Positioned to Choose:
Reckoning with Racial Privilege in Progressive White Parents' School Choice Discourse

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation critically examines how socioeconomically advantaged, white progressive parents talk about what schools they choose for their children in ways that maintain, challenge, and disrupt inequity and white supremacy within the K12 education system. I ask: how do white, socioeconomically advantaged, politically progressive parents construct their white racial identity in relation to power, privilege, and racial difference through their K12 school choice discourse? I demonstrate how parents constructed their white racial identities in a range of ways that reflect varying stages of critical awareness of their privileged positionality. I account for this variation through considering how parents differently emphasized the competing values of community and the individual in their school choice discourse. Despite exhibiting significant differences in their varied stages of critical awareness, I argue progressive white parents must contend with the dynamics of the inescapability of the tension between reconciling their broader concerns for their communities with their narrow focus on securing individual advantages.

Engaging qualitative field methods, I conducted interviews and focus groups with forty-three white, politically progressive, socioeconomically advantaged parents of K12 school-aged children living in the Madison, WI area. Each dissertation chapter engages with these transcripts to pursue separate but related questions focused on four key concepts: choice, ideology, identity, and difference. This project intersects critical whiteness studies with the rhetoric of education policy to contribute to rhetorical scholarship that deepens our understanding of the tensions of white political progressives through attending to their privileged position in relation to systems of inequity in the K12 education system.

INTRODUCTION

Progressive White Parents and the Competing Values of Community and the Individual

In a June 2017 speech, former Secretary of Education Betsy Devos likened choice to a "basic human right." The longtime school choice advocate critiqued the limits of the public school system and advocated for the expansion of school choice reforms, declaring that a "system that denies parents the freedom to choose the education that best suits their children's individual and unique needs denies them a basic human right. It is un-American, and it is fundamentally unjust."[1] Through employing rights-based language, DeVos appealed to moral justice to suggest that a parent's ability to exercise choice serves as an inalienable right, resonating with the basic tenants of what it means to be an American.

Choice functions as a key concept within the United States' political culture and its emphasis on individual rights. Discourses of choice resonate broadly with abortion rights advocates arguing a pro-choice stance, anti-vaxxers professing their right to choose, and gun-rights activists asserting that carrying a firearm is an individual choice. Given the prominence of choice discourses within our contemporary lexicon, it is no surprise that choice influences how parents engage in educational decision making within K12 education.

The phrase school choice signals a broader reform movement that advocates for a parent's right to use public tax dollars to choose the best fit school for a child. It includes a spectrum of policy reforms, including open enrollment, magnet or specialty schools, charter schools, scholarship tax credit programs, and private school vouchers. These education policy reforms range in their degree of controversiality, from less controversial open enrollment programs to more controversial private school voucher programs. Traditionally, a student's

school is determined by a neighborhood catchment area that feeds into a designated public school based on place of residence. Mechanisms of school choice enable parents to elect an option other than their default neighborhood public school. Despite Republican politicians historically supporting school choice policies, the logic of parent-as-consumer entitled to choose has become a widespread approach to educational decision making across the political spectrum. In its contemporary manifestations, the language of school choice is rife with subjective measures of quality, justifications of unique circumstances, and often coded racism. When viewing school choice discourse in explicitly racial terms, it is evident that school choice is an inequity issue within K12 education.

Although parents of all races advocate for various forms of school choice, the historical legacy of the U.S. education system unfairly benefiting white families bears significance on its meaning. The language of school choice carries historical baggage that dates to the mid-twentieth century era of white opposition to school desegregation in the U.S. A glimpse into the historical uses of school choice demonstrates how this language has long been used to perpetuate unequal access to a quality education based on privilege and race.[2] This history of institutionalized racism in K12 education warrants scrutinization of how white parents in particular employ school choice discourses in the present-day in ways that reaffirm white privilege.

A specific quandary presents itself for politically progressive white parents, given the assumptions that accompany their left-of-center values. Often well-intentioned with their beliefs in educational equity, progressive white parents must reckon with the ways their unearned racial privileges afford them an advantage in the education system. White progressives, like their conservative counterparts, benefit from complex systems of neoliberalism and racial capitalism.

This raises questions as to how white progressive parents may intend to contribute to equity efforts while bound up in violent systems of racial oppression. I define white progressives as white people that politically identify as left of center with nominal commitments to social justice values like educational equity, antiracism, and multiculturalism. Progressive white parents must navigate the tension between their nominal commitments and their privileged positioning. Carrie Crenshaw defines white privilege as "a host of material advantages white people enjoy as a result of being socially and rhetorically located as a white person."[3] Whiteness operates as an oppressive and hegemonic social construct that unfairly positions socioeconomically advantaged, white progressive parents with greater access to school choice. This privileged position enables white progressive parents to influence the racial demographics of a school in ways that can perpetuate or disrupt segregation through the manner in which they assign value to certain schools. White progressive parents' school choice discourse is significant because unrecognized white privilege poses an obstacle to the democratic ideal of truly integrated schools.

Rhetorically, white progressive school choice discourse is a site to understand oppressive relations of power and social inequalities. Conversations in rhetorical studies have called for scholarship that critically interrogates the relationship between whiteness and the maintenance of racist systems in effort to dismantle white supremacy.[4] Responding to these calls, my project specifically examines how the hegemonic construct of whiteness gets maintained within the institution of the K12 education system. Decentering whiteness as the invisible and unstated norm within this context, I set my critical gaze on progressive white parents to consider their role in upholding inequity and racism within K12 education through school choice. To deepen our understanding of this area of public discourse, I conducted interviews and focus groups with white, socioeconomically advantaged, progressive parents in the Madison, WI area.

White Progressive Parents' School Choice Discourse from a Rhetorical Perspective

The extant Education literature on white, advantaged parents' school choice behaviors reveals much is already known on this topic. First, Education scholars suggest that school choice is socially charged and functions as a mode of social identity enactment.[5] Second, parents' school choice discourse offers a way to specifically study how parents think and talk about their school choice decisions.[6] Third, Education scholars demonstrate the need to isolate white parent choice behaviors in particular to call attention to the assumed normality of whiteness and its role in maintaining social inequalities and racial stratification.[7] Finally, heterogeneity exists within white, advantaged parent school choice behaviors that suggests degrees of difference based on political ideologies and racial ideologies.[8]

There are problems yet to grapple with when considering this topic through the lens of a rhetorical project in Communication Studies. As a rhetorician, I study the ways symbolic communication influences people. I am attuned to questions of how we use language, and how the relationship between language and power motivates people to act in certain ways. A rhetorical project that foregrounds questions of race, power, and privilege in approaching school choice discourse nuances our understanding of how, if at all, parents reckon with their white privilege when reflecting on their school choice decisions. From a rhetorical perspective, I believe these lingering problems can be articulated through four conceptual angles: choice, ideology, identity, and difference. These four concepts are critical to my study because I am interested in how choice circulates rhetorically in relation to progressive white parents' professed political ideology, formation of their white racial identity, and constructions of a racialized "other."

Rhetoricians have shown an interest in the discourse of "choice" as a focused area of study,[9] demonstrating that how we interpret choice discourses ought to vary depending on the rhetor's positionality.[10] We might further pursue this line of inquiry to consider choice discourses in terms of specific positionalities. Such an intervention prompts the question of how to interpret choice when talked about from the position of progressive white parents with the socioeconomic privilege to behave as consumers that choose where to send their students to school. Analyzing choice in relation to ideology provokes unanswered questions around the relationship between political ideology and racial ideology as it informs progressive white parents' commitments to their political convictions via the ways they talk about school choice. Furthermore, rhetorical scholars have critically interrogated processes of white identity formation and self-reflexivity.[11] Yet, absent within this white identity formation scholarship are examinations of how socioeconomically advantaged white political progressives demonstrate critical self-reflexivity of their social position and privilege specifically within the cultural context of the K12 school system. Finally, the perennial question of how individuals make meaning across difference through social constructions of "other" continues to be an enduring area of inquiry in Communication scholarship.[12] We have yet to fully consider the significance of school choice discourse to this ongoing conversation. Questions remain as to how progressive white parents orient themselves to racial difference through the ways they talk about their educational decisions in relation to a racialized "other."

The conceptual problems articulated above spark a set of research questions that guide this study. Principally, my dissertation asks: how do white, socioeconomically advantaged, politically progressive parents construct their white racial identity in relation to power, privilege, and racial difference through the ways they talk about their K12 school choice decisions?

Related to this overarching question are three sub-questions: first, how does their political ideology inform the ways they talk about their school choice decisions for their children?, second, to what extent does their discourse reflect a critical self-reflexivity of their white racial identity and an acknowledgement of their white privilege?, and third, how do they rhetorically position the value of diversity in relation to their school choice decisions?

My study engages the key terms choice, ideology, identity, and difference. Choice suggests a positionality of being able to choose and is a concept associated with access and privilege, thus unevenly distributed. Choice also signals race-absent, neoliberal consumer logics. I define ideology as the convictions, values, and beliefs individuals possess that uphold their ways of knowing and motivate their behaviors. Ideology does not exist absent of power. Depending on the positionality of those possessing it, ideology has the potential to manifest in hegemonic and oppressive or resistive and liberatory ways. Given the ways ideology is enmeshed in power structures, ideology needs to be understood in relation to identity. Identity is one's perception of self, how one understands their subjectivity, and identity is understood through varied levels of reflexivity. Identities are also social and outward-facing, meaning identity can be created in common with others through sharing characteristics and values. Finally, foregrounding the conceptual lenses of choice, ideology, and identity raises the question of how socioeconomically advantaged white parents communicate about racial difference, or how racialized "others" are constructed. I conceive of difference in terms of cues in language that indicate one's perceptions of a racially constructed other in relation to oneself. Placed together, these four key terms mark this project's conceptual focus on how choice operates in K12 educational contexts given considerations of ideology, identity, and difference.

My project contributes to disciplinary thinking on these key concepts in significant ways. First, through providing an ideology of choice from the position of white political progressives it contributes to scholarship on discourses of choice that argue for the need to foreground rhetors' social location. Second, it provides a sustained, critical examination of the tension between identity and ideology of white, political progressive parents. Through exploring how these two key concepts operate in tension, it deepens our disciplinary understanding of the constraints and opportunities of the particular social position of white political progressives. Third, this project engages rhetorical field methods to construct a primary text that deepens our understanding of vernacular discourses of white folks that are otherwise difficult for rhetorical scholars to encounter. It provides crucial insights as to how white folks construct their racial identity and racialize others through local, everyday discourses.

I argue throughout this dissertation that rather than conceive of progressive white parents as a monolith, we must interpret their school choice discourse along a continuum of critical awareness. Doing so illuminates the degrees of variation in which they construct their racial identities. I assert that among this seemingly homogenous group of white, socioeconomically advantaged, political progressives residing within the same geography, parents constructed their white racial identities in a range of ways that reflect varying stages of critical awareness of their privileged positionality. I account for this variation through considering how parents differently emphasized the competing values of community and the individual in their school choice discourse. Despite exhibiting significant differences in their varied stages of critical awareness of their positionality, I argue progressive white parents must contend with the dynamics of the inescapability of the tension between reconciling their broader concerns for their communities with their narrow focus on securing individual advantages.

Literature Review

In the section that follows, I outline three areas of literature that inform my research focus: critical whiteness studies, the rhetoric of K12 education policy, and scholarship on white political progressives. In this review of literature, I demonstrate the need to expand critical whiteness studies through focusing on progressive white parents' K12 school choice discourse. Doing so in turn contributes to scholarly conversations within the area of the rhetoric of K12 education policy through intersecting this literature with critical whiteness studies. I suggest that attending to these gaps in the literature will deepen scholarly understandings of the tension inherent to the position of white political progressives in terms of the competing values of community and the individual.

Critical Whiteness Studies

My dissertation contributes to rhetorical scholarship within critical whiteness studies concerned with questions of white identity formation through its focus on how progressive white parents construct their racialized identity within K12 school choice discourse. Rhetorical scholars engaged in projects of critical whiteness studies seek to understand and deconstruct the hegemonic forces of whiteness as the normative center.[13] Whiteness as a hegemonic social construct subscribes to a color-blind ideology that denies or minimizes the racial category of whiteness, fomenting the structural unequal privileging of whites and racial stratification.[14] Raka Shome defines whiteness as a "*process* constituted by an ensemble of social and material practices in which whites (and often non-whites for survival) are invested, by which they are socialized, and through which they are produced."[15] The failure of white individuals to account for their white racialized subjectivity continues to center whiteness and render its privilege invisible.[16] Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek's seminal essay calls for the need to decenter

whiteness and render it visible,[17] leading to a proliferation of Communication scholarship committed to the project of critical whiteness studies.

One specific aim of critical whiteness studies is to deconstruct whiteness through better understanding the dynamics white racial identity formation. Such scholarship examines, for instance, how white individuals self-identify[18] and processes of white racial enculturation.[19] Extant literature on white identity formation also seeks to understand critical self-reflexivity among white folks.[20] Indeed, Carrie Crenshaw notes how the invisibility of both white privilege and institutionalized racism presents a challenge for a majority of white people who do not view themselves as racist and fail to recognize how institutionalized racism manifests.[21] Stephanie Hartzell highlights the need for more U.S. Americans to "confront their position in the contemporary racial landscape" as an age of race-consciousness emerges through directing attention to how white individuals understand their racial subject position.[22] Such degrees of self-awareness correspond with what Diane Reay, David James, and Gill Crozier call "social reflexivity"[23] or Moon and Flores call a "critical self-reflexivity."[24] These projects deepen and nuance scholarly understandings of white identity formation as part of critical whiteness studies' concern with dismantling white supremacy.

I intervene in this body of scholarship through isolating how political identity informs white racial identity formation within the specific cultural context of K12 education. My project emphasizes the ways white identities are dynamic and complex through examination of how political ideology intersects with racial ideology. Moreover, while discourses of white identity formation occur within various cultural sites, I specifically focus on K12 school choice discourse.

Rhetoric of K12 Education Policy

My project intersects critical whiteness studies with the rhetoric of K12 education policy to contribute to rhetorical scholarship that examines the dynamics of race and K12 education. Communication scholarship on critical whiteness studies accounts for how whiteness as a hegemonic construct manifests in various sites, such as education. Communication scholars have considered the impact of whiteness in higher education settings.[25] These projects examine white identity development through focus on the formation of white racialized identities and social positionality of college-aged students.[26] While Communication scholarship has taken up these questions of white identity formation within the context of higher education, I suggest we might expand our scope to include K12 schooling as another salient context where whiteness manifests. Specifically, the discourse of school choice opens a site for critical understandings of white identity formation in terms of how white parents talk about their school choice decisions in relation to power, privilege, and racial difference.

My project applies an explicit critical whiteness studies lens to rhetorical scholarship that examines the dynamics of race and K12 education policy. Rhetorical scholars within the sub-area of K12 education policy and race have considered the historical impacts of school choice policies on African American communities; [27] how local discursive communities engage in deliberation to negotiate racial differences;[28] and how market-based education reform rhetoric obscures structural racism.[29] I build on these conversational threads through setting my critical gaze on white parents' school choice discourse to consider their role in upholding inequity and racism within the K12 education system.

White Political Progressives

My dissertation focuses specifically on the end of the political spectrum often overlooked in critical whiteness studies scholarship: political progressives. There is far-less scholarship

critically examining the colorblind ideology and coded racism of the political left, despite the fact both liberals and conservatives are embedded in systems of neoliberalism, white supremacy, and capitalism.[30] Indeed, extant literature on white identity formation demonstrates that white racial identities broadly are replete with tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes.[31] It is necessary to isolate the position of white political progressives to nuance the contradictions and tensions specific to this social identity.

Despite their complicity in systems of oppression, white political progressives engage rhetorical maneuvers to evade associations with their privilege. Rhetorical scholars have identified how progressive white folks are often reluctant to view their own complicity in racialized systems of oppression.[32] This tendency to avoid naming white privilege explicitly as such is a contradictory behavior of more self-aware white liberals. Their defensiveness around confronting issues of white privilege is often exhibited through talking around race, employing racial euphemisms, or minimizing the significance of race.[33] Sara Ahmed describes how white progressives often cling to the progressive label to deflect from their own complicity with racism.[34] Matthew Houdek likewise observes the tendency of white liberals to evade accusations of racism through scapegoating racial extremists.[35] Moreover, white political progressives often engage in spectacles of performative allyship while demonstrating a lack of accountability to their antiracist commitments.[36] Wendy S. Hesford defines performative white allyship as the "violence of identification and epideictic displays of white citizenship built on Black death, Black suffering, and Black grief."[37] This scholarship demonstrates the need for further research on the complexities of white political progressives to consider how the tensions of this social position play out in various cultural contexts.

Careful examination of how white progressives enact their political identity through school choice further illuminates the contradictions inherent to their position. Margaret Hagerman's "conundrum of privilege" provides a useful springboard from which to grapple with these tensions.[38] Hagerman characterizes the "conundrum of privilege" as the complexity of raising a white, privileged child in a way that supports the individual child while also recognizing the injustice of the systems of privilege that benefit the child. She considers: "How does one raise children in ways that truly cultivate antiracist praxis while still receiving unearned white advantage and the benefits of class privilege?"[39] Hagerman indicates the tension between white political progressives' valuing of antiracism, social justice, and dismantling oppressive systems with the fact that they are positioned to benefit from such systems. My project intervenes in these observations about the complexities and contradictions of the white political progressive. I examine the tensions of the progressive white identity through the competing values of community and the individual.

Collective beliefs in the value of community unite political progressives. Sharon Crowley indicates how a shared belief set discursively functions to reinforce a sense of in-group identity.[40] Generally speaking, political progressives believe in the good of the broader community and a commitment to social wellbeing. Robert Asen suggests that belief in the value of community is a "practice" that involves concern for others and feelings of mutuality and solidarity.[41] Some progressive parents manifest their political identity through the act of making educational decisions that support their beliefs in the welfare of the broader community. Indeed, Maia Bloomfield Cucchiara and Erin McNamara Horvat articulate that school choice feels like a symbolic way for some parents to enact their political ideologies, and certain parents will make school choice decisions to align with their liberal political beliefs.[42] White progressive parents

may intentionally make educational decisions for their children in accordance with aspects of their progressive ideology, like educational equity and multiculturalism.[43] School choice functions as a tangible way to act on their nominal commitments rooted in the value of community.

Although progressive white parents may choose to demonstrate their commitments to community through their school choices, they do so within a U.S. social context that celebrates and values the individual. Rebecca Kuehl identifies how dominant ideologies circulate in education reform discourses to promote individualism through emphasizing "individual accountability" and "personal responsibility."[44] Broader capitalist structures reinforce these principles of individualism. Ronald Jackson observes how the U.S. capitalist system depends on an "insistence on rabid individualism." Noting the connection between whiteness and capitalism, he describes how whiteness functions as a "template" for "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstrap American capitalist success," in a way that suggests all are equally capable of individual success regardless of structural disadvantages.[45] In this way, whiteness and capitalism are inextricably linked. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva asserts that white adherence to the principle of individualism obscures the uneven structural racial dynamics and reproduces white supremacy.[46] Despite white progressive parents' commitments to the value of community, they exercise school choice within a broader, racist capitalist structure which promotes the individual in race neutral ways that dangerously reinforce racial inequity.

Dominant neoliberal ideologies circulate in K12 education to further reinscribe celebrations of the individual. Neoliberalism exerts a hegemonic influence as an orientation that applies a market-based lens to previously non-economic public realms, like education.[47] Neoliberal structural influences have constructed K12 public education into a site of privatization

reforms that create uneven systems of privilege that foment race- and class-based inequities.[48] Neoliberal ideology manifests in education discourse to promote values like the freedom of competition and individual choice through efforts to privatize education.[49] As a result of these hegemonic influences, the logic of parent as individual consumer has become a generally accepted norm in U.S. K12 education contexts. Neoliberal education reforms promote an ideology of school choice that positions parents into a consumer entitled to choose.[50] Within this neoliberal ideology, choice becomes associated with an abstracted form of freedom: a parent's freedom to shop for the best fit school and a parent's freedom to have options.[51] One danger in this of course is that neoliberalism depends on the depoliticization of race and the absence of race as a legitimate topic of public discourse. Neoliberalism's minimization of racial inequities centers whiteness as the invisible racial reference and blames individual people of color for their shortcomings rather than attend to structural racism.[52] The broader context of neoliberalism promotes race-absent discourses that position the parent as an individual consumer without fully reckoning with the ways structural racism produces systems that unevenly position families to exercise school choice. Robert Asen observes how dominant neoliberal discourse, like that of former education secretary Betsy DeVos, hyper-focuses on the individual, "at the expense of wider structures that conditio[n] individual action."[53] Hegemonic systems of capitalism and neoliberalism promote and celebrate the individual while perpetuating systems of racial inequity. My project illuminates how white progressive parents reckon with the tension between their communally-motivated concerns for society's wellbeing and the forces that influence their drive to secure individualistic advantages.

Methods

To trace how progressive white parents' school choice discourse operates in K12 education, I conducted rhetorical field work in the summer of 2021. Through a combination of interviews and focus groups, I engaged with the unique perspectives of forty-three socioeconomically advantaged K12 parents in Dane County, WI that racially identify as white, and politically identify as left-of-center. Locating primary texts of local, everyday discourses of whiteness that are already in existence often presents a challenge for rhetorical scholars. Field methods augment our methodological toolbox, affording rhetorical critics the ability to engage otherwise inaccessible texts among vernacular publics.[54] Rhetorical field methods enabled me to construct a primary text to interrogate the localized discursive phenomenon of how progressive white parents with socioeconomic privilege construct their white racial identity in relation to power, privilege, and racial difference in their school choice discourse.

Moreover, field methods' participatory nature creates opportunities for *in situ* rhetorical study, immersing the critic into the cultural context in which discourse circulates.[55] This methodological approach allowed me to capture the nuance, texture, and complexity in how this local, shared culture rhetorically constructs their racial identities amidst broader discourses. Given my position within this methodological approach, it is important to recognize the implications of my own white racial identity as both the researcher and the critic. As the researcher, I share several characteristics of my social identity with study participants: I racially identify as white, I politically identify as progressive, I benefit from socioeconomic advantages, and I am a parent. As I engaged with participants, some of these commonalities were obvious, such as my white race; some were assumed, such as my progressive identity; and some were at times made explicit, such as my role as a mother. These shared identifications absolutely

influenced participants' comfort levels and the ways they chose to discuss their views with me.[56] As the rhetorical critic, I approach this project as one committed to decentering whiteness while simultaneously acknowledging my own whiteness and my implication in systems of white supremacy. I am also aware that the work of this recognition is an ongoing process. My goal here is to work toward critically deconstructing these systems through deepening our understanding of the power of language to uphold pervasive, yet often invisible and violent, systems of racism in K12 education.

To recruit study participants, I conducted snowball sampling through contacts in my personal network, including Madison-area parents and PTO leaders. They shared the details of my study on their neighborhood association listservs, school PTO listservs, social media pages, and directly with friends and neighbors in their social networks. I also asked participants at the conclusion of their interview for recommendations of people that might be interested in participating. I followed up with some, but not all, as to ensure I recruited a representative sample of parents from a wide variety of neighborhoods across the Madison area. I conducted twenty-nine interviews, lasting between thirty-nine minutes to one hour and thirty-five minutes. Twenty-six of these were one-on-one with an individual parent and three were two-on-one with a married couple, totaling thirty-two interview participants. I also conducted three seventy-five minute focus groups with three to four participants in each, totaling eleven focus group participants. The interviews and focus groups met either over Zoom or in-person. Participants received a monetary incentive in recognition of their time. With approval from the UW-Madison Institutional Review Board and the consent of each participant, the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

Prior to their interview or focus group, participants completed an eight-question demographic survey from which I determined their socially economically advantaged designation and confirmed their political identity. My socioeconomically advantaged designation is based on participants' reported household incomes and education levels. All participants earned within the range or above the median household income for Dane County[57] and all participants held a BA/S degree, with more than two-thirds holding advanced degrees. My political progressive designation is based on all participants identifying as left of center on the political spectrum.[58] All forty-three participants racially identified as white/Caucasian. Thirty-nine identified as female and four as identified as male. My sample skews heavily female, as more mothers than fathers indicated their interest in participating in the study. The majority of participants were in heterosexual marriages, although a handful were in gay marriages, and some were single-parents or divorced. Parents worked in a range of careers such as attorneys, librarians, software engineers, social workers, researchers, educators, small-business owners, and stay-at-home moms. In addition to these roles, many parents assumed leadership positions at their children's schools, serving as classroom volunteers, afterschool club facilitators, members of parent leadership groups like the parent teacher organization (PTO) or parent equity groups, leaders of school fundraising efforts, or regular attendees of parent assemblies.

At the start of every interview, I shared my background as a former public-school teacher, indicating how that experience raised questions about the education system that led me to my PhD program at UW-Madison and conducting this dissertation project.[59] The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and followed an interview protocol that covered five main themes: school attendance background, political identity and values, definitions of school choice, race and difference, and the position of white parents in school choice. Any method presents

advantages and limitations, and I acknowledge that people in any interview situation may present the best version of themselves rather than reveal their authentic thoughts. While that may have certainly occurred in these conversations, I cannot know for sure. I base my analysis off the transcripts as they were presented knowing that markers of self-reflexivity informed the questions I asked of these texts. Additionally, these perspectives come from people specifically living in the midwestern city of Madison, WI. This represents one specific geography. I do not claim that this represents a generalizable perspective of all white, socioeconomically advantaged, progressive parents.

I completed two rounds of coding on the transcripts. To begin, I open coded two sets of six representative interview transcripts in order to build my code book of first-level descriptive themes. Next, I first-level coded all interview and focus group transcripts according to these descriptive codes using NVIVO Qualitative Software. Then, I completed second-level analytic coding within each of these descriptive themes. A critical paradigm guided my analytic approach. Dennis Mumby identifies a critical paradigm as concerned with the "complex relationships among discourse, ideology, and power" and how these socially construct systems that influence identity and the way one exists in the world.[60] I employed rhetorical analysis as my critical method. Rhetorical analysis begins with an interest in a phenomenon and attempts to understand how it manifests itself discursively. This process unfolds through an oscillation between conceptual questions and the text of analysis, as the text is considered in relation to the specific conceptual questions to deepen understanding of the text to advance a conceptual argument. James Jasinski describes that theory and criticism in rhetorical studies intersect to result in, "the development of conceptually grounded, interpretive accounts of particular discursive performances."[61] One key assumption that framed my inquiry is an understanding of rhetoric as

the study of how symbolic communication influences people or how words and symbols move people to act. This definition is based on the idea that language has the power to do things. Another key assumption is this is a rhetorical project because of its concern with the way we use language to make sense of our social worlds. This project specifically focuses on parent discourse to nuance, texture, and deepen our understandings of how parents talk about school choice.

Case Context: The Progressive, Advantaged, and Segregated City of Madison, WI

As Wisconsin's capital city and home to the state's flagship university, Madison's current population hovers around 269,840. Consistently ranked as one of America's "best places to live" Madison is nationally recognized as eco-friendly, physically fit, bike-friendly, family-friendly, and of course as a college football town.[62] Madison is also nationally well-known for its progressive politics. In the 2020 Presidential election, over 75% of Dane County, where Madison is located, voted for President Biden, and over 76% of Madison voted in favor of two local school district referenda that would raise property taxes in support of the city's schools.[63] The city is steeped in a long history of taking an active role in progressive causes. Protests regularly gather in front of the Wisconsin State Capitol building to advocate for abortion-rights, gun control reform, marijuana legalization, or climate change policies. In the summer of 2020, after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, Madison-area residents participated in racial justice protests in downtown Madison for nearly 11 consecutive days. Madison residents also tend to be highly educated and economically advantaged with 58.5% of its population holding a Bachelor's degree or higher and an average household income of $67,565.[64] These

socioeconomic levels cater to class privilege, making Madison a comfortable city to live in for those who are white and middle-class.

Accounting for Madison's racial segregation and educational disparities paints a less bright picture of the city. A 2020 report ranked Wisconsin the most segregated state in America, reflecting the significant disparities between the state's white and Black residents in areas such as income gaps and labor force participation.[65] Historical patterns of residential segregation, which reveal the city's alignment with national trends of exclusionary housing and zoning practices dating back to the 1930s, continue to shape a racially segregated city.[66] Madison is an overwhelming white city with nearly 73% of its population racially identifying as white, and about 9% identifying as Asian, 7% identifying as Latinx, and 7% identifying as Black.[67] Despite its majority white population, Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) is what is known as a "majority-minority" school district. More than half of MMSD's students are students of color, and white students comprise 43% of the district's enrollment.[68] Within the district, white students consistently outperform their Black and Brown peers on a variety of academic measures.[69]

Madison's school choice context made it a salient site for this study. All Madison-area students are assigned to a default public school based on their designated attendance areas. There is a lottery-system in MMSD for three middle-schools and for the Dual Language Immersion program. MMSD offers an internal transfer program, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction provides an inter-district public school open enrollment program. Parents can also choose among the handful of charter school options in the area. Additionally, there are a variety of private schools around Madison as well as a statewide private school voucher program available for qualifying families.

Whether it be an intentional choice or choice by happenstance, Madison-area families also exercise school choice through choosing where to live. Although all the public schools within the city proper are part of MMSD, local assumptions persist about the varying quality of MMSD schools based on location. Madison is geographically situated on an isthmus between two lakes that divide the city into what residents refer to as the "West Side" and the "East Side." Regarded as the more white collar of the two, the West Side carries some of the highest property taxes in the city as well as a strong reputation for high-performing schools. The parents I spoke to consistently lauded West High School as the standard of comparison for all the other high schools in the city, describing how families intentionally choose to live in neighborhoods that fall within the West High zoning boundaries. The East Side takes pride in its crunchy hippie identity and asserts itself as the *more* liberal of the two. Reflecting higher levels of racial diversity, schools on the East Side fluctuate more in terms of their academic performance. What's more, even within this West Side / East Side divide, differing perceptions of schools persist at the neighborhood level. For instance, there are greater concentrations of wealth in the neighborhoods in closer proximity to the city center and University. This concentrated wealth produces better-resourced schools in these neighborhoods due to factors like home values and parents' income levels, the latter influencing efforts like school fundraising campaigns. Neighborhood-level reputations of schools reflect patterns of Madison's residential segregation, as certain schools are known to be majority all-white schools while others just a few miles away enroll primarily students of color. Furthermore, a ring of neighboring suburbs borders the city of Madison. The school districts within these adjacent communities are generally assumed to be less racially diverse, more financially resourced, and more academically rigorous than MMSD.

Within my sample, 67% of families chose among only public-school options and the other 33% choose among mixed public and private options. Public options included staying at their default public school in the city of Madison proper or in a neighboring suburb, open enrolling to another public school in MMSD or neighboring school district, entering the lottery for a public magnet school, or enrolling in a publicly-funded charter school. Private options included enrolling in religious, gifted, specialty, and secular private schools. Within this typology of participants' school choices, parents held a range of viewpoints on various forms of choice, how much choice parents should have, and the conditions that justify the need for school choice. Taken together, these unique perspectives create a cohesive text of progressive white parents' school choice discourse for critical examination.

Chapter Previews

In Chapter 1, "Unpacking the Tensions of Progressive White Parents: Agency to Choose Varying Degrees of Value Alignment," I examine the dissonance in the degrees of value alignment between parents professed progressive identity and the values they associate with their educational decisions. I ask how white progressive parents discuss their K12 educational decisions for their children in accordance with their progressive political values. Considering the key concepts of agency and choice, I contextualize choice discourse in relation to the structural advantages of socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents' positionality. Doing so accounts for the ways these parents' uneven positioning enables them to exercise choice with minimal constraints. I argue that from this already unfair position of increased agency, parents enjoy an additional agency to choose the degree of value alignment between their progressive identity and their school choice decisions. My analysis of parents' discourse demonstrates four

stages of value alignment: concordance, challenge, compromise, contradiction. This chapter complicates and nuances the position of white political progressives through demonstrating the varied ways they grapple with their values, privilege, and identities. The heterogeneity among the modes in which they enact their progressive identities through school choice illustrates the struggle in aligning with the value of community against the influence of broader societal structures that promote individualism like neoliberalism, capitalism, and structural racism.

Chapter 2, "Gradations of Self-Reflexivity: How Progressive White Parents Understand their White Racial Identity" explores the extent to which progressive white parents are critically aware of their white racial identity when talking about their school choice decisions. Interrogating whiteness as a rhetorical identity, I emphasize the ways whiteness functions as privileged, embodied, and operating as if outside of identity. Through the frame of critical self-reflexivity, I reveal the varying degrees to which participants name and recognize their whiteness as a privileged social identity. I argue that participants reflect on their whiteness through ambiguity, ease and comfort, and relationality. The gradations of self-reflexivity evident within each of these themes reveal a range of understandings of whiteness as part of a hegemonic structure for which parents might assume a broader sense of responsibility. This chapter engages a nominalist rhetoric to attend to the varying degrees to which white parents are critically aware of their white privilege. In doing so, I trace how parents understand their whiteness as a rhetorical identity in ways that operate to sustain, question, and challenge the status quo.

Chapter 3 "Choosing Diverse Schools: Troubling Uncritical Diversity Discourses," critically examines how the term diversity functions in progressive white parents' school choice discourse. I demonstrate the significance of the racialized contexts in which the polysemous term diversity circulates to suggest how diversity produces contradictory "both-and" meanings. I

argue that emphasizing the privileged positioning of white rhetors illustrates how diversity operates as both a well-intentioned discourse that celebrates multiculturalism and one that conceals inequities, revealing diversity discourses that function to maintain whiteness as center. My analysis demonstrates the varying degrees to which these discourses reinforce whiteness as dominant through exploration of how parents rhetorically position diversity in relation to their school choice decisions as a threat, as a distant other, as capital, and as commonplace. In troubling these uncritical diversity discourses, this chapter contributes a nuanced and complex interpretation of how polysemous diversity discourses get employed by white rhetors in racialized contexts like school choice to produce contradictory meanings.

Finally, in the dissertation's conclusion, "Disrupting Whiteness through Critical Awareness and Social Responsibility," I unpack the implications of white progressive parents' school choice discourse as they relate to the tension between community and the individual. In doing so, I underscore the significance of foregrounding the rhetor's white positionality, a continuum of critical awareness, and social responsibility to the ways this tension played out in parents' discourse. I also further unpack how this dissertation contributes to the theoretical concepts of choice, ideology, identity, and difference while anticipating future scholarly inquiry in these areas. Moreover, I reflect on my project's contributions in terms of rhetorical field methods, highlighting the significance of interviews and focus groups in prompting opportunities to increase participants' self-reflexivity. Finally, I assert that this project deepens our scholarly understanding within this area of public discourse through its emphasis on the themes of individual instances of critical awareness and social responsibility. I gesture toward future scholarship that engages individual actions harnessed toward social responsibility in pursuit of community values, particularly as they pertain to antiracism and educational equity.

Introduction Notes

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[56] In addition to these shared characteristics, I identified with participants in other ways that felt natural to build rapport, such as divulging that I am also from a small, rural town when they were too, recounting about the process of home-buying in Madison, or just visiting about the day's weather.

[57] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Dane County's 2021 estimated household median household income was $78,452. See https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/danecountywisconsin/.

[58] Participants were asked to classify themselves on a 9-point political identity scale: 1-Far Left; 2-Liberal; 3-Democrat; 4-Progressive; 5-Independent; 6-Moderate; 7-Republican; 8-Conservative; and 9-Far Right. 100% identified as left of center: 14% identified as 1-Far Left, 56% identified as 2-Liberal, 21% identified as 3-Democrat, and 9% identified as 4-Progressive. Given how all participants identified as a 4 or less, I employ "Political Progressive" throughout this dissertation as an umbrella term to refer to their collective left-of-center political identities despite these scaled differences within their classifications.

[59] Although I indicated my knowledge with schools in Denver, CO where I taught, I leveraged my unfamiliarity with the Madison, WI K12 educational landscape to position parents as the experts on the local Madison context.

[60] Dennis K. Mumby, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Communication Studies: A Rereading of an Ongoing Debate," *Communication Theory* 7, no. 1 (1997): 13.

[61] James Jasinski, "The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism," *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (2001): 261.

[62] "Rankings and Accolades," *Destination Madison*, accessed July 5, 2022, https://www.visitmadison.com/media/rankings/.

[63] "Election and Voting Information 2020 General Election," *County of Dane Wisconsin*, December 15, 2020, https://elections.countyofdane.com/Election-Result/124#race0041.

[64] U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S190, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=1600000US5548000, (Accessed July 5, 2022); U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1501, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=1600000US5548000, (Accessed July 5, 2022).

[65] Adam McCann, "States with the Most Racial Progress," *WalletHub*, January 11, 2022. https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-most-and-least-racial-progress/18428.

[66] Jamie Perez, "Redlining Madison: Expert Describes how Cities Were Designed to Put People of Color at Disadvantage," *Channel 3000*, June 19, 2020. https://www.channel3000.com/redlining-madison-expert-describes-how-cities-were-designed-to-put-people-of-color-at-disadvantage/; "City of Madison Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice" *City of Madison Community Development Division,* April 22, 2019, https://www.cityofmadison.com/cdbg/documents/DRAFTFullReport-ImpedimentstoFairHousingChoice4.22.19.pdf.

[67] According to U.S. Census 2021 data on race/ethnicity: 72.9% White/non Hispanic or Latino; 6.6% Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino 7.2%; Asian 9.1%; American Indian/Alaskan Native 0.4%; Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 0.1%; Two or more races 5%. U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts Madison city, Wisconsin, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/madisoncitywisconsin,US/PST045221, (Accessed July 5, 2022).

[68] Black/African American 18%, Asian 9%, Latino 21%, White 43%, two or more races 9%. "About," *Madison Metropolitan School District,* Accessed July 5, 2022, https://www.madison.k12.wi.us/about.

[69] "Accountability Report Cards- Madison Metropolitan District Report Card 2020-21," *Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction*, accessed July 5, 2022. https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/home.

CHAPTER 1

Unpacking the Tensions of Progressive White Parents: Agency to Choose Varying Degrees of Value Alignment

Residents of Madison, WI pride themselves in their strong progressive identity through the ways they value their public institutions like the education system. Madison progressives overwhelmingly are favorable of their public schools and are generally against school choice reforms. As previously mentioned, in 2020 Madison residents demonstrated their support of the public school district when over 76% of them voted "yes" in favor of two major school district referenda that would invest in MMSD schools through increased property taxes. The common understanding is that progressive families attend and support their neighborhood schools rather than pursue options that direct funding away from public schools. The phrase "school choice" is often negatively associated with state Republican politicians, such as former Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, who enacted a state-wide private school voucher program in 2013. Although the school choice context differs drastically across major cities in the United States, with some cities more amenable to less controversial forms of school choice like charter schools, the pulse of the political progressive ethic around the Madison area is one that has not fully embraced charter schools. Instead, Madison progressives advocate for the traditional neighborhood public school because it resonates most closely with their political values. It is important to contextualize Madison's local school choice context to appreciate the common perceptions of choice that provide the backdrop against which study participants' choice discourse circulated.

Given these local resonances between progressive values and public schools, it is perhaps unsurprising that the parents I met with overwhelmingly valued their public schools. They grew up in the public schools, had parents or other family members that worked as public school teachers, vote in favor of referendums that allocate increased funding to the public schools, support property tax increases, and vote for elected officials that advocate for the public schools. They described their conviction in the public school system, subscribing to the commitment that the public schools work best when everybody attends them. They associated the public schools with their progressive beliefs, enumerating values such as the ways public schools promote a sense of community, connections between neighbors, exposure to all types of learners, and foster parent networks. This valuing of their local public schools extended to parents expressing a concern with privatization efforts that redirect resources from the public school system. They acknowledged how school choice had become a politicized issue and generally positioned themselves against any policy that would threaten the livelihood of the area's public schools. They indicated their pro-public education stance through their opposition to school choice reforms that erode the public school system, such as private school vouchers. Repeatedly throughout our conversations, participants expressed their "belief" in the public schools.

Despite these shared beliefs, participants associated different values with the notion of choice, expressing varying views about how much choice parents should possess. Some participants believed there should be no need for choice and everyone should instead invest in their public schools. Other participants recognized the need for some choice, as long as it does not harm the public schools or get abused by parents with privilege. Some parents conceded that there are legitimate needs for choice, citing, for instance, circumstances of children with disabilities. Other participants envisioned an equity-based model of choice that would

redistribute choice to families that currently lack equal access to exercising choice. Finally, several parents said they value choice and that it is important for all parents to have options. These conflicting values around choice provoke questions pertaining to the relationship between school choice and parents' collective identity as political progressives.

In this chapter, I examine the dissonance in the degrees of value alignment between parents professed progressive identity and the values they associate with their own school choice decisions. I consider the key concepts of agency and choice as I ask how white progressive parents discuss their K12 educational decisions for their children in accordance with their progressive political values. Drawing on the concept of rhetorical agency, I contextualize choice discourse in relation to the structural advantages of socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents' positionality. Doing so accounts for the ways parents' unfair advantages enable them to exercise choice with minimal constraints. I argue that from this already advantaged position of increased agency, parents enjoy an additional agency to choose the degree of value alignment between their progressive identity and their school choice decisions. My analysis of parents' discourse demonstrates a range of four stages of value alignment: concordance, challenge, compromise, and contradiction.

Despite participants' collective identification as political progressives, how they manifest their progressive identities through their school choice discourse differs to the extent they emphasize the competing values of community and the individual in their decision making. This heterogeneity among the ways they enact their progressive identities through school choice illustrates the pull between attempting to align with communal principles and the influence of broader structures that promote individualism. Although all parents expressed value in the public schools, they struggled in different ways with how to act on that value through their own choices.

Tracing how they grappled with decisions around attending the neighborhood public school, I assert that their choice discourse reflects a tension between nominal commitments to communal values with a desire to maximize individual advantages for their children. This tension illustrates the ways individualistic influences tempered communal impulses and the challenges in sustaining beliefs in community against structural forces like racial capitalism and neoliberalism.

This chapter complicates and nuances the social position of white political progressives through demonstrating the range of ways they contend with their values, privilege, and identities. In what follows, I first theorize agency and choice to contextualize parents' discourse within structural relations of power. Then, I analyze how participants talk about their school choice decisions with varying degrees of alignment to their political progressive identity through the four themes of concordance, challenge, compromise, and contradiction. Finally, I conclude through unpacking the implications of white parents enacting their progressive identity through school choice in relation to broader social structures.

Agency, Choice, and a Position of Structural Advantage

Drawing from the manifold competing and complimentary definitions of rhetorical agency,[70] I define the concept as the capacity of the rhetor to act and assert that agency must be understood in relation to social influences that produce differing material and symbolic constraints. Cheryl Geisler defines agency succinctly as the "capacity of the rhetor to act."[71] This capacity is shaped by various social forces. Stacey Sowards asserts that rhetors negotiate agency in relation to intersecting aspects of their social identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class, among others.[72] The rhetor's negotiation of their social position in relation to their capacity to act occurs within cultural contexts that produce varying symbolic and material constraints.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell suggests that these "material and symbolic elements of context and culture" simultaneously constitute and constrain agency as a social force.[73] Attention to the dynamics of a rhetor's negotiation of their capacity to act in relation to social identity illuminates how agency is unevenly distributed.

The ability to exercise choice is one mode through which agency gets enacted. The concept choice presents itself as a neutral, market-based term. Understood through competitive market principles, individual market actors are free exercise choice without constraint to indicate their preferences, such as choosing a school. It is crucial to situate choice within the uneven power relations in which it circulates to reveal how these contextual factors produce varying levels of access to choice. Whitney Gent complicates neoliberal discourses that position choice as a universally accessible value through contextualizing choice within relations of power to make visible the ways social inequality produces uneven access to choice. [74] Within the discourse of neoliberal education reforms more specifically, rhetorical scholars trouble how the concept choice operates, demonstrating the ways these discourses leverage "choice" to promote privatization while obscuring how market-based principles exacerbate educational inequities.[75] Choice does not occur in a vacuum; rather, power relations like structural inequalities, the uneven distribution of resources, and racial privilege differently position individuals to be able to exercise choice.

Attention to the contexts in which choice actually circulates reveals how structural inequalities influence the ways choice differently constrains and enables. Factors like the relationship between structural racism and urban planning influence how parents exercise school choice. Drawing attention to the racial geography of school choice, Education scholars Jeremy Singer and Sarah Winchell Lenhoff indicate how open enrollment enables white and

socioeconomically advantaged families to hoard educational opportunities via enrollment patterns that redirect resources away from racially minoritized students and produce racially segregated schools. [76] Structural advantages can enable white, socioeconomically advantaged families with greater ability to exercise choice and constrain the ability for families that do not benefit from race and class-based privileges. Citing circumstances like poverty, community instability, and family structure, Philosopher Derrick Darby and Education scholar Argun Saatcioglu describe how material and social adversities can hinder the capacity for some families marginalized by race and class to exercise school choice.[77] Contextualizing how choice circulates within uneven social structures accounts for the ways choice can simultaneously constrain and enable.

Uneven access to choice also must be understood in relation to society's unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources. Crucial differences in the accumulation and possession of various forms capital such as financial resources, access to transportation, time, institutional knowledge of the school system, and more influence parents' capacity to exercise choice. In his framework of forms of capital, Pierre Bourdieu accounts for how the unequal accumulation of economic, cultural, and social capital reproduces social structures.[78] Attention to the unevenness of these various forms of capital accounts for how choice differently constrains and enables. For instance, Bourdieu classifies social capital as the network of social relationships that lead to upward mobility.[79] Demonstrating the significance of social capital in the school choice process, Sociologists of Education indicate how white parent networks influence school reputations to inform the educational decisions of other white parents.[80] Such instances of white parents leveraging their social capital can reproduce racial segregation, as white families concentrate in specific schools and districts, influencing enrollment patterns and funding in ways

that may constrain the ability of other families to exercise choice. Likewise, parents' forms of cultural capital, such as their knowledge of the school system, their own educational experiences, their occupations and/or status within their communities also account for the ways white families with socioeconomic privilege can exercise school choice with fewer constraints than families with less access to cultural capital. Contextualizing how white, socioeconomically advantaged parents benefit from society's unequal distribution of resources reveals how they unfairly possess multiple forms of capital that allow them to freely exercise school choice with minimal constraints.

Analyses of choice also need to specifically account for the privileges associated with white parents' racial positionality. Rhetorical scholarship has indicated how we must analyze choice discourse in relation to rhetor positionality, as positionality reveals differences in privilege and access.[81] To fully consider the school choice discourse of white, socioeconomically advantaged, progressive parents requires foregrounding the ways they benefit from the unearned racial privileges of whiteness that position them with greater access to choice. Education research has made it abundantly clear that white parents, from their position of structural advantage, exercise school choice in ways that function to maintain racial stratification and social inequalities.[82] In fact, Education Sociologist Amanda Lewis engages Bourdieu's framework to argue that whiteness itself operates within schools as a form of symbolic capital, or as a "resource that may be accessed or deployed to provide access to additional resources."[83] In other words, parents' white racial identities function within institutions like K12 public education to bestow additional benefits on them because of the symbolic power of whiteness. Thus, attention to parents' racial positionality must vitally inform how to interpret the values parents associate with choice.

The concept agency enables us to conceptualize parents' capacity to act in accordance with their professed progressive values. I argue that from the position of increased agency that socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents possess occupy, they enjoy an additional layer of agency to decide to what degree to act in alignment with their professed progressive identity. It is crucial to emphasize that they negotiate these values already from a position of structural advantage. It is from this privileged position that we can examine the dissonance and tensions between their professed progressive identity and the actual values that guide their educational decisions for their children. Indeed, Education researchers observe this contradiction in white parent's school choice behavior, noting how parents often struggle to reconcile their nominal commitments to values like integration, antiracism, and multiculturalism with securing competitive advantages for their individual child. [84] I maintain that while white progressive parents with socioeconomic privilege already possess greater agency to exercise choice, they also possess an additional agency to choose to what degree they actually want to act in alignment with their nominal progressive commitments.

To be sure, parents across racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds negotiate various values when making educational decisions and do so in ways that comport with their identities to differing degrees. Indeed, Linn Posey-Maddox and co-authors explore how Black parents make certain trade-offs and risk assessments when considering quality schooling options for their children.[85] Yet, the authors make the crucial point that Black parents negotiate these decisions from a constrained position, emphasizing how Black parents encounter racialized dilemmas as they weigh factors like the effects of racialized harm and anti-Black racism on their children in their school choice process.[86] Posey-Maddox and her co-authors' study underscores how parents minoritized by race negotiate different contextual factors into their school choice process than do

white parents with race and class-based advantages. Socioeconomically advantaged white parents possess the privilege to choose whether to explicitly factor race into their decision making. Although their whiteness has a bearing on their social realities at all times, one of the structural advantages of whiteness is the privilege to maintain one's racial identity as implicit. Because the public school system is structurally designed for the benefit of white families, their racial position need not always be made explicit. The white progressive parents with socioeconomic advantages in this study exercise choice from a position of structural privilege within a social institution designed for them. The structural position of privilege from which they talk about their choices matters. Contextualizing their choice discourse within power relations like structural inequalities, societal resources, and the privileges associated with their white positionality informs how to interpret the varied degrees of dissonance between parents' professed progressive identity and the values they associate with their school choice decisions.

Analyzing Degrees of Value Alignment in Parents' School Choice Discourse

In the following analysis, I trace how parents reckon with the tensions of their privileged position through revealing the varying degrees of value alignment between their professed identities as political progressives and the values they associate with school choice. I consider these varying degrees of value alignment through four stages: concordance, challenge, compromise, and contradiction. Concordance reflects themes in parents' discourse that indicate harmony and alignment between their progressive political identities and the values informing their school choice process. Challenge reflects themes in parents' discourse where parents had aspired for alignment, but instead experience questioning and uncertainty around the tensions their identities and choices produce. Compromise refers to the ways parents "pick and choose"

and ultimately make concessions, weighing certain values more heavily than others. Finally, contradiction encompasses themes within parents' discourse where they spoke about their choice values in ways that did not conform to their political identities. Although I created these four stages of value alignment to demonstrate parents' varying degrees of dissonance, each interview did not match purely into each stage. In general, an interview resonated most strongly with one stage, although in some cases a parent within the same interview reflected themes that overlapped across more than one stage. These overlaps suggest the porousness among these arbitrary distinctions and further illustrate the nuance and complexity of parents' struggles with the tensions of their social position.

Concordance

First, parents talked about how they enacted their progressive identity through their school choice decisions in ways that reflected concordance of identity and values. In this most value aligned stage, parents associated communal values with school choice, describing making choices that emphasized broader societal needs over the needs of their individual children. They associated choice with the value of the "greater good." To illustrate, one mother told me:

> [I]t's important to be. . . part of a greater good. . .[I]t's important for my kids to not think . . . that their education is more important than somebody else's. . . I don't know if it's a Democrat thing or not but like the idea that we have plenty of resources available to us as middle-class white parents. . . and our kids do than a lot of kids in the school. . . I don't think it's important for me to be protecting their rights. I think it's more important for me to be looking out for the greater good of that class, or that school and supporting the kids in there that need the more. . . support.

Explicitly recognizing the resources afforded to her as white and middle class, this mother expressed her concern with advocating for needs of less-resourced children more so than her own children. She associated her value for the "greater good" with her political ideology to illustrate how school choice functions as a manifestation of her political identity through her choice to

support her neighborhood public schools. Parents that talked about their choices in concordance with their progressive identity associated choice with communal values like the need to care about others beyond their individual family unit.

Within the stage of concordance, parents discussed individual choices in terms of broader impacts on society. One husband and wife explained how they weigh the needs of the broader community more heavily than the needs of their individual children. The husband explained: "[S]ometimes you make a choice for society, or for your community, that . . . maybe isn't the best choice for your kids." The wife added: "But maybe . . . in the larger picture maybe the kid finds it to be a school that they don't want to go to but if you're making the choice for the benefit of the community, then in the end I think you could argue that that is what's better for your kid. . . . you just maybe can't. . .There's not an immediate return." Their language of making choices for the wellbeing of the "community" or "society" suggests the ways they align their choices to communal values. Their perspective reflects a trade-off of individual values in favor of communal values, as they indicate how a concern for the wellbeing of their communities in turn could benefit their children too, but the latter is not their primarily concern in the way it is for parents that center more individualistic values. Yet, despite intentions of communal values motivating their choices, the economic language of "benefits" and "immediate return" for their individual child reflects the pervasiveness of a consumerist mentality. This discrepancy reveals the tension of their privileged position to think and act like consumers, even when doing so in ways that reflect a concern for their communities.

The modes by which participants characterized their choice to stay in their assigned public school also illuminated how they made choices in concordance with their progressive identities. They characterized public schools as "public goods," and they viewed their individual

choice to stay as "investing" in the public schools. As one mother articulated, "I feel really strongly about public goods and . . . us all paying into a system that provides goods and services to everyone. And those things get stronger when we all use them." She considered the financial impacts of her choices broadly, indicating her understanding that her individual choices carry financial implications that influence the funding of the public school system. Albeit employing economic language that suggests she acts as a consumer with dollars attached to her choices, she tempers her individualistic rhetoric through expressing value in public schools as a "public good" and choosing to act in alignment with those values. Other parents likewise expressed how they value public institutions and choose to act in ways that ensure the flow of public dollars into those institutions, reflecting harmony between their values and progressive identity. Choice functions here as more than a parent-as-consumer indicating their individual preference; it reflects the enactment of their progressive beliefs through the flow of public monies in support of public institutions.

Parents that emphasized communal values in their school choice process understood the impact of their individual choices in terms of the broader effects on school funding. This recognition reflects a consideration of their privileged position and their decision to intentionally exercise choice in ways that would improve the public school system for all. Recognizing how the public school system faces myriad challenges, particularly with regards to inadequate funding, parents expressed a desire "to be a part of the solution" rather than leave and further deplete resources from the public schools. One mother characterized this as "staying is doing something" to rationalize her choice to remain at their assigned public school. She described her family's choice process as a very intentional one driven by their beliefs in integration and community: "We're not leaving. We're not going to move to [the Southwestern Suburbs], we're

not going to open enroll to [the Southwestern Suburbs], we're going to stay in our community and invest in our community . . . Yeah, like staying is doing something in terms of the school choice." She recognized her privilege in naming their ability to move or open enroll to more affluent schools in the neighboring suburbs. Yet, she instead expressed her desire to use her privileged position to intentionally stay at her assigned school, thus reflecting alignment between her beliefs and her choices. "Staying is doing something" because the funding attached to her children maintains resources within that school to improve the quality of the school for all students, reflecting alignment between the values she associates with her progressive identity and her choice decisions.

The expression of "my kid will be fine" emerged as another theme within the concordance stage. Parents reconciled the potential drawbacks and shortcomings the choice to remain at their assigned public schools produced with the reassurance that their children would ultimately succeed academically because of the resources available to their family. Within this theme, alignment to their progressive beliefs in the public schools came with a little individual sacrifice of their children's academic experience. One mother articulated this trade-off: "you're involved in your child's education, you have so many resources, like you're this white parent with usually two working parents and lots of resources . . . you're going to be able to provide for your child if they're struggling, like they're going to be fine." Her confidence in knowing her child would succeed academically despite concerns with the quality of instruction at their school speaks to how her social and cultural capital ensures her child's academic success. She has the privileged ability to emphasize community in her choice decisions because she can trust her individual child's needs will be met regardless. Similarly, parents indicated predictors of educational success such as two-parent households, parent education levels, financial resources,

the means to provide tutoring and enrichment, and high graduation rates for white students. One husband and wife illustrated this perspective, the wife explaining, “There’s this feeling of like our kids, probably because of their privilege, their whiteness . . . their place in society, because of how they were born. . . They have all of the things that all of the data shows that they need. . . And so. . . to that degree, our whiteness keeps us in a school where I feel like we can do good by staying in a community.” Her husband continued, “We might be much more likely to advocate or make school choices. . . choose a different school if we thought it was going to be a better school. If we didn’t think that--,” and his wife finished the sentence for him: “--they’d be fine wherever.” The reassurance to trust that their kids would ultimately be “fine” illustrates how families like theirs encounter minimal constraints when exercising choice as their unequal possession of economic, social, and cultural capital provides a comfort in knowing their children will succeed academically in most learning environments. This security enables them to make choices that “do good by staying in a community,” because they can trust their individual child’s needs will also be met, even when those needs do not centrally drive their decision making.

The context in which these progressive white parents negotiate trade-offs differs from parents of color that must factor in the racialized environment and potential racist threats toward their children. The white couple above indicated how they simply sacrifice a less rigorous learning environment for the sake of making community-driven choices that align with their progressive identities. Yet, another mother troubled the ways her desire to remain in the public schools produces a tension with her expectations around academics:

> It’s easy when things are going well for my child to say I’m making a decision that is good for everyone, right? . . . I just think like it’s easy to say that until the moment where . . . my child is losing something to benefit another kid . . . A lot of us white people who are pretty good at saying the right thing until the point where we feel like our kid isn’t getting the absolute most that they could get. And how do we deal with that in our schools, and in our school system when we bump up against that? Because it’s like well I

> want my kids to get all the pros of being in this environment, but I don't want them to lose out and I don't want somebody else to get more than they do, and that's the exact point, right? Like we've gotten a lot more than a lot of people have gotten, so I just think it's something that I'm trying to think about and let go a little bit of in terms of my expectations about what we walk away from school with.

This mother grappled with her privileged positionality through recognizing society's unfair distribution of resources while still feeling the individualistic pull to seize educational opportunities for her child. She called out how it is "easy" to make nominal commitments, but then indicated the difficulty in actually sustaining those commitments. Her perspective illustrates the tension between making choices aligned to community and the individualistic impulse to maximize learning experiences, ensuring the child does not "lose out." This tension illuminates how progressive white parents attempt to align their school choices to values that resonate with their political identity amidst the pull of broader structures that reinforce competition and the individual.

Within this stage of concordance of identity and values, parents diluted the strength of their convictions when they discussed their ability to have a backup plan in place. They spoke to their enactment of their progressive identity through their choice to attend their public school, but then acknowledged possessing other options if they needed them, or as one mother put it, having a "safety valve." Parents described how mechanisms of choice like the ability to open enroll, reconsider their finances to budget for private school, or even relocate houses enabled them options in the school choice process. These options indicate the sense of ease with which parents exercise choice, due to their accumulation of capital. The security in possessing options enabled parents to make the "riskier" choice to align with their progressive identities. For instance, the ways parents acknowledged how if their current choice did not work out, they felt

financially positioned to "entertain" other options illustrates levels of economic capital. As one mother described:

> The economic situation that I'm in . . . which is very much a product of whiteness gives me the possibility to consider other things that we've chosen not to do, but it did put those things on the table. . . I didn't seriously consider them . . . I didn't actually go down the path of like school visits and grappling with like will we put this particular kid in there but I did think about them, and I knew that I could think about them because we could . . . have. . . if that was going to be a financial priority in our family. We have the option of making that a financial priority, I mean it's not that it would be like an easy decision. . . but it's one we could entertain. And I know that my whiteness has everything to do with the position that my husband I are both in, financially, or it has a huge part.

Despite acknowledging she has never acted on other options, her accumulation of financial capital affords her peace of mind in knowing she has them. She exercises her agency in choosing to enroll her children in public schools, indicating the alignment with her progressive identity; yet, she engages that choice very much from a position of structural privilege, knowing she makes that choice among other possible options.

Parents also spoke to their relative ease in choosing where to live to attend a particular school. For example, one participant articulated the progressive values that inform her choice of the neighborhood public school, but then diluted the strength of these assertions when she noted how "easy" it would been for her family to just choose another house if they did not end up liking their assigned school: "had we been super nervous about [our assigned Elementary School] . . . had we been super worried . . . people across the street go to [the nearby Elementary School], [and it] would have been the easiest thing in the world to just buy one of the houses over there. So we . . . did vote by choosing the house we chose and sticking with the assigned school . . . there's lots of ways to make those adjustments if you're in a situation where you can and feel you need to." Her family's financial situation affords her a sense of ease in exercising school choice with minimal constraint. The position of structural advantage from which she

exercises choice is reflected through her flippancy around the discussion of moving houses. Several other parents expressed this pattern of considering relocating houses for a school. Moving houses to attend a certain school illustrates the ability to exercise school choice with minimal constraints. Despite the alignment between their choice to attend their assigned public school and their progressive identity, the rhetorical effect of participants' discussions of a safety valve dampens their commitments to community through recasting emphasis on their individual family's privileged position.

Challenge

Within the challenge stage of value alignment, parents wrestled more explicitly with the difficulties in enacting their progressive identities through their school choice decisions. They questioned how to reconcile their progressive identity with the desire to maximize educational opportunities for their individual children. Distinct from the stage of concordance, where broader societal impacts motivated parents' choices, discourse in the challenge stage more narrowly valued education "for *my* child." It leveraged choice to ensure the education of the individual child and struggled to equally value the accessibility of education for others. To illustrate, a mother told me "I've been very concerned about the achievement gap. And I know that they say that. . . I don't know higher achieving kids or whatever are pulling, pull your kids out of the public schools that hurts public school, but . . . at the same time. I feel like, we need to think about college and having them get a good education. It's like, well, are they going to get a good education no matter what or do they need a different environment?" This participant's line of questioning demonstrates the dissonance between her concern for the wellbeing of students facing academic challenges with her desire to ensure that her daughters receive a rigorous, college preparatory education. Although she indicated a concern with how her choices impact the

quality of the public schools, she tempered those broader concerns with her impulse to secure a competitive learning environment for her children. Another mother demonstrated a similar negotiation of values as she struggled with the question of whether to keep her children in MMSD or move to the suburbs: "[H]ow do you not believe you're sacrificing your kids' future? . . . I want them to have good things like science curriculum and . . . AP. . . I know if my kids went to [the Western Suburb] they would be getting a much more rigorous science curriculum. (*pause*) Now, we wouldn't have full immersion Spanish, they wouldn't have the racial diversity, but I know for damn sure, they'd be getting more . . . than they are getting right now. And that's much harder than I thought it would be." She grappled with the discomfort in accepting that her daughter could be receiving a less academically rigorous education than peers in the more resourced suburb. This concern reflects her individualistic drive to secure academic rigor so her daughter will be competitive with her peers, while potentially trading off her professed values of diversity and multiculturalism. Yet, she reconciled this conflict from her position of structural advantage; regardless of the choice she makes, she will ultimately do so with access to economic, social, and cultural capital that will ensure her daughter's educational success. This tension reflects how participants contended with broader influences that reinforce individualism in ways that challenged their commitments to their progressive identities.

Parents' discourse in this challenge stage of value alignment questioned how to reconcile the tension between nominal commitments to their progressive identity and choices driven by their concern for their individual child. Whereas discourse in the stage of concordance reflected parents emphasizing communal values in their choices, parent discourse in the challenge stage expressed conflict around how to care about other students as much as their own. One mother who chose to stay in her neighborhood public school expressed: "Our schools kind of suck. . .

and we have to help fix them for everyone. But it's so hard to get into that mindset of you got to care about everyone else's kids as much as your own. I think that's where a lot of us have the like, I believe in that until I see my kid like suffering or drowning and then you were like, what do I do? I'll just get out of there." She indicated how it is easy to say the right things until the moment where the parent is challenged because their student requires extra support. Her perspective illustrates the tension white progressive parents with socioeconomic advantages navigate: the pull between communal commitments to the public schools with the parental instinct to ensure the needs of their individual children are met. Ultimately, this mother is positioned with an increased agency to decide to what degree she wants to make a choice in alignment with her professed progressive values.

Some participants that opted for public schools expressed feeling insecure about their choice and questioned the adequacy of their children's education. For instance, one mother expressed how comparisons from friends about their children's private school experience challenges her value of the public schools: "the kids who go to private school, you [ask], how was your day? Oh, well, we, you know, learned about this today compared to what my daughter. . . took home from her day of learning, which is often not much . . . are we doing her a disservice by not giving her a much bigger, more diverse toolkit to work with when it comes to her education?" The academic experience of her friends in private school led her to question her decisions, illustrating the tension between her professed progressive commitments and the individualistic drive to maximize her daughter's educational experience. Another participant grappled with the dissonance of wanting to stay in the public schools while also feeling like her children are not receiving the level of education they could be: "I can't bear to not stay and be a part of it but like also there's been things that I've found really troubling and disappointing, and I

felt like the needs of my kids haven't been met in the way that I wish they could be. But also I feel like there's a lot of value to having them do what's available . . . for everybody." Her concern about the quality of her children's education challenges her belief in the public schools. She expressed value in her children remaining a part of the option "available for everybody" and how attending public schools aligns with her progressive identity through her declaration of "I can't bear to not stay and be a part of it." Yet, she questioned how to reconcile these commitments with her academic expectations of the schools. Unlike the mother in the concordance stage, who indicated working on adjusting her expectations of what her family gains from their schooling experience, this participant remains more challenged.

In addition to the pattern of questioning, parents in the challenge stage of alignment engaged language of discomfort to express the feelings their dissonance produced. They confronted their privilege and acknowledged their challenges through phrases like "icky," "tortuous," "battle," "pain," "agony," "struggle," and an uncertainty whether they made the "right" choice. To illustrate, one mother confided in me that her decision to pull her daughters out of public school was "super hard" in the ways it challenged her identity. She explained that she had hoped to be "that public school advocate," continuing:

> I wanted to be the parent who sent my kid to public school and . . . supported public schools. And I'm not that parent, and it came down to needing to do what was best for my kids. And it's not what's best for, like public schools only work well if everyone goes. And so from a societal standpoint, I don't think it was a good decision. So that was a bit of an internal struggle. . . Part of it's my own discomfort. You know, I think I think it's very awkward for me to have my kids at a gifted school. . . Prior to having kids, if someone would have said, oh, you send your kids to gifted school, I would have been like, no, no, that is *not* who I am. But it is who I am.

She described her discomfort in the choice process employing language like "internal struggle," and "awkward" as she characterized the ways her choice challenged her perceived identity as a political progressive that supports her public schools. She wrestled with the difficulty of

sacrificing communal values for the sake of meeting the individualized needs of her children. Of course, her possession of capital enables her to be able to make the choice to pursue a gifted private school for her children, and so she reckons with this challenge from a position of structural privilege.

Parents that specifically made choices to pull their children out of the public schools and enroll them in private schools for various reasons described that process as "hard." Their experiences reflect the ways their educational decisions challenge their progressive identities. One mother recounted, "When we chose to send our kids to [Private School Name] it made us feel sick . . . it was a hard decision, and I don't think we've ever fought as a couple more than we did about doing that. So, I can tell you that was a hard decision." Her language of discomfort like "hard," "sick," and fighting with her husband speaks to the level of conflict this decision produced with her progressive identity. Another father told me, "part of our liberal belief is that we believe strongly in public services like public education. And so, even just taking [Son] out of the pool of public education students, and dropping him in a different pond all while paying money to do that" was one of the "hardest things we had to come to grips with." He explicitly spoke to his progressive belief in public monies supporting public goods and how those are challenged by his individualistic choices. As these parents described their discomfort through language like "hard," it is crucial to contextualize their challenge within power relations that structurally position them with a greater capacity to exercise choice and determine the degree to which their choices will align to their progressive identities.

Parents engaged the language of discomfort to grapple with their privileged ability to exercise school choice with minimal constraints. One mother explicitly named her privilege and described this recognition as "uncomfortable," telling me that, "I am certain my parents did not,

and my husband's parents did not put that much thought into where you went to school, you just went to school. It was very uncomfortable to think as much as we did about it. . . Now looking back, it felt it feels very privileged to be able to have those thoughts." Although she named her privileged ability to be able to consider multiple schooling options for her children, she also indicated how recognizing her privilege produced feelings of discomfort. Parents similarly described the discomfort of confronting their privilege as "guilt." As one mother put it: "As a white middle class family . . . we have more choice than. . . some others. And, there are times that I feel guilty about that." This association of guilt with their privilege illustrates the inescapability of the tension inherent to white political progressives between their nominal commitments to values like educational equity with the recognition that they structurally benefit from oppressive systems like white supremacy. Likewise engaging with the term "guilt," another mother told me, "It always weighs. The guilt that all children don't have that same opportunity, and that our public schools aren't good enough. They don't have the resources that they need. And that simply by virtue of having more resources I'm able to provide my child with an alternative." Her educational decision to enroll her daughter in an alternative school setting weakens her progressive assertions in valuing the public schools and her communal visions of supporting children beyond her family. Although recognizing her privilege by virtue of her access to capital, she leveraged her privileged position to make educational decisions for her child in ways that do not align with her professed progressive identity. Parents' choice discourse that challenges their progressive identity illustrates how structures of individualism pull on their commitments to the value of community.

Compromise

The compromise stage of value alignment reflects patterns where parents weighed individualistic values more heavily in their school choice discourse, ultimately making concessions to their progressive commitments. Parents relied on technicalities as one rhetorical maneuver to justify choices that did not align with their progressive identity, such as the choice to not attend their neighborhood public school. For example, one mother pulled her son out of public school because she felt it did not meet his unique learning needs and sought an alternative setting for him. She landed on a charter school that is part of the public school district. She rationalized her choice: "this was the only school that we were like we, we're not doing private, that's not, it's not. No way. . . not just the price but like I cannot live with myself if we did private. [T]his was like a kind of like a sneaky like it was technically public." While she indicated how a private school option felt outside of the scope of her perceived progressive identity, her identification of a "sneaky" technicality reveals her sense of compromise. She negotiated a choice outside of her neighborhood public school that may not have aligned as squarely with her progressive identity, but was not as beyond her sense of self as a private option would be. Likewise, another participant told me how she relied on technicalities in the way she describes to others the type of school her children attend: "I don't always admit it's a charter school. I say dual language immersion, and everyone just assumes it's a public dual language, which it is! But it is a charter. And there are still people in Madison who don't think any charters are good, and so I think I am very selective on when I use the term in *my* circles because many people hold those perceptions of charter schools or I am very clear to say . . . it's a district charter." Anticipating the assumptions of Madison progressives who associate charter schools with school choice reforms that compete against the public school system, this mother

strategically defined her children's school to occlude the ways her choice goes against the grain of commonly held perceptions of charter schools. Relying on technicalities, she compromises her value of attending her local neighborhood public school through her rationalizing that her children's school is a charter school that is technically included within the public school district.

Parents also employed the language of "pick and choose" and "pros and cons" to indicate the ways they negotiated competing values. These rhetorical strategies illustrate how they weighed certain values in their decision-making process more heavily over others. For example, one mother told me how she "picks and chooses" values in her decision to send her children to a private, religious school: "it's not close to my ideal, but it's still better than public school for me for my family. Because, in terms of safety, . . . the smaller classroom sizes, and it is across the street. And I do like the. . . spiritual side of it. . . [A]s I said before, there are cons too. . . ideally . . . it'd be more diverse, they'd be more open about the world. But I guess you got to pick and choose. Luckily I can teach them some of that area. It just is unfortunate that not all parents may be doing the same." Albeit identifying as progressive, this mother allows other values to guide her school choice process than those she would necessarily associate with her political identity. To be sure, parents of various social identities certainly negotiate differing values in their school choice process; yet, this mother demonstrates how progressive white parents do so from a position of structural privilege where the factors that influence their decisions may differ from those of parents marginalized by class and race. She recognized, for instance, the school's shortcomings in diversity and open-mindedness, and while she expressed how she can supplement that at home, that same factor could potentially produce a racially hostile environment for children of color. Another mother employed the language "pros and cons" to describe navigating school choice: "My advice is just . . . to list out the pros and cons about how

you want to raise your children, so not thinking just about education, but the other opportunities that come with where you send your child, and to factor in as many of those other core beliefs as possible so we . . . try to live very green, and yet I had to drive my children to school, back and forth and . . . so I feel like you have to weigh out more than just that." Her perspective illuminates how parents negotiate multiple competing values as they choose schools. She highlighted her environmental concerns as one of her "core beliefs," yet acknowledged how she still chose a school that required daily drives in their vehicle rather than attend her nearby neighborhood elementary school. In her case, other values superseded her professed political values to suggest a lack of alignment with her progressive identity.

Parents employed phrases like "you gotta do what's best for your kid" to suggest the ways they favored more individually driven values in their school choice process at the expense of their communal values. They expressed how schooling is not a "one size fits all" model, and parents need to do what is "best for your kid," or "for me," or "for my family." Such a mentality reflects the dominance of broader neoliberal discourses that emphasize the individual over community. The following illustrates how one mother, who pulled her daughter out of public school and enrolled her in private school, ultimately weighed individualistic values more heavily in her school choice process: "there are some more parents who are more like me, and found themselves where public school wasn't working. And it was a hard decision. But at the end of the day, you do what's best for your kid when you have the means to do so." Her perspective narrowly focuses on her individual child and reflects a departure from notions of what's best for "all kids," or society as a whole evident in the concordance stage of alignment. She understands that she exercises choice from a position of privilege through her recognition that she possesses the "means to do so." Yet, this mother grappled with the tension between her decision and her

progressive identity. Her communal beliefs pulled at her even as she asserted this individualistic stance. She went on to express that her choice made her "nervous" because it redirects funding from the public schools:

> I struggle with it because I moved my kids and made a choice. And everybody should be able to do what's best for their kid. At the same time, if everybody makes that decision that's not good for the greater community. And I wish that we could instead invest in public schools and have options within public schools. So I think school choice is *really* tough. And I think that what people don't understand about school choice is that . . . it still only gives choice to people who . . . have some level of privilege . . . it seems like a good thing, but it still doesn't give everybody choice.

Despite ultimately weighing the value of her individual child most heavily in her choice process, her progressive identity still actively influences her ideology. She asserted her convictions in communal principles like the public schools and the "greater community" while actively making choices that are not in alignment with those beliefs. Moreover, her recognition of her ability to exercise choice with minimal constraints given her uneven access complicates school choice for her both in relation to the tensions of her progressive identity and race and class-based privilege.

Parents engaged in the rhetorical manuever of describing their "ideal world" versus "when it comes down to my actual kid" to emphasize the individual child at the expense of their professed progressive identity. A married couple employed this "ideal world" language as they spoke to the tension between their professed ideals and their decision to ultimately enroll their son in a majority white, academically rigorous middle school over the more racially diverse, less high-achieving one. The husband explained, "in an ideal world that's what . . . we wanted. We want to be the parents who send our kids to a school like that. But then when it comes down to like what I want to do for my kid- - ." The wife interjected: "It's different." The husband continued, "It's hard and I again, I'm embarrassed to admit that what we came to was, what we're going to do for our kid is send them to the best place for them." His acknowledgement of

his embarrassment speaks to the tension between negotiating what he calls his "ideal world," or progressive beliefs in supporting an under-resourced public school and celebrating racial diversity, with his individualistic impulse to send his son to "the best place for him." Ultimately, they centered their individual child over competing progressive values. The language of a projected "ideal" contrasted with the "actual" functions to create a divide between parents' professed beliefs and the factors that ultimately influenced their choices. As one participant succinctly put it, "there's the belief system, and then there's the everyday for my kid." Through separating their beliefs from their "everyday" choices, parents compartmentalized their projected progressive identity as separate from their school choice process, enabling them to justify the compromises they made. This differs from the more aligned discourses in the concordance stage, where parents enacted their progressive identities *through* their school choice decisions. For example, a mother described how choices about their children produced an exception, allowing her to compromise her and her husband's progressive beliefs: "what we discovered . . . about ourselves is there's this ideology that this is what we want for the world and then there are our kids and . . . if it's specifically related to my kids, then I'm a consumer, and . . . what I need for my kids' needs to be met. And so then I'm blinded by that." Through positioning choices about their individual children as the exception to acting on their set of beliefs "for the world," parents like her could rationalize choices that emphasized the individual over broader community concerns. Prioritizing the values of individual family or individual child feels excusable in this context because of broader societal influences that reinforce this mentality.

Parents can justify the compromise of their progressive beliefs for the sake of their individual child because it is difficult to rebut the argument that a parent should care for their individual child's needs. I am confident that all participants, regardless of their stage of

alignment, value their children and families. The use of the individual child and family as values in this compromise stage refers to centering one's individual family unit above more communally driven values. It contrasts from parent discourse in the concordance and challenged stages that struggled to reckon with the notion of giving up expectations or sacrificing a bit of educational quality for the sake of supporting public institutions and community wellbeing. To be sure, I am certain parents that emphasized more communal values in their choice processes would also agree they want the best for their children; they would just argue that what is best for their children is a thriving neighborhood public school and community. Parent discourse in this compromise stage focuses more narrowly on the individual child without these broader considerations. To illustrate, one mother justified her choices through positioning her children as the dominant value: "your children are . . . they're the center of your world. . . you want the best for them, and you want them to have as many choices and options in life as possible." In her case, the needs of her individual children drove her choice making process more so than making sacrifices for the sake of broader societal-level goals. One mother succinctly summarized this tendency to center the individual child and family unit as the dominant value: "at the end of the day we can only take care of our own kids, which is a sad way to look at it. . . but that's reality." Her perspective illustrates an understanding of her individual choices in relation to her individual family unit rather than viewing them as carrying broader societal impacts. Structural forces that emphasize the individual over communal concerns for all society's children influence her narrow vision of "reality."

Contradiction

The final stage, contradiction, reflects how participants spoke about their school choices in ways that did not align with their political identities. In most cases, these examples came from

parents that opted for private schools or other alternatives to public schools, or that were heavily conflicted about their choice to remain in the public schools. Themes that emerged within this final stage reflect parents' willingness to embrace school choice and its mechanisms, despite the assumptions of a political progressive stance on the issue. Participants told me about how they have engaged modes of school choice such as open enrollment or choosing private schools, without needing to qualify these discourses through an equity or broader social lens. As one mother told me: "I don't mind school choice, but I know I, as a . . . what am I left of center I should hate school choice, but I don't mind school choice." She acknowledged the disconnect between her political identity and the ways she values school choice, producing a contradiction in her value alignment. Parents described behaving as consumers to embrace mechanisms of school choice. One participant who elected to send her children to a private, Montessori school described, "From my place of privilege I have been able to make those choices. . . I just never really thought about it as participating in the consumer side of it. . . [Y]ou feel more like you're just thrown in the mix, and we've just been lucky that we've been able to make different choices with education. But . . . we have had to spend our money on it." She acknowledged that she had not previously considered her behaviors through a consumer lens despite very much describing consumer mentality in noting "we have had to spend our money on it." Moreover, her acknowledgement of her privilege speaks to the ways she exercises choice from a position of increased agency while choosing to act in individualized ways that contradict her professed progressive identity, rather than use her position of privilege to act in ways that might positively impact her community.

Other participants indicated a bit more self-awareness around the ways their choice behaviors produced a conflict with their professed progressive beliefs. One mother characterized

this contradiction as "hypocrisy": "But when we move[d] them to [Private School Name] . . . we were at the time we would say we weren't running from something we were running to something . . . and that's . . . how we justify . . . we stayed involved in the local public school. . . we tried to stay involved, but, yes. . . in that way we were total hypocrites, absolute hypocrites." She called out her "hypocrisy" in demonstrating her support of public schools through remaining involved but not to the degree that her own children would attend them. A participant that elects to send her daughter to a private school likewise described how her choice produces a "tension" with her progressive beliefs in public education:

> I'm happy paying tax money towards [public education]. I would far rather my tax dollars be spent collectively educating the children of Wisconsin, than probably on any other single line item in the state budget. . . I see this as a collective responsibility that we have to provide a core quality education to all children. . . my underlying value is that it is a community good . . . And that's one aspect that's obviously in tension with my choice to pull my child out of a public school and act individually and send them to a private school, and how . . . that does impact school funding right that my child's line item is no longer there, and directing towards her school as it was when she was there. . . I made the choice to change schools. I guess you can't read it as anything other than a consumer choice. Because at the end of the day I have one child, and she wasn't getting what she needed, and I had the resources to sort of change that situation to try to actually have her needs to be met.

Her perspective illustrates the ways her communal values conflict with the individual choices she made for her family. Although she acts in alignment with her progressive beliefs through her favorable support of public funding toward public institutions, that support does not extend to the very personal decision of her daughter's education. Layered into this tension is the mother's recognition of her privilege through naming her ability to access resources to make those individual choices. Her position illustrates her simultaneous advocacy for public schools while acting in individualized, consumer-driven ways.

The conflict between community and the individual prominently characterized parents' discourse within this final stage. They acted in support of the public school system through tax

dollars, voting, volunteering, and financial contributions, while still choosing to enroll their children in private school. One mother described this as "conflicting": "[W]e vote for our taxes to go up, even though it's money into the school that we aren't sending our daughter to. Because we do think it's the right thing, and we want everyone to be well educated and we want that for society. And it feels like really snobby to then send her to private school where it's like, yes yay public schools but we don't send our kid there, it seems, it feels really snobby." Her conflict demonstrates how white political progressives may actively align themselves with their political identity in numerous ways while simultaneously not enact their political identity through the one very specific mode of their educational decisions. It suggests limits of how personal white political progressives are willing to act to support their communal beliefs in the public schools. These limits raise questions about the strength of their progressive assertions and illustrate how the position of socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents enables them to exercise the agency to make choices that do not conform with their progressive commitments.

Finally, some parents spoke to the conflict between community and the individual specifically in terms of progressive beliefs around racial justice. One mother observed of her choice to enroll her daughters in majority white private schools:

> There's a conflict because I think some of the liberal views would be overlapping with some of the racial justice beliefs . . . that we support as a family, and yet we're choosing to send our children to schools that are mostly white and affluent. And that's a that's a big . . . conflict. And . . . that's, like, a biggest regret about the choices is that . . . we're not supporting our neighborhood families that . . . also include some people of color . . . I mean, I hate to say it but I think . . . you pick and choose at the time, which value is the most important, and in this case it's been family.

The ability to represent family as a non-racialized value in her decision-making process illustrates the privileged position from which this mother exercises choice. The structural benefits of her white privilege enable her to position family as the dominant, race-neutral value

for her justification as to why she cannot make choices that align with her racial justice beliefs. This is a privilege specifically afforded to families that benefit from white privilege as their whiteness operates in implicit ways not afforded to families minoritized by race. For the latter, family is always racialized as parents of color must always account for the racial dynamics of their positionality, particularly in public institutions with histories of racial injustice, like the K12 education system. Socioeconomically advantaged white families possess the ability to engage choice in race-neutral ways because the system is designed for their benefit, thus their whiteness need not always be made explicit. It is from a privileged location that white, progressive, socioeconomically advantaged parents are positioned to choose to act in ways that contradict their professed values. They have the ability to express nominal commitments to racialized values like integration, antiracism, and social justice while making educational decisions that contradict their commitments. These contradictions function to secure individual advantages for their child, thus maintaining white students' position of privilege and perpetuating contributors to inequity within the public education system.

Conclusion

I have considered how white parents talk about their school choice decisions in relation to their progressive identities through tracing degrees of value alignment in their school choice discourse. Drawing on agency and choice as key concepts, I contextualized choice in relation to participants' structural advantages to account for the ways they are positioned to exercise choice with minimal constraints. I have suggested that from this unfair positioning, parents enjoy an additional agency to choose the degree of value alignment to their professed progressive convictions. This examination of the dissonance and tensions between parents' professed progressive identity and the values they associate with their school choice decisions has

demonstrated four different stages of value alignment: concordance, challenge, compromise, and contradiction.

Through complicating the ways parents negotiate competing values in their school choice process, this chapter contributes a nuanced and complex understanding of the social position of the white political progressive. Although there are myriad ways white parents may enact their political progressive identity, I have focused the act of choosing schools for their children as one specific mode, revealing a variation in the intensities of alignment to their progressive beliefs. Despite all participants collectively identifying as politically left of center, the varied ways in which they negotiated the differing values that informed their school choice decisions illuminates how multiple factors influence a parent's decision-making process in addition to political identity. Political identity functions as one social identity among various others to which parents may choose to align their choices. Constructing associations among parents according to their shared social identities as racially white, socioeconomically advantaged, political progressives, and parents of K12 children in the Madison, WI area enabled me to analyze their discourse according to broad themes; yet, I balance this with the recognition that even among these shared identifications, there are unique circumstances within each family that also influence their school choice decisions.

Though individuals possess multiple social identities that make them complex and layered, it is incumbent upon rhetorical scholars to collectively analyze the discourse of white progressives in order to trace how privilege is maintained, questioned, and disrupted in various communicative contexts, such as K12 education. This chapter offered a sustained focus on the school choice discourse of socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents to illuminate the inescapable tension inherent to this positionality. As white progressives enact their

political commitments in various ways, they must reckon with implications of their privileged positionality. They navigate the commitment to their values amidst broader structural forces that celebrate and reinforce the individual in ways that perpetuate systems of inequity. As I will explore in the next chapter, it is with varying degrees of critical awareness that progressive white parents understand their racial identity within systems of privilege.

Chapter 1 Notes

[70] Specifically, I draw on rhetorical scholarship that theorizes agency within relations of power. See, for instance, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005): 1-19; Robert Danisch, "Rhetorical Agency in a Neoliberal Age: Foucault, Power, Agency, and Ethos," in *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*, ed. Kim Hong Nguyen, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 63-85; Cheryl Geisler, "How Ought We to Understand the Concept of Rhetorical Agency? Report from the ARS," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34 (2004): 9-17; Erin J. Rand, "An Inflammatory Fag and a Queer Form: Larry Kramer, Polemics, and Rhetorical Agency." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 297-319; Stacey Sowards, "Rhetorical Agency as Haciendo Caras and Differential Consciousness Through Lens of Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class: An Examination of Delores Huerta's Rhetoric," *Communication Theory* 20 (2010): 223-47.

[71] Geisler, "How Ought We," 12.

[72] Sowards, "Rhetorical Agency."

[73] Campbell, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," 3.

[74] Whitney Gent, "'Expensive' People: Consumer Citizenship and the Limits of Choice in Neoliberal Publics," *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 190–204.

[75] Robert Asen, *School Choice and the Betrayal of Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021); Lisa A. Flores, "Choosing to Consume: Race, Education, and the School Voucher Debate," in *The Motherhood Business: Consumption, Communication, & Privilege,* eds. Anne Teresa Demo, Jennifer L. Borda, and Charlotte Kroløkke (Tuscaloosa: University of

Alabama Press, 2015), 243-265; Paige Hermansen, "'There Was No One Coming"; Mark Hlavacik, "Milton Friedman Blames the Bureaucrats," in *Assigning Blame: The Rhetoric of Education Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016), 19-46.

[76] Jeremy Singer and Sarah Winchell Lenhoff, "Race, Geography, and School Choice Policy: A Critical Analysis of Detroit Students' Suburban School Choices," *AERA Open* 8 (January 2022): 233285842110672. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211067202.

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[78] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London: Routledge, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

[79] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

[80] Jennifer J. Holme, "Buying Homes, Buying Schools: School Choice and the Social Construction of School Quality," *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 2 (2002):177-206; Heather Beth Johnson, *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth : Choosing Schools and Inheriting Inequality in the Land of Opportunity* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Shelley M. Kimelberg and Chase M. Billingham, "Attitudes Toward Diversity and the School Choice Process: Middle-Class Parents in a Segregated Urban Public School District," *Urban Education* 48, no. 2 (2013):198-231; Linn Posey-Maddox, *When Middle-Class Parents Choose Urban Schools*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[81] Kathleen M. De Onís, "Lost in Translation: Challenging (White, Monolingual Feminism's) with Justicia Reproductiva," *Women's Studies in Communication* 38, no. 1 (2015): 1–19; Sara Hayden, "Revitalizing the Debate between <Life> and <Choice>: The 2004 March for Women's Lives," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2009): 111-131; Kelly Jensen, "Localized Ideographs in Education Rhetoric: Polly Williams and a Justice-Driven Ideology of Choice," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 107, no. 3 (2021): 305-327.

[82] Bridget Byrne, "Not Just Class: Towards an Understanding of the Whiteness of Middle-Class Schooling Choice," *Ethnic & Racial Studies 32*, no. 3 (2009): 424–41; Heather B. Johnson and Thomas M. Shapiro, "Good Neighborhoods, Good Schools: Race and the 'Good Choices' of White Families," in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, eds. Ashley W. Doane & Eduardo Bonila-

Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003),173-187; Kimelberg and Billingham, "Attitudes Toward Diversity"; Diane Reay, Gill Crozier, and David James, *White Middle-Class Identities and Urban Schooling* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Johnson, *The American Dream*; Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Posey-Maddox, *When Middle Class Parents*; Salvatore Saporito and Annette Lareau, "School Selection as a Process: The Multiple Dimensions of Race in Framing Educational Choice," *Social Problems 46*, no. 3 (1999): 418-439. doi:10.2307/3097108.

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[84] Allison Roda and Amy Stuart Wells, "School Choice Policies and Racial Segregation: Where White Parents' Good Intentions, Anxiety, and Privilege Collide," *American Journal of Education* 119, no. 2 (2013): 261-293; Sarah A. Matlock and Robin DiAngelo, "'We Put It in Terms of Not-Nice': White Antiracists and Parenting," *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 26, no. 1 (2015): 67–92; Reay et al., *White Middle Class Identities.*

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CHAPTER 2

Gradations of Self-Reflexivity:

How Progressive White Parents Understand their White Racial Identity

Renewed racial justice movements erupted across the U.S. during the summer of 2020 in the wake of Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin's brutal murder of George Floyd, an African American man. Adding to the fervor of the moment, these protests mobilized after months of global COVID-19 lockdowns and the release of evidence that revealed the virus' disproportionate impact on communities of color. Occurring amidst the backdrop of the fourth year of Donald Trump's presidency, a president who ignited and condoned heightened levels of xenophobic and racist public discourse, these combined exigences punctured any illusions of a postracial, color-blind society that may have still been lingering in the minds of white folks since the Obama-era. Ushering in what many hoped would be a new era of white racial consciousness, the public discourse of this historical moment anecdotally suggested a swell of white folks critically reckoning with the structural privileges of their white racial identities in ways they may not have previously. Terms like "white supremacy," "white privilege," and "structural racism" circulated widely on social media. Books such as Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* and Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist* soared to the top of the New York Times' bestsellers list. Online shops capitalized on marketing t-shirts and other merchandise proclaiming "White Silence is Violence."

A progressive city like Madison, WI was no exception to these nation-wide trends. Protesters mobilized in response to police brutality in downtown Madison for nearly 11

consecutive days after the murder of George Floyd, prompting confrontations with Madison police officers in riot gear, the presence of National Guard Troops, and the implementation of nightly city-wide curfews.[87] Their activism led to a significant local victory: on June 29, 2020 the MMSD board voted to end their contract with the Madison Police Department, removing school resource officers from Madison's four main high schools. This decision came after a contentious muti-year campaign and a position reversal in response to the protestors' heightened demands from both Madison's Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and then MMSD Board President Gloria Reyes.[88] MMSD has continued on this trajectory to make a concerted effort to position itself as an anti-racist organization, including a establishing a Black Excellence initiative within its Equity and Engagement department, conducting a district-wide equity audit in Fall 2021, and announcing a 2021-22 budget plan with proposed curricular changes that seek to "dismantle white supremacy culture."[89] Around the city, there are many local grassroots coalitions on the ground committed to such work, including organizations like Families for Justice of Dane County and Allies for Black Lives – Madison that specifically call on white people to take accountability in dismantling racism and white supremacy.

When I met with Madison-area white parents in summer of 2021, I noticed their use of time referents like "particularly right now," "especially over the last year" or "since George Floyd," during our interviews. Participants told me about attending Black Lives Matter protests during summer 2020 with their kids. They described reading books about structural racism by authors of color, mentioning specific titles like *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem and *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee. Nearly a quarter of participants referenced the Serial and New York Times podcast *Nice White Parents* during our interviews. Such details anecdotally suggest that many participants had been engaged in their own work around

developing a critical awareness of their white identity. Yet, when talking specifically about their whiteness, I noticed how parents responded in a range of ways: some told me what they think I wanted to hear, some relied on popularly circulating phrases that perhaps they had recently read somewhere, others rehearsed careful responses that they may not have had an opportunity to say out loud yet, and some were willing to abandon neatly packaged answers in favor of wandering through responses that were messy and complicated.

This chapter explores the extent to which progressive white parents are critically aware of their white racial identity when talking about their school choice decisions. Interrogating whiteness as a rhetorical identity, I emphasize the ways whiteness functions as privileged, embodied, and operating as if outside of identity. Through the frame of critical self-reflexivity, I demonstrate the varying degrees to which participants name and recognize their whiteness as a racial identity associated with privilege. I argue that participants reflect on their whiteness through ambiguity, ease and comfort, and relationality. The gradations of self-reflexivity evident within each of these themes reveal varied understandings of whiteness as part of a hegemonic structure for which parents might assume a broader sense of responsibility. The extent to which parents discussed their whiteness in terms of a broader sense of responsibility illuminates how the tension between community and the individual also influences this realm of their school choice discourse. As I will demonstrate, some parents understood their whiteness merely within the scope of the individual while others connected their whiteness to a communal responsibility to change structures that enable racial inequities.

In the absence of a nominalist rhetoric that recognizes white parents' privileged positioning in the K12 education system, existing white privilege continues to entrench established relations of power. As such, this chapter attends to the varying degrees with which

parents critically discuss whiteness as social identity fundamentally linked to structural racism. In doing so, I trace how parents understand their whiteness as a rhetorical identity in ways that sustain, question, and challenge the status quo. In what follows, I theorize white identities as privileged, embodied, and operating as if outside identity before describing my analytic frame of self-reflexivity. I then analyze the varying degrees of self-reflexivity through three themes of white identity formation in parents' discourse: ambiguity in articulating white identity, ease and comfort in school spaces, and relationality to other white people. I conclude with reflections about what this chapter demonstrates in terms of a broader ethic of responsibility as it relates to the position of progressive white parents and the tensions inherent to this identity.

Theorizing White Social Identities and Levels of Self-Reflexivity

While rhetorical scholars and whiteness studies scholars have demonstrated the particularities of whiteness as a social identity in myriad ways, I wish to emphasize three key aspects: whiteness as privileged, embodied, and operating as if outside identity. Foregrounding whiteness as a privileged social identity directs necessary attention to the ways white individuals historically have benefitted from structural privileges that inform contemporary unfair racial positioning. Cheryl Harris historicizes white racial identity to forward her conceptualization of whiteness as property, which considers how various legal channels work to sustain whiteness as a "valuable asset."[90] Tracing whiteness back to historical oppressive systems, such as slavery in the U.S., illuminates the ways structural racism becomes codified into laws that unfairly benefit white individuals. George Lipsitz likewise argues whiteness functions as a "possessive investment" that unevenly bestows structural advantages, resources, and privileges onto white people.[91] The continued adherence of individuals to the social construct of the white identity,

produces unfair advantages across all aspects of contemporary U.S. society from educational opportunities, employment prospects, to the distribution of wealth. Sarah Matlock and Robin DiAngelo observe how whiteness is "historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced" to be fundamentally linked to "dynamic relations of racial domination."[92] That is, to understand whiteness as a social identity requires acknowledgement of how historical racist structures inform its contemporary privileged positioning that unfairly situate white people with increased access to power.

Attention to the embodied aspects of whiteness reveals how racial ideologies unevenly map onto bodies to afford white bodies the privilege to remain unmarked and experience ease in a variety of contexts. Kelly Happe accounts for how racial ideologies circulate as commonsense discourses to rhetorically constitute differently positioned bodies.[93] Everyday embodied behaviors, like interacting with K12 schools, enact a privileged, white racial identity. One such privilege, as Karma Chávez identifies, is the white body's ability to move as normative and unmarked.[94] The failure to mark white bodies as such reinforces whiteness' normative identity, enabling white bodies to move with a sense of comfort and ease in a majority of spaces they occupy. Sara Ahmed maintains that spaces are oriented around whiteness through whiteness' ability to remain unseen, a privilege that nonwhite bodies do not equally enjoy.[95] The institution of the U.S. K12 public school system is one such context proven to be oriented around whiteness. Scholarship demonstrates how the K12 educational system historically functioned as an institution designed for white comfort, often to the expense of families of color.[96] Moreover, examinations of the contemporary relationship between white parents and their children's schools reveal the comfort and ease that white parents experience in occupying traditionally Black and Brown educational spaces.[97] The embodied nature of white racial identity highlights

how it is enacted through everyday behaviors, such as the ways white parents occupy spaces like their children's schools.

Finally, whiteness as outside identity refers to how whiteness often functions without needing to be explicitly named. A key component of white racial identity is its privilege to function as the assumed or unstated norm. Linda Martín Alcoff theorizes how white ideology operates simultaneously as both universal and absent.[98] She describes universality as the ways whiteness stands in as representative of all perspectives and absence as how whiteness exists outside of the color spectrum or as non-racialized.[99] In both cases, whiteness operates as non-marked while non-white perspectives are distinctly marked. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek suggest that whiteness amasses its power through its unnamed positioning, which renders it invisible.[100] They argue that a nominalist rhetoric, or naming and interrogating the social location of whiteness, displaces its centrality as the "locus from which Other differences are calculated and organized."[101] A nominalist rhetoric disrupts the assumed normality of whiteness as outside of a social identity.

Attending to whiteness as privileged, embodied, and operating as if outside identity, I build on Nakayama and Krizek's urging of a nominalist rhetoric to examine the degrees to which progressive parents are critically aware of their white privilege. I explore how a nominalist rhetoric functions to make whiteness' privileged invisible positioning explicit. To understand white identities as social necessitates that white folks critically associate their identity with structural power relations. Yet, despite operating as a rhetorical construct, whiteness' social force is not equally understood among white individuals.

Self-reflexivity provides an analytic lens to observe the varying degrees of social awareness of white privilege that white people demonstrate. Dreama Moon and Lisa Flores

define critical self-reflexivity as the "holding up of our own practices to question and critique."[102] Nakyama and Krizek observe how reflexivity directs attention to "that which has been silenced or invisible" through an individual's awareness of speaking from their social position.[103] Attention to differences in self-reflexivity need to be understood in a range of degrees to account for the gradations in how individuals understand and articulate their whiteness in relation to systems of privilege.

In the analysis that follows, I examine differing levels of self-reflexivity in terms of low, medium, and high levels of critical awareness. I characterize low reflexivity by patterns of a refusal to come to terms with one's white privilege, a sense of denial, and/or rhetorical silences around the topic. I categorize medium levels of reflexivity as nominal recognitions of privilege without fully reckoning with the implications of one's white privilege. I define high critical self-reflexivity as not only critically reconciling with one's privilege but also describing a felt sense of responsibility based on that awareness and expressing a desire to change the status quo. I examine these varying degrees of self-reflexivity through three themes of white identity formation in parents' discourse: ambiguity in articulating white identity, ease and comfort in school spaces, and relationality to other white people. Participants generally exhibited consistency in their reflexivity levels across these three subthemes. However, given that humans are nuanced and complicated, not all participants fell neatly into these classifications. Around forty percent exhibited some variation across these subthemes: some demonstrated high self-reflexivity in articulating their white identity but then medium levels of ease and comfort in school spaces and relating to other white people; some did not articulate their white identity with high levels of self-reflexivity but then expressed greater reflexivity around how they took up

space and related to other white people; and a few exhibited varying levels across all three subthemes.

Ambiguity in Articulating White Identity

Low

The theme ambiguity in articulating white identity considers the lack of clarity parents provided when describing how they racially identify and what their racial identity means to them. Rhetorical silences and equivocation emerged as one low-level reflexivity pattern from a very small number of parents. These individuals found themselves unable to articulate their racial identity and what it means to them beyond stating "Caucasian." To illustrate, one mother responded: "So just Caucasian. Um. I don't know (*laughs*). What. Yeah." Her laughter and pauses reflected a discomfort with the question and an unfamiliarity with having to reflect on the assumed normality of her whiteness with me, a white researcher. Her lack of fluency in describing her whiteness demonstrated her privileged ability to inhabit an unmarked, unnamed racial position. Denial functioned as another low-level reflexivity pattern. Participants explained their whiteness in terms of their ethnic background absent of any consideration of power structures. One father told me, "I would say I'm white. Non-Latin. . . What does that mean to me, uh most of my grandparents came from Western Europe. Western Europe ancestors." His answer ended there with no further elaboration, suggesting an understanding of his whiteness akin to the boxes checked on a Census form. He denied any association of his racial identity with white privilege through his silence on historical power relations that would inform his European ethnic heritage. A refusal to engage with the broader implications of one's racial identity marked a third pattern among low-level reflexivity discourses. When prompted to describe her racial identity,

one mother articulated: “I am freckled (*laughs*). I am sunburned and freckled. Um, I am white, um, you know as is often the case with white we don’t have to describe our racial identity, we’re just the top check box, so yes, I am white, Caucasian . . . with a period after that.” She demonstrated how whiteness functions as absent of identity through her refusal to immediately answer the question in terms of her racial identity, instead describing herself first by other physical traits. Although she eventually acknowledged white identity’s privileged ability to frequently remain unstated and its position as the “top check box,” her noting of the period demonstrated her refusal to elaborate any further on these privileges, suggesting that “white, Caucasian” provided a sufficient answer.

Medium

Parents that exhibited mid-levels of self-reflexivity nominally recognized their whiteness and complicated it through relating it to other aspects of their social identities to create ambiguity around its meaning. Sharing “European” references with low-reflexive discourses, mid-level discourses elaborated further to characterize whiteness by its absence of cultural identity markers, or as one participant told me, “white is kind of like the meaningless default.” This tendency to focus associations of whiteness with ancestry and ethnic heritage reflects an understanding of whiteness through the scope of the individual or one’s individual family and neglects to consider whiteness in terms of broader social implications. In the following quote, a mother racially identified as white and then muddled her response through elaborating on her European ethnic heritage:

> I mean just white, lots of mix of like Western and Eastern European, there’s a whole bunch of different things in there . . . I don’t have a very strong ethnic identity in any way . . . like on my mom’s side I guess they’re Swedish and something else . . . My dad is a mix of Alsatian and Polish and I say Alsatian because some people call it French and some people call it German. But it’s not like we all were like these the foods that we eat

> and these are the traditions we have, it was just sort of like, we're just white people, you know, so it's not very specific.

Like the low-reflexive pattern of denial, she described her ethnic heritage absent of any consideration of historical power relations, denying whiteness' privileged status. Language such as "meaningless default" and "just white" denotes white as nonspecific and without cultural identity markers, demonstrating how whiteness operates as an absence or unmarked. Another mother similarly reflected, "It is interesting to think that oh god, I don't have any sort of ethnic identification . . . based on the realization that white just strips us of all our ethnicity . . . I kind of have been trying to identify as Southern. Because I think there's some cultural components associated with the South. But I don't know that I do that super well other than like iced tea and cornbread and a preference for Tex Mex . . . I don't really know what I mean by Southern." Through articulating her whiteness as without ethnic identification, she reinscribed whiteness' hidden status as an absent identity. This normalizes whiteness as the default identity from which racialized others are distinctly marked. Her pivot from reflecting on her racial identity to considering adopting a regional cultural identity conflated these two social identities, suggesting there is no power differential between what it means to be white in the U.S. and what it means to be Southern and enjoy its regional cuisine. This rhetorical move minimizes whiteness' privileged status and secures its position as unmarked and non-racialized.

Parents also referenced how their whiteness intersected with their other identities to inform their positionality. Doing so acknowledged their white privilege but then dampened its significance through highlighting their other social identities. One participant employed the term intersectionality to reflect on her white racial identity in relation to her gender identity as a woman[104]: "I spend my time reading and thinking about intersectionality and how my story doesn't get to be the story. And, as a woman . . . I feel like my story hasn't been told or like I feel

like I have stuff to say that men haven't let me say, but I need to make room at the table for other people and it's not just my story." She employed the frame of intersectionality to consider the power differential between her identity as a woman and her privileged identity as white. She indirectly referenced, without explicitly naming, how her whiteness unequally positions her in relation to women of color, thus recognizing her privileged positioning, albeit in an ambiguous manner.

Other participants articulated their whiteness through observing how it intersected with their Jewish identity. As one participant described, "I identify as white. . . and Jewish, which, I think for lots of my family sort of feels like a pass, which I think is interesting, like, oh no we didn't do anything wrong because were discriminated against too. Like we get a free pass because somebody burned our village. . . I don't know that it really works that way." She nuanced her white identity through identifying with Judaism's history of oppression and discrimination. Although she wondered how this intersection informs her understanding of her white identity, she failed to fully account for the impact of her white privilege within a white supremacist system. Another participant articulated her whiteness through relating it to her multiple identities as Jewish and Canadian: "I only learned that I was white about five years ago because . . . I'm Jewish, and I am from a family of Holocaust survivors . . . and in Canada . . . there were no forms where you check off that you're white, it was always ethnic background, so I only had that awakening about five years ago that I was white." She made sense of her white racial identity through considering it in relation to her Judaism and her national identity as Canadian. Although this demonstrates how identities are contextual and the meaning of whiteness maps differently within certain national contexts, it neglects to fully account for the impact of her white privilege within her current context. Her articulation of her whiteness

reflects the patterns of mid-levels of self-reflexivity where participants nominally recognized their whiteness and complicated it in ways that failed to truly reckon with the implications of its privileged position.

High

High level critical self-reflexivity discourses went beyond identifying privilege to articulate a sense of responsibility. These parents explicitly named the relationship between whiteness and systems of power and engaged the term "responsibility" as they unpacked the implications of this relationship. One mother made this connection explicit: "I'm working on learning what my whiteness means, as far as my contribution to a system that has subjugated other races over time and . . . being a white woman what my role is in either counteracting that or trying to live differently so that system doesn't keep working in the same way." She reflected a critical understanding of her white identity as part of a broader hegemonic system that unfairly distributes power. Her ability to position herself within this system and name her responsibility to seek ways to interrupt it evidences a high level of critical self-reflexivity. The following quote from another mother also illustrates this highly reflexive perspective: "I have a responsibility to understand the (*pause*) sort of . . . power behind being white . . . I need to understand what my whiteness how it's contributing to the conversation and in the community like . . . how my views are contributing or not contributing as well." This participant not only associated her whiteness with a position of power, she also connected it with a sense of responsibility in how she communicates from this privileged positionality. These participants enumerated the various privileges their white positionality afforded them and expressed intentions to disrupt such patterns. One mother described how her unearned white privilege afforded her a level of comfort in everyday spaces such as the grocery store where she can place items in her reusable bag as she

shops and decline to take a receipt without fear that she will be questioned upon exit. After describing these privileges, she reflected on "how to kind of muddle through that and . . . find a path that that can help pull others out of their white focus, including a lot of my family members and friends." Her desire to educate others in her white circles about their similarly unearned white privileges reflects a sense of responsibility understood in relation to her privilege. This marks a high level of critical self-awareness through her recognition of an unfair status quo and desire to change it.

Although these more reflexive parents clearly articulated a critical understanding of their whiteness in relation to systems of power, they expressed ambiguity around how to take action accordingly. Discussions around responsibility often generated more questions than specific answers. The following quote from a mother illustrates this sense of responsibility coupled with ambiguity around concrete action steps: "I grapple with the fact that what [my whiteness] means is that I have been granted privileges . . . that I don't deserve. And I don't know what to do with, and I have been trying to figure out that second piece . . . what to do with them and how to use them in a way to help those who unfortunately have not been granted that for no good reason other than not being white." To be sure, the logic of the responsibility of whiteness risks falling into a white savior mentality. While even the most self-reflexive participants did not use that exact language, some did express enacting this sense of responsibility in ways that would not produce further harm and the need to be conscious of their whiteness in various interactions.

The desire of wanting to raise their children in race-conscious ways emerged as one concrete way highly reflexive participants discussed the responsibility associated with their unearned racial privileges. As one mother told me, her whiteness means, "I have more responsibility to raise my children differently than how I was raised." Parents described their

intent to take actions as a family to help cultivate within their children a critical awareness of their whiteness. For instance, one mother critically recognized her white privilege and then wondered, "How am I bringing my kids up into the world in a way that they are recognizing that as well and . . . then how do we how do we walk with that and help bring other people up to that same place?" Although the desire to raise their children in race conscious ways emerged as one of the more concrete actions parents could take to disrupt patterns of white privilege, ambiguity remained in terms of specific ways this type of parenting could look. Yet, albeit ambiguous and provoking more questions than answers, these more highly reflexive articulations of whiteness offer hope in the ways white parents might act in meaningful ways in response to critically understanding their whiteness. Matlock and DiAngelo find an awareness of racial privilege and racism to be a significant feature in distinguishing between antiracist white parents and nonantiracist white parents.[105] Highly reflexive parents that understood their whiteness in terms of a sense of communal responsibility thus suggest productive understandings of their white racial identity in relation to an antiracist praxis.

Ease and Comfort in School Spaces

Low

The theme ease and comfort in school spaces encompasses the ways white parents related their whiteness to their children's schools. Participants that exhibited low levels of reflexivity expressed uncertainty around how their white identity influenced the ways they choose schools for their children. They confessed that they had not previously given the relationship between their whiteness and school choice much consideration. Some remarked that they supposed their whiteness influenced their school choice decisions, but they refused to specifically indicate how.

One father reflected: “Hmm. I guess I haven't thought about it too much. You know, it’s easy to say it doesn’t but, you know, it’s easy for a fish to say they don’t know what water is either. (*pause*) Yeah, I don't know. Hard to say.” This participant’s lack of reflection illustrates how whiteness operates as if beyond identity, allowing it to remain hidden or unnamed. Another participant admitted:

> I haven’t thought about [my daughter’s] whiteness . . . and how it moves her through the world. But I have thought about that I did want her in a school where there was going to be more diversity so that when she was in her peer groups . . . she was seeing people that have different . . . racial identities, have different racial skin tones, have different family heritages and traditions. And so I wanted her in that mix. So that it seemed like whiteness was just a part of that and not above it or below it, but it was just all on the same playing field.

Her perspective illustrates that although she had not reflected on her own daughter’s whiteness, she had indeed racialized others in seeking a “diverse” school, as her use of “different racial identities” suggests non-white racial identities. A failure to reflect on her own identity maintains whiteness as a universal position from which she racialized others to guide her school choice decisions. Her “same playing field” language denies any understanding of her whiteness as implicated within power structures.

Entitlement in terms of expectations of schools and administrators also illustrated a lack of parents’ reflection of their privileged positionality. Parents’ comfort in making demands of school administrators’ time demonstrated how they occupy space in school settings. In addition to participating in multiple school tours, many parents individually met with school principals to receive additional assurance that the school would be a good fit for their family. Indeed, several participants indicated that if other white parents felt unsure about their assigned neighborhood school, they should simply reach out to schedule a meeting with the principal, suggesting the normalcy of this behavior. Such comfort in making individualized demands of school

administration reflects a history of white parents respected in public school systems and a confidence that breeds a contemporary sense of entitlement. Parents also discussed with me instances where school leadership failed to meet their expectations. These participants described some sort of disagreement they had with the principal or the district superintendent and told me how they expected more or felt like they were owed something. One mother recounted a disagreement with the school principal and reflected: “I’m selfishly hoping that by reaching out and letting . . . the principal know . . . that she’s going to give me a good teacher. That feels really selfish but also I’m just kind of, you owe me lady . . . you totally failed us . . . big time.” Her reflection suggests an absence of reflexivity around her privileged positioning in school spaces. She felt confident waging individualized demands for her child rather than broadly consider the principal’s multiple obligations to the entire student population. Her white entitlement manifested through her level of expectation, and when those were not individually met, the feeling that the school then “owes” her something. Such entitled attitudes lacked reflexivity of the privileged positioning of these parents to occupy administrators’ time and reflected advocacy for the benefit of their individual child rather than in the service of the broader community.

Medium

Participants with medium levels of self-reflexivity readily indicated how their white racial identity afforded them a sense of ease and comfort in schools, and some explicitly associated these feelings with the language of privilege. Their perspectives illustrated the embodied nature of whiteness in affording a sense of ease in school spaces, as parents described their comfort level with a variety of the area schools and districts, or in one parent’s words “I feel comfortable anywhere we want to go.” Their perspectives suggest how whiteness enables

them the luxury to make choices without fear, providing an ease in knowing they are afforded a lot of options to choose from. The following participant's description of the relationship between her whiteness and school choice reflects how her embodied whiteness enables a sense of freedom through her increased mobility around the Madison area and its schools:

> I feel comfortable everywhere. . . there's no part of the city where I would be like oh, I can't go to that part of the city, I'm not welcomed in that part of the city and that's certainly true of my neighborhood. My neighborhood is very white, and . . . I feel fine here I don't stick out or anything like that. So, in terms of school choice I felt like I could go anywhere in the city I wasn't confined to any particular neighborhoods so I wasn't confined any particular school.

The ease and comfort she experienced indicates the dominance of white presence in such spaces, and how schools have historically been comfortable spaces for white families with class privilege. Moreover, her description of the privilege to remain unseen in her predominantly white neighborhood illustrates the ways white bodies enjoy the privilege to move as normative and unmarked. She exhibited mid-levels of self-reflexivity as she named the connection between comfort and her whiteness but does not go so far as to challenge it. Another participant described this comfort as a privilege of "belongingness" or a "default comfort level in the school," knowing that their family could have multiple choices and feel like they belong at the school. In contrast, families marginalized by race and class need to consider the circumstances that constrain their capacity to engage school choice so freely, such as material and social adversities like poverty, community instability, and family contexts.[106]

Parents' sense of comfort and ease in the school choice process extended to their relationships with school administrators. The institutional history of white parents possessing authority in school spaces enabled white parents to speak from a positionality that has traditionally been respected in the school system. To illustrate, one mother associated her

comfort with her whiteness: “Oh, I’m always speaking up for my son because of his ADHD . . . and I think . . . if I wasn't white would I be as fearless as I’ve been in telling [administration] what they need to do rather than like walking around it?” Although she recognized the connection between her whiteness and her confidence in advocating for her son, she did not indicate a willingness to change her behavior in any way. Her language “telling them what they need to do” expressed a sense of authority in confronting school leadership. Unlike more highly reflexive participants, these parents did not express any reflection around learning to quietly sit back or not make demands. Instead, they described identifying as an “obnoxious white parent” or an “annoying white parent.” One mother described herself as such when recounting her attempts to work with the school to advocate for gifted services for her daughter: “[T]he vibe from the school was that I was asking for something that was totally, like, unacceptable, and that only an annoying white par-- of course, they didn't say that. But that was definitely how I felt like, who do you think you are asking for this? No other kids get this. Why should we give it to your kid when no other kids get this?” She stopped herself here from fully saying “annoying white parent,” but eventually identified with this position more openly later in our interview. These parents qualified their outspokenness and willingness to make demands through recognizing their white positionality; however, these nominal recognitions of whiteness fell short of any reflexivity around a broader responsibility in the service of equity.

High

In contrast, parents that exhibited high levels of self-reflexivity discussed their school choice behaviors in terms of the responsibility of white parents and an awareness around how much space white parents take up. One mother described that because, “resources follow whiteness . . . there . . . is the possibility that if enough white parents make choices to send their

kids to diverse schools . . . that there's a way of . . . spreading resources . . . Education in in America is . . . so ingrained with property and funding and wealth that something does need to change . . . And that white parents need to do some listening and hear what it is that they can do to help." She indicated an understanding of her individual choice behaviors within broader patterns of white parent choice as they connect to power structures. Moreover, identifying the need for white parents to listen marks her higher self-reflexivity around understanding that white parents often occupy school spaces without engaging with the communities that were already there. Yet, even these well-intentioned discourses reflect a privileged position to be able to consider broader impacts of school choices on a collective level as opposed to the immediate needs of the individual child. This reflects how even highly reflexive white progressive parents must contend with the tension their positionality produces in terms of their commitments to educational equity and the ways they benefit from unearned privilege.

As participants considered their responsibility as white parents, they tempered these discussions with a mindfulness about not taking up too much space in historically Black and Brown schools. One mother who sends her children to an integrated middle school described, "the fundraising project for the playground . . . feels like it was driven by folks within the school community, the students themselves who were like, hey could we get some support around this . . . I like the idea of supporting a piece of the culture in the school that has something else going on as opposed to this idea of like having too big of presence as white families or bringing whiteness into a space that that that wasn't searching for it." Her experience indicated the responsibility of white families to improve schools, but also a critical awareness of her position as a white parent through her desire to listen and be an ally to families of color within the school community. These perspectives indicated a consciousness around the comfort white parents

traditionally experience in school spaces and actions taken to respect the communities of color with whom they share those spaces.

Intentional efforts to interrupt well-worn patterns of white comfort characterized these more highly reflexive discourses. Parents challenged themselves to practice finding comfort in their discomfort. They described their attempts to consciously re-train automatic behaviors, like learning to not demand and instead stepping back and remaining quiet. One mother described this as "just taking a backseat to not saying a whole lot. . . I try really, really, really hard to, if there's going to be a complaint, it's going to come from a place of like, help me understand. Not you need to do these things because I'm demanding it, or because my kid deserves it." Unlike parents that exhibited mid-levels of self-reflexivity, she reflected an awareness of how white parents typically relate to schools through entitlement or demands and her desire to alter such behaviors. She reflected an awareness of her white positionality and a desire to assume a position of listening and understanding. Yet, seeking comfort in these new behaviors speaks to the level of comfort already established as a result of her privileged position.

Parents described reframing their approach to their children's education from needing to take advantage of every opportunity, recognizing how this only perpetuates unequal power dynamics, to instead interrupting these attitudes. Some participants discussed reframing their expectations from "what can I gain?" to "what can I contribute?" marking a shift from an individual-driven mindset to a more communal relationship. One participant described this as moving away from the mindset of "what I can take . . . if I choose to be an active perpetuator of racial inequity." As she elaborated:

> [O]ne way to do that is to . . . pull my kids out of the public school or . . . get them in the Spanish Immersion program because I want it. So I'm going to take that spot because I can get them there and I know how to put pressure on a school administrator, because I do know how to do that, but I'm not going to. . . it's not just the privilege, but it's also the

> how I can tap that to take things away from others. . . I do think when white folks do this on a bigger level . . . this is how we would get to, I don't know Philadelphia's schools or Chicago's or New York's.

She indicated a desire to challenge this automatic mindset she characterized as common among white families to instead think about how to relate to schools more communally to undo behaviors that maintain white privilege. She reflexively understood herself in relation to the patterns of white parents that engage these behaviors on broader scales to create under-resourced school systems. This retraining of behavior asks white parents to experience discomfort in spaces that have traditionally provided comfort and ease.

Relationality to Other White People

Low

This final theme considers how parents reflect their white identity through variously positioning other white people in relation to themselves. In low level self-reflexive discourses, parents positioned themselves in close proximity to other white people through indicating how they are embedded within white social networks. They refused to acknowledge how these networks further privilege them in relation to school choice, and they were silent on any critiques of other white parents or white privilege. To illustrate, parents described how their networks provided them increased access to choice opportunities. One mother told me that she found out about her children's gifted, private school through a personal connection. She explained how the school does not engage in any external marketing strategies, instead relying on promotion through "word of mouth": "I knew a lot about the school because my friend's kids went there. And she and her husband were both professors . . . so I have that connection with other people." She was silent on any critique of the private school's reliance on insular, privileged parent

networks to attract new pupils and how she personally benefitted from her white, highly educated social network. Another mother explained how her friends supported one another in moving to one of the most sought-after suburbs, whose school district is known for its "notoriety" and "ranking," which she described as a "big deal" in the area. After characterizing the high demand for the district, she shared how "people are trying to work through friends to get in before [houses] are listed because they want their kids in the school district." She described this behavior matter-of-factly, without a critical tone and without considering her own implication in these patterns.

Parents indicated how their white social networks function to circulate and maintain various reputations of area schools and districts. Low-level reflexive discourses refused to acknowledge the possibility of bias in the circulation of these reputations, instead parents actively engaged and maintained them. Participants told me about hearing "good reports" of a school from neighbors, believing stories of their middle school being a "slightly rougher school," friends telling them that they are "so lucky" to live in a particular school zone, or how coworkers would fear monger about quality of the public schools. One mother described the importance of these reputations in guiding her choice of moving to the aforementioned highly sought-after suburban school district: "[F]or us, school district is important . . . we did talk to quite a few people and ask them, like what they recommend. And a lot of people recommended [that district.]" She was silent around any critiques of how these reputations circulate and who maintains them as well as any mention of her privileged ability to move into that district.

Medium

Distancing from other white people characterized mid-level self-reflexivity discourses. Through contrast, parents demonstrated how they are different from what they identified as the

problematic behaviors of other white people. This pattern suggests some reflexivity as participants named white privilege, but they waged their critique through projecting it onto other white people rather than critically interrogate their own positionality. For instance, participants juxtaposed themselves to other white people to cast a reflection of themselves as actually committed to living out their progressive values through their school choice decisions. Although participants recognized the political similarities between themselves and other white people, they differentiated themselves as further left than other people that they believed act in ways that contradict progressive values. One father illustrated this through discursively distancing himself from a group of his friends he has known since high school:

> They all live in a suburb of some sort. . . politically, we're very well aligned, but it's like, this is a realm that they just are able to like compartmentalize and set aside and not see that . . . this part of their life is also a part of their politics. [They] just say like, well, no this is just me choosing a school for my kid that has nothing to do with whether I think schools should be segregated or integrated like, for certain I think they should be integrated, I just think my kid should go to an all-white school.

He observed how his friends can "compartmentalize" their political views and their school choices, suggesting that not only does he value integration, he also sees himself living out his value through his school choices. Scholars indicate that one pitfall white individuals often employ to manifest a positive white racial identity is distancing oneself from other white folks as if to suggest *I* am a better white person than *them*.[107] Timothy Lensmire observes of this problematic dynamic: "instead of [mobilizing] other white people for anti-racist action, we use them, scapegoat them, to create our own anti-racist identities."[108] Participants employed contrast to cast an identity of themselves as antiracist and committed to equity, at the expense of scapegoating the school choices of other white people.

Alternatively, another participant demonstrated this pattern of reflecting herself as more progressive but did so from the perspective of someone that left her neighborhood public school.

She described her decision to pull her son out of the neighborhood public school and enroll him in a Montessori public charter school, hoping the latter would be a better environment for his recently diagnosed learning disorder. She told me how this decision "messed up some friendships" and how "good friends" were "disappointed" in her. She explained, "Friends . . . judged us for pulling him out . . . and . . . I would just say that my husband and I do so much more to try to be about equity and living a life that is making space for all people to thrive. And our friends who are super privileged, you know they've got like a lake house and . . . They're not going to give until it hurts, right? They say they believe the things but they're not going to get uncomfortable about the things." Despite participating in trends of pulling out from neighborhood public schools, she viewed herself as more progressive and less of a contradiction than her friends. She positioned herself as superior to her friends that remained in the public school based on her perception that she acts in ways more aligned to equity than them. Through juxtaposition, she reflected an image of her family as living out their progressive values rather than simply espousing them. Pauli Badenhorst offers the concept of "progressive hatred" to describe the form of discursive violence that projects hatred onto racist white people to paint oneself as a hero or be absolved from one's own shame.[109] This mother absolves herself of the tension produced by making a choice that conflicts with the typical progressive behavior of supporting public schools through positioning her family as superior progressives to her peers that remained in the public schools.

Several participants employed the historically loaded phrase "white flight" to critique trends of white parents moving out of the city of Madison proper to its suburbs or out of the public schools to the private schools. Through this language, they associated other white people with the near-century long trend of white families moving out of integrating U.S. cities or

schools and into majority white suburban neighborhoods. As one participant described "I do see that there's a lot of this white flight happening to . . . the neighboring districts. And you know what, I'm just not concerned about it. Like, I don't really care to lose white people in our district that . . . aren't here to be part of this community anyway, that don't see the value in what Madison offers." This participant implied that Madison's school district is more racially diverse than neighboring suburban districts and that she was able to appreciate the value in Madison's racially diverse student population whereas the other white people she dismissed were not. Contrast functioned to cast her own school choices on the historically correct side of "white flight" patterns. Although recognizing the racially problematic ways that other white individuals engaged choice to maintain unequal racial privilege within the school system, this participant scapegoated these white people to cast her own actions as superior rather than, say, take action to engage in critical dialogues with these acquaintances about the effects of their racially problematic behaviors. Despite positioning themselves as distant from the problematic actions of other white parents, these participants must contend with how one of the advantages of their positionality is the privilege to be able to talk about how they are a "good" white progressive without always engaging in direct, antiracist actions themselves.

High

In highly reflexive discourses parents placed themselves in close proximity to other white people, but in ways that suggested a critical stance of their positionality. They moved beyond scapegoating other people to taking accountability for their own positionality through working in coalitions to change the status quo. These parents engaged in modes of advocacy such as holding discussions with other white parents around reasons for staying in public schools. One mother characterized these sorts of conversations as "helping" and "educating." Another mother

described the discussions she had with parents in her network in response to the trends of families concerned about virtual schooling in fall 2020 considering leaving the public schools: "There were some conversations with people about like, let's balance your kid and, the school, the district. Let's at least have that conversation. . . that's an example of how . . . we can keep schools as a public good, and make it a better public good, for everyone and, in a way that ideally would advance social justice and give families, and people an opportunity to thrive." Rather than simply dismiss these families, this participant engaged them in conversation, indicating her broader sense of responsibility around equity and the wellbeing of public schools for all families.

Highly reflexive parents positioned themselves in close proximity with other white parents with the critical mission to engage in challenging, equity-based conversations, rather than leverage parent networks to obtain more resources for their individual child, as less reflexive parents did. To illustrate, one mother who worked on a parent team tasked to expand out grade levels at her children's charter school described her experience of being called out by another community member from the neighboring public middle school about the possible ways fear of Blackness informed the charter school's expansion. She recounted, "[I]t was a *really* important statement that needed to be said to us and . . . we need to keep reminding ourselves . . . who are we including and excluding. [T]he parents that I know and who identify as white are . . . trying to understand . . . what does racism look like in their neighborhoods? . . . [T]hose people are trying to do better and using their whiteness in a way that's valuable." Her proximity to the other white parents on the team enabled her to engage in challenging conversations around how their implicit biases informed school design. In such collectives, white privilege is not silent or denied, but critically examined. Likewise, one group of mothers told me about the "parent equity group"

they formed to have a space to work through race-related issues at their children's school. They described the group as "very committed to trying to build an anti-racist school environment." They work together to critically understand various district-level policies that reinforce racial privileges. A mother told me about her advocacy as a result of her involvement with the equity group: "there's a group of white parents . . . that I was part of that wrote a letter to the editor. . . opposing the recent bills that are seeking to push back on teaching about racism in classrooms." These parents' actions in opposition to current nation-wide trends of proposed bills that ban the teaching of critical race theory in classrooms demonstrate an ethic of responsibility through their commitment to community values and corresponding actions. Through these networks, white parents uncover their privileges and work to change the status quo as a result of critical conversations they hold in close proximity with other white parents.

Conclusion

This examination of the force of white identity as a rhetorical construct within progressive white parent's school choice discourse has emphasized the ways whiteness is privileged, embodied, and operates as if outside of identity. Employing critical self-reflexivity as an analytic, I demonstrated the distinctions between low, medium, and high levels of social awareness of whiteness as an identity associated with privilege through the themes of ambiguity, ease and comfort, and relationality. I have argued that low self-reflexive discourse reinforced whiteness' privileged position as unmarked and unnamed through how it is articulated, occupies space, and its proximity to other white folks. Medium levels indicated an awareness of structural privilege and perhaps a hopefulness for change, yet an absence of any action. High reflexivity demonstrated reconciliation with whiteness' privileged position through expressing a broader

sense of responsibility to change the status quo. Through relating the impact of their individual school choices as part of patterns white parents do on a broader scale, the more highly reflexive participants expressed an understanding of how their individual white identity relates to broader power structures and a desire to disrupt these patterns.

This chapter engaged a nominalist rhetoric that recognized white parents' privileged position in relation to school choice. My analysis revealed the varied positions progressive white parents occupy along a continuum of critical awareness of their white identities. These gradations of self-reflexivity demonstrate the different ways that whiteness as a rhetorical identity can operate to sustain, question, and challenge the status quo. The low self-reflexive discourses demonstrate the all-too-familiar rhetorical maneuvers of whiteness to defend a status quo that denies racial injustices and preserves structural privileges. The distinction between the middle and high levels reveals the difference between a nominalist rhetoric, or simply naming one's awareness, and a nominalist rhetoric coupled with action to change the status quo, or an ethic of responsibility. Whereas a nominalist rhetoric simply *recognizes* the status quo, highly reflexive discourses expressed the desire to *change* it.

A nominalist rhetoric coupled with an ethic of responsibility offers potential for greater self-awareness of the privileged position of white parents and intentional actions to disrupt an unjust status quo. Yet, the tension inherent to the position of white political progressives suggests the need for intentionality around how white folks engage this sense of a broader responsibility. Scholars have certainly revealed that well-meaning white people who actively seek to undo systems of white supremacy may unconsciously reify its systems.[110] Even the most self-reflexive white people are not exempt from systems of racial privilege. The linking of white identity with an ethic of responsibility certainly poses risks of further harm, given whiteness' privileged

position within the institution of K12 education. The fact that white individuals are already implicated within racialized systems of privilege requires a critical consciousness of the ways their words and behaviors, regardless of however well-intentioned, may reinscribe their position of privilege. I explore these contradictions more in the next chapter as I interrogate the ways white progressive parents position values like multiculturalism and diversity in their school choice discourse can produce meanings that both reflect their positive intentions and work to reinscribe whiteness as normative and unmarked.

Chapter 2 Notes

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[101] Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," 292; 297.

[102] Dreama Moon and Lisa A. Flores, "Antiracism and the Abolition of Whiteness: Rhetorical Strategies of Domination among 'Race Traitors,'" *Communication Studies* 51, no. 2 (2000): 111.

[103] Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," 303-304.

[104] The term intersectionality originated in Black feminist theory to describe the multiple axes of domination unique to the social location of Black women. Scholars have criticized the cooptation of the term by white folks, suggesting that intersectionality's original focus on how identities are shaped by systems of power does not translate in the same way onto whiteness. See, for instance, Bernadette Marie Calafell, Shinsuke Eguchi, and Shadee Abdi, "Introduction: De-Whitening Intersectionality in Intercultural Communication," in *De-Whitening Intersectionality: Race, Intercultural Communication, and Politics*, ed. Shinsuke Eguchi, Bernadette Marie Calafell, and Shadee Abdi (Lapham: Lexington Books, 2020), xvii-xxvii.

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CHAPTER 3

Choosing Diverse Schools: Troubling Uncritical Diversity Discourses

Diversity's sudden resurgence into public discourse produces a ripe exigence for critical examinations of how the term gets employed. The societal racial reckoning of summer 2020 incited a swell of institutions, organizations, and private companies to swiftly implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Certainly, these initiatives are as wide-ranging in their scope and implementation as the various organizations themselves; yet, research indicates a common pitfall among private companies where they often promote diversity in surface-level ways while failing to critically examine the company's own internal practices and shortcomings.[111] While by no means a new concept, the contemporary circulation of diversity discourses within U.S. contexts calls into question the need to be critical about how diversity gets taken up in shallow or uncritical ways. As Sara Ahmed keenly observes: "we need to keep asking what we are doing with diversity."[112] To consider, for instance, how institutions of higher learning promote diversity as a core value, we must first understand the strong institutional whiteness already in place before the addition of diversity celebrations. Brandi Lawless argues that higher education often co-opts diversity initiatives to reinforce an ideology of "neoliberal multiculturalism," or the public celebration of diversity in the absence of actions that actually dismantle white supremacy and neoliberalism, promoting instead individualism and competition.[113] Applying a critical lens to how diversity discourses function at the organizational level to conceal structural racial inequalities suggests such patterns occur at the individual level as well.

Diversity discourses also hold a certain appeal at the individual level, particularly among well-intentioned white folks with expressed commitments to dismantling white supremacy. Ahmed identifies how diversity can function as a "fashionable term" that enables individuals to "feel good."[114] Diversity is often viewed positively as conveying well-meaning intentions and an appreciation for difference. Yet, Ahmed classifies diversity as a contested term by its very "emptiness," observing that an "absence of an agreed-on meaning for diversity" allows it to "be defined in quite different ways."[115] Of particular concern are uncritical diversity discourses that conceal novel forms of racism and reinforce whiteness as normative. When considering how individuals value diversity in relation to school choice, recent Education literature marks a shift from what has been the traditional behavior of white parents to self-segregate into predominantly white schools[116] to parents that identify as more progressive intentionally integrating or seeking diverse schools.[117] Yet, as this research suggests, white parents may possess good intentions in their quest for diverse learning environments while simultaneously enacting harm. Sociologist Shani Adia Evans directs awareness to how seemingly "well meaning" white parents that value diversity make school choices in ways that reproduce racial inequalities and contribute to racial segregation.[118] Parents can center diversity as a "feel good" value in their school choice decisions while at the same time perpetuating racial inequities.

The parents that I interviewed overwhelmingly valued diversity and many intentionally sought diverse learning environments for their children. They valued school environments that celebrated difference with a student body representative of a broad range of cultures, races, backgrounds, family types, religions, and more. Most parents also supported school curricula that taught about diversity, racism, sexism, equity, and social justice. Many parents appreciated how schools provided the experience for students to learn how to navigate difference and they viewed

exposure to diversity as part of children's academic education. Yet, these celebrations of multiculturalism need to be considered in relation to the dominance of structural whiteness already in place within the institution of K12 and the privileged positioning of these parents. It bears critical examination of how socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents take up diversity discourses in relation to their school choice decisions.

This chapter examines how diversity functions as a concept in parents' discourse and the impacts it produces. I consider how white parents position the word diversity in relation to their school choice decisions and how they construct a racialized other in relation to themselves. To underscore how diversity gets taken up as a polysemous term to produce varied meanings, I first demonstrate the range of ways parents defined diversity. Through my analysis, I trace the significance of the racialized contexts in which the term circulates to suggest how diversity produces "both-and" meanings. I argue that emphasizing the privileged positioning of white rhetors illustrates how diversity operates as *both* a well-intentioned discourse that celebrates multiculturalism *and* one that conceals inequities, revealing diversity discourses that function to maintain whiteness as center. My analysis demonstrates the varying modes as to how their discourses reinforce whiteness as dominant through examination of how parents position diversity in relation to their school choice decisions as a threat, as a distant other, as capital, and as commonplace. Although values of diversity commonly invoke celebrations of multicultural, pluralistic communities, I trouble how diversity as a threat, diversity as a distant other, and diversity as capital function to privilege the individual to varying extents while only diversity as commonplace aligns with the value of community.

In what follows, I first theorize diversity as a polysemous term before analyzing how the term functions in progressive white parents' school choice discourse. I structure my analysis by

demonstrating the various ways parents defined diversity before considering the four functions of diversity in turn. Finally, I conclude by considering the implications of how white rhetors' engage polysemous diversity discourses.

Diversity as a Polysemous, Complex, and Contradictory Term

Rhetoricians draw on the concept of polysemy to account for the ways value terms like diversity can produce multiple meanings. Leah Ceccarelli defines polysemy as "the existence of determinate but nonsingular denotational meanings."[119] Ceccarelli accounts for how terms take on multiple meanings through her tripartite distinction of polysemy that emphasizes the actor who incites a polysemous reading: resistive reading when audiences understand the term as contrary to the rhetor's intended meaning, strategic ambiguity when the rhetor intentionally invites multiple interpretations, and hermeneutic depth when the critic uncovers multiple meanings.[120] I wish to emphasize hermeneutic depth and the critic's capacity to, as Ceccerelli writes, "offer a new expanded way that audiences *should* read a text" (emphasis added).[121] Polysemy as provoked by the critic underscores expanded meanings of a term that may challenge initial interpretations. Hermeneutic depth emphasizes "should" to underscore how the critic argues for how we ought to understand the term in ways that appreciate a more complex and richer interpretation. To be sure, an analysis of strategic ambiguity would spotlight the active role parents as rhetors play in producing multiple meanings of the term diversity; yet, Ceccarelli maintains that the rhetor would intentionally invite these multiple interpretations.[122] Instead, hermeneutic depth reveals how multiple meanings of diversity can unintentionally function in oppositional ways when understood against the broader backdrop of the structural whiteness in K12 education and white parents' privileged positioning within that system.

To fully appreciate diversity's complexity as a polysemous term, we need to account for how racialized contexts inform its interpretation. Sara Hayden directs attention to the significance of the various social and rhetorical contexts in which polysemous terms circulate, emphasizing racialized rhetorical contexts in particular.[123] Attention to racialized rhetorical contexts acknowledges the centrality of whiteness in organizing racialized power structures. Lindsay Cramer observes how discourses that idealize diversity can function to sustain whiteness as central because of whiteness' dominance in the first place.[124] Our interpretation of polysemous terms like diversity must foreground the rhetor's social location in relation to racialized power structures, and particularly account for white rhetors' privileged positionality. White rhetors often discursively place diversity onto nonwhite bodies which functions to obscure their whiteness. Ahmed suggests that when diversity functions as a stand in for "other," it directs attention toward difference and away from "the whiteness of what is already in place."[125] These racialized power dynamics must vitally inform interpretations of how white rhetors deploy diversity discourses.

Diversity functions as a polysemous value term that produces contradictory "both-and" meanings in progressive white parents' school choice discourse. Ceccarelli offers the language "both-and" as a way for critics to recognize how polysemic texts can produce contradictory meanings.[126] Diversity as understood within the racialized context of progressive white parents' school choice discourse can mean *both* white parents' well-intentioned use of the term to celebrate multiculturalism *and* function to conceal racial inequities that reinforce whiteness as normative. Sociologists account for the ways that individuals who value diversity often emphasize their intentions while falling short in enacting actual outcomes or practices that engage the term.[127] Sarah Mayorga-Gallo argues that "focusing on good intentions can obscure

issues of inequality. If we are truly interested in equity, we cannot ignore inequitable outcomes-even if they are the result of well-intentioned actions."[128] That is, to fully appreciate how diversity functions in this particular racialized context requires that we consider how it takes on contradictory meanings. Critical examinations of white parents' diversity discourses need to consider *both* their intended use of the term *and* how the term may further reproduce inequalities in ways that can contradict their intentions. Parents' individualistic motivations influence their choice of schools, and this intersects with racialized power structures to further complicate diversity discourses. Sociologists account for how white people's stated preferences for diversity are often at odds with their individual interests in contexts such as neighborhood improvement projects, residential decisions, and school choice decisions.[129] Both-and interpretations of white parents' diversity discourses must account for the full complexity of how good intentions, a failure to engage the term in ways that disrupt whiteness' normative positioning, and tensions between individualistic motivations all interact to produce multiple and contradictory meanings.

Defining Diversity

Before examining how diversity functioned as a particular rhetoric, I will first describe the different ways parents defined diversity. By doing so, I underscore that diversity is a contested term, even among this arguably homogenous group of forty-three progressive white parents residing in the same geography. These definitions range in their narrowness and breadth. Narrow definitions of diversity employed the term to merely indicate "nonwhite." To illustrate, when one mother expressed her desire for diversity at her children's school, I asked her to clarify what she meant by "diverse," and she responded: "I guess, you know, people of color." Another mother similarly engaged this definition of diversity when she described the demographics of her

daughter's private school, stating that "her grade itself is not very diverse. I think that there are only one or two children that would identify as people of color in her class." These two examples illustrate how parents commonly used diversity as a stand for people of color. This definition associates the presence of nonwhite children in a school with the responsibility for representing what it means to be diverse. Sara Ahmed emphasizes how patterns that place diversity onto nonwhite bodies function to keep whiteness implicit through the explicit focus on people of color.[130] Through focusing attention onto people of color as the definitional meaning for diversity, such discourses direct attention away from the rhetor's privileged white positionality. Another mother relied on this definitional usage of diversity, reinforcing it through contrasting diversity's meaning directly to white: "I pick up my kids from school, and almost all of the parents that are at pickup are white, because the diversity within the school . . . there's buses and so most of the parents of color live in a different neighborhood." She continued to explain that during pickup she visits with the other white parents, and they have shared with one another how they choose to send their children to public schools because they value diversity. Her expressed value for diversity that she and the other white parents share, which her narrow definition signals as families of color, rings absent of any recognition of the power imbalance suggested by the fact that she and the other white parents enjoy the luxury of attending school pick up while the parents she identified as people of color live a further distance from the school and rely on school transportation. Diversity's focus is explicitly placed on the families of color that transport into the school to offer diversity while whiteness' privileged position in this dynamic is not explicitly recognized.

Parents also defined diversity as racial diversity intersected with socioeconomic diversity. To illustrate, many private school parents lamented the fact that their children's school offered

racial diversity but lacked socioeconomic diversity. A mother told me that the "the one thing" she did not appreciate about her children's private gifted school was "there's no socioeconomic diversity. . . it has cultural diversity, but it's not socioeconomic diversity." Although they recognized the school's multiracial student enrollment, these parents acknowledged how private school tuition fees limit the representation of socioeconomic diversity that a public school might offer. A public-school parent recognized these tradeoffs, as she considered different schooling options in the area, weighing her options between "great" schools with racial diversity but lacking "economic variety" and her neighborhood public school. She ultimately chose the latter justifying that, "I don't want to give up you know the larger sense of the world." This definition placed a premium on racial diversity that can also offer exposure to various socioeconomic classes. Some parents went so far as to discredit the value of racial diversity absent of socioeconomic diversity. Such is illustrated by the following parent as she explains how her daughter's public school zone in their suburban neighborhood represents:

> a fair amount of diversity in her class between socioeconomic areas so like . . . up and downstream on the spectrum of that. But then a lot of different, like racial diversity too so there's a lot of folks from . . . Asian countries, Indian countries, those kinds of things so it's a nice kind of mix. Some of the other schools during this redistricting might have the racial diversity, but don't so much have the socioeconomic diversity . . . [L]ast year I saw the spreadsheets . . . showing like . . . socioeconomic, racial, free lunch, reduced lunch kind of numbers for the different elementary schools . . .[My daughter's school] was *far* more diverse compared to the brand new school that's opening where there's a fair amount of racial diversity, but *very* little on socioeconomic diversity.

She distinguished between racial diversity absent of socioeconomic diversity and racial diversity inclusive of socioeconomic diversity, suggesting the latter to add a grittier element to what it means to have a diverse student enrollment. Intersecting racial diversity with class functions to place the responsibility of representing diversity not only on the presence of nonwhite students

but also on nonwhite students managing the multiple challenges that may accompany a lower-class position.

Broader definitional usages of diversity encompassed several characteristics in addition to race and class. These parents classified diversity as a list of traits such as race, class, religion, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, family types, ability, and so forth. For instance, when a mother expressed her vision to live in a diverse community and I asked her to define what she meant by diversity, she told me, "I define it really broadly, like diversity of upbringing, diverse family diversity, skin color diversity, language diversity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age diversity, ability diversity, like all of it, you know, like every group." Similarly, another mother expressed her desire for her children's school to be "as diverse as possible," elaborating, "diverse in every way racially, economically, different religions. All of that. People from different cultures . . . that exposure to different students from all walks of life." Although these usages offer a broader definitional purview of diversity's characteristics, these celebrations of difference occurred absent of references to power. This embrace of diversity and multiculturalism illustrates what Sociologist of Education Margaret Hagerman refers to as "uncritical 'diversity discourse,'" or "shallow multiculturalism," that constructs "who is 'ethnic,' who has 'culture,' and who is 'normal'" without critically engaging racial hierarchies and systems of power.[131] These parents may profess values of "diversity" and "multiculturalism" but fail to interrogate these values in relation to their position within the systems that produce inequality.

Finally, parents also employed diversity very broadly to associate it as a "mix of everyone" or "represents the world." For example, one mother said it is important that her daughters go to school with a diversity of people and family structures because "that's what you have in the world." Likewise, participants seeking diverse school settings commonly expressed

that their ideal school demographics would "reflect the community." Yet, only a few actually troubled such assertions with the recognition that, depending on how they classified community, many of their neighborhoods are quite racially segregated. The majority generally did not confront racial segregation when ambiguously associating "community" with "diversity." Although this final definitional theme suggests how parents might imagine diverse, multicultural worlds for their children and hope for that vision to be mirrored in their schools, the reality of many parents' residential choices dampen the realization of such aspirations.

Through demonstrating the various ways parents defined diversity, I have suggested the differing definitional usages ranging from diversity as narrowly signaling nonwhite races to more broadly representing "community" or "the world." Yet, the absence of parents' recognition of the privileges of their whiteness across these usages of diversity renders uncritical definitions that maintain whiteness as implicit and dominant.

Functions of Diversity

I suggest the term diversity rhetorically functions in white progressive parents' school choice discourse in four key ways: as a threat, as a distant other, as capital, and as commonplace. These four themes are not mutually exclusive, as some participants talked about diversity in ways that suggested more than one function. The purpose of the analysis in this chapter is to understand how diversity functions across the interviews rather than group parents according to different classifications. I argue that in all four ways diversity functions *both* as a value that celebrates multiculturalism *and* still works to center whiteness as normative. Diversity as a threat refers to the ways parents express nominal commitments to diversity while negotiating tensions around what factoring diversity into school choice decisions actually looks like in practice. This

first theme considers how parents' privileged position enables them to make choices that limit or contradict their stated values for diversity. Diversity as a distant other traces how parents express their desire for diversity while creating discursive difference from it through marking contrast and space from racialized others. Such discursive maneuvers function to contain diversity as something to be valued but apart from their family's lives. Diversity as capital considers how parents engage diversity in economic terms to add value to a school. This third theme accounts for how the commodification of nonwhite bodies functions to center whiteness at the expense of students of color. Finally, diversity as commonplace explores the ways parents value diversity as an ordinary part of their children's lives while cognizant of the tensions this produces with their white positionality. It considers how parents express their value of diversity in ways that challenge objectification to create worlds for their children that are diverse and driven by social responsibility. Through analysis of parents' discourse in relation to these four themes, I reveal the varying extents as to how each functions to reinforce whiteness' dominance.

Through my analysis I also consider how these four themes operate differently in relation to the tension between community and the individual. I suggest that the first three produce more individualistic motivations. Diversity as threat highlights how parents make choices to protect their individual family unit in response to a perceived sense of harm. Diversity as distant other marks space between the individual family from that which is unfamiliar or foreign. Although diversity as capital intends to be more communal through choices that celebrate multiculturalism, I reveal how it produces imbalanced benefits in favor of the individual white child. The final theme, diversity as commonplace, aims to reflect an awareness of broader societal benefits that extend beyond the individual family unit. Diversity as commonplace challenges individualistic

motivations with parents' communal beliefs around a sense of social responsibility while underscoring the simultaneous need to reckon such broader goals with parents' white privilege.

The variation among parents' choices and critical awareness as they relate to these four functions of diversity calls back to concepts discussed in previous chapters. As I argued in Chapter 1, parents make school choice decisions with varying degrees of alignment to their professed progressive values. Inherent to the position of socioeconomically advantaged white political progressives are contradictions that result from how they reconcile their political beliefs with the structural advantages of their whiteness. I assert the same pattern also holds true when it comes to diversity as a value. Although parents overwhelmingly expressed their value for diversity in principle, they encountered numerous challenges when it came to engaging diversity through their school choice decisions. As parents made school choices decisions with varying degrees of alignment to the value of diversity, some were more or less reflective about it. The extent to which parents acknowledged this conflict occurred with differing amounts of self-reflexivity. In Chapter 2, I argued that parents expressed varying degrees of self-reflexivity around their privileged white positionality. The same trend is apparent in the variation in their thoughtfulness around the dissonance between their conflicting values and their privileged positionality when it comes to diversity. As I analyze how diversity functions across parents' discourse in this chapter, I do so with the acknowledgement that parents talked about diversity with varying amounts of social awareness of their privilege within and across these four functions.

Diversity as Threat

As a particular rhetoric, one way diversity functioned in relation to parents' choices was as a threat. Although parents expressed their appreciation for diversity, their use of the term also

suggested tensions around questions of safety, fear, student behavior, and the quality of academics. These tensions imposed limits on the amount of diversity parents actually desired. For instance, one mother reflected on her family's home buying process and how the different zoned neighborhood schools influenced their decisions. Reflecting on how her views have changed since this experience, she recalled feeling concerned at the time after hearing that one of the two middle schools was a "slightly rougher school." She explained:

> There were early conversations that I'm not proud of at all. . . And I remember those conversations, along the lines of . . . we want a diverse experience for our kids, but maybe, and not again, directly, stating because of, you know, the diversity of that particular school versus this one. That that's why we chose that but . . . there are better stories out of this school versus this one where it seems like the staff hangs around more and there are fewer disciplinary issues.

Her hesitations given her association between diversity with a "rougher school" and behavior issues limit her nominal commitments to diversity. These tensions are evident in an example from another mother who expressed her appreciation for diversity in principle but then also her fear around what that would mean in practice:

> When I thought about diversity, was there any sort of fear from a white perspective that played into our choice at all? . . . [W]as there a fear that that would have just been too different from how I was brought up . . . I think I've changed a lot since we've moved to Madison. And so we might have said oh yeah we want diversity, but then was part of the decision to send her there, a little bit on fear of what that actually would have been like, I don't know, maybe.

Although this mother and the mother quoted above both reflected on their attitudinal shifts since their initial school choice decisions, they still had the ability to make choices from a privileged positioning that enabled them to decide their degree of alignment to the value of diversity. Their decisions to ultimately choose the less diverse schools contradict their nominal commitments to diversity and secure their white, privileged positioning in the school choice process.

Diversity functioned as a threat to signal both a diverse student enrollment and potential tradeoffs such as low-performing academics, behavior issues, and questionable school reputations. For example, as one mother navigated school choice for her kindergartener, she recalled touring her assigned neighborhood school despite the school's "hard persona." She recounted how one neighbor told her, "your kids will get street smarts if they go there," telling me, "I knew exactly what they meant, you know that the academics weren't going to be the priority and that they were going to learn how to get along. And I think it was clear code for they're going to get along with Black kids. Because that's the predominant race of the kids outside of our neighborhood." Although this mother repeatedly expressed to me how much she values diversity, for several reasons she ultimately chose another school setting for her daughter. Such a dynamic reflects the tension white parents negotiate between nominal commitments to diversity and their individual interests and motivations. Parents navigated these tensions with varying amount of social awareness. The following example illustrates how one mother tempered her expressed value for diversity through constructing thresholds of comfort with diversity:

> I have to be able to find value in . . . diversity and know that in the long run, if I perceive there might be some harm, like the goodwill . . . will outweigh any of that perception on the front end. . . [T]here's definitely barriers or there's going to be like, max to where maybe I feel comfortable with that. . . maybe if I lived in, I don't know, Southside Inner City Chicago I might have a different viewpoint from that. But I think, for *her* school district, it's being done well . . . [the] district is supporting the diversity of students . . . everybody being part of this and helping everybody and not having like the us versus them mentality, knowing that it takes a collective to you know raise the full ship of . . . the community, rather than thinking about like what small losses I might be getting out of it, like a holistic viewpoint.

Apparent tensions existed between how she expressed her value for diversity and her negotiation of perceived harm and possible losses. While on the one hand, she indicated her communal desires, she limited this vision with the racialized reference to the Southside of Chicago, which

functioned to circumscribe the boundaries of her comfort levels. Her perspective reflects how diversity as threat functions in parents' discourse to limit or contradict professed values for diversity. Diversity as threat privileges the individual, as families make choices in the interests of their individual family in response to a perceived sense of threat or harm.

Diversity as Distant Other

Diversity also rhetorically functioned in parents' school choice discourse as a distant other. Contrast functioned as one mode in which parents discursively distanced themselves from diversity, marking their separateness from racialized others. Parents contrasted their positionality from racialized others to imply at their privileges as white, middle-class, midwestern, U.S. citizens, and native English speakers. For example, as one father discussed the importance high school swim team played in his daughter's life, he contrasted her privileged experience to "diversity issues," describing that, "swim team is . . . kind of a middle-class white kid activity, right, you need a fair amount of money and time and access to . . . a pool . . . you have to have been on a swim club for years and years and years so that . . . involves a fair amount of money and access and all these other things . . . and as you know these diversity issues aren't easy to fix." He contrasted between families like his with access to the time and money required for swim team and those lacking this level of access, associating the latter with diversity. This contrast functions to imply his privileges while marking his family as distinct from his usage of diversity.

Parents also engaged discursive contrast through recognizing their differing circumstances from racialized others. They constructed a contrast to indicate how other families navigate more challenging circumstances by accounting for their own ability to raise their children in stable households with supportive parents and their adeptness in navigating

institutions. To illustrate, a private school mother expressed her appreciation that there are fewer demands on the staff at her daughter's school than she imagined there would be in a "crowded public school," where school staff have pressing issues like students "crying because their dad got thrown in jail in front of them last night. So (*laughs*) it's like. There is less of that at [our Private School] . . . I feel like I can bother the teachers when she's having a bad day because the cat died. . . I wouldn't bother a public-school teacher that has a hundred and some kids that have way bigger problems than that." Her assumptions about the contrast between students that attend public schools and those at her daughter's small private school function to mark the differences in circumstances that she imagines for each group, likely based on socioeconomic status. This contrast marks her own family as apart from experiencing severe circumstances like the loss of one's primary caregiver and instead with the privilege to focus on circumstances for someone with more security, like grieving one's pet. Another mother painted a contrast to imply at her privilege when recounting her experience of navigating the school system to enroll her daughter in kindergarten. Because her daughter's birthday fell on the enrollment cusp, she had to complete many difficult and confusing steps through the district's central office. She described the process as "horrendous," remarking: "I would have left if I were poor. I had three screaming kids with me. I wasn't an English speaker. I mean, it was appalling." Her comments function to mark a contrast between herself and someone navigating this challenging process with more complex circumstances. These distinctions mark the differences between participants' seemingly less complicated life circumstances and those of a distinctly marked other with lives unrelatable to them.

Additionally, parents employed spatial references that functioned to distance themselves from diversity. Their discourses associated diversity with a sense of foreignness or unfamiliarity,

which marked diversity's distance from their family's daily lives outside of school. On the one hand, parents expressed how much they valued diversity in their schools. Then, on the other hand, parents talked about the families that they considered as diverse living in neighborhoods apart from their own that felt strange or unfamiliar. A mother explained to me how students of color bus in from a different neighborhood to attend her children's school. Although she expressed how much she valued the racial diversity in her children's school, she struggled to pinpoint where the students she identified as diverse travel from: "I don't know. I don't know the names of the neighborhoods like I could point out . . . I know where they're located (*laughs*) down by the, I can like picture where I take my car to get my car service. And I can picture the apartment buildings." This unfamiliarity with the lives of the students whom she classified as diverse, beyond her appreciation of their presence at her children's school in her predominantly white neighborhood, suggests a surface-level valuing of diversity. Instead of expressing a familiarity with these students' identities, backgrounds, and cultures, she objectified their presence in the school building. She discussed them with a sense of foreignness, as she is only as familiar with them as knowing that they live near where she takes her car to get serviced. Similarly, another mother described her school's PTO efforts to move the location of their school's end of year picnic, which had traditionally been held in the park immediately in her neighborhood nearby the school, to engage the families that may not have always felt welcomed at school events. She recognized how the previous location was, "actually kind of far from where some of the other kids live, who also go to [our school] and so we . . . moved it over to I think I'm trying to remember the name of the park but it was further away from here, because it was like, well, let's make it convenient to *all* of these other people. And so there I felt like oh I'm seeing a lot of the parents who don't look exactly like me and live in my neighborhood." She

noted a clear separation between families in her neighborhood like her and the "other" families that travel from further away to attend the school. Although she could clearly describe the park where the picnic had traditionally been held, her struggle to recount the name of the park in its new location indicates her sense of foreignness with the area. These spatial references cast racial others with a sense of unfamiliarity, enabling parents to both appreciate diversity and note it as distinct from their day-to-day realities outside of the school day.

Parents also engaged bussing discourse to create spatial distance from diversity. Participants often distinguished between students in the neighborhood with the ability to walk to school, often their own families, and students that rely on school buses to attend the school. They commonly employed phrases like "bus in" to describe certain populations of students, suggesting the spatial movement of crossing boundaries. The following quotation from a mother discussing the racial demographics at her daughter's school illustrates this pattern: "we bus in kids from the [Neighborhood Park Name] area, which is like, I don't know if you've ever been to like the Woodman's store on the West Side. But it's over there it's like a lower income apartment area. So we bus kids in from there so that's where almost all of our diversity comes from aside from like some Indian families. And so an interesting thing is that they bus to our school." Describing a commercial area of town nearby a local grocery store and low-income apartments, she noted the spatial difference between "where the diversity comes from" as distinct from her own neighborhood of single-family homes. To be sure, school zoning boundaries are certainly not within individual parents' direct control. And yet, there is a certain historical weight to how white parents engage in bussing discourse, given its ties to mid-to-late twentieth century policies that intended to remedy school segregation, which bear significance on its contemporary usages.

One mother exercised greater degrees of self-reflexivity as she recognized the unfairness of these systems:

> And then there's the kids who . . . they all live . . . over by the Walmart. They live . . . in a different neighborhood . . . and they come in on the bus. And you can see the kids coming in on the bus and you see who gets on and off and I (*sigh*) feel really bad because I feel like I *get* why they are busing kids, but I also feel like why do those kids have to get up at five o'clock in the morning and get on a bus? Why don't they have a school that they can walk to, and that pisses me off . . . most of them are families of color . . . and most of the people in [our neighborhood] are white, working-class families.

This mother recognized the spatial differences and the boundaries students cross to attend the school in her neighborhood, and she grappled with the injustices of bussing systems that unfairly make demands on families of color. She both appreciated the racial integration at her children's school and struggled with how bussing produces racial inequities.

Finally, parents engaged the issue of residential segregation and housing disparities in the Madison area to mark a contrast that functioned to create spatial distance between themselves and racialized others. Many described a common zoning pattern where their neighborhood school included both students that lived in the immediate area surrounding the school who can walk to the school and students who must travel further to get to the school. In describing these differences, parents often mentioned class and race to note the distinctions. One mother described this residential segregation by its "economic breakdown," noting how a main road creates these distinctions. On one side of the road:

> It's single-family homes, nice size yards . . . middle income families, and the other side is like apartments and Section Eight housing, and you tend to see in the majority of the people of color in our school are living on that side . . . So there's huge socioeconomic discrepancies. And . . . that's really hard because I don't want my kids to grow up thinking anybody with Black or Brown skin is poor. . . I recognize that as a problem specifically in Dane County, like more so than other cities in terms of our socioeconomic gaps along racial lines. But regardless of all that . . . we still want to be a part of a community that represents different people in different cultures, and we think that's a really important thing for our kids to see and experience.

Despite the good intentions of white parents like this mother, decades of structural racist residential zoning practices combined with white families' individual segregationist behaviors have resulted in a present-day racially segregated city. Albeit expressing a high amount of social awareness about segregation patterns, this mother's desires for her children to grow up in an integrated community are limited by geographic boundaries that contain Black, Brown, and low-income families into certain areas. These factors not only frustrate parents' intentions, like this mother, but also reinforce the spatial distance white parents understand between themselves and racialized others, marking diversity as apart from themselves and reinforcing whiteness as normative. The complex web between white parents' good intentions, their challenge in engaging diversity in ways that disrupt entrenched white privilege, and their individual motivations suggests how diversity takes on contradictory meanings that function to both value it and maintain it at a distance.

Diversity as Capital

Diversity also functioned as capital in parents' school choice discourse. Parents imbued the term with economic meanings as they expressed their value for diversity, positioning it as a value-add to the school choice process. For instance, they described it as "valuable" to send their kids to MMSD schools given the diversity levels, the "opportunity" to be with a diverse community, and diversity posing a "really great benefit" for their children. Parents compared diversity levels between schools and districts, suggesting how greater diversity offered an increased overall value to the school. One mother told me that she constantly advocates for the "valuable" reasons to send students to Madison's diverse public schools over area private schools or more racially homogenous neighboring school districts, maintaining that Madison's diversity levels are just as valuable as the high-test scores at the other schools. Yet, these well-

intentioned white parents engage values like diversity and multiculturalism in ways that do not critically reflect on their unearned white privilege and social positioning within broader racialized systems. To illustrate, a mother described how she perceived diversity as a positive value-add in her school choice decision making process: "we saw the higher level of racial diversity as a real advantage of the school . . . it wasn't something that was part of actively part of our decision, but I think once we were tilting in that direction, it was just sort of a net positive." Employing economic language like "advantage" and "net positive" equates diversity with a numerical calculation, abstracting the term from the actual bodies that represent the diversity. Sarah Mayorga-Gallo observes how the practice of white individuals commodifying nonwhite bodies to construct multiethnic spaces as desirable objectifies people of color through this simultaneous "valuing and devaluing of them."[132] Employing an economic lens to discuss the high value placed on ideal diversity levels devalues and objectifies the very students responsible for representing those levels.

Parents' diversity as capital discourse employed economic terminology to talk about diversity in terms of tradeoffs: where a school may be deficient in diversity in one area, they make up for it in another. To illustrate, parents described how their school may have racial diversity but lacks socioeconomic diversity. Alternatively, parents highlighted different aspects of diversity beyond race or socioeconomic status to justify the lack of diversity in their school. A mother described how diversity factored into her family's decision of choosing where to live, noting how her neighborhood is "not diverse from a racial ethnic standpoint but it is diverse in its gender and sexual orientation standpoint," elaborating, "the neighborhood we live in . . . it's the heavy gay community. And . . . knowing that it is kind of tricky for us to be really where we wanted which was in a neighborhood that was walkable and have it be racially mixed this was

sort of at least one way that at least you're in a neighborhood that felt diverse in *some* way." She justified the lack of racial diversity in her neighborhood, and as a result at their school, through noting how she compromised her desire for racial diversity while still fulfilling some ideal diversity indicators quota to feel good about her decision of where to live. Another parent reflects this trade-off mentality, describing her daughter's private school as: "mostly white and mostly affluent because you have to pay tuition to go there. . . I think there might be a one or two students with special needs, but that would be about it as far as diversity." Adopting a broader definition of diversity that extends beyond race and class, she accounts for how she justifies diversity at her daughter's school through objectifying students with disabilities to fulfill some diversity quota. Diversity as capital functions in these discourses to position diversity markers as bargaining chips that parents shift and trade in the absence of racial or economic diversity to justify how they still make choices that value diversity. Yet, these discourses still reflect the value of diversity as enjoyed by some while denied to others. Albeit employing definitions of diversity that signal broader meanings beyond racial difference, they still center white, heteronormative, able-bodies and direct attention to an "other" responsible for adding diversity.

Despite the good intentions of white parents' value for diversity, engaging diversity through economic terms as a value add to their school choice process highlights the inequalities of their privileged position. White families with socioeconomic privileges unequally enjoy the ability to make school choice decisions based on individual preferences for diversity levels. Non-white parents with fewer class-based privileges do not possess this luxury because the very notion of multiculturalism suggests an ethnic, non-white other. To be sure, families of color certainly have the freedom to choose schools based on racial demographics. Yet, as whiteness has already marked them the racialized other, their choices are limited to the extent they choose

to what degree to participate in hegemonic white, dominant ways of knowing and being. One mother illustrated this disparity in the following quotation, as she described the privileged ability to choose amounts of diversity: "[I]t depends how much diversity you want, and it depends how many different opportunities you want, . . . what kind of like breadth of opportunity you want for your kid. And it feels so like privileged to say like, choose your level of diversity, but that's kind of what it is, and like for us we wanted a high level of diversity, but some people don't." Her perspective illustrates how parents factored diversity in as value-add or "opportunity" in their school choice decision-making process. Yet, it also suggests the one-sidedness of the privileged ability to intentionally factor diversity into the choice making process. Diversity positioned as a value that celebrates the presence of non-white bodies is a value unfairly accessed by white parents with socioeconomic privilege. Although parents of other racial and class backgrounds certainly make choices based on the racial composition of various schools, white parents with socioeconomic privilege do so from a distinct position where they can both profess diversity as a value and engage the term in harmful ways that objectify and devalue families with fewer class and racial privileges.

Diversity as capital discourses that center how white students benefit at the cost of the presence of students of color function as a unique form of capital known as "multicultural capital" that positions students of color as responsible for enriching white children's education. Diane Reay, David James, and Gill Crozier define "multicultural capital," as the idea of extracting value from a "multi-ethnic other" to account for how parents factor the value of nonwhite bodies into their school choice decisions.[133] Although often well-intentioned discourses celebrating multiculturalism and appreciating difference, these discourses are extractive in the way they position students of color. To provide an example, one mother told me: "I've seen my

kids' development be enriched by being around kids and teachers of such a variety of backgrounds." Such perspectives center white students as receiving not only their required academic education, but a supplemental education provided by the presence of non-white bodies in the school. Parents similarly expressed sentiments like, "my kids got so much out of cultural night," and "the kids were exposed to a lot of different nationalities," which similarly function to center how their white children benefitted at the expense of people of color. Implicit in these remarks is the notion that their white students gain value, or multicultural capital, from various exposure to cultural difference, whereas it is just a daily requirement for the students offering that exposure to adhere to white dominant norms of the institution of K12 education. Diversity as multicultural capital functions as a one-sided form of capital acquisition designed for white families' benefit.

Diversity as multicultural capital discourses reinforce existing racial inequalities through the celebration of how white children receive a supplemental education or, in one mother's words, a "leg up" academically. To illustrate, a mother compared her own choices to those of her friends that opted into private schools or moved to the suburbs, telling me:

> [T]heir kids might come out with more academic learning, because I know at our school, we sacrifice some academic learning because we have a very diverse population . . . a lot of our energy goes to behavior and intervention for different needs. And if we weren't grappling with that, we'd have a whole lot more to give everybody for like the academic part of what we do. . . [E]ven though they'll be coming out maybe ahead academically, I feel like [my daughter] will have an advantage because she'll know like how to get along with a whole bunch of people and how to make her own way.

She positioned the school's "very diverse population" as providing her already privileged white daughter with an "advantage" equivalent to the academic rigor offered at less racially diverse schools. Her failure to acknowledge what the students classified as diverse gain or lose in this equation indicates low levels of social awareness around this tension. Instead, these discourses

direct focus toward what white children acquire in such diverse settings, such as equipping them with a comfort in navigating racially and ethnically diverse spaces. Reay and co-authors indicate how families secure their white privilege through the increased acquisition of multicultural capital that enables them to move in and out of multicultural spaces with ease.[134] Such perspectives suggest how diversity as multicultural capital can represent contradictory motivations. On the one hand, parents express their openness for cultural difference because they truly believe in the values of multiculturalism. Yet, parents also more selfishly understand that increased exposure to cultural difference will provide their child with valuable life skills. Reay and co-authors describe this as "both civic commitment and a self-interested altruism."[135] This pattern emerged in parents' discourse through the ways they talked about the advantages of integrated schools as directly benefitting their individual children through preparing them for the world. Parents expressed sentiments like, how it is "important to expose my son to what the world is like" and one mother described how she prioritized for her daughter's school: "a place where she can learn much more about the world through the diversity of her surroundings and what they can teach her. And then the people that she gets interact with and learn from." Although certainly valuing multiculturalism, the direction of multiculturalism's enrichment flows one way to center the white children benefitting from their diverse surroundings. These perspectives suggest how even the most well-intentioned white parents are still motivated by their individualistic impulses to equip their children for an increasingly diverse and globalized world.

Parents undoubtedly possessed the best of intentions when employing discourses that celebrate multiculturalism and racially integrated schools. Yet, when these discourses center how their individual white child benefits at the expense of their classmates of color, they become

problematic. Many parents I spoke with unintentionally fell into this trend, suggesting how individualistic impulses can dominate communal beliefs. Two mothers, however, brought high levels of self-reflexivity to this problematic dynamic. One mother described this pattern as "tricky,": "something that's super tricky and uncomfortable is . . . I'm talking about . . . liking that she has a lot of racial diversity and socio-economic diversity in her class. And I think being aware of, like, what she might be getting out of that at the expense, or taking from those particular students and are we giving or acknowledging that and I think that's a little trickier." She recognized the extractive nature of the pattern of thinking that appreciates diversity in ways that may not necessarily be reciprocal. The other mother expressed: "I get nervous about. I don't want to send my kids to sort of be tourists in somebody else's culture . . . someone else's children are not my children's entertainment and they're not my children's education and they're not my children's enrichment." She recognized the difficulty of her position as a mother with white privilege and talked about the responsibility of how to appreciate diversity in ways that do not rely on students of color to provide that supplemental education for her children. Their perspectives suggest greater levels of awareness of the privileged position of whiteness in diversity as capital discourses. Their naming and recognition of this inequity may provide the first steps in actively disrupting it. However, the lack of reflexivity the majority of parents indicated in engaging diversity as capital discourses suggests the pervasiveness of ingrained, individualistic motivations despite inclinations toward community-motivated actions.

Diversity as Commonplace

This final theme explores how parents positioned diversity as ordinary or unremarkable in their school choice discourse. In contrast to previous themes, diversity functioned as commonplace to celebrate difference as a normal part of children's lives in ways that did not

objectify students of color, contain diversity as separate from their lives, or place focus on white children as the direct beneficiaries of diversity. Instead, this final theme made the tensions of parents' privileged positionality explicit as parents discussed diversity in terms of broader societal benefits. Parents engaged diversity as commonplace to talk about how they valued integrated spaces for the sake of integration, like choosing the more racially diverse middle school over the less racially integrated one. Parents rationalized their desire to seek out majority nonwhite spaces because diversity is "normal" and represents "our world," or "our future."

Parents described how they wanted their children to understand diversity and difference and that they valued the ways schools create exposure to a wide variety of people. These perspectives embraced a more communal view of the benefits of diversity rather than how their individual child stands to benefit. Parents expressed sentiments like the importance for their children to go to a school that was not "full of other white children," but rather for their children to understand their "world as more than just people who look like them." Participants indicated how through their school choices they hope to model for their children how to interact in a world full of difference. One mother expressed her vision:

> to be a part of a community that represents different people in different cultures, and we think that's a really important thing for our kids to see and experience. . . we value raising our children in a world where they understand that people look different, that people have different cultural backgrounds, people speak different languages, that diversity is beautiful and important. And we value . . . this idea that . . . we have something to learn in every situation. So everybody we encounter has something to teach us . . . So I think that that drives part of why we like to be in a community that is reflective of that diversity.

She emphasized a communal vision that views her family as engaged within a community as opposed to a surface level appreciation of diversity from a distance. She underscored multidirectional learning from one another, rather than learning flowing in one direction to benefit her white children. Another mother talked about her value for diversity in terms of larger

societal benefits, describing how her children's friends are: "from all different walks of life backgrounds, all different kinds of families. . . I love that I can see my kids are growing up to be the sort of people where if somebody were to say, you know, so and so is gay they're [like] what's your point? . . . I don't mean it in a belittling way but they're just they're exposed to everybody. So, . . . it's not going to be the issue it is for us older folks. . . I hope that's really the way that our society is going." Although she reflects on the benefit the exposure to difference has on her own children, she frames this in terms of her hopes for larger societal shifts as opposed to an individualistic drive for her children to receive a supplemental education or "leg up" to help them navigate the world.

Diversity as commonplace discourses expressed an expanded vision of the purpose of education. Parents articulated academic goals for children that included learning about diversity, understanding exposure to diversity as part of what constitutes an academic education, and viewing schooling as providing experiences that make children adept at navigating difference. They described the various diversity efforts their schools engaged and how diversity themes are integrated into the school curriculum to simply become an ordinary part of their children's schooling. For example, a mother recounted an experience where her daughter came home from first grade and said to her:

> "Mama, did you know that everybody's skin is a different shade of brown?" And I said, "Yes, it is." And my wife is in the kitchen and she says, "it is?" And she looks at her skin. And I said, "Yes, it is." And she looked at me and she said "it is?" And I gritted my teeth. And I said, "Yes, it is." And later I said to her, "do you know what our school has done? . . . They've decentered whiteness as the center of skin." That is, to me is what is going to change how we come and operate in our world. So it has never been about white skinned girls or . . . white skin stories. All the stories have been about Brown people doing something, whether it's good or bad. That's the center.

She celebrated the ways her daughter's school normalized diversity and difference through its attempts to decenter whiteness. She framed the benefits of this education through a communal lens of how such lessons will produce larger societal benefits.

Parents discussed how they value diversity because of the ways that exposure to difference breeds empathy and open mindedness. Participants described how ignorance can be overcome through actually knowing people that are different from oneself. To illustrate, one mother told me how she grew up in a family with two adopted siblings that are very dark-skinned African Americans. Describing how she and her adopted siblings would be treated differently in various settings, she indicated how these family dynamics exposed her to understand difference at a young age. This awareness now undergirds her values that inform her school choice decisions. It was important for her that her children attend a school where other students look like their aunt and uncle. She expressed that she wants her children to experience diversity in such a way that "they're being surrounded by it . . . seeing that in real life. . . And, . . . that constant learning and unlearning of things and what does that mean to be white and what does it mean to, to understand our history from different perspectives. . . And seeing and understanding how other people live and experience the same community." Through attempting to normalize difference by way of her school choices, she engages diversity to promote understanding with her children of how various social identities inform people's unique perspectives. She indicated a high degree of self-reflexivity through her efforts to value difference by explicitly making sense of different positionalities, including her children's white positionality.

Diversity as commonplace discourses suggest the ways parents were highly aware of their white positionality and engaged diversity as a value in such a way where they wanted their

children to critically understand their privileged racial positioning in relation to difference. These participants discussed diversity's value as the exposure to different perspectives and ways of seeing the world as a way to then critically reflect back on their own whiteness. One mother expressed this as: "My top goal for my kids' education and education really broadly, is to understand what it means to be a white person in this society and what needs to be different about that positionality in relation to others. And so, having an opportunity to engage with kids in an everyday space who have different racial ethnic backgrounds and economic experiences is my top top top priority." Her focus is not for her children to be in spaces with different people to enrich or supplement their education, but rather to be able to reflect back on their white positionality and understand their racial privilege in relation to difference. Essentially, this mother desires to teach her children how to be self-reflexive in order to become more critically aware of their whiteness. Such diversity as commonplace discourses reflect broader goals in valuing diversity that include critically deconstructing whiteness and its associated privileges.

Although diversity as commonplace discourses certainly function to suggest a high degree of self-awareness of parents' white positionality, parents still engage the term from their privileged position and within broader racialized contexts where whiteness is dominant. The implications of this conundrum are that white parents with socioeconomic privilege must contend with both how they center diversity as a driver in their school choice decisions and the privileged ability to be able to choose their diversity levels, as opposed to making choices based on more limited circumstances. Despite their intentions to leverage diversity to normalize difference and deconstruct whiteness, they still engage diversity while benefitting from their privileged positioning and within broader structures that reinforce white ways of knowing and being. And yet, diversity as commonplace certainly offers the most possibility for dismantling

white supremacy as parents seek integrated school settings with a critical awareness of their white privilege and sense of social responsibility.

Conclusion

I have examined how diversity functions in socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents' discourse and its impacts through considering how these parents position the word diversity in relation to their school choice decisions. Through emphasizing the range of narrowness and breadth in how parents defined the term, I underscored how diversity functions as a polysemous term within their discourse. I demonstrated the significance of racialized contexts, like K12 education, in which the polysemous term diversity circulates to produce conflicting "both-and" meanings. I have argued that emphasizing the privileged positioning of white rhetors illustrates how diversity operates as *both* a well-intentioned discourse that celebrates multiculturalism *and* one that conceals inequities, revealing diversity discourses that function to maintain whiteness as center. Through my analysis, I demonstrated the varying degrees as to how parents' discourses reinforce whiteness as dominant through examination of how they position diversity in relation to their school choice decisions as a threat, as a distant other, as capital, and as commonplace.

Through troubling these uncritical diversity discourses, this chapter contributes a nuanced and complex interpretation of how polysemous diversity discourses get employed by white rhetors in racialized contexts to produce contradictory meanings. I have emphasized the importance of the rhetor's social location to provide this expanded interpretation of diversity. It is crucial to foreground the white rhetor's privileged positionality to account for the racialized power dynamics that inform how white rhetors engage the term diversity. As my analysis

suggests, although white rhetors may engage diversity discourses with the best of intentions, uncritical diversity discourses that are absent of any consideration of racial hierarchies and systems of power can function to conceal novel forms of racism and reinforce the dominance of whiteness. These contradictory meanings reveal the disconnect between a rhetor's good intentions and actions that actually disrupt whiteness' normative positioning.

The conflicting "both and" impacts of parents' diversity discourses produce yet another illustration of the tensions inherent to the positionality of white, political progressives with socioeconomic privilege as to how they must negotiate the conundrum of their white privilege with their progressive values. Parents positioned diversity in relation to their school choice decisions with varying degrees of value alignment, yet they also did so with more or less self-reflexivity of their privileged ability to make such choices. Connecting to the broader themes of this dissertation, this chapter underscores the variation among participants' levels of critical awareness. The emphasis on the range of ways participants defined and engaged the term diversity reveals the possibilities when people understand diversity in terms of communal benefits and social responsibility. Such possibilities raise questions as to how privileged white folks might engage the term in liberatory ways. Perhaps with greater self-reflexivity around the racialized power dynamics associated with diversity, well-meaning white progressives might critically engage with the term to confront discomfort and seek ways to enact change at systemic levels that disrupts systems of white supremacy. Next, I further pursue this notion of how individual instances of critical awareness might lead to meaningful action that disrupts whiteness at multiple levels in the dissertation's conclusion.

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CONCLUSION

Disrupting Whiteness through Critical Awareness and Social Responsibility

Americans on the political left breathed a collective sigh of relief on January 20, 2021, as President Joe Biden took the oath of office to be sworn in as the 46th U.S. President. Myriad factors contributed to this shared sense of relief; among them was the cabinet appointment of Miguel Cardona as Secretary of Education, a far less controversial pick than predecessor Betsy DeVos. Although I began imagining this project during the tumultuousness of 2020, I met with my study participants in 2021 when, as political progressives, we were all breathing a little easier. The all-too-familiar move for white progressives now would be to permit these sighs of relief to backslide us into the cozy grooves of complacency conditioned by whiteness. Yet, as the parent discourse in the previous chapters demonstrates, the tenacity of broader structural forces that reinforce racism and educational inequity endures despite progressive commitments. The threats racial capitalism and neoliberalism pose do not simply disappear with the transition of elected officials in dominant positions of power. It would certainly be easier as white progressives to wave our flags of victory as we call out white supremacists while neglecting to flip the critical scrutiny back on ourselves. As rhetorical scholars committed to projects of dismantling white supremacy, we must do both.

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined how white parents negotiate their progressive commitments with the ways they are positioned to benefit from oppressive systems, like white supremacy. I have suggested this tension is inescapable and inherent to their social position. I have argued that we ought to consider this tension in terms of white progressives' broad concerns for their communities and their narrow focus on securing individual advantages.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I observed the dynamics of the competing values of community and the individual within parents' school choice discourse as they relate to choice and agency, white racial identity, and diversity. In Chapter 1, I considered how parents exercised school choice in ways that variously emphasized the broad community impacts of their choices and the narrow focus on their individual family. In Chapter 2, I observed how parents spoke about their white racial identity in ways ranging from the belief that their white privilege obligates a social responsibility to change the status quo to whiteness signifying their individual racial classification. Finally, Chapter 3 traced how parents' diversity discourses function to both associate diversity with communal values that celebrate multiculturalism and reinscribe whiteness in ways that center the individual. Across the distinct foci of each of these analyses, they together indicate how these progressive white parents navigate the pull between their communal beliefs and influences that promote the individual in their school choice discourse. In this conclusion, I unpack the implications of this argument as it connects to three themes that span the dissertation: white racial positionality, a continuum of critical awareness, and social responsibility. Then, I reflect on the dissertation's contributions to anticipate possible directions for future scholarly inquiry.

White Racial Positionality

I have asserted that attention to progressive white parents' social positionality crucially informs how to interpret their choice discourse because it contextualizes uneven power dynamics. Through foregrounding parents' white racial positionality across the preceding chapters, I illuminated the ways they benefit from race and class-based privileges that position them to exercise choice with minimal constraints. Principally, they benefit from the ways

whiteness functions as an implicit, universal assumption. This privilege manifested in their choice discourse through their ability to racialize others while remaining silent about their own racial positionality. For instance, in Chapter 3, parents spoke to the trend of "choose your level of diversity," which functioned to racialize a diverse "other" from the position of an unnamed white center. Chapter 1 illustrated how progressive white parents can choose to position values like family and their individual child in non-racialized ways, a privilege not equally afforded to parents of color. Moreover, Chapter 2 demonstrated that when parents are prompted to explicitly talk about their whiteness, some remain silent on associating their whiteness with systems of privilege, thus demonstrating the privileged ability to discuss their race in uncritical ways.

The ways that the design of institutions like the K12 education system caters to structural whiteness functioned as another benefit that informs parents' choice discourse. As the privileged beneficiaries of this structural design, parents do not have to explicitly recognize how the education system benefits them. As I indicated in Chapter 1, they are free to exercise choice with increased agency and minimal constraints. Parents described feeling comfortable in any of the Madison area schools, having a "safety valve" or backup options in place, and even relocating houses to attend a different area school. Chapter 2 suggested how parents experience ease and comfort within the school space in ways such as confidence in confronting administrators and other authority officials to advocate on behalf of their individual child. Additionally, the fact parents could position diversity as an "add-on" value in Chapter 3 illustrates the default of whiteness already in place within schools.

Because of the ways parents often engage abstract value terms in their school choice discourse, it is especially crucial to foreground progressive white parents' racial positionality to account for their use of polysemous terms. In Chapter 3, I suggested how reading diversity

discourses in relation to white rhetors' positionality considers contextual power relations that reveal how diversity can function as conflicting value. Likewise, in Chapter 1, the polysemous values parents associated with their choices, such as "family" and "opportunity," need to be considered in terms of parents' increased agency. As parents grappled with the various conundrums of school choice, the polysemous terms they engaged to rationalize their various choices must be read in relation to parents' position of increased agency that results from their structural privilege.

A Continuum of Critical Awareness

I have suggested that progressive white parents are not a monolith. Instead, this project emphasizes the complexities, layers, and nuances of this social position. Throughout this dissertation, I have stressed the variation among participants in terms of the values they associate with choice, their awareness of their white privilege, and how they value diversity. In Chapter 2, I specifically engaged the frame of self-reflexivity to account for the gradations in parents' varying stages of critical awareness of their privileged positionality. I asserted that critical understandings of whiteness reflect an awareness of its unfair positioning within a social structure shaped by historical and contemporary structural racism. Applying this notion of a continuum of critical awareness across all the chapters provides a lens to account for variations in parents' school choice discourse broadly. There is a utility, as I suggested in Chapter 2, in marking low, medium, and high levels of self-reflexivity along this continuum of critical awareness.

Several themes within parents' discourse across the dissertation reflected low levels of critical awareness. In Chapter 2, I observed how low levels of reflexivity manifested as denial,

refusals, and silence. These patterns are evident in Chapter 1 where participants expressed nominal commitments to educational equity but then failed to recognize the lack of alignment between their commitments and their school choices. Parents also demonstrated low levels of reflexivity in the diversity discourses in Chapter 3 when they sought diverse learning environments without accounting for their own positionality in their celebrations of diversity.

At the medium position on the continuum are instances of a nominalist rhetoric, or naming of whiteness to disrupt its unstated normative position. In Chapter 2, I indicated how parents called out their whiteness as a racial position associated with privilege without critically interrogating the implications or taking any according action. These patterns are evident in Chapter 1 when parents indicated awareness of their white privilege without changing their behaviors in any way to disrupt their privileged position. Additionally, the diversity as capital rhetoric in Chapter 3 suggested medium levels of awareness as parents sought integrated, multicultural learning environments but did so in ways that failed to fully consider the implications of their children's white privilege in terms of a one-directional, supplementary education.

Finally, patterns in parents' discourse that fall on the high end of the continuum of critical awareness demonstrate fully reckoning with the tensions of progressive white parents. As I suggested in Chapter 2, a combination of a nominalist rhetoric and corresponding action to change an unfair status quo reflects these higher levels of critical awareness. This coupling is evident across parents' school choice discourse when they indicated understanding whiteness as a position associated with power and a desire to productively leverage their privileged positionality to work toward the value of community. To illustrate, in Chapter 1 parents discussed the impacts of their individual choices in reference to patterns of white parent choice

on a broader scale and its possible effects. In Chapter 2, I discussed how parents demonstrate high levels of reflexivity through their white networks when they work in relationship with other white folks to critically deconstruct whiteness together. Finally, diversity as commonplace discourses in Chapter 3 reflect high levels of critical awareness when parents described factoring diversity into their choices in such a way that accounts for their white positionality in relation to others.

Social Responsibility

As I reiterated above, high levels of critical awareness reflect a nominalist rhetoric that disrupts whiteness' implicit location combined with corresponding action to change the status quo. In Chapter 2, I discussed this corresponding action through the theme of an ethic of responsibility. Although not explicitly naming it as such, this notion of responsibility surfaces across the dissertation. Given the broader argument around the tension between community and the individual, it is productive to consider how high levels of critical awareness foster a sense of social responsibility. Social responsibility entails action, suggesting that it is not enough to just name and critically recognize whiteness. It encompasses the idea of parents leveraging their privileged position to work toward the communal values they profess to believe in.

Social responsibility manifested in parents' discourse when they indicated the need to disrupt the status quo and recondition their established behaviors. In Chapter 1, parents discussed recalibrating their expectations around their children's schooling experience and retraining their actions around the impulse to secure every individual educational opportunity for their children. In Chapter 2, parents described shifting their mentality from "what can I gain" to "what can I contribute." They also indicated a critical awareness of how white parents occupy space. Parents

expressed a desire to listen and make space for less privileged voices and to learn when to sit back and remain silent. In the discussion of multicultural capital in Chapter 3, I mentioned the two mothers that explicitly called out the problematic dynamic of exploiting children of color for the supplemental education of white children. There is promise in their ability to recognize how this tendency can further harm students of color. They importantly called out the need to retrain behaviors that center what white children might gain at the expense of children of color.

Parents' desire to use their privileged positionality specifically to further progressive causes also illustrates social responsibility. This intention indicates a critical awareness of their white privilege and a concern with harnessing that privilege in ways that align to their beliefs. For instance, parents illustrated this in Chapter 1 when they discussed how they made choices in support of thriving and resourced public schools that aligned with their beliefs in educational equity. Social responsibility also manifested through the ways parents described taking a critical stance on their positionality within white parent networks in Chapter 2. They spoke to the need to educate others in their white circles to support the public schools through engaging them in conversation about their choice to stay in the public schools. These actions illustrate social responsibility through critical actions within white parent networks; yet action must pair with high levels of critical awareness. Critical self-reflexivity needs to accompany social responsibility to account for impacts that could be perceived as white saviorism.

The ways parents spoke to their values and behaviors in raising their children also illustrates social responsibility. Parents' discussions of bringing up their children in race conscious ways in Chapter 2 illustrates their desire to leverage white privilege to support progressive causes. Likewise, in Chapter 3's discussion of diversity as commonplace, parents indicated their concern with supporting their children to develop a critical awareness of their

whiteness in relation to racialized others. Sarah A. Matlock and Robin DiAngelo emphasize the importance of parents acting out their values, suggesting that parents modeling actions in accordance with professed values is potentially the "most effective antiracist parenting strategy."[136] Their observation underscores the importance of the action component attached to espoused values that encompasses social responsibility.

Contributions & Looking Forward

Having reflected back on the dissertation's overall argument and related themes, I now shift my gaze to consider the ways this project moves our scholarly trajectory forward. In this next section, I consider the contributions of this project to theory, method, and discourse to anticipate directions for future scholarship. As I comment on the dissertation's contributions to theory, I do so in terms of the key concepts presented in the introduction: choice, ideology, identity, and difference.

To begin with rhetorical theory on choice and ideology, this project contributes to scholarship on discourses of choice that argue for the need to foreground the rhetors' social location. I complicated and nuanced the social position of white political progressives by demonstrating how they enact choice through an increased agency to align with their progressive commitments to varying degrees of intensity. Doing so, I accounted for the unfair structural advantages that enable them to exercise choice with minimal constraints. This intervention explored how choice gets exercised with varying degrees of conviction to ideology and the ways that increased agency enabled that variation. Future scholarship might continue to account for the uneven distribution of choice through critically interrogating how majoritarian groups exercise choice in ways that suggest conflicting amounts of conviction to their ideologies.

My project contributes to rhetorical scholarship on white identity formation through examining white parents' degrees of self-reflexivity around their white privilege within the cultural context of K12 school choice discourse. I demonstrated how parents exhibit varying understandings of their whiteness as a part of a hegemonic structure for which they ought to assume responsibility. Through gesturing toward the significance of varying gradations of self-reflexivity, I deepen our understanding of white identity formation within K12 education discourses to show how parents construct their white racial identity in ways that sustain, question, and challenge the status quo. With regard to the ways more highly reflexive parents associated their white racial identity with a sense of responsibility, it would be a worthy scholarly endeavor to consider how individuals in other cultural contexts construct whiteness as rhetorical identity that bears an ethic of responsibility.

In terms of my final key concept of difference, this project intervenes in scholarship on racialized constructions of other to demonstrate the significance of school choice discourse as a site to understand how white parents construct racial difference. Through asserting the need to consider white rhetors' positionality in relation to diversity discourses, it provides crucial insights as to how progressive white parents construct their racial identity and racialize others through local, everyday discourses. It demonstrates how intent does not always align with impact by troubling the ways white rhetors engage diversity discourses to produce contradictory both-and meanings. In doing so, it contributes an expanded perspective on diversity discourses when specifically employed by progressive white parents. There would be merit in future scholarship that expands the scope of this analysis to include the perspectives of non-white parents to create a cross-racial dialogue around parent perspectives on choosing diverse schools. Indeed, sociological research indicates that parents across racial and ethnic groups demonstrate

heterogeneity in their preferences for racial composition of schools.[137] While my dissertation underscored the need to make explicit the too-often implicit dominant perspectives of everyday discourses of whiteness that uphold racial inequity, future research could incorporate the diversity discourses of Black, Indigenous, and other parents of color to construct a multi-directional focus on these issues.

Now reflecting on methods, this project engaged rhetorical field methods to construct a primary text that deepens our scholarly understanding of the social position of white political progressives. Although this methodological approach enabled me to capture discourse not previously recorded, limitations inevitably arise as a result of making certain decisions to the exclusion of others. As I gestured in the introduction, I based my analysis off the transcripts as parents presented themselves in the interviews and focus groups. We could certainly question whether parents presented the most authentic versions of themselves when in conversation with me, a white doctoral candidate. A different methodological choice would have been to act as a complete participant deeply and fully enmeshed as a member of the local culture and conduct my observations over an extended period time.[138] Immersing myself within the local Madison culture of progressive white parents in this way would have enabled me to overhear unfiltered conversations that informally occur *in situ*.[139] I would have captured this raw dialogue through contexts like parent conversations while waiting at the bus stop, exchanges during school pick up and drop off, neighbors discussing area schools during a backyard BBQ, or even through online posts in parent groups on social media. [140]

That said, my methodological choices certainly afforded opportunities. I believe the intentionally constructed nature of the interviews and focus groups functioned in instructive ways to promote participants' self-reflexivity. Their side comments like "this is really making me

think" or "I am appreciating this conversation" anecdotally suggest how the formal nature of interviews can serve a dual function that fosters opportunities for learning that the passive observation of informal conversations around the bus stop may necessarily not. Some of the questions during the interviews prompted participants to pause and reflect as they may not have previously considered the relationship between their whiteness and school choice. The focus groups especially produced a synergy as parents would bounce ideas off one another or build on one another's comments. Despite their artificialness, interviews and focus groups possess the potential to prompt greater levels of critical awareness while simultaneously generating research transcripts. I can imagine future projects designed with this dual purpose in mind. Scholars might leverage rhetorical field methods to conduct focus groups designed as antiracist workshops for white folks. These would serve a dual purpose of fostering an environment for white people to critically reflect on their white privilege in relation to antiracist goals while also producing transcripts for research on vernacular constructions of white identity.

With respect to discourse, this project demonstrates the significance of critical whiteness studies-focused projects within discourses of education by underscoring how K12 education serves as a cultural context to critique white supremacy. Contributing to the rhetoric of K12 education policy through intersecting this area with critical whiteness studies, I revealed how local, everyday discourses, like the ways white parents talk about their children's school, uphold logics of whiteness and reinforce racialized power dynamics. I spotlighted this area of public discourse through sustained focus on progressive white parents within the specific geography of Madison, WI. Future scholarship that engages this area of public discourse might examine different geographies to consider how local cultural contexts differently shape the dynamics of white parents' school choice discourse. Since school choice policies vary so greatly from city to

city, research projects could consider regional perspectives or comparisons across different urban settings.

Critical awareness and social responsibility as specific modes to disrupt whiteness emerged as two key themes in progressive white parents' school choice discourse, deepening our scholarly understanding of this area of public discourse. Too often, the implications of rhetorical projects committed to the project of dismantling white supremacy employ an exclusive macro-level lens and leave us with a sense of overwhelm. To only offer systems-levels reflections on how to disrupt whiteness produces individual helplessness around the enormity of the task. Indeed, systems-level education policies actively shape the broader structures in which individual parents exercise choice. Education scholars Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj and Allison Roda underscore the significance of how school choice policies interact with advantaged white parents' anxieties around scarcity to produce opportunity hoarding that maintains race and class-based inequities.[141] Although we absolutely must continue to consider these questions at the systems level, we might do so in ways that also account for individual agency. My project offers a tone of hopefulness through the implications for individual actions. I have emphasized the notion of increasing individual instances of critical awareness coupled with social responsibility. For white individuals committed to antiracism, Matlock and DiAngelo highlight the significance of awareness and suggest it needs to be paired with meaningful action. They identify a key principle of antiracism as "engaging in meaningful action against racism at a personal, interpersonal, and community level."[142] Despite the tenacity of oppressive systems, individual instances of critical awareness matter because they have the potential to build collective momentum in support of communities.

There is promise in individuals committed to increasing their critical awareness and moving toward higher levels on the continuum. Yet, such commitments require work and ongoing reflection. Matlock and DiAngelo observe that is it not solely sufficient to possess a critical awareness of white privilege; individuals committed to antiracism must also possess an awareness of how their good intentions may indeed function to reinforce racism.[143] That is, it is not enough for an individual to be broadly aware that they benefit from white privilege, they need to develop critical awareness around how their white privilege may manifest in ways that perpetuate inequities. To illustrate, I prepared a research brief that I shared with all my study participants a year after our meetings that reported high-level themes from the interviews. One mother responded to me to tell me that she recognized herself in some of the problematic behaviors I included in the report. She specifically saw herself reflected in the pattern of calling out other white people while failing to critically examine one's own actions, and she expressed her commitment to do better. Although this example is anecdotal, I use it to suggest that increasing individual instances of awareness matters in terms of collective movement toward higher levels of critical reflexivity.

I have also suggested that individual instances of critical awareness are not enough if they do not result in action. Social responsibility accounts for the ways individuals might feel compelled to act as a result of increasing individual instances of critical awareness. For instance, participation in this study may have prompted parents to think about their choices more collectively, such as consider the impact of white parent choices on broader levels. Yet, the crucial next step would be to take action, such as engage in critical dialogues with other white folks about the impacts of socioeconomically advantaged, progressive white parents' school choices. This dissertation has emphasized how progressive white folks have a responsibility to

confront individual discomfort as they use their privileged position to act on their progressive ideals. Yet, these actions must always connect back to self-reflexivity. Ersula J. Ore calls out "performances of white allyship" that reflect "empty solidarity" and are designed for white benefit.[144] Ore suggests to meaningfully engage in action, white people need to "understand that anti-oppression work involves- but isn't about- them."[145] As white progressives enact social responsibility, they must do so in self-reflexive ways to avoid missteps that work to recenter whiteness.

Throughout this dissertation, I have positioned the individual and community as competing values. Now, I want to suggest a repositioning that imagines the possibilities when the individual is harnessed to support action for their communities. I envision the potential of individual instances of critical awareness that coheres groups of critically aware white folks, leading to diverse coalition-building that enacts systems-level change to disrupt whiteness. There is power in individual instances of awareness building when it might result in meaningful action that supports communal values. To illustrate, Education researcher Allison Roda examines how parents working in racially and ethnically diverse coalitions both recognize their privilege and mobilize other parents to opt-in and support their local public schools.[146] Future rhetorical scholarship should seek communicative contexts where groups of critically aware white folks are working in coalition, however imperfectly, toward progressive goals. I envision projects conducted in collaboration with grassroots parent organizations oriented around justice, such as local organizations like Families for Justice of Dane County and Allies for Black Lives – Madison. Projects might also examine parent equity groups within local schools or a local chapter of Integrated Schools. The intent would be to amplify examples where white parents are self-reflexively working in cross-racial coalitions and engaged in action aligned to their nominal

commitments. Our discipline is bursting with progressive white folks committed to dismantling white supremacy. I urge rhetorical scholars to look to instances where they might conduct scholarship that can further develop the blueprint for how to harness the individual to work in harmony with community.

Conclusion Notes

[136] Sarah A. Matlock, and Robin DiAngelo, "'We Put It in Terms of Not-Nice': White Antiracists and Parenting," *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 26, no. 1 (2015), 90.

[137] Chantal A. Hailey, "Racial Preferences for Schools: Evidence from an Experiment with White, Black, Latinx, and Asian Parents and Students," *Sociology of Education* 95, no. 2 (2022): 110–32.

[138] Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 107.

[139] Michael K. Middleton, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres, "Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Challenges and Tensions," *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (2011), 387.

[140] Despite the allure of capturing unfiltered parent dialogue in these contexts, it bears mentioning that I conducted field work in summer 2021 during the COVID-19 Pandemic. At this particular moment in the pandemic, vaccines were still being rolled out to the public and people generally still exercised caution around unnecessary gatherings in-person. For instance, when given the option, the majority of my participants felt most comfortable conducting our meetings virtually over Zoom.

[141] Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj and Allison Roda, "Opportunity Hoarding in School Choice Contexts: The Role of Policy Design in Promoting Middle-Class Parents' Exclusionary Behaviors," *Educational Policy* 34, no. 7 (2020): 992–1035.

[142] Matlock and DiAngelo, "'We Put It in Terms of Not-Nice,'" 90.

[143] Matlock and DiAngelo, "'We Put It in Terms of Not-Nice,'" 89.

[144] Matthew Houdek and Ersula J. Ore, "Cultivating Otherwise Worlds and Breathable Futures," *Rhetoric, Politics & Culture 1*, no. 1 (2021), 88.

[145] Houdek and Ore, "Cultivating Otherwise Worlds and Breathable Futures," 88.

[146] Allison Roda, "School Choice and the Politics of Parenthood: Exploring Parent Mobilization As a Catalyst for the Common Good," *Peabody Journal of Education* 93, no. 4 (2018): 430–49.

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