussion.

Risks and Discomforts

If you participate in this project, you may find that people disagree with some of your opinions or your interpretations and that this disagreement could be strong. This could
include family members or members of the general public.

**Possible Benefits**

We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, upon completion of the study, you will be provided with an executive analysis of an issue that is of increasing importance to life in the United States.

**Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality**

The interview and group discussion will be video recorded and used for a website, documentary, You Tube channel, and/or Vimeo. Clips from your interview will be edited and merged with other participants’ interviews to create videos telling the story of the American Dream. These videos will be kept on password-protected computers and databases, with access available only to those people working on the project until the finished product is ready for production and distribution.

All videos and written reports will use pseudonyms to protect your identity to the best of our ability. Once the project is complete, the videos will be kept to allow for further studies, documentaries, or projects. In addition, as we proceed through the interview, please point out any issues that you may wish to keep “off the record” in published reports. Despite the care we take to avoid divulging identity in written reports, in a study like this, confidentiality will not be fully possible because of the public nature of the video.
Choosing to Be in the Study

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Leslie D. Gonzales at Clemson University at leslieg@clemson.edu or 864-371-0739.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-6460 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

Consent

I have read this form and have been allowed to ask any questions I might have. I agree to take part in this study.

Participant’s signature: ________________________________
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REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM


REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM


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