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“I Like People... Who Are Like Me:” Attitudes of Southern White Conservative Males  
on Diversity

K. Patrick Schell Jr.

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science in Education

Human Resource Development/Adult Education

May 2023

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## Dedication:

Firstly, I dedicate this paper to the God, the Alpha and Omega. As I walked this journey, I felt his guiding hand. Without him words would have never appeared, I would remain without breath in my lungs and without a spirit within me. For this my eternal gratitude, my dedication, and my life are forfeit to Him, Selah.

I also want to dedicate this to my family, my mother, father, and sister who dealt with the constant turmoil that this thesis caused.

Additionally, I want to recognize those brave men and women who sought to come to this country centuries ago to build a home for them and their offspring in this new world. The bravery that took them here and was passed down, I hope, in some small part helped me in the writing of this thesis.

Finally, I want to dedicate this to my comrades on this journey Mohamed Serry, and Elona Gashi. You were the kindest of friends, and a benefit to both your lands and throughout the world. Only us three know the strength this took truly and now that it is finished. Let us not worry about it any longer.

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## Abstract

In America, racism, discrimination, and white supremacy are systemic. In the South, this is seen more prominently given its history of intolerance. Leading to diversity training being ineffective towards Southern white conservative men in society and at the workplace. This research study aims to understand Southern white conservative men's attitudes toward diversity to inform diversity training practitioners on better training methods. It also sought entry points and a path forward in diversity training for this demographic. Focus group studies were done with four individuals in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Data was collected and analyzed. It was found that their attitudes on diversity involved a dislike of new ideals, an us versus them mentality, and a belief in their own greatness. This matched the pre-existing works of literature assertions. Additionally, diversity training focused on factual truth and empathy with an emphasis on lived experiences was suggested as it may lead to transformational change.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction:**

In the history of the United States of America, discrimination and hateful acts have occurred throughout. Since 2000, despite a downturn in 2021, hate groups in America have increased by nearly one hundred percent (Miller & Rivas, 2021). Hate crimes have been consistently on the rise since 2016 (Bell, 2019). Due to COVID-19, the socio-economic chasm among minority and majority (white Americans) treatment has grown (Bailey & Moon, 2019). These trends suggest that, despite progress towards equity and inclusion, prejudice discrimination and inequality continue to reverberate in American culture.

The South-eastern United States, colloquially known as “The South” is a focal point of this modern hate, showing trends related to Jim Crow era laws and “legal” segregation occurring in the South today (Feagin & Ducey, 2019). In explanation, Feagin and Ducey, (2019) suggest that education plays a role, because schools predominantly in the South and Midwest make little mention of important events not involving white men. This lack in having diverse figures represented in education reinforces discriminatory trends, influencing deepening divide on the grounds of diversity in the South.

Additionally white men, not specific to the South, have seen current forms of diversity training as oppressive. Cabrera (2014) draws attention to white leadership feeling oppressed in a diverse workforce. Goodman et al (2020) suggests the concept of individualism within the white community is to be blamed for issues of prejudice, leading to diversity training being rendered ineffective. Individualism is a societal framework

where value is put on the individual decision and freedom over that of the collective good (Pacheco, 2020).

### **Statement of Problem**

Many white males, specifically conservative and Southern men, are participating in diversity training practices, however these trainings have been ineffective in combating discriminatory behavior both in the world and places of business (Dobbins & Kalev, 2018; van Dijk et al, 2020). This ineffectiveness has been correlated with feelings of oppression and going against long held established beliefs among this demographic (Dobbins & Kalev, 2018, Goodman et al 2020). On the topic of being more open to a diverse range of opinions, especially ones held by diverse groups, Southern white men feel as if their ideas are being invalidated and that their beliefs must be protected from these perceived new influences (Peacock, 2007; Peacock, 2021). However, Rivers et al (2010) explain that white men specifically enjoy the highest quality of life, meaning obtaining higher paying jobs, better real estate, better education, and overall, a happier existence, compared to others of different racial and gender groups. There is a need for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives that reach white, Southern, and conservative, males in a more effective way.

This is a problem for Human Resource Development (HRD) because it negates any advantage a company may gain through a diverse workforce. Hartenian and Gudmundson (2000) suggest there is a correlation between organizational performance and workplace diversity. However, this increase in performance would be forfeited if diverse ideas and agents are not allowed to prosper. HRD practitioners are increasingly called by businesses and institutions to establish more effective means for a change in

ideals with this study's explored demographic, Southern Conservative White Men (Adams et al., 2022; Dobbins & Kalev, 2018).

### **Purpose of Study:**

To create more effective diversity training experiences for conservative white men, it is important to better understand the factors that lead this demographic to hold anti-diversity biases. Despite hate crimes being on the rise (Bell, 2019) and with the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" Rally in 2017 still in public memory, Southern, conservative white men's attitudes towards diversity deserve further examination. Wellman (1993) and Ezekiel (1995) gathered information on the viewpoints and factors leading to white men's attitudes on diversity during the late 20th century. Wellman (1993) reports a strong dissatisfaction with changing moods in society on racial issues within the 1970s, finding that the civil rights movement was in seen negatively with some of the older generations interviewed who felt that some of the laws went against their freedoms. The Wellman (1993) and Ezekiel (1995) studies were conducted over 30 years ago and did not focus exclusively on Southern, white, conservative men. Based on an increase in hate groups formed in the South and a rise in hate crimes (Bell, 2019; Miller and Rivas 2021), this study attempts to understand the attitudes of Southern, conservative white men to inform possibilities for effective diversity training.

### **Research Questions:**

This research aims to first explore existing attitudes of a small sample of Southern White Conservative Men, to examine possible entry points for diversity training, and finally to

explore pathways forward. The following questions provide both the purpose and problem around the study:

RQ1: What are the attitudes of Southern white conservative men on diversity?

RQ2: Where is an “entry” point for talking to this demographic on diversity?

RQ3: What is the path forward in reaching this demographic about diversity training?

The formation of these research questions will be explored in Chapter three.

### **Definitions:**

Below is Table 1, it has words and keys terms that help are used throughout the study.

Words	Definitions	Source
Diversity	To be of or pertaining to people from different demographic groups such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, and nationality	(Ely & Thomas, 2001)
Southern	Description of an individual who abides either culturally or geographically, usually both, in the Southeastern portion of the United States.	(Peacock, 2007)
White	To have pale skin, descended from Europeans. Who usually possess a higher level of income, education, are politically conservative, displaying hierarchical and individualist world views.	(Rivers et al, 2010)
Conservative	The right of the traditional liberal-conservative continuum holds a more traditional outlook on political, social and economic values.	(Treier & Hillygus, 2009)
Men	Individuals usually biologically belonging to the male sex distinction with membership into the dominant gender group, with all the privileges that brings with it	(Shrock & Schwalbe, 2009)

Attitudes	“In psychology, an attitude refers to a set of emotions, beliefs, and behaviors toward a particular object, person, thing, or event.”	(Cherry, 2022)
Meritocracy	A social system where rewards and status are based off hard work and productivity	(Van Dijk et al, 2020)
Assimilation	In Sociology a one-way absorptive process where individuals of one culture, either forcefully or by choice, completely converts to another’s cultures norms.	(Facchini, 2015)
Systematic Racism	Racism, embedded into a society so deeply that is common represented as natural order of things.	(Braveman, 2022)
Entry Points	Something that helps you start an activity	(Oxford, 2023)
Path Forward	A course of action or conduct that will allow for meaningful, positive progress to be made.	(Farlex, 2015)

### **Limitations of the Study:**

The Southern, white conservative male demographic is a large segment of the United States population. The time and resources for a large-scale study were not possible in the time frame available and the scope of this master's thesis research project. As such the focus of this study will be localized within the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Three focus groups with the same four participants each time. This small population is not representative, limiting findings to this group alone without extension to the larger population. This exploratory study sought to understand the attitudes of a select, small group of men.

### **Ethical Considerations:**

Ethical considerations in the discussion of such a sensitive topic included informed consent, guidelines for focus group discussion and choice throughout the study. Within

this study, there was informed consent among participants. I was transparent and honest with the participants on the nature of the study and what it aimed to do. Participants were also allowed to leave or not participate when the need was felt.

Key concepts, the problem and its significance were introduced in Chapter One. These concepts are explored in the literature review of Chapter Two. The methodology used is described in Chapter Three. The results of the study including the three primary themes are reported in Chapter Four with discussion synthesis with the literature and conclusions found in Chapter Five.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction:**

The United States of America is currently facing a white supremacy issue within its borders (Bailey & Moon, 2020). This is seen through the rise of hate groups, and hate crimes since 2000 (Miller & Rivas, 2021). The mechanisms and training within the field of diversity and HRD have been ineffective in bringing about change in the Southern white conservative male demographic, (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018). Within the South, there is a history of systematic racism, through slavery and Jim Crow laws (Feagan & Ducey, 2019). Systemic Racism as defined by Braveman (2020) is racism, embedded into a society so deeply that it is commonly represented as the natural order of things. White men in the South, and other regions in the US, enjoy a higher standard of living in health, wealth, status and education compared to their non-white and female counterparts resulting from years of oppression (Rivers et al 2010). If strides are to be made in righting these wrongs and legacies of systemic racism, then effective interventions with people who hold entrenched views pertaining to diversity need to be developed. As a starting point for change, the attitudes of these white Southern men should be gathered, understood and analyzed.

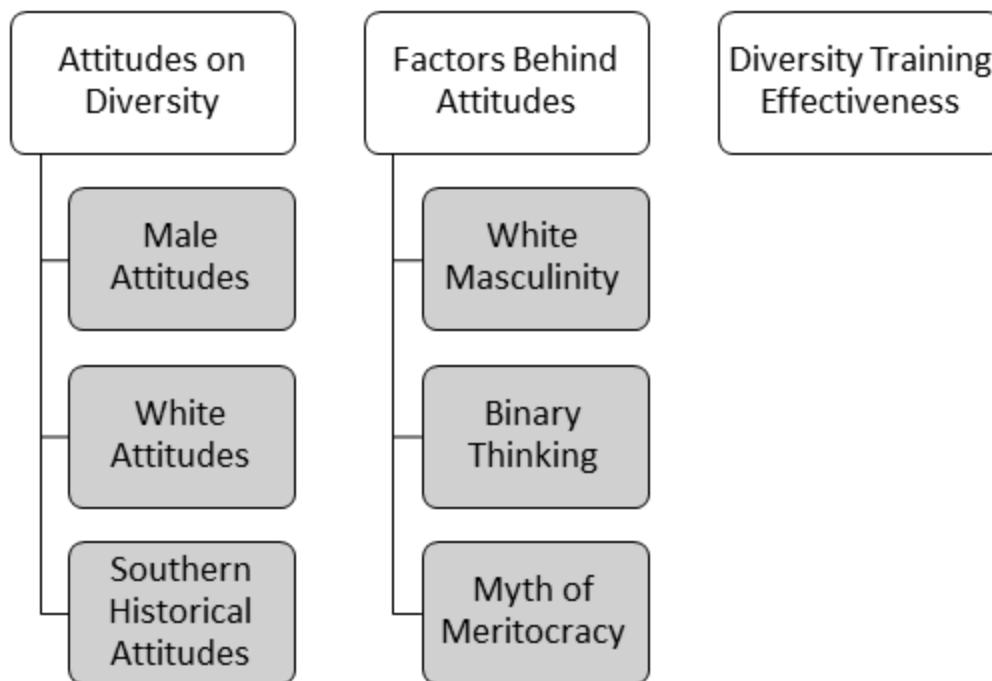
This literature review addresses three intertwined fields of research pertaining to the attitudes on diversity shared by Southern white conservative males. Firstly, this review examines attitudes generally, as scholarly literature of Southern white

conservative men, specifically is sparse. The focus of this review includes men's beliefs on diversity, white beliefs on diversity and historical trends of the South and its attitudes on diversity. Secondly, factors influencing these attitudes including: resistance to change, meritocracy, western masculinity, and cultural sense of place are inspected. The review concludes with an inquiry of literature pertaining to ways of changing these attitudes as it pertains to diversity training.

This review into the literature utilized The JMU libraries, Google Scholar, The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and EBSCO Open Dissertations as databases for literature collection. Keywords for searches included: masculinity, attitudes on diversity, white privilege, binary thinking, hate groups, hate crimes, southern attitudes, The South, Meritocracy, Jim Crowe in the Modern Day, diversity training, individualism, empathy in training, men and diversity, whites and diversity. Below is review and synthesis of the literature found through these inquiries in databases.

Figure 2.1

## Layout of Literature Review

**Attitudes on Diversity:**

Ely and Thomas (2001) refer to diversity as pertaining to people from different demographic groups such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion and nationality. Cherry (2022) refers to attitudes as a set of emotions, beliefs and behaviors. Using these two definitions together, attitudes on diversity are, for this study, a set of emotions, beliefs and behaviors pertaining to people of different demographic groups from those who participated in this research study. To better understand the Southern conservative white male demographic, separate facets of their identity must be explored in relation to diversity attitudes. No research studies, from my search in the research literature, was found on the Southern white conservative male demographic specifically.

## *Gender and Diversity*

The relationship between gender and attitudes on diversity remains a little explored topic (Holladay et al, 2003). However, there is some empirical research that can be utilized in determining the attitudes of men on diversity. Sawyer et al. (2005) posits that men have less positive diversity attitudes than women they surveyed. This study did not define what was meant by positive diversity attitudes explicitly. Contextualization suggests that positive diversity attitudes meant an openness to change and a desire for a more diverse organizational makeup. Sawyer, et al's (2005) results support an earlier claim by Burke and Black (1997) that men are more likely than women to resist the hiring and promotion of diverse employees (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ or people of color). The reasoning behind this will be explored later in this chapter.

Much of the research found on men's attitudes towards diversity relates to gender rather than minority status or any other demographic. Cundiff and Komarraju (2008) find that men are less likely to value women in positions of leadership compared to other men in leadership. They go further in saying that gender also plays a major role in ethnic and culture empathy. Men, despite culture playing a role, are less likely to show high levels of ethnic and cultural empathy compared to women. Cundiff and Komarraju, (2008) point to a lack of cultural empathy leading to presenting bias through discrimination. Jones et al (2022) research pertaining to gender domains and the workforce found men and also women, resisted the opposite gender entering the workforce, particularly in STEM fields which remain predominantly male. Jones et al (2022) relied heavily on intergroup threat theory first discussed by Stephan et al (2009). The basic tenets of Stephan et al (2009)'s theory is that when any demographic (e.g. men, women, heterosexuals) perceive a threat

to their realistic or symbolic meaning, either physical or on their worldview, it is likely to lead to mutual hostility among those two groups.

This literature suggests that men tend to have less positive diversity attitudes (Black, 1997; Sawyerr et al. 2005) than non-white men or women. Men also lack cultural and ethnic empathy which could lead to discrimination (Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008). And finally, men have a preference in the workplace for men over women in male dominated fields (Jones et al, 2022). This literature informs a framework of the white, Southern, conservative, male demographic. However, it can only be strengthened by looking at the attitude the white racial group has towards diversity.

### ***Whites and Diversity:***

Other than explaining the reason “why” whites have certain attitudes on diversity, little empirical research was found on the “what” attitudes of white Americans are in general. Wellman (1993) reports in a study conducted in the 1970s and concludes that there is an ancestral precedence to the white racial group’s anti-diversity attitudes. These attitudes range from traditional family structures to a bias against racial and ethnic minorities. Ezekiel (1993) also looked at the attitudes of the white racial group, however this study focused exclusively on fringe alt-right groups like Neo-Nazis and the Klu Klux Klan and was not indicative of all individuals in the white racial group. However, Ezekiel (1993) did make a compelling argument that typically the leaders of these hate groups feed on preconceived perceptions of race to indoctrinate and radicalize the white racial group. Ezekiel (1993) further claims that these leaders usually do not hold to the same beliefs they espouse, rather they espouse them to gain a source of power.

In more recent years the rhetoric used by the white majority has changed. Bonilla-Silva (2014), writing on white justification of racial inequalities, is referenced commonly in modern research. One research project that validated the Bonilla-Silva (2014) seminal piece is Rich (2011). Rich (2011) conducted research within a racially integrated neighborhood. When interviewing white people in the neighborhood, conflation with poor and racial diverse people became a theme. Meaning white people in this neighborhood saw African Americans as poorer and still did not want them in their community because of this perceived wealth gap. This affirmed the theory of Bonilla-Silva (2014) that racial discrimination was being conflated with stereotypes that would put people of color in the conflated demographic.

Whites tend to hold biases against racial minorities, passed down generationally that can be incited by leaders to lead to radicalization (Ezekiel, 1995; Wellman, 1993). Attitudes on race are congruent with earlier generations of white individuals, however the way they are discussed changes in order to justify them being valid (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Evans, 2021; Rich, 2011). The literature points to the white racial group relying on perspectives passed down through generations yet claiming non-prejudice. Whites also will say they have come to terms with their privilege; however, their actions often speak otherwise. This is seen through systemic racism (Braveman, 2022) which is Racism, embedded into a society so deeply that is common represented as natural order of things. How this is reflected in the findings will be addressed in Chapter five.

***Historic Trends in the South on Diversity:***

The South historically is more conservative than much of the country. The South tends to have a higher amount of hate groups per capita than elsewhere (Miller & Rivas, 2021). Wright and Esses (2017) found that Southerners, those who supported the confederate battle flag as a symbol of heritage, exuded attitudes of white supremacy. However, there is little empirical evidence to back up claims of current racism made by Miller and Rivas (2021) and Wright and Esses (2017). Miller and Rivas (2021) focused on the narrativization of news events rather than empirical data. While Wright and Esses (2017) did a quantitative study to back up the claims made, they did not give a strong indication of how they determined racist beliefs. Instead, they asked point blank questions to determine “Blatant Racial Attitudes” (Wright & Esses, 2017, 229). These findings are contrary to those of Elmir et al, (2011), whose work confirmed the earlier findings of Elam and Fenton (2003) that when gathering data on sensitive topics, for validity, a qualitative study is more effective than a quantitative approach. However, Wright and Esses, (2017) study suggested that there was a strong population of white supremacists in the South. With few empirical studies found on modern Southern attitudes towards diversity, and assuming that Wellman’s (1993) findings of generational trends towards attitudes can be applied, then it is important that we look at historic trends pertaining to diversity in the South.

One trend throughout Southern history is the treatment of different demographics, specifically, enslavement and disenfranchisement of minorities, particularly African Americans, pre-civil war and under Jim Crow laws of the late 19th and early 20th Century. (Harold, 2016; Noyalas et al, 2021). For example, Jim Crow laws included, segregation practices, and voting restrictions. While these laws were repealed during the

1960's Civil Rights movement, Peacock (2007) claims that the threats perceived by traditional Southern culture strengthened the views of the white racial group in the South against different demographics. Therefore, when creating framework based on the literature it can be assumed some Southerner's attitudes would show blatant racial bias (Wright & Esses, 2017). This includes using derogatory language and using blatant racial stereotypes. They may also hold on to racist prejudice passed down from past generations (Harold, 2016; Noyalas et al, 2021; Wellman, 1993). These beliefs will be explained further into Chapter two.

### ***Summary:***

Having looked at the attitudes of men, the white racial group, and the historical attitudes of the South, a framework of the demographic described begins to emerge. A Southern white conservative man will show a lack of ethnic and cultural empathy and have a preference towards men in positions of power over women (Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008; Jones et al, 2022). They may harbor deep-seated racial views, but those views will be portrayed as being against other demographics (e.g., impoverished individuals) (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Evans, 2021). They may have strong generational congruency in their beliefs, which in turn may lead to blatant racial bias (Peacock, 2007; Wellman, 1993; Wright & Esses, 2017). The next section looks at the literature surrounding the reasoning behind these viewpoints.

### **Factors Leading to Attitudes:**

A review of the literature of the attitudes of Southern white men on diversity, necessitates the review of white perceptions of masculinity, resistance to change, cultural



sense of place, and the myth of meritocracy among others to provide a picture of what factors may be changed in order to make for positive change in diversity training.

### ***White Masculinity***

Shrock and Schwalbe (2009) define men as individuals usually biologically belonging to the male sex distinction with membership into the dominant gender group, and its privileges. They also claim that what makes up masculinity varies among cultures or ethnicities. With this variance, the acts of “masculinity” or the procedures to assert and retain dominance are centered within cultures and ethnicities. Literature today sometimes conflates all forms of masculinity as toxic masculinity; however, some articles define it as white masculinity in particular as toxic (Harsin, 2020; Robinson, 2000). Harsin (2020) describes white masculinity as individualist, perceived truth-telling, and aggressive in actions. Robinson (2000) speaks on psychological aspects of masculinity, where white masculinity relies on the outward expression of little emotion, little perception of emotions in others and, to confirm Shrock and Schwalbe (2009), a desire to retain dominance. Also, individualism is closely tied with white masculinity (Pacheco, 2020). Individualism is a societal framework where value is put on the individual decision and freedom over the collective good (Pacheco, 2020). If then, a male, according to Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) is a member of the dominant gender group, and masculine actions are how they retain that authority, then it stands to reason that individualism, being an important part of white masculinity, is too a way to retain that authority.

The literature reviewed here on white masculinity, and the closely tied concept of individualism, suggests a white male with white masculinity norms of emotionally

closed, outwardly aggressive, open to speaking one's mind and overwhelmingly individualistic. (Pacheco, 2020; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) Contrasted with Dobbin and Kalev, (2018) ineffectiveness of diversity training, some gaps are suggested. Ineffectiveness of diversity training in this demographic may be due to individualism which leads to an emotional aversion to changing ideals, and the belief that their own opinions and decisions are more important than collective equality. However, this is not the only reason for ineffectiveness of diversity training in the Southern white conservative demographic.

***Binary Thinking:***

Binary thinking is a lack of perception relating to social gray zones where concepts are either fully one thing or the other. There is no gradience to beliefs (DiAngelo & Dyson, 2018). DiAngelo and Dyson, (2018) make the claim that the white racial group, due to fragility over current discussions about race, are more likely to have binary conceptions of racism than other racial groups. DiAngelo and Dyson, (2018) in a similar discussion, discuss that the white racial group views racism as bad, however they view themselves as good, therefore since they are good and racism is bad then they can't be racist. This shows binary thinking among the white demographic. An additional binary conclusion is disregarding institutions held up by the white social group as racist and actions of whites being racist in nature. It is this binary thinking that does not allow those in the white social group to think about racism critically and therefore they do not challenge racial inequality as institutionalized or as part of a larger system of oppression. Deeper still among Southerners is a cultural sense of place.

### *Southern Sense of Place*

Peacock (2007) makes the claim that Southerners believe in a cultural sense of place. Like, DiAngelo and Dyson's (2018) claims on racial binary thinking, Southerners exhibit binary thinking about the South. According to Peacock (2007) there is an inherently Southern culture. Old songs or literature that romanticize the South, are indicative of perceptions Southerners have today. Where this becomes hazardous, as Peacock (2007) explains, is when the South's historical discrimination of the Black racial group is intertwined with a sense of place. Peacock (2007) gives the example of cities focusing quality of life efforts in white communities over historically minority communities. He draws similarities with plantation homes and slave quarters; showing is a continual tradition of discrimination that is systemic in Southern culture. Finally, Peacock (2007) makes the claim that Southerners perceive globalism or outside influences as a threat to this sense of place. This binary thinking can be addressed through learning different perspectives and empathizing with them; however, this demographic does not do that (Peacock, 2021). Peacock (2007) suggests that Southern resistance to change stems from deep rooted cultural values that pre-date the US Civil War. As such it may be difficult to suggest any change within the Southern demographic and not illicit resistance.

### *Conservative Homogeneity*

Peacock (2021) claims that the US conservative demographics within group viewpoints are less likely to be challenged than within the liberal demographic, as the conservative population tends to be more homogeneous than the liberal population.

Heterogeneous groups, Peacock (2021) claims, tend to have greater exposure to more ideas and values in politics rather than homogenous groups. Conservative groups are predisposed to strong inside group influences and few outside group influences. Thus, concepts of racism and binary thinking continue within the Southern white conservative male community, often unchallenged.

*Diversity Training Connection:*

Binary thinking can lead to a sense of exemption from diversity thinking. DiAngelo and Dyson, (2018) claims the white social group perceives racism as bad, therefore since they view racism as bad and themselves as good they cannot harbor no racism. Within Southerners these perceptions are coupled with a strong sense of cultural place which may lead to overt racism (Peacock, 2007). Also, among conservative groups, these beliefs become solidified with the lack of diversity in ideals (Peacock, 2021). So, when diversity training is initiated with this group, it can be perceived as a threat, inviting a sense of exemption, and reinforcing solid belief in their own innocence rendering the training ineffective even before it has begun.

The literature reviewed suggests this demographic has a firm belief that they harbor no personally mediated racism, or personal racism against others (Jones, 2000), rendering diversity training on race, inapplicable. Barring other forms of diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001), where binary thinking can still apply, there is little indication that these individuals perceive institutionalized racism, or systemwide preference for one demographic, as being a facet of American society (Jones, 2000). This then leads to an

apparent acceptance in American meritocracy being congruent in any demographic despite evidence to the contrary.

***The Myth of Meritocracy:***

The meritocracy myth has been a prevailing theory in the political and societal sphere since the 1970s (Feingold, 2011). Meritocracy is a social system where rewards and status are based off hard work and productivity; Van Dijk et al (2020) describes, that especially in business, social inequality hinders meritocracy from taking shape. Van Dijk et al, (2020) go further in citing empirical studies of meritocracy as a myth. This included studies on men being preferred over women for roles solely based on race and people of color being overlooked for in promotions. This is an issue that it encompasses differences based on any number of intersectional identities (van Dijk et al, 2020). Dannefer, (2003) claims that demographic divides in success only become wider with time because advantaged demographics retain resources and increase social capital among their group at the expense of disadvantaged social groups.

Empirical evidence identifies the advantaged group to be middle aged, educated, white, western, men (Acker, 2006; Foschi, 1996; Hirsh, 2009; Merluzzi & Sterling, 2017; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2015; Sawert, 2019). Additionally, Rivers et al (2010) shows that this lack of meritocracy in business is reflected in society, with white men being the advantaged group and having access to better houses, education, resources, and jobs. The myth of meritocracy as a facet of white perspective this then can lead to beliefs that people of color are simply just not working hard enough to be granted higher positions. With the pre-established points on Southern sense of place and

conservative homogeneity, then there is a perspective that diversity training would be ineffective as they do not like change, and they feel vindicated through not only a lack of diverse opinions but a belief that they are successful solely off their merit. White Southern men may have the perspective that it is not them causing an imbalance in power rather it is women or people of color who are not working hard enough to gain power. In the next subsection this will be tied into the larger picture.

***Resistance to Change/Summary:***

The above themes are suggesting a strong resistance to change within the Southern white conservative male demographic. Firstly, Shrock and Schwalbe (2009) discuss men's committing of masculine acts to retain dominance. Pacheco (2020) speaks on white perceptions of individualism which values the individual over the collective. In turn white men who prescribe to individualism, only thinking about their own needs and desires, have positioned themselves above other groups. In the studies reviewed, the demographic this study explored are in the societal advantaged group (Acker, 2006; Foschi, 1996; Hirsh, 2009; Merluzzi & Sterling, 2017; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2015; Rivers et al, 2010; Sawert, 2019). Additionally, Peacock (2007) explains that anything that does not match the Southern sense of place is often met with hostility, making changes to this sense of place usually unfruitful (Peacock, 2007). There is also a high level of binary thinking and a lack of exposure to contrary beliefs that fuels the idea that demographic tensions are overly exclaimed or even completely fabricated (DiAngelo, 2019; Peacock, 2021). When southern white conservative men experience diversity training it is likely to be met with resistance as it does not abide by their societal beliefs (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018).

In summary, white masculinity and its emphasis on individualism, binary thinking, and a cultural sense of place and success in a perceived meritocracy has led to attitudes on diversity to and a resistance to change. Relatively little research, in my review of literature, has been done on how to address attitude change in this group.

### **Research on how to change attitudes:**

I found little empirical evidence on effective ways to change attitudes towards diversity in any demographic. While Dobbin and Kalev's (2018) findings into the ineffectiveness in diversity training is noted, the landscape of training has changed in the last five years. Scant evidence exists for determining the effectiveness of diversity training broadly. Rodgers and Kangas (2022) frame diversity training by creating an inviting space for change with attempts at transformational learning using experiential learning or creating safe spaces. However, the binary thinking of the white social group may lead to failure to create change, as there may be a feeling of exclusion from diversity concepts (DiAngelo & Dyson, 2018). Apart from that, in recent years there has been a focus on the impacts on diversity training and more importantly, ways of measuring effectiveness (Thakur & Dhar, 2022).

### **Research Gap and Summary:**

This literature review examined attitudes on diversity of white men and Southerners. Other factors that may influence diversity attitudes were reviewed and recent literature regarding modern diversity training practices was inquired about. Research studies were found specifically addressing white, conservative, Southern men.

Since there is stigma against Southern white conservative men as being blatantly racist and slow to embrace different demographics, it is essential to verify the literature's framework of attitudes before informing diversity training (DiAngelo, 2019). This study aims to shed light on attitudes about diversity and in turn, figure out entry points to foster more inclusive and open attitudes in this demographic. This study seeks to remedy that gap and its procedure will be discussed in the Methodology chapter.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction:**

This qualitative study utilized focus groups studies to gauge the attitudes of Southern white conservative men on diversity through narrative inquiry methods. Narrative inquiry, according to Creswell et al (2007), is a study of people their experiences and lives over time. The data was then transcribed, omitting any identifying information, coded and put into themes related to the research questions.

### **Location:**

The study took place in the Shenandoah valley of Virginia, in a church building that was located near the vicinity of a prominent metropolitan area. Speaking from personal experience, the Shenandoah Valley exhibits a political divide based off city and county lines throughout. An example of this is the Staunton City and Augusta County political difference. Staunton votes primarily Democratic and for a liberal agenda, while Augusta County votes primarily Republican and for a conservative agenda. This is important to mention given political leanings are part of a worldview that can shape attitudes regarding diversity. The Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, is in the historic South, was fought for heavily during the American Civil War and contained a reasonably sized slave population (Noyalas et al, 2021).

The focus group study was conducted over the span of three separate meetings. The meeting space consisted of a long oval table, with chairs around the space. The room was also adorned with books. The church was chosen as a meeting place due to its perceived safety, as all participants were members of the congregation. Food was

provided at the beginning of all the meetings with light refreshments available on the table and drinks provided in a cooler in the corner. Eating food together is a custom seen throughout United States and is a sign of friendship and equality among individuals (Juiler, 2013). The food served was dependent on the time of day. I will discuss this further in chapter three.

### **Participants:**

Participants had to be a cis-gendered male, born or a predominantly raised and living in the South, white and self-reported as center-right to alt-right in their political leanings. Participants were found amongst the church parishioners. Four participants meeting these criteria agreed to participate. Participant one is a college student pursuing a STEM degree. He is in his twenties. Participant two is a retired staff member from a local university, near seventy in age. Participant three is a retired, college-educated staff member at a local hospital, also near seventy in age. Participant Four worked at factories all his life and did not graduate high school. He was just beyond eighty. All met the basic criteria to be considered for the study. I initially discussed it with three other gentlemen who were either busy or felt that their leadership role in the church may lead others to not be as forward with information. So, of the seven people I reached out too, four were able and ready to be a part of these focus groups.

### **Research Positionality:**

I label myself within the demographic of focus, a white conservative Southern man. It is not with any joy I write these words. I have a past within the Alt-right, and would have, at one time considered myself, due to personal ignorance, a neo-confederate.

There was a time in my life where I considered other communities, primarily black communities, as being different than my own. I also felt like I was unjustly persecuted for biases I did not feel I had. I did view white privilege as a fallacy used to indoctrinate the black community in believing that we, being Southern white conservative males, were the problem. I also felt strongly that anyone, without restriction, can succeed in the United States. I am now painfully aware of my own biases towards my fellow man. It was my love of music that drew these ill-conceptions out of me; it was my entry point for change. It was in a desire to strengthen and harden my own beliefs that I sought out to challenge them. I sought to listen to other perspectives. And having heard those perspectives and the stories of my fellow members of humanity, I grew aware of the shaky ground upon which my beliefs were formed. And therefore, I changed my outlook.

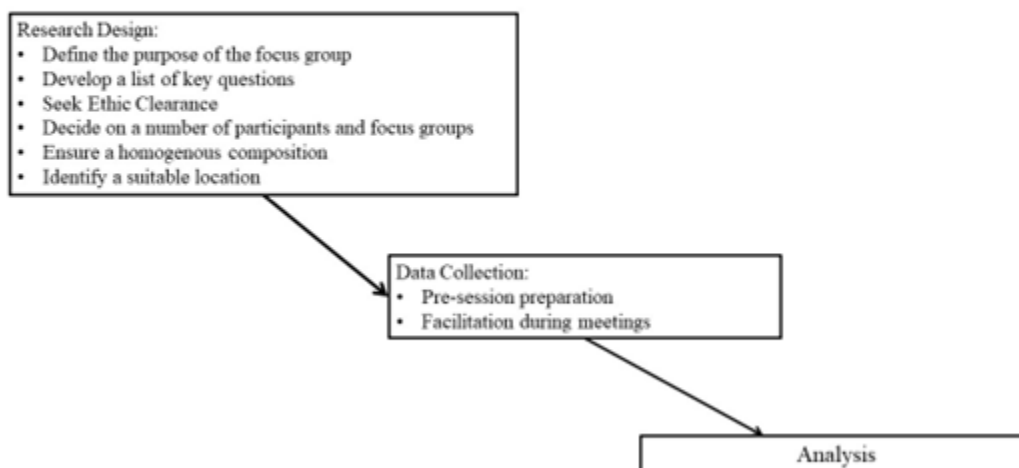
I still believe myself to be within the demographic of a Southern, white conservative male. However, I have grown to understand that racism and prejudice leads ultimately to a lose-lose scenario and believe that my demographic, those who hold onto racism and prejudice reasonlessly, should reconsider their stance. It is a conviction that has been laid on my heart, that I consider divinely inspired, to help remedy. I see that there are systems and institutions in this country that keep down minorities for the sake of dominance of the majority. I see the lack of acceptance to diverse individuals as a major problem and feel that one must strive to fix the problems within my community. Here I'm serving as an observer to discussions that I am privy to. It is then my endeavor to help those in this group to seek the ultimate end of prejudice within this group. While this goal may be impossible, at the very least it is important to strive to minimize the impact of prejudice to enhance equality.

## Procedure:

Focus group methodologies, despite their repeated use, had past trouble in defining how they should be conducted and the process to be used (O. Nyumba et al, 2018). O. Nyumba et al. (2018) provides procedures and a flow chart for creating a focus group study. This flowchart guided creation and execution of this study:

Figure 2.1

### Focus Group Procedure



Framework for the procedure of a Focus group study based off O. Nyumba et al (2018), recreated with approval from the authors.

### *Define the purpose of the focus group.*

This study collected data on the attitudes on diversity held by focus group participants. Wellman (1993) suggests that it is an important value in using focus groups when conducting research on diversity. Liamputtong (2016) explains that when

discussing sensitive topics, like diversity, focus groups work effectively in gathering sincere responses by providing participants with voices of confirmation. The focus group maintained a similarity between this study and the Wellman (1993) study on white racism, which is used as a guiding framework for this study.

***Develop a list of key questions.***

With the purpose of the focus group determined, questions were drawn primarily from the original Wellman (1993) questions, adjusting for language and modern framings of diversity. These questions were broken into three different parts. 1) Building trust questions were used in the first focus group to build confidence among the group. For example, the question “What was it like growing up?” was used to not only develop a narrative inquiry according to Creswell et al (2007) but also to allow them to feel safe and build rapport with the participants. 2) Broad Diversity questions focused on diversity concepts not directly related to race and racism. These included questions on gender roles, religion and politics. For example, “What makes a man and what makes a woman?” was asked. While these questions were initially asked as a segway into more racially involved questions, I found that these questions offered much information reflected in Chapter Four. 3) Race and race relation questions related solely to the racial and ethnicity aspects of diversity. For example, “When was the first time you saw someone that didn’t look like you?” These questions would be asked at three separate focus groups. It was decided on the three focus groups as to only take up around two hours of time at a time from the participants.

***Seek ethic clearance.***

A protocol was submitted to IRB at James Madison University, approved and given a number. Consent forms were obtained from participants. All participants were made aware of the intended outcome of these focus groups and were allowed to excuse themselves freely.

***Decide on number of participants and focus groups.***

The number of participants were chosen to be between 3-5, giving this study a mini-focus group distinction (O. Nyumba et al, 2018) a result of time and resource constraints. After asking seven individuals to be a part of the focus group, four were able to dedicate their time to them. Three focus groups sessions were determined as appropriate due to the nature of the questions asked.

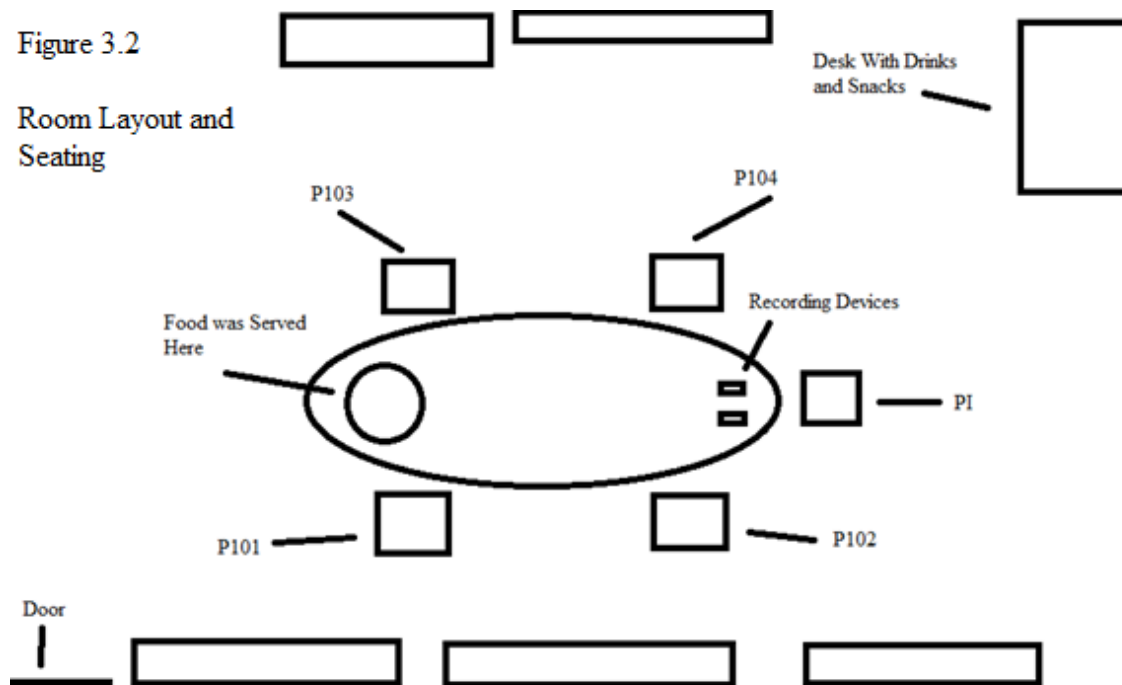
***Ensure Homogenous Composition.***

According to the O. Nyumba et al (2018) framework, this step should have been conducted before deciding the number of participants and number of focus groups. However, participants and focus group amounts needed to be determined as part of the IRB, this was done earlier and out of sequence from the framework. This study sought to assure that the recruits were homogenous. Participants were individually selected from my previous interactions and recommendations of others. All members selected were a purposeful sampling and were confirmed as meeting the criteria to participate in the study.

***Identify a suitable location.***

A suitable location was found. The focus groups were conducted in a space the participants were familiar of. The meeting space that was away from any individuals, giving a greater sense of confidentiality.

*Pre-session preparation.*



*First Meeting -*

Before the first meeting, I made sure that both recording devices were procured and in working order. the meeting was held during lunch and a meal was provided. The food was from a local sit-down restaurant chain that specialized in chicken and consisted of grilled chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, and rolls. There was also a salad provided. Drinks served were hot coffee, ice tea, water and lemonade. Seating was determined by that participants level of voice, with softer spoken participants sitting

closer to the record devices. I familiarized myself with the scripting of questions and checked the layout for flow discrepancies.

*Second Meeting -*

Only light refreshments, such as moon pies, snack bars, and crackers, were made available to the participants at the second meeting. Refreshments were set out on the table before the meeting. The audio recorders were also checked to make sure they were operational. Seating arrangement remained the same.

*Third Meeting -*

Participant one could not make the third meeting, due to a conflict. His usual place around the table was used as a drink bar. Breakfast was provided for the participants. The breakfast food was home-made and included breakfast potatoes, sausage, Danishes and an egg scramble. Hot coffee, orange juice and milk were provided as drinks. The audio recorders were also checked to make sure they were operational.

***Facilitation during meetings.***

At the beginning of the first focus group, there was a discussion on the confidential nature of the focus group. I told the participants that everything within these meetings would remain confidential, and all transcripts would leave out any identifying information and would not be included in the final report. I also made assurances that all recordings would be destroyed as well. There was also a brief discussion on their ability to leave whenever they felt the need, or to not answer questions. This discussion only occurred during the first meeting.



During all three of the focus groups, I attempted to build trust and camaraderie amongst the participants through humor, and slight nudges to continue conversation. This helped create a friendly environment that led to more in-depth discussion on the attitudes of diversity. This included using non-verbal cues to ask participants to answer questions and vocally asking also. Each session was scheduled for 120 minutes however, conversations reached their terminus after 70 to 90 minutes. At the end of each session all participants were thanked and were offered the remainder of the food left from the group. This was in line with the cultural traditions of hospitality in the South and the Shenandoah Valley.

### ***Transcription.***

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics, the utmost care was taken to de-identify all the participants in this study. Transcriptions were typed without assistance from outside sources to maintain the information and data integrity. While being transcribed participants were given a code (P101, P102, P103, and P104) and omissions were made to protect the identity of the individuals in the focus groups.

### ***Data Analysis.***

The way data analysis was conducted was based on Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Barbour (2014). Once transcribed, data was coded using Microsoft word software using a filter through the comments made in the focus groups to generate themes that addressed the research questions. I made comments in the margin with comment function to illustrate codes. Initially these codes were summarized versions of the words spoken by the participants. After than I then numbered each code by meeting number and

location within the transcript, for example M1-1 was the numeral for the first code in meeting one. I created an excel sheet where every code numeral was placed with the Participants it belonged to. For example, M3-23 was spoken by P102 then that code would be placed under the P102 column. After than was concluded I then looked over the data and codes to develop overarching themes to answer the research questions. In collaboration with my thesis chair, initial themes and subthemes were chosen and rejected on two occasions as they did not accurately encompass all or most of the codes. After this, higher inference themes we used to understand and explain the data. An Excel sheet with all of code numerals and individuals who spoke them was then placed and these themes were created with all unmatched codes added to a section.

These themes and answers to the research questions are identified in the following chapter that focuses on findings and results.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### **Process, Systems and Bias**

#### *Process*

Focus groups were conducted among four Southern, white, conservative men located in the Shenandoah of Virginia. The three focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed. After completion of the transcriptions, open coding was conducted, creating concept sets (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Comparative analysis was then conducted on coded data sets to achieve conceptual saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It was through that process that the themes of the study revealed themselves.

#### *Systems*

The four focus group members were given a distinguishing number on an Excel sheet: P101, P102, P103, P104. Under these numbers I put the codes that belonged to them. This was to find similarities among the participants in their answers to questions and contribute to comparative analysis. This allowed me to make sure the major themes of the topic area were a shared attitude among most, if not all, of the participants. This was the primary cataloging system used in the creation of the themes.

#### *Researcher Biases*

I have lived in this community all my life. It then was not a surprise of the themes that came out of this study, and others were surprising. However, I admit that living in

the community may have shaped the themes that were pulled out among other ones. I feel however that my attempt to position myself out of the data and rather focus on only what my four participants said was effective. However, I have lived in this community and have held similar beliefs to those I feel were espoused in these focus groups, so this may have clouded my judgement in what themes I found.

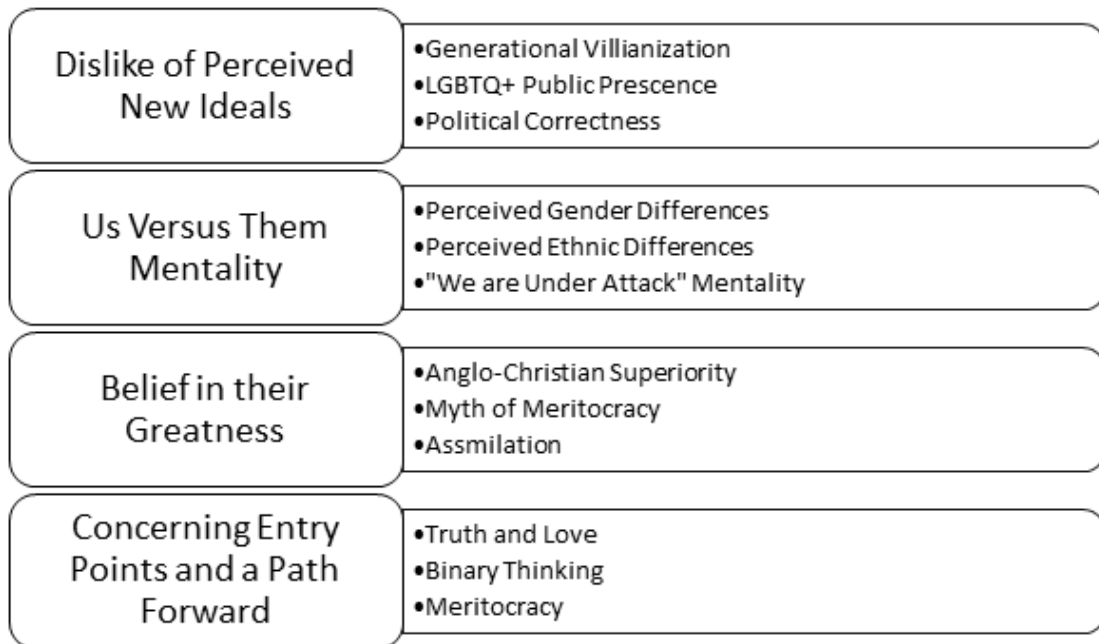
### **The Findings:**

These results aim to show the themes spoken by the four participating white Southern conservative men. While I am a member of this group, I also understand that with every group there are different concepts of thought. Georgian white Southern conservative men might think differently about diversity, then a similar demographic in Virginia. However, it is important to record the results as found. The four themes answering the core research questions: What are the attitudes of white Southern conservative men on diversity, and what are entry points and a path forward with diversity training in Southern white conservative men? The three themes pulled out were: disliking perceived new ideals, A Us vs. Them Mentality, and a belief in their own greatness. Additionally, there is a theme dedicated to exploring what the data said on a

path forward and entry point

Figure 4.1

Layout of Themes

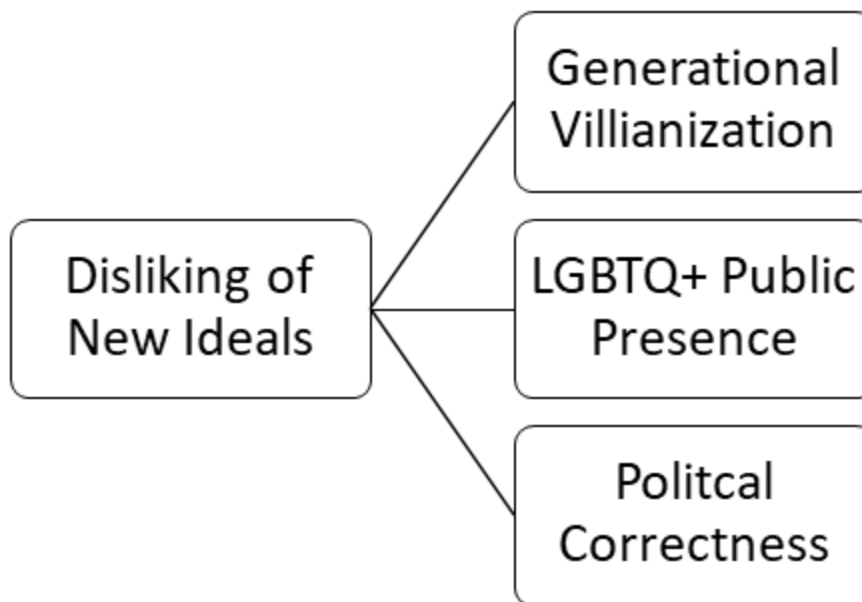


***Disliking Perceived New Ideals:***

Within the three focus groups there was strong disfavor in new ideals and attitudes. The disagreement with new ideals is not a new concept among older generations however, the Generation Z participant, there was in stark congruence with his elders. This was most prevalent in their concepts of generational villainization, the public presence of LGBTQ+ communities, and disdain over political correctness issues.

Figure 4.2

## Disliking of New Ideals Subthemes

*Generational Villainization-*

For this group, diversity was not only bound race, gender, or sexual orientation, it was whatever makes humanity different from them including age and perceptions about age. Generational villainization was exhibited in a variety of ways in the focus groups, appearing prominently in response to questions related to childhood. Overwhelmingly, responses were a comparison between themselves and the newest generations of Generation Z and Millennials. Even the participant belonging to Generation Z expressed a sense of the difference between him and those belonging to his generation. He saw his peers as lazy and entitled at times, saying “And I'm also a little worried about lack of motivation. A lot of people I have seen a lot of people go on drugs and just get really lazy and not very productive” This was confirmed by the two participants who belonged to the

“Baby Boomer” generation. They expressed that these newest generations were expecting handouts from government entities and had a strong sense of grandeur about what would be given to them upon entering the “real world.” When discussing their fears about the future, participants gradually turned the discussion toward fears about the newest generations when one participant stated:

*But, you know, you have to get a job and you have to, you know, you have to earn it. Yeah. And I respected him [Mark Cuban for forcing his kids to work] for that. And I think that's. Kind of lacking [In these newest generations] (P103, 2023, 19).*

This sense of grandeur leads to a lack of motivation by the newer generations to do better when things do not go their way. It was the consensus that blame should be on the current generation of parents for fostering this lack of motivation. Parents at an early age, they espoused, are not disciplining their children and this leads to the youth feeling entitled.

Three out of four participants expressed that they also believe that young people cannot think logically or for themselves. One participant said:

*You know, with the younger people. I think the younger people today are being sold a lot of goods and they're buying [it] hooks, lines, and sinkers. And they don't think for themselves. They think whatever social media tells them what they think (P102, 2023, 16).*

This quote was indicative of the other participants, except the oldest, had about the newest generations. They also perceived a lack of respect among “the younger people,” Blame was placed on how parents treated their children compared to how their parents

and the rise of social media. They expressed that social media is leading to a collective mindset of sorts and that the current youth are being brainwashed into believing fabricated lies, or at the very least, not opening their mind to other concepts than the ones fed to them. A general disdain for social media, for how younger generations are gullible to brainwashing and how parents are raising their children was expressed by participants. In general, when discussing societal components (i.e. Social Media, Parenting) “new” was seen in a negative light and the “old” ways were seen as superior. The only exclusions were tangible items (i.e., Clothes, Cars).

#### *LGBTQ+ Public Presence –*

Perception of new concepts is important when discussing these findings. Historical figures as far back as the 25<sup>th</sup> century BC are believed to be members of the LGBTQ+ community, with the first definite evidence of the community being in 630 BC (Dover, 2016; Reeder, 2000). However, two members of the focus group out of three available to talk about this topic, found the idea of either prejudice against LGBTQ+ members or the movement itself as a novel one. As one participant put it “So this trans thing. Is kind of new, and I think that's stupid.” Similarly, the other participant said, “And so I don't think they [The LGBTQ+ community] can claim the same prejudice that, you know, the last [African American community] can that they've been discriminated against a long history they're going to have with the last.” These two quotes show a potential prevalence of viewing this LGBTQ+ movement, specifically the transgender portion of it, as a novel one. Therefore, while it can be historically proven that this community is not a new phenomenon, there is a perception that the movement is new and as will be discussed it is despised.



Secondly, they showed a level of disdain against LGBTQ+ lifestyle. As quoted above one participant viewed the movement as “stupid.” Another participant said “But I’m going to still love you. And hopefully we can still have a relationship, even though I don’t agree with your [The LGBTQ+] lifestyle.” These once again were the attitudes of two of the three participants able to respond to this discussion. What this suggests is a perception of this “lifestyle” being a relatively new one and a leveled dislike for it. Even on the topic of marriage their opinions were shown when one participant said “I think that’s what a good marriage is [partners working together]. You know, you take both men and women...” There was never any open discussion on non-traditional marriage structures. The reason given for this dislike for perceived lifestyle led by LGBTQ+ members, by the Southern white conservative men in this focus groups, was on religious grounds. One participant said, “I don’t agree with their [LGBTQ+ members] lifestyle based on the word [The Holy Bible].” I noted a nod of agreement, conveying consensus among the other participants with that statement.

#### *Political Correctness –*

Political Correctness is a multi-faceted and wide-ranging term (Elsner-Petri, 2016). For this study, the focus lies with political correctness in spoken terms rather than any other definition or usage of political correctness it may be inferred. Three out of the four participants had a discussion on political correctness pertaining to other people of diverse backgrounds. One participant said “Sometimes you may say something that makes complete sense in your head and made complete sense and a lot of your peers’ heads. But to that person was really mean.” P101 in this quote, reflects on the intention of what he says and it can impact the those in communication with him suggests a lack of

understanding of political correctness. It also shows a perception that the individual being offended was in the wrong; as he believed he and his peers were congruent in their thought of non-offense. This is also indicative of a Us versus them mindset which will be further discussed later in this chapter. On the topic of political correctness another participant says:

*But I think compared to now, it seems like everybody gets turned off by something and, you know, there are offended by something and things that people like P103 and I took for granted when we were kids now could offend people (P102, 2023, 11)*

This quote shows, with this participant, a strong distinction between the new and the old when discussing what offends people in the current time. They show a disdain and confusion over the trends of political correctness. A participant described it as “I feel like I’m walking on eggshells to try [being politically correct].” It was noted that this was agreed to by at least three of the Individuals. In fact, the only positive example of political correctness was when a participant said:

*Some things need to be changed because I remember when, when we were growing up, we had Brazil nuts and they were always nigger toes. And, you know, I heard I didn't I didn't really realize, you know, the connotation and but yeah, that that was very derogatory. And, you know, I think would be a huge mistake [if they were still called that] (P103, 2023, 13)*

This shows that the only good these participants saw in modern political correctness were in extreme examples of derogatory language being used in the past.

While this one participant recognized the negative and damaging effects of this racist example, he with the others believed that political correctness had gone too far. They also felt in contradicted the ways they labeled and saw the world. Once again, a sign of disdain for perceived new concepts, in this case political correctness, and a holding of old traditions was spoken of in these focus groups.

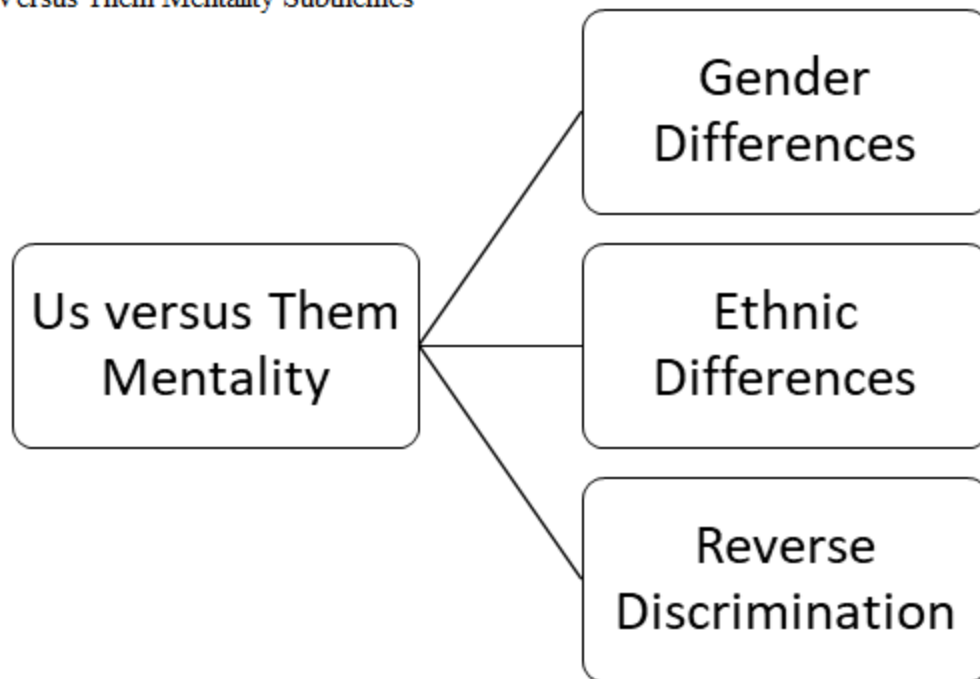
The concept of disliking new ideals or perceptions is not a novel theme, it is also doubtful that this demographic is the only one that feels this way about new concepts. However, among the participants there was an overarching sense that new concepts, including those pertaining to diversity (gender, sexual orientation, etc.), were disliked. The current generation was viewed as unfree thinking entitled and lazy. The LGBTQ+ movement was labeled as “stupid.” Political correctness was seen as an inconvenience. How this relates to literature and further discussion can be found in chapter five.

***Us Versus Them Mentality:***

In addition to the overarching theme of a dislike of new ideals, an overarching theme of “us versus them” emerged from the data. Participants within the focus group had exhibited “binary” thinking. They exhibited strong beliefs that individuals who were not like them (Southern, white, male, etc.) were distinct, and therefore, different than themselves. They did not denote strong hatred over these differences, they did note the difference. This is seen most prominently in their views of gender, people of color, and perception of aggression from other demographics.

Figure 4.3

## Us Versus Them Mentality Subthemes

*Gender –*

The perception of this demographic, within the focus group, is that gender is binary. They believe in only two different and distinct genders: men and women. They then expressed a strong belief that men and women in themselves are very different from one another. All four participants noted differences between men and women. One participant said “But I think I think there are differences in our physical, emotional [strengths]. You know gentlemen are stronger here. Where women are, are more of the relationship people.” Men are good for one thing and women are good for another thing. Another participant expressed a similar viewpoint saying “I think that when it comes to skills being brought to the table generally, men have certain strengths and women have certain strengths and we have to work together in order to know most effectively get

things done.” This exhibits a binary sense about women and men dynamics. Another participant said:

*They still kind of look up to the guys in a relationship. They all, they say they want equal rights, and everything, but we'll still will be the ones who take out the trash, you those kinds of things, mostly that kind of stuff. I'm not saying they don't do that but still seemed men are the ones mowing the lawn and stuff like that (P102, 2023, 2).*

The perception of this individual is that men are typically, through his experience, doing more physically demanding or undesirable roles around the house. What this leads to is then a signal that women are unwilling to do some of the harder roles in the household. He addresses this in the scope that women want equal rights but they do not want to do equal work. He denotes a difference in what is expected from men and what is expected from women in the household. From the tone in his voice and the quote above, I noted a sense of belief that this was unfair if equal rights are given.

While not as blatant as the other participants another said, did say “And I’ll just sit there but when that ball gets hiked, his mom will be standing up and checking to see if her son gets up and such. I think moms worry more about that stuff than I do.”

Supporting a trend of these members of the Southern white conservative male demographic having a binary split between men and women, mainly on the grounds of emotional conditions. Women are more relationship focused and men are more task focused. Traditional masculinity concepts play a very heavy role in their beliefs between

genders, reflecting lack of regard for emotions and relationships and an emphasis on individual strength. The belief in individualism, as discussed, is a deeply held belief.

*People of Color –*

Women were not the only individuals that the participants viewed as being different than themselves. The third focus group predominantly discussed race and relations, in coming into this research study it was my intention to focus only on race and racism. However, the literature pointed towards a need at a holistic look at diversity attitudes. Therefore, I only made it the focus of the third focus group exclusively. Participants without being overtly racist, using slang and calling individuals inferior, held values that showed a level of a “Us versus Them” mindset. Three out of four participants were able to take part in a discussion on race and racism. One participant had prior engagements that kept him from attending the third focus group.

It is important to note that participants had a proclivity to only refer to people of color as “Black” or “Blacks” throughout all the focus groups when people of color were discussed. The words African Americans were rarely used and the term People of Color was never used. Additionally, only one mention was made to Latinx people and Asian Americans were not mentioned when discussing race. This suggests a us and them mentality present and that race is constructed on black and white constructs. Participants comments exhibited a lack of awareness or perhaps a lack of respect and a/or understanding of the terms individuals of color preferred to be called by. It also shows a lack of distinction amongst a diverse group. In other words, these white men, based on their word choices, seemed to convey race relations in terms of black and white. More

evidence showing this divide between people of color and this demographic is forthcoming. One participant said:

*I see blacks get upset with Blacks that are doing well. They call them uncle toms and stuff like that. They can't. They seem to get upset with if they've been real successful. And they're doing a lot of stuff that they feel like it's the White community's way of doing stuff. (P102, 2023, 6).*

This participant clearly sees a distinction between black and white communities, and black and white ways of “doing stuff.” He further says that the “white community’s way of doing stuff,” leads to people of color becoming “real successful”. Assimilation and Anglo Christian superiority are subthemes of the third major theme in this chapter. This individual describes a divide between communities based off success, and ways of doing tasks, highlighting the attitudes of these Southern white conservative men, that white superiority is factual. An attitude of white supremacy is expressed here.

While not expressly asked, one participant said pertaining to interracial marriage: “I don’t agree that whites and the very blacks should be together [in a relationship].” This participant sees whites and people of very dark complexion as being different and disagrees with marriage or relationships with individuals of a very dark complexion and white individuals. It might be important, to provide some context. In 1967, Loving versus Virginia overturned laws both in Virginia and elsewhere that made marriage between people of difference racial groups illegal. This individual would have had to live through that, and therefore, had older social conditioning and personal beliefs that were anti-interracial marriage.

The third participant additionally said “And whether it's a health issue or economic issue or whatever, that well, [they think] it's race related. And and it seems like it's really kind of pushed. I and you know, I know there are issues there, but, you know sometimes I wonder if it's. Over over emphasized,” The participant shows a level of distrust that race is as big of a problem, that people of color make it out to be. In this he feels accused of racist actions, and under attack.

*Perceptions of Aggression against Southern White Conservative Men-*

Participating in the focus group said that modern society was aggressive towards their demographic. Whether it is the media, women or minorities, their perception is that Southern White Conservative Men and their values are constantly under attack and that these attacks are unjustified. One of the ways this was exhibited was in their perceptions of the education system. One participant had a negative outlook on the education system and its gender make up:

*I mean, I don't know. I had some male elementary teachers but now if a man goes in teaching the elementary kids, what's wrong with him? He must be a pedophile. Or you know, you know, He must like little boys or little girls or something like that, and they look down upon. (P102, 2023, 4).*

This is a perception of how society views male teachers. Male elementary teacher is under attack because he perceives society to perceive them as pedophiles, leading to a lack of male elementary level teachers. Men are under attack for performing a needed role in society, that of a teacher. The participant also had said that more women going to colleges rather than men was a societal conspiracy:



*You take colleges There's more women going to college to men. Why is that? It's because they're not getting the grades to go to school because they're not being taught as well in in the lower grades to get to college. Something's happening that's that's you know, changing that. I think it's almost like a concerted effort and I think it's all part of the big picture of society and how they're trying to change it. I don't have the hard-core facts. It's just something I observed over the years and it just seems to be happening. (P102, 2023, 5).*

While he admits his lack of factual information to back up these claims, he still does espouse that society is at odds with men broadly. He is not the only participant to make a similar claim against society's treatment of men. When discussing modern media, meaning both news and entertainment media, one participant exclaimed "Now where are those good, strong, male role model people that you can say, usually the fathers somebody doesn't know what they're doing." I noted signs of agreement (laughing, and positive vocal signals) from all participants with this statement. Modern media does not represent fathers and men broadly in a positive light. This perception of aggression is not only against men but also ideals shared by these participants. As one claimed:

*I do agree with that. I think the media definitely likes to. They like to ambiguously or indirectly say we think this is the wrong, the morally wrong thing, and we think this is the morally right thing and you all should join us in the fight against the morally wrong people... (P101, 2023, 12).*

While not overtly saying which side the media portrays as right and wrong it still shows binary thinking and that it is leading to friction between two parties on the grounds

of thought and moral affiliation. In practice this can mean that this participant feels like society, especially the media, views their concepts and attitudes as invalid.

In addition to masculinity there was discussion of whiteness also being under attack. Or at the very least not respected in today's culture. One participant said:

*And I think that it [the pendulum of rights] has swung so much to woman's rights and black rights that that's what you see a lot of. And well you know, is that where the pendulum needs to be or is it doesn't need to be more equal? (P103, 2023, 12)*

There is a distinction between men and women and whites and people of color. He refers to the metaphorical pendulum swinging too far against people like him, white males, and this is leading to strife. His opinion was shared by another participant when it was said:

*I think the race issues is if it's growing, if they [people of color] think it's growing or is it's only because they're stoking the fires and they're creating this. And I didn't see it before they started all this stuff, you know, a few years back. And I think it's. Misplace, misplace. Racism, so to speak, at this point. And I if you see it, it's only. Because people now are more sensitive. I mean, minorities sometimes are more sensitive to it. They take every. Little thing as you being racist because they've been trained to do that (P102, 2023, 2).*

Minorities or people of color are against him because they are “trained to do that”. The underlying concepts are split in desires among people of color and white men. From the perspective of the participant racism is fabricated but perpetuated by agents within diverse communities. There is a strong indication that he views this struggle as being two

sided, whites vs. minorities. These two participants have shown a level of belief that whiteness is under attack and, therefore, they themselves are under attack.

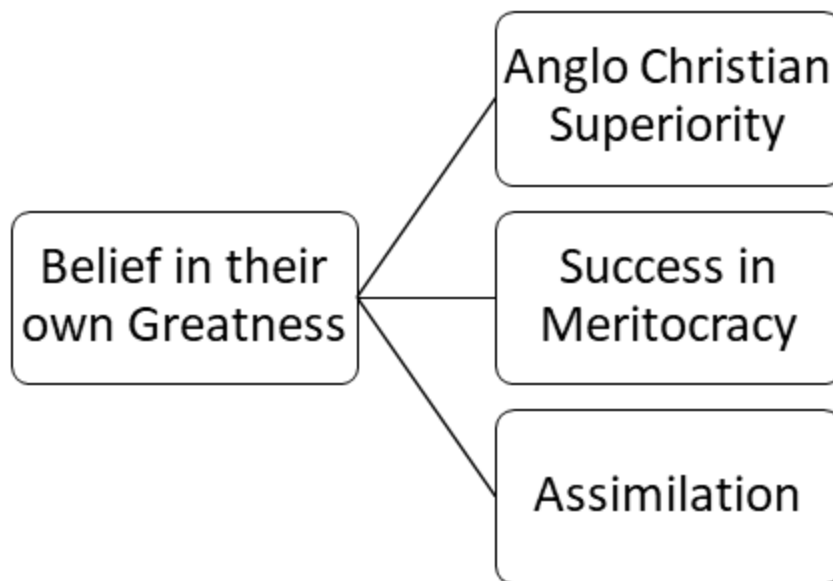
There is a strong level of binary thinking or a “us versus them mindset” evident. People of a different gender are different than themselves. These different people seek to destroy masculinity. Similarly, people of color are different than themselves and seek to undermine whiteness. These perceptions of aggression lead to a defensive position and allow for justification of biased beliefs and related “us versus them” binary way of thinking about difference. These participants’ attitudes on diversity suggest that their value is being unjustly undermined in modern society and they are under attack. This is then leading to individuals to keep to a small group of like-minded and similar-looking individuals. As one individual said, “The truth of the matter is that I like people who are like, who are like me.” These assimilationist sentiments and attitudes will be further discussed in Chapter five.

### ***Belief in their own Greatness***

All participants, in their own ways, conveyed, a sense of superiority over others. While this was exhibited in different ways, they did have similar expressions of superiority when discussing themselves juxtaposed against other diverse individuals. They expressed strong feelings of Anglo Christian culture’s superiority; they embraced meritocracy and there were suggestions towards desire to assimilate other individuals with varying degrees of diversity.

Figure 4.4

## Belief in their own Greatness Subthemes

*Anglo Christian Superiority –*

All four participants were devoutly religious. Three of the participants had parents who influenced their religious beliefs and one did not come to his convictions until later in life. However, all participants did show a varied belief in the superiority of their beliefs and culture and White westernized Christians. One participant said:

*You know, you're supposed to be [feel responsible for generational racism], but then again, they only bring out the bad stuff. Okay. If that's the case, then we should also be held responsible for, hey, this is the greatest country in the world (P102, 2023, 12).*

Another participant immediately agreed with him after this. White Christian men built this nation solely and therefore are superior. While that is the most evident and clear sense of superiority, other quotes suggest superiority in a comparative sense. For example, a participant had this to say when discussing the governments: role of helping minorities, “There were a lot of black families. Had a mother and a father. And since that. Act is going. Down drastically to like 20% because the way the rules are set up.” While not overtly speaking to the superiority of Anglo Christian culture, the culture is used as a measure. A traditional family consists of a mother and father, or is assumed so by this participant, and since people of color are now living in one parent households, then they are not as well off. Traditional values are being used to measure success. Deeper still, since families are not living those values, they are not successful. Anglo Christian cultural traditions, commonly held by white Southerners, are being used as a “measurement” of success. Therefore, anything that is in congruent with these cultural norms is inferior. Another example of this measuring success through perspective of Anglo Christian culture is when another participant said:

*I laugh every time we hear, you know, may God bless America. And I want to say, does America bless God? And I don't. Think we do. We just come up with all the possessions that we have, and we think we're the smartest in the world. And I and I fear at times. What God is going to do but happen to this nation (P103, 2023, 12).*

Since America stopped looking towards a deity for answers, it is doomed. Meanwhile it is the custom of Anglo Christians to look towards God for answers. Since it is believed that

his is not happening, America is worse off. Once again measurement, and therefore, superiority, of this demographic's cultural values prevails in their attitudes.

*Embracing Meritocracy –*

Meritocracy is the belief that in America or elsewhere anyone no matter their circumstances can gain success in life based off hard work. Three of the four participants expressed in their response that hard work was the pathway to success in America. This is seen with a participant when discussing the newest generation and work ethic:

*And he [Mark Cuban] said one of the best things he did was, you know, make his kids work, work for what they got, you know, just not be handed money. But, you know, you have to get a job and you have to you know, you have to earn it. Yeah. And I respected him for that. And I think that's. Kind of lacking (P103, 2023, 19).*

Getting the newest generation involved in meritocracy or hard work early is that way you make sure they succeed. Similarly, one participant had a strong role model that embodied hard work in the meritocracy and wished to follow in their path:

*And I always respected how much work he [his father] put in just for us. And when I'm in school, I'm always thinking I, you know, I can't be a disappointment. Now, you've been working way too hard to just have me be a slacker (P101, 2023, 6).*

America is a meritocracy, from father to son there is a belief that hard work is the determining factor to success. This belief in meritocracy combined with the previously established trend towards binary thinking, creates a belief that individuals of any

background can benefit from the meritocracy state. This in turn opens the door for a strengthening of biases. As one participant clearly spoke when discussing poor versus rich people:

*And they still want to blame other people for their misfortunes and stuff. And they won't take any responsibility for their actions. I watch it all the time. People make bad decisions and then they want to blame it on somebody else. And if they want to blame it on the white folks, well, that's their problem to do. But sometimes they just need to look in the mirror and say, hey, I need to make better decisions in my life and not keep blaming everybody else for the problems I have (P102, 2023, 12).*

Individual decisions, not a system of privileges to majority parties (white, men) are used to describe why people are falling behind. There is a level of equivalency going on with this participant, where he equates poor people with minorities and rich people with white folks. This elaborates on the feeling of superiority in the belief of meritocracy because he and his peers have done well in America, and minorities who he views as poor, haven't; therefore, he and his peers must be superior. This suggests a connection between diversity and meritocracy, even taking the minority versus white argument off the table that there is a disdain for the poor. The poor are viewed as lazy because they did not work hard enough to achieve success. Which negates any notion of institutional racism or societal advantages, that as white men, these participants are privy to (Paecheo, 2020). The prevailing belief instead is that if you work hard enough you will be successful.

*Assimilation –*

We have established that the participants in the focus groups had a strong inclination to believe in their own superiority and that America is a meritocracy. All members of the focus groups show a level of desire to spread their beliefs and fix the problems they have with other groups. However, given their belief in their own superiority, their solution to the issues was assimilation of minorities into their Anglo Christian culture. This was done in a variety of ways. One participant helped his Muslim neighbors with their flower bed and lawn because “their value system is different than ours.” He could not stand how his neighbors treated their yard so he was going to fix the issue himself. While this serves as a minor example of assimilation through direct action, it is an attempt to bring diverse agents in line with his beliefs. The same participant when discussing how white people could help minorities said, “Maybe you try to give them the right incentives for people, you know, for the behavior that you want.” This conveys that this participant wants to introduce a conditioning approach in order to assimilate their culture into his.

In many other ways there was discussion of assimilation too. Politically speaking there are efforts to revert to the “ways things were.” This is a byproduct of assimilation. As discussed, they believe their culture to be superior and therefore, they wish to revert to a time where their culture was more in a position of power. This is seen when a participant says “I don't think I think country's not following its history. They're [non-Southern white conservative men] trying to get away from what made this country great to start with,” The country was great at one time and there is a need to get back to that time. There is then a desire to assimilate other people into “Making America Great Again”.



Superiority in one's beliefs and self are distinct from a desire for diversity. The participants used meritocracy for reasoning for this attitude of superiority. Which may have led to a desire that assimilation into their culture was the right thing to bring about. This attitude pertains to diversity, shows a lack of acceptance of diverse thoughts and cultures within society, instead, preferring a homogenous one. How this reflects literature will be shown in chapter five.

*Concerning Entry Points and A Path Forward:*

Research questions two and three pertained to entry points and a path forward in diversity training when dealing with Southern white conservative men. Truth, love, and faith were commonly used terms when the discussion on how they would bring people to their side of thinking—out of that spurred a debate attempting to emphasize with other individuals. I think one participant summed it up best when he said:

*But the interesting thing is, you know you can love somebody to death, but if you never tell them the truth, you're not going to help them. But if you tell them the truth, cram it down their throats, but not loving them, you're not going to help. So, the two have to run in parallel, that you tell the truth, and you tell them in love. (P103, 2023, 17).*

Truth and love can be seen as an entry point and a path forward in discussions on diversity with this demographic. Additionally, when P101, with affirmative head nods from P102, and P104 suggested that “living in their shoes” would be an appropriate way of reaching out to people. P102 believed that speaking from personal experience was also

an effective way of reaching out to individuals who think differently than you. These results will be heavily discussed in Chapter Five.

Additionally, concerning the above themes on a dislike of new ideals, “Us versus them Mentality,” and a belief in their own greatness; some entry points emerge. Binary thinking is seen in the theme regarding their us versus them mentality. Kegan and Lahey, (2008) make the argument that this emphasis on one’s own beliefs over others is indicative of a Socialized Mindset. While most adults, around 58% of the population, exhibit this mindset there are more complex levels of development and ways of knowing (Kegan & Lahey, 2008). An adult development approach might be an entry point, or a path forward in, addressing diversity training for everyone, recognizing particularly, the southern white conservative male demographic.

Meritocracy may also be an entry point into creating change. As P102 said: “And they still want to blame other people for their misfortunes and stuff. And they won't take any responsibility for their actions.” There is an established belief in this participant, and others, as discussed earlier, in meritocracy. There is strong literature pointing towards this being a myth in America. If then as P103 said “that you tell the truth [when changing someone’s mind]” then it is worthwhile to consider telling these individuals about the myth of meritocracy as an entry point into a larger discussion on diversity and tolerance.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility:**

Following Cresswell et al (2007), to build trustworthiness within this thesis I gave a thick description of the setting and gave as many insights as the participants gave on the themes above. I also spent a prolonged time in the field and had continued

communication with the participants in their natural settings to identify the accuracy of the themes. Additionally, I elicited peer feedback on my work. These interactions informed my work and checked my own bias. Additionally, I kept a vocal memo and a journal, during the focus group process to denote physical reactions and gather consensus which was shown in the reporting of these results.

The themes of dislike of new ideals, an ‘us versus them mentality’, and belief in their own greatness are the attitudes on diversity of the participating southern white conservative men in this study. Additionally, the data analysis suggests truth and love, meritocracy and binary thinking as attitudes shared by these men. These attitudes present potential paths and entry points for the larger diversity training discussion. How these themes connect to literature and what recommendations can be made on action and further research will be discussed in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### **Introduction:**

This study aimed to identify the attitudes Southern white conservative men had on diversity. This was done to inform best practices in conducting diversity training for this demographic.

The main research question and two sub questions for this study were:

RQ1: What are the attitudes of Southern white conservative men on diversity?

RQ2: Where is an “entry” point to talking to this demographic on diversity?

RQ3: What is the path forward in reaching this demographic about diversity training?

After creating and refining the questions, a qualitative study was done with four participants in a focus group environment. This group was made up of the population of the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. The audio of the groups was recorded and transcribed. After completion of the transcriptions, open coding was conducted to turn the raw data into concept sets. Afterward, comparative analysis was conducted on coded data sets in order acquire conceptual saturation. From that the three themes of dislike for perceived new ideals, an Us vs. Them Mentality, and a belief in their own greatness were discussed. The following is a discussion of the findings and how they relate to the research literature.

### **Overview of Key Findings:**

#### ***Dislike of New Ideals:***

The literature gave vague references to this overarching theme. Peacock (2007) particularly through discussion of sense of place identified a traditional mindset when conforming to outside influence. Emphasis on social media in the newest generations “entitlement” and “laziness” is an example of Southern attitudes towards non-Southern values. Social media provides access to globalism and outside perspectives that contrast with the Southern sense of place. When P102 said “I think the younger people today are being sold a lot of goods and they're buying [it] hooks, lines, and sinkers. And they don't think for themselves. They think whatever social media tells them what they think,” it appears to tie back also to Individualism. Pacheco, (2020) as previously discussed, stated individualism in white masculinity usually appears as looking after the individual rather than the collective good. Social media is maybe a place for collectivist thought which goes against individualist ideals. They are opposites. So, then P102 and two of the other participants voiced similar opinions, affirming Pacheco (2020) and Peacock’s (2007) claims of a Southern sense of place and an emphasis on individualism in white masculinity.

The second subtheme of hatred of perceived new ideals, was the public presence of the LGBTQ+ demographic. This line of conversation was not expected and not reviewed in the literature. However, disdain for the LGBTQ+ community is, perhaps, a lack of empathy for diverse demographics. This would confirm the theory espoused by Cundiff and Komarraju, (2008) that white men, according to the study, exhibit a lack empathy for such groups, broadly speaking. When a participant called the Transgender Movement “stupid,” it came from a lack of empathy, which is very concerning but

indictive of cultural norms reflected in the literature. A lack of empathy can be hurtful and hateful to someone from that demographic.

The third subtheme, political correctness, is a continuation of Cundiff and Komarraju's (2008) assertion that white men lack cultural empathy. It also points to a conception of discrimination in a verbal sense, through stereotypes and racially derogatory remarks. Consider the historic precedence that Harold, (2016) and Noyalas et al, (2021). In the South this shows as a trend of discriminatory or even malicious acts against the Black racial group. Which confirms the argument by Peacock (2007) and Wellman (1993) of a generational continuance of racial tension.

What was not seen is blatant racial bias, meaning the use of extreme derogatory language and stereotypes in conversation which was suggested by Wright and Esses (2017) as being a possibility. Stereotypes and racist names were used subversively. Participants showed a proclivity to use the term "Black" as an all-encompassing term rather than People of Color of racial minorities. Stereotypes were not openly expressed. Discussion around stereotypes focused on socio-economic trends and meritocracy. For example, when P102 said:

*And they still want to blame other people for their misfortunes and stuff. And they won't take any responsibility for their actions. I watch it all the time. People make bad decisions and then they want to blame it on somebody else. And if they want to blame it on the white folks, well, that's their problem to do. But sometimes they just need to look in the mirror and say, hey, I need to make better decisions in my*

*life and not keep blaming everybody else for the problems I have (P102, 2023, 12).*

While not blatantly referring to people of color in this quote the fact he says “blame it on the white folks” gives a strong indication that he is talking about people of color. If we then make the inference that this quote is about people of color, he is embracing a stereotype, however, he is not forward with his communication of that which may have been expected based off the claims of Wright and Esses (2017). This actually is more aligned with Rich’s (2011), and by extension Bonilla-Silva’s (2014), claims that other intersectional identities are being conflated to the Black racial group.

### ***Us vs. Them Mentality***

The literature gave a strong indication that this would be found in the results of the study. Binary thinking, which this theme is predominantly concerned with, was a primary factor leading to the literature framework of attitudes in diversity by the Southern white conservative male demographic. DiAngelo and Dyson, (2018) and Peacock (2007) position the concepts of binary thinking on topics of race and the South as being a white and Southern perspective.

Gender, in the traditional sense, is also viewed in binary terms. I am reminded by the quote P103 had “men have certain strengths and women have certain strengths.” These attitudes were found in the literature. Cundiff and Komarraju, (2008) and Jones (2022) both make similar claims that, in the workforce, men prefer other men than women in both leadership roles and working alongside. P103 conveys binary thought. It might be inferred that his logic would proclaim, if a man can do this job then a woman

can't. Similarly, if a woman can do this job, then a man shouldn't. Misogyny is in this set of Southern white conservative male demographic in the Shenandoah valley. P102 re-confirmed the position of Schrock and Schwalbe (2009), pertaining to men being the dominant gender when he said, "They still kind of look up to the guys in a relationship." This shows a level of dominance seen within this subject's perception. Confirming Schrock and Schwalbe's (2009) ascertain that men are pre-disposed to desire dominance.

People of color too were not seen as being part of the same group as Southern white conservative men. This can be seen most prominently in their proclivity to only refer to people of color as "Black" or "Blacks" throughout all the focus groups that people of color came up. While this shows a lack of respect and understanding towards the terms individuals of color preferred to be called by, it also shows a lack of distinction amongst a diverse group. According to DiAngelo and Dyson, (2018) that is a clear-cut example of binary thinking. While I admit struggling with this myself, the fact that there was no concerted effort to even ask what the preferred describing noun would be for people of color is very troubling. The implications of this as discussed above are deeply troubling given the historical trends of racism in the South (Harold, 2016; Noyalas et al, 2021; Peacock, 2007).

The final subtheme of this pertained to the perceptions of hostility against Southern white conservative males in practice this means reverse racism or reverse sexism. The attitudes of the group were best exemplified by the quote from P103:

*And I think that it [the pendulum of rights] has swung so much to woman's rights and black rights that that's what you see a lot of. And well you know, is that where*



*the pendulum needs to be or is it doesn't need to be more equal? (P103, 2023, 12).*

Reverse racism did not really come up in the initial literature review. This was simply do to it not fitting in thematically with the review. The myth of reverse racism, much like the myth of meritocracy, is a way for white men to claim power and discrimination at the same time. However, Suiter (2016) makes the claim that reverse racism cannot exist, as any biases against the white racial group from people of color are reactionary rather than unjustified, meaning that perceived racist actions from minority groups are only expressed in order to gain equal power with majority groups. So, while this perception of aggression is an attitude, it is a false notion when looking at the larger picture. DiAngelo and Dyson, (2018) makes a similar claim about reverse racism and cites a study that showed among an undisclosed amount of white men reported feeling reverse racism was a valid phenomenon however did not experience any form of reverse racism personally. This is similar to the sentiment of the research participants in my focus groups who believed that they were “under attack,” yet little in the way of actual lived experience towards reverse racism or reverse sexism was seen. The men in these studies are embracing a myth of reverse racism that in turn perpetuates their own aggression towards people they feel are unfairly treating them.

### ***Belief in own Greatness***

The literature indicated this would be an attitude of Southern White Conservative Men, as they are among the advantaged group in business and society (Acker, 2006; Foschi, 1996; Hirsh, 2009; Merluzzi & Sterling, 2017; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019; Rubery &

Grimshaw, 2015; Rivers et al, 2010; Sawert, 2019). Expressions of their superiority to other social groups were expected. Assimilation, however, was not represented in the literature reviewed. P102 makes a claim that:

*I see blacks get upset with Blacks that are doing well. They call them uncle toms and stuff like that. They can't. They seem to get upset with if they've been real successful. And they're doing a lot of stuff that they feel like it's the white community's way of doing stuff (P102, 2023, 6).*

Similarly, P103 suggested how to create change in the African American community “Maybe you try to give them the right incentives for people, you know, for the behavior that you want.” This is particularly troubling as it suggests the use of classical conditioning without ethical consideration. In essence, these men seek to diminish a deeply rooted and vibrant culture of the black racial group. In suggesting the “right incentives” for “the behavior that you want,” this participant is making the claim that my racial group is superior and other’s need to be like me and like us, in essence, affirming an assimilationist stance that “I Like People... Who Are Like Me.” And if people are not like me and my racial group, then assimilation must and should take place. In an ideal world people would have similar values. However, every culture and the worlds have what makes them unique. Assimilation, as a strategy for achieving shared values across diverse peoples and cultures, has long been problematic. As analogy, consider a stew. The stew is made of beef, carrot, celery, potato and whatever else might be included. All these ingredients work together, in harmony, to make something truly special, however, each ingredient is unique and different from the other. Assimilation, unfortunately, is like

a stew with different vegetables, yet all that is recognized are cooked carrots. When one vegetable overrides all the others, the result is bland and unappetizing.

***Conclusions:***

The literature reviewed provided a conceptual framework, despite little empirical evidence, which was seen through the themes of these focus groups. The results generated showed binary thinking, which led to a perception of difference pertaining to gender and race. The participants also exhibited behaviors which fell in line with the paradigm of white masculinity being heavily influenced by individualism. Their perceptions of new ideals, that of disfavor, may be connected to the concepts of a southern sense of place and conservative homogeneity (Peacock, 2007; Peacock, 2021). Their belief in meritocracy was also conveyed in the literature despite the inaccuracies of their claims about its authenticity. These men, did not show blatant racial bias by using racist slurs and stereotypes as was suggested they would by Wright and Esses (2017). However, they did show strong biases against individuals not belonging to their demographic. I think the quote that encapsulate this the most is when P103 said “The truth of the matter is that I like people who are like, who are like me.” Through both the findings and the literature, Southern, white, conservative men favor individuals like them over those who are not. These men conclude there is a need for assimilation to get along with everyone as if they are all alike, then they will be liked.

**Recommendations for Further Study:**

This study, thanks to the Wellman (1993) study, can be duplicated easily among other demographics with only a few tweaks to the questions asked in the focus groups in order to gain similar information on diversity attitudes.

Interesting to note, is the similarity in view of this study with Rich (2011). Rich (2011) gathered information on white attitudes on race and socioeconomic diversity in the scope of a racially integrated Maryland neighborhood. The study found that attitudes on race and socioeconomic status were conflated, aligning with Bonilla-Silva's (2014) claims that class is sometimes conflated with blackness. This study had similar findings of conflation and with assimilation and meritocracy. Further study along these lines would be beneficial and may be useful in seeing distinctive attitudes within the South, Northern South and Deep South on the lines of diversity. As there were no blatant racial attitudes, meaning the use of racial slang and derogatory stereotypes claimed by Wright and Esses, (2008) however there was conflation of demographic biases and stereotypes which were more aligned with Rich, (2011) out of Maryland. Perhaps there will be found strong differences between them as it may show first an even more regionalized perception to diversity and may also go against the earlier claims made by Peacock (2021) on conservative homogeneity and stagnant ideals found within.

### **Reflection:**

I was a novice in facilitating focus groups. There were questions and dialogue that were left undiscussed. For example, when P104 was discussing interracial marriage and his opposition to it, there were measures I could have taken to have him elaborate on the topic at hand. However, I was unconfident in my ability to do so. I did not know how to

ask him to elaborate, and I did not want to break up a discussion that was occurring among the participants I have learned and grown as a facilitator of conversations about diversity. In the future I would ask more probing and follow up questions in instances where it appeared racist views were being expressed. Additionally, meeting at a church building may have made the discussion more religious, leading individuals to express their religious and individual faith perspectives more. Perhaps if the focus groups took place in a library or a restaurant, maybe the focus of the group would have changed as well.

***Biases:***

My personal biases played a role in my findings. I have a close affiliation with all members of my focus group and remain in regular contact. This prior relationship may have skewed my manner, both in the focus groups and with the themes generated. For example, in retrospect, I could have asked for explanation of exact religious tenets or beliefs. I also could have pointed out the myth of meritocracy to them and asked them to defend it. Also, as an identified member of the demographic, there were times where I found myself agreeing with members on certain issues, most prominently on their perceptions of generational villainization. This may be important to note because, while I consider myself reformed from most of my previously held beliefs, I have gotten in the habit of hearing out anyone regardless of affiliation. I still hold strong biases against my generation, I do feel there is a sense of entitlement and a dangerously high level of usage of social media among them. Therefore, I found myself agreeing with them. As I proceed with facilitation of diversity training, I will remain aware that despite my personal progress there are still biases I hold, and I will strive to mitigate these as I go along.

**Recommendations for Action:**

Where to begin is quite difficult given there are so many challenges and possibilities. There is a strong bias in this group against anyone that does not belong to this group. They perceive threats from other groups, both unjustly and without factual basis. With this found knowledge then, where do we begin to show my demographic that their perceptions are wrong and that they are unjustly oppressing different already disenfranchised groups? I am reminded by the words of P103.

*But the interesting thing is, you know you can love somebody to death, but if you never tell them the truth, you're not going to help them. But if you tell them the truth, cram it down their throats, but not loving them, you're not going to help. So, the two have to run in parallel, that you tell the truth and you tell them in love.*  
(P103, 2023, 17)

All four participants have things to say on how they would change someone's mind. I would suggest starting there. P103, as mentioned believed that when persuading individuals to your side, truth and love should be key tenets of it. This means that there should be a level of empathy taken when conducting diversity training with these participants in this demographic. Additionally, factual data or truth should be utilized. P102 and P101 further expressed a desire for both discussing lived experiences and "living in their shoes." I interpret this to mean that the practitioner of diversity training should be open to both sharing the lived experiences of all intersectional identities including race, gender and sexual orientation. Additionally, the practitioner should be well versed in the culture of Southern white conservative men, which this thesis has

aimed to explore further in some way, pertaining to their attitudes on diversity. Finally, P104 believed that faith was important too. I interpreted this to mean that they should have confidence or faith in themselves and the truth and love they are about to speak on.

In the results there was discussion on entry points and a path forward. These were truth and love, as previously discussed. Additionally, meritocracy and binary thinking are also possible entry points for creating a potential path forward in diversity training. Possible strategies for diversity training with individuals who harbor the same attitudes as the participants are discussed below

First, there was reasoning behind crafting this narrative inquiry as a focus group study. It was to instill a power dynamic where they were in charge, Shrock and Schwalbe (2008) suggest that masculinity is a series of actions set out to preserve male dominance. Individualism is a facet of this masculinity and leads to hostility when ideas men have been questioned (Pacheco, 2020). This is seen in the data, specifically in the subtheme of perceptions of other's aggression against Southern white conservative men. This is tied back to binary thinking and the perspective that things that go against their worldview are bad. These concepts of individualism and masculinity dictate that they must have dominance or power. Thus, when they meet a teacher or facilitator who exudes dominance by being head of a class and giving it structure, then they may not respond well to a classroom structure. So, contrary to some literature on teaching diversity and social justice, a highly structured classroom setting should be avoided (Adams et al, 2022). Rather, creating an unstructured environment that invites changes in beliefs is important without taking away their feeling of authority. This does come at a cost however, by giving away this teacher dominated environment this may lead to, especially

in a diverse classroom setting, a breaking down of “safe spaces.” What I am then suggesting, is to consider having no strong authority figure where ideals of political correctness and measures found in the act of creating “safe spaces” and “community agreements” not be used. I am now suggesting to practitioners of diversity training to be aware of binary thinking and the myth of meritocracy which are likely present. These can be used as entry points for further discussion, as pointed out in the results of my focus groups. The practitioner must be willing to support their side, the one of diversity, equity, and inclusion, with information and, if possible, lived experiences. If there are members who are part of minority groups, then, if they are willing, it may be important for them to be able to speak up at this time. However, this must once again be a decision these individuals make. The freedom of choice, and the freedom to speak about a topic must be preserved. In essence the diversity training practitioner’s job is not to attempt to transform the minds of southern white conservative men. To do so was seen in the data and literature led to a feeling of hostility towards them for their viewpoints and resulting in closing minds. Considering these entry points and practices may help diversity training practitioners to create an environment that invites *them* to transform their minds.

Kegan and Lahey (2009) would call this changing a move from a socialized mindset toward a more self-authoring mindset. This move in perspective is exhibited when one no longer identifies themselves exclusively with a group and that group identity is all important in relation to all other groups (binary thinking). Rather, they are changing and can view themselves as an individual who can change their mindset. Their viewpoint does not have to be based solely on the beliefs of individuals in their “group.” From that point a practitioner would be able to better convey the issues with the myth of



meritocracy and binary thinking in the workplace and expect individuals to be more open to adjusting their viewpoints on the matter.

What has been learned from this inquiry may be useful to facilitators of diversity training and anyone fighting for diversity equity and inclusion. Understanding resistance to change in this demographic can impact workplace attitudes on diversity. If transformational learning can occur, and lead to a downward trend in prejudice and an upward trend in acceptance, then businesses can benefit from better outcomes (Ely & Thomas, 2001). I understand that the outlook looks grim, these individuals clearly show a strong bias against a lot of diverse groups. However, I know from experience, of my own life, that change is possible in this demographic if we can build a place for them to experience truth and love. In 1968, Elvis Presley, a fan of the then recently assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, sang a song to close what was known as his comeback special called "If I Can Dream." I am reminded of its opening stanza in this:

"There must be lights burning brighter somewhere  
Got to be birds flying higher in a sky more blue  
If I can dream of a better land  
Where all my brothers walk hand in hand  
Tell me why, oh why, oh why can't my dream come true."

## Appendix A

### Focus Group Questions

#### Meeting 1: Building Trust

1. So, tell us about yourself. What is your age and where were you born?
2. Tell us about your current job? Do you like it, why are you doing it? If you were retired, what would you do for a living?
3. How was it growing up? Did you get along with your folks? Who did you look up to growing up?
4. Did you like school? What did you do for fun growing up? What do you do currently for fun?
5. From when you were a kid to how you are now, how have your viewpoints changed? Have they? What made you change your viewpoints?
6. How did you meet your spouse if you have one? Do or did they work for a living?
7. What do you fear most about the future?

#### Meeting 2: Diversity: Gender roles, religion, politics

1. What are your thoughts on the world today? What issues do you see the most?
2. How do you view women and men differently? What makes a man? What makes a woman?
3. How has the world changed since you grew up? Do you like the changes?
4. How important is religion in your life? What led you to your beliefs?
5. What's wrong with America nowadays? Who's at fault?
6. Who do you want to see in power? Why?
7. What would change your mind on that? Anything?
8. If you were to try to bring people to your side, how would you do that?
9. What are your views on race?

#### Meeting 3: Race and Race Relations

1. Last time we touched on race a little, thinking back when was the first time you saw someone who didn't look like you? Did you grow up in a mainly white area?
2. Do you think that race is an issue in your life? Do you think you are prejudicial?
3. How did your parents view black people or Latinos? Did you agree with them?
4. Do you think there is more the white race can do to help minorities? Or should they just help themselves?
5. You know statistically white men are better off than minorities. Why is that?
6. What's your opinion of Blacks Lives Matter? Barack Obama?
7. What does it mean to be a white man? To you?
8. Is there anything that we didn't discuss in these last three meetings, that we should have discussed?

## **Appendix B:**

### **Sample Consent Form**

#### **Consent to Participate in Research**

##### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by K. Patrick Schell Jr from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to identify the attitudes on diversity that Southern white conservative men hold. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of his master's thesis.

##### **Research Procedures**

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of a three focus groups that will be administered to individual participants. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to attitudes on diversity that Southern white conservative men hold. You will be audio recorded during the focus group study.

##### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require 6 hours of your time over three focus group meetings.

##### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

##### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits. However, the indirect benefits may come in term of making organizational diversity training more effective.

##### **Incentives**

You will not receive any compensation for participation in this study.

##### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented at conference. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researchers Upon completion of the study, all information that matches

up individual respondents with their answers including audio recordings will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

K. Patrick Schell Jr

LTLE Department

James Madison University

[schellkp@jmu.edu](mailto:schellkp@jmu.edu)

Edward Brantmeier

LTLE Department

James Madison University

Telephone: 970-231-0249

[Brantmej@jmu.edu](mailto:Brantmej@jmu.edu)

### **Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman

Chair, Institutional Review Board

James Madison University

(540) 568-2611

[harve2la@jmu.edu](mailto:harve2la@jmu.edu)

### **Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

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Name of Participant (Printed)

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Name of Participant (Signed)

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Date

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Name of Researcher (Signed)

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Date

This study has been approved by the IRB, protocol # 23-3848.

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