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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

STORIES OF ANTI-RACIST WHITE FEMINIST ACTIVISTS:  
“A CONVERSATION WITH MYSELF”

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Christina Linder

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Leadership, Policy and Development:  
Higher Education and P-12 Education  
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

May, 2011

This Dissertation by: Christina Linder

Entitled: Stories of Anti-Racist White Feminist Activists: “A Conversation with Myself”

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Department of Leadership, Policy and Development: Higher Education and P-12 Education, Program of Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

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## ABSTRACT

Linder, Christina. *Stories of Anti-Racist White Feminist Activists: "A Conversation with Myself."* Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation. University of Northern Colorado, 2011.

Six anti-racist White feminist activists shared stories of engaging in anti-racist activism. Critical race feminism and intersectionality provide the theoretical framework supporting this transformative inquiry. Through interviews, a focus group, and guided reflections, activists shared their understanding of their White racial identity, influences on their identity development, and their experiences engaging in anti-racist activism. Participants' white identity development consisted of experiences of anger and resistance, shame and guilt, creating a new version of whiteness, and pride in racial identity. Influences on identities included sexual violence, women's studies and ethnic studies classes, involvement and activism, family relationships, and relationships with People of Color. Importance of community, everyday activism, internal dialogue and hyper-awareness, and the fear of appearing racist emerged as themes related to the experiences of engaging in anti-racist activism. Implications for student affairs and social justice educators include supporting integrated learning, community building, and self-awareness. Future directions for research and implications for women's studies, student development, and intersectionality scholars are also provided.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to Ava Marie and Rigley June who represent my hope for the next generation of anti-racist White women. I hope this work and work like it allows you to develop your full voice and potential in the world and that you feel supported in engaging in full, authentic relationships with all people. While I would like to think racism will no longer exist when you are a young adult, the realistic part of me knows that is not true. Find your voice and use it.

As with most things in life, there is nothing solitary about the process of writing a dissertation. Numerous people supported, guided, challenged, consoled, pushed, and encouraged me throughout this process. First, I thank the participants of this study – the courageous women who shared their insights, wisdom, and vulnerabilities with me so others may learn. While there are differences between the experiences of oppression and pain, the exhaustion and pain the participants experienced as a result of their self-awareness and commitment to anti-racism is to be acknowledged. I do so cautiously, recognizing the fine balance between praising people with privileged identities for doing what we should be doing anyway and supporting and encouraging further reflection and self-awareness. While the pain we experience as White people is different than the oppression People of Color experience as a result of racism, organizing the consequences of racism into a hierarchy benefits no one. So, to the participants of this study, thank you. Your wisdom, patience, perseverance, and commitment matters.

To my Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership community at the University of Northern Colorado, thank you for providing me a place of comfort and safety – a home. During my three years as a full-time student affairs professional and part-time student, you supported, encouraged, and challenged me. Most of all, you let me be me – unfiltered and authentic. With the kind of thoughts that managed to find their way from my head and heart out into the world, you might have regretted this sometimes but I am grateful to each of you. Thank you to my advisor, Flo, for your patience and guidance. Katrina, thank you for the hours and hours of processing and for helping me develop my voice as a teacher and researcher. Louise, thank you for helping me process what it means to be an anti-racist White person and teacher and for validating my voice as a budding researcher and scholar. Kathy, thank you for your support, validation, and encouragement with the writing process.

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To my family, thank you for your support and encouragement, for teaching me to read, for encouraging my education, and instilling an incredible work ethic in me. Thank you for supporting and encouraging my formal education, even though you didn't have your own experiences to share. And finally, thank you for not shutting me out as I grew

(and continue to grow) through my anger and impatient stages of development. To my chosen family, JJ and Leck, thanks for your on-going support, validation, and for joining me on this journey.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION .....	1
	Background.....	1
	Terminology.....	3
	Statement of the Problem.....	5
	Purpose of the Study and Research Questions.....	6
	Significance of the Study .....	7
	Researcher Perspective .....	9
	Journey to My Questions .....	9
	Socially Constructed Identities .....	9
	Chapter Summary .....	23
II.	REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	25
	A History of Feminism .....	25
	White Privilege and Exclusion in Mainstream Feminism .....	30
	Constructing and Deconstructing Whiteness .....	34
	Whiteness and White Privilege.....	35
	White Anti-Racism .....	43
	College Student Development Theory.....	47
	White Racial Identity Development.....	47
	Feminist Identity Development.....	53
	Social Justice Ally Development.....	57
	Multiple Identity Development.....	61
	Social Justice Education .....	65
	Social Justice Pedagogy .....	66
	Privileged Identity Exploration Model .....	68
	Application to Study .....	70
	Chapter Summary .....	71
III.	METHODOLOGY .....	74
	Transformative Paradigm.....	74
	Axiology .....	75
	Ontology .....	76
	Epistemology .....	77
	Theoretical Framework.....	78
	Critical Race Feminism.....	79
	Intersectionality Theory .....	81
	Methodology .....	83
	Narrative Inquiry.....	83
	Data Collection Methods .....	84

Participants and Setting.....	89
Data Analysis .....	90
Coding Process.....	92
Criteria for Rigor.....	94
Chapter Summary .....	97
 IV.    PROFILES OF ANTI-RACIST FEMINISTS .....	 99
Alice: “We’re all girls; we’re all okay.” .....	100
Relationships with Women .....	100
Leadership.....	101
Education and Social Identities.....	102
Extended Family .....	104
Anti-Racist Development.....	105
Carolyn: “It’s an internal dialogue.” .....	107
Social Identities.....	108
Family Influences.....	110
Complicated Dynamics with Men .....	111
Anti-Racist Development.....	113
Georgia: “It’s part of my family life.” .....	116
Family Influences and Social Identities .....	117
Complicated Relationships with Men.....	120
Anti-Racist Development.....	121
Jane: “It’s not a walk in the park.” .....	123
Social Identities and Family.....	124
Extended Family .....	126
Education .....	126
Anti-Racist Development.....	127
Miriam: “I want to be the best ally I can be.” .....	131
Social Identities.....	131
Family Influences.....	133
Educational Experiences.....	134
Anti-Racist Development.....	135
Rhonda: “I hated being a girl.” .....	137
Social Identities and Family Influences.....	137
Education .....	140
Anti-Racist Development.....	142
Chapter Summary .....	146
 V.    THEMES.....	 149
White Racial Identity Development Processes .....	149
Anger and Resistance.....	150
Shame and Guilt of White Racial Identity .....	153
“Creating my Own Version of Whiteness” .....	156
Pride in White Racial Identity.....	158

Influences on Identities .....	159
Sexual Violence .....	160
Activism and Involvement .....	163
Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies .....	165
Relationships with People of Color .....	170
Family Influences on Identities .....	175
Experiences of White Anti-Racist Feminist College Women .....	185
Importance of Community .....	185
Engaging in Everyday Activism .....	193
Internal Dialogue and Analysis .....	200
Chapter Summary .....	211
 VI. DISCUSSION .....	 215
Discussion .....	216
Identity Development Processes .....	216
Influences on Identity Development .....	219
Engaging in Anti-Racist Activism .....	221
White Racial Identity Development .....	225
White Anti-Racist Activism .....	230
Anti-Racist Feminism .....	232
Implications for Educators .....	233
Integrated Learning .....	234
Community Building .....	236
Opportunities for Self-Reflection .....	240
Implications for Scholars .....	243
Student Development Theory .....	243
Intersectionality Theory Scholars .....	245
Women’s Studies Scholars .....	246
Directions for Future Research .....	247
Transition Experiences .....	247
Gendered Nature of the “Fear of Appearing Racist” .....	248
Longitudinal Research Related to White Anti-Racist Identity .....	248
Influence of Transformative Research on Participants .....	249
Chapter Summary .....	251
 EPILOGUE .....	 254
Looking in a Mirror .....	254
Improving my Work .....	258
Conclusions .....	262
 REFERENCES .....	 265

## APPENDIX

A.	Guide for Individual Interviews .....	281
B.	Guide for Focus Group .....	283
C.	Guided Journaling.....	285
D.	Informed Consent.....	287

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The process of exploring and understanding the stories of six, anti-racist White feminists allowed me to reflect on my own experiences and better understand the power of my own White guilt and shame. During one of our conversations, Jane shared with me her process of engaging in anti-racism was like having “a conversation with myself,” implying that her process revolved around self-awareness and reflection. She further articulated how her thought process often influenced her to consider various ideas, resulting in a constant redefinition of herself and her ideas related to anti-racism. This dissertation was autobiographical for me and participants clearly engaged in self-awareness, so I chose to title the work, “A Conversation with Myself.”

#### **Background**

Just as many people who work in student affairs and higher education, I dread the small talk question, “What do you do?” While I am incredibly proud of and passionate about the work I do, I find many people have trouble understanding what it means to work in student affairs. More specifically, as the director of a women’s center, I often fielded questions from people who misunderstood the purpose of women’s centers and social justice work. Many people resist the idea of diversity and social justice education, believing the myth that academics push their “liberal bias” on college students (Applebaum, 2009, p. 376).

Over the past several years, I have tested many ways to answer the question, “What do you do?” Recently, I was on an airplane and I answered this question by focusing on the teaching component of my role in student affairs, hopeful the context would be more relevant. Most people understand classroom teaching in a way they do not understand the teaching that goes on outside the classroom.

I said, “I teach at a University.”

His response, “Oh really, what do you teach?”

“Women’s studies and ethnic studies,” I responded, expecting to engage in the usual banter debunking myths that women’s studies professors are a bunch of man-hating lesbians. Instead, the person responded, “Ethnic studies? But you’re White! Why are you teaching ethnic studies?”

I responded by sharing with him that I believe I have a responsibility to talk about race and racism *because* I am a White person. As a White person, I hold formal and informal power, significantly influencing societal norms and practices. My seatmate seemed genuinely interested and satisfied with my answer though the conversation did not continue much beyond this brief exchange. Hopefully, he reflected on this exchange at least a fraction of the time I have.

In thinking about this conversation, I ask myself why I continue to engage with social justice work. Why is helping students to understand the significance of their privileged identities such important work to me? I see the answer as two-fold. First, when people with dominant identities engage in struggles for social justice alongside people with marginalized identities, communities grow and change happens (Thompson, 2001). Second, when people explore their dominant identities, they better understand

themselves and the world around them. Knowing ourselves improves our relationships with other people, and our lives are more fulfilled (Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006; Stalvey, 1970).

Individuals possess multiple socially constructed identities, some of which grant access to privilege, some of which do not. While it is important to explore dominance and subordination in all socially constructed identities, this research focuses on whiteness as a dominant identity and gender as a subordinated identity. As a leader in the feminist movement and a women's studies instructor, my circle of influence includes students active in feminist scholarship and activism. Anti-racist activists and scholars sharply criticize the mainstream feminist movement for historically excluding women of color (hooks, 1984; Morága & Anzáldua, 1981; Thompson, 2001). The history and current reality of racism in feminist movements provides an opportunity for me to work within my circle of influence to challenge White women engaged in feminism to explore White privilege and whiteness as it intersects with their gender. As a White woman, I understand the potential I have to create spaces where White students feel safe in exploring their racial identity. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the terminology used throughout the study and explore the statement of the problem, significance and purpose of this study, and researcher perspective.

### **Terminology**

Over the last decade, social justice educators have developed a common language for discussing power, privilege, and oppression (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). I believe social justice educators share a common language, yet sometimes have different understandings of the same terminology. For this reason, I describe the ways I

understand and use several terms in this research. Activists describe feminism in many ways; I use the definition, “a movement to end sexist oppression” (hooks, 1984, p. 17). hooks’ definition includes a focus on examining the ways multiple forms of oppression intersect to inform sexism. For example, she describes the ways racism, classism, and heterosexism connect with sexism. To address sexism, she argues activists must also address other forms of oppression because they are all connected and inform each other.

*Social justice* refers to the belief that all people should have access to resources for sustaining a healthy existence (Guest, Lies, Kerssen-Griep, & Frieberg, 2009; Quin, 2009). For the purposes of this research, I focused on social group identities and systems of oppression as a basis for understanding social justice. The term *social group identity* refers to membership in various socially constructed identities, including, but not limited to, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and religion. While social group identity is socially constructed, meaning distinctions are not based in any biological fact, the implications of social group identity have significant influence on people’s experiences (Applebaum, 2001).

I use the term *privilege* to describe an unearned benefit or right granted to a person based on membership in a particular social group (Kendall, 2006). Similarly, the term *oppression* portrays the restricted access to resources and marginalization and isolation based on social group membership (Kendall, 2006).

Limited access to power based in cultural norms, values, legal systems, and other structural components of society defines the term *systems of oppression* (Johnson, 2006). Systems of oppression have three key features: they are dominated by, centered on, and identified with dominant groups (Johnson, 2006). *Dominant*, or *agent group*, refers to

membership in a social identity group that provides access to privilege, while *subordinated*, or *target group*, refers to membership in a group that experiences oppression or marginalization in mainstream society (Adams et al., 1997).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Scholars and activists have criticized the mainstream feminist movement for excluding the experiences of Women of Color (hooks, 1984; Morága & Anzáldua, 1981; Thompson, 2002). Much of the history of the feminist movement focuses on the ways that White middle-class women fought for the right to vote, worked to gain access to political leadership positions, and challenged notions of traditional gender roles (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004; Thompson, 2002). Women of Color also fought sexism and racism to gain access to resources, yet this history is rarely taught in women's studies programs (Thompson, 2002). Additionally, the experiences and challenges facing Women of Color and White women have unique differences that White activists in mainstream feminism often overlook, contributing to further marginalization in feminism (Hurtado, 1989). While activists in feminist movements do not intend to exclude individuals, many activists use a philosophy of shared experience to guide their work in the mainstream feminist movement. Feminism excludes Women of Color when feminists assume most women share the experiences of women from dominant groups in the United States (Crenshaw, 2003).

Because whiteness and the privilege associated with it tends to be invisible in U.S. culture, many White people fail to recognize their racial socialization and its influence on their experiences (Kendall, 2006; Wise, 2005). White feminist activists and scholars experience White socialization from an early age and fail to learn the accurate

history of exclusion and marginalization in the feminist movement. This lack of knowledge contributes to a lack of understanding of the ways White privilege manifests itself in feminism.

Generally, White women do not intend to exclude Women of Color in feminist activism. However, when White women are unaware of their White privilege, they unintentionally perpetuate exclusion and marginalization of Women of Color (Hurtado, 1989). When White women have an opportunity to explore and understand White privilege and its manifestations in feminism, they develop a consciousness different from their White peers who have not explored White privilege (Frankenberg, 1993). In understanding their White privilege, White women develop a greater consciousness about racism and their role in ending racist oppression. In spaces and movements where White women and Women of Color build multiracial coalitions, the work of addressing oppression becomes larger than addressing individual acts of discrimination. Coalition members challenge systems of oppression, contributing to more significant change and eradication of multiple forms of oppression, which ultimately benefits all women (Hurtado, 1996; Zinn & Dill, 1996). Additionally, feminists who learn about Women of Color often learn more about the experiences of all women (Butler, 1991). This study seeks to explore the experiences of White college feminist women engaged in understanding White privilege and anti-racist activism as it relates to feminism and broader social justice movements.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

In my experience teaching women's studies courses on a predominantly White campus for seven years, I have observed White women experiencing a transformation in

understanding their identities when provided with a space to explore their whiteness in conjunction with their gender. After exploring their racial identity, White women engage in more authentic and sincere relationships with Women of Color, resulting in a stronger and healthier feminist community.

The purpose of this research is to understand ways White college women understand whiteness and White privilege through feminism. The inquiry contributes to college student development theory and ways feminist activists might create more inclusive spaces. The research questions for this study include:

- Q1 How do White college women who identify as feminist describe their White racial identity?
- Q2 How do White college women who identify as feminist engage in anti-racist work?
- Q3 What types of experiences influence White feminist college women's understanding of whiteness and White privilege?

### **Significance of the Study**

Recently, I shared my dissertation topic with a colleague, who identifies as a Woman of Color, and she exclaimed, “Finally! I have been trying to figure you all out for years!” Coupled with my experience over the past seven years in observing White college women struggle to understand their racial identity in relation to their gender identity, her tongue-in-cheek comment validated the need for this study. While many student development and feminist studies have implicitly researched whiteness by virtue of having a predominantly White population or sample, few studies have explicitly explored whiteness and its construction (Hardiman, 2001). In this study, I explore whiteness as a central focus, rather than an accidental by-product.

One of the purposes of higher education is to engage students in a process of growth and development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Examining ways White college feminist women understand their whiteness as it intersects with their gender further contributes to college student development theory. Beyond the contribution to the literature, this inquiry supported White college women engaged in a process of self-discovery. White feminists who read the results of this study may feel supported and validated in their quest for self-understanding. Community often provides a sense of empowerment for people. When community members learn that “structural contradictions” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 5) contribute to many of their negative experiences, they often feel a sense of relief and feel more empowered to address the problems systemically rather than individually (Brookfield, 2005).

Feminist scholars, student development theorists, and anti-racist feminist activists can learn from the experiences of a group of self-identified White feminist students. Scholars and activists have criticized women’s studies programs and feminist movements for excluding Women of Color (hooks, 1984; Hurtado, 1996; Morága & Anzáldua, 1981; Thompson, 2001); this study provides insight for feminist scholars and activists to understand their role in addressing White privilege and racism in the feminist movement.

Finally, this research provides insight for educators and administrators related to working with and engaging students about the privilege they receive through their dominant identities. Social justice activists may benefit from understanding ways White college women come to describe their privileged racial identities. By exploring some feminists’ experiences, people involved in various social justice movements may improve their practice of discussing ways individual’s identities intersect and influence the ways

they experience the world and the influence they have on other people with whom they are in community.

### **Researcher Perspective**

Transformative research requires researchers to understand their identities and motivations for conducting research. In this section, I explore my journey to selecting a research topic and my personal racial and gender identity development. By sharing my own experiences, I describe the context in which this research was conducted.

#### **Journey to My Questions**

For the purposes of this dissertation research, I chose to focus on the experiences of White women for two significant reasons. First, in my experiences as the Director of Women's Programs and Studies, I talked with many White college women hungering for a space to talk with other White women about their struggles to understand their racial privilege and engage in effective anti-racist work. Next, as someone engaged in social justice work for the past several years, I recognize the importance of understanding privileged identities as a method to address systemic inequity. Those who have an awareness of power and privilege are more likely to work to dismantle systems of oppression, recognizing the benefits to everyone when oppression is eradicated (Kendall, 2006).

#### **Socially Constructed Identities**

As a self-identified White, educated, mixed social class, queer, cisgender, non-disabled woman, I fit the epitome of what most people imagine when they think of *feminism*. My identities align with most of the stereotypical identities associated with directors of women's centers and women's studies instructors: White, woman, and queer.

Feminism centers the experiences of people like me and I am the face of feminism. For all of these reasons, I have a responsibility to criticize and challenge our movement to include voices of people who have been historically excluded. Because I identify as White, people (especially White people) hear me talking about race differently than People of Color discussing race. People are expected to talk about their marginalized identities; it is less common to hear people discussing their dominant identities. For these reasons, it is important for me to challenge those who share my racial privilege to understand what it means to be White and how race influences daily experiences and the experiences of those around us.

A turning point in my development as an anti-racist feminist happened as a result of required training for a grant I applied for and received in 2005. One of the requirements to maintain the grant was to attend an anti-racist, anti-violence training. I enthusiastically attended the training, strongly identifying as an ally, and recognizing ways People of Color experienced discrimination. However, during the training, I grew angry and defensive. I felt as though the facilitators (mostly Women of Color) directed anger toward White people and I believed I was doing the best I could to address racism in my life. I did not participate in racist acts and I named and addressed racism by others whenever I saw it. I could not understand why the trainers were so angry, and from my perspective, so anti-White. I left the training angry and defensive, offended that the trainers could not see the great work I was doing. I wanted to write off the training as a bad experience, but I could not. Something continued to nag at me afterwards. I kept thinking about the ideas and concepts raised and about the ways I received privilege. Thankfully, my colleagues helped me continue to explore my privileged identities.

Eventually, I realized I was the problem. My arrogance and inability to see ways I perpetuated racism and benefited from systems of privilege in my daily life was exactly what the trainers were discussing. I began to do more reading about privilege and attended as many workshops and training sessions as I could on the topic. I also had personal relationships with people who helped me to understand my privilege and explore ways I perpetuated racism and other oppression. My defensiveness turned to guilt and embarrassment, a typical part of the process of becoming an ally (Edwards, 2006).

Since this training, I have continued to grow and develop as a social justice advocate and an anti-racist White ally. In the next sections, I describe a process of exploring my socially constructed identities, focusing on the experiences of my racial identity development. Experiences in my childhood; personal relationships; and activism, teaching, and scholarship contribute to my understanding of my own socially constructed identities, specifically my racial and gender identity, as they are most pertinent to the current study. While I did not necessarily understand the experiences described here as salient when they were happening, as I reflect back now, I see the influence they had on me.

**Childhood experiences.** As with many people, a significant portion of the messages I received about what it means to be White came from my family. While it may feel as though I am criticizing my family, my intent is to criticize the culture in which my family assimilated to survive. My family members did the best they could with the knowledge and information they had. As a young, single woman, my mother did not have access to formal education and used her values, knowledge, and experiences to raise her children to be kind and compassionate human beings. While she may make

different decisions today, I feel proud of the way my mother raised me and thankful for the ways she supported and encouraged me to love and respect all people as human beings. Despite the negative impact of some of the messages I received, I realize my family did not intend to cause harm and simply worked to make my life as easy as they could.

Looking back on my childhood experiences, several experiences stand out to me as significant in my racial identity development. As with most White children, the experiences that stand out to me focus on how being White is the opposite of being a person of color. In other words, I learned to understand what it means to be White through the absence of talking about race, specifically my own race, and by focusing on how other people were different from me. Further, many of the messages I received about whiteness came from silence about race and ethnicity.

Born and raised in Southeastern Kansas, I am the oldest daughter of divorced, working-class, non-formally educated, socialized-as-White parents. I grew up in a town called Independence, the home of many working-class families, where people did not discuss race. Looking back, I realize many of my friends were People of Color, but we did not talk about race in my family or my groups of friends. One of my close friends in elementary school, Shanel, was a Black girl. I remember that she was always welcome to come to my house for slumber parties or sleepovers, but I was not allowed to spend the night at her house. I specifically remember my mother telling me it was not okay for a White girl to sleep in the same place as young Black boys. I believe my mom learned this through her racial and gender socialization, through messages she received from the media, church, and her own parents. I also recognize several of the other kids I went to

school with probably identify as Latino based on their last names and phenotype; however, in our town, race was a Black and White issue, so many people, including my family, considered the kids and families of Latino descent White. I also remember my sister getting in trouble for dating a Black boy in high school. My mother told us it was inappropriate to date Black men. She told us we should never date anyone we would not consider marrying, and she discouraged us from considering marrying a Black man because “it would be hard for the kids,” meaning that it would be difficult for mixed-race children in our society.

I also remember taking family vacations to Kansas City as a child. Our family would occasionally go to Royals’ baseball games, and on special occasions, Worlds of Fun, an amusement park. My grandma would sometimes take us back to school shopping in Kansas City and I remember on many of these visits to the city learning to be afraid of Black people. We did not go into certain parts of this Midwestern city because they were considered “dangerous.” I remember locking the doors of the car as we drove through certain sections of the city and I noticed more Black people in these parts of the city than in the other areas we visited.

In addition to the racial ideas ingrained in me by my family members, I remember learning things at church as well. I grew up in a very conservative Baptist church, and learned about the sin of mixed-race relationships there as well. As a child, I felt confused about why I was supposed to love everyone and treat everyone the same, yet it was wrong for me to like a Black boy.

When it came to thinking about my own racial or ethnic heritage, my parents and grandparents often commented on us being “Indian,” meaning Native American. My

skin color was darker than the rest of the people in my family, and in the summer time when I played outside, my skin would get exceptionally dark. My family and friends often made jokes that my dad “must be Black,” contributing to very confusing messages about race and ethnicity in my family. I asked about the Native American heritage in my family, but no one could answer my questions. I learned my mother’s paternal grandmother was likely affiliated with the Cherokee tribe, yet she grew up in an era of forced assimilation, so this identity was not passed on to other members of our family. She learned to be ashamed of her ethnic background, contributing to silence and assimilation for generations to come. In my father’s family, his maternal grandfather also had a Native American background and similarly was forced to assimilate. To this day when I ask my grandparents about my ethnic heritage, there are more questions than answers. I usually get the answer, “we’re White,” and sometimes the even more vague answer of, “we’re American,” sending me the message to stop asking so many questions.

My gender socialization closely aligned with my racial socialization in childhood. Many messages I received were about the relationships between Black men and White women; additionally, I learned from a young age women and girls lack agency and strength. Similar to many girls and women growing up in a similar time period as me, I learned I needed a man in my life to protect me – but not just any man – a White, Christian man from a “good family,” probably meaning middle to upper-class.

**College experiences.** Many experiences during college contributed to a greater understanding of my racial and gender identities. During college, I participated in various campus leadership positions, including the Chancellor’s Leadership Program, the University Honors Program, University Admissions, Residence Life, and student

government. In each of these areas, I developed relationships with people who influenced my understanding of my multiple identities, both peers and mentors. As a resident assistant, I am sure I participated in diversity-related training, although I do not remember it as significant. The most salient experiences related to racial diversity centered my experiences with student government, where my peers and I wanted to include students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and ensure a balanced gender representation in student government. We attempted to include students we knew from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, and I wonder if we potentially caused more harm than good. Most of my friends identified as White and I remember reaching out to Students of Color to involve them in student government. With the best of intentions, I believe my peers and I in student government tokenized many people in our efforts to include multiple perspectives. While I attempted to involve Students of Color, I did little to explore and understand how some of my peers' experiences differed from mine and I did not understand ways I received privilege compared to my Peers of Color. We specifically included Students of Color whose mannerisms, behaviors, and ideas mirrored those of the dominant culture. We did not change the systems that excluded students from non-dominant backgrounds; we helped to assimilate the students to fit into the dominant structure.

I also discovered my passion for feminism in college. While I spent little time reflecting about my gender identity prior to college and do not remember many messages about gender as a child, I better understood my gender in college. I worked as a resident assistant on an all-women's floor where I dealt with a number of interpersonal violence incidents involving members of my community. I also attended fraternity parties on the

weekends, engaging in stereotypical college women's behavior to attract the attention of men involved in the fraternities. While I had subtly learned as a child that I needed a man to complete me as a woman, in college, that message was driven home.

I internalized this message and chose to remain at the University of the Midwest for my graduate program because of a romantic relationship with a man who was younger than me and had two years of college left when I received my bachelor's degree. In October of my first year of graduate work, he came out as gay, resulting in the end of our intimate relationship. I experienced a significant shift in my understanding of my identities as an ally and I wanted to understand what I needed to do as an ally to make his experience in coming out less painful and safer. In addition to my own pain and sadness I felt in losing one of the most significant relationships in my life, I also felt sadness and fear for his safety. I knew that he had not come out previously because of the danger and shame associated with being gay in our culture. For these reasons, I chose to attend a Diversity Retreat, where I finally started to recognize and understand my privilege. I know that seeds had been planted through various classes and involvement opportunities throughout my undergraduate career, but I was not able to take advantage of those experiences until the time was right for me. At this retreat, I finally began to understand ways privilege influences my life, recognizing how my experiences as a White person differed from the experiences of my Peers of Color. Fortunately, I was in a graduate program that encouraged reflection and was well-supported by a strong, queer Women of Color as my assistantship supervisor.

One of the drawbacks to my development during this time was my socialization as a "smart" person. For my entire life, I have been seen as a smart kid, talented and

gifted in the classroom and with most anything academic. While this was certainly a benefit to my educational upbringing (and related to my whiteness), it also prevented me from being able to be as vulnerable as I could have been, to truly understand and explore my privilege. As a “smart kid,” I learned it was never okay to be wrong and that I had to do whatever I could to ensure that I was “right.” This spilled over to my work with social justice, so I did not spend as much time in the learning phase as I could have to be effective in my role as an advocate. I immediately jumped to doing, teaching, and explaining. I became an “expert” on diversity, failing to recognize how this was tied to both my White socialization (as the expert) and my socialization as a smart person, who could never be wrong. I believe these experiences stunted my understanding of diversity and social justice until the training in Colorado previously described.

**Professional work experiences.** After graduating with my master’s degree from the University of the Midwest, I began working at the University of Alumni as the Coordinator for Greek Life. During my time at the University of Alumni, I volunteered at The Shelter for Domestic Violence in the community, where I further developed an understanding of my gender identity. As a volunteer at the shelter, I participated in as much training as I could. I went to a daylong workshop with a group from The Shelter one Saturday, and I realized for the first time that I was a secondary survivor of domestic violence. My mother’s second husband used mental and emotional abuse to control her, yet we never named it as such in our home. Through trainings, one-on-one experiences with individual women seeking support through The Shelter, and reflection on my own experiences growing up, I understood the ways systemic oppression impacted women as a whole, and my experience specifically. My step-father did not allow my mother to

work outside the home, relying on his meager factory wage to support six children. In addition, he expressed anger if she went to the grocery store by herself, resulting in her having little autonomy in the relationship. After they separated (on my mother's birthday!), she struggled to regain the self-confidence she lost and fought to gain control over our finances. The abuse she experienced at the hands of this man led us into poverty and she experienced severe depression, both of which are seen as individual, rather than systemic issues. My mother asked for little help and did not share with many people what had happened. She did what she could to recover on her own, a situation true for many women leaving abusive relationships, resulting in continued oppression of women.

Volunteering at The Shelter ignited a passion for gender-related work. I chose to quit my job and go to law school to pursue a career in domestic violence law. During my tenure in law school, I worked as the Graduate Assistant for the Rape Education Office at the University of Alumni. My experience in law school was miserable. I observed and experienced a cycle of classism. Students who did not have to work during law school received the best grades, resulting in the highest-paying jobs; students who had to or chose to work spent less time studying, resulting in lower-paying jobs and more law school-related debt. During this time, I lived in a fraternity house as the house director for an all-male group, where I again experienced marginalization related to my gender. The men in the fraternity disrespected my requests for quiet hours and disregarded the small amount of authority I had in the chapter house. These experiences paired with my assistantship in the Rape Education Office, where I had the support to reflect and think critically about my experiences as a woman in these spaces, allowed me to grow significantly. The Women's Center and Rape Education Office at the University of

Alumni modeled the kind of inclusivity I had heard and read about in my previous social justice training. The space in the Women's Center is one where people were accepted for who they were and for the many gifts they brought to the space. Students representing many racial and ethnic, religious, ability, and gender identities filled the space and participated in the programming and leadership aspects of the department. I grew from watching the director of the Women's Center empower students and staff and build an inclusive environment. I understood what it meant to change a structure, rather than a person to build more inclusive spaces. Students involved with the Women's Center entered with their whole self, all of their integrated identities and were valued and celebrated in the space. No one ever asked students to change who they were to fit in; rather, the staff in the Women's Center provided students with the skills and tools to challenge current structures to adapt to fit them in all of their multiple identities. Students volunteering and working in the Women's Center sought solace in the inclusive and safe environment created in the center. All of the people in the space shared the responsibility for creating this environment. Towards the end of my first year in law school, three separate people forwarded me a job opening at Mountain State University in the Office of Women's Programs and Studies. I decided to apply for the position.

In August 2004, I began work as the Assistant Director of the Office of Women's Programs and Studies at Mountain State University. In addition to the training previously mentioned, I also grew from the direct connections our office had with the other Student Diversity offices at MSU. The office, along with four ethnically-based offices, GLBT Student Services, and Resources for Disabled students make up the Student Diversity cluster. These relationships helped me to further understand the connections between

sexism and other kinds of oppression. My first year at MSU, I served on the planning committee for the Student of Color Leadership Retreat and participated in the Multicultural Leadership Retreat as a small group facilitator. Both of these opportunities allowed me to further explore my own identities and develop relationships with other people at the institution who valued social justice and diversity.

Through the Student of Color Leadership Retreat, I was paired with Rachel as my co-facilitator for our small group. Rachel was also on the planning committee so I already knew that I enjoyed her company and was excited to have the opportunity to get to know her better. Rachel eventually became a close friend and someone who had a significant influence on me in understanding my identities. About this same time, I also met a woman who worked in our campus recreation center, LaTisha, who also became a close friend. Both Rachel and LaTisha identified as queer Women of Color, and shared with me some very real and personal experiences with racism and homophobia. During this time, I also struggled with my own sexual orientation, knowing that I did not identify completely as straight, but I did not feel “gay enough” to identify with the GLBT community. Later, I learned this is a common experience for people who identify as bisexual.

My relationships with Rachel and LaTisha likely had more impact on my racial identity development than most other things in my life. In addition to learning from the experiences they shared with me from their past, I also accompanied them on many occasions when they experienced racism. When the three of us would go to dinner or do other things in Mountain City, I noticed ways we were treated differently by wait staff and other service people than if I were by myself or with my White friends. We were

often seated near the back of restaurants and our service typically took longer than if I were with my White friends. Both Rachel and LaTisha were very patient with me as I came to better understand my own privilege, and allowed me to make mistakes and say dumb things. Gently and compassionately, they helped me to recognize and understand my White privilege.

In addition to the personal experiences, I also learned a considerable amount from Rachel through various social justice workshops and trainings at which she and I co-facilitated. Most recently, we served as the large group facilitators for the Campus Step Up Social Justice Retreat where she helped me identify and understand more significant aspects of my internalized racial superiority. Specifically, Rachel challenged me to think about the way I understand leadership as an individual, rather than community construct, something closely affiliated with my socialization as a White person. I have resisted the idea of leadership for the past several years, believing it is a hierarchical construct, something in which one person is “in charge” of many other people. Rachel described leadership as something expected of a person by their community, not necessarily a hierarchical idea, rather a role to be filled because your community asks you to do so. This idea has assisted me in my exploration of whiteness through leadership and specifically relates to understanding of whiteness through activism, teaching and scholarship.

**Activism, teaching, and scholarship.** As a result of my commitment to eradicating oppression, I regularly engage in various kinds of activism and education related to social justice, specifically related to understanding personal identities. As previously mentioned, I served as a small and large group facilitator at the Campus Step

Up Social Justice retreat for the past six years. In these experiences, I broadened my understanding of my multiple identities as well as assisted students in further understanding their identities. Each year, the retreat has different facilitators and students, resulting in a unique experience. Campus Step Up provides the foundation on which most of my other social justice work lies. The content of the retreat focuses on understanding our own identities and how we influence the communities in which we live and work. Powerfully, this philosophy informs my social justice work in the classroom and in my scholarship. In addition to Campus Step Up, I regularly facilitate workshops related to social justice at local, regional, and national conferences and events. Each of these opportunities also allows me to explore my own identities and create an awareness with others about the importance of understanding themselves.

Beyond facilitating workshops and trainings, I also integrate social justice education and pedagogy into the classes I teach. Beginning with the Introduction to Women's Studies class, and more recently in Ethnic Studies and Student Affairs programs, I learned I am an effective classroom facilitator and students respond to my challenges around power and privilege in a positive way. I work to create dissonance with students around their dominant identities and validate them in articulating their experiences in their marginalized identities, a version of the popular "challenge and support" model used in student affairs. For example, I often track the people speaking up in classes and share with students that I noted that the last five voices that contributed were male, providing an opportunity for students to reflect on how and why they are choosing to speak up in class discussions or not. Feedback on my course evaluations

indicates students learn about themselves in relation to the rest of the world and they understand ways systems of oppression intersect to inform various experiences.

Each of these experiences contributed to the foundation that I have for understanding and grappling with White racial identity development and commitment to anti-racism. My childhood, college, graduate school, and professional experiences inform my perspective and the way I view the world. Through feminism, I began to understand the complexities of power and privilege and the ways I both benefited from and experienced marginalization through systems of oppression.

My experiences inform the research process from research design to data collection and analysis. Exploring my White privilege through feminism prompted the questions I chose to ask in this inquiry. My relationship with participants allowed me to have in-depth conversations with them and to gain insight I may not have garnered had I not had my own revelations and experiences related to White privilege. Finally, my experience as a social justice educator allowed me to ask the questions and reflect back to participants in a non-judgmental way, allowing them to further explore and reflect on their experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a context for the research in this study. First, I shared definitions of social justice terminology, including terms such as privilege, oppression, dominant, and subordinated groups. Next, I reviewed the statement of the problem as well as the significance and purpose of this study. Because many White feminists do not recognize or understand their White privilege, they contribute to continued marginalization and exclusion of Women of Color in feminism. Further, when White

women and Women of Color work together to build multiracial coalitions, they are more likely to address systemic change, rather than individual acts of discrimination (Zinn & Dill, 1996).

Exploring the ways White college women understand whiteness and White privilege through feminism contributes to scholarship on college student development theory and anti-racist feminism. The study will provide insight for social justice and feminist educators to challenge and support students in exploring how their race and gender intersect as part of their multiple identities.

Additionally, I explored the researcher perspective, highlighting the ways my identities as an anti-racist White feminist influence my perspectives as a researcher. My socialization as a White woman contributes to my understanding of some of the experiences participants in this study will share. I learned about my gender and race through experiences and messages from family members; educational systems, including higher education; professional work experiences; and personal relationships with friends and colleagues. In the next chapter, I continue building a context for understanding the current study by reviewing the literature related to the history of the feminist movement, White culture and White privilege, college student development theory, and social justice education pedagogy.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In the following section, I provide a context for exploring ways White college women understand whiteness and engage in anti-racist activism through feminism. I provide a brief description of feminism and history of the feminist movement. Next, a description of race as a social construct provides a foundation for understanding whiteness and White privilege. I explore relevant identity development models, including White racial identity development, feminist identity development, multiple identity development, and social justice ally development. Finally, I describe social justice education pedagogy as a vehicle for social change.

#### **A History of Feminism**

The term *feminism* conjures many ideas, images, and feelings for most people. One of the most controversial movements historically and currently in United States culture, feminism means different things to different people (Thompson, 2002; Roth, 2004). For the purposes of this study, I use a broad definition of feminism encompassing social justice for all oppressed groups, centering the experiences of oppression based on gender. bell hooks' simple, yet complex definition, "feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression" (hooks, 1984, p. 17) includes the importance of exploring oppression as a piece of feminism. While many consider feminism a movement designed to address issues of concern to women, including equal pay, work-life balance issues, and

interpersonal violence, others include the eradication of all forms of oppression in their definition of feminism. Historically, mainstream feminism has focused on the issues of White, middle-class women, intentionally and unintentionally marginalizing women from non-dominant backgrounds, including Women of Color and poor women (Thompson, 2002).

Typically, scholars describe feminism in the United States in three waves, beginning with the suffrage movement in the mid-1800's (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). First-wave activists worked to secure the right to vote, legalize birth control, and own property (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). While most activists (many of whom identified as White) worked to secure the right to vote advocated for all women, including Women of Color, many backed down from inclusivity as the fight continued. To ensure that White women received the right to vote, some activists advocated against People of Color gaining access to the ballot box (Allen & Allen, 1974; Newman, 1999). In the battle to legalize birth control, activists employed eugenics to advocate for legalization. By arguing birth control would diminish the numbers of People of Color reproducing, activists convinced political figures to legalize birth control, setting the foundation for a long history of racism in reproductive justice (Roberts, 1998).

Scholars commonly recognize the second wave of feminism, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as the time women gained access to opportunities in the workforce, politics, and education. Scholars also credit second-wave feminists with working to legalize abortion (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). The movement to legalize abortion signified the height of White privilege for many Women of Color. While White women concerned themselves with working to gain access to legal abortions, Women of Color worked to

ensure their choice to enjoy parenthood (Silliman, Fried, Ross, & Gutiérrez, 2004). Many government programs sterilized Women of Color and poor women without their consent or knowledge, and activists in the mainstream reproductive movement did not acknowledge nor address these issues of choice, further marginalizing Women of Color in feminist activism (Silliman et al., 2004). Many White activists and feminists minimize examples of historical racism, arguing activists worked in the context of the time to accomplish as much as they could (Newman, 1999).

Anti-racist activists and scholars provide a more comprehensive description of the history of feminism in the United States (McCluskey, 1994; Roth, 2004; Thompson, 2002). In the 1970's, Women of Color addressed sexism on at least three fronts: working with White-dominated feminist groups; creating women's caucuses in mixed-gendered groups; and developing independent Black, Latina, Native American, and Asian feminist organizations (Thompson, 2002). Table 1 highlights events of significance in feminist history, including the experiences of mainstream feminism and Women of Color feminisms (McCluskey, 1994; Thompson, 2002).

As illustrated in the Table 1, the 1970s and 80s represent a time of decreased activity in mainstream feminism, yet significant struggles and victories affected many women during this time. Because most of the issues of concern in the 70s and 80s primarily influenced Women of Color, many students in women's studies and ethnic studies classes fail to learn this history (McCluskey, 1994; Thompson, 2002). The misrepresentation of this history perpetuates White privilege and exclusion of Women of Color in today's mainstream feminist movement.

Table 1

## History of the Feminist Movement

Year	Event	Significance
1966	National Organization for Women established	Political organization dedicated to raising awareness of issues affecting women
1968	Third World Women's Alliance established	Black feminist organization that emerged out of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
1971	<i>Hijas de Cuauhtemoc</i> group established	<i>Feminista</i> group that published a newspaper; originally a part of a Chicano/a student movement
	Asian Sisters established	Focus on drug abuse by young women in Los Angeles, CA
1972	Congress Passes Title IX	Law requiring equal access to educational opportunities for men and for women. Significant for co-curricular activities including athletics and honor societies
	Congress Passes Equal Rights Amendment	
1973	Roe v. Wade	Supreme court ruling legalizing abortion
1973	National Black Women's Feminist established	Consciousness raising groups focusing on stereotypes in the media, workplace discrimination, myths about matriarchs, beauty and self esteem with black women
1974	Combahee River Collective established	A black feminist organization that remained distant from mainstream feminism with the goal of integrating antiracist and anti-homophobic principles in the movement
	Women of All Red Nations established	Fighting sterilization in public health services, water rights on Pine Ridge

Table 1 (cont.)

Year	Event	Significance
1976	Hyde Amendment passes	Law restricting federal funds to pay for abortion
1977	Combahee River Collective Statement published	Worked to infuse anti-racist, anti-homophobic politics into grassroots organizing
1979	First National Third World Lesbian Conference held	
	Assata Shakur escaped from prison	Woman of color arrested for shooting police officers after experiencing violence at the hands of officers
1981	<i>This Bridge Called My Back</i> by Gloria Anzaldua published	Brings writings by radical women of color together in one book
	Byllye Avery founded the National Black Women's Health Project in Atlanta	
1982	Equal Rights Amendment not ratified	
1984	Young women against Rape Conference	Multiracial, multiethnic conference that addressed multiple forms of violence against women – by partners, police, social service agencies and poverty
1985	The United Nations Decade for Women took place in Kenya	
1985	Wilma Mankiller was named the first principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation	
1987	Reinterpretation of the Refugee Act	Supreme Court ruled that the Immigration and Naturalization Service must interpret the Refugee Act more broadly to recognize refugees from Central America, work done by feminists

Table 1 (cont.)

Year	Event	Significance
1991	African American Women in Defense of Ourselves campaign launched in response to Anita Hill's testimony about Clarence Thomas	
1993	Family and Medical Leave Act passed	Requires employers to allow employees 12 weeks of leave to care for new or ill family members

### White Privilege and Exclusion in Mainstream Feminism

Examples of ways activists perpetuate White privilege and marginalization within feminist movements provides a context for understanding ways White women engage in anti-racist activism through feminism. Understanding privilege and marginalization contributes to a deeper understanding of the roles of anti-racist White feminists in mainstream movements. White privilege in feminism manifests itself in many ways, including lack of awareness of issues affecting Women of Color, essentialization of women's identities, and re-centering the experiences of White women when addressing issues of privilege and marginalization.

**Lack of awareness.** Sexism influences White women and Women of Color differently. Both critical race feminism and intersectionality challenge feminist scholars and activists to consider the whole person in addressing issues of sexism (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2008; Jones, 1997). Women of Color report feeling marginalized in mainstream feminist movements because White women do not recognize or understand how racism intersects with sexism. White feminists often fail to recognize how they receive White privilege at the same time they are experiencing sexism. The pay gap between men and women illustrates this challenge. In 2009, White women earned 79.2 cents to every

dollar White men earned. Latinas earned 60.2 cents and Black women earned 68.9 cents to every dollar White men earned (Hartmann, Hegewisch, Liepmann, & Williams, 2010). Mainstream feminist movements often fail to discuss this additional racial gap, focusing solely on the gender gap in earnings. Additionally, White feminists also fail to recognize how their relationships to White men contribute to the privilege they receive. White women's relationships to White men as mothers, wives, and daughters gives them greater economic and social benefits than do women of color's relationships to men of color (Hurtado, 1989).

Further contributing to a lack of awareness about the complexity of the intersections of race and gender, many White women discourage Women of Color from expressing anger about the racism they experience (Hasseler, 1999; Linder & Rodriguez, in press; Washington, 2001). In mixed race groups, all women are encouraged to express anger about their experiences with sexism, but Women of Color are asked not to share their anger about their experiences with racism. Women of Color share experiences of being told, "I cannot hear you when you're angry," which minimizes and de-legitimizes the experiences of Women of Color. Not allowing a person to express anger contributes to feelings of isolation and invalidation (Hurtado, 1996).

**Essentialization.** The concept of essentialism encourages people to focus on their commonalities rather than their differences (Harris, 1990). Many scholars and activists have critiqued the mainstream feminist movement for essentializing the experiences of women, failing to recognize the important ways women's experiences differ based on various contexts and environments as well as socially constructed identities, such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Harris, 1990). Essentialization

contributes to privilege in the feminist movement. When focusing on the commonalities without taking into account important differences, feminism centers the experiences dominant identities, including whiteness. Women of Color report experiencing an expectation that they separate gender from other identities when discussing oppression (Hurtado, 1989; Kim, 2001; Linder & Rodriguez, in press; McDonald, 2003). For example, if a Woman of Color raises an issue of race at a feminist gathering, she may be asked to focus on the ways women experience sexism, rather than exploring the intersections of various oppressions. Exploring race and gender separately does not provide ample opportunity for addressing oppression because the two are intricately intertwined and may not be separated (Kim, 2001). Expecting women to decide whether they experience oppression based on their gender, race, sexual orientation, class, or other identities is impossible (Hurtado, 1989; Kim, 2001).

In the same way, using the experiences of the *neutral woman* to create support services for all women minimizes differences based on race, class, disability, and sexual orientation. When service providers do not take differences into account, gaps in services exist. For example, in situations of domestic violence, some Women of Color report feeling disempowered or unsafe in mainstream domestic violence services (Crenshaw, 1991). Because mainstream domestic violence providers rely so much on the criminal justice system as an integral part of response to domestic violence, some Women of Color and queer women may feel excluded. A long history of racism and homophobia in the criminal justice system contributes to feelings of marginalization and fear for many Women of Color and queer women. Centering the experiences of marginalized women allows us to create services that serve more women (Butler, 1991; Crenshaw, 2003).

Activists and providers knowledgeable about the history of racism and homophobia in the criminal justice system will provide more comprehensive care for survivors of domestic violence than advocates only focused on one response.

**Re-centering White women.** When people discover they have privilege, they may experience feelings of guilt, anger, and embarrassment (Alcoff, 1998; Butler, 1991). Working through these feelings requires vulnerability and openness to making mistakes. Unfortunately, working through feelings of guilt, anger, and embarrassment often contributes to further marginalization of people of color by re-centering the dominant group's experience to discuss privilege. Many Women of Color have expressed frustration with watching White women cry about their feelings of guilt related to privilege, feeling as though their experiences are once again pushed aside to make room for White women's experiences (Accapadi, 2007). Additionally, some White women focus on receiving "acceptance and forgiveness" from Women of Color (Alcoff, 1998, p. 12), and others fail to see the way their process of discovering White privilege often relies on women of color to educate them by sharing painful experiences of racism. The process of self-discovery might turn into a "long-drawn-out, rather self-referential, even self-indulgent, concern with one's own feelings" (Kruks, 2005, p. 183). These experiences highlight the need for spaces for Women of Color and White women to process their experiences independently of one another.

A history of racial exclusion and privilege in feminism challenges current activists to consider whiteness and White privilege in the context of feminism. Understanding whiteness, including White privilege and White culture provides a foundation from which to explore anti-racist activism, including anti-racist feminism.

### **Constructing and Deconstructing Whiteness**

Race is a social construction in the United States. While race has serious implications for all people, it has been created by people with power (e.g. White men) to ensure continued access to power and privilege (Kendall, 2006). Researchers have analyzed sociological and historical publications documenting race in the United States and categorized the social characteristics of race in North America. In race-based societies, people perceive physical characteristics as markers for racial distinctions, believe races as naturally unequal, understand distinct cultural behaviors and physical features as biologically related to race, understand racial differences as profound and unalterable, and create racial distinctions in legal and social systems (Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Race, as we know it today, has roots in legal, political, scientific, and religious history. Religious, legal, and political leaders constructed race during the Revolutionary Era in the United States to justify slavery. Christians could not allow slavery unless they could “demote Africans to nonhuman status” (Smedley & Smedley, 2005, p. 19). Historically, people from mixed race ancestry sued state organizations to reclassify their race as White or Caucasian. Between 1878 and 1952, courts in the United States heard 44 racial pre-requisite cases from people seeking citizenship and classification as White (Lopez, 1995). Courts regularly struck down these requests, creating legal racial classifications based on perceived scientific evidence that races are biologically defined (Kendall, 2006; Lopez, 1995).

More recently, geneticists, psychologists, and anthropologists argue people are not born with “propensities for any particular culture, culture traits, or language, only the

capacity to acquire and create culture” (Smedley & Smedley, 2005, p. 17). Because a person’s race cannot be determined by their genes, geneticists argue biological racial differences do not exist. Racial differences are socially constructed based on skin color, hair texture, nose width, lip thickness, and other physical features, even though these features vary considerably among people within the same racial categories (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The socially constructed ideas and beliefs about these characteristics create the meaning of race and racism in United States culture. For example, in court cases determining the racial classification of individuals, judges denigrated the character of the group of people seeking classification as White, therefore reifying the superiority of whiteness (Lopez, 1995). Social constructions of People of Color as the opposite of White people perpetuate continued racism. Generally, when discussing racism in the United States, scholars and activists focus attention on People of Color because they are the recipients of racism. However, some scholars and activists emphasize the importance of also exploring White culture to understand the dynamics of race and racism in the United States (Johnson, 2006; Kendall, 2006).

### **Whiteness and White Privilege**

Whiteness refers to the culture surrounding White racial identity, including the existence of power and privilege (Kendall, 2006; Reason, Roosa Millar, & Scales, 2005). Like all races, whiteness is socially constructed and has many meanings. Three layers of whiteness include description, experience, and ideology (Lawrence, 1997). Whiteness as a description includes physical characteristics; whiteness as experience encompasses White privilege and the other day-to-day experiences associated with being White. Finally, whiteness as ideology describes the attitudes, values and beliefs associated with

whiteness. Often, individuals do not recognize the latter two layers of experience and ideology because they are invisible in U.S. culture (Lawrence, 1997).

Current literature on whiteness includes traditional scholarly material (e.g. Frankenberg, 1997; Painter, 2010) as well as popular culture materials, including blogs and books (e.g. Benjamin, 2009; Wise, 2008). Much of the literature on whiteness focuses on the relationships between White people and people of color. Additional literature in whiteness studies consists of personal auto-biographies describing individual's experiences coming to understand their White identity (e.g. Segrest, 1994; Stalvey, 1970; Rothenberg, 2004; Wise, 2005). An emerging field of critical White studies (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997), often a subset of ethnic, racial, or cultural studies departments, also influences the study of whiteness. People of Color have written about whiteness for the past 150 years, but only when White scholars began to address it in traditional academic scholarship did it become a field of study (Kendall, 2006). In the following section, I explore White socialization, culture, and privilege.

**White socialization.** In a world where people rush to claim “post-racialness,” children learn from an early age they should be “color-blind.” They should not see or discuss race (Lawrence, 1997). This is especially true for White children, socialized from a very young age not to see or discuss difference. I reflect on the many times I have observed White children and heard stories from White college students where they first noticed someone had a different skin color than they do and loudly pointed it out to their parents in public. Embarrassed and unskilled at discussing difference, parents quiet the children while in public, and do not revisit the conversation again. The implicit message

the child learns is that difference is bad and we should not point it out or discuss it. At some point, White children also learn that whiteness is superior. Messages from many White parents to their White children include, “we do not see color” and “everyone is equal,” but children still learn from actions and experiences about the power of systemic racism and White superiority (Wise, 2005). White children notice from a young age that the people who serve them lunch at school and the people who clean often have a different color skin than they do. Eventually, White children learn that service jobs like food service and janitorial service are unwanted. This socialization begins from a young age and continues for a lifetime. White people (and People of Color) continue to receive messages from multiple places about the superiority of White people as compared with People of Color.

The example above describes one step in the Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2000), which describes ways individual’s experiences are influenced by people and institutions to shape beliefs. Initially, individuals learn norms and expectations from caregivers, including parents, teachers, clergy members, and relatives. The caregivers provide information and share norms they learned from the larger culture, working to ensure safety and comfort for the child in their care. Next, individuals participate in societal institutions and develop their social lens based on what they learn in schools, churches, and other institutions as well as through media, language, and other transmitters of culture (Harro, 2000). The cycle of socialization explains one way individuals learn to understand their racial identity – and the internalization of messages of superiority and inferiority (Harro, 2000).

**White culture.** Many people argue White culture does not exist. Often, White people do not identify as racial beings and rarely understand or acknowledge the culture and consciousness that comes with whiteness (Kendall, 2006; Ortiz & Rhoades, 2000; Reason et al., 2005; Singleton & Linton, 2006). A significant piece of White culture is White privilege, or benefits afforded to people based on the color of their skin, usually invisible or ignored by White people (Kendall, 2006; Lawrence, 1997). Because White privilege is often invisible to those who receive it, it manifests itself as entitlement (Watt, 2007). When White people believe they are entitled to the benefits they receive, they do not recognize the benefits as privilege (Singleton & Littleton, 2006).

Entitlement is closely related to White people's socialization to individualism (Watt, 2007). White people are socialized to believe that achievements are as a result of individuals working hard, so when they consistently observe people of color not succeeding in the same ways as White people, they contribute it to laziness or individual failure, rather than systemic oppression (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Another way individualism contributes to White people's understanding of racism is through the idea of "moral responsibility" (Applebaum, 2007, p. 454). White people separate the "good" antiracist Whites from the "bad" racist Whites through the idea that racism constitutes individual acts perpetuated by individual people (Schelurich, 1993, p. 7). The belief that some White people possess a moral responsibility not to be racist, while others commit overt racist acts contributes to the idea of individual oppression, rather than systemic oppression. While society socializes White people to believe racism as individual acts, People of Color experience racism based on their membership in a social group, perpetuated by members of a different social group (Schelurich, 1993). When White

people do not understand ways they are complicit in racism because they only view racism as individual acts, they contribute to further marginalizing People of Color.

Another characteristic of whiteness is universalization. Because many people do not view whiteness as a race, whiteness is considered the norm, making it the dominant race in society (Kendall, 2006; Ortiz & Rhoades, 2000). People of Color learn to understand whiteness to survive, but White people do not have to understand their or other people's race because their experiences are considered the norm (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Once White people begin to understand their racial identity, they often attempt to distance themselves from whiteness for a multitude of reasons (Alcoff, 1998; Eichstedt, 2001). White people often experience guilt, anger, and embarrassment as a result of recognizing White privilege (Singleton & Linton, 2006). In addition, because many people associate whiteness with bigotry and discrimination, and most White people do not consider themselves racist, they do not want to associate with a group that perpetuates racism (Alcoff, 1998). Further, because of White people's socialization to individualism, some White people may believe it feels impersonal to associate with a group, rather than as be recognized as an individual (Kendall, 2006).

**White privilege.** Privilege, or benefits afforded to people based on their membership in the dominant culture, permeates our culture (Adams et al., 1997). The term *privilege* originates from the Latin words *privus* (private) and *legis* (laws). Privilege originally indicated "individual exemption from the law," illustrating the legal roots of privilege in the United States. The term eventually evolved to indicate social status, often resulting in informal exemption from the law (Kruks, 2005). Privilege manifests itself in

many capacities, often associated with various social identities – including race (White), gender (male), class (middle and owning class), and sexual orientation (straight or heterosexual).

People do not ask for White privilege, nor can they give it back (Johnson, 2006; Kendall, 2006). As illustrated earlier, an elite group of people created White privilege through legal, political, and social norms (Kendall, 2006). A seminal article by Peggy McIntosh (1990) laid the foundation for White people to discuss White privilege.

Defining and explaining White privilege presents complex challenges. Most authors who discuss White privilege acknowledge the ways other social identities influence ways White people experience White privilege. For example, White working-class people do not have access to the same kinds of power as White middle-class people (Johnson, 2006; Kendall, 2006). In addition, scholars discuss White privilege as being invisible, something that we do not see unless someone points it out to us (Alcoff, 1998; Johnson, 2006; Kendall, 2006). Privilege is like running with the wind at our backs: we do not know the wind is there until we turn around to run the other way (Kimmel, 2003).

Examples of White privilege appear daily. Some specific examples of White privilege include ignoring or minimizing the experiences of People of Color, learning and teaching a false history of race in the United States, making decisions that affect other people without consulting with them, expecting to be educated by People of Color about racism and White privilege, intellectualizing issues of privilege in order to avoid the pain associated with racism, and believing race is not an issue of concern (Kendall, 2006). Further, White people have a significant influence on the experiences of People of Color. A White person's assessment of a Person of Color's experience significantly influences

their future. For example, in job interviews when a White person, who does not have experience with various racial and ethnic groups, says they believe a Person of Color does not have the appropriate experiences or skills, it is taken more seriously than what a Person of Color says about the same candidate. An additional component of White privilege in this setting is when White people believe that People of Color cannot cope with situations, rather than recognizing the significance racism and White privilege has on the person's experiences (Kendall, 2006). White privilege also manifests itself by keeping White people central in conversations about race and other things (Applebaum, 2007). Seeing White people as the norm or reference point for everyone else contributes to a culture that does not value People of Color. Additionally, when White people focus on the guilt they feel as a result of White privilege, crying in mixed race spaces, the attention is back on the White people, rather than understanding and addressing the racism experienced by the People of Color (Kruks, 2005). In addition to setting a norm for all people, White people also create the standards of appropriate language and safe spaces for all people (Kendall, 2006). Another component of White privilege is the ability to surround ourselves with people who look and think like us at all times (Kendall, 2006; Johnson, 2006).

**Whiteness and White privilege on college campuses.** Whiteness and White privilege appear on college campuses similar to the ways they exist in mainstream society. Two major ways whiteness and White privilege appear on college campuses include the pervasiveness of whiteness and color-blind mentalities. Socialization prior to college impacts college students' experiences related to race (Milem, Umbach, & Liang, 2004).

White students socialized in mainstream culture often do not recognize whiteness as a culture nor a race (Rankin & Reason, 2005). This invisibility of White culture contributes to the overall campus climate and feelings of isolation and marginalization for Students of Color. Pervasive White culture creates traditions and practices on campuses that cater to the White population, including social programming and classroom curricula (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Reason & Evans, 2007) and contributes to ignorance about cultures other than White. Further, Students of Color report “interpersonal awkwardness” (Lewis, Chesler & Forman, 2000, p. 81) and White resistance to discussions related to diversity and social justice contribute to a negative campus racial climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Lewis et al., 2000; Reason & Evans, 2007).

Many White faculty, staff, and students on college campuses proudly proclaim they are “color-blind” (Reason & Evans, 2007, p. 67) to show their support for racial diversity, believing racism ended with the Civil Rights movement. The color-blind mentality contributes to subtle rather than overt racism and supports the notion that individuals rather than systems perpetuate racism. A color-blind mentality plays a role in feelings of isolation and marginalization of Students of Color (Reason & Evans, 2007).

The pervasiveness of whiteness on college campuses contributes to creating a negative racial climate for all students, including White students. To mitigate some of the negative impact, educators must intentionally create spaces to help White students understand their White identity, White privilege, and racism. As described through student development theory, when White students understand their racial identity, they will gain an awareness of other cultures, and better understand ways to improve the

campus racial climate (Eichstedt, 2001; Ortiz & Rhoades, 2000; Reason & Evans, 2007; Reason et al., 2005).

### **White Anti-Racism**

Understanding the process by which White people begin to explore and develop racial ally identities provides a context for educators challenged with engaging White students, including White anti-racist feminist activists. While few studies have specifically explored racial ally development among college students, several scholars have explored anti-racist activism among White adults. Scholars describe common characteristics of White people engaged in anti-racist activism (Applebaum, 2007; Eichstedt, 2001; Frankenberg, 1993; O'Brien, 2001; Thompson, 2001; Warren, 2010).

First, White anti-racists activists understand their racial identity (Applebaum, 2007; Eichstedt, 2001). Anti-racist activists work to define what whiteness and White culture means to them without reifying the superiority of whiteness or defining whiteness in negative terms (Bailey, 1998; Eichstedt, 2001). Anti-racist activists explore their understanding of their racial identity, acknowledging the reality that whiteness is not neutral (Eichstedt, 2001). Many anti-racist White activists describe experiencing feelings of guilt and embarrassment about their whiteness and working through those feelings to establish a healthy sense of racial consciousness (Eichstedt, 2001).

Next, White anti-racists activists name themselves as oppressors and recognize the privileges they receive over people of color (Applebaum, 2007; Eichstedt, 2001). Further, White anti-racist activists understand ways they are personally complicit in a system of racism (Applebaum, 2007; Eichstedt, 2001). Anti-racist White activists recognize racism consists of more than overt, discriminatory acts. "Nice" White people

perpetuate racism when they fail to acknowledge their roles in upholding the system of oppression by ignoring White privilege (Applebaum, 2007, p. 455). Anti-racist activists also recognize that feelings of guilt about White privilege contribute to further ignoring and marginalizing People of Color. By focusing on guilt and “moral status,” (Applebaum, 2007, p. 458) the conversation about racism gets stuck on addressing the feelings of White people, rather than addressing racism and systems of privilege (Alcoff, 1998; Applebaum, 2007; Kruks, 2005).

Finally, White anti-racist activists understand that racism affects everyone (Eichstedt, 2001; Frankenberg, 1993). Because many White anti-racist activists have experienced marginalization in other areas of their lives, they understand the ways systems of oppression maintain the superiority of one group over another. Further, White anti-racist activists understand the ways racism hurts them – and work to dismantle systems of oppression for their benefit as well as for other’s benefit (Eichstedt, 2001; Frankenberg, 1993).

**White feminist anti-racism.** Because mainstream feminism has historically excluded and marginalized Women of Color, some White feminist scholars and activists worked to explore White anti-racist feminism (Frankenberg, 1993; Thompson, 2001). Based in California in the 1980’s, Frankenberg’s (1993) study explored ways racism impacted White women’s lives, the processes through which White women came to understand their racial identity, and White women’s acts of resistance toward White superiority. Frankenberg interviewed 30 White women who grew up in various places in the United States about their experiences understanding race.

Anti-racist feminist's experiences understanding their racial identity centered on their childhood experiences and relationships with people of color (Frankenberg, 1993). Childhood experiences, including the geographical location where women grew up, significantly influenced their understanding of their White racial identity. Frankenberg (1993) described four ways White women understood race in the United States: essentialist racism, color-evasiveness, power-evasiveness, and race-cognizance.

Essential racism describes how people understand race as hierarchical and based in biological inequality (Frankenberg, 1993). For example, some people believe that people of color are inherently inferior to White people. Many participants expressed beliefs in essential racism in their childhoods as a result of messages they learned from their families and other members of their communities. No women subscribed to essential racism at the point at which the study was completed; however, some women continued to observe essential racism through relationships with friends and family members (Frankenberg, 1993).

Most participants in the study subscribed to color-evasiveness or power-evasive understandings of racism (Frankenberg, 1993). Color-evasiveness refers to a segment of people who claim to be color blind when it comes to race relations. These individuals say, "I don't see color. I see a person." While the intent of a color-evasive perspective is equality, the impact is often the opposite. Failing to see color contributes to the mentality that everyone is the same, ignoring the real experiences of racism with which people of color deal on a daily basis.

Closely related to color-evasive are people subscribing to a power-evasive perspective, meaning they avoid naming power in situations (Frankenberg, 1993). They

acknowledge that different races exist, but deny any oppression related to those differences. A person who subscribes to power-evasiveness might say something like, “Black, White, brown, or green, it’s all the same to me.” Power-evasive perspectives ignore the systemic oppression at the heart of racism.

Finally, race-cognizance describes people who acknowledge that race influences every person’s experience and that racism is real and significant (Frankenberg, 1993). Further, women subscribing to a race-cognizant view identified their racist behaviors and ways they participated in racist culture. Specifically, race-cognizance allows women to understand ways they are harmed by racism at the same time they benefit from it.

Thompson (2001) explored the history of anti-racist activism in various civil rights movements by interviewing 39 anti-racist activists across the United States. Frustrated with the lack of a roadmap for White anti-racist activists, Thompson sought to explore the experiences of activists to learn from their challenges and successes. Themes included courage and resilience, self-reflection, and accountability. White anti-racist activists work on issues requiring a significant amount of courage and resilience, the ability to learn from mistakes and stand up to their greatest fears. Anti-racist activists risk losing or hurting relationships with family members or other loved ones by challenging the systems that provide benefit to White people (Thompson, 2001).

By doing the work of self-reflection, anti-racist White activists learn from their mistakes and the mistakes of their colleagues. Self-reflection requires honest assessment of successes and failures and the ability to change behaviors and beliefs when they do not benefit the work of anti-racism. Self-reflection requires a level of self-awareness and ability to see admit to failure (Thompson, 2001).

Additionally, anti-racist activists expressed the importance of accountability in their lives. Taking the role of relationships with people from oppressed groups a step farther than education, White anti-racist activists sought relationships with people of color to hold them accountable to the work they should be doing as anti-racists. For example, if a White anti-racist activist failed to acknowledge White privilege, the anti-racist activist expected their colleagues of color to name that failure and the White anti-racist activist to respond without defensiveness (Thompson, 2001).

### **College Student Development Theory**

Student development theory describes the process by which college students grow and change during college. A subset of student development theory describes ways college students understand their social identity group memberships, including race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion and spirituality, and ability (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). White racial identity development, multiple identity development, feminist identity development, and social justice ally development theories provide insight for understanding the experiences of anti-racist White feminists.

### **White Racial Identity Development**

Historically, scholarship related to White racial identity development (WRID) focused solely on the ways White people understood their relationship to racism and White privilege. Many scholars have critiqued the WRID literature for failing to explore the meaning of whiteness independently of other races and for assuming that all White people grow and develop as anti-racist allies (Hardiman, 2001; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994; Sabnani, Ponterotto, & Borodovsky, 1991).

Helms & Cook (1999/2005) describe White racial identity development specifically in relation to Black identity through seven statuses. Starting with *contact*, White people generally deny racism exists. They avoid discussing race and ignore instances of racist behaviors. During *contact*, White people discover the reality that Black people exist.

Next, White people experience *disintegration* and *reintegration*, statuses related to their White racial environment. In *disintegration*, people recognize racism exists, forcing a person to choose between White loyalty and loyalty to humanity. Usually people in *disintegration* disassociate with race and racism, behaving in ways that allow them to be accepted by members of their White communities. Disintegration often feels disorienting and confusing for people (Helms & Cook, 1999/2005).

Many White people then enter *reintegration*, a status where they engage with their White environment, noting the historical context of racism. People deny current racism, absolving themselves of any responsibility for racism. Additionally, many people in *reintegration* adopt the racist values of the environments in which they find themselves to avoid acknowledging the racism exists (Helms & Cook, 1999/2005).

Next, people enter *pseudo-independence*, a status where they accept White superiority and tolerate people of other races who subscribe to White standards of success. During this status, White people reject the “bad” racists and associate with “good” anti-racists (Helms & Cook, 1999/2005, p. 252) and attempt to assist people of color in acting more like White people. Additionally, people in *pseudo-independence* deny negative information about themselves and shape their experiences to fit into their worldview denying their racist behaviors.

In the *immersion* status, White people begin the search for an understanding of whiteness, specifically as it relates to racism and the privilege they receive as a White person. The person seeks accurate information about whiteness and racism, working to understanding their socialization related to White privilege. Often, White people in the immersion stage focus on relationships with people of color to understand their White identity (Helms & Cook, 1999/2005).

After *immersion*, a White person might enter *emersion*, a status in which they engage with other White people engaged in understanding whiteness. This allows the person to continue to develop a sense of themselves and their White identity.

Finally, *autonomy* represents the final status in the White identity development model. In *autonomy*, White people integrate their White racial identities and possess “the capacity to relinquish the privileges of racism” (Helms & Cook, 2005/1999, p. 251). Further, White people use their experiences and ideas to define racism and to understand people of color, rather than relying on stereotypes they learn from other people.

Hardiman (2001) developed a White identity development model to understand ways White people recognized racism and White privilege. She developed the model to push Whites forward in a “new way to be White” that did not rely on the “subjugation or denigration” of people of color (Hardiman, 2001, p. 110). Hardiman (2001) describes a White identity development model with five stages: no social coconsciousness of race or naiveté, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization.

People begin this process with no consciousness of race, no awareness of the value assigned to various races and ethnicities. After childhood, White people move into the *acceptance* stage. During *acceptance*, a person has unconsciously accepted race and

racism as fact and internalizes the superiority of whiteness over other races. The model assumes it is impossible for White people in the United States to skip the acceptance stage, given that every person is socialized to understand and accept racism (Hardiman, 2001).

Following *acceptance*, a person enters *resistance* where she or he begins to question the dominant paradigm about race, sometimes becoming active in anti-racist movements. During *resistance*, many White people deal with emotions of guilt, embarrassment, and anger about their whiteness. Some White people even distance themselves from other White people in an attempt to deny their White privilege and racism.

From the *resistance* stage, some White people move into *redefinition*, where they begin to understand how racism affects them as a White person and begin to take responsibility for the role they play in racism. They do not distance themselves from White people; instead, they attempt to create a new version of being White (Hardiman, 2001). Finally, some White people reach the *internalization* stage, where they integrate an understanding of race and racism into all aspects of their lives (Hardiman, 2001).

Scholars critique the Helms (1999/2005) and Hardiman (2001) models of White racial identity development for focusing on the development of White people in relation to people of color, further contributing to the lack of understanding of White culture, which is a form of White privilege. Additionally, scholars critique the models for their linear nature, highlighting the fact that development depends largely on the context in which it happens (Hardiman, 2001; Rowe et al., 1994; Sabnani et al., 1991). Rowe et al. (1994) developed the White Racial Consciousness Statuses (WRCS) model to address

some of the concerns with the WRID models. Specifically, the WRCS model uses statuses rather than stages to describe White people's racial consciousness.

Acknowledging people's attitudes and behaviors changes as a result of their experiences and environments, the model relies on a typology structure, rather than a linear, developmental model (Rowe et al., 1994). The authors name the model a "racial consciousness" model since it describes the process of consciousness in relation to people of color, rather than a White identity development process.

The WRCS model describes unachieved and achieved racial consciousness statuses. The unachieved statuses include avoidant, dependent, and dissonant. The achieved statuses include dominative, conflictive, reactive, and integrative (Rowe et al., 1994). The unachieved statuses lack exploration and commitment in relation to racial consciousness and the achieved statuses include exploration and a commitment to beliefs about race.

The *avoidant* type is similar to the unawareness stage of Hardiman's (2001) model. People in the avoidant typology do not recognize race as an identity and do not recognize their White racial identity. People subscribing to avoidant typology minimize and dismiss the existence of race and racism.

People characterized by the *dependent* typology rely on others for their perceptions of race and racial consciousness. They are aware that race exists, yet have not internalized any beliefs about race or racism. Finally, the *dissonant* type describes people who are aware of race and racism but have not developed any commitments to their ideas about race. They are open to new information but feel confused because the information conflicts with other information they have received about race.

The achieved White racial consciousness types exemplify people who have considered race and racism and committed to their ideas about race. The *dominative* type subscribes to White superiority and actively engages in racist acts toward people of color. Additionally, the *dominative* type does not see commonalities with people of color.

People described by the *conflictive* type acknowledge overt acts of racism exist and recognize the harm in racism, yet oppose any potential remedies for racism. Conflicted between the two values of egalitarianism and individualism, people in the *conflictive* typology believe everything should be addressed fairly, resulting in lack of support for programs like affirmative action and busing (Rowe et al., 1994).

The *reactive* typology describes characteristics of people who see discrimination in society and react to it. They note discrimination in situations and respond to it; yet are unaware of their role in racism. People in the reactive typology attribute every problem with racism to systems, failing to recognize the individual responsibility for addressing racism.

Finally, a fourth typology is the *integrative* type. Attitudes in line with the *integrative* type include a complex understanding of issues affecting people of color. People have integrated their White racial identity and recognize the ways they experience privilege compared to people of color. People in the integrative typology participate in social action to address inequity and comfortably engage with people of color as well as White people (Rowe et al., 1994).

The WRCS models describe a statuses or typologies to which White people might subscribe at various points in their lives, depending on the context or environment in which they function. The model closely aligns with some stages of the WRID models.

The WRCS model is based on “variable consequences of life experiences,” rather than sequential or predictable stages (Rowe et al., 1994, p. 142).

None of the WRID or WRCS models describe an understanding of White racial identity development, rather a model of White racial consciousness in relation to people of color. Scholars challenge researchers to continue to explore and develop White identity development models in relation to their ethnic and other identities (i.e. gender, sexual orientation, etc) (Hardiman, 2001; Helms & Cook, 2005/1999; Jones, 1997; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). As individuals better understand what it means to be White, including, but not limited to White privilege, they may be less defensive and better understand their roles as social justice allies.

### **Feminist Identity Development**

Psychology and counseling psychology scholars generated theories and models for feminist identity development. Scholars have explored Downing and Roush’s (1985) model for understanding feminist identity development through numerous positivist studies designed to measure participants’ commitment to and understanding of feminism based on several psychometric scales. In my search for literatures relevant to this study, I discovered no qualitative studies exploring feminist identity development, nor any studies in college student development theory related to feminist identity development.

Downing and Roush (1985) generated their feminist identity development model based on their experiences, pre-existing literature on feminism, and theories “describing the acquisition and maintenance of a positive minority identity” (p. 696). Cross’s (1971) theory of Black identity development model, including the stages of pre-encounter,

encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment, provided the foundation from which feminist identity development model grew.

The feminist identity model consists of five stages specifically geared toward women. *Passive acceptance* includes women who is “unaware of or denies” discrimination she experiences as a woman (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 698) and who believes traditional gender roles provide advantages to women as well as men. Late in this stage of development, the woman experiences a crisis or a series of crises causing her to question traditional gender roles and ways she may experience discrimination or prejudice based on her identity as a woman (Downing & Roush, 1985).

*Revelation*, the next stage, comes after the crisis or series of crises experienced at the end of the first stage, including divorce, loss of a job, or consciousness. The shift from passive acceptance to revelation is often gradual and difficult, largely because it requires a great deal of confidence for women to question themselves and the way they experience their gender. Because women are socialized to question themselves, gaining this confidence takes time. Further because women typically experience varying and different crises at the end of the *passive acceptance* stage, sometimes recognizing their relationships to gender takes time. Women in the revelation stage often experience intense feelings of guilt and anger and use dualistic thinking where they see most men as the enemy. Typically women in this stage surround themselves with a small number of people who validate their “intense feelings” (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 700).

After rejecting their identity with traditional gender roles and recognizing that their anger alone has limited impact on the factors creating oppression, women likely move to the *embeddedness-emanation* stage. In this stage, women develop a sisterhood

with other women and withdraw from dominant culture. For some women, this proves difficult because of their relationships with men as husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers. During *embeddedness-emanation*, women often find themselves in women's studies programs, women's centers, and other women-centered spaces. Additionally, women in the *embeddedness-emanation* stage often use creative as a form of expressing feelings about oppression. Women-centered spaces become an avenue for creating poetry, dance, art, and theatre (Downing & Roush, 1985).

Next, women transition to the *synthesis* stage of the feminist identity development model. In synthesis, women integrate their personal values with "positive aspects of being female" (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 702). Women in this stage transcend traditional gender roles, making decisions for themselves about their role in society based on their personal values. They develop an ability to evaluate men on an individual basis rather than based on stereotypes and respond to oppression and discrimination effectively and consistently (Downing & Roush, 1985).

The fifth and final stage of the feminist identity development model is *active commitment*. Women in the *active commitment* stage develop a commitment to social change, working towards "creating a future in which sex role transcendence is a valued and encouraged goal" (Downing & Roush, 1985, p. 702). The authors of the feminist identity development model argue few women ever move into the *active commitment* stage and that most women working on social change act out of needs of previous stages, usually *revelation* or *embeddedness* (Downing & Roush, 1985).

Similarly to most stage-models of identity development, women generally recycle through the stages and some stagnate in an early stage of development. When women

find themselves lacking skills to respond to major events or stressors in their lives, they revert back to earlier stages temporarily. Additionally, the process of moving through stages is influenced by a woman's unique situation, including her readiness for the stages as well as environmental factors influencing her ability to grow and change (Downing & Roush, 1985).

Research done using Downing and Roush's (1985) model uses a positivist framework and is found in the fields of psychology and counseling psychology (Moradi, Subich, & Phillips, 2002). Most research on feminist identity development focuses on reasons why women, specifically college women, do or do not identify as feminist (e.g. Liss, O'Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001; Myaskovsky & Witting, 1997; Quinn & Radtke, 2006). Additionally, other categories of studies include feminist identity development as related to perceptions of women in society, disordered eating, heterosexual relationships, and applications to therapy and the classroom (Moradi et al., 2002). Scholars critique the literature on feminist identity development for focusing almost exclusively on White college women, which does not take into account experiences of ethnic identity as related to feminist identity and ways age and class impact feminist identity development (Moradi et al., 2002). Finally, the research on feminist identity development assumes all women develop as feminists and men cannot subscribe to feminist values and beliefs (Moradi et al., 2002). Few studies focusing on feminist college women exist in the student affairs literature and no student development theories center feminist identity development. However, several student affairs scholars have explored social justice ally development.

## **Social Justice Ally Development**

Scholars have explored the development of social justice allies in college. While the names for such models vary depending on the authors, the themes are similar.

Generally, students transition through stages of unawareness of social injustices, an early awareness of injustice, education related to the injustice through friends or formal education, integration of the awareness, and commitment to social activism (Broido, 2000; Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000).

Two models emphasize the importance of developing an awareness of the “other” (Chávez et al., 2003, p. 453) for various identities, and provide a framework applicable to people with both dominant and marginalized identities (Chávez et al., 2003; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). The Framework of Multicultural Education (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000) provides steps for educators to use in helping students to be more multi-culturally aware: understanding culture, learning about other cultures, recognizing and deconstructing White culture, recognizing the legitimacy of other cultures, and developing a multicultural outlook. Because whiteness is a central piece of culture in the United States, the authors argue both White and non-White students benefit from the deconstruction of whiteness and recognition of the value of other cultures.

Similarly, the Framework of Individual Diversity Development (Chávez et al., 2003) emphasizes the importance of self-reflection and awareness about “those who are other, as well as the otherness within ourselves” (p. 457). The Individual Diversity Development model seeks to assist scholar practitioners in understanding students’ “cognitive, affective, and behavioral growth processes toward consciously valuing complex and integrated differences in others and ourselves” (Chávez et al., 2003, p. 453).

The model consists of five dimensions of development: Unawareness/Lack of Exposure to the Other, Dualistic Awareness, Questioning/Self-Exploration, Risk Taking/Exploration of Otherness, and Integration/Validation (Chávez et al., 2003). Specifically, the model helps to describe ways individuals understand both their and others' multiple identities, highlighting commonalities and assisting in building bridges between identities of those in students' social networks (Chávez et al., 2003). Students benefit from understanding their identities, as well as those around them. The Individual Diversity Development Model strengthens the way scholar-practitioners help students to understand their multiple identities, including their privileged identities.

Broido's (2000) research provides insight into ways college students develop as social justice allies. Participants in her study identified "increased information on social justice issues, engagement in meaning-making processes, and self-confidence" (p. 7) as components of their development as allies. In terms of increased information, participants identified learning about others' perspectives, benefits of diversity, facts about and experiences of oppression as significant in their development. Students derived this information from various sources including target group members, classes about diversity and social justice, residence life, reading, and relationships with like-minded allies. Meaning-making engagement included discussing information and attempting to take on the perspective of people sharing the information. Discussions happened both spontaneously among friends and in more formally organized in and out of classroom learning environments. By attempting to "take on" (p. 11) the perspective of others, students gained skills and practice in developing empathy. Finally, self-reflection allowed the students to "transform information into knowledge" (p. 10). As the

participants' self-confidence grew, so did their ability to challenge and address social injustices.

Additionally, researchers have explored characteristics of college student allies (Munin & Speight, 2010). The researchers named common personality qualities, faith, family influence, and realization of own identities as common factors among the 13 participants in their study. Specifically, personality qualities included extroversion, leadership, empathy, impatience, and competitiveness (among the male participants only). Students also identified their parents as having significant influence on their development as allies. All but one of the parents of the students in this study held at least a bachelor's degree. Faith also contributed to students' understanding of their ally roles. Finally, as students became more familiar with their dominant and subordinated identities, their role as an ally became more clear (Munin & Speight, 2010).

Specific to college students' racial ally development, research shows White students' experiences prior to college, college coursework, and co-curricular experiences in college influence their understanding of whiteness (Reason et al., 2005). In addition, invitations and opportunities to participate in social justice work significantly influenced students' identities as racial justice allies. Participants in one study shared they did not initiate activism on their – they were invited to participate by a friend or educator on campus. Students' cognitive ability to make meaning of their experiences also impacted their ability to understand their whiteness and act as racial justice allies. A preliminary model of racial justice ally development includes coursework related to race, diverse friendships, "minority" experiences (Reason et al., 2005, p. 543), sense of whiteness, racial justice actions, invitation and opportunity, support and White racial justice role

models, and intentionally diverse living arrangements (Reason et al., 2005). When all of these components are present, White students are more likely to engage as racial justice allies.

Edwards (2006) provides a theoretical model for aspiring social justice ally identity development, including three ways in which people engage as allies for social justice: aspiring ally for self-interest, aspiring ally for altruism, and ally for social justice. Aspiring allies for self-interest generally see themselves as a “protector” (Edwards, 2006, p. 46) and feel motivated by a personal connection to a person, rather than a connection to a group or an issue. Aspiring allies for self-interest also view the world as fair and just and express surprise when instances of oppression occur. Aspiring allies for altruism often feel guilt for the privileges associated with their identities, which becomes a primary motivator for the work as an ally. They see themselves as a good person, and get defensive if challenged on mistakes they make related to their privileged identities. Aspiring allies for altruism do work for other people, seeing their role as one of a hero or rescuer. As allies continue to explore their privilege, they move toward an understanding of ways members of the dominant group experience harm as a result of oppression, and work *with*, rather than for people in the targeted group. Allies for social justice understand the role they play in perpetuating oppression and see themselves as allies to an issue rather than an individual. Allies for social justice work challenge systems of oppression (Edwards, 2006).

Each of the models exploring students’ social justice ally development emphasize that student affairs educators who create opportunities for students to explore their dominant identities should also engage in their development related to their dominant

identities (Broido, 2000; Edwards, 2006; Reason et al., 2005). Because students do not identify solely as a White person, a feminist, or a social justice ally, understanding multiple identity development helps educators working to engage students in a process of self-discovery.

### **Multiple Identity Development**

Scholars in several disciplines have addressed multiple identity development theory, providing a framework for scholar-practitioners in student affairs and higher education to enhance current research on college student development theory (Cramer & Gilson, 1999; Deaux, 1993; Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003; McCall, 2005; Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Zaytoun, 2006). The complexity of multiple identities and the contexts in which individuals operate cannot be described in the linear structure of former identity development theories in student affairs (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Scholar-practitioners should consider moving beyond the traditional linear based models of student development theories to include contextual, historical, political, and socially constructed identities into an understanding of identity development for a diverse college student population.

Few student affairs scholars have begun to unpack the complexity of identity development related to multiple and intersecting identities. Jones (1997) led the student affairs scholarship in understanding the complexity of multiple dimensions of identity by exploring identity development in women college students through a constructivist grounded theory approach. By exploring the ways college women understood their experiences, as opposed to what identities are imposed on them from the outside, 10 key categories emerged as influencing the construction of identity: relative salience of

identity dimensions in relation to difference; multiple ways in which race matters; multiple layers of identity; gender braiding with other dimensions; importance of cultural identifications and cultural values; influence of family and background experiences; current experiences and situational factors; relational, inclusive values and guiding personal beliefs; career decisions and future planning; and search for identity (Jones, 1997).

Building on the grounded theory study of Jones (1997), Jones and McEwen (2000) created a model of multiple dimensions of identity development to help scholar-practitioners understand and explain identity development in a more complex way. This model highlights the way core identities and contextual influences intersect with outside identities to explain a fluid model of identity development. Specifically, women in this study described their core identity as being their “inner identity” or “inside self” as opposed to their “outside” self (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 408). The women described core identity as having multiple intersections and the salience of each identity depended on the context in which it was experienced. The model’s strength lies in its description of both dominant and marginalized identities as they connect with the salience of the identity dimensions; however, marginalized identities are still described as more salient than others contributing to a lack of understanding of privilege (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

The same scholars who developed the model of multiple dimensions of identity explored students’ meaning-making capacity related to identity development of college women lesbian students (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007). The scholars described a “meaning making filter” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 7) of varying complexities allowing contextual influences to pass through, providing an understanding of the way students

make meaning of their identities. Borrowing from Baxter Magolda's (2001) self-authorship model, three participants' stories illustrated formulaic, transitional, and foundational meaning-making capacities integrated with identity perceptions. The student displaying the formulaic meaning-making capacity allowed stereotypes/beliefs about identities to pass through her filter without making meaning of those stereotypes. The transitional student started to see contradictions in what she believed and what stereotypes exist and began to filter some information to make her own meaning before integrating ideas into her identities. The student associated with the foundational meaning-making capacity filtered stereotypes and presented her identities the same in every environment (Abes et al., 2007).

More recently, Abes and Kasch (2007) re-analyzed the data from the meaning-making study utilizing queer theory and suggested scholars explore student development theory as a fluid process and analyze it from critical perspectives, focusing on the ways that students' identity development of marginalized identities leads to resistance of the dominant power structures. Students are forced to understand their marginalized identities more quickly than their dominant identities because they must make meaning of those marginalized identities that counters the messages they have been given about marginalized identities being abnormal.

Each of these multiple identity development models allow and encourage student affairs practitioners and scholars to think about the ways students develop differently based on context, intersections of identities, and cognitive development. The models imply development is an individual and unique process and helping students to develop wholly is a complex task that cannot be taught through learning one linear model at a

time or layering linear identity models on top of one another. Power and privilege play a significant role in understanding the ways college women develop, as every college student possesses some sort of privileged identity and has benefited from the oppression of others. While the models developed to understand the ways students create meaning around their multiple identities contribute significantly to the literature in student affairs (Jones, 1997; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Abes et al., 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007), they lack the critical piece of ensuring college women understand both their dominant and marginalized identities. The strength of the Individual Diversity Development Model (Chávez, et. a., 2003) lies in its ability to help students understand their and others' identities at the same time, including their dominant identities. When individuals begin to understand the power associated with their privileged identities, oppression can be challenged and access to resources will become more equitable.

Research in student affairs and higher education has focused on ways students' multiple identities intersect, mainly focusing on marginalized identities (Jackson, 1998; Miville, Darlington, Whitlock, & Mulligan, 2005; Poindexter-Cameron & Robinson, 1997; Sanchez & Carter, 2005). This research emphasizes the importance of recognizing how students' different identities influence their experiences, depending on the context, and highlights some of the experiences that encourage and allow students to understand and explore their multiple identities.

Experiences that influence multiple identity development include participating in coalition building with people with similar and different identities than their (Gandhi & Shah, 2006; Perumal, 2006), attending historically black colleges and universities, women's colleges, or historically black women's colleges (Poindexter-Cameron &

Robinson, 1997; Jackson, 1998), and participating in classroom discussions that highlight intersectionality (Knight, 2002). Each of these strategies support students in understanding the ways in which their marginalized identities intersect to create identity.

While it is important for students with multiple marginalized identities to understand all of their identities, it is equally important for students with dominant identities to explore their myriad identities. To end oppression, individuals must begin to explore and understand their multiple identities and pay as much attention to their dominant identities as they do to their marginalized identities (Miville et al., 2005; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Development for students who have dominant identities includes examining the privileges associated with their identities, the way membership in a privilege group oppresses others, and the positive aspects of being a member of the particular dominant group (McEwen, 2003). This research contributes to the literature on multiple identity development, focusing on the ways White women understand their racial identity in relation to their gender identity. One avenue for encouraging the development of multiple identities is formal social justice education.

### **Social Justice Education**

Social justice education provides an avenue for engaging White students while continuing to support Students of Color through multicultural homes and increasing the numbers of students, faculty, and staff of color. Historically, diversity or multicultural education has focused on educating people about cultures not considered dominant in U.S. society, including specific racial or ethnic groups, GLBT people, and people with disabilities (Elhoweris, Parameswaran, & Alsheikh, 2004). More recently, scholars and activists advocate a new way of thinking about oppression: understanding the self.

People may simultaneously experience privilege and oppression (Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007), and when people understand their privileged identities, they also begin to understand ways systems of power and oppression influence their lives and the lives of the people around them. In addition, focusing on one's personal identities and experiences leads to deeper understanding and an on-going commitment to self-awareness (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Because people and their experiences are not static, neither is oppression. An individual's ability to reflect and identify oppression through their privilege contributes to long-term understanding of and eradication of oppression (Adams et al., 1997; Torres et al., 2009).

Social justice education provides an avenue for engaging people in critical self-reflection, which in turn allows people to understand systems of oppression. Educators and scholars explain social justice as both a process and a goal of providing equal access to resources and opportunities for all people (Adams et al., 1997; Applebaum, 2009; Hackman, 2005). Components of social justice education include a critical understanding of systems of oppression, social action, and understanding personal identities (Adams et al., 1997; Hackman, 2005; Quin, 2009; Rozas & Miller, 2009).

### **Social Justice Pedagogy**

Social justice education requires "engagement but not necessarily agreement" (Applebaum, 2009, p. 399). Critical reflection and engagement provide a foundation from which social justice education develops. Scholars and activists note the importance of teaching students to engage in critical self-reflection as well as critical analysis of systems of oppression (Quin, 2009). Self-reflection requires individuals to consider their role in perpetuating oppression. While most people do not intentionally cause harm to

other people, unrecognized complicity contributes to systemic oppression (Applebaum, 2007). Individuals learn to see racism and other forms of oppression as individual acts, rather than systemic marginalization. Critical engagement teaches individuals to understand oppression as systemic, in which all people play a role (Applebaum, 2007).

Further, social justice education includes praxis, or the integration of reflection and action (Quin, 2009). When individuals from primarily dominant backgrounds first begin to learn about privilege and oppression, they often feel overwhelmed and “stuck” (Hackman, 2005, p. 105). By integrating action into social justice education, educators limit the feelings of helplessness, contributing to a sense of agency and responsibility (Hackman, 2005; Quin, 2009).

Various scholars and activists provide specific components of social justice education. Hackman (2005) advocates content mastery, tools for critical analysis, tools for action and social change, tools for personal reflection, and multicultural group dynamics as “five essential components” (Hackman, 2005, p. 103). Content mastery includes understanding facts, historical context, and macro and micro context analysis. Beyond content, social justice educators must also provide students with tools for critical analysis and action, which includes the ability to question and critique dominant ways of thinking and find their voice for challenging the status quo. Educators and students alike must engage in personal reflection, recognizing the ways each person perpetuates a systems of power and privilege, which leads to the final component, understanding multicultural group dynamics. Teaching students to recognize, understand, and challenge dominant group dynamics encourages groups to monitor themselves for inclusion and respect and places responsibility for education on each individual (Hackman, 2005).

Scholars advocating culturally responsive teaching outline establishing inclusion, developing attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence as components of social justice education (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Other scholars use the term “critically compassionate intellectualism,” specifically consisting of critical pedagogy, authentic caring, and social justice curriculum (Camarota & Romero, 2004, p. 16).

### **Privileged Identity Exploration Model**

The Privileged Identity Exploration Model (PIE) provides social justice educators a way to understand some reactions students may have when exploring privilege associated with their dominant identities (Watt, 2007). The model, rooted in the results of a qualitative study of responses to difficult dialogues, describes eight “behaviors and defense modes” (Watt, 2007, p. 118) displayed by people exploring their privileged identities. When recognizing a privileged identity, students may deny, deflect, or rationalize oppression. In denial, a person will argue that oppression does not exist, highlighting examples from their experiences that counter other individual’s experiences with oppression. A person who deflects oppression attempts to refocus the conversation to focus on issues other than oppression. In rationalization, a person attempts to explain away oppression, articulating various reasons other than racism, sexism, or homophobia why another person is experiencing discomfort (Watt, 2007).

Once individuals begin to contemplate a privileged identity, they may engage in intellectualization, principium, or false envy (Watt, 2007). Intellectualization closely relates to rationalization, in that the person focuses on the intellectual, rather than emotional, aspects of oppression, resulting in avoiding a shift in perspective for the person exploring privilege. Additionally, a person may avoid exploration of privilege by

focusing on a personal principle or value. For example, a person may say that it is against their religion to explore homophobia, or because they identify a particular way politically, they do not need to engage in exploring privilege. A person may engage in false envy by over-identifying with a particular group or identity they do not possess as a way to deflect understanding their privileged identities.

Finally, when a person begins to address their privileged identities, they may continue to engage in behavior that deflects addressing the complexity of injustice. Benevolence and minimization describe two ways individuals may continue to minimize oppression (Watt, 2007). In benevolence a person may provide examples of ways they try to “help” those less fortunate than them, failing to recognize how “helping” contributes to maintaining the current structure of dominance and subordination (Watt, 2007, p. 122). When a person minimizes oppression, they often attempt to find easy strategies for “cross-cultural interactions” to avoid discussing the complexity of privilege and ways to change systems of oppression (Watt, 2007, p. 122). By understanding these eight potential ways individuals may respond to exploring privilege, social justice educators might better challenge and support individuals in a process of self-exploration.

Social justice education provides an avenue through which educators might engage White students to consider the impact their invisible privilege has on the overall campus racial climate. Specifically, feminist social justice educators engage students in an exploration of ways their identities intersect to impact their and others’ experiences, supporting anti-racist White feminists in their quest to eradicate oppression.

### **Application to Study**

The history of racism in feminism, description of White culture and White privilege, and exploration of student development theory inform the design of this study. Understanding the exclusionary history of the mainstream feminist movement provides a context for understanding the significance of this study. In addition to the importance of creating space for White women to engage in authentic dialogue and to build sincere relationships with each other and Women of Color, the study also challenges White women to recognize their privilege, ultimately resulting in a more inclusive feminist movement.

The social construction of race, White culture, and White privilege inform the nature of the questions used in this study. Because White racial identity is invisible to many people, the study required participants have an understanding of White racial identity. Further, White privilege allows White people to ignore racism and the consequences of racism for People of Color. In this study, I started from a place of critiquing and recognizing White privilege as salient part of the participants' experiences as White people.

Finally, student development theory provided the foundation for understanding White privilege and White racial identity for traditionally aged college students. By combining White racial, feminist, ally, and multiple identity development models, I considered multiple and intersecting identities in the development of the research and interview questions. The White racial, feminist, and ally identity development models assume a linear developmental approach, while the model for multiple identity development includes the importance of context when exploring identity.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored literature relevant to understanding ways White feminist college women understand their racial and gender identities as related to anti-racist feminism. Specifically, I provided a brief history of the feminist movement, including the marginalization Women of Color experience in mainstream feminism. Women of Color report experiencing ignorance of their experiences, tokenization, essentialization, and re-centering the experiences of White women. Anti-racist White feminists and Women of Color provide a rich description of the history of feminism, highlighting the importance of recognizing multiple and intersecting identities.

In the past several decades, literature on whiteness and critical White studies has exploded. In this chapter, I explore the social construction of race with legal, political, and religious roots. Race is socially constructed, yet the consequences of race are real (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The culture associated with whiteness includes White privilege, individualism, and universalization, socialized in White people and People of Color from a young age.

Scholars describe White privilege as unearned benefits people receive based on the color of their skin. Often, this privilege is invisible, resulting in ignorance about its existence (Johnson, 2006). White privilege on college campuses manifests itself through color-blind mentalities and the pervasiveness of whiteness in campus traditions, classrooms and activities (Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Characteristics of anti-racist activists include understanding their own racial identity, naming themselves as oppressors and recognize White privilege, and understanding racism affects everyone, including White people (Applebaum, 2007;

Eichstedt, 2001). A subset of the literature on anti-racist activism explores anti-racism in the context of feminism (Frankenberg, 1993; Thompson, 2002).

College student development theory also provides a context for this study. White racial identity development, feminist identity development, social justice ally development, and multiple identity development contribute to understanding the experiences of anti-racist White feminists. White racial identity development explores the process of White people understanding their racial identity, including White privilege. Stages generally move from no awareness or consciousness of race through integration of racial identity in their lives and work (Helms & Cook, 1995/2005).

Downing & Rousch (1985) developed a model for understanding feminist identity, including passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and active commitment. Scholars studying social justice ally development describe a process of moving from no awareness to action (Broido, 2000). Multiple identity development describes students' process of integrating multiple socially constructed identities to define themselves (Jones, 1997).

Finally, I described social justice education and pedagogy as a framework for exploring whiteness and anti-racism. Historically, diversity or multicultural education focused on teaching people about the "other" as a way of raising awareness about equality and access. Today, scholars and educators advocate a more holistic approach to social justice education. In addition to learning about people from cultures different from our own, educators advocate understanding the self in relation to others (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Social justice pedagogy consists of crucial reflection, self-reflection, teaching bystander intervention skills, and praxis (Applebaum, 2007; Quinn, 2009). In

the next chapter, I explore the paradigm, theoretical framework, methodology, methods, and data analysis employed in this study.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I describe a transformative paradigm, including the axiology, ontology, and epistemology, used in this study. Critical race feminism and intersectionality theory provide the inquiry's theoretical framework. In concert with the transformative paradigm, I chose narrative inquiry as the methodology. Data collection methods included interviews, a focus group, and guided reflections. Finally, I explore analysis procedures and criteria for rigor for this study.

#### **Transformative Paradigm**

*Paradigm* describes the worldview, philosophy, beliefs, and perspective the researcher uses to conduct the research (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010). For the purposes of this research, I employed a paradigm focused on transforming systems of oppression and listening to the voices of participants in the study (Mertens, 2010). Various scholars use different language to describe this paradigm. Guido et al. (2010) describe the blended nature of a critical/cultural paradigm, using critical (grounded in sociology) and cultural (grounded in anthropology) paradigms to describe the ways the research works to challenge and transform systems of oppression (critical) at the same time it gives voice to and describes the specific culture of a group (cultural). Mertens (2010) describes the paradigm as transformative, focusing on transforming systems of oppression through action based on research.

Research conducted through a transformative or critical/cultural paradigm gives voice to participants and works to transform systems of oppression (Guido et al., 2010; Mertens, 2010). Researchers traditionally used the transformative paradigm to explore the experiences of marginalized groups, yet some scholars argue for the use of the transformative paradigm in studying the experiences of oppressors (Delgado, 1989; Mertens, 2010). By investigating ways dominant group members understand power and privilege, scholars and activists break down systems of oppression. Researchers use a transformative paradigm to understand power relationships and engage in social action for justice (Mertens, 2009).

This study focused on understanding ways White women experience power and privilege as a result of their race while simultaneously experiencing marginalization as a result of their gender. While many studies have centered the experiences of White people, or people with other dominant identities, rarely does the research focus on dominant group members' process of understanding and recognizing their privileged identities. This study uses a critical perspective to center the experiences of White people, with the goal of understanding and deconstructing power structures perpetuating oppression. The results of the study will be used to provide guidance to social justice educators interested in engaging White students to understand their power and privilege. The axiology, ontology, and epistemology of the transformative paradigm inform the design of this study.

### **Axiology**

Axiology refers to the values associated with the ethics of a paradigm and answers the question, "what is the nature of ethics?" (Mertens, 2010, p. 10). In

transformative research, scholars focus on social justice as a primary value associated with research. Consistent with other paradigms, researchers using a transformational paradigm employ informed consent, minimization of harm, and co-construction of knowledge as part of its axiology. Additionally, researchers employing a transformative paradigm address the historical, political, and sociological context of oppression through axiology. By employing principles of social justice, such as inclusion, equity, and fairness, researchers engaged in the transformational paradigm co-construct knowledge with participants to challenge systems of oppression (Mertens, 2010). In this study, I worked with the participants to co-construct the knowledge through a discussion in a focus group and a final interview with each participant where we discuss potential findings for the study. Additionally, I used an informed consent form for the participants and work to establish mutual expectations between the participants of the study and me as the researcher.

The purpose of research in a transformative paradigm is to inform practice; therefore, researchers employing a transformative approach have an ethical responsibility to use the findings for action related to justice (Mertens, 2009). In addition to recognizing the importance of participants in co-creating knowledge and challenging systems of oppression, results of this study will be shared with social justice educators interested in engaging anti-racist White students to understand power and privilege.

### **Ontology**

Ontology answers the question “what is the nature of reality?” (Mertens, 2010, p. 10) and requires the researcher to think about how and where knowledge emerges (Mertens, 2010). Power structures influence ways research questions are developed and

ways data is collected and analyzed, contributing to the influence of power on the creation of knowledge (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2009). Ontologically, in the transformative paradigm, the researcher acknowledges the social construction of reality and the existence of multiple truths. Further, researchers using the transformative paradigm explore the influence of social and power structures on socially constructed realities. Researchers using a transformative paradigm acknowledge “reality is socially constructed and that specific characteristics associated with more or less power determine which version of reality is accepted as ‘real’” (Mertens, 2009, p. 54). People with dominant identities (i.e. White people, heterosexuals, non-disabled people, and men) have their truths and realities accepted as real or normal more often than people with non-dominant identities (People of Color, GLBT, women, and people with disabilities). In this study, I explored the existence of multiple truths from the perspectives of White anti-racist feminists. The exploration of these truths will contribute to understanding and breaking down current power structures privileging White women in feminism.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemological assumptions define the nature of the relationship between the knower and the would-be known and the relationship between the researcher and participants (Mertens, 2010). Researchers engaged in transformative research minimize the distance between researcher and participants, making participants active in the creation of new knowledge. Since transformative research transforms oppressive power structures, the researcher and participants work together to define and construct knowledge (Mertens, 2010). Equality defines the relationship between the researcher and participants, and the researcher acts as both a learner and informer. As the researcher

works with participants to understand and make meaning of experiences, the transformation of oppressive structures begins. While participating in the study, participants share their perspectives to inform future practice and begin to transform their way of thinking and addressing the inequity in current power structures (i.e. racism). The relationship between the researcher and participants is both “interactive and empowering” (Mertens, 2009, p. 56). I designed this study to include participants in the meaning-making and knowledge construction process. After two initial individual interviews with each participants, I conducted a focus group where the participants came together to discuss initial themes from the interviews, co-constructing the findings for this study.

The axiology, ontology, and epistemology of the transformative paradigm closely align with the purpose of this study. Exploring the ways White feminist women understand whiteness and White privilege contributes to exploring and understanding the dynamics of power and privilege and the systems that perpetuate privilege and oppression. Further, engaging participants in the co-construction of knowledge results in powerful recommendations for social action.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework intersects with the paradigm to support the design of a study (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). For the purposes of this transformative study, I used critical race feminism (Wing, 1999) and intersectionality theory (Bowleg, 2008) as frameworks to inform narrative inquiry focusing on the experiences of White anti-racist college women. Critical race feminism highlights experiences of marginalization based on race, gender, and other socially constructed identities (Wing, 2003).; intersectionality

theory supports research by focusing on identities as intersecting, rather than additive (Bowleg, 2008).

### **Critical Race Feminism**

Critical race feminism (CRF) based in legal theory, challenges scholars and activists to consider the whole person in political and legal struggles, highlighting the importance of addressing issues at the core of the oppression (Wing, 2003). CRF emerged from the fields of Critical Legal Studies, Critical Race Theory, and feminist jurisprudence (Wing, 1999). The underlying tenets of CRF include: (a) praxis; (b) critique of the belief that legal systems are value-free, objective, and color-blind; (c) use of multidisciplinary scholarship; (d) storytelling as methodology; (e) rejection of essentialism in mainstream feminist and civil rights movements; and (f) recognition of the importance of exploring multiple identities (Wing, 1999).

CRF requires praxis – the merger of scholarship and action. CRF scholars argue people with multiple marginalized identities do not share the luxury of the “detached ivory tower model of scholarship” because people are suffering (Wing, 1999, p. 17). Praxis takes the form of coalition building, writing, speaking, and membership in various political and activist groups (Wing, 1999). Critical race feminism’s emphasis on the connection between theory and practice aligns closely with the transformative paradigm. In this study, I will explore participants’ experiences integrating the concepts they learned about anti-racist activism with their practices.

Critical race feminists challenge the notion that the U.S. legal system is objective, neutral and color-blind, and embrace “color consciousness and identity politics as the way to rectify today’s racist legal legacies” (Wing, 1999, p. 16). Further critical race

feminists explore systemic oppression and challenge activists to consider ways systems work to perpetuate oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). CRF asserts that addressing gender issues by centering the experiences of the most marginalized women, all people benefit; however, by only focusing on the issue of gender, only those with privileged identities benefit (Crenshaw, 2003).

In their quest to address issues of inequity, critical race feminists employ interdisciplinary scholarship, acknowledging that law is a necessary, “but not sufficient basis to formulate solutions to racial dilemmas” (Wing, 1999, p. 17). Integrating women’s studies, African American studies, critical white studies, history, political science, anthropology, and economics, critical race feminists build a strong case for integration of CRF in multiple disciplines. Additionally, while many scholars critique the use of storytelling as methodology, CRF advocates the use of storytelling as methodology because it recognizes the significance of oral tradition in many marginalized communities and provides an opportunity to connect with people who do not use “hyper-technical legal language” (Wing, 1999, p. 16).

Next, critical race feminists critique the mainstream feminist and civil rights movements, and rejects essentialism, the idea that all women share the same experience. Critical race feminists tell us, “identity is not additive...Black women are not White women plus color, or black men plus gender” (Wing, 1999, p. 18). Many critical race feminists do not identify with the mainstream feminist movement because of the long legacy of exclusion of Women of Color and working class women in mainstream feminism (Crenshaw, 1991; Wing, 1999). Essentialization of women results in the issues

of Women of Color and working class women being subsumed by the experiences of White middle class women (Wing, 1999).

Critical race feminists advocate exploring multiple identities, specifically recognizing how privilege impacts individual people's experiences. For example, Wing (1999) argues that poor Women of Color may have identities that privilege them in various contexts. They may identify as heterosexual or nondisabled, two identities that afford individual privilege in mainstream U.S. culture. By recognizing the ways individual's experiences privilege them, scholars and activists may learn to design programs and services to improve the situations of marginalized people (Wing, 1999).

Scholars often employ CRF to explore the experiences of Women of Color, yet the tenets of CRF also apply to studying the experiences of anti-racist White women, who provide a counter-story to the exclusion perpetuated by mainstream feminists. In this study, White feminists share their stories related to engaging in anti-racism, providing a context for other White feminists to explore their ideas and perspectives. This study emphasizes the importance of exploring multiple socially constructed identities simultaneously, a central tenant of CRF and intersectionality theory, described below.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Intersectionality theory emerged from critical race theory and critical race feminism as a strategy to highlight ways women of color experience marginalization (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984) by focusing on how multiple identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality also acknowledges the complexity of identity by recognizing people have multiple identities and experience dominance and marginalization simultaneously (Dill et al., 2007). Black

feminist scholars first introduced the concept of intersectionality, stating a woman of color should not have to choose between her identity as a woman and as an African American person in political or personal struggles (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). Some scholars also included sexual orientation as a category that should be included in the analysis (Lorde, 1984; Morága & Anzáldua, 1981). Intersectionality theory offers language to discuss multiple identities, explore an indefinite number of identities salient to individuals, and approach identities as intersectional, rather than additive (Jones, 1997; Shields, 2008). Since the early 1980s, feminist scholars have argued for the inclusion of multiple identities when exploring identity politics. By asking the question, “*which* women?” (Shields, 2008, p. 300), they challenge the notion that all women are the same.

Current scholarship calls for an understanding of intersectionality methodology to study experiences of people related to their multiple identities (Bowleg, 2008). By going beyond a single standpoint when seeking to understand participants’ experiences (Bowleg, 2008), and exploring ways identities are related to social structures, researchers employ intersectionality methodology. The methodology “requires that we think about social categories in terms of stratification brought about through practices of individuals, institutions, and cultures rather than primarily as characteristics of individuals” (Cole, 2008, p. 445). Moving beyond exploring individual social constructions of identities to experiences of discrimination and oppression helps illuminate experiences. Consistent with the transformative paradigm, researchers have a responsibility to connect participants’ experiences with socio-historical inequality to explain how multiple identities intersect and interact with systems of domination (Bowleg, 2008; Dill et al., 2007). Intersectionality theory assists in the exploration of White women’s experiences

by recognizing the marginalization White women experience based on their gender, while also exploring the ways White women experience privilege related to their race.

### **Methodology**

Methodology describes the procedures for collecting information relevant to the study (Mertens, 2010). In this study, I employed narrative inquiry as the methodology to explore White anti-racist feminist experiences. Multiple methods supported the data collection process and encouraged participants to share their experiences and stories (Chase, 2003). Data analysis included three-dimensional space analysis and authenticity criteria to illustrate the rigor of the study.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

People learn from stories. Narrative methodology formalizes the process of story-telling for the purposes of qualitative research (Chase, 2005). The purpose of narrative inquiry is to explore individuals' stories to describe and learn from common experiences (Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007). Sociologists, anthropologists, and feminists introduced the concept of using stories to understand and interpret people's experiences for the purposes of research (Chase, 2005). Further, narrative methodology aligns with a transformative paradigm to explore ways people interact and "construct selves within specific institutional, organizational, discursive, and local cultural contexts" (Chase, 2005, p.658). Narrative methodology also aligns with critical race feminism and intersectionality.

Both CRF and intersectionality theory advocate the use of story-telling in critiquing systems of privilege and oppression. Specifically, people with marginalized identities use stories, sometimes considered counter-stories, as forms of survival and self-

preservation (Delgado, 1989). Members of marginalized groups use stories to inform members of dominant groups about oppression and discrimination and to find solidarity and healing with other members of marginalized groups. Stories inform policy and practice and challenge dominant paradigms about various social groups (Delgado, 1989). In addition to giving voice to traditionally underrepresented groups, story-telling also encourages members of dominant groups to consider ways the unconscious nature of their stories contributes to oppression and discrimination (Delgado, 1989).

Specific to this study, narrative inquiry provided a methodological framework to examine the experiences of White anti-racist feminists. The methodology highlights the experiences of historically under-represented populations by exploring oppression from oppressors' standpoints and illuminates examples of anti-racist activism. By asking women to share their experiences and understanding of White privilege, then exploring the commonalities in those stories, I worked with the participants to co-construct meaning from those commonalities, resulting in a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power and oppression (Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2007).

### **Data Collection Methods**

In narrative inquiry, researchers take great care to elicit participants' life stories and significant events they have experienced related to the area of inquiry (Chase, 2003). Aligning with the transformative paradigm, narrative inquiry also relies on an equal relationship between the participants and the researcher, resulting in thick, rich descriptions and deeper understanding of life events and circumstances (Chase, 2003). Transformative research and narrative inquiry both result in a deeper understanding of

personal experiences for participants as well as significant learning for the consumer of the research (Chase, 2003; Mertens, 2010).

Researchers explore individuals' stories through various methods including interviews, focus groups, journaling, observation, review of artifacts, and artistic and creative expressions (Chase, 2005). For the purposes of this study, I conducted three individual interviews with each participant and a focus group with all of the participants together. Additionally, participants reflected about their experiences and thoughts through guided journaling and provided a creative representation of their identities as White anti-racist feminists. Finally I explored new insights through a researcher journal. I collected data between October 15 and December 15, 2010. Individual interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and the focus group lasted two hours.

**Individual interviews.** One effective way to collect stories from participants is through individual interviews. Questions designed to elicit memories of experiences relevant to the topic provide opportunities for the researcher to gain insight into the phenomenon and for the participants to further understand their experiences through reflection (Chase, 2003). I conducted three individual interviews with each participant, continuing the conversation until participants believed they shared their relevant experiences related to anti-racist feminism. Beginning the process with individual interviews designed to establish trust with the participants, we (researcher and participants) explored ways they understand and explain anti-racism and feminism.

In the first interview, I explored participants' identities and experiences from their early memories through recent ones that influenced their experiences with racism and their understanding of White privilege. Questions included: "Tell me a little bit about

you and what prompted your interest in participating in this study.” “What kinds of things have influenced the person that you are today?” “Tell me about your racial identity. What does being White mean to you? What experiences have influenced your understanding of your racial identity?”

The second interview focused on ways participants’ identities intersected, specifically focusing on how participants understand their racial and gender identities. I included questions such as “Let’s go back to talking more about your identity as an anti-racist feminist. What does that mean to you?” “ Share some examples of times you witnessed or participated in anti-racist feminism,” and “What experiences have influenced your development as an anti-racist feminist?”

Finally, the last interview focused on ways participants experienced the research process, exploring ways they changed during the process, and their renewed ideas and commitments related to feminist activism. Sample questions included, “What have you learned about yourself as a result of participating in this study?” and “After participating in the focus group, do you have any additional stories or experiences related to this study to share?” The complete interview guide is included in Appendix A.

**Focus group.** In addition to individual interviews, focus groups encourage participants to reflect on their experiences as they listen to the experiences of others. Providing opportunities for synergy among participants, focus group conversations result in more description and exploration of concepts or themes generated in the individual interviews (Merriam, 2009). I conducted one focus group with the participants to discuss the themes from the individual interviews and to further explore any concepts or ideas raised in individual interviews that merited further discussion as determined by any of the

participants. I invited the participants to my house for dinner and we engaged in dialogue related to the study in an informal setting. Participants noted the comfort they felt throughout the process, including the importance of the informal focus group meeting.

The focus group served as both a form of member-validating (Lather & Smithies, 1997) and an opportunity for participants to explore ideas generated in the individual interviews in more depth. Further, the focus group provided an opportunity for participants to develop relationships with each other and a space to explore whiteness with other White-identified people. Participants noted the importance of connecting with other antiracist feminists and acknowledged the feeling of community generated at the focus group. At the participants' request, the group continued meeting beyond the boundaries of the study to explore experiences with anti-racism and activism. The guide for the focus group conversation is included in Appendix B. The themes discussed in the focus group included: a) Family impacts commitment to anti-racist work; b) Class privilege – acknowledgement of educational/financial privilege to do activist work; c) Lack of community outside university – challenge to build relationships with other white folks, d) Lack of skills/practice in addressing racism - can identify it, but feel stuck in how to respond; e) Learned about whiteness through coursework (women's studies & ethnic studies); f) Romantic relationships with men influence/paralyze/contradict internal values around anti-racism values; g) Everyday activism (i.e. "small" things at work); h) Fear of being wrong, admitting mistakes ; i) Internal dialogue when interacting with a person of color; j) Don't identify as anti-racist b/c it implies "arrival" at anti-racism

The focus group provided an opportunity for participants to connect with each other and to further reflect on their experiences with anti-racism.

**Guided journals.** Guided reflecting and a creative representation provided an opportunity for participants to explore concepts related to whiteness and feminism using a different mode of exploration and expression, resulting in new concepts and ideas not previously discussed (Chang, 2008). Participants completed three guided reflections, including their racial autobiography, a creative representation depicting the ways they engaged in anti-racist activism, and a reflection of their experience as a participant in the study. Prompts for the first reflection included:

Please write a brief version of your racial auto-biography. Use the following questions to prompt your thoughts: What can you recall about the events and/or experiences related to race, race relations, and/or racism that may have affected your current perspectives and/or behaviors? How do you experience yourself as a racial being? What are the situations and circumstances in which you believe yourself to be most racially aware?

The prompt for the second reflection, the creative representation, read: “Please prepare a creative representation of what anti-racist feminism means to you. This can take the form of a poem, drawing, collage, gathering of artifacts related to your identities, or any other creative representation.” The participants expressed this activity challenged them and chose to focus on artifacts representing their experiences, rather than creating a new representation.

The final reflection asked participants to think about their experience as a participant in the study. Reflection questions included: “What have you learned about yourself while participating in this study? What are your renewed hopes and goals as an anti-racist White feminist?” Two participants did not complete this component of the data collection process.

**Researcher journal.** In transformative research, the researcher’s perspective is included as a part of the research process (Best, 2003). Because I identify as an anti-

racist White feminist, I had my own experiences exploring and recognizing new insights as a result of talking with others about their experiences with anti-racism. I maintained a journal, highlighting new thoughts, ideas, and experiences of growth I experienced as a part of this process. In my journal, I noted the salience of the “fear of appearing racist” for the participants and reflected on the impact of our prior relationship on the research process. For example, I wondered if the participants felt nervous with me because they were afraid to disappoint me by sharing their struggles and mistakes. In discussing this with the participants, most indicated they shared more, not less, as a result of having a prior relationship with me. Additionally, I often reflected on the courage, wisdom, and insight of the participants, taking note when participants shared experiences that appeared to be especially painful for them. The information from my journal is integrated throughout the findings and discussion sections of the dissertation.

### **Participants and Setting**

Participants with experiences specifically related to the focus of the study ensure thick, rich description in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Employing purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007), I recruited six participants who identify as anti-racist White feminists. I did not define the terms anti-racist, White, or feminist, allowing participants to self-select into the study. I recruited participants from personal relationships I maintained with former students and community activists I worked with in my role as a women’s studies instructor and as a women’s center director. Racial identity development theory indicates that people better understand their relationship to their racial identity after having the opportunity to interact and reflect on their experiences

(Hardiman, 2001); therefore, I recruited participants in their senior year of college or within two years after graduation from college.

The setting for this study is a mid-sized community in the Western United States with a large, predominantly White, land-grant university. At the time of the study, participants were either current or former students at the university. The community has a significant activist community, largely dedicated to environmentalism and Mexican-American immigration issues, as well as other social justice issues. The university has a women's studies program, established 30 years ago, and an ethnic studies program, established 15 years ago. As a result of its land-grant roots, the campus has a large emphasis on science, technology, and agriculture. There is also a large veterinary school affiliated with the institution.

Participants did not receive monetary compensation for participating in this study. During the individual interviews, I bought the participants lunch, coffee, or a non-alcoholic drink of their choice; for the focus group, I provided dinner. Additionally, if interested, participants will receive a copy of the final version of this dissertation reflecting their stories as an anti-racist feminist. Finally, during the study, participants requested that we continue meeting as a group to process anti-racist experiences. I initiated the continued meeting of this group.

### **Data Analysis**

Principles associated with a transformative paradigm, critical race feminism, and intersectionality theory informed the data analysis process for this study. The transformative paradigm requires the involvement of participants in the data analysis process and requires the researcher and participants to consider the social power

structures at work in participants' lives (Mertens, 2009). Critical race feminism seeks to include analysis related to the ways race restricts relationships between the dominant and marginalized groups and how racism functions through "unconscious habit, naturalized practices, and beliefs of White supremacy" (Mertens, 2009, p. 285). Further, specifically related to a study about White women, the data analysis process must include an exploration of the ways participants construct their racial identity and how White privilege influences their experiences (Mertens, 2009). Finally, intersectionality theory requires the researcher to consider the whole person in the data analysis process, recognizing that social identities are not discrete categories that can be separated out for the purposes of inquiry (Shields, 2008). Race, class, gender, and other social identities operate as processes, not characteristics of participants (Cole, 2008). I describe the ways I employed each of these strategies below.

Qualitative data analysis is not a linear process. Employing the principles related to CRF and intersectionality theory, steps of the analytic process include data preparation, data exploration and reduction, and interpretation (Mertens, 2009). In transformative research, each step includes researcher and participant voices and perspectives (Mertens, 2009). Because data analysis begins before data collection is complete, explorations of interaction, continuity, and situation occurred throughout the process of data collection. During each interview, I reviewed information from the previous interview with the participants, seeking clarification and elaboration on ideas or themes, conducting member checks and co-creating findings. Several participants also sent me emails or text messages with follow up thoughts or ideas after individual interviews. I included summaries of these conversations in the researcher journal.

Consistent with these general steps, some narrative researchers employ a three-dimensional space approach in qualitative data analysis, exploring participants' interaction, continuity, and situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach encourages the researcher to consider ways participants interact with the power structures of their environments, consistent with the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010). More specifically, the three-dimensional space approach requires data analysis to consider participants' relationships to other people and their environments, the way they understand their current experiences as related to past experiences and future expectations, and the physical dimensions of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). CRF and intersectionality theory inform the three-dimensional space approach by reminding the researcher to consider the ways socially constructed identities intersect and impact the ways people experience interaction, continuity, and situation (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2008; Shields, 2008).

In analyzing the data for this research, I employed the three-dimensional space approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) informed by critical race feminism and intersectionality. I specifically sought to understand ways participants' past experiences influenced their current situations and future conceptualizations. I also explored ways relationships shaped participants' identities. Finally, I took note of ways participants' physical environments influenced their experiences.

### **Coding Process**

I coded the interview transcripts, participant journals, and researcher journal in three cycles (Saldana, 2009), first coding for salient identities and influences on participants' salient identities. During the first cycle, I also coded for experiences related

to the participants' racial, anti-racist, and feminist identity development processes. I used *in vivo* coding during the first cycle, using participant language wherever possible. In second cycle coding, I grouped participant words and experiences into larger categories that were consistent across participants. In cases where participants shared experiences that contradicted other participants' experiences, I made note of the inconsistency, or anomaly, to discuss in the findings section. During the third cycle coding, I grouped the categories into themes to answer the research questions set out in the study. Finally, I noted additional themes and similarities in participants' stories that addressed questions or issues not originally sought by the study.

Through each of these steps, I noted specific instances where social identities influenced each other, consistent with intersectionality research (Bowleg, 2008). I involved participants in the data analysis process through member-checks and on-going discussion with the participants. During the focus group, participants provided feedback on initial themes I generated, resulting in a more refined understanding of the original themes generated. After the focus group, I sent the participants transcripts from their interviews and the focus group, asking for feedback, clarification, and any additional stories or ideas participants had to share. Finally, I sent the participants a draft of the findings section of the dissertation for additional feedback or suggestions. Two participants responded to my requests for feedback. One participant, Miriam, asked that I remove some of the instances where she used the word "like." Another participant, Carolyn, indicated she was surprised how she portrayed her father, but wanted me to leave the quote as it was because it represented how she felt in the moment. Carolyn also

commented that she enjoyed reading the findings, feeling as though they captured her experiences and thought processes.

I chose to present the findings of this study in relation to the research questions. While qualitative research is emergent in nature, the research questions provided a framework for describing and defining the themes. I also chose quotes from the participants to illustrate the themes generated. To re-story the participants' experiences, I grouped similar experiences together, weaving parts of each participant's story to create a comprehensive view of an idea or shared experience.

### **Criteria for Rigor**

Scholars continue to discuss emerging criteria for rigor for qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 2008; Lincoln, 2009). Rigor relates to the research paradigm used in the study, specifically aligning with the axiology, or ethical guidelines, associated with a paradigm. Researchers have responsibility to ensure their research is both rigorous and ethical. A central question related to validity and rigor is, "How do we know when we have specific social inquiries that are faithful enough to some human construction that we may feel safe in acting on them, or, more important, that members of the community in which the research is conducted may act on them?" (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, p. 274). In other words, how do researchers know what they are doing is both ethical and meaningful? The transformative paradigm requires the researcher to consider the community as central to the research, including in the process of ensuring rigor.

Historically, scholars of qualitative research worked to establish criteria for rigor that mirrored the rigor established in positivist research (Lincoln, 2001). More recently, those same qualitative research scholars challenge the notion that qualitative research

should mirror positivist research and recognize the importance of establishing rigor independently in ways that connect to the paradigms most often used in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 2008; Lincoln, 2009). For the purposes of this research, I engaged various criteria that align with the transformative paradigm to ensure rigor, including trustworthiness, and authenticity criteria.

I engaged authenticity principles, including voice, reflexivity, catalytic and tactical authenticity, and ontological authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 2008). Voice refers to the commitment to using participant voices in research, focusing on allowing readers to “hear” (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, p. 277) their voices allowing readers to more fully understand the experiences of the participants. By providing thick, rich description and bringing out the voices of the participants in this study, readers better connect with the ideas proposed by the participants. Closely connected is the principle of reflexivity, or understanding the role of the researcher in the process. Reflecting on the “self as researcher” (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, p. 278) requires researchers to consider their socially constructed identities and how they impact the research process, specifically noting those identities in relation to the identities of the participants in the study. My research journal assisted me in addressing the reflexivity criteria in this study.

Next, catalytic and tactical authenticity criteria require the researcher to consider the action needed after conducting the research (Lincoln, 2009). For the purposes of this study, I worked to ensure participants have the tools to engage in action related to the research topic. We (participants and I) continue to meet as a group to discuss and explore ideas related to anti-racism, white privilege, and feminism, resulting in continued action as a result of the study. Additionally, I will provide the information to educators and

activists through many avenues, including journal articles, presentations at local and national conferences, and informal conversations. By raising awareness of social justice and student affairs educators, they can work to assist students in their identity development processes, specifically related to privileged identities.

The purpose of ontological authenticity is to engage participants to consider ideas and thoughts they did not know they possessed. For example, interview questions, guided reflections, and focus groups provided opportunities for participants to better understand themselves and their motivations for social justice work, as well as tools to further engage in creating positive change (Lincoln, 2009). Each of the participants noted ways they grew as a result of participating in this study and identified renewed commitments to anti-racist activism. For example, Rhonda shared she felt rejuvenated and less isolated after participating the focus group. Other participants shared her sentiments, reflecting feeling connected to a community of anti-racist activists after participating in the study.

The more traditional criteria for rigor is trustworthiness, including transferability, dependability, credibility, and confirmability. While these criteria are regularly emerging and changing (Lincoln, 2001), I employed each of them in this research to ensure a thorough review of multiple criteria. First, I established dependability by using multiple data gathering methods through individual interviews, a focus group, guided reflections, and a creative representation to uncover participants' experiences. Next, I established credibility by conducting member-checks throughout the process. I satisfied the confirmability criteria through a peer review and member-checking of the preliminary findings. Finally, the transferability criteria was addressed by providing thick, rich

description from which readers can draw their inferences and understandings (Lincoln, 2001).

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I explored a transformative paradigm, including axiology, ontology, and epistemology as the framework for this study. The transformative paradigm focuses on challenging systems of oppression by exploring experiences of power and privilege. Additionally, I describe the use of narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study. Narrative inquiry encourages the use of stories as form of teaching and learning. By exploring the commonalities of stories from the participants' experiences, both the participants and the reader gain insight related to transforming systems of oppression.

Next, I described the participants, setting, and methods proposed for the study. Individual interviews, a focus group, and guided reflections allowed me to explore experiences of six self-identified White anti-racist feminist activists. I analyzed the data using a three-dimensional space approach, focusing on the connections of participants' past, present, and future experiences; the relationship between participants' experiences and environments; and the influence of personal relationships on their experiences.

Finally, I describe the criteria for rigor employed in this study. I used authenticity and trustworthiness criteria as forms of validity. Authenticity criteria included voice, reflexivity, catalytic and tactical authenticity, and ontological authenticity. Transferability, dependability, credibility, and confirmability acted as the trustworthiness criteria. By highlighting the voices of the participants, using multiple forms of data

collection, and intentionally choosing participants with extensive feminism and White privilege experiences, I ensured rigor in the study.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PROFILES OF ANTI-RACIST FEMINISTS**

While I had previous relationships with each of the women, I learned more about each of them by engaging with them in this research. Discussing identities is a personal endeavor requiring strength and courage. The participants in this study shared their stories openly and honestly, laughing, crying, and expressing anger at various points in the data collection process. In this chapter, I re-story the activists' experiences to provide a context for exploring their experiences with anti-racism. Each feminist shared her story over the course of three individual interviews, two written reflections, a creative representation of anti-racist feminism, and a focus group with the other participants. The energy at the focus group illuminated the importance of community in anti-racist work and each participant shared that she wished we would have met more than once in the focus group format. Activists expressed gratitude for the opportunity to examine their stories in more depth, indicating their commitment to engaging in self-reflection related to anti-racist identity. Throughout the final four chapters, I use the terms "participants," "activists," "feminists," and "women" interchangeably to refer to the study participants. In this chapter, I share the participants' portraits in alphabetical order.

The activists' stories illustrated the complexity of the ways they understood and articulated their identities. Each woman described her salient social identities, experiences influencing her understanding of her identities, and her process of developing

a commitment to anti-racist feminism. I strive to honor each participant through her story below, providing a context to understand the themes in the next chapter.

**Alice: “We’re all girls; we’re all okay.”**

Centering on experiences with family members, classroom discussions, and leadership roles on a college campus, Alice openly shared her struggle to engage in anti-racist feminist work. A fifth year senior, Alice graduated at the end of the data collection phase. I had known Alice for four years prior to the study as a student in classes I taught and as an informal advisor to the campus feminist organization of which she was a part. Her future work as a feminist was at the forefront of her mind during our conversations. At various points in the interview and focus group discussions, Alice reflected on her role as an anti-racist feminist and did not shy away from opportunities to understand the complex nuances of anti-racist feminism.

Growing up in a mid-sized mountain community that she called, “a very White neighborhood,” Alice recalled the influence her family had on her identity development and further described her educational experiences as salient to her identities. A daughter of divorced parents, Alice identified as a White, queer, able-bodied woman with dyslexia. In addition to her student identity, Alice also held her roles as a yoga instructor and a visible leader in the campus feminist organization dearly.

**Relationships with Women**

Alice’s relationships with her mom and her sister, as well as her experiences in women’s only spaces and communities, contributed to her development as a feminist. At two different instances throughout the interviews Alice proudly shared, “we’re all girls, we’re all okay.” She used this sentiment to describe her experiences being raised by a

single mom and her experience at an all women's college for one semester. She recalled her experiences at an all-women's college:

That was really fun because it was at a point that I had just come out (as queer) and I was like, wow, I need people to support this thing, because my family didn't, what better idea than to go to an all women's school? And it was so supportive. Everyone there was either queer or hadn't figured it out yet, or was really accepting of it, or was going to experiment. There [were] no boundaries; there was nothing we couldn't talk about. We'd have super intense conversations over lunch about anything and everything and I think part of that is that there weren't men involved. I think it was just a really open space for women to just be women... it was just a really supportive environment for each other, because it was just that, we're all just girls, we're all ok, and it was just super fun.

### **Leadership**

As a leader in high school student council and with the campus feminist organization that plans the annual *Take Back the Night* march, Alice described leadership as instrumental in her feminist identity development:

Yeah. I haven't even brought up *Take Back the Night* and [campus organization] which is really fun, but god, has that impacted me. I would say that I would come back to that being one of my hugest, one my biggest identities for such a long time, one of my biggest feats. Every single day, was just learning how to do that, how to be a leader, how to apply the skills that we talked about in class and then get to a meeting and be like, whoa, it's time to deal with this thing...I don't even know what else to say about that other than I hold that so dear that....you know people ask me what my major is, and I want to be like, I'm a major in activism.

Her peers considered her a resource about issues related to sexual violence, which Alice described as validating:

I think it's just been really fun because I have realized how well-established I am in this community. Just lately, I feel like anywhere I go and everywhere I go, somebody knows me and somebody knows to turn to me, or somebody knows that I have resources and I think that's a huge part of activism too, just having those resources and having people who know that they can use you for that.

Alice's identity as a yoga instructor also related to her leadership roles, "I've been practicing yoga for three years and that's actually a really huge part of my identity too.

It's a lifestyle; it's a mindset; it's a practice." Her roles as a leader and feminist remained salient for her throughout the study. Additionally, social identities added complexity to Alice's identity as an anti-racist feminist.

### **Education and Social Identities**

Formal educational experiences and dyslexia intersected to inform Alice's experience:

I hold my student identity very tight because it's so much of my time, but also, I'm not that great of a student. I love class, I love reading, but also part of my identity that's interesting to me is that I'm dyslexic and so that's always extremely present in my life, especially when I'm taking tests. It's something that I try not to rely on...I only did one semester of disabled student services, and I was just like, "I'm not disabled. I like 'differently-abled.'"

Dyslexia significantly influenced her development from the time she was a child:

One of the major highlights was in first grade, we had five reading groups and my two best friends who also lived in my neighborhood were in reading groups four and five and I was in reading group one. They kind of stratified us, and I started looking and seeing, "oh you're reading chapter books" and I was still reading one word at a time and we got candy. We were the only group that got candy and reading group one was the special kids who needed special attention, and I wasn't diagnosed as dyslexic until I was 18. All those years, I was in all these special programs and special reading groups and special this and special that and I just remember thinking, "I don't need this. Tell me what I need to do. Tell me why I'm different." Just being pulled out of class for some weird, here, "now you need to read into the recorder and then we're going to play it back for you and you're going to listen to yourself stumble over words instead of just knowing you're stumbling over words," and so I just remember that I as being such a negative experience, and so then I would just refuse to go and so that didn't help anything either, so a lot of my, especially my primary education revolved around a total inability to read. That's not fun.

Additionally, Alice noted the salience of her able-body privilege as a result of a recent yoga teacher training in which she engaged:

And, oh, something else I've been very interested in lately is being very, very able bodied, after doing my yoga teacher training all summer. That was something that I was doing things that I have never even seen pictures of...so there's 13 of us in my teacher training, and then one of them had this really bad back problem

the whole time. She knew how to deal with it, she had scoliosis as a kid, and she dealt with it, it was fine, and then maybe two weeks after teacher training ended, she had some kind of a huge back spasm and was paralyzed for two weeks and it was just this total slap in the face of you may be in some crazy inversion today and paralyzed tomorrow...And that's something that's just been very much on my mind, and I've been very, very, just learning to detach from the idea of being able bodied just in case, what if?

Alice identified as queer, which to her meant dating both men and women. She named recent relationships with both a man and a woman has having an influence on her understanding of her gender and sexual orientation. Most recently, she described a relationship with a woman, "I have been very aware of me being queer lately because I have been dating this woman on and off and too much drama."

In relation to her gender identity, Alice described a romantic relationship with a man as having a significant impact on her understanding of what it means to be a woman. She felt "vulnerable" in that relationship, and acknowledged the way the relationship functioned using "traditional gender roles," where she did more maintenance of the relationship (i.e. figuring out ways to spend time together) and did most of the cooking and cleaning in the relationship:

Lately, I've been experiencing incredible vulnerability which hasn't been very pleasant, especially in the last four years of feeling this incredible female empowerment, and really making friends with feminists, and just feeling like, now the playing field is even for me. I never really felt very oppressed by it, but then I was in a relationship with a man all summer, which I had never experienced such a huge feeling of being a woman. I feel like it's very different in lesbian relationships because it's just the way it is, those gender identities aren't as important.

She continued:

I recently was reading for a class, and it was talking about how women are so much more giving than men, typically, and much more focused on trying to satisfied the other person's needs, which was something that was very present with us and I was constantly bending over backwards to make everything work and trying to give and give and give and it was very particular to the situation

because he was studying abroad this semester and I was kind of clingy because I didn't want him to leave too, but it was very present. I was cooking for him. He was staying at my house. I was cleaning up after him; I was doing all the traditional gender roles, and then he would come up with activities that we would do and we would do them all and at the end of the day, I was like, "ok, we did everything you wanted to do and then I did everything I had to do. Where were you?"

Her gender further related to the vulnerability she felt related to sexual health. She connected her gender and her relationship with her extended family:

And then also, on a more personal note, the sexual part was very [scary]. Just the idea, even though it wasn't a problem, the idea that I could get pregnant. I became very, very vulnerable. I became very conscious of that and thinking about my cousins. My mom is always so disappointed when another cousin gets pregnant. She's always like, "What is this girl thinking? Why is she doing this? Why can't you control it?" and it became really [overwhelming] to the point where sex wasn't sexy anymore... I'm like, "Dammit, I feel so vulnerable." That's been the main source of my gender identity lately, that vulnerability. Feeling like a woman, feeling like my physical presence in this world is more obvious than before.

Similar to other participants in the study, Alice's family, relationships with friends and significant others, and leadership experiences influenced the ways she thought about her identities. Alice's extended family influenced her understanding of her own identities.

As discussed in more detail in the section "Influences on Identity Development," two of Alice's aunts married Men of Color, so several of Alice's cousins identified as People of Color. She recalled noticing the differences between her and her cousins' experiences as they interacted at family gatherings throughout her childhood.

### **Extended Family**

At numerous points in the data collection, Alice referred to the situation of her family members as an example of learning about race. She struggled with mixed messages she received from observing her family and the material she learned in classrooms regarding anti-racist feminism. She shared a salient example of feeling

frustrated because of the “cycles” among the women in her family (namely cousins and step aunts) of having children at a very young age, not finishing high school, and being in relationships with men who are in and out of jail. She noted that these cycles were not solely about race, yet she could not articulate how the problems of poverty are related to systems of oppression that disproportionately impact People of Color. Multiple times in the interviews, Alice struggled with language to describe what she observed in her family in the “right” way based on what she was learning about race in her classes:

Chris: Do you remember at what point you started to understand the systems piece, that the cycles are not necessarily somebody’s fault and that the race and the class piece intersect? Does that make sense?

Alice: Yeah. Totally. I do remember. I remember when my first cousin got pregnant at 14 and I think that was part of it. Well her mom had her when she was 15 and her mom had her when she was 16 and so seeing that lineage I think was part of it, was realizing that, ok, and now, because none of them have any money, none of them are going to college, and because none of them are going to college, they’re looking for something else and so I think that those, they obviously weren’t just tied with race or anything else but I guess the distinctions were clear because they were my family.

Alice did not understand the connection between systemic racism and classism and the situations of her family members. With further prompts, Alice continually referred to their situations as individual problems, failing to connect the systemic racism discussed in her classes to her family member’s situations.

### **Anti-Racist Development**

Similar to other participants, Alice recognized the importance of self-awareness in anti-racist work:

I guess it’s just a lot of being educated to understand where is your place. So much of it is just understanding your own identity in order to understand other people’s and to recognize that you are racist is the first step to being anti-racist.

She described her process of engaging in social justice work:

I think so much of it is that I've learned how to think and that just sounds, it sounds really simple, but it's so huge and that I've learned also how to not think. I've learned why I'm thinking what I'm thinking and that's so much of the social justice piece is understanding where these things have come from that you hold as truths and how to acknowledge that there your truths but not someone else's, that they might be real to you, but they also might not be.

Different from other participants, Alice asserted feminism and anti-racism can relate to each other, yet she did not connect them in her practice. She differentiated feminism and anti-racism, "Feminism still has a component of my identity as a woman, whether it's supposed to or not, I don't know." She continued:

Feminism is my word as a woman. As somebody who understands the division of sex and gender, so much greater than...I think that that's part of it, because all these other things happen on such individual levels and such personal levels, but then there's something about sex and gender that is so obvious and so different from all the others, even though feminism obviously has the rest of them in it too.

Her language insinuated a hierarchy of oppression, naming sexism as "different" than other kinds of oppression because it happens at "personal" levels. Toward the end of the study, Alice acknowledged that she might not know the personal nature of racism because she identified as White. Alice described ways that she knew feminism and anti-racism *should* be connected:

I think it's connected through goals. (long pause)... feminism can be such a broad word, so I'm going to talk about it in the context of activism, I guess. Because if people are going to come together as feminists as I have seen, with so many different goals, (pause) and it can seem racist if you don't have an anti-racist goal. And it's not necessarily that you're trying to portray something that is racist, but in not dealing with racism, I think People of Color can see it as racism because your goals aren't directly to counter racism.

Alice used the term "affirmative action" multiple times in the interview process, alluding to the idea of doing "special" things to address race. As a leader in the campus feminist organization, Alice received criticism from members of the community that the

organization did not represent the concerns of Women of Color. She felt frustrated with the continued “criticism:”

And then, you know, if you’re going to be criticized for being an all White women’s club, again, am I supposed to take a step of affirmative action and go out and be like, hey, Black sororities, you should come join us, but then also there’s this issue with that as to, well I understand [organization] as being, we make Take Back the Night happen and everybody always comes in with, you know, environmental action and feminism have a lot to do with each other. Yeah, they do, so I don’t know where we can help you, you know, we don’t have any money to give you, we can’t do that. Race and feminism intersect – you should come help us with this fundraiser, yes but we don’t have the human power, and my goal with the feminist alliance was we need to make Take Back the Night happen. I don’t care what it takes to make that happen. And so, it always was just this really interesting feeling of, well what should I do about that? Should I do something about it? Should I network with people? And I just never found any answers, so that’s a very present place for it.

She explained what steps of affirmative action means to her, “Is that what affirmative action is? Is that saying, ok, I’m not racist, therefore, I’m going to do special things that would make me look not racist?”

The transparency with which Alice struggled to make sense of the connection between feminism and anti-racism led to significant growth for her during the course of the study. Alice described how her understanding of anti-racism shifted over the course of the study and how discussing these issues in community resulted in a change in her way of thinking. The honesty and courage with which she struggled with the internal tension she felt related to anti-racism and feminism provides a model for engaging students to understand their privileged identities.

### **Carolyn: “It’s an internal dialogue.”**

A calm demeanor, sarcastic personality, and analytical mind created an opportunity for Carolyn and I to explore her experiences engaging in anti-racism. Carolyn graduated from college five months prior to beginning the interviews for the

study. I had known Carolyn for three years as a student in multiple classes I taught as well as a student employee in the women's center where I worked. I observed Carolyn's ability to engage in thoughtful conversation and to challenge herself to think more deeply so I was excited to explore her identities with her through this research.

### **Social Identities**

Growing up in a family of strong female activists, Carolyn described herself as a White, pansexual, US born woman who recently graduated from college. She articulated confusion about her sexual orientation and social class identities and named her family as a significant influence on her identities. Carolyn described her social identities and the thought processes associated with each of the typical "check boxes" of identities:

I identify as a White woman, and I used to identify as straight, and I just don't generally identify in terms of sexuality. I was identifying as pansexual, but I just feel like everyone's on the spectrum for the most part, so I don't even know why I bother identifying. Being White and being a woman are both really important and once I started thinking about them, really play a huge role in basically every aspect of my life.

She further described the complexity associated with her socio-economic status:

The other piece that I don't talk about as often is my socioeconomic status, which I have a hard time defining. I think when I was a kid with my family, we were always middle to upper-middle class, and then even in college, I think I was still upper to middle-class really – I got out of college without loans and ended up with a job, and money in a savings account, and then I got a job and my job now puts me not at, I don't know, maybe middle class, I guess, because I'm living on my own, but if I was paying for me and [partner] or if I had any other real expenses, even a dog, I would not be middle class anymore, which is fine, and I think I'm sustaining fine, but I think my socioeconomic status is super important and something that has become more prominent since I graduated. I felt like when I was in school my parents were generous and helped out and helped pay for bills and everything, but I also worked all the way through, so I kind of validated it, like I wasn't just spoiled, which is shady, because I kind of was spoiled all the way through, but I've had a job since I was 16 steadily and so I don't feel like I ever just sat back and let my parents pay for everything but even then having a job and having my parents help with everything and then not having that, that's a change, for sure.

Carolyn clearly named the privilege associated with her socio-economic status while also recognizing the challenges associated with an entry-level salary in a non-profit organization.

Carolyn also recognized the privilege associated with her identity as a US citizen:

I think, depending on the situation, my identity of being US born and White, those two kind of intersecting is really important and that I think about often...even when the Chilean miners were pulled out, I thought that it was really important that I was White and American and I watched it on my computer streaming, you know, that people were being pulled out of a mine, so that one's important too.

As a recent college graduate, Carolyn experienced confusion about the meaning of her bachelor's degree:

I just graduated, and I feel like...it's kind of relevant that I just graduated, that I don't really know how to budget money that well, nobody ever taught me that, credit cards are confusing me, they just don't make any sense and also I have a bachelor's degree, which for some reason is supposed to qualify me as an adult, and more qualified than somebody who didn't graduate, which come to find out seems really silly to me because I don't think that I know anything that I should know at this stage of my life. I just graduated.

Working as a case manager, prevention specialist, and health educator with an AIDS service organization, Carolyn described her job as fulfilling:

The majority of my job is case management and working with people who are living with HIV...access to care, which has been a whole different lesson in oppression and the things that people don't have based on stigma and that kind of thing. And then, the other piece is working with people around prevention, specifically around HIV, but around STI's (sexually transmitted infections) and taking care of yourself and any number of other things that come into it.

She chose her job because it closely related to social justice, something important to her upon graduating from college. Additionally, Carolyn wanted to "push" herself to better understand issues facing the GLBT population.

Finally, similar to several other participants, Carolyn's identity as a survivor of sexual assault was a salient piece of her identity:

Well, identifying as a survivor and I feel like that's a really big piece that never comes into conversations very well. I don't know how you chat about that conversation with people, especially people who think, "agh...why are you talking to me about that and why are you open about it?" and it's been kind of salient in this job because...that identity went from being like one of the most important while I was in school to being something I pretend isn't there or don't want to talk about. I don't know how relevant any of this is, but I think that it's important because it was so important for a while and it doesn't seem as relevant all of a sudden which is weird because for half of my senior year it was all that I could think of so to go from super huge, played into everything I did, impacted school, to something nobody talks about and that I only talk about if a client comes in who is talking about it and then I separate myself from it, so it's weird that it went from being such an important identity to something I don't talk about.

Carolyn's identity as a survivor illuminated the struggle she identified in transitioning from college to her work setting. She felt isolated and alone in her new workplace, unable to find her voice to challenge oppression. In her mind, Carolyn's job related closely to social justice, yet she often felt as though the organization with which she worked could do a better job addressing issues of power and privilege. Several activists in this study felt similarly, and I will discuss concerns related to isolation further in the section, "Experiences of Anti-Racist Feminists."

### **Family Influences**

Carolyn's family and significant other also played a role in her description of herself. She came from "a family who don't identify [themselves] as feminists, but I would identify as feminists." In a relationship with her partner for a year and a half, her relationship was, "a pretty relevant piece of who I am at this point." Carolyn's family influenced her identities and development. A middle child with one older and one younger brother, she says:

I used to think that I was kind of spoiled because I was the only girl and I think it just worked out that my mom and I got along really well. I think that that was really important in the way that I was formed.

Carolyn credited her mother, grandmother, and female cousin with her strong feminist identity. In 2004, when she was still in high school, Carolyn, and her mother, aunt, cousin, and grandmother, participated in the March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC. Traveling with a pro-choice group from Colorado pushed Carolyn to identify strong feelings related to justice:

[It was] a turning point in feeling like, in having emotions about things, or feeling like there were important things going on, but then going to an event where there were so many people who felt that way about something that seemed important to me was a huge moment and realization that things are going on and things aren't right, people are being mistreated, there's not attention being paid to where it should be.

As described later, Carolyn's grandmother and mother actively engaged in community politics, influencing Carolyn's commitment to activism and involvement.

Carolyn's relationships with members of her family changed as a result of her awareness of and engagement with social justice. Described her mother as "accepting" of her ideas and experiences, Carolyn shared:

I think my mom is the most accepting and I think that's just because in general she's a pretty accepting person and she gets that people have different experiences and that a college education I think really changes things, not in an elitist way, but you learn much different things in a University than you do in high school or the workforce...so I think my mom gets it a little better but I'm sure sometimes she still gets annoyed when I mention, "I think privilege or power had something to do with it," she just does better not talking about it.

### **Complicated Dynamics with Men**

Carolyn's relationships with her brothers, father, and male partner reveal complicated dynamics with men in her life. Generally, the men in her life support Carolyn, inclusive of her feminist leanings. However, Carolyn felt silenced in various aspects of her relationships with these men. For example, with her male partner, Carolyn sometimes felt as though she cannot speak up when his friends and family members make

inappropriate comments. While her partner shared with her she is welcome to say whatever she wants, she continued to feel as though it might not be well-received. She provided an example:

One of his friends from the military came and stayed the night with us and I have my mini-refrigerator that I had when I lived in the dorms and it has all my political stickers and stuff on it and like “elect a feminist now” stickers and he started making jokes about it and I didn’t feel like I could call out [partner]’s friends and be like you are being a jerk and also I feel bad for your girlfriend, but I do and so, he’s just saying things. I’m like, “it’s cool, it’s cool,” because I don’t want [partner] to feel like he has to be a part of it if he doesn’t want to be, but then when I ask him later he’s like, “it’s cool, you can say whatever you want to my friends, don’t say anything to my family.”

Carolyn and her partner often engaged in discussions related to feminism and anti-racism and while her partner is generally very supportive, sometimes she felt alone in her thinking:

Sometimes I say things and he’s like, “you are not being, I don’t feel like you’re being very nice right now” [and I’ll say,] “I think what I’m saying is important.” So it’s hard, it’s really hard, especially in a perceived straight couple, I guess, that I be a feminist and I think [partner] kind of feels like he is just a part of it.

However, Carolyn’s partner also shared with her that he understood where she was coming from and was starting to shift some of his perspectives. “He told me, ‘even though I don’t call myself a feminist, I’m starting to really see what you’re talking about.’ And I was like, ‘yes!’ Even just the little things, I also know that he’s trying.”

Further, Carolyn described how her relationship with her partner has challenged her to be more inclusive of people whose views differ from her own. Because she valued inclusivity, he challenged her to be patient and recognize the perspectives of people with different experiences, which has resulted in her having a better understanding of why people may have some differing values than her own. On the other hand, Carolyn’s brothers did not “appreciate” her feminist anti-racist ideology:

My brothers, I don't think appreciate it at all, even though as far as people go, they lean more socially understanding of causes and issues, but I talked to my older brother on the phone for like an hour and a half about sexual assault and I was like, you don't really get it. He tried really hard because one of his friends gave him *Full Frontal Feminism* and told him to read it...He read it and he thought that it was really interesting and there were a lot of points that he thought he could get on board with but I think the big picture kind of escaped him.

Additionally, she described her father as not really "having a stake" in anti-racism or feminism, so she generally does not engage in conversations with him about it:

I generally don't talk about it with my dad. I mean, every once in a while I will bring things up in casual conversation because that's what I do now, and it's casual conversation, but, he does not respond well, and I think in a lot of ways, he's still on the same page, but talking about it as directly and pinpointing as you are White and male and in this prime age and you probably have a lot of power in the world compared to even my mom who doesn't have the same power or privilege. I don't think he gets it or cares to get it as much, and not in an "I don't give a shit" kind of way, just I really don't have a stake in it, it doesn't really make a difference to me and I think that's how other people see it.

While Carolyn clearly felt support from her family and partner, she also experienced challenges associated with the changes in her ideology throughout college. Carolyn's understanding of her own socially constructed identities and her relationship with her family and significant other significantly influenced her understanding of feminism and anti-racism. Her experiences with feminism and anti-racism provide insight into understanding the process of anti-racist identity development.

### **Anti-Racist Development**

Carolyn's transcripts were littered with notions of being a "good White person" and a "good feminist." The internal dialogue she had when communicating and interacting with People of Color represents the thought process many activists in the study described. Carolyn understood the complexity of this on-going analysis. Because color-blindness contributes to unintentional exclusion and tokenization, Carolyn

struggled to balance the urge to treat her colleagues “the same” as each other while at the same time recognizing that the experiences of her friends and colleagues of color may differ from her own.

Carolyn’s stories illuminated the on-going struggle many participants described engaging in anti-racism. She shifted her understanding of her identity as an anti-racist feminist and recalled specific situations involving critical self-analysis and dialogue related to anti-racism. Reflecting on the ways she changed as a result of self-awareness, Carolyn recalled:

People used to say things when I was younger, and I was like, “oh, chuckle, chuckle, that was funny,” and then it started to seem not as funny and then it started to seem inappropriate and offensive, and then it started to feel kind of hurtful that people would say that about people that I cared about or people that I knew.

She continued:

I feel like I moved from thinking it was important because it helped other people to thinking it was important because it’s important to other people and it’s important to me and it’s important to the people I care about. For any issue, I just kind of changed, from being “it’s about me” to it matters to everyone else too.

Consciously acknowledging she had to have a personal stake in addressing racism; Carolyn understood how racism influenced her as well as People of Color. She shared her perspective in developing a commitment to anti-racism:

I think a lot of it is that I could see how being racist was impacting me as well so I think it does have to start from kind of a selfish perspective that, because otherwise what’s the motivation for doing it, really? I don’t think caring about other people is always enough to motivate someone to make a change like that but I saw that it impacted me.

Sensing she had specific experiences understanding how racism affected her, I asked her to elaborate on this idea. She felt frustrated because she missed out on knowledge and experience in many of her classes because of racism:

I could see that it impacted the people around me that Women of Color didn't want to talk in our class because people said awful things or in like my human development classes they were just non-existent. Maybe there's something going on here that we're not even thinking about People of Color during these classes, so maybe we're not saying things that are racist but we're completely ignoring those populations in general. Seems like we're missing something, we're not getting the whole picture.

Discovering White people's motivation for addressing racism proved more challenging for Carolyn. She explained that her White guilt made her "feel bad" and continued to describe how racism hurts her as a White person:

I think [racism] does hurt me and it makes it harder for us to work together. It makes it more challenging for me to learn about other cultures or to learn about other people if I'm surrounded by people who are racist or who are ignoring race or pretending it doesn't exist, because then we don't even get to talk about it or learn about it and I'm missing out on knowledge.

Experiences outside of classrooms also influenced Carolyn's commitment to anti-racism:

When I started RAing is when I started recognizing that this was something that was not only not very nice but also hurtful in a grand scheme that it was affecting people more broadly and I think that the end of my RAing into working at women's studies, I started to transition to saying things to people because it was just too frustrating to not... "Isn't there a better word, or couldn't you not make that joke?"

Carolyn's self-awareness influenced her anti-racist identity:

I experience my race vastly different now than I ever have before and in some ways; I see my own experiences as having an impact (positive or negative) on those around me. I work towards anti-racism but I find myself messing up all the time, and I struggle to make those mistakes and continue to feel like I've made personal and/or societal progress.

She further shared two instances of recognizing White privilege in her daily experience, reflecting her commitment to awareness of her surroundings:

I used to notice a lot in classes when all the White people would talk. I remember it especially in our intro class that the White, a couple of White women in particular would just talk all day long, but the few Women of Color in the class we almost never heard, or when they did they were, it felt like, they were really uncomfortable or quiet or nervous about talking.

In her current work, Carolyn noted the racial dynamics of her workplace as an example of White privilege:

Right now statistics say that HIV is growing at the fastest rate among African American women and our staff is made up of I think 11 people, 10 of whom I would perceive as White or who have identified as White, one who identifies as Latina or Mexican American maybe. I feel like that's kind of a sign of White privilege. Where are all the people who are actually representative of the people who are actually dealing with this disease? Some of it is kind of representative of the area we live in, we have a higher percentage of White people than people of color, but we don't have any Black women, which is a huge portion of who is affected by HIV right now and it seems like that would be valuable to have that perspective.

As described later, Carolyn's thoughtful self-awareness often leads to over-analysis of situations involving race. Carolyn articulated a struggle to engage in thoughtful reflection while at the same time remaining present in the interactions in which she engages. Carolyn's commitment to critical self-awareness and the recognition of anti-racist identity as an on-going process related to the experiences of other participants.

### **Georgia: "It's part of my family life."**

An ethnic studies major who graduated at the end of the data collection phase, Georgia's reflection and insight provided a particularly academic view of the experiences of anti-racist feminists. At the time of the study, Georgia was enrolled in a course where she wrote her racial auto-biography, using Helms (1999/2005) model of White racial identity development. Because she was in the thick of recalling childhood experiences for the purpose of that project, her stories and thoughts came quickly throughout the interview process.

Although I knew Georgia as a student in two separate courses I taught, I had only known her for two years and had a less in-depth relationship with her than the other activists. However, that did not deter from our ability to connect and engage in in-depth conversations related to race, racism, and feminism. Because Georgia engaged so deeply with the material, I often received text messages or emails after our interviews describing something she shared in more detail or providing another perspective about an issue we had discussed.

### **Family Influences and Social Identities**

Georgia came from a long lineage of social justice activists and educators, resulting in a strong commitment to education as a form of activism in her life. Quite simply, she stated, “There’s always been a very strong influence in my family to be doing something in social justice work.” She continued describing her family, “All of my extended family members are involved in some sort of service work. My aunt and uncle are both completely pro-bono lawyers, my aunt is a social worker, my cousin is a teacher. It’s part of my family life.”

Georgia grew up in a predominantly White community in the mountain west, known for its politically liberal ideology. While Georgia acknowledged this perception of her community and discussed the reality that many of her friends and their parents shared her family’s relatively progressive views, she also named the lack of interaction with People of Color as significant in her history:

Limited interaction with people of color continues to play a major role in my own racial identity formation. While I have been fortunate enough to surround myself with a fairly (racially) diverse community at [college] through the ethnic studies department the fact remains that I was born and raised in a very White community and went on to attend a very White university.

Georgia identified as a White, Jewish, cisgender, straight woman from an upper middle-class family:

I identify as a cisgendered woman who is straight. I'm White and Jewish, which is really important identity to me, because even though I'm culturally Jewish, I'm not really religious at all... And I also am really close my family, which is a big part of my identity as well.

Cisgender implies that her gender identity matches her biological sex, resulting in her sex and gender being the same. Georgia's close relationship with her mother's family influenced her identity development:

When I say I'm really close to my family, I'm usually referring to my mother's side of the family and that mostly just has to do with proximity, but also, culturally. I grew up in an upper middle class household as did my mother and her siblings. My dad is the only person in his family to finish high school. He ended up going to college, and so, we sort of live in this middle class world and I think it's a little uncomfortable, especially for my mom to go into his family's cultural space. I mostly grew up around my mom's family.

Georgia spent most of her childhood split between her parents' house, her grandparents' house, and her aunt's house, all on her mother's side of the family. Her grandparents significantly influenced her commitment to social justice, and lived in the same community where Georgia attended college and were well-known as progressive activists in the community.

Both of her parents are teachers, which Georgia acknowledged as a privileged social identity significantly influencing her experiences growing up:

I also should say that I had a very privileged and very different experience going through elementary, middle and high school in the same school district my parents taught in. Firstly, because my parents had weight with the school counselors and so they got me into the classes with the teachers they wanted to be my teachers and also, they had a pretty solid understanding of what schools they wanted me in and had the privilege to put me in those schools instead of me just having to go to my neighborhood school.

Georgia's parents helped with her school work growing up, and she still regularly communicates with her father, an English teacher, about grammar and writing style. After one of our interviews, Georgia and I remained at the same table working on our own projects and she called her father to ask a grammatical question about a paper she was writing. This demonstrated to me the on-going educational support Georgia's parents provided her.

Georgia elaborated on the closeness of her family, highlighting experiences that influenced her as a child:

I have memories of the sort of, inconsequential, everybody is equally valuable, you should respect everybody and at least my parents took the step to say, "You know, not only everybody's the same, but not everybody's the same, and that's awesome." My mom's a middle school counselor so she's one of those women who wears like horrifying, yet awesome t-shirts, like she has one that has all of these fish that are purple swimming one direction and a polka dot fish swimming the other direction and it's like, "It's cool to be different." Yeah, that's my mom in a nutshell. So, I remember having those conversations.

She recalled hurting her father through a lack of understanding of their shared Irish identity:

I think probably the only one that's really salient for me is a huge argument we got into one time about I didn't want to eat corned beef on St. Patty's day, and my dad's family is Irish. We got into a big argument about me always favoring my Jewish identity over my Irish identity or my Jewish heritage over my Irish heritage. And I haven't quite worked through that yet, I'm still kind of trying to, I don't know a whole lot about my Irish heritage and it didn't have the same impact, or I didn't identify with it as early on in my life so I don't have memories associated with it that either strengthened it or weakened it really.

At various points during the interviews and in the written reflections, Georgia noted the importance of her Jewish identity in her commitment to anti-racism:

There's a lot in the religious texts about being humble, even the idea that we all come from the same man and therefore we're all equal, so there's a lot, a cultural understanding around, of social justice being an integral part of your existence on earth... a lot of my Jewish identity has more been about doing anti-oppression

work and a lot of the cultural understanding around that I think is different than maybe some of my Christian friends' experiences.

As a child and adolescent, Georgia conflated the identities of White and Christian, often distancing herself from her White identity by focusing on the target identity of Judaism.

Georgia and her family valued education, which represented a significant aspect of her identity. An ethnic studies major and women's studies minor, Georgia anticipates working as an educator in some fashion after graduating from college. She connected education to activism and anti-racism:

It's mostly being an activist in school and for me that means actually doing the work that I'm assigned because I'm lucky enough to be in a major and minor that are assigning me work that challenge my understandings of activism and equality and empowerment, peace, and justice, everything. So for me, learning is a pretty big part of spending my time or of activism in general.

Because both of her parents were educators, Georgia felt supported in her home to continue to pursue education and engage in educational work after college.

### **Complicated Relationships with Men**

Similar to other participants, Georgia's complicated relationships with male partners challenged her anti-racist feminist identities. Georgia struggled to engage in conversations with a former partner's friends. She elaborated on her thoughts related to romantic relationships with men:

I've been thinking a lot about this lately because [name] and I broke up fairly recently and I've been thinking about ok, what exactly do I want out of a partner because we had innumerable conversations about why we were wrong for each other, but there were things that kept us in that relationship, and I'm almost a little ashamed in some way to admit that even though I'm a feminist, I'm attracted to masculinity and it's hard for me to find a person who has the values that I think I would like in a partner and is pretty traditionally masculine.

As with many anti-racist feminists, finding community proved challenging for Georgia, especially with regard to romantic relationships.

## **Anti-Racist Development**

Georgia's experiences engaging in anti-racism and feminism differed slightly from most of the other participants. Georgia similarly acknowledged the importance of critical self-awareness and the nature of the on-going process of anti-oppression work; however, she did not identify with the terms anti-racist or feminist. Georgia named her primary identity related to anti-racism and feminism as anti-violence work, "My own feminist philosophy...[is] not limited to what is commonly understood as feminism and I very much understand doing anti-violence work as doing feminist work." She further described her struggle with the term "feminism:"

The reason that I've opted to stay away from feminism is because...I have some discomfort around using the word feminism understanding the privilege around using that term and I'm tempted in some ways to be like, "I'm a womanist," but then is that appropriation, so I've sort of opted to veer away from any of those connotations at all and choose anti-violence because then I'm both and neither at the same time.

Georgia's primary experiences related to engaging in anti-oppression work stem from her family and education. She considered education a primary inspiration for her work. In addition to several classroom experiences introducing her to more broad concepts and ideas related to anti-oppression, Georgia also considered education as a part of formal activism:

Mostly being an activist in school and for me that means actually doing the work that I'm assigned because I'm lucky enough to be in a major and minor that are assigning me work that challenge my understandings of activism and equality and empowerment, peace, and justice, everything. So for me, learning is a pretty big part of spending my time or of activism in general.

Formal education provided opportunities for critical self-reflection. Georgia's interactions with professors and other students challenged her understanding of herself:

I've been thinking about it a lot recently, that absolutely the most embarrassing and painful memories around social and understanding other identities have been the most important in propelling me forward in my understanding of privileged identity.

Georgia described an experience at a student organization meeting where she unintentionally perpetuated White privilege among a group of Students of Color. A group of students was planning a Columbus Day protest and she insinuated that the people in the group would be speaking for Native American people, rather than themselves. A professor challenged her thinking on the matter and she quickly acknowledged her ignorance, learning from the mistake. She explained how the experience provided her with an opportunity to engage in self-reflection:

It's given me sort of a sense of forgiveness for myself and then a sense of understanding that I don't understand and that there are going to be moments where I don't understand and where I kind of fall into that place.

Georgia shared other instances of self-reflection, specifically related to her White identity. Most recently, she thought about opportunities for employment after college and what her role as a White person engaged in anti-oppression work might be:

Overall, I am most attracted to paradigms employed by organizations that are for and by Women of Color and so I find myself wondering whether there is a place for me at these organizations, if it would be inappropriate for me to invade a safe space for Women of Color, and if I could find an organization that uses a similar paradigm and relates more directly to one or more of my identities.

In terms of recognizing the on-going nature of anti-oppression work, Georgia shared her perspective:

So even though there are moments where I still feel really guilty and still really just wish I could be like, "oh, I know all about it," and be done with it, for the most part, it's a work in progress to try and actually utilize my privilege instead of just having it and feeling bad about it.

Georgia's experiences as an anti-oppression activist provide another perspective related to anti-racist work. Georgia integrated her understanding of the intersections of oppression to address oppression at its core. Rather than addressing racism or sexism as individual issues, she worked to address the systemic issues that perpetuate oppression more broadly.

**Jane: "It's not a walk in the park."**

Jane arrived at the coffee shop, greeting me with a hug, ready to dive into a conversation about her experiences understanding her own identities. Because she had previously engaged in her own research study related to anti-racist feminism, Jane felt nervous about participating in the study because she "heard some horrible things" when she did it, implying that she feared saying something insensitive as well. I knew Jane for five years prior to the study, and knew that she was a thoughtful, kind person whose thoughts and experiences would contribute significantly to the study. Jane's unassuming presence and thoughtful demeanor allowed us to engage in meaningful and deep conversations.

Throughout the interview process, Jane reflected on her previous experiences, often through tears, revealing the personal nature of this topic for her. When I asked why this topic raised such emotion, she indicated that it has been a lot of "work" to engage in anti-racism and her learning process has at times been painful. Primarily through classroom experiences, relationships with faculty of color, and a large amount of personal reading, Jane engaged in learning about the history of racism in the U.S., and more specifically, the history of racism in feminism.

## Social Identities and Family

Jane described herself as a White straight female, who lived in a mid-sized mountain west community for the past eight years. At the time of the study, Jane had been out of college for one year and worked as an employee in a locally-owned toy store. As a child, Jane moved around the country often; eight years is the longest she has ever lived in once place:

Moving constantly during my childhood had a big impact. I wasn't just moving to different houses; I was moving to different states constantly. So, while a little bit trying, I think I learned a lot about how even just in the US there's a lot of different culture here and how people communicate and deal with situations, so moving was a big one.

A daughter of divorced parents, she “grew up in really, really different families.” Her parents divorced when she was three years old. Jane discussed the way her parents' situations influenced her development:

My parents have both been divorced multiple times ... My mom is her own story, but she was raised, she comes from this really like [Midwestern] kind of existence and my dad's side of my family is like very kind of liberal, bouigy-[city], (slang for bourgeoisie)... my mom grew up in a really religious family and the other side of my family is completely atheist. My grandma, who was born in the late 20's, was raised by an atheist, so it's a really different existence, so I think that affected my ability to see different kinds of things.

She primarily lived with her mother when growing up and acknowledged the influence her mother had on her feminist identity. Similar to other participants who grew up with a single mother, Jane appreciated the strength she observed in her mother. However, Jane received mixed messages from her mother, “I was growing up watching my mom be who she was, and be really solid in her existence, and having my stepdad just be mean and it was a very bizarre childhood experience.”

Religion influenced Jane's experiences growing up. While her mother grew up in a Methodist family, she joined the Mormon Church when Jane was a year old to find "family:"

She basically chose to be a Mormon because she wanted a family and she wanted to be able to have kids. When she got pregnant with me she said it was either go to California and join a commune of women and she had had some physically abusive relationships with women so wasn't really comfortable with that. So, she just decided to join the church and hopefully find someone there that she could raise kids with.

Jane felt uncomfortable with her experiences in the Mormon Church. In addition to the patriarchy she experienced in the church, she also felt uncomfortable with the exclusion of gay and lesbian people. Jane's experience with religion influenced her ability to understand exclusion and marginalization.

Jane also named social class as a salient identity. She reflected on her "middle class," childhood experiences:

My [step] dad was a truck driver, and my mom was a stay at home mom, so we had enough for her to do that, and I think that's a big deal. When my brother was little, she started teaching again. And my grandparents, the other thing is that neither of my parents really had a lot of money but my grandparents (on my dad's side) paid for me to go to college. So, because they had a plastics company they started in the 50s and sold it in the 80s so that was able to help me go to college.

Jane further connected the class privilege she associated with her grandparents to White privilege:

I mean my college fund that I have, my grandparents were able to start a plastics company back in the 50's and they wouldn't have been able to do that if they weren't White. They probably wouldn't have been able to get a loan and they wouldn't have been able to do that, and then they wouldn't have been able to put it away for me to go to college.

Jane described her mother's current financial situation:

Now because my mom is a single mom who's a teacher, but doesn't have any savings. She's like, really poor, well, I mean, poor is a relative term. But she's

not really well off right now and buying groceries is a big deal. It's kind of an interesting thing, and so my brother is growing up in a totally different family situation than me.

### **Extended Family**

Jane's extended family also influenced her identity development. Her aunt lived in Mexico for six years, and married a Mexican man and had children with him. Jane recalled having "pretty intense conversations with my cousin who went to school in [city] and was pretty into social activism."

I think more than anything, I was just really, really curious, and trying to look at my family and be like, "where are all these people coming from," you know? And I don't know what sparked those conversations that we had, or, that side of my family is really abrupt. I don't know, abrupt is not the word, but they're not subtle, so I don't know if maybe something was said at some point that just made me wonder.

She described her cousin:

He's a journalist now. and he, but I remember having a lot of conversations with him at a pretty young age about how he identified and how he preferred people to refer to him and I know he was doing like, documentary at one point on cooking and social connections in the Mexican community in [city], and so yeah, I think that was a really big thing.

In the section on "White Identity Development," Jane described the influence her relationships with her cousin had on her White identity development.

### **Education**

After high school, Jane took a year off before enrolling in college. She completed a semester of college then took another semester off to do some "soul searching." During her time away from college, Jane worked as a housekeeper at the mountain campus of the university she attended. She also traveled to Poland to visit friends she met working at the mountain campus. She described her experience during her time off from college:

I think I definitely came into my own a lot during that period of time. I had spent some time with my dad when I was growing up but I was mostly with my mom and near the end of it, I was just kind of done, I just needed to leave and go do my own thing so I think I kind of did a lot of soul searching during that period of time...it was just a lot of thinking and realizing what parts of myself were me and what parts of myself were just things that I was expected to exist as, you know?

When Jane came back to college, she discovered women's studies and ethnic studies as places where she felt comfortable and engaged in the coursework. She did not intend to go back to college because it was not working for her until she discovered women's studies:

I knew I had to find something that was interesting enough for me to sit through all of my classes, to be honest, that's how I found and got interested in the women's studies classes, and then from there it just kind of opened up, and that's how I got into ethnic studies classes too. I think there's a lot of privilege in being able to say that I just nonchalantly was like, "Well, this will work," but I just started taking ethnic studies classes and I was like "this works, I can come to class every day and I will work hard and it will be way more interesting and way more life improving than anything else I can do." That's how that happened.

### **Anti-Racist Development**

Jane's experience as an anti-racist feminist grew from her academic experiences in ethnic studies and women's studies in college. While Jane's family influenced her understanding of herself, feminism, and anti-racism, her most significant interactions came from reading and in classrooms with well-respected professors. Jane participated in formal community activism, through the campus feminist organization and valued community-based, grassroots organizing and every day activism.

Jane noted connections between understanding anti-racism and feminism. She began her activism in feminism and as she learned about the racist history of feminism, she questioned her role in the movement. When she learned of the racism in the feminist movement, she spent some time negotiating her identities, "I had to figure out how to

integrate my love for ethnic studies and my love for women's studies. To integrate those was really hard and it took me a long time to be comfortable with that." Jane's process of understanding racism was very personal for her, touching her at a very deep level. She spoke with passion when she described her experiences in understanding racism and cried at multiple points during the interview process. I asked what made this emotional for her and she shared, "it's been work, you know. It hasn't been a walk in the park, which it shouldn't be, but it has been an intense process." She shared numerous experiences when she realized the impact of racism on People of Color and her complicit role in racism. She analogized this to her experience in the Mormon Church. Through tears she explained:

When I was in high school and going to the Mormon Church, [I realized] that I had gay friends that weren't really welcome there. I didn't want to be part of something that was kicking out other people. I think that a big part of it was that I was like, well, if this is real, I want to deal with it because I don't want to be a feminist if this is the kind of shit we do to people.

Jane talked about a "mythological" history White people perpetuate, specifically as it relates to feminism. She acknowledged where she learned this history and describes her process of relearning feminist history:

I think that I experienced this with my mom a little bit too, but I think that people who were raised with second wave feminist moms who were just trying to get their kids psyched about feminism, "forget," they leave out...it's like the mythological version of feminism, they leave out all this other stuff and I think it's a huge part of culture and a part of the culture of whiteness, is to only focus on the stuff that you want to focus on and to ignore all the bad stuff and I think that you see that in how we recount our history and how we recount our feminist history.

Jane believed she will never "achieve" the status of anti-racist, rather she acknowledged the lifelong process that comes with striving to be an ally to People of Color:

I have a really hard time making definitive statements about what it means to be an anti-racist feminist or what it means to be a White woman because there are always too many, along with all the answers there are all these questions, there's all this process, and it really is like a conversation that you're having with yourself. So your answer one day could be different than your answer two months later.

She further elaborated:

I consider myself to be in the process of becoming an anti-racist feminist...Being an anti-racist feminist is the only way to negotiate the racist history in feminism with being a feminist for me. I couldn't do it without trying to change it, you know? Or at least change it in myself. Being an anti-racist feminist, it means taking all the good stuff and keeping it and recognizing all the bad stuff and trying to change it.

Jane recounted her experiences in classrooms that influenced her development related to anti-racist feminism which are highlighted in the section on Influences on Identity Development. Here she described the pain associated with the process of listening Women of Color to relearn the history that she did not originally learn as a part of her feminist upbringing:

[I was] really trying to do a lot of listening around race and racism in the feminist movement and trying to do a lot of listening and putting my own shit aside and focusing on what people had experienced, on what Women of Color had experienced. I think I was doing a lot of reading, and I think that that was also a big part of recognizing my whiteness...I had definitely thought about it before but it was rough.

As part of the process of attempting to "integrate her love for ethnic studies and women's studies," Jane engaged in an independent research project as part of her undergraduate career where she explored White college feminists' understandings of racism and White privilege within the feminist movement. Jane described this experience as frustrating and named significant feelings of anger as a result of talking with her White peers about their understanding of racism within feminism:

It's been a big process for me to recognize the negative things that have happened in the feminist movement and insert them into my feminist thought process. It's obviously, historically a huge issue, and when I did all of those interviews for my capstone, it was just a really big shock that people were saying things...and people weren't aware at all of the racism in the feminist movement and they either weren't aware at all or they were aware and were in that first stage of being like well, but it couldn't have been that, that's gotta be wrong you know.

She further explained the feelings of anger associated with this project:

I was really angry. It was my first like really angry at the White feminist experience, you know? Like I'd done a lot of reading and I'd done a lot of personal processing and I'd really tried to be listening hard to what people were saying in my classes and to what Women of color were saying and experiencing and just really trying to absorb and let it in but that was the first time it was ever blatantly, totally in my face and I was really angry.

Jane also shared a current struggle she had related to understanding White privilege and how it connects to her own personal history and family:

I think actually both of my great-grandparents on that side of the family, used to go hunting and when they would hunt they would trade things with the Native Americans, and so we have all of this huge collection of Native American rugs that they collected over time, and they have some that they collected on their trips down to visit my grandma in Albuquerque. My grandma has a ton of jewelry that she has bought over a long period of time and they used to go to Mexico a lot, so there's kind of, I haven't figured out how to incorporate that comfortably and I talked with [professor] about it and it's one of those weird things because I totally respect her and I want to be able to wear her jewelry when she dies, but I mean, it's bad stuff, and I've been given one of the rugs, and I'm like, I don't know what to do with this, and so that's kind of uncomfortable and I think it relates to my feminism and where I'm at and my process and trying to figure it out.

The transparency with which Jane described trying to understand and make sense of her family history with colonization summarizes her process of understanding her anti-racist identity. Jane acknowledged the on-going process of developing an anti-racist identity, as well as the importance of self-awareness, both key components of the experiences of the participants in this study.

**Miriam: “I want to be the best ally I can be.”**

At the time of the study, I knew Miriam for five years both as a student in several classes I taught as well as a student employee in the women’s center where I worked for six years. Miriam’s laid-back personality and experience working in diversity and social justice related programs combined to create an opportunity for exploring her ideas about anti-racist feminism. Miriam’s family, friends, and classroom experiences intersected to inform her ideas about anti-racist feminism.

**Social Identities**

A White, pansexual, Jewish woman, Miriam grew up in a suburban community in a mountain west state. At the time of the study, she worked as an admissions counselor at the same college she attended and graduated from five months prior to the study.

When I asked her what identities felt most salient to her, she shared:

My identity as a woman. More and more and more, my identity as a White...also being Jewish, since I grew up in a fairly White, Christian suburb. At certain times, I notice being Jewish more. People will say certain things and it will be more salient, but I don’t think about it as much as being a woman and being White...I think about my sexual orientation and how that can be privileged, especially with all the stuff going on lately in regards to sexual orientation. I try to think about all my identities, but I’d say White and women are salient.

Miriam described her sexual orientation as pansexual, or attracted to a person, rather than their gender. She explained the privilege associated with this identity, “I think of myself as pansexual, so I don’t really like want to define myself as straight, they tend to be with men, so my relationships with men.”

I prompted her to describe her socio-economic status because I had heard her discuss it in different capacities prior to the study:

My socio-economic status was lower than the people I went to school with, so it’s just interesting going to schools and seeing people who are having similar

experiences...going to suburban schools and seeing that and then going to schools that are more in the city and then seeing those differences, socio-economic-wise. I think about it, but I don't think about it as much because I'm one person and I have a salaried job and my status has changed from when I was a kid, you know. I would say, even though my salary is low, I make more than enough to cover myself and to take care of myself, so I don't think about status as much but it's definitely, definitely something I think about when I go to schools.

Miriam's ability to reflect on her own identities and experiences and how they relate to her work exemplify her commitment as an anti-racist ally. She has incorporated self-reflection into her work, observing different areas in which she experiences privilege and how other people may perceive her.

Related to her self-awareness, Miriam also connected her understanding of oppression to experiences with her own marginalized identities. Miriam described a kind of kinship she feels with other oppressed groups based on her experience with religious oppression:

I feel like being Jewish is an ethnic group because...growing up I felt like, this sounds kind of weird, but I felt a kinship with Black kids at my school because...we didn't fit in with the White Christian kids. You know, all of my books on my shelf, when I was growing up were about the Holocaust, slavery, and the Civil Rights movement. That's what I was interested in. I was really interested in oppression as a kid, but historical oppression. I think I saw similarities between being Jewish in a non-Jewish neighborhood and being Black in a non-Black neighborhood.

Miriam also drew connections between her understanding of herself as a gendered person and her commitment to anti-racism:

My gender is what got me interested in my race. If I hadn't gotten interested in women's studies, I would never have gotten interested in my race, even though it was always there as I said. I was always interested in some of that kind of stuff, but it just never had a name for me. I would never be passionate about being an ally to people, I'd never have the language for it, I'd never had the tools in my toolbox for it, so I think that that identity of being a woman makes me want to be a better ally in my White identity.

## Family Influences

Miriam described the community in which she grew up, acknowledging the conscientiousness of her parents in choosing schooling for her and her siblings:

My parents made a conscious choice to live in this suburb of [city] because my sister, brother, and I would get an education from [name] schools, which are very well-known in the [city] metro area. My mom tells me that she and my father had to decide which was more important: going to [name] Schools and experiencing less diversity or going to [city public schools] schools and experiencing much more diversity. They chose education and so my siblings and I grew up in “Whitesville.”

In addition to being conscientious about her education, Miriam also credited her family as having significant influence on her development. She described her parents as “hippies,” supportive of her involvement with feminism and social justice work:

Well, I’ve always been a feminist. My mom is a feminist, so she always raised my sister and I very much in a way that, we never, in my house we really never questioned things like sexual orientation. When I was younger, I never thought it was weird that two people of the same gender would want to be with each other, even though I’d been spoon-fed all the stupid Disney bullshit...my parents never raised us with biases like that or in any way, because they’re old hippies. So, like I said, some of their language is very dated and some of the thoughts are dated, but I think if they were my age today, they would be like me.

She continued describing her parents’ influence on her:

My parents have never pushed me to do anything. That’s something that I totally admire about my parents is that if I didn’t like something, they were like, “Ok,” so they’ve never been the type like you should really hang out with so and so, they’ve just been really open. When I was little, I did ballet and I hated it, I don’t know, they were like, “ok, you don’t have to do ballet anymore,” and that’s just kind of how they’ve been with everything, like if you’re interested in it, do it, but if you don’t like it, don’t do it, so I just kind of found that group on my own.

Additionally, Miriam had a younger sister who died when she was three months old and the experience influenced her relationship with her other sister:

When I was in seventh grade, I had a little sister who passed away. She was about three months old and that totally changed everything in my life and changed

my family and my family structure, and how my parents dealt with things and stuff, and that definitely is a big milestone.

She continued:

It devastated my mom and so I just learned how to be mom to my sister. My other sister is only like two years younger than me and so we're like best of friends and I think that that brought us closer because we were kind of like watching out for her. Because... there were days [my mom] couldn't get out of bed because she was so depressed, so it kind of taught me how to look out for my own.

Miriam learned to manage grief as a result of the loss her family experienced.

### **Educational Experiences**

Miriam's experiences as a teenage girl influenced her gendered identity. Similar to many other girls, Miriam struggled to make sense of her identity and focused a lot on what boys expected of her during middle school:

All of middle school...it was like all of a sudden, sixth, seventh grade, I was like, "I want a boyfriend, I need a boyfriend, I have to have a boyfriend," and started wearing makeup, and I was like, "what do boys like?" and "Should I dress in a certain way because that's what boys like?" And my life was very centered around boys and men and what they thought about me and trying to be attractive and pretty. It was very exhausting and very stifling. I felt like I couldn't be who I really was, and I felt like it's just sometimes hard to be a girl...I was told I was ugly all the time when I was in middle school and it was just devastating, like somebody told me I had a mustache when I was in middle school, and it was just like, "ah, why?" It was so like, "oh my gosh, that's the one thing I want to be. I don't care if I'm smart, I don't care if I'm talented, like I just don't want to be ugly."

As she moved into high school, Miriam grew critical of the sexist nature of her experiences in adolescence and developed strong relationships with other girls, contributing to an improved sense of self:

I've always been friends with what I call the "smart girls"...in middle school, I didn't have a super strong friend group, but in high school, I had a very, very strong core group and looking at it now, from what I know now, they suffered from very gendered type things, you know, like eating disorders and warped body image and things like that, but what I liked about them is that they all are smart

and they all wanted to flaunt that they were smart...The ones who I spent most of my time with, we didn't drink, we didn't do drugs, we didn't do anything, it was important for us to go to AP (advanced placement) classes and do well in class.

When Miriam went to college, she continued to engage in opportunities to reflect on her identities, specifically as they related to anti-racist feminism. Similar to other participants, Miriam's experiences in classrooms and with co-curricular activities continued to influence her developmental process.

### **Anti-Racist Development**

Miriam described the connections between her feminist and anti-racist identities, her process of learning to critically analyze situations, and examples of self-awareness. Miriam shared a shift in her thinking in high school as an initial step in her commitment to anti-racism:

When I was in high school, I started thinking more critically about [sexism], like, wait, there's something not right about, I think I started to notice the double standard, and so I think that's how I first started getting interested in women's stuff, and thinking in a feminist manner, because I just kind of got to the point where I was like, fuck it, I don't care. In high school, I was more punk rock, and just kind of anti- you know, I'm anti-this, if society's going to tell me to wear these things and act this way, I'm going to do the exact opposite. I'm going to be the opposite of what a girl or woman was supposed to be in high school and so, I think that that kind of helped me.

Once in college, Miriam engaged in women's studies classes to continue on her feminist journey. She described how women's studies required her to consider her privileged identities, another step in developing a commitment to anti-racism, "Throughout Women's Studies, I [thought] about my privileged identities more than I used to because I used to think about my identities that were oppressed, and now I think more about privilege."

Miriam shared several examples of self-awareness as a primary way she engaged in anti-racism. She started by discussing her understanding of social justice:

My whole thing on social justice is always educating myself and always spreading education so if I'm not thinking about it, thinking about my identities and how they intersect with each other, then I'm not doing my part as a feminist and advocate.

Very simply, she continued, "I think in my daily life I just try to be conscious of it in every interaction I have." She provided an example of engaging in self-awareness at a campus social justice retreat:

I feel like social justice is all about learning regardless, like at [social justice retreat], I didn't learn a ton there because I was really involved with social justice, and it was all very similar to what I had discussed in classes and the office and everything. But I learned a lot outside of the program, so talking to people there, and getting to know people, or even that I spent a lot of time with [co-workers] and talking to them I learned so much and it helped me to re-evaluate my views on social justice and so I think that social justice is about learning and taking what you're learning and applying it to making that vision of that world.

She also described her commitment to accountability in her self-awareness:

I want to be the best ally to people I can be – whatever that means, however they want me to be an ally, that's how I want to be an ally, so whatever that looks like, to me, that's kind of like what being white means. If they want me to be like, "hey White lady, go away, you're overstepping your bounds, you don't know what you're talking about, go away," that's fine by me.

Similar to Carolyn, Miriam also struggled with hyper-awareness related to her interactions. As an anti-racist ally, Miriam learned to be critical and self-aware, sometimes to the detriment of her conversations. In a later section, I explore the concept of hyper-awareness and how participants described experiences with thinking too much about their interactions, moving from their hearts to their heads, limiting the authentic interactions they had with people, specifically with People of Color.

### **Rhonda: “I hated being a girl.”**

Rhonda arrived at the coffee shop right on time, true to her laid-back and calm style. A recent college graduate, Rhonda worked as a case manager in a residential treatment facility with boys. A very even-keeled person, Rhonda never seemed to get too worked up about anything – bad or good. She knew when to speak up, recognized her role in ending oppression, and openly shared her mistakes and growth processes related to anti-racism. Rhonda’s humble, reflective nature made it easy to engage in meaningful conversations with her. She integrated anti-racist activism to her core and it reflects in her routine and daily activities. From conversations with friends and family to challenging systems of oppression in her workplace, Rhonda exemplified a consistent ally. Rhonda’s commitment to anti-racism emerged from a delicate blend of real-life experiences and academic experiences.

### **Social Identities and Family Influences**

Rhonda grew up in a rural part of a mountain west state, near a Native American reservation. As a child, Rhonda experienced and observed overt racism and sexism. When I asked Rhonda what experiences had influenced her development throughout her life, she immediately named her family’s religion:

They’re an extreme sector of Christianity and so growing up, my church is, their church is really small and being a woman in that church was an interesting experience because women are really devalued. It’s like common that men can beat their wives or their female children because god made man first and they interpret that as men can do whatever they want and they’re right. Even going into our church, like once we enter our church building, women aren’t allowed to talk and men and boys, whatever age can. Just watching my brothers’ rights over my rights and when my dad beat my mom and just how it was so accepted never really sat well with me.

She continued to discuss the role her father played in her development:

My dad, especially, is extremely racist. He didn't get a job one time and he blames it on the fact that the person he was competing for it was a Man of Color and so he's always had this hatred of Men of Color and how they don't work for, in his opinion, how they don't work for what they have and they're just getting it based on the fact that they're a minority. That never really sat well with me, and then, getting the education behind made me realize why, so I guess those two things really shaped it a lot.

Rhonda elaborated on the role of her parents and the connection to their religion:

Neither one of my parents even graduated from high school. In their opinion, everything you do in life should be to serve god, and that is your only purpose for living, and a woman especially, the way you do that is by marrying someone in our church and providing as many children to god as possible. Most of the women in our church have, I have aunts with 14-15 kids and they all drop out [from school] at 15-16 [years old].

She continued by describing some examples of the ways she was treated by her father because of her gender:

It was like some pretty outrageous things, I couldn't put my hair in braids because my dad thought that was trying to draw attention. I couldn't wear capris because that was showing too much skin and just like all these weird things that I disagreed with.

She wanted to be a boy because of how she was treated as a girl:

This is so silly, but we always, me and my sister, because we have three brothers and then my sister, and during the summertime, they would be able to go outside and play and we would have to stay inside and clean their rooms and do their laundry and cook with my mom and whatever, and they could just do whatever the hell they wanted for the entire day, and they would always go swimming and me and my sister loved swimming and just like be so jealous of that...and then I didn't blame it on the fact that the church was putting on us, because I thought of it as this is what girls do, this is the life that all girls have and this is the role boys have and I hate being a girl, you know?

Clearly Rhonda's experiences with sexism and oppression significantly influenced the person she grew to be. When discussing socially constructed identities, Rhonda articulated her most salient identity was her gender, followed by her ability because all of

her other identities are “dominant.” After Rhonda shared with me her experiences with her family and religion, I observed that since neither of her parents graduated from college, she might have a different class experience than some of her peers who had formally educated parents. She acknowledged the class differences, but was quick to recognize the privilege she received by earning her own college degree.

Rhonda shared how her identity as a White person was shaped by a history of assimilation in her family. She expressed sadness as a result of not knowing anything about the Native American culture of family:

I’m not completely White. My great-grandma is Native American, but I guess when they got married...my great-grandpa is White and I guess at that time and in that area it was still a really negative thing to be Native American and she had lighter skin, so they played it off like she was White and she completely got rid of it, and separated herself from it all. Now it’s this big shameful thing for my family that we’re part Native American, which makes me really sad because I think that’s one of the most beautiful cultures...if we could embrace that more and actually know something about it and learn from it...but I consider myself White because I get all the privileges from being White, you know?

Rhonda has four siblings, all to whom she remains close. During the data collection process, one of Rhonda’s younger brothers moved across the state live with her. She described her college experience in relationship her family. She recalled painful memories of not being allowed to interact with her younger brothers after she left for college:

I didn’t have any contact with my family because they just thought it was really selfish of me. It was really hard because I still had three little brothers who I love a lot. They’re like my babies and my dad wouldn’t even let me talk to them because he just thought I was such a bad influence on them because I was being so selfish and going to school and so that was hard. ...I still don’t talk to my dad ever. But my mom and dad got divorced so now my mom changed a lot and she’s out of the church and so now I have contact with my brothers and my sister again.

In addition to her immediate family, Rhonda also shared that she was not allowed to spend time with the other kids in her family, including cousins:

I have a huge family, and I love kids and I used to babysit all the time and now, the few times I do go back to my hometown, I'm not allowed to be alone with the kids because my family doesn't [agree with me].

Rhonda believed that her decision to attend college influenced her mother's decision to leave her father and the abusive relationship:

I think my mom was always submissive to my dad, and just really, well I don't know if she really accepted it, but she grew to really accept it and when I left ... I think that caused a lot of tension because my dad was very upset with me and I think my mom disagreed with why he was upset with me and so that started problems in their relationship. I wasn't allowed to go home for Christmas or anything, and I think my mom disagreed with it a lot and that caused a lot of tension and then they got divorced the end of my freshman year.

Additionally, Rhonda's decision to attend college influenced her older sister, who recently married a man outside of the church and moved to another state to attend college with him.

## **Education**

Rhonda credited her education as having a significant impact on her growth and development. She shared how a high school teacher gently encouraged her to consider college:

You kind of believe what your parents teach you to believe to some extent and when I was a sophomore in high school, I really like history, and I took an Advanced Placement history class and my teacher was phenomenal. She sat me down one day and was like, "I don't mean to dis on your family's religion say that it's not ok – it's just different, but if you wanted to go to school, you're really smart and you can do it and I'll help you do it," and so that kind of got me thinking, and I spent a lot of time with her doing scholarship applications and college applications because my family had no idea because they didn't agree with it.

I asked Rhonda if she would have gone to college if that teacher would not have intervened. She was hopeful, yet not optimistic:

I would like to think that I would, but I just watched, I had a lot of cousins who would say, “We’re leaving as soon as we can, this is not okay,” and looking back, they’re all married, in our church, with five or six kids at 23. And so I’d really like to think that I would, but I don’t know. I hope so.

In college, Rhonda was an ideal student, taking advantage of every educational opportunity available to her on campus. She regularly attended events on campus, including speakers and film screenings and continues to attend as many events as she can, taking her younger brother along whenever possible. Rhonda described the influence college had on her and her relationship with her family:

I guess since college and women’s studies, I’ve changed 100%. When I go home, people are like, “did you just correct me for using ‘fag’?” I grew up extremely conservative and religious. My family was very, lives in a bubble of White privilege that they have no idea exists pretty much and then coming to [college] and being in women’s studies completely change my perspective of myself and how I view the world, and I really appreciate that perspective because I think it’s needed and a really valuable perspective to have but I feel like now, really disconnected from everything because my family is like....they just don’t...I don’t relate anymore.

As a recent graduate, Rhonda incorporated much of what she learned in college with her job as a case manager. She describes her work:

I’m a counselor for adolescent boys between ages of 14 and 19 that are in jail and are now transitioning. It’s their last six months or so of their sentence, and so they can be comfortable transitioning to the community, so it’s not like straight lockdown to freedom. We teach them social skills and life skills.

Because of Rhonda’s commitment to anti-racism, she regularly takes the boys she works with to events in the community and on the college campus in the community where she lives. Rhonda minimized her influence on the boys’ development, but in our conversations she shared numerous examples of engaging the boys in conversations about oppression. Her humility is an indicator of the integration Rhonda has managed to

achieve related to anti-racism. I explore her experiences more in the section on “Everyday Activism.”

Rhonda further described the way her job related to her experiences growing up:

I think maybe with my job, because I was always so resentful of how my brothers were raised because even something simple, now it's kind of silly, but when you're growing up it's not silly, even something as simple as chores...Me and my sister had to make my brothers' beds in the morning because they were men. So I think now, working with that age of boys, because that was the age when I was so resentful of my brothers, and working with that age of boys now is a constant reminder of [it]. There's definitely times when they treat me differently because I'm a female and I'm one of the very few female staff there. They treat me very differently, and it always is just like a reminder, you know.

The connection Rhonda draws between her job and her childhood experiences exemplified the courage with which she lives her life and the pain she endured from her childhood experiences.

### **Anti-Racist Development**

Rhonda also articulated the thought process associated with many experiences that influenced her understanding of racism and White privilege. Many of Rhonda's understandings closely related to her experiences growing up in a small town in a rural community. Rhonda's reflective nature and ability to explore racism provides insight into her process of understanding her anti-racist identity. Rhonda connected her feminist and anti-racist identities:

I definitely think I have a lot of conversations around race, but I don't think I have ever labeled myself [an anti-racist]....feminism, to me, encompasses a lot of areas of social justice, and so, I feel like anything I do around race I do because I consider myself a feminist vs. anti-racist.

Further, she clearly connected her understanding of White privilege to her own personal experiences with sexism:

I guess how I got there was just being on the opposite end of it so much, and then when I realized, I always felt like, kind of like a victim my whole life because of my church and everything and then taking Women's Studies and realizing the privilege I also had that I never like really had to recognize, like those two things probably influenced it the most.

Rhonda recognized that being an anti-racist activist is an on-going process. In a written reflection about her anti-racist identity development, she said, "I realized there is still so much I don't understand and still ways in which I don't recognize or take accountability for my White privilege." Her awareness of the on-going process of becoming an anti-racist was prompted by her relationship with her friends in the Latina sorority of which she was a part. As described later, her relationships with friends of color significantly influenced her ability to understand her White racial identity and her role as an anti-racist White ally.

In reflecting on her childhood, Rhonda recalled two specific instances where her personal values conflicted with those of the people around her, yet she did not have the language to articulate what she felt. The first example of conflict took place within her family:

I remember my dad applying for a job when I was young and a Person of Color, I don't remember what race they were, getting it instead of him and which I'm like, I have no idea what the circumstances were or what the qualifications of that person were, but they probably a lot higher than my dad's because my dad dropped out of school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, so you don't have to do a lot to beat that, but my dad perceived it as because they're filling a quota or whatever and so, I remember that being like one of my first [struggles] with race.

Additionally, Rhonda remembered instances of racism in her workplace when she was in high school. She worked at a buffet restaurant near a Native American reservation and recalls discussions among her co-workers related to Native American people. She

noted that she did not feel comfortable with the discussion, yet at the time, could not articulate why:

And thinking back on it, no one tipped well, everyone was dirty, everyone was rude, but of course when the Native Americans did it, we singled that out. And I remember my boss, so terrible, but once a table would leave, they would come in, which others would too, so it's sad we only noticed that, but they'd leave a big mess and they would leave, my boss initiated the song, you know that song off *Pocahontas* where she's like, "savages, savages..." My boss would start singing that at the end of the night as we were cleaning, at the end of the night when we were cleaning up near the first of the month.

Rhonda recalled the complexity of the situation, noting contradictions in her boss's behavior:

I remember everyone I worked with was White, and I remember when people, they would always say that the Native American were lazy and didn't want jobs because we were paying for them, but I remember so many of them coming in to get jobs and of course if my boss is singing that song, he's not going to hire one of them, so of course, they can't get jobs hardly because of that mentality so it was just so cyclical.

Later, when Rhonda was in college, she developed the language to articulate the values associated with the negative feelings she felt as a result of this overt racism.

Rhonda further described instances in college where she noted White privilege. She named a classroom experience as part of her gaining awareness of her own White privilege:

I don't know if this is because of the numbers, but there's always less, People of Color, Women of Color, specifically, in women's studies, but it kind of seems like a pattern that White women or White people in general just talk more and generally take up more space.

She also recalled a time in college where she did not consider her White privilege when deciding to join a multicultural sorority with primarily Latina membership:

It was my two Latina friends who were like, "do it with us, do it with us," and I never for a second considered, this is place for this group of people to feel comfortable. And it is because of White people that they need this space, and

here I am a White person coming into this space, and just not even questioning if I was ok to do that.

This experience closely related to her current thought process about ways to continue engaging in anti-racist activism. As a result of Rhonda's reflective nature, she questions her usefulness in "helping" where she may not be needed:

I have a lot of kids who are in gangs, hardcore into gangs and I think gangs are the most fascinating, and I really want to work with gangs now, and I've been thinking about that a lot. The majority of kids in gangs are kids of color, and the reason the gangs were formed in the first place were because of White people, and so me as a White person coming in to try to fix part of that, makes me question it a lot. But then at the same time, being White I could use that a lot to help them more, I don't know. To help navigate the criminal justice system, the systems that are based around being White, you know what I mean?

Rhonda's reflective nature influenced her commitment to anti-racism. Her thought processes exemplified the idea that anti-racist identity is an on-going process. She will not "achieve" anti-racist status, rather she engaged in anti-racism through on-going discussions and self-awareness.

Each participant described her own unique experiences and identities leading to her commitment to anti-racist feminism. While participants each shared their thought processes and various salient identities, several themes rang true throughout the stories. Each participant named ways her family impacted and her education influenced her understanding of her identities, which will both be explored in more detail in Chapter V. Additionally, four participants clearly articulated the connection between anti-racism and feminism from their perspectives. Finally, each participant described anti-racist feminism as a process with self-awareness as an essential component. In the next chapter, I explore themes related to participants' understanding of their White racial

identity, influences on their identity development processes, and experiences of engaging in anti-racist activism.

### **Chapter Summary**

Profiles of participants in this study provide context for exploring the themes generated from the data collection process. Each participant shared stories of her past and current experiences related to her identities as an anti-racist White feminist activist. Childhood, school, and college experiences influenced their identity development. Participants also described salient experiences in their families introducing them to the concepts of feminism and social justice. Finally, each participant shared her own definitions of anti-racism and feminism.

Alice, the daughter of divorced parents, grew up in a mid-sized mountain town and discovered her voice among various communities of strong women. As a college student, she spent her time outside of classes planning the annual Take Back the Night March and working. Alice says if she could say her major was “activism,” she would. In addition to her race and gender, other salient identities included identifying as queer, having a learning disability, and being an able-bodied yoga instructor.

Another activist who discovered her voice among communities of strong women was Carolyn, whose grandmother and mother significantly influenced her feminist identity development. In addition to identifying as White and woman, Carolyn names her sexual orientation, social class, and nationality as salient identities. Carolyn recognizes her privilege as a U.S. citizen and names her social class as educated. Preferring to identify on a continuum of sexual orientation, she identifies as pansexual.

Georgia, a White Jewish woman, feels supported by her immediate and extended family in her social justice work. She articulates that her family members subscribe to social justice values as a result of their Jewish identity. From a family of educators, Georgia values education and developed a significant portion of her anti-racist White feminist identity through college classroom experiences, specifically in ethnic studies classes.

Working in a local toy store provides Jane an opportunity to employ the anti-racist feminist values she discovered in college. In addition to identifying as White and woman, Jane's heterosexual identity and middle-class status stand out to her as salient. Jane expressed significant emotion related to her journey as an anti-racist White feminist, crying at various points in the interview process. Jane described journey as "hard work," recognizing the importance of taking her privilege seriously and working to address racism whenever she could.

Miriam, another woman who also identified as Jewish, talked about the support she received from her parents, who she called "hippies." College, including classroom and co-curricular activities, shaped Miriam's understanding as an anti-racist feminist activist. The introduction to women's studies course Miriam enrolled in as a first-year student encouraged her to explore previous experiences she had related to sexism and the privilege she received based on her race.

Growing up in a community with a large Native American reservation shaped Rhonda's understanding of her own identity. Even though her great-grandmother was Native American, Rhonda identified as White because her light-skinned great-grandmother married a White man and assimilated to mainstream White culture, resulting

in family members who also identify as White. Rhonda's father shaped her understanding of both her gender and her race through oppressive practices he inherited from a church. Recalling memories of interpersonal violence and overt racism, Rhonda's father's behavior as propelled her to activism.

Each participant shared a powerful and unique story, contributing to the depth of the findings in this study. Because the women shared openly and honestly about their challenges and struggles, other White anti-racist activists, and those striving to support them, will be better equipped to manage similar challenges. The next chapter provides an overview of the themes that emerged from the data collection process.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **THEMES**

In the previous chapter, I explored participants' individual and unique identities and experiences to provide a context for the themes related to their collective experiences. In this chapter, I explore the themes related to the women's White racial identity development process, the influences on their identity development, and their experiences engaging in anti-racist feminism. While several commonalities stand out among the activists' experiences and stories, there are some anomalies throughout the text. In each section, I note areas where participants agree on a common idea or theme and areas in which one or more participants provides a unique or different perspective.

#### **White Racial Identity Development Processes**

Participants identified salient influences on their racial identities and shared poignant stories related to their struggle to understand their racial identity. Similar to their experiences with anti-racism, the women in this study identified their racial identity development as an on-going process, recognizing that they would never completely understand their White privilege, nor would they ever completely understand all of the ways they have been socialized as a White person. Georgia summarized this:

My understanding of whiteness is constantly evolving because every time I think I have a decent grasp on how privilege informs my worldview, I am presented with a new story or experience that reveals another degree of ignorance on my part.

Carolyn's process of exploring and understanding her White identity, provided an overview of many of the components other participants also described in their understanding of White identity:

It used to not mean anything as it was the norm...and I think after I spent more time thinking about it, it turned into...being kind of ashamed of it almost because I recognize what shitty awful things White people have done...so I think there was a time where I was really ashamed of it...and then I think it kind of transitioned more into I can't change that and it is who I am so I have to make the best of it I guess. [I have to] work towards changing what White means for me or what White means for other people and I don't really know how to do that. I think white now still signifies power and it still signifies privilege but it also signifies being able to use power and privilege to make change.

After reviewing each of the women's stories, four themes emerged as part of the activists' experiences in understanding their White racial identity. While not necessarily linear in nature, participants each described experiences related to feeling anger and resisting their White racial identity and the privilege associated with it, shame and guilt associated with being White, and the process of moving through guilt and shame to create their understanding and definition of their racial identities. Finally, the women addressed the importance of finding pride in their racial identities, though they did not identify ways in which they did this in their lives. In this section, I describe the feminists' experiences related to their White racial identity development.

### **Anger and Resistance**

Each participant described feeling resistance and anger related to identifying and recognizing White privilege. Some women expressed feelings of resistance and anger in women's studies classes, while others described distancing themselves from their White identity by focusing instead on their target identities and working to indicate they are "different from those White people," as Carolyn shared.

As discussed in the section, “Influences on Identity Development,” women’s studies and ethnic studies classes had a significant influence on participants’ identity development. Two women clearly described experiences in women’s studies classrooms where they felt anger when the concept of White privilege was first introduced. Rhonda shared her experience in an introduction to women’s studies class, “I really hated that class because, oh god, it’s so embarrassing now, but it was reverse racism, like I was being told that I have these experiences, and now I’m being told that I’m the privileged one and that’s crap.” Alice similarly explained her resistance stemming from her experience in an introduction to women’s studies class, seeing feminism and anti-racism as competing for attention from activists, rather than being movements that could interact and benefit from each other:

I’ll admit, when I first got involved I didn’t fully understand intersectionality and I wasn’t open to it. I thought, “what are we actually talking about here? Are we talking about feminism? Are we talking about, you know, what are we getting to?” And so there was part of me that was very resistant I would say even for the first like two years. Very resistant to wanting to acknowledge and wanting to talk about it, and in classes of all White people, it can kind of wash out, but it wasn’t ignored, and I wasn’t allowed to ignore it.

Further Alice felt “annoyed” when people asked her to think about her privileged identities in relation to her subordinated identities:

I would just get really annoyed with, well, if they’re just going to complain about it, why should I read it? And it’s just so classic, just not willing to acknowledge it and not willing to deal with it and wanting to only read about my own oppression and only wanting to learn about my own problems. It became very clear that I had a lot of work to do.

Alice’s description highlights how she sees her process as “classic,” implying she believes many White feminists have a similar experience in learning to understand and acknowledge White privilege.

**Distancing from whiteness.** Other participants recalled instances of distancing themselves from their White privilege by focusing on their target or subordinated identities. Both Miriam and Georgia shared experiences of focusing on their Jewish identity as an ethnic identity to distance themselves from White privilege. Georgia recalled her experience:

I feel like my Jewish identity and my White identity go hand in hand, especially, it's been really hard for me to work through this conflation that I've had for as long as I can remember of White and Christian, and so for a long time, I sort of struggled with accepting a White identity because I'm not a Christian, and so for a very, very long period of my life, I used different language around it. I would either say, no, I'm not White, I'm Jewish, or I would say, "Jewish is my ethnic identity," and did a lot to reject the White identity.

Miriam recounted a similar experience of focusing on her identity as a Jewish woman to distance herself from White privilege:

This Black woman read this poem, and it was about slavery and it was really, really moving. At the end, I forget what she said, but it was something, and she looked, there were two White kids in the room and two Black kids and she looked at the White kids and was like really accusing and it was about slavery, and I was like, "what? I'm Jewish. My family didn't own any slaves....We were kicked out of Europe because they hate Jews there." I'm still White, so my race still reaps the benefits of slavery even though we weren't...it's very conflicting because two different sides of things: a lot of the world hates Jews but my race still reaps the benefits of being White.

The complexity of the history of Jews in the United States contributes to understanding Miriam and Georgia's experiences with using their marginalized Jewish identity to distance themselves from their White privilege.

Georgia elaborated on Alice's description of focusing on her "own oppression" by sharing the way she often defaulted to her gender identity when she felt defensive about her White privilege:

For a long time, and still, I tend to default and say, well, "my experience as a woman," versus talking about my privilege as a White person and since I have

privilege in my racial identity, it's been really easy in conversation for me to separate the two and talk about them as if they're separate identities even though I know that they're not.

The feminists' experiences with anger and resistance matches the descriptions of white racial identity development and understanding of White privilege as depicted in much of the literature about whiteness (e.g., Kendall, 2006; Wise, 2005). Participants in this study uniquely illustrate their experiences related to understanding White privilege in the context of feminism, supporting the notion of exploring privilege in the context of intersecting identities. Closely related to anger and resistance, the activists also named feelings of guilt and shame as part of their process of understanding White privilege and their White racial identities.

### **Shame and Guilt of White Racial Identity**

Some of the women did not articulate experiences with anger and resistance; however, they did describe experiences with shame and guilt associated with their white identities. Shame and guilt manifested itself in two major ways among the women of this study. Some participants learned to associate White as bad from a very young age; other participants participated in cultural appropriation, attempting to relive themselves of White guilt by taking on characteristics of cultures other than their own.

**Whiteness as “bad.”** Participants portrayed numerous ways they understood whiteness as a negative or bad thing. Georgia articulated two specific examples of ways she understood her parents' actions reifying whiteness as negative. The first experience related to her experience growing up as a Jewish child and the second experience related to her parents choices around her schooling. She described the first experience:

One of the earliest memories I have was really important to my conflation of White and Christian. I found a crucifix necklace on the playground and that night

I was in a play, a first grade play, and I wore the necklace throughout the entire play. At the end of the night, I expected that my mom was going to be like, “Oh you were so great and it was so good.” and she had just been sitting there the entire time fixated on the fact that her little Jewish daughter was wearing a cross and she made me take it off and yelled at me and told me that is not who we are. And I had already understood Christian and White as pretty tied together and so I really started thinking about White as bad, I think, from there on out, to the degree that I didn’t want White dolls.

Additionally, Georgia shared a story of hearing her parents say that they did not send her to their neighborhood school because “it was too White,” and to her six year-old mind, that resulted in interpreting “whiteness as bad.” If her parents did not want her attending a school because it was “too White,” that must mean whiteness is bad.

Alice felt shame associated with her White identity as a result of being “called out” because the campus feminist organization, of which she was the president, was “too White.”

I was called out one time about feminist alliance being mainly White women. And that was probably one of the very first times that I was like really ashamed of that identity, being a White woman, being a White feminist, you know, in some of our women’s studies classes, we’ve addressed the fact that White women have always led the marches, have always been the ring leaders, and so I kind of dealt with that a little bit.

Additionally, Carolyn often found herself assuming negative stereotypes related to race happen as a result of White people’s racism. She conflated whiteness with racism, “I’ll never know what the situation is, but I just assume that it was White people being unreasonable and irrational or being racist...or just assuming that everything people do is because they’re White.” While the other women did not portray such intentional experiences conflating race and racism, they described instances of distancing themselves from White people or whiteness because of the connection between whiteness with racism.

**Cultural appropriation.** Another way the activists dealt with shame and guilt associated with whiteness was by appropriating other people's cultures. Three participants noted experiences of appropriating other people's cultures as a way to manage the guilt they felt as a result of being White. Jane captured this feeling of guilt when she described how she clung on to the culture of her cousins who were Mexican. Her White aunt lived in Mexico for several years and married a Mexican man. Jane recalled how she felt when she visited Mexico with her Mexican cousins:

I always thought I would have this strong connection with Mexico and I just didn't at all, and I speak very, very little Spanish so there was that cultural barrier and I just experienced some culture shock that I wasn't expecting and I think that threw me off even more and I just realized that it really cleared up for me that you can appreciate a culture but it's really different to appreciate and incorporate tiny bits of it into your life versus feeling like it's part of you when it's not...I think that I had a little bit of my own cultural appropriation going on there. I was just really clinging to that part of my family even though it's not my blood culture and it made me feel better about being White, you know?

Jane's experience highlighted a turning point in her understanding of her White identity. She attempted to cling to a culture that was not her own, expecting it to help her manage her feelings of guilt associated with White privilege. Her experience in Mexico helped her understand she might be able to appreciate a culture, yet it still would not be part of her own identity.

Georgia described experiences of picking up language and intonation of some of her friends of color and only dating Men of Color, distancing herself from White people wherever possible. She articulated the feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with her White identity. She wanted to distance herself from other White people as a result of one of her classmates' overt racism toward Latino people, "in that moment I

was... thrown back into the whole, 'I cannot be White. I am not like these people. This cannot be my legacy that I came from and my culture.'”

At the request of her friends, Rhonda joined a Latina sorority where she was regularly mistaken for Latina rather than White. While she did not articulate this experience as a form of cultural appropriation, she did not correct people when they assumed she was Latina and described how she felt like a “fly on the wall,” which eventually led her to better understand her peers’ experiences with racism.

As participants explored experiences with guilt and shame, they also recognized the importance of developing their cultural identity. Whether they learned to associate whiteness as bad or tried to distance themselves from whiteness by appropriating other cultures, participants articulated the importance of working through guilt and shame to create their understanding and version of whiteness in which they could take pride. In the next section, I share the activists’ experiences with creating their version of whiteness.

### **“Creating my Own Version of Whiteness”**

The women described processes related to re-creating their version of whiteness and their White racial identity. Specifically, the feminists discussed situations in which they came to recognize the importance of recognizing their identity as a White person and the privilege associated with their whiteness. They described instances of working to become an ally and to use their White privilege for good, rather than to ignore it or dwell in the shame and guilt associated with it. Participants also worked to decipher the positive or neutral attributes associated with whiteness, rather than conflating it with racism and negative attributes related to racism.

Rhonda came to understand whiteness as a part of her identity, rather than something that she associated with being “bad.”

[I learned] White people aren’t bad, that’s just how I interpreted it, and then, I had passion in the opposite direction. As I just sat through that class and I started realizing through the readings and the discussions what really was being said about White privilege that I really wasn’t a bad person for being White, it was just I had unearned privileges and responsibility that came along with those. That just fueled everything I believed in and...allowed me to describe it and make an identity out of it.

Georgia and Jane also recognized White does not always mean “bad.” Jane found comfort with whiteness, “I feel like I’m just starting to be comfortable again with my whiteness, not all the bad stuff that comes with whiteness, but the fact that I’m really White and I wear White clothes and I have White mannerisms.”

Georgia highlighted the concept of intersectionality by noting the importance of recognizing the both/and of her identities as both White and Jewish:

It’s really only been probably within the last three years that I’ve kind of come to terms with the fact that I absolutely benefit from White privilege and that it’s not always a bad thing to be White and so I can accept that and be Jewish at the same time.

In addition to finding ways to feel comfortable with their White identity, participants also recognized the importance of using their White privilege to act as an ally. Rhonda and Georgia connected their role as allies directly to the process of moving through the guilt they associated with White privilege. Rhonda eloquently shared:

That’s where the place of feeling guilt about White privilege comes in versus feeling responsibility for the White privilege...I feel like because of being White, you might be able to do, sadly, a lot more than a Woman of Color or another Person of Color because of your White identity. I think in some ways you can take advantage of that privilege and use it to their benefit which is what I think we should do with our privilege, and at the same time, just really asking what they need versus what I think they need.

In the example above, Rhonda articulated the importance of accountability in her role as an ally. Georgia also worked through understanding her role as an ally and its connection to guilt:

I think I had gotten to a point in my understanding of privilege where I'm like, ok it's a social and systemic thing that I can't shed, I can't get rid of my privilege ever, so the only thing I can do is try and embrace it and recognize it and use it for other people's benefit, and so...even though there are moments where I still feel really guilty and still really just wish I could be like, "oh, I know all about it," and be done with it, for the most part, it's a work in progress to try and actually utilize my privilege instead of just having it and feeling bad about it.

Georgia further elaborated on the responsibility associated with White privilege to act as an ally, especially in all White spaces, "among other White people I often step into an ally role—viewing it as my duty to call out White people in ostensibly White spaces."

She continued:

At this point all I feel I can do is use the experiences I have had to inform my understanding of racism, try to teach other White people about racism and anti-racism, understand that I have privilege I am often unaware of and stay open to and expect new experiences that will be undoubtedly humbling, embarrassing, and catalytic.

Working toward a personal understanding of White racial identity and the role of White allies proved challenging for the feminists in this study. In addition to working to create their version of whiteness, the women also noted the importance of finding pride in their racial identity. While each participant articulated ways they made peace with their White identity, no participants described ways they actually manifested pride in their race.

### **Pride in White Racial Identity**

The women each named the importance of finding pride in their racial identity, recognizing the purpose of social justice work is to embrace all of their identities and

understand how their multiple identities influence them and the people around them. Each participant strove to have pride in her White identity, yet did not know how to achieve this state of pride without marginalizing People of Color. Georgia described the sentiment present among participants, “I am still struggling to develop a real sense of pride in my racial identity but I am at least comfortable with identifying myself as White now.”

Activists’ stories illuminated their processes of understanding their White identity. More specifically, participants described experiences of considering White to be the norm, then moving through experiences of anger and resistance related to White privilege, shame and guilt associated with whiteness, finally moving into redefining White racial identity for themselves, striving to have pride in their racial identity. Closely related to the women’s understandings of their anti-racist, feminist, and White identities are the influences on those identities. In the next section, the feminists’ stories highlight salient experiences that influenced their understanding of their anti-racist White feminist identities.

### **Influences on Identities**

Participants recounted many experiences that influenced their understanding of their anti-racist, White, and feminist identities. The women named salient experiences that significantly influenced their growth and development, specifically related to developing a commitment to anti-racist feminism. Sexual violence, activism and involvement, women’s studies and ethnic studies classes, relationships with People of Color, and family members influenced participants’ development as anti-racist White feminists.

## Sexual Violence

Sadly, all but one woman recalled salient experiences with sexual violence, directly leading them to a commitment to activism. Some participants described direct experiences surviving sexual violence while others noted the salience of a close friend or family member's experience with sexual violence.

Carolyn, Miriam, and Rhonda described their experiences with sexual violence and how it influenced their commitment to feminist activism. Miriam was assaulted in high school and said, "It definitely changed my view about things, just about people and how the world works and such." Carolyn identified the influence of her experience with sexual assault when she was on an Alternative Spring Break trip to Juarez, Mexico. The purpose of the trip was to better understand the violence occurring on the border between Mexico and the United States. Hundreds of Mexican women are killed in Juarez every year yet many of the murders remain unsolved (Fregoso, 2006). Carolyn's experience as a survivor of sexual violence became more salient for her while she was on the trip:

It was scary, and not just because it's a different culture, but because worldwide, we don't treat people that well and then reflecting back on my culture that people get treated like this there and we are willing to drive down there and go learn about it but we don't want to stay on campus and learn about sexual assault or how people are torn apart by their significant others here, so I think subconsciously, that played a part in it too and was an important piece of me kind of think of what sexual assault is and how being a survivor plays into it.

Rhonda described the influence that her father's abuse toward her mother and her own experience with an abusive boyfriend in high school had on her. "My dad abused and raped my mom for years, and it was open. Everyone knew and it was just completely ok and it just never really ok with me and I always spoke up about it which is not ok

either.” She also explained how her family did not intervene when she was in an abusive relationship in high school:

He hit me, he was a terrible, terrible person and my family knew and it was okay because he was in the church, and his family was in the church. The pattern is in our church once you find the person that you might marry, who is obviously going to be in the church, you kind of stop school and that becomes your focus and you start having kids and everything. It only lasted a couple months because I couldn’t handle it, but my family was so accepting of it, and it just really opened my eyes, like what the hell? In the church this is ok because...it would always be a different excuse because of that so that definitely made me...I had seen my dad do it to my mom my whole life but it was different when it was happening to me.

Jane’s mother and a close friend in high school experience sexual violence, influencing Jane’s understanding of sexism and violence. She attributed both experiences as influencing her commitment to activism. She described the experience she had in talking with her mother about sexual violence:

I had a really intense conversation with my mom and learned that she had dated women when she was in college and she had also been (started crying), she had also been gang raped when she was in college and she still hadn’t talked to anyone about it, which is ok, but I think it affected her in a major, major way.

Additionally, Jane learned about the dynamics of race and sexual violence through the experience of a friend in high school:

I had a friend that said that someone had raped her. She was an African American woman and the man that she said had raped her was a White man who’s dating someone else who had been like a steady and nobody believed her and that was pretty messed up and I actually had a teacher – a White male teacher – pull me aside at one point and tell me that I shouldn’t believe her that she was probably doing to get attention.

Jane talked about how this shaped her understanding of White privilege and how she recalled that no one believed the Black woman and the people at the school rallied around the White man from a “good family.” Jane knew at the time this was not right, but did

not have the language or support to challenge people in authority positions. She elaborated on how this influenced her commitment to involvement with feminism:

It just seemed like the right thing to do, I guess. I had known enough people at that point who had been assaulted and it was kind of ridiculous and I wanted to do something where I was making a difference.

Working to address sexual violence was an important piece of Rhonda's identity and activism:

Sexual assault, because of my dad, and I just think it's one of the only problems in society that the victim is blamed. I work with [local rape crisis agency] and just the other day I had the most outrageous experience with an officer and I was just like, in no other crime would the victim be blamed and victimized further and so I guess that piece really does it.

A major part of Alice's feminist identity revolved around her experience as a leader in the campus feminist organization that planned the annual *Take Back the Night* March. She sometimes felt as though she was ready to move on from talking about sexual violence, yet she also knew the importance of her work as a feminist leader:

Sometimes I think I'm sick and tired of talking about sexual violence because it's so hard to think about, but then yesterday, I did another presentation about Take Back the Night, about a funding thing that we got, and suddenly I found myself up there and I was on fire, and I realized well, this is obviously something I've done a lot of research on, I've done a lot of thinking about, I've done a lot of talking about and it makes so much sense as to why sexual violence can be such an important topic.

Experiences of sexual violence influenced the women in significant ways, both directly and indirectly. Three women in the study survived sexual violence in a very personal nature, while two additional women experienced the secondary effects of sexual violence. Experiences with and an understanding of the significance of sexual violence in women's lives directly resulted in a commitment to activism and involvement related

to feminism and anti-racism, which also influenced participants' understandings of their anti-racist feminist identities.

### **Activism and Involvement**

In addition to the ways identities and sexual violence influenced the activists' understanding of their identities, experiences with activism and involvement also shaped their commitment to anti-racism and feminism. The women discussed participating in activist events, volunteering in community organizations, and serving in leadership roles as influential in their understanding of their identities. For participants, activism and involvement started in high school and further developed as they continued through college.

**Early experiences.** Carolyn and her family were active in the pro-choice movement, which influenced Carolyn's identity as an activist. Attending the March for Women's Lives as a high school student with her mom, aunt, cousin, and grandmother was a transformational experience for Carolyn:

Going to the March for Women's Lives in 2004...was ...a turning point in having emotions about things, or feeling like there were important things going on...going to an event where there were so many people who felt that way about something that seemed important to me was a huge moment and realization that things are going on and things aren't right, people are being mistreated, there's not attention being paid to where it should be.

Additionally, volunteering at Planned Parenthood influenced Carolyn's understanding of feminism:

Working at Planned Parenthood made it obviously huge that it's important that everyone have rights and even if I think of the choice issue differently than I used to, I still see how working in that, and volunteering with those people and talking with people and hearing what they have to say was super shaping for how I thought about feminism or women's rights or people's rights.

Alice, Miriam, and Georgia engaged in leadership and involvement in high school that influenced their understanding of themselves. Alice learned the importance of understanding inclusivity through leadership training provided in high school:

I had some major leadership roles in high school and I started understanding power and privilege through that and we did a lot of trainings and that kind of stuff and so as class president, every year and student body president my senior year, and just learning how to work with people became such a huge part of my life and just like, how do I get people to do things? How do I motivate people? Well, you treat them like human beings. How do you do that? You know, especially when you have feuds with people, especially when you're annoyed with somebody? And I think that those leadership skills were probably where it all kind of started for me.

Miriam was involved with the diversity task force at her high school which allowed her to explore her interest in “diversity and spreading awareness about different issues.” Georgia was involved in the youth advisory board to the city council in her hometown. The role of the board included distributing funds for youth programming in the city and she recalled, “I found myself fighting harder for organizations that targeted People of Color; in fact, I often resented organizations that didn't emphasize diversity or specifically serve Youth of Color.”

**College experiences.** Several women noted leadership and involvement experiences in college as influential in their understanding of themselves. Both Miriam and Carolyn named serving as a resident assistant and working in the women's center as influential in their understanding of power and privilege. Miriam shared:

I think for me being a resident assistant (RA) changed a lot. The position, I could give or take, I had lots of problems with it, but had I not done that, I wouldn't have known about women's studies. I remember it so clearly...it was during RA training the first year I was an RA. You and [another staff member] came in and talked about sexual assault awareness and you mentioned that there was a women's studies certificate and classes you can take. I was like, “there's classes?” I've always been interested, I've always called myself a feminist, ever since I was in high school, so I was like, “Oh, wow, I can actually study that?”

and after taking your class and kind of just going from there, that was the jumping off point. Working at [women's center] now, and meeting everyone there, everyone in that office because it's helped shape who I am today and I've learned so much from working there. I've learned a lot just from everywhere I've been on campus, and all the people I've met, so, yeah, I'd say, being an RA, going to [college], every decision I've made has shaped me into who I am now.

Carolyn also named her experience with an Alternative Spring Break trip as one of the most transformational experiences of her college career:

I think before I went with kind of an idea of what community service was and going helping people and making change that way and I came back thinking that that idea was the worst idea that anyone had ever come up with just because my culture was really different than theirs and my idea of what is good and what is acceptable and what is important was not the same.

While activism and involvement meant something different to each participant in the study, both significantly impacted the activists' understanding of their identities. In addition to the learning that happened through informal involvement outside the classroom, the feminists also described salient learning experiences in classroom settings. In the next section, I describe participants' experiences in women's studies and ethnic studies classes that influenced their identity development.

### **Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies**

In addition to campus involvement, the feminists also named their experiences in classrooms – specifically ethnic studies and women's studies – as transformational in understanding their identities. The women discussed discovering language to articulate some of the feelings they had about privilege and oppression, being exposed to new ideas and perspectives, and having faculty challenge them to consider their privilege. The activists share their experiences in women's studies and ethnic studies classrooms as transformational.

Miriam gained language for what she noticed about sexism through her women's studies classes, "I feel like I didn't have the right language, like I didn't have the right tools in high school and going away to college kind of gave me the vocabulary and the tools for what I already felt." Miriam also shared she better understood her privilege as a result of her experience in the Introduction to Women's Studies course she took, "I think about privilege that other people have, but I also think of my own privilege, so if I hadn't taken [introduction to women's studies], I wouldn't be as aware and conscious of the way I move in the world."

College helped Georgia understand terms and ideas she had considered before but did not have the opportunity to explore in great depth:

Deconstructing the word ally really helped a lot too and learning, just sort of flipping the generally accepted understanding of a lot of words like empowerment. I very much, coming into college, had an understanding of empowerment as something that one individual can provide for another individual and that's changed. Now I very much see empowerment as something that can only come through somebody claiming it for themselves. And all I can do with my privilege is try and say, "What can I do to help?" and assume a position of being a worker bee. A lot of it was ethnic studies classes that exposed me to those ideas in the first place, and then it was easy to apply it to women's studies.

Reading and formal education informed Jane's identity as an anti-racist feminist. From being exposed to new ideas to being challenged by faculty related to her White privilege, she shared several examples of classroom experiences relevant to her identity as an anti-racist White feminist. As described previously, Jane started college right after high school, soon discovering it was not a good fit for her, so she took some time away from college to do some soul searching. She described her experience coming back to college after taking one full year off:

I knew I had to find something that was interesting enough for me to sit through all of my classes, to be honest, that's how I found and got interested in the

women's studies classes, and then from there it just kind of opened up, and that's how I got into ethnic studies classes too.

Jane majored in ethnic studies, and in a written reflection she articulated what she learned from her experience in ethnic studies:

Learning about the importance of space, trying not to talk too much, quickly becoming uncomfortable with being White, and then trying to deal with that. The enormous amount of information about groups of people and their social struggles and cultures that I received really pushed my understanding of whiteness.

She elaborated on her experience, sharing what made the courses so influential for her:

You can tell when someone's being mistreated, you can tell when a situation is inappropriate between different kinds of people, or, I mean you just know when something isn't cool, but when you have quality academics on the history and the personal narratives, I think personal narratives have been a huge part of it for me actually, to really get an understanding of what those other people have been like, and what it's like to be someone else. I mean, you can never know what it's like to be someone else, but you can really gain an understanding of what other people go through and how it relates to you and the whiteness thing, and yeah, it was like, I had all these ideas, and reading bell hooks for me, it was like all of that was allowing me to apply and process and understand things that I kind of knew but didn't have any words for.

Further, Jane recalled a particularly salient interaction with an ethnic studies faculty member who "called her out" about her White privilege. Jane felt pain and hurt in the moment, yet recognized the importance of the interaction in her own development:

I was just really struggling in her class, but it was totally, we've read about it a thousand times now that I got my degree in ethnic studies. I went into her classroom freaking out about being a White woman and not understanding, what do you mean the feminist movement is racist? And she called me out on my shit and it took me literally, probably a whole year, at least a year to be comfortable with the interaction that we had, and to totally process the whole thing, from being angry and hurt to coming out on the other side and really recognizing that I had some shit I needed to deal with. And realizing how inappropriate it was for me to go and talk to her about it, so that was huge.

Georgia's classroom experiences were transformational in her educational career.

She explained her exposure to women's studies through ethnic studies:

Because my mother was so outspoken about her feminist identity, I, for as long as I can remember, have identified as a feminist, even though I didn't necessarily understand the history or academic history behind it. But for some reason, I think I have some internalized crap going on, I really was not interested in pursuing the women's studies program until I started taking ethnic studies classes and we started talking about gender as a racialized issue and a racialized identity and so it took that sort of around the way step of coming to accepting or developing a legitimate interest in the academic side of feminism.

In another interview, she elaborated on this idea:

Studying feminism got really interesting to me once we started talking about intersectionality and once we started talking about stories that I hadn't heard or hadn't considered. It was interesting to me, but not super engaging to talk about first wave feminism, and but then, when we started talking about sterilization abuses and the differences between reproductive justice and pro-choice, that really got me interested because it challenged my own understanding of the woodwork.

In one of her written reflections, Georgia described classroom moments as “epiphanies” where she “understood the world in a brand new way.” Professors influenced her by “flipping her world upside down.”

I spent one semester in class with two professors who, each in their way, traced what seemed like all the world's violence to capitalism. Viewing capitalism as the root cause of violence (against women, people of color, queer people, disabled people, poor people, etc.) changed how I see everything—literally, everything. Sometimes it just takes one or two people flipping your world upside down for the world to make sense at all. I felt liberated, vindicated even, I felt like I understood. It changed everything about how I view feminism and the motivation behind racism.

Alice also articulated the importance of faculty on her development:

Then I got into [professor's] class and just loved every second of it and it pushed me so hard in so many ways. She has such a great way of understanding and explaining racism and just really shoving it in your face and making you swallow it and figure it out. I think that that's when I was really able to finally really reconcile all those kinds of things and then loved it so much that I took Federal Indian Law and then somebody told me that there's this diversity and the law thing going on too and got to take a couple more ethnic studies classes and I was like, finally, it all comes together, it all makes sense.

Rhonda's experiences in women's studies helped her to make sense of the sexism she experienced as a child. As discussed earlier, Rhonda "hated being a girl" when she was younger and taking women's studies classes helped her work through her understanding of sexism, "women's studies made me realize that it was society's problem, not my problem as a woman.... There was nothing wrong with me. It was society's treatment of that identity, not me. That made me really accept myself." She continued describing the impact that women's studies classes had on her development, "my passion for, the knowledge I have about racism came largely from women's studies." Rhonda also used the materials she learned in her classes in her work with young boys in the criminal justice system:

Then women's studies, with the ethnic studies classes that I took really make me think about how [the boys] experience things differently because we have a wide racial background of kids, and I feel like that's like lacking there, everyone's like, they're all teenage boys and this is their experience, where the Black kid who grew up in the projects is a lot different from the White kid who just messed around and is in trouble with the law because he smoked weed too many times at school and got caught and I don't think they look at that enough. And like, I hear a lot of times, like, "oh, he's pulling the race card..."

She further discussed how she tries to challenge her colleagues at work and often feels silenced by them as discussed in the "Isolation" section of the findings.

The women clearly benefitted from their formal educational experiences, specifically in women's studies and ethnic studies classes. From being challenged to better understand their identities and the privileges associated with those identities to gaining information to assist them in their future careers and activist lives, faculty and peers influenced participants' understandings of their identities. In the next section, the activists' experiences illustrate the importance of relationships with People of Color as related to their identity development processes.

### **Relationships with People of Color**

Feminists in this study described relationships *and* lack of relationships with People of Color as significant in their identity development. Previous studies on anti-racist White identity indicate relationships with People of Color are a very significant aspect of their anti-racist identity development process (Frankenberg, 1993; O'Brien, 2001). Frankenberg (1993) dedicates two chapters of her book, *White Women, Race Matters*, to the relationships that her participants have with People of Color as significant others and as parents. Only some of the feminists in this study described relationships with People of Color as having significant influence on their development of their anti-racist identity. Other participants named the lack of relationships with People of Color as significant to their identity development.

Rhonda's experiences highlighted the importance of relationships with People of Color in her development as an anti-racist feminist. She described relationships with two Latinas she met on her floor in her residence hall during her first semester of college and how those relationships led to her involvement with a Latina sorority. Additionally, she described the influence of a relationship with another Woman of Color, Lisa, enrolled in the same women's studies class as Rhonda. Lisa's perspective on the class was quite different than Rhonda's, resulting in significant learning for Rhonda.

Rhonda recalled meeting friends during her first semester:

My freshman year, I became best friends with these two women who were Mexican on my floor, and one of the sisters had been a Lambda, the sorority. Her sister was one in California, and she really wanted to do it here, and my other friend wanted to too and they were like, "do it with us," and I was like, "I'm White and it's a Latina sorority" and so I did it and that became my friend base.

She continued to describe the influence the experience in the sorority had on her:

I think that being in a Latina sorority and being White definitely influenced a whole lot and...I did it when I was a freshman, so it was the same time when I was learning about everything we learned about in women's studies. I remember at first, feeling oppression from it and not realizing that maybe I really didn't have a place to step in....but then once I was in it, we'd come together for our weekly meetings or social or whatever, and someone would come in with this story about something that happened to them that day about race and they would sit there and bash on White people and at first I was like, how dare you do this when I'm sitting right here and I'm White, and yada yada yada, and then I took women's studies at the same time and I saw this really does exist and they're not exaggerating this or blaming race when it's not real. I'd say that it was really happening for them, and at the same time, building close friendships with those people experiencing it...I think it was really good for me to hear how much it really did influence every day things, even like a class format of those experiences.

Rhonda's friends of color "called her out" on her privilege:

Those two friends were both, they didn't do women's studies, but they did ethnic studies and they're really similar, they overlap a lot, and so we started having those discussions and they started calling me out for things. Like things, like when we explain something you'll explain it over, like I'll say something and someone clearly understood what I said and you'll still feel the need to re-explain it and just learning to recognize those things just drove home what we were doing in class wasn't some theory. My friends were telling me I was like that.

During her introduction to women's studies class, Rhonda developed a close relationship with Lisa, a woman she knew from the residence halls. Lisa, who identified as a Woman of Color, experienced the class very differently than Rhonda did:

I remember with Lisa, we lived in the dorms together, she always talked about how she felt, leaving class, we'd always walk to our cars together and what she took out of it, or how she felt about the conversation, was many times completely different from what I took from it and what I thought about it...She even felt like comments that people would say in there would really bother her and really make her feel non-read-about and how when I would leave I would feel so supported and so, I love this group of people and there were things that really bothered her and really made her feel horrible.

People of Color also influenced Georgia's development. Specifically, she talked about the schools she attended and romantic relationships with Men of Color as particularly salient, even at a very young age:

Primarily in my first major relationship, actually all of my relationships until college, were with Latino men. My first love got deported, and so there was a lot around that to unpack. There was one argument that we got in, I really didn't want to break up, I thought we would make it through, and he was like, "No, you just have no idea, you could never have any idea what I'm going through," and we had never really, in direct terms, discussed racial differences. We always termed it as cultural differences, but you know, that was one of the moments that I was very aware that I was White.

The women also discussed the importance of having People of Color in their classes, both as students and instructors. Georgia described a very racially diverse school in both elementary school and middle school as having a significant impact on her:

My elementary school now is 75% Latino, and when I went there, I think it was probably closer to 50%, and then my middle school was the bilingual school in town, so it was about 80% Latino and so most of my friends were either Mexican American or Black until high school.

The racial diversity in their college classrooms also influenced Jane and Alice's identity development processes. Jane's instructor's personal narratives and the Students of Color in her classes supported her ability to learn:

I think [the professor] is really, really good at setting up graphs and charts and describing things in a way that makes it click, I guess. I think that he's also really good at bringing in personal narratives, which some people hate, I know about him, but I think that taking his class really opened my eyes a lot. I mean it had a, class was really diverse, and I remember [student] was in that class and she was always piping up and saying things....and so, yeah, I think that those were the two big things that really did it for me...

Alice shared an experience with the same faculty member in a summer class:

[I took] ES100 over the summer, which was great, and I definitely had never felt so White in my life, and it was so wonderful because [professor] brings such an obvious stance of, "Yes, I'm a person of color, and yes, I'm going to tell you about this." And it was just so amazing because half the class was probably

People of Color, which was a pretty huge percentage for [college] and yet I felt very comfortable speaking in class and also knew when I wasn't supposed to...I am very, very comfortable speaking, and then in that class, I was able to monitor that a little bit better than usual.

Carolyn and Miriam both described the lack of racial diversity in their schools as having a significant influence on them. Carolyn reflected:

When I think about pre-school and before, I don't have real memories of anybody who was anything but White (though I know that there was one student in my pre-school "class" who I perceived to be Latino, but I only remember his existence because we went to the same middle school and reminisced about being in the same pre-school class). I wouldn't say this was a fault of my parents for failing to provide opportunities to diversify; really, there just weren't many opportunities in my neighborhood. And, the opportunities that did exist to visit with People of Color would have been too "dangerous" or inappropriate because the only People of Color in the surrounding communities lived in government-funded, low-income housing a few blocks away.

Miriam shared a story about talking with her mother about her parents' process of making decisions regarding schooling for Miriam and her siblings. Unfortunately, Miriam's parents felt torn between choosing between a "good" school and a school with more racial diversity:

My parents made a conscious choice to live in this suburb of [city] because my sister, brother, and I would get an education from [name] schools, which are very well-known in the [city] metro area. My mom tells me that she and my father had to decide which was more important: going to [name] schools and experiencing less diversity or going to [city] schools and experiencing much more diversity. They chose education and so my siblings and I grew up in "Whitesville."

Along the same lines, Rhonda described how a lack of interaction with People of Color influenced her experience. Rhonda grew up in a small town near a reservation, yet never had the opportunity to interact with or learn about the experiences of people on the reservation:

It's a very small town, so if we wanted to go shopping or if we wanted to go do anything we had to drive through the reservation and I remember when we were driving through there my mom would be like, "lock your doors" and we had to

make sure we had gas so we wouldn't have to stop or anything because there was so much crime and violence on there that it was scary to them. But they also ignored it. We didn't learn about a lot in school or anything, which you'd think that with that much and that close around us they would take the opportunity to teach us about it, but...

When Rhonda was a child, a transgender person was murdered near her hometown; however, she did not discuss the incident until after she graduated from college. While she knew the murder happened when she was in middle school, she did not know the details and reflected back on the experience after learning about racism in college:

They just showed a video about Native Americans and [town] at [college], and I went because it was my hometown. When I was there, I had such a different perspective than I do now and I wanted to see a more educated and a new perspective and so my roommate and I went and it was about this kid who was murdered, he was a Native American transgendered kid who was murdered. I remember him being murdered, and I remember going home and my dad being like, "that little fag asked for it," you know, and it wasn't a big deal even in [town]. It wasn't a big deal at all. And now watching that video of the kid wearing high heels and purses and he was very like open about it and how un-accepting – his mom was talking about how the principal called him to the office for having different shoes on that weren't boys shoes - and how the administration so the systemic oppression in it and seeing that, and you know, and thinking about how much Matthew Shephard, how much attention he got. Even people from [town] – after I went to it, I asked my mom, do you remember Fred Martinez and my mom was like, the name doesn't sound familiar and he was murdered in our hometown.

Work situations involving relationships or lack of relationships with People of Color influenced both Rhonda and Miriam's understandings of their identities. Miriam recognized her race in contrast to groups of students with whom she works:

Certain schools I go to, I notice my identity as a White woman. In this school of People of Color, I'm this White woman coming through to tell the students about, you know, it just feels kind of uncomfortable sometimes. Some of the students are already like, "I'm not going to college. I'm not going to college." It's just interesting how socio-economic status and race play a part. So I'm definitely noticing myself as a White person in schools where People of Color are the majority and I'm the minority.

Rhonda learned about race from a relationship she established with a young Man of Color with whom she worked:

This one kid, he was doing a project, he was a Latino kid and he was doing a project at school about how much they're treated differently... he was interviewing every kid in our facility, so I sat through it with them and he was asking them, what did you do to get in here and how long is your time and it was stark differences between the White kids and the other kids. One kid was like I was caught with marijuana at school, I have a mandatory two years where another kid was like I did this and this and I was caught with cocaine and I have 0-6 months, you know, unexplainable differences.

Participants' experiences interacting with and building relationships with People of Color supported their anti-racist and White identity development. In addition to recognizing the importance of relationships with People of Color, Miriam, Carolyn, and Rhonda also noted how the lack of relationships with People of Color influenced their identity development. Because they grew up in predominantly White areas and attended schools with few Students of Color, they expressed a lack of awareness of issues affecting People of Color until they came to college. In the next section, participants' stories illuminate the ways their family members and family structures influenced their identity development processes.

### **Family Influences on Identities**

The women's families had both positive and negative influences on their identity development processes. Four participants, Georgia, Carolyn, Jane, and Alice, provided examples of both positive influences and confusing or inconsistent messages about racism. For two of those participants, Georgia and Carolyn, family members provided role modeling for engaging in anti-oppression and social justice work. Three additional participants, Alice, Jane, and Miriam, had family members who role modeled feminist

values and supported them in developing a feminist identity. Rhonda's childhood and adolescence led her to discover social justice work as a source of healing from the trauma she experienced in her family setting. Finally, for Alice, while her mother served as a strong role model and support, the rest of her family supplied a source of great confusion around her anti-racist feminist identity.

Georgia and Carolyn described numerous experiences and specific instances in their families where they were encouraged and supported in engaging in social justice work. As described earlier, Georgia's family's commitment to Judaism encouraged social justice and oppression work:

There's always been a very strong influence in my family to be doing something in social justice work. And like I said earlier, I think a lot of that is actually cultural. I think that there's a culture that's developed sort of from the religious side of Judaism, or they developed hand in hand really, but there's a lot in the religious texts about being humble, and everybody, even the idea that we all come from the same man and therefore we're all equal, so there's a lot, a cultural understanding around, of social justice being an integral part of your existence on earth.

She continued to describe her family:

On my mother's side, my grandfather is a socialist, my grandmother is, has communist leanings, and both of my parents are, I don't think they are self-identified as socialists, but they definitely are on the pretty far left side of the political spectrum in the U.S. And all of my extended family members are involved in some sort of service work so you know, my aunt and uncle, are both completely pro-bono lawyers, my aunt is a social worker, my cousin is a teacher. It's part of my family life.

Georgia also articulated the importance of the day-to-day interactions and observations she had with her parents when she was a child. She remembered having regular informal conversations with her mother about gender:

So there were little conversations that I had with my mom that were really informal and seemed very day to day, that not only taught me personally about my gender but also about questioning what exactly that means. That's a long

legacy in my family, on my mom's side. My great grandmother in the 20's in Austria had a PhD. I come from a long legacy of outspoken feminist women and from men who were equally feminist in their understanding of gender roles and equality and egalitarianism in a relationship.

She also discussed the impact of her parents' relationship on her understanding of gender:

I think my parents did a really good job of modeling egalitarian relationships and so, sort of my understanding of what's normal and right and how things should be has always been sort of through a feminist lens and that's just kind of how I walked through the world.

Similarly, Carolyn described the positive influence her mother and grandmother had on her feminist identity, "growing up with a grandma who was always involved in politics...seeing her working for things and fighting for things that really mattered to her was always kind of impactful for me." She further explained the "pro-choice" politics her mother and grandmother engaged in:

It was always the choice issue that it always came back to and it went down to my mom that when she was working on politics when she was a stay at home mom, she would always fight for the pro-choice Republican and that would be the stakes that we would always take because we were working for them or voting for them because they were a pro-choice republican.

She also acknowledged the role her father played in her feminist identity development through "valuing women in a way that other people didn't." Carolyn believes that growing up in a supportive environment with people – both men and women – who believed in women's capabilities positively influenced her commitment to feminism.

Both Carolyn and Georgia also shared times when they received inconsistent messages from their families about anti-racism. Georgia recalled a situation with her extended family on her father's side of the family:

When I was about 15 years old my older cousin got pregnant. My father's side of the family is Irish American and I had never considered them particularly racist. The father of my cousin's child is Mexican American and was in jail at the time. Sitting at the dinner table that night I realized for the first time that there was

certainly overt racism in my family. I was particularly aware of the tone and content of that conversation because my boyfriend at the time was also Mexican American. I remember deciding not to tell my family anything about my boyfriend when I heard my cousin herself spout off an openly racist comment. Dynamics since then seem to have changed. [Cousin] ended up marrying and having another child with her then boyfriend and, as far as I can tell, he and their kids are fully accepted members of the family. I haven't forgotten that conversation though and I still find myself censoring certain aspects of my life around my dad's side of the family as a result.

Carolyn felt confused about the messages she learned from her family about racism. In a guided journal, Carolyn recalled watching television with her dad and her experience trying to make sense of her father's comments about race and the news:

I recall (and have thought often about) a time when I was in high school and my Dad and I were watching the nightly news. A story came on about a robber and his sentence. When they put up the man's picture he was a man who I perceived to be Black. My Dad (who I believe also generally functions as anti-racist but without all the terrible internal dialogue involved) made a comment that, even though he knows crime and race aren't ACTUALLY connected (i.e., a person doesn't commit a crime BECAUSE of the color of their skin), sometimes he wonders if there's some kind of correlation. I know my Dad didn't say this with the intention of being blatantly racist, but I can't validate the comment as anything but ignorance and racism. It's hard to look at my Dad and think of him as racist and I don't think one comment makes a person racist (as I think racism is an overall mindset), but the comment itself was racist and there just isn't any way of getting around it.

Carolyn's experience interacting with her father provides insight into her process of making sense of the conflicting messages she receives from her family. While she generally knew her family has good intentions, recognizing the racism socialized in members of her family proved challenging in her process of coming to understand her own anti-racist identity development.

Jane, Miriam, and Alice also discussed the positive influence of their families on their commitment to anti-racist feminism, though they did not highlight specific instances of activism in their families. All three participants grew up with a strong feminist mother

as a role model, influencing their identity. Jane and Alice's parents both divorced, exposing them to life with a single mother for short periods of time. Alice recalled the relationship she had with her mother and her sister:

That was my core growing up. It was just me and my mom and my sister. My dad left when I was six and it was definitely this feeling of yeah, we're fine, we're better off, we're girls, let's have fun. It wasn't always fun, but it was definitely a very, very thick feminist identity that ran through that.

She continued, describing the importance of community in her understanding of her feminist identity:

I would say so much of my identity comes from just knowing that women can do anything they need to do, on their or in community with each other, especially in community with each other. I think that's so powerful. So a lot of my identity comes as a sister and a daughter.

Jane shared a similar sentiment about her mother, "I think yeah with my mom, there was always this kind of strong force to do what I wanted to do or travel or be a journalist or do all these different things, explore." She continued describing her mother:

[She was a] second wave feminist...she had the shirt that said, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle" and that whole thing. I think just becoming aware of how she had navigated her life was really an eye-opener for me.

Jane provided specific examples of how her mother encouraged her to be open-minded and strong:

She was always really open minded about a lot of things and was always encouraging me to go do things with friends and go to their churches, and [she would] talk about her friends back in San Francisco that were gay, and she always raised me to be really ok with being a woman...I don't know if I can really pinpoint it, but we've had a lot of conversations around being a woman and I think a lot about what other women go through around the world and kind of like talking to me about social issues was a big part.

However, Jane also felt confused because of conflicting messages between what her mother said and what she did:

I think more than anything seeing my mom telling me to be strong and stand up for myself and do all kinds of things and then watching her kind of be pushed around was confusing. And bullied. It was like telling me to do one thing and then...

Jane described her grandmother as a strong female role model:

She got a degree in biology and chemistry and she has always been a big, “fuck housekeeping, I’m going to do what I want” personality and that’s been interesting. She’s...been this really amazing woman and she’s really strong and she’s always really breaking barriers down and she’s really like, badly behaved.

Similarly, Miriam named both of her parents and her sister as feminists who support her work as an anti-racist feminist:

My parents are both feminists and both, they’re from an older generation, so some of it they don’t understand as much as, like intersectionality and that kind of stuff, but [they are] totally supportive. My sister also calls herself a feminist.

While five participants depicted varying degrees of support and role modeling for feminist and social justice work from their families, Rhonda’s family provided the opposite motivation. As shared previously, Rhonda’s family’s religion and her father felt oppressive to her and she described being driven away from her family in search of community and support in discovering her feminist identity:

I got accepted to [college] and I chose here because it was as far away as possible but still getting in-state tuition...and then my first year of school I didn’t have any contact with my family because they just thought it was really selfish of me. It was really hard because I still had three little brothers who I love a lot. They’re like my babies and my dad wouldn’t even let me talk to them because he just thought I was such a bad influence on them because I was being so selfish and going to school and so that was hard but then I kind of, f-you...I still don’t talk to my dad ever. But my mom and dad got divorced so now my mom changed a lot and she’s out of the church and so now I have contact with my brothers and my sister again.

As described above, Rhonda described “hating being a girl” when she was younger. She articulated how women’s studies classes helped her to better understand

the way she was treated by her father and her family's religion and helped her to recognize that she was not the problem, society's treatment of her was the problem.

**Interracial marriages.** In addition to the role modeling or oppression families provided to participants, Jane and Alice both discussed the impact that inter-racial marriages had on their understanding of their identities. Jane described the relationships she had with her cousins who had a Mexican father:

My aunt married my uncle who worked in Mexico, and they got married down there and lived there for a couple of years and then moved back up, and so my cousins are Mexican and I remember having some pretty intense conversations with my cousin [name] who went to school in Denver and was pretty into social activism.

Jane recalls being curious about her cousins' experiences and taking the opportunity whenever she could to explore and understand how their experiences were similar and different from her own.

Alice shared a similar experience with her cousins who were born of inter-racial partnerships:

From the beginning I have been aware of race through my cousins. Three of my cousins are mixed Native American, African American, and white and I knew they looked different from me. Two more of my cousins are Latina and they have a sister who is white, making it clear to me that they looked different from me as well as different from one another, but that was as far as that difference ever went for me.

She further elaborated on how some stereotypes were solidified through experiences with her family:

Over time, it began to set in that these cousins were different from my immediate family. This part of the family has always been particularly impoverished, having children very early, men leaving women alone with children to care for, and dealing on a greater scale with drug and alcohol abuse. It was never discussed that they had these issues because they are people of color, but I began to understand these stereotypes through a lived experience.

Alice referred back to these cousins over and over again in her interviews and written reflections, trying to make sense of what she learned from observing cycles of poverty and racism in her own family and what she learned in the classroom about systemic racism. Alice regularly referred to her cousins' situations as a "cycle" as described here, "My cousins are of different races. There was this very obvious cycle in their lives, ok well my mom got pregnant at 15, now I'm pregnant at 15, and when I started really thinking about it, it was a cycle."

Alice struggled to articulate the difference between systems of oppression and individual circumstances related to race. She learned that cycles of poverty do not happen because someone is a person of color and she does not subscribe to a deficit model wherein race or People of Color are defined as the problem:

It is not because they are people of color. It is their personal situation, their circumstances, their neighborhood, their expectations for their children that are repeated time and time again in this part of my family. I know that this has had an effect on my understanding of linkages among race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

However, Alice had not quite grasped the concept of systemic racism and how race was directly related to her cousins' experiences through systems, rather than individual actions.

Alice further described how she struggled to make sense of what she was learning in classrooms about racial equality with what she was seeing in her own family. This conversation at our second interview illuminated the struggle Alice engaged in:

Alice: When I was writing the autobiography, I started seeing a lot of things in gender and race and my thoughts about that and previously I had told you that my cousins were part of my first idea of what race is, and it relates also to the book we read, the reproductive justice book, it just really hit home for me. There were parts that I honestly didn't read a lot of because I got really frustrated and didn't know how to handle ... part of it apparently really triggers me.

Chris: Ok. Which part? The reproductive justice part or the race part?

Alice: Yeah. The reproductive justice part because all my cousins are of different races. There was this very obvious cycle in their lives, ok well my mom got pregnant at 15, now I'm pregnant at 15, and when I started really thinking about it, it was a cycle and it was, you know, it's not necessarily connected to race. That's something I really outlined in my autobiography too. Just the idea that that's where that came from me for me for the first time and I think that's why I get so triggered by it, ok, now I'm understanding that there is socio-economic status, that there's race, there's a neighborhood...

She referred back to this idea again in a later conversation, articulating why it was so hard for her to read the book:

So I guess it was just a lot of thinking about how they all have kids really early and that that's a very prominent fixture in our family because there's just kids everywhere and they're all struggling to support them, and they're all struggling with husbands that are either partners that aren't married or in and out of jail, and lots of those things that are very stereotypical, but to have it in your own family is different because you can see the circumstances that are there and I think that's part of why that reproductive justice book was really hard, just because, you know, it was explaining that not all People of Color have these circumstances, but within my immediate family, they all do, so that was really, really hard to dissect for me.

Throughout the course of the interviews, Alice continued to struggle with these ideas and concepts, never shying away from the challenge in front of her. She worked to understand, to make meaning of contradictory messages she received from her family and from her coursework. She described her understanding of White privilege in direct relationship to her cousins' experiences:

But I guess I have two White parents and even if they have one White parent and parent of color, they are therefore a Person of Color, and whether it has to do with being White or not, they grew up in a very different neighborhood than me. They grew up in some really scary neighborhoods sometimes. They dealt with things as kids that I never dealt with...so that relates to White privilege in a lot of ways because I never had to deal with some of the things they had to deal with just because either of poverty of, you know, their parents just weren't as well-educated as mine. I think also the expectations were very different and again, I can't say that that's all race, but there weren't expectations necessarily to graduate

from high school. Not only did I have to graduate from high school, but I had to do it without being pregnant and I had to go to college. That was the expectation... I think expectations are a really interesting place for that, at least in my own family, but the things that keep you down can be very institutionalized.

Alice's struggle to make sense of racism and to connect what she learned in her classes with what she saw in her family demonstrated the internal struggle many participants engaged in to connect with their White racial identity and their understanding of White privilege. Over and over, Alice connected the poverty in her family to race, yet struggled to clearly articulate the difference between individual and systemic racism.

Each participant's family had a different influence on them and their commitment to anti-racist feminism, and activism. For the most part, participants' families positively influenced their commitment to and understanding of anti-racism. For one participant, her family provided a catalyst for engaging in feminism and anti-racism as a result of the oppression she experienced in her own family structure.

The activists described many instances that influenced their anti-racist and feminist identity development and did not distinguish between their identities when describing their developmental processes or the experiences that influenced their development. Additionally, participants clearly noted commonalities among the experiences that influenced their anti-racist feminist identity development processes. In addition to commonalities among the experiences that influenced the women's identities, some women expressed unique experiences contributing to a deeper understanding of identity development. The next section explores the experiences of White anti-racist feminist college women.

### **Experiences of White Anti-Racist Feminist College Women**

In discussing their experiences with anti-racist feminism, the activists in this study described several common themes centering on how they engaged in anti-racism. Participants discussed the importance of community in their anti-racist work, including the challenges associated with transitioning from college campus where they were supported in engaging in social justice work to workplaces where they did not feel supported. The women also articulated their struggles to have conversations with colleagues and friends as they transitioned out of a supportive environment. Conversely, the feminists also shared ways they engaged in every day activism through their jobs and relationships with friends and family. Finally, each participant described the internal dialogue and analysis they engaged in related to anti-racism. Often the internal dialogue resulted from a common fear of appearing racist, or wanting to be the “good White person.”

#### **Importance of Community**

Participants discussed the importance of community in various ways throughout the interview process. From discussions about feelings of isolation in the workplace, struggles to have conversations related to social justice issues, and examples of positive social justice communities, participants clearly indicated the value of community in their work. Four of the six participants graduated before I conducted the interviews and the other two graduated during the semester I conducted the interviews, further influencing the understanding of the importance of community for those forming an anti-racist identity.

**Isolation.** The four participants who graduated prior to the study expressed feelings of isolation in their workplace and within their social networks related to engaging in social justice work, specifically anti-racism. Carolyn, who worked at a local social service agency serving clients with HIV and AIDS, described the disappointment she felt related to her work place because she expected it to match her understanding of and experience with prior work experiences related to social justice:

It's just been interesting to balance feeling like it should really be an activist kind of organization and space and when it doesn't always feel like that, it's kind of disappointing and frustrating. I know I was really disillusioned by what I was expecting out of that, and that's ok, because I think it's important to be in that space and recognize it, but I feel like not being around it at all, I feel myself moving backwards sometimes.

Similarly, Rhonda worked for an organization that provides support to youth transitioning out of detention centers for drug and alcohol offenses. She regularly challenged the status quo in her organization, yet often felt isolated as a result of the lack of knowledge her peers have about racism and sexism. Rhonda struggled to figure out how to work within a system to make change when she often disagrees with her colleagues' perspectives and behaviors:

I work in the criminal justice system and I hugely disagree with the criminal justice system and I find myself right on the line of being in the system and trying to fight against the system but still having to work within their boundaries and their expectations and not agreeing with what I do...and it's just been bothering me for a really long time, and I don't know what to do with it.

Miriam worked in an admissions office at a university and during the data collection process, she and her colleagues were in the process of reviewing admissions applications and admitting or denying potential students to the university where she worked. Miriam struggled to talk with her colleagues about the complexities of systems of power and privilege related to admissions processes:

It was really hard graduating, kind of get taken out of that environment where it's totally acceptable to say, well look at the intersections of oppression with this student and this is why they should go to [college] because we need that, we want students like this at our campus and we don't want them to feel like they're not going to college, they're not going to our school, so, you want to advocate for them, but it's hard when you work with a bunch of white people who don't really get it.

Finally, Jane, who graduated a year prior to the study, struggled with deciding “what’s next” for her. She wanted to continue engaging in social justice work in whatever kind of job she had, yet she also recognized the importance of having a stable income and the ability to plan for retirement. Because her mother struggled financially, Jane wanted to ensure that she did not have the same worries as her mother as she progressed through her life. At the same time, Jane acknowledged the privilege associated with the ability to make a choice about engaging in activism or not:

Now that I’ve graduated, I’m trying to figure out (crying and laughing) where my activism fits in outside of the University, and because of the situations of my parents, I want to be able to save enough to retire, and take care of myself, and enjoy my day to day life. I’m trying to figure out, I want to put those two things together, what kind of activist work that I can do that won’t make me want to die every night, and that’s also privilege to say that.

Because the women each engaged in various kinds of involvement and activism on campus as students, they noted a significant difference in the campus environment where they were supported in their social justice and anti-racist activism and their current workplaces where they experienced isolation and frustration. As a result of the isolation they felt in their workplaces and additional communities, the activists struggled to engage in conversations with co-workers and peers regarding social justice issues, most specifically addressing issues of racism in the workplace.

**Struggling to find a voice.** Participants discussed instances of struggling to have conversations about social justice issues both at work and with peer groups. Rhonda

described her experience at work where she pointed out the way racism may impact kids in the criminal justice system:

In any conversation about a kid, I'll try to point something out, and everyone just looks at me like I'm on crack and then there's just not the time or energy or the care from other people to get the point across and I'm like, "is it worth it?" which is White privilege in itself.

In this interaction, Rhonda noted the privilege associated with not speaking up, yet she struggled to engage because her co-workers do not seem to want to understand the broader issues, which resulted in frustration for Rhonda.

Similarly, Miriam raised an issue of White privilege with her White colleagues at work and felt as though they did not appreciate hearing her perspective:

It was like crickets in the car and it was really uncomfortable because I was like, you're not really listening to what I'm saying and you're turning off [and thinking], "of course Miriam's going to talk about social justice, blah, blah, blah" it's not really important, so it's like, what's the point of saying something if they're just going to turn off and not listen to it?

Carolyn's experience struggling to have conversations in the workplace resulted from her expectations of what an organization committed to social justice would feel like. She described two recent experiences at work where she struggled to find her voice to challenge what she believed to be uninclusive language. Overall, Carolyn described her experience in the workplace challenging behavior that does not feel congruent with her anti-racist perspective:

I think of all sorts of times when I did not do anything, so...that's unfortunate. And a lot of them have been at work because it's so much harder in a place that functions like it should be anti-racist and anti-sexist and really kind of a feminist organization, it's even more difficult I think to call those people out than it is for me to call someone out who is blatantly, it's not that hard for me to say something to [partner's] dad because we just, he's just so obnoxious about it but when little things happen at work, I'm like, I don't know what to say, what am I doing?

She continued, describing two specific examples when she found herself struggling with what to say to her co-workers:

There are all kinds of things that I think are just little changes that I don't know how to tell people that I think using the word lame feels really insensitive when we have a mental health counselor, when our mental health counselor uses it, I'm like, "oh, stop using that."

In a written reflection, Carolyn described another situation where she struggled to find her voice:

Recently, a co-worker (at an organization who, in all regards, should be a feminist/humanist organization) did the "slant eyes" action...I couldn't even formulate words for what to do. The best I could muster was to turn and walk away. So, what I'm getting at is this: I experience myself personally as always striving for anti-racism but I struggle to reach that non-existent point when all the people around me seem to think I'm being overly sensitive.

Alice did not speak up in the workplace because she knew she has to work with her co-workers and did not want to create divisions or awkward tension as a result of speaking up about language that she found hurtful:

I am sick and tired of hearing it, but I also know that I have to work with them every day and so I haven't figured out how to say anything yet, and I've been working there for two months, and I still, you know, I know how to have those conversations with...people who you can just sit down and have a conversation with, but to have it in these quick, "I need a salad," "I need you not to say that word," how do you do that? So that's been really, really hard and trying to just figure out, yeah, where does that real activism, how do you do that?

In high school, Rhonda worked at a buffet restaurant in a community near a Native American reservation. She reflected on numerous instances of racism in her workplace and explains how she felt isolated, even as a high school student before she had the language to articulate how she was feeling and why. In this particular instance, Rhonda's boss at the restaurant where she worked sang the song from the Disney movie *Pocahontas* that has the line about "savages" in it on the evenings when they were

cleaning up after several groups of people who appeared to be Native American ate in the restaurant:

I remember not agreeing with it, but feeling like I was such a minority in that that I didn't stand up for what I was feeling because it was all of my co-workers and my boss, so I would just go to a different part and clean by myself. I felt really uncomfortable because part of my family is part Native American and after that, I think that's a point when I started to not talk about being Native American because that's how everyone felt about Native Americans there, so I never talked about it to my friends.

In addition to struggling to find their voices in the workplace, the feminists also described instances when they did not speak up or struggled to have conversations with friends and family members about inappropriate language and behavior. Two participants described their experiences in trying to address friends of their male partners. Georgia explained how she was seen as the target for saying inappropriate things in a particular group of her male partner's friends:

It's like the first impression, so I'm thinking about a particular community of people that I was kind of the sole social justice voice and I brought something up in a somewhat combative way the first time that I was with that group of people and from there on out it seemed like there was an open invitation to bring up things that people knew would piss me off in a combative way and so I felt like there was no way for me not to, my options were, I felt like, to be like I'm not having this conversation, like no thanks, or to meet that person in the person in the style in which they were speaking which I felt responsible for and that was really frustrating.

Carolyn also felt like the target of a group of friends, "I just end up being the funny one who thinks it's funny to bring these things up, like it's easy to make me mad. Now I'm just like sensitive, too offensive, frustrating."

Georgia also grew weary after confronting the same group of people over and over again. After a year of having tough conversations and not being heard, she felt isolated:

I spent a lot of energy having discussions with people, debating with people, so on and so forth, raising what I thought were important questions and right about a year in, I was done with it. I would just hang out with his friends and let it happen around me and unpack it with my own groups later, but then I would feel really guilty for not using my voice in the space where it was probably most needed. And so, in that way, I felt really isolated.

Georgia shared the complexity associated with finding her voice in the classroom. She worked to recognize the balance between speaking for someone and serving as an ally in a particular situation. She explained the dynamics of attempting to “meet people where they are” and picking her battles so people do not stop listening to her because she is always speaking up about something:

It has been really hard for me to try to balance being an ally and saying, it’s not a very well rounded perspective on what womanhood is or what sexual assault is to a community. It’s been hard to balance that voice in the classroom, and not being written off as the crazy person but it’s frustrating because there are so few people of color in that classroom that I don’t want to put the burden on them to be the person that speaks up every time and there are only, it seems like, there are only a couple other people who are kind of aware of the dynamics that are going on in that classroom, and they’re dealing with the same, when do I speak up and when do I not? So a lot of stuff goes unchallenged, which is frustrating.

In addition to feeling isolated in their friend groups, some women also shared instances of feeling isolated within their family networks for speaking up about particular issues. Alice described her experience in going home for a family holiday at one point during college. She tried to laugh it off, indicating that her feminist views make her different than her family members:

I just sat there and bit my tongue and ate my potatoes cuz of course there’s nothing but meat and potatoes and I’m just sitting there and I remember just feeling like such a confused outcast cuz we were talking about all these people who don’t go to college and what’s wrong with them and why don’t they go to college and why don’t they just do it, and why don’t they just blah, blah, blah, and I’m sitting there and I’m midway through college and I’m thinking you don’t remember what it’s like to go to college, you don’t remember, you don’t know how hard some people have to work to even get to college and, so there’s definitely a lot of issues that I come across with my family that I’m able to be

like, whatever, I'm just being a feminist and kind of just laugh it off because I can't talk to them about it. It's not even worth it.

Even though she comes from a progressive family, Georgia also felt some isolation in her own family. She moved "farther left" than many of her family members, resulting in discomfort for her, "More recently, even within my family unit, I think I have moved further left than my progressive family, so that can be a little bit difficult, just because it challenges my understanding of my family."

**Strength in social justice community.** As participants highlighted the struggles they have in finding community in their workplaces, with friends, and even with family, they also expressed the importance of finding community in social justice work and the strength associated with such communities. Alice compared the importance of community to attending church:

That we're able to put all these people together in a time and a space and talk about these things that are super hard about mutual respect and what is it but love, and most of the time we don't have any place to talk about that other than if you go to church, and I don't go to church and I'm not going to start going to church. I don't want to go to church, but I think that that becomes the only place where people get to interact on that raw, human level of, "ok, how do we treat each other?" Well, it's not only that it exists within biblical scripture, but it exists within wise people who have done some kind of thinking on how do we treat each other? How do we stand each other? How do we get along? I think that's been a huge part of it for me, is just having a space to explore those really hard concepts without number one, being told how to think about it and number two being allowed to screw up on a daily basis and that's something that the church never offered me was just the ability to screw up.

Similarly, Georgia described the importance of activist spaces for her:

It's also been my avenue to having an activist space that's really comfortable to be "radical" in and I think that's a pretty important part of activism as well, having a space where it's comfortable to have the view that you have. I think in many ways that's what the manifestations of formal activism are – I think it's people seeking to kind of expand that space for people in whatever interesting way, you know, having some activity to make an excuse for getting a bunch of

people who think the same way together and that can be really invigorating and refreshing.

For Miriam, finding other people interested in and committed to social justice felt like “taking off tight pants.” She described the importance of community for her work:

I always get excited when I find people who are interested in social justice. It kind of feels like you’re taking off really tight pants, you just, you know, let it all out... I hung out with [co-worker and partner] a couple of days ago and we just had this huge discussion and talk about social justice...when I meet other people or talk to other people, that gets me excited to do more change because if I’m not hanging out with people who are interested in it, then I’m going to get, I kind of don’t think about it as much as when I’m with people who do think about it.

Both Miriam and Georgia articulated the importance of community for their continued motivation and commitment. The isolation described above results in less motivation to continue working toward change. Finding a community provides a place to re-engage and feel supported in challenging and addressing the status quo. Alice also named the importance of establishing friendships in her activist community, “I’ve made such great friendships out of this. It’s so cool how we’ve got such a network and such a community.”

### **Engaging in Everyday Activism**

On the flip side of their struggles to engage in conversations about social justice and confront friends, family, and co-workers about uninclusive or hurtful behaviors and language, the women also described several instances of “everyday activism,” actions they did to make a difference without formally engaging in large-scale protests, marches, and awareness events. The feminists described ways they engaged in everyday activism through conversations with their friends, workplace activism, and self-awareness and action.

During the focus group discussion, Georgia expressed frustration related to the ways people commonly understand activism:

I think something that has also been somewhat frustrating for me is that within White activist communities, I have over and over again felt like there's a specific understanding of what exactly activism is and what it looks like, and like some people said about that connection to class but also the connection to a white, or Euro-American world view and this is how you get things done or it's important to be very visible in your activism in some way.

Other participants nodded in agreement, and Miriam chimed in:

I totally agree with you on that, I think especially as White people that doing those things is like doing the picket line and going to marches and yelling at people doing that kind of thing and being like the angry feminist but when you see pictures of people who do that, they're White women in Take Back the Night marches and stuff like that, so it's definitely hard to switch your focus and be like I can be, I can be active in a different way. I can do daily things.

**Everyday conversations.** Even though participants clearly struggled to speak up in many instances, they also named several ways they engaged in conversations with friends about issues of social justice. Jane's friend told her about the influence of their conversations on her own understanding of racism and sexism:

She was telling me that conversations that we've had have affected her own understanding of racism and feminism and has made her think about things a lot more. She was like, "I feel like I can have conversations with you about this stuff and I haven't been able to before and it's affecting me." She's paying attention to things in her sociology classes so that makes me feel better about it. I think that I need to be ok with the fact that I can do social change without necessarily having a title that has to do with social change. I still struggle with that.

Similarly, Alice described an interaction she had with her roommate about a paper she was writing for a sociology class. Alice's roommate was a chemical engineering major and struggled to understand the importance or relevance of discussing race in her sociology class. Because Alice had more experience taking classes revolving around race

and gender, she talked with her roommate about her experiences and helped her to write her paper for the sociology class:

She comes home and she's like why do we have to talk about race, I don't even understand, it's irrelevant, if we didn't have to talk about it, it wouldn't be a problem. Ok. Well, so there's part of me that always wants to be, and I always ask, "Why is it hard? Why is it, we always kind of talk some stuff through but I don't really know how to do that with her yet?" She's turning in a paper that's her final this week, and she came to me with two pages of eight, and she says, "I don't know how to do this, I'm supposed to be writing about my own racial identity, but I don't have a racial identity, I'm just white." And it was, it was just so fun to finally put all of this social justice and all of this ethnicity and all of this women's studies into play and so this paper that I was helping this woman write to help her really, fully finally understand why this stuff matters and it was really interesting...I brought up all these different things and I was just seeing wheels turning and lights flipping and finally she's turning in the paper tomorrow and it's eight pages and it was a project that we did together, so it was a big deal.

Georgia explained that she attempts to address insensitive comments through everyday conversations in a very casual manner. She said, "I think it's the most effective to just be really calm and casual and be like, hmm, maybe you should think about that."

Georgia also provided an example of when she did this when visiting a friend:

I was sitting at a table helping my friend's roommates make dinner and one of her roommates said, "Yeah, that's pretty gay." And I happened to be sitting next to my gay friend and so I was like, "meaning?" and he was like, "oh I don't really know" and we went on and it was a very casual interaction and the night played out just fine, we were able to just move on in conversation and not deconstruct it anymore, but I think I made my point.

Georgia continued to describe a second situation in the same setting where she could not find her voice. The second comment was a violence sexist comment, and Georgia did not feel safe in addressing it. She struggled to understand how she could find her voice in some situations and not in others.

Participants also described positive feelings associated with speaking up. Georgia and Alice both felt affirmed and empowered after challenging a comment or interaction that made them uncomfortable. Georgia explained:

I will say that that experience was really positive and reaffirming though in that I felt like it was just this casual thing where we were cutting vegetables and I could just be like, “huh, what does that mean?” and we could go on with the evening and we could continue to get to know each other and that was great and I feel like that has really been a process to get to a point where I feel like I can address things that are incredibly serious in a casual way because in so many other instances, I’m still like, how do I call this person out, and that wasn’t really the thought, it was just like, it just came out like that was part of the conversation and I want to get there on all the other stuff too.

Alice also shared her perspective related to speaking up to address comments or situations:

I think it does take practice and so every single time that you do it, whether it’s positive experience or a negative experience, it’s so worth it because then you realize, “Well, I’m sure not going to do it like that again,” or “Ok, I think I finally figured out how to talk about this thing.”

Participants worked to find ways to engage in everyday conversations about social justice in their lives. They talked with friends and acquaintances when they could, describing the thought processes associated with choosing to engage in conversations or not. In addition, the women also engaged in everyday activism in their workplaces.

**Workplace activism.** Both Rhonda and Jane shared numerous instances of engaging in everyday activism in their work places. As described previously, Jane works in a toy store and part of her responsibility it to order books for the store, so she works to purchase books with inclusive representations of families. Specifically, Jane discussed how she tried to purchase books with representations of both multi-racial families and families with same-sex parents to ensure that multiple perspectives were represented in the selection. Additionally, as Jane interacted with customers, she found ways to

encourage them to purchase “non-traditional” gender-based items for kids in their lives.

She described this as “button-pushing”:

I get to think a lot about the kinds of books that we bring in and making sure that we stock, alternative princess books and books about girls that like to go on adventures, and books about boys that like to play with dolls...and I think, even just interacting with customers, I do a lot more “button pushing” than I probably should...I think there’s a lot of work that can be done just with kind of confronting people. I [say], “oh, yeah, people get dolls for boys all the time,” and “I’m buying that thing for my friend that’s having a boy. I think it’s awesome.”

Similarly, Rhonda engaged in everyday activism by supporting and validating the experiences of the boys she works with in her job in the criminal justice system. In her workplace, she is one of few people who has a deep awareness of racism and its connection with the criminal justice system:

I felt like, like at [sexual assault organization] for example, that’s where I really wanted to do [my internship], they have a lot of people there who are on the exact same page, who get it and who are already passing that stuff on and putting it into the work, [current organization] had none of that so it was a good opportunity to incorporate social justice into the work and I really just enjoy the boys I work with. They’re really cool people. They just haven’t had the opportunity.

She continued by describing her role in validating the boys’ experiences. Many of her colleagues do not recognize racism, so she attempts to both address the systems of inequity in her job and validate the boys’ daily experiences at the same time:

I think racial equality is a big one just because I just feel like people want to think that racism is over, and it’s not. I see how much it affects the kids I work with and how people like staff and therapists and every level of authority in their lives has kind of written it off and, so I think just trying to be, even if I can’t change that much in the system, just like with one person so that they know, like when they just need to vent about how they’re being treated differently to just know that someone recognizes it.

She continued by describing how one of her boys responded to the conversation they had about his experiences with racism in the criminal justice system:

We had this great conversation about it and afterwards he was like “I never thought I would be able to talk to someone in authority...about how it is a White man’s world”...he’s like, “I’m not saying I didn’t commit my crimes and shouldn’t be held accountable but just how like it is different for me because I’m Native American.” It was just really cool to be able to validate that for him.

Additionally, Rhonda provided examples of ways she directly interacts with and challenges the boys about the sexism they’ve been socialized to accept. Regularly addressing the boys when they use words like “bitch” and “fag,” she is known among the boys as “the feminist one.” She helps them understand how those words hurt her and, in the long run, them. Engaging the boys in spoken word poetry workshops, and documentary film nights, Rhonda provides opportunities for the boys to express themselves in various formats.

In addition to her interactions directly with the boys she works with, Rhonda also works to incorporate social justice awareness and programs into her job wherever possible. While she was a student and doing an internship at the same place where she currently works full-time, Rhonda would regularly ask the staff if they could take the boys to events on campus. She continues to advocate for these opportunities in her workplace, which was supported by the director of the program:

I’ve been emailing again being like hey, can we do this? Can we do this? And she’s like, we used to have a social cultural expert, which I don’t like that word, cuz I don’t feel like I’m a cultural expert by any means but she was just like do you want to take it on and make sure that we go to a minimum of two cultural things a month, so I’m really excited about that.

Rhonda and Jane both provide excellent examples of engaging in everyday activism at work. Finally, participants discussed self-awareness as an essential component of everyday activism.

**Self-awareness as an anti-racist feminist.** The women each described the importance of self-awareness in their roles as anti-racist activists. In addition to the self-awareness participants described in their understanding of anti-racist feminism, the feminists also named self-awareness as an important part of everyday activism. Carolyn summarized self-awareness, “I think I spend a lot of time thinking about social justice and working on it, even if it’s not as direct or around the same issues that I ultimately want to be working on.” Alice also described her awareness of self and her ability to be an activist through her leadership roles on campus, “Every single day, was just learning how to be a leader, how to apply the skills that we talked about in class and then get to a meeting and be like, ‘whoa, it’s time to deal with this thing.’”

Rhonda moved from feeling overwhelmed and depressed about oppression to understanding her role in addressing it through everyday activism:

For a long time, with women’s studies I just felt depressed, like there’s so many issues and so many problems that so many people have been working on for so long and it just seems like nothing is changing, and then realizing that there’s so many moments in every day that you can make change that I guess, just that. Knowing what I’m passionate about it.

Finally, Miriam provided a very concrete example of her self-awareness in relationship to the action she takes. She described how she works to be aware of the ways that she communicates and the amount of “space” she takes up in meetings and other areas of work:

I think of taking up space sometimes, you know, the people that I work with, I try to make sure that I’m not taking up space – I’ve noticed, and we’ve talked in class and stuff, I’ve noticed, sometimes White people will talk for People of Color sometimes. So, I don’t talk for other people...I try to be really, really conscious of the space I take up, but still, take up some space, but just not all the space, still say my opinion and share my thoughts, but not in a way that is like, “White person, what are you doing?”

At various points throughout the data collection process, participants described their experiences with self-awareness and critical analysis. Engaging in everyday activism included an awareness of self as did participants' understanding of anti-racist feminism. Closely related to participants' level of self-awareness was their experience with internal dialogue and "over-analysis."

### **Internal Dialogue and Analysis**

Participants each described their process of internal dialogue and "over-analysis" of their interactions with people related to social justice issues. This theme rang loud and clear throughout the written reflections, individual interviews, and the focus group with all of the participants together. The women described the process of having a conversation with themselves about various interactions and experiences they encountered. Most participants discussed this as "over-analysis" at various points in their interviews. Additionally, the feminists struggled to make sense of race cognizance and its relationship to color-blindness. Finally, participants shared very intense descriptions of the fear of appearing racist and striving to be a "cool White person," all while recognizing the consequences of this fear.

**Internal dialogue: "A conversation with myself."** In discussing the process of analyzing interactions and the internal dialogue participants had regarding issues of social justice, they often referred to it as "over-analysis" or "hyper-awareness." Carolyn provided numerous examples of the dialogue she engages in with herself when interacting with or reflecting on an interaction she had with a Person of Color. In one of her written reflections, Carolyn summarized what all of the participants shared with me at various points in the data collection process:

Through the last 2.5 years of college, I became increasingly more aware of my relationships (almost all with white folks) and how my interactions differed between white people and People of Color. I still find myself feeling anxious or nervous around some People of Color because I'm afraid of being "offensive" (whatever that means) or of coming off as insensitive or, on the flip side, knowledgeable about experiences different than my own. It's a really challenging balance for me because I want (badly) to treat everybody the same but I think I've trained myself to pay such close attention to interactions and nuances that I forget to just treat everybody like everybody else. College taught me a lot about breaking down situations and looking at variables and being really critical about what I see and hear and feel and experience. Unfortunately, that awareness has turned into a hyper-awareness that makes it difficult to just BE.

I asked Carolyn what made this "over" analysis rather than just a way of thinking or being. She responded:

Well if I see something and I think in my head that was White privilege playing out there, and then I think about it a little bit more, and I can't decide if it's because I'm looking, I've just been looking for things, basically all the time, that I've just kind of trained myself to always be tracking that I see things that aren't actually there. Maybe, I don't know, however it works out and they're walking past the Person of Color was more in the way than the White person, and that's why they stepped out of the way is cuz they felt like they were more in the way, so, so I analyze it and analyze and I think, maybe it wasn't White privilege. Maybe it was just the way things played out and now you're overanalyzing it and thinking about it too much and now you're making a big deal out of nothing.

Jane also described how her formal education in college had an influence on the way she thinks about interactions related to social justice:

I think that as a White woman, ethnic studies really taught me to be hyper-aware of cultural background and struggles and all of these things and I'll really connect it and so you know, even if I'm looking at a White man I'm seeing all this stuff, there's this like book of stuff behind everybody that you talk to, and at the same time, you're like, "well I don't know this person and I don't know their background."

Carolyn and Miriam clearly articulated the consequences of this internal dialogue or "over-analysis," noting that the self-deprecation did not contribute to making change:

It's a frustrating balance because I really want to be analytical and regulate myself and look at things but I tear myself apart about it and I find that I do that a lot,

“you knew better, maybe you didn’t know better then, but you know better now, now you can tear yourself apart about it,” which is not useful at all.

Miriam described situations where she was in constant dialogue with herself. On multiple occasions, twice during two different interviews, once during a written reflection, and again in the focus group, Miriam referred to “being too much in my head.” For Miriam, this was largely related to the “fear of appearing racist,” which I will discuss in the next section. Miriam shared an example of the internal dialogue in which she engages:

As I said in the other interview, not thinking too much, you know, because that it is being racist, because whenever you’re talking to someone, like anyone, you know, and you’re talking to someone of color and you’re like, oh my gosh, don’t be racist, don’t be racist, you’re treating them differently than you would anyone else, but you also want to be thinking, and not being like, oh like I’m talking to someone, I’m going to interrupt them now, oh wait, I’m not thinking, I’m being a White person and talking to a Person of Color, you know, so you’ve got to be thinking, but not thinking too much. It’s hard, but it doesn’t have to be that hard. You just don’t want to be too much in your head, but you want to be cognizant of what you’re doing.

Like Carolyn, Miriam also understood the consequences of the internal dialogue and described the rationale behind her process of thinking about race in her interactions with People of Color:

You’re so much in here (points to head) that you’re not getting to know this person as a person because we all are people, despite these superficial systems that have been put into place...I don’t want people to be oppressed, but at the same time, still calling those moments when you notice them, and being able to recognize when, like hey, that was a yucky thing I did.

Jane also described her process of internal dialogue when thinking about her interactions with People of Color:

It’s hard because I don’t want to be thinking about what other people’s race too much and I don’t want to be tokenizing them because I have all of this information about different groups of people in my head that I didn’t have 10 years ago and it’s not that I’m looking at them and saying well that’s who you are,

but I think it makes me more informed, and I don't know what to do with that information except just try to treat everyone like normal people and I try to check myself a lot for sure.

Jane, Georgia, and Alice all provided very specific examples of times when they engaged in internal dialogue about a previous interaction they had with another person related to social justice. Georgia described an incident where she gave money to a person standing on the side of the road holding a sign asking for help:

I analyzed this interaction for the hour long drive at least and a little bit beyond that and I really don't know how I feel about it. I feel like I am still so self conscious about, ok, did I treat him in a way that recognized his humanity? Did I give him enough money? ...And I feel like I've gotten to this point where I'm so overly analytical about some interactions and was saying good luck condescending, or was that just a nice thing to say to somebody? I feel like there's this internal dialogue going on when I'm by myself and I'm not really sure that being that analytical is helpful to the way I move in the world.

Jane described an experience in the data collection process where she analyzed a conversation that we had during an interview for a couple of days. She describes it here:

At some point in the interview I got really stuck on the, thinking about the fact that I'm, sometimes I'm very uncomfortable being what I feel like is an extremely White woman, really blond, and, after our interview, I spent two or three days thinking about it and called all my friends and wrote out an email that I never sent to you, and was thinking all of these things and getting all like, well I don't know how I feel and maybe this is wrong and maybe I should, you know, thinking about the privilege and stuff but I think I did process through some of it, but at the same time, I don't know, I did get a little stuck in my head.

Jane's concern was that she minimized Women of Color's experiences with racism by sharing her experiences with sexism. In our conversation, her point was that she deals with a lot of sexism because she meets stereotypical definitions of what beauty is in U.S. culture. As a result of this identity, people tend to treat her as though she is unintelligent and she receives a large number of catcalls and inappropriate behavior from men. Her level of guilt was such that if she discussed or shared this experience, she was

somehow not acknowledging her White privilege, therefore “taking away” from the attention being given to Women of Color with regard to racism.

In a written reflection, Alice noted one example of an internal dialogue she had about an interaction with a Person of Color:

Earlier this week I took a man by surprise when I came up behind him on my bike on the sidewalk. It was not dangerous, and we had plenty of time to correct the situation, but I immediately wondered if he thought that I startled him because I am white and was being intentionally disrespectful. I do not know why I had to bring our race into it, but I hoped that he was not thinking that was true, I knew it was not the truth, so I do not understand where the idea would come from. Mainly it is situations like that, whether holding the door open for someone, or saying hello on the street that I hope that they do not notice the color of my skin in contrast to their, hoping to find solidarity through humility for a brief moment.

Not surprisingly, the women clearly noted that their awareness of race and racism is heightened in their interactions with People of Color. Four participants specifically named their discomfort with their race when interacting with People of Color. In a written reflection, Alice described her discomfort:

As a racial being, I often do not know how to fit in with people of color. I become shy and self-aware. I know that I make our racial difference clear and available for consideration because I do not want to be the loudest in a racially mixed group, nor feel powerful, but in the things that I do to attempt to fit in, I often feel more White, more different, and in someone else’s space. I generally feel as though I can talk to anyone, just being a social, as well as socially conscious person, but when it is clear that I am a racial minority, I become nervous and small.

In two different instances, Carolyn recalled her discomfort with her own race around people of color. In a written reflection, she explained it as follows:

I find that I’m most comfortable as a White person in a room with other White people, while at the same time I feel uncomfortable that there aren’t People of Color present. My internal dialogue is bitter and usually says something like, “Oh! Big f\*\*king surprise, a bunch of White people talking about how to improve the lives of Latinos with risk of contracting HIV!” If, however, I’m in a room and am one of the only White people present, my internal dialogue turns terrified. “I bet everyone thinks I’m racist. I’m scared to say anything because I

don't want to take up too much space. Now I'm not saying anything and they probably all think I'm racist again!" When I take a step back and get done beating myself up ("CAROLYN-if you keep thinking they think you're racist, you probably ARE racist! Stop thinking about it!"), I realize that maybe someone did think those things but maybe they didn't.

She further elaborated on this experience in an interview:

I think in my mind to be not racist, to be completely not racist would be to not notice even, I mean, not to not notice it, but, I don't know, I guess to not notice it, to not make any play off of the fact that someone's skin is a different color, or you know, any other, that someone's not the same social class, or whatever it is. So, it feels like if I'm looking at people or I'm talking to people, I should try hard to make sure I'm not treating any differently than I would treat you or that I'm making the same jokes with you that I would with you, but that's really hard to do because I think I end up overanalyzing everything so I spend, you know, I talk to a Woman of Color and I'm like, oh my gosh, what if I say something that she thinks is offensive? What if I, I don't know, what if I say something that she thinks is like imitating her cultural standards, or something like that that's not my intention, but out of ignorance or lack of knowledge or whatever, whereas with a White woman, I wouldn't maybe say the same thing or over think it, but I end up over thinking it, and I end up treating them differently inherently because I'm so busy thinking about it. And it's frustrating, it's frustrating when you're like, internal dialogue, and then it just goes to hell.

Jane also described her discomfort with her racial identity in interactions with

People of Color:

My personal racial awareness definitely impacts all of my relationships; it effects what I choose to bring up in the company of other white people. I feel hyperaware of my whiteness and how it presents (and how I manifest it) in relationships around people of color.

The degree to which participants engaged in internal dialogue and over analysis of their interaction with people related to anti-racism and other social justice issues illustrates the complexity of critical analysis and self-awareness. While participants clearly had the best of intentions in the thought processes, they also noted instances where they knew they behaved inauthentically as a result of over-thinking situations in which they found themselves. Closely related to "over-analysis," participants shared the

internal struggles and dialogues they engaged in related to balancing the ideas of race cognizance and color-blindness.

**Race cognizance and colorblindness.** As indicated through the numerous internal dialogues, participants had a keen awareness of the importance of race cognizance, or the importance of recognizing the impact of race on people's lives. However, most participants also described struggling to make sense of the need for race cognizance in a world where politeness requires "colorblindness." In addition to internal dialogues, participants also shared examples of their struggles to find the balance between race cognizance and comfort. Jane discussed her experience with and ideas about the concept of colorblindness:

When people talk about color being invisible, I think that's total bullshit. I think that's crap. I'm not trying to be overly aware of what other people's race is, but I'm trying to be aware of how I reflect that in my interactions with people.

Numerous times throughout the interview process, Alice used the term "affirmative action" to refer to her interactions with People of Color, clearly struggling to make sense of her role as an anti-racist White ally:

I am realizing that in many ways I may take a personal leap of affirmative action through these actions, doing things for People of Color more so than White individuals. I suppose that this too is considered racism, though I am trying to correct my privilege. I am not seeking out friends of color, nor dressing as a Native American for Halloween, but it is so pervasive that my race is omnipresent in the minutest moments of daily living.

She continued explaining her thought process:

I guess it's just that feeling of not having to be so intentional about it, so you know, there's those conversations that you have that you're like, how do I acknowledge that we're different but not call you out about being different, or make you feel different, so much is like that's what I feel like this anti-racist concept is, is not having to think about it so hard, and I guess that's that feeling of, I always felt like I was doing some kind of an affirmative action vs. just living it and just doing it, and then being happily surprised by it later.

Potentially indicating her own process of understanding her White identity development, Alice named the difference as the “other” person being different, rather than her own skin color being “different.”

Jane provided an example from a work situation where she wanted to recognize, yet not tokenize, people based on her perception of their skin color:

I order books that have all these amazing things and sometimes people come into the store that appear to be a certain identity and then there’s this part of me that’s like, “oh, I want to show you these books but I can’t because that would be a totally inappropriate interaction to have” and so I’m stuck in like this, “well, I have this cool stuff but I can’t [show you] because we don’t know each other.”

Part of participants’ struggle to make sense of race cognizance was directly related to their concerns about appearing racist and wanting to be a “cool White person.” The women in the study used the term “cool White person” to describe how they wanted to appear to others, specifically People of Color. The women noted that many White people engage in racist behavior, and they desired to distance themselves from the racism of White people by being a “cool White person,” rather than a White person who engages in racist behavior.

**White feminists’ fear of appearing racist.** An underlying concern throughout the discussion about the internal dialogue and analysis of intersections included the fear of appearing racist and not being “good enough.” The women described their fear in numerous ways, sometimes focusing on the desire to be a “cool White person,” other times clearly naming their fear of appearing racist, and finally other times, sharing a desire to avoid unintentionally hurting other people. In addition to articulating the fear of appearing racist, the activists also described the consequences associated with this fear.

By not saying anything because they might hurt or offend someone, they were contributing to the problem of racism and oppression.

The women's transcripts were littered with notions of being a "good White person" and a "good feminist." In the very first interview, Carolyn named her fear related to engaging in anti-racist feminism. When I asked why she chose to participate in the research she said, "There's some guilt around it that I'm not as good of as feminist as someone else." In the focus group, Carolyn elaborated on this idea by sharing she experienced a significant amount of anxiety related to sharing her creative representation of anti-racism:

Let me just preface this with this is the most anxiety producing thing I've done in a while because I couldn't come up with anything, so I'm sorry that this is very low quality. And, let me also say, I had a dream that you (points to Jane) built a wall. (Laughter from the group). That's how much anxiety....I was like, "she built a wall!?" and I have a t-shirt.

I asked, "Have you all been talking about this? What do you mean, she built a wall?" and Carolyn responded, "No, that's what she did in my dream – she built a wall. And I was like, 'I've been so outdone.'" Further, Carolyn said to me as the facilitator and researcher, "You were really impressed by it."

One of Jane's comments at the focus group summarized what other participants shared throughout the process about their fear of being racist. The women connected the fear of appearing racist to the need to be "the best" or "right," traits that participants noted as often being socialized in White people:

For me, I think that wanting to be an awesome person and an awesome feminist and an awesome anti-racist feminist is directly tied to my fear of saying the wrong thing and of making, not of making mistakes, but just of making a fool of myself or that's where that quietness comes from...I guess it's just practice of being okay with not being right and I think it's really hard sometimes to accept that.

She continued by sharing:

There's this push among the feminist community sometimes to be the best feminist and how there this thing and it made me really think a lot about how we view our peers and our friends as we're doing all these things together and just the, like you said, "well I'm not the worst feminist," and we do that all the time, and it's like you said, it's a progression and something we all have to go through and it shouldn't be something where people are trying to one-up each other and I think especially in these communities, it's easy to look at your friend who's an activist and be like, "I can't believe you just said that," you know, and I think it's one thing to call someone out but I think it's different to just think that you know everything.

Miriam connected the idea of being "the best" to White socialization:

I think being the best feminist or being the best activist is a White thing, like I'm the best, no one else can be, that's not what it's about, about being beat at your activism, like it's about advocating for people and advocating for yourself.

Miriam also shared her perspective about her desires to be the "cool White person":

It's kind of silly but when I'm talking to someone outside my race, I would like that person to see me as a "cool" white person, I really try to be a good ally but sometimes I focus on race *too* much.

She further explained:

I know me and some other people get so much in your head, like especially when I talk to Person of Color, I'm so much like, "I'm not racist, I'm not racist." I'm so much in here (points at head) that I'm still being racist because I'm treating this person in a different way than if they were white.

Carolyn echoed Miriam's thoughts about striving to be the cool White person:

I don't want someone to think I'm racist. Miriam and I talked about this a lot, we want to be the cool White people, you know, you want people to think, "I trust you and know that you're reliable," but I don't want to say anything and have somebody be like, no you don't get it, exactly, so then I just don't say anything, which in turn is not making me any more cool, it's just making me the quiet one in the corner who doesn't say anything.

While the activists clearly articulated feelings of insecurity and fear, they also understood the consequences of these actions. Jane shared with the group her fear of

hurting people by saying the wrong thing, and the group proceeded to have a conversation about the implications of not doing anything out of fear. Jane said:

I think sometimes I'm afraid to say things because I don't want to offend people and so I just decide, I think that's one of the issues sometimes with activism is you don't want to offend anybody so you just decide to sit and be quiet and you're like, well, if I don't do anything, maybe I won't ...that's where the fear comes from for me.

Carolyn responded, "I struggle with that because if I don't say anything than nobody can be like, let's tweak the way you're thinking about that, so I miss a lot of opportunities to learn if I don't say anything." Carolyn further explained how she also misses out on relationships with people when she is afraid to be wrong:

I feel like I miss a whole layer of learning about a person if I am afraid to be wrong and when it is people that I'm comfortable being wrong with and I know that they're going to step in and say something or pull me aside and say something, then I feel like it is more ok for me to just say what I'm thinking or say what I want to say because then, because I know it's not going to be judged, but also because someone could give me a different perspective if I need it.

Georgia offered another perspective on the implications of wanting to be "right" in situations related to anti-racism or social justice:

In some ways I still feel like I'm in many interactions in some way, wanting to get my cookie, or get my pat on the back...I want to know that I communicated to somebody, "I'm a cool person, I know about these books, I ordered these books, I traveled to another place, I know that you're wearing the state sari of Cara and I lived there and let's talk about it" and it's this totally selfish desire to get validation from other people that I'm so critical of others for.

During the focus group, participants spent the most time discussing the issue of over-analysis and the fear of appearing racist, both validating each other's experiences and challenging each other to consider another viewpoint as highlighted here. The experiences of anti-racist feminist activists included exploring the importance of

community, engaging in everyday activism, and struggling to make sense of internal dialogue and over-analysis.

### **Chapter Summary**

The anti-racist White feminist activists who participated in this study shared poignant stories and experiences related to engaging in anti-racist feminism. Participants reflected on their experiences from childhood in school and with their families as well as collegiate and current workplace experiences. While participants shared similar sentiments and ideas related to anti-racist identity, they did not agree on everything. Because each participant minored in women's studies and many participants also took ethnic studies classes, they shared a similar academic background related to engaging in anti-racist feminism. However, each participant engaged in struggles related to activism in different ways – sometimes with friends and family and sometimes in the workplaces.

Participants' stories revealed themes related to understanding their anti-racist feminist and White identity development. Participants described anger and resistance, shame and guilt, creating their versions of whiteness, and pride in their racial identity as salient themes in their White identity development. The women's understanding of their White racial identity intensified as a result of engaging in anti-racist activism. For example, the feminists described their experiences in women's studies and ethnic studies classes as significantly influencing their understanding of anti-racism, and in turn, their understanding of their White identity.

The women in the study shared experiences that influenced their understanding of their identity as anti-racist White feminists. Each participant described ways her family influenced her understanding of herself and her identity as an anti-racist White feminists.

The families of all but one participant supported their commitment to social justice; one participant, Rhonda, grew up in a home where oppression manifested itself as domestic violence. Rhonda felt motivated to engage in social justice work because of the oppression she felt in her family. The feminists, all women's studies minors, explained how experiences in women's studies and ethnic studies classes influenced their commitment to and understanding of anti-racism. All of the participants named one common instructor in women's studies and ethnic studies as salient to her identity development.

The activists in this study also named activism and involvement as important in their development as an anti-racist feminist. All but one participant experienced sexual violence as either a primary or secondary survivor, leading to significant experiences with activism addressing sexual violence. Additionally, participants discussed engaging in community service, planning and participating in marches and protests, and diversity involvement prior to college as salient experiences.

Next, participants described relationships with people of color, or lack thereof, as significant in their development. The feminists talked about going to elementary and high school in a "diverse" part of town or attending school with "all White people" as salient. Additionally, several of the women discussed the importance of having People of Color in their classes in college. While the women were careful not to tokenize the People of Color with whom they interacted, the women also noted the value of multiple and varying perspectives in their classes. Finally, participants shared numerous examples of ways racism in their circle of friends and in their families influenced them. Most of the activists shared they recognized times in their lives prior to college when they felt

uncomfortable with a situation or experience, yet did not have the language or knowledge to articulate why they believed the interaction felt wrong. After starting college, the women could identify the racism or sexism present in previous interactions, developing the knowledge and language to address such situations.

Finally, participants shared commonalities related to their experiences in engaging as an anti-racist feminist, including the importance of community, everyday activism, and internal dialogue and over-analysis. Because four of the six women in the study graduated college prior to engaging in the research, they shared experiences of isolation in their current workplaces and social communities related to social justice. The women shared stories of situations at work and with friends and family where they experienced isolation and struggled to find their voices to interrupt racism or sexism. On the other hand, the feminists also shared examples of times they engaged in everyday activism by informally addressing racist or sexist behavior or sharing a new perspective with a friend or acquaintance.

The women in the study also shared their struggles to engage in anti-racist activism, including the internal dialogues and hyper-awareness they felt related to their ability to interrupt racism. Through stories and written reflections, the women shared examples of the internal dialogue they had related to engaging in anti-racist behavior. The women shared poignant examples of times their internal dialogue and hyper-awareness caused more harm than good. When the internal dialogue took over, participants expressed feelings of paralysis related to action. Because they were afraid to be “wrong” in how they addressed a particular situation, they chose not to address it at all. Further, the women examined the concept of striving to be a “cool White person,” in

contrast to the examples of whiteness they had experienced their whole lives. The feminists openly shared their struggles in seeking validation for their work as allies. Even though the women recognized the harm in working as an ally because it “made them look good,” rather than because it was the right thing to do, they struggled to find support without seeking validation from People of Color.

The women in this study openly shared their ideas, experiences, and struggles related to anti-racist activism. By sharing these stories, participants shed light on the importance of community in anti-racist activism and the significant influences in their development as an anti-racist feminist. In the next chapter, I share my perspective on the meaning of these stories, connect the women’s examples to the literature on anti-racist activism, and provide implications for educators and scholars.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this study, I explored ways White college women make meaning of whiteness and engage in anti-racist activism through feminism. As director of a women's center and instructor for women's studies for several years, I observed many White college women engage in a transformative learning experiences related to their racial identity. Through this study, I sought to explore the experiences which informed White feminist college women's understanding of their racial identity and their commitment to anti-racism. Further, I wanted to examine ways White anti-racist feminist women engaged in anti-racist activism. White racial identity and commitment to anti-racism can be two separate identities, but for these women the two intertwined in both concrete and abstract ways.

The research questions guiding this study included: How do White college women who identify as feminist understand their White racial identity? How do White college women who identify as feminist engage in anti-racist work? What experiences influenced feminist White college women's understanding of whiteness and White privilege? Participants' stories provide insight related to these research questions and beyond.

In this chapter, I integrate the women's stories, exploring the feminists' descriptions of their identity development processes, influences on their identity

development, and the implications of “hyper-awareness” and internal dialogue. Connecting participants’ stories and the literature on White racial identity development and anti-racist feminism provides a context for further understanding the themes present in this study. Additionally, I share implications of this research for social justice educators, student affairs professionals, and faculty. Directions for future research related to White anti-racist identity development conclude the chapter.

### **Discussion**

The feminists in this study shared stories and experiences highlighting their identity development processes as anti-racist White feminist activists. Participants described experiences influencing their development as anti-racist activists, including their White racial identity. Further, the activists shared their experiences engaging in anti-racist activism, highlighting the struggles and challenges they encountered in their processes.

#### **Identity Development Processes**

One of the purposes of this study included examining participants’ White racial identities and their identities as anti-racist activists. Not surprisingly, participants in this study did not separate the two identities and often integrated ideas about their various socially constructed identities in conversations about race and anti-racism. For example, participants commonly discussed experiences of sexism as salient to their understanding of White identity and anti-racist activism. Rhonda and Miriam both identified instances in women’s studies classes, which they enrolled in to examine the sexism they experienced, as salient in their understanding of racism and White privilege. Four

participants described incidents in their religious backgrounds that allowed them to better comprehend their identities as anti-racist activists.

Congruent with the literature on multiple identity development (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones, 1997), the women in this study considered their identities to intersect with each other. While some identities felt more salient than others depending on the context in which the participants found themselves, the feminists acknowledged the complexities of understanding their multiple and intersecting identities. Jane provided an example of this complexity when she shared that she felt self-conscious of her identity as a woman because she was a “thin, blond woman with big boobs.” After sharing this example, she felt guilty because she felt like she minimized the experiences Women of Color had with racism by focusing on the sexism she felt by meeting the stereotypical definitions of beauty in mainstream U.S. culture.

Through their experiences with anti-racist activism, the women in this study further defined what they understood about their White racial identity. Many people in mainstream U.S. culture define whiteness as the norm or default race, failing to examine White culture or the meaning of whiteness (Kendall, 2006; Lawrence, 1997; Wise, 2005). The activists described their experiences understanding their whiteness similarly. While they recognized they were “White” prior to engaging in anti-racist work, their experiences as anti-racist activists allowed them to examine their White racial identity in more depth. Prior to comprehending the concept of racism, participants recognized they had White skin and they lived in areas separate from People of Color, yet they did not understand the privilege associated with their White skin. As they engaged in relationships with Friends of Color through school and co-curricular activities, the

women began to understand the implications of their White skin. Georgia shared a story of a romantic relationship she had with an undocumented Mexican man in high school. While Georgia knew she identified as White and her boyfriend as Latino, the privilege associated with her White skin became more salient when she rode in the car with her boyfriend, who consistently drove below the speed limit and drove carefully to avoid being pulled over by police. Further, Georgia and her boyfriend broke up because his family was deported back to Mexico from living in the United States. When Georgia stated she wanted to stay with her boyfriend and attempt to maintain a long distance relationship, he indicated she could never understand what he was dealing with, another point at which she examined her White privilege.

Five of the women in this study clearly connected their experiences with feminism and anti-racist activism, seeing feminism as a movement to end sexism and all of the other oppression connected with sexism, including racism, classism, and homophobia. Participants strove to integrate their feminist and anti-racist identities, acknowledging the history of racism in the feminist movement (Thompson, 2002). For one participant, Alice, feminism and anti-racism seemed to compete for her attention. Alice shared numerous examples of situations where she felt as though she was supposed to be aware of the dynamics of racism, yet struggled to articulate her role as an anti-racist ally. She expressed frustration when people asked her to consider race in her feminist work, stating she did not have the resources to address racism in her work to end sexism. Instead of viewing systems of oppression as inter-locking, Alice considered sexism to be separate and more “personal” than other kinds of oppression. Failing to note the White privilege inherent in her statement, “sexism is the most obvious form of oppression...the

most pervasive, the most personal,” Alice perpetuated continued separation between feminism and anti-racism. Alice self-identified as an anti-racist feminist and her knowledge and language often matched that of other participants engaged in anti-racist feminism. However, Alice lacked the ability to provide concrete examples of engaging in anti-racist feminism. She recognized examples in her family situation where race intersected with gender to influence her cousins’ lives, yet she could not articulate the ways her cousins experienced systemic racism. Instead, she attributed their situations to individual circumstances that had “nothing to do with race,” engaging in power-evasive ideology, or the belief that race exists, yet it has little influence on people’s lives (Frankenberg, 1993). Alice differed from the other women in this study as she strove to find the balance between race cognizance and power-evasiveness. While she recognized the significance race had in people’s lives, she also struggled to understand the complexities of systems of oppression in her analysis of racism, or the connection between racism and sexism.

### **Influences on Identity Development**

The women in this study discussed various influences on their identity development process. Family members, activism and involvement, women’s studies and ethnic studies coursework, and relationships with People of Color all influenced the women. Each of the participants named their families as significant in their identity development, as anti-racist activists, feminists, and White people. Five of the women named mothers, grandmothers, and aunts as positive role models in their feminist identity development. One feminist, Georgia, described the connection between social justice activism and her family’s Jewish religion. Carolyn also shared experiences where she

engaged in formal activism with members of her family, highlighting the March for Women's Lives in 2004 as a salient turning point in her feminist identity development. Three of the other feminists indicated their families provided support to them in their activism and ideas related to social justice. Finally, Rhonda's family propelled her to activism from a different perspective. Because Rhonda felt traumatized by several experiences from her childhood as a result of her father's behavior and the church of which her family was a member, she felt motivated to find community to understand her situation. Feminism helped her understand her childhood experiences with sexism and further allowed her to explore childhood experiences with overt racism from her father.

In addition to participants' families, the women described transformative experiences in women's studies and ethnic studies classrooms related to their anti-racist identity development. Engaging in various co-curricular activities allowed the women to integrate the materials they learned in their classes to the experiences they had outside the classroom, resulting in integrated learning (Keeling, 2004). The feminists in this study described specific instances and people who influenced their development, noting the importance of People of Color in their development as anti-racist White allies. While participants strove not to tokenize People of Color by asking their Peers of Color to educate them about their experiences with racism, the women did articulate specific instances where they learned from a Student or Faculty of Color through the personal narratives they shared in classrooms. The women in this study clearly have their cultures and may understand their cultures differently based on the various ethnic identities present in their families, relationships with People of Color helped the White feminists in this study understand the culture associated with whiteness. Many people consider

whiteness regularly considered the norm in mainstream U.S. culture (Kendall, 2006; Lawrence, 1997; Wise, 2005). The feminists articulated the importance of learning about things other than the “norm” to improve their comprehension of their privileged identities, including White privilege.

### **Engaging in Anti-Racist Activism**

The activists’ stories illuminated successes and challenges associated with engaging in anti-racist activism. The women in this study shared salient examples of employing everyday activism in their jobs and relationships with friends and family members. Additionally, participants discussed internal dialogue and hyperawareness as part of their struggle to engage in anti-racist activism. While the feminists clearly articulated the consequences of paralysis connected to hyperawareness, they also discussed their struggles to negotiate this tension.

The activists in this study engaged in everyday activism by sharing their perspectives and ideas with people in their circles of influence. For example, both Jane and Rhonda shared salient examples of raising awareness about equality in their workplaces. Jane regularly challenged customers at the toy store where she works to consider purchasing toys outside the typical “gender box” for children. To ensure the boys she works with gain awareness of social issues, Rhonda provides opportunities for them to attend at least two cultural events per month. Other participants shared examples of self-awareness related to everyday activism, noting times when they changed their language or behavior after reflecting on how their actions might impact another person negatively.

The internal dialogue in which the activists engaged often resulted in paralysis or inaction. Describing feelings of fear, activists explained instances in which they did not address a racist or sexist action of another person because they did not know if their response would be the correct one. The activists discussed an intense feeling of the fear of appearing racist as prohibiting their actions. Closely related to the guilt they felt associated with their White privilege, the feminists feared appearing racist, like the other White people they knew. Carolyn specifically articulated her fear of appearing racist as directly tied to her dislike of “racist White people.” She wanted People of Color to see her as “different from other White people.” The other women nodded in agreement when Carolyn shared her perspective, and the discussion of the idea of being a “cool White person” gained momentum. All of the activists connected to the idea of wanting to be different from other White people, and strove to be the “cool White person” in their interactions with People of Color. However, the feminists were acutely aware of the consequences of this behavior. Carolyn clearly noted that when she did not speak up out of fear, she missed opportunities for learning and growth. Speaking up gave others the opportunity to engage her in discussion related to her ideas and beliefs, resulting in greater self-awareness and new ideas for her to consider.

Additionally, the women discussed the need for validation in their roles as anti-racist allies. Georgia raised the idea at the focus group, acknowledging her “over-analysis” of situations often results from her desire to get a “pat on the back” for her ally behavior. While Georgia explained she is very critical of this behavior in other people, she also acknowledged that she sometimes found herself engaging in similar behavior. The experiences shared by the women in this study closely mirrored a model for ally

identity development that describes an aspiring ally motivated by “looking good” as an aspiring ally for altruism (Edwards, 2006).

Edwards’ (2006) model examines three types of allies – aspiring allies for self-interest, aspiring allies for altruism, and allies for social justice. Acting as protectors of those who experience oppression, aspiring allies for self-interest generally feel motivated by a connection to a person, rather than an issue (Edwards, 2006). For example, an anti-racist aspiring ally for self-interest may address acts of racism directed at their friend who identifies as a Person of Color, but may not address acts of racism they observe in other situations. An aspiring ally for altruism often feels motivated by the guilt and shame they feel in relation to their privileged identity (Edwards, 2006). In this study, the women described numerous instances where they behaved as an aspiring ally for altruism, motivated by the guilt and shame associated with their White privilege. Finally, allies for social justice understand the connection between oppression and privilege and recognize the ways they are hurt by oppression, even in their privileged identities (Edwards, 2006). The women in this study also described some instances where they acted based on a common interest or understanding, recognizing the ways in which they were harmed by racism. For example, Carolyn shared her experience in classrooms where the professor did not recognize racism and oppression. When professors ignored issues of oppression out of ignorance, Carolyn believed she missed opportunities to learn about experiences of people different from her own, an example of how racism hurt Carolyn as a White person.

The internal dialogue participants described, along with their discussion about “over-analysis” and “hyper-awareness” felt strikingly clear and consistent among

participants. During the focus group, the energy shifted and the discussion grew more intense, indicating a connection among participants around this topic. One by one, the women shared stories of situations where they lost their voices, not knowing how to respond to a particular situation. The feminists also shared times when they knew they should be interrupting racism, yet struggled to know how to do it “right,” resulting in them not doing anything at all.

The activists’ descriptions of the thought processes and internal dialogue they engage in when interacting with People of Color provided insight into challenges of authentic relationships between White students and Students of Color. White students struggling to ensure they do not “appear racist” or unintentionally tokenize People of Color results in a lack of authenticity in their interactions, resulting in limited opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with people outside of their race. Further, the feminists in this study acknowledged they also felt the pressure to be a “cool White person” with other anti-racist activists, resulting in potentially superficial relationships with other White people as well, further isolating anti-racist White activists from each other. White guilt and shame tangled with the importance of individualism present in White culture (Kendall, 2006; Watt, 2007), results in a constant fear of appearing racist for these anti-racist White activists.

Navigating a confusing web of guilt, shame, isolation, and inadequacy proves exhausting for the people striving to act as allies and unhelpful for those suffering from systemic racism. While providing opportunities for White students to explore feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation is crucial for supporting them in their anti-racist identity development, it must be done with caution. Conversations about White guilt and shame

may unintentionally shift the focus from understanding racism to placing the experiences of White people back at the center of the conversation (Alcoff, 1998).

Participants in this study also described instances of confidence and success in acting as anti-racist allies. Alice and Georgia described instances when they experienced a boost in self-confidence as a result of interrupting a racist behavior on the part of a friend or family member. Casually addressing a homophobic comment in the moment allowed Georgia to gain confidence in challenging oppression. Alice engaged a roommate in a longer discussion about her White racial identity development, resulting in a shift in her roommate's understanding of the privilege she received as a result of her White skin.

The women also described meaningful relationships with other anti-racist White activists and People of Color. Several participants described instances when they felt accepted in a community of other social justice activists, engaging in authentic relationships with people who shared values of equity. "It feels like taking off tight pants," Miriam explained when she described her relationships with other social justice allies. She felt comfortable, rejuvenated, and validated by people who struggled with similar issues as her. Each woman described a relationship or a group where she felt as though she could be her whole self, engaging authentically with other social justice allies.

### **White Racial Identity Development**

Scholars examining White racial identity development highlight various stages, statuses or typologies White people engage in related to understanding their White identity. Helms & Cook (1999/2005) illustrate statuses of White racial identity development includes seven statuses of development: contact, disintegration,

reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion, emersion, and autonomy. The model explores ways White people develop specifically in relationship to People of Color. The model assumes a linear developmental process, beginning with little or no knowledge of racial identity, moving through various stages of acceptance of White privilege, ending with an understanding of White identity as central to a person's identity.

Rowe et al. (1994) developed the White Racial Consciousness Statuses (WRCS) as a typology model, highlighting their ideas that White identity development is not linear in nature. WRCS examines unachieved and achieved racial consciousness statuses, which closely relate to Helms & Cooks' (1995/2005) model of White racial identity development. The unachieved statuses include avoidant, dependant, and dissonant; the achieved statuses include dominative, conflictive, reactive, and integrative (Rowe et al., 1994). The statuses describe various ways White people engage in understanding their White racial identity.

Finally, Hardiman (2001) developed a model White Racial Identity describing White individual's process of understanding whiteness and White privilege. The stages of the model include no consciousness of race, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization. The experiences of participants in this study closely aligned with Hardiman's (2001) model. Participants described an understanding of their racial identity development as a process. Consistent with much of Hardiman's model, the women described developmental processes starting at no awareness of their racial identity through striving to have pride in their racial identity. Also consistent with the model, participants described their understanding of their racial identity as directly related to White privilege and an awareness of racism (Hardiman, 2001). Most women's stories

focused on their experiences in the resistance and redefinition stages, striving for internalization (Hardiman, 2001). The experiences of the activists who participated in this study provide insight into the process of development between the final two stages of the model: redefinition to internalization.

Hardiman's (2001) model consists of five stages: no social consciousness of race or naiveté, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization. Participants clearly articulated experience related to each of these stages with the exception of acceptance. Each woman reflected on times when she exhibited an unawareness of race. Usually, participants described experiences in their childhood when they considered their racial identity to be the "norm" and described situations in which they came into contact with the "other" in relation to their racial identity and the impact that had on their development. For example, Miriam shares in her racial auto-biography that she does not remember consciously thinking about being White until she had a negative interaction with a group of People of Color:

I don't think I started thinking of myself as "White" until high school. Once I was on the light rail with my sister and some other kids got on (who happened to be black) we started talking and they asked what high school I went to. When they heard I went to [high school] they started yelling "Fuck [high school], fuck all the White kids." It made me feel *very* uncomfortable and to be completely honest I didn't feel comforted until a group of (White) men got on the light rail. I was very ashamed of myself; I felt like I was a racist. That's the first time I felt like a "white lady."

Other participants shared similar sentiments related to their lack of consciousness of race, which closely resembles Hardiman's stage of naiveté in the White Racial Identity Model.

Feminist activists in this study did not describe experiences directly related to the acceptance stage Hardiman (2001) describes in her model. In the acceptance stage, individuals subscribe to a belief in the superiority of whiteness. While the women in this

study may have participated in this stage of development, they did not share those experiences with me. However, the activists in this study described numerous experiences consistent with the resistance stage. During the resistance stage, White people begin to understand racism and their role in addressing racist oppression. Additionally, White people often experience significant guilt and shame associated with their racial identity during the resistance stage. In this study, participants described salient experiences with guilt and shame related to their White identity. Activists in this study described distancing themselves from other White people as a coping strategy for managing the guilt and shame they experienced. Additionally, some women participated in cultural appropriation as a way to feel better about being White. Jane shared salient experiences where she over-identified with her cousins who had a Mexican father and who were born in Mexico:

I had a little bit of my own cultural appropriation going on there. I was just really clinging to that part of my family even though it's not my blood culture and it made me feel better about being White, you know?

According to Hardiman's (2001) White racial identity model, White people move from resistance to redefinition, where they learn to redefine their racial identity on their terms. The women in this study clearly articulated their struggles in attempting to create their definitions of whiteness. Many White people exploring their White racial identity, including participants in this study, "conflate race and racism," as Georgia described. We (White people) note the instances when we observe White people perpetuating racism and internalize the idea that White people are responsible for building and maintaining systems of racism (Kendall, 2006). Often attempts to understand whiteness center around experiences of the perpetuation of racism and receiving White privilege, which results in

a negative perception of whiteness. While recognizing White privilege is an important part of understanding White identity, redefining whiteness also requires people to consider the positive or neutral components of White culture (Wise, 2005). Participants in this study struggled to identify components of White culture. Because whiteness is considered the “norm” in mainstream U.S. culture, most people cannot identify specific components of White culture because they are just considered “the way it is.” The women in this study illustrated this when I asked them what White culture meant to them and they could not define it. In order for White people to move to the final stage of White racial identity, internalization, they must understand and articulate White culture and its influence on the world around them. Ironically, the inability to name and describe components of White culture is a form of White privilege (Kendall, 2006), the exact problem White anti-racist activists are striving to address.

Internalization, the final stage of the White racial identity model, happens when White people integrate an understanding of race and racism into all aspects of their lives (Hardiman, 2001). The women in this study argued that anti-racism is a process, not a final stage to be “achieved.” As self-aware young women and activists, participants provided significant insight into the process of development between the final two stages of the model, from redefinition to internalization. While participants clearly understood their responsibility to address privilege in their role as a White person, they also struggled to incorporate this into every aspect of their lives without it taking over their thought processes and interactions. Participants’ experiences attempting to incorporate an understanding of race and racism into every aspect of their lives resulted in paralysis and inauthenticity. While most participants recognized the consequences of their hyper-

awareness and over-analysis of situations, they struggled to find the balance between race cognizance (Frankenberg, 1993) and authenticity. In the next section, I explore the concepts of color-evasiveness, power-evasiveness, and race cognizance (Frankenberg, 1993) as they relate to participant experiences.

### **White Anti-Racist Activism**

Research on the experiences of White anti-racist activists maintains a strong focus on the importance of self-awareness (Applebaum, 2007; Eichstedt, 2001). The anti-racist activist literature stresses the importance of understanding the complicit role that many White people play in perpetuating racism and White privilege (Eichstedt, 2001). Related to knowing themselves and self-awareness, understanding the cognitive, emotional, and behavior components of anti-racism propels activists forward in engaging in anti-racist White activism (O'Brien, 2001). The women in the current study clearly recognized the cognitive dimension of anti-racism, sometimes to the detriment of their ability to engage in the behavioral components of anti-racism. For example, many participants focused on their experiences in classrooms related to understanding their anti-racist White identity, articulating their understanding of racism and White privilege as knowledge, rather than feelings. Miriam described instances of being “too much in her head,” acknowledging the ways she “over-analyzed” interactions with People of Color. She strove to show her knowledge about racism, the cognitive dimension, to the detriment of the emotional dimension of understanding racism.

Most participants considered the emotional component of anti-racist work as a secondary aspect of engaging in anti-racism. As described, much of the conversation in the interviews and focus group revolved around the cognitive aspects of engaging in anti-

racism. Two participants, Jane and Rhonda, described feelings related to anti-racism and White privilege. Jane cried at multiple points during the interviews as she discussed the pain she felt in unlearning her racist tendencies and Rhonda described intense emotional reactions to the relationships she had with the boys she worked with in the residential facility, indicating their internalization of the emotional components of anti-racist work.

Many participants in this study had limited interactions with and close relationships with People of Color, which may have contributed to their lack of emotions related to anti-racist activism. White anti-racist feminists in this inquiry lacked an important emotional connection resulting in over-analysis and intellectualization of anti-racist activism. Participants noted the importance of not tokenizing People of Color, yet often lacked the in-depth relationships described in previous literature about anti-racist activism. For example, Frankenberg (1993) dedicates two chapters of her book to the significance of the relationships participants in her study had with People of Color. Participants in the current study strove not to tokenize People of Color and engaged in so much internal analysis of race that they could not engage in authentic relationships with People of Color for fear of saying the wrong thing or “appearing racist.” Participants’ attempts not to tokenize People of Color perpetuated the exact problem they were trying to address. By limiting their interactions with People of Color out of fear of ignorance, participants may have unintentionally contributed to further marginalization of People of Color by failing to allow People of Color to practice their agency by naming experiences of marginalization. Additionally, by not engaging in authentic relationships with People of Color, participants missed important opportunities for continued self-reflection and growth, as eloquently noted by Carolyn in Chapter V.

### **Anti-Racist Feminism**

Ruth Frankenberg (1993) provided the seminal study on the experiences of White women and their understanding of racism. In the 1980's, she talked with 30 White women who engaged in community activism in California. Participants in her study grew up in various places in the United States, resulting in wide variety of experiences and understandings. Participants' understanding of race fell into four major categories: essentialist racism, color-evasiveness, power-evasiveness, and race-cognizance.

Essentialist racism refers to the idea of explicit or overt racism and includes statements like, "All Black people are on welfare." Essentialism reduces people to one aspect of their identity and groups and stereotypes them based on that identity. People subscribing to color or power-evasiveness ignore or downplay the concepts of racism. Similar to color-blindness, color-evasiveness ignores race and statements illustrating color-evasiveness might include, "I don't see color. Everyone is the same to me." Closely related, power-evasiveness refers to the idea that race is real, yet does not have consequences. "Red, yellow, brown, or black – it doesn't matter to me" describes the perspective of someone who subscribes to power-evasiveness. Finally, in race cognizance, people recognize race and the influence race has on people's experiences.

Acknowledging race allows people to recognize a significant aspect of a person's identity. A race cognizant statement might include, "I realize I am White and I understand some privilege that goes with my White skin."

While the women in the current study illustrated examples of racial understandings in all four categories, their experiences primarily focused on their struggle to find the balance between race-cognizance and authenticity. The activists in this study

understood the importance of race-cognizance, or the ability to recognize the influence race has in people's lives and experiences. For participants in this study, race-cognizance was something easier said than done. As described previously, participants spent a significant amount of time and energy analyzing their interactions with People of Color. While participants clearly noted the inauthenticity this perpetuated in their relationships with People of Color, they also struggled to find the balance between being aware of race and not tokenizing people based on their perceived race. Closely related to their desires to be seen as a "good White person," participants wanted People of Color to know that they could "trust" them. The women expressed concerns about unintentionally hurting someone as a result of their ignorance about a topic or "appearing racist," which often resulted in them not saying anything or not engaging in relationships with People of Color.

Because participants learned to think critically about situations and their role in perpetuating White privilege, they often engaged in internal dialogue about the potential outcomes of a situation in which they found themselves. This internal dialogue resulted in being too much "in their head" which then resulted in inauthentic relationships with People of Color. The implications of this finding are monumental, providing insight for educators striving to support White students in their ally development.

### **Implications for Educators**

While I appear to criticize participants for their inability to engage in authentic relationships in the previous section, here I advocate the responsibility of educators to address the issue of over-analysis and intellectualization of anti-racism. The continued separation of academic and student affairs, traditional ideas about the role of emotion in

academics, and distance between educators and students contribute to a culture of separation of cognitive and emotional components of anti-racist activism. In this section, I name the importance of integrated learning, community building, and self-awareness as implications of this work on anti-racist White feminist identity development.

### **Integrated Learning**

Intellectualization continues to permeate institutions of higher education, often minimizing feelings associated with content of material taught in academic course work (Rendón, 2009). Scholars from historically marginalized populations, including women and People of Color, have advocated for a broader, more holistic approach to education for years (hooks, 1994, 2003; Rendón, 2009); however, in their quest for academic rigor, professors often separate head from heart, resulting in compartmentalized learning (Rendón, 2009). Student affairs educators are often charged with facilitating the emotional and spiritual growth of students on campus (Keeling, 2004). A continued separation between student affairs and academic affairs, supported by a division between cognitive and emotional learning perpetuates the problem of over-analysis and intellectualization of issues related to anti-racist development.

Previous scholars support the notions of integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components when supporting students in ally development (Edwards, 2006; O'Brien, 2001). When people understand the dynamics of racism (cognitive), feel the consequences of racism (emotional), and act on the combination of their knowledge and feelings (behavioral), a sustainable ally develops (O'Brien, 2001). If a person over-emphasizes either their feelings or knowledge associated with racism, they cannot truly commit to anti-racism because their transformation is incomplete. Currently, the

structures of institutions of higher education, created by and for members of dominant cultures, support the separation of head and heart, resulting in few opportunities for students to fully engage and develop a strong commitment to anti-racism prior to graduating from college (Rendón, 2009).

Participants noted the significance of their classroom experiences on their understanding of anti-racism, clearly articulating faculty's contribution to the on-going development of anti-racist White allies. Largely focusing on the knowledge associated with racism and oppression, classroom experiences provided an essential component of the activists' ability to critically analyze situations. As previously noted, some participants did not balance this critical analysis with a healthy emotional connection to understanding racism and oppression. Student affairs professionals are often charged with managing the emotional aspects of students' development. As student affairs educators and faculty have similar goals, yet differing expectations for how to achieve those goals, working together to engage students connecting cognitive and emotional learning processes is important (Keeling, 2004).

One way to connect cognitive and emotional learning processes is to integrate classroom and out-of-classroom activities. Student affairs educators and faculty share the responsibility for integration of head and heart. When student affairs professionals and social justice educators on campuses are aware of the cognitive dimensions of what students learn in their classes, they can facilitate conversations connecting the co-curricular activities students engage in outside of the classroom with their coursework. Even courses that traditionally focus solely on the cognitive dimensions of learning have a human component; helping students to draw out the human component of their content

and the influence the topical area has on people contributes to more holistic learning. For example, students might connect what they learn in their biology class with public health concerns, resulting in a stronger connection between the cognitive and emotional aspects of their learning.

All of the participants described experiences in ethnic studies and women's studies classes that shaped their understanding of anti-racist identity development. Additionally, each activist described instances when she integrated what she learned in the classroom to something going on in her life outside of it. Carolyn discussed her experiences on an Alternative Spring Break trip and Rhonda described ways her friends in her sorority re-emphasized what she learned about White privilege in her classes by "calling her out" when she spoke over them. When faculty provide opportunities for students to bring personal situations and experiences into conversations related to the course material, students more clearly understand the course material and integrate it more fully into their lives. While this is important for any discipline, it may hold special relevance in women's studies and ethnic studies coursework as the material directly relates to daily experiences of people in the classroom.

### **Community Building**

Participants expressed the importance of building community to explore their anti-racist identity. Often feeling isolated in their work, students and graduates disengage from anti-racism because they lack a community to support and validate their experiences and provide the space to continue to learn and grow. Participants in this study noted the importance of having spaces of other anti-racist White feminists to engage in discussions related to their work. While student affairs professionals and social justice educators

sometimes shy away from creating spaces for students to explore their dominant identities for fear of “appearing racist” or further marginalizing Students of Color, creating spaces to explore whiteness benefits many groups in the long run. Creating opportunities for White anti-racist allies to explore their experiences as allies provides a space for them to openly identify their struggles and challenges related to understanding White privilege. The guilt and shame associated with White racial identity development often further marginalizes People of Color because it distracts from issues of racism to re-center White people’s experiences (Accapadi, 2007). Guilt and shame appear to be a natural part of White identity development, so creating opportunities for White students to explore these feelings without further marginalizing People of Color benefits multiple groups.

Creating built in systems of accountability is crucial to creating programs for students to explore their White identity, similar to engaging men as allies to women (Linder & Johnson, 2010). Facilitators of White privilege groups should identify as White and have on-going discussions with People of Color to ensure they are continuing to address and challenge students’ understanding of White privilege. Additionally, White privilege groups should be a complement to the other groups working to address racism on campus, not a detraction. With limited resources available to social justice and multiculturalism work, groups focusing on privileged identities should not be center stage, nor should they utilize limited resources available to programs and services for historically under-represented populations. For professionals and educators with dominant identities (i.e. White), this is an opportunity to take responsibility for and use

privilege to improve campus climate. Engaging in social justice work through our privileged identities requires time, but should not require money.

The activists in this study also lacked meaningful relationships with People of Color. Supporting students in building authentic relationships with people outside of their race proves challenging. Literature about campus climate also supports the importance of inter-racial relationships as a component of a healthy campus climate (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Maintaining current support networks and cultural centers is crucial to the on-going support of Students of Color on predominantly White campuses; additionally, supporting White students in their desires to engage in anti-racist activism requires they cultivate authentic and meaningful relationships with People of Color. Sincere and authentic relationships often grow from shared experiences, including co-curricular, classroom, and work experiences. Participants noted the importance of relationships built based on a common understanding of social justice which resulted in opportunities for them to learn from each other and engage authentically without fear of doing or saying something wrong. For example, Carolyn shared an example of a friend she met through engaging in social justice activities including participating in an Alternative Spring Break trip and an on-campus work experience. This particular friend identified as a Person of Color and Carolyn articulated the importance of this relationship in her on-going anti-racist development:

But, I guess, it depends, like, [co-worker] who I got to know really well, I don't feel like I talk to [her] any differently or like she's any different than I was, but at the same time, I knew I could make jokes that she would understand where I was coming from with it, and if I said something that maybe wasn't all that ok, she probably would have called me out on it...

The relationship which developed based on a shared experience did not focus on race, yet the inter-racial nature of the relationship contributed to Carolyn's understanding of racism and White privilege.

In addition to the lack of ability to understand the emotional components of the consequences of racism, lack of relationships with People of Color also results in lack of accountability for anti-racist work. In this context, accountability refers to the responsibility associated with the label "anti-racist." In striving to be anti-racist allies, White people must understand the consequences of their actions and have people in their lives who can assist in the on-going process of further understanding, unearned and often unnoticed, privilege. Similar to the ways that men need to be accountable to women in the pro-feminist men's movement, White people must have People of Color in their lives to hold them accountable and help them to engage in their continued development. The importance of accountability cannot be understated, yet the complexity of developing mutually beneficial relationships, rather than tokenizing People of Color to serve as the sole educators on racism remains challenging.

While many participants did not name relationships with People of Color as essential to their development as anti-racist White allies, they did name the importance of authentic relationships with faculty members, many times Faculty of Color, in their development. Georgia described an example of a faculty member "calling her out" related to her White privilege, resulting in a growth experience for Georgia. She articulated the importance of the relationship with this faculty member in her ability to hear what he said to hear and his comfort level in challenging her. Georgia's relationship

with this professor developed because she took a course from him and he served as an advisor to a student organization of which she was a member.

Several participants named another ethnic studies faculty member as having a significant influence on their understanding of racism. This particular faculty member is known among the students as facilitating academically rigorous courses and having an “open door policy.” The professor’s office hours are always busy, indicating students’ comfort in talking with her outside of class and her commitment to being available for students. She regularly invites students to engage in her research and was quite visible at campus-diversity programs and events.

Student affairs professionals’ roles allow them to facilitate opportunities for students to engage in mutually beneficial inter-racial relationships. By intentionally working to ensure the programs they create welcome students from various backgrounds, student affairs professionals contribute to building an environment in which students might build authentic relationships with one another. Additionally, by role modeling on-going relationships and involvement in campus programs related to raising awareness about race, White student affairs professionals emphasize the importance of on-going education and relationship building. Engaging in anti-racist work requires on-going development and self-awareness. When students observe staff engaging in on-going development and observe professionals identifying their privilege, students learn to do the same.

### **Opportunities for Self-Reflection**

Social justice educators strive to raise awareness about individual’s personal identities and their impact on the world around them (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). For

decades, multicultural education focused on learning about *other* cultures to be more sensitive and aware of what makes *other* cultures *different*, resulting in perpetuating the normality of the dominant group (Elhoweris, Parameswaran, & Alsheikh, 2004). More recent social justice education strategies include examining the self as a form of awareness building (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). By understanding one's own identities, both dominant and subordinated, students better understand their relationship to the environment around them and understand the ways they may unintentionally contribute to marginalization of people with different subordinated identities than them. For example, if a White person is aware of the concept of White privilege and the ways they experience White privilege, they maybe be more aware of the ways their Peers of Color do not experience the same privileges. This awareness often translates into action related to anti-racism in the form of interrupting privilege, acknowledging difference, and challenging racism of other White people.

The experiences of participants in this study support the notion that awareness of self contributes to an increased commitment to anti-racist activism. Feminist activists described their process of understanding their privilege and how they strove to incorporate this awareness into their everyday actions. Student affairs professionals regularly facilitate opportunities related to students' personal awareness and self-reflection (Keeling, 2004). By incorporating reflection about students' dominant identities, including their White racial identity, educators continue to support and facilitate students' self-awareness and reflection, and by extension, students' development.

Additionally, asking students to explore feelings associated with the material they learn in class contributes to deeper awareness and understanding. For example, when White students first begin to explore the concept of White privilege, they may feel anger, shame, or guilt as a result of their new understanding or knowledge they have. When students have the opportunity to express those feelings, rather than being expected to stifle them and focus on the “facts” of the situation, they move through the feelings of guilt and shame more quickly, and moving to their role as an ally.

In some cases, self-awareness may have been taken to the extreme, as participants noted several instances of their awareness and caution of unintentionally exerting their White privilege or lack of awareness contributing to paralysis in action. While it is important for people to analyze their interactions critically and to have awareness of their identities, doing so at the price of inauthenticity further contributes to racism and marginalization. By engaging in intentional conversations with students about the consequences of inaction and inauthenticity, educators might help students to work through confusion related to over-analysis.

Educators responsible for the development of students as responsible citizens contribute significantly to the development of anti-racist White allies. By providing opportunities for integrated learning, working to intentionally build diverse communities, and supporting students in their process of self-awareness and reflection, educators continue to support ally development. In addition to the implications for educators – both student affairs professionals and faculty – this study also contributes to scholarship related to anti-racist identity development and intersectionality theory.

### **Implications for Scholars**

Intersectionality theory scholars, student development theorists, and women's studies and ethnic studies scholars provided the foundation for this work through previous scholarship on anti-racist White activist identity and White privilege. The current study also contributes to scholarship in each of these areas and provides an opportunity for scholars to build on the findings and implications to further explore experiences of anti-racist White activists. Because the current study specifically explored the experiences of anti-racist White feminist women in college, the findings and implications add depth to the current student development theory research, specifically related to ally and multiple identity development. The current research explored the experiences of anti-racist White feminists in great depth and provided examples of the concepts discussed in intersectionality theory scholarship. Finally, women's studies scholars striving to address the long history of racism in the feminist movement may build on this scholarship to further explore White feminists' understanding of White privilege as related to feminism. I explore all of these areas below.

### **Student Development Theory**

In addition to the exploration of White racial identity development, student development theorists have also explored social justice ally development and multiple identity development (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Edwards, 2006; Jones, 1997). While ally development models vary based on context, generally development occurs through several stages: unawareness of social injustices, early awareness of injustice, education related to the injustice through friends or formal education, integration of the awareness, and commitment to social activism (Broido, 2000; Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory,

2003; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). The activists in this study exhibited some characteristics related to these models, including examples of moving from no awareness to awareness of injustice, education from formal education, and an attempt to integrate awareness of social injustice to commit to social activism. However, the significance of the stories shared by participants in this study highlight the struggles associated with development between the final two stages of development. Participants fully understood the importance of self-reflection and analysis of situations; however, they struggled to fully integrate this awareness of self and situations without sacrificing authenticity.

As described previously, in the theoretical model of aspiring allies (Edwards, 2006), people who aspire as allies for altruism focus on “helping” other people while the aspiring allies for social justice understand the ways oppression affects them, even as a person in the dominant group. While four of the participants in this study provided specific examples of understanding the need to engage as allies for social justice rather than to “help” others, they struggled to articulate the ways in which racism affected them as White people. This illustrates the need for a more complex model related to social justice ally development. Participants’ stories illuminate the need to further understand the process of development between understanding issues of power and oppression and integrating those ideas into their daily activities and interactions. By continuing to explore the experiences of students toward the end of their college careers and as recent graduates, student development theorists may better understand the ways allies authentically integrate their understanding of social justice to their lives and work.

### **Intersectionality Theory Scholars**

Intersectionality theory challenges scholars and practitioners to consider the whole person in their work related to identity. Recognizing ways multiple identities intersect with systems of power and privilege contributes to a complex understanding of power (Shields, 2008). Participants in this study further supported the importance of intersectionality and its importance to engaging in anti-racism. They provided examples of the ways their identities and their identity development processes intersected to inform their experiences. This study also contributes to exploring intersectionality through the intersections of a dominant and subordinated identity. While much of the literatures on intersectionality focuses on the intersections of multiple subordinated or marginalized identities (Dill et al., 2007), this study contributes to understanding how White privilege intersects with sexism to inform the experiences of White women. Participants discussed experiences of feeling guilty when describing instances of sexism for fear of unintentionally contributing to building a hierarchy of oppression or serving the purpose of focusing on their oppression rather than the White privilege they receive. This well-founded concern illustrates the complexity of the issues at hand and further demonstrates the need for research related to the intersections of dominant and subordinated identities. Ignoring issues of marginalization to focus solely on experiences of privilege does not promote holistic development, nor does it contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of power and oppression. Exploring the intersections of dominant and subordinated identities contributes to understanding ways people can make sense of their intersecting dominant and subordinated identities.

## **Women's Studies Scholars**

The long history of exclusion and racism in the feminist movement provides a context for understanding and exploring White privilege and racism as related to gender. The feminist movement, including women's studies scholarship, often excludes and marginalizes Women of Color by focusing on issues of concern to White women or failing to recognize how sexism and racism intersect. The current study provides insight for women's studies scholars seeking to better understand the context that facilitates the development of anti-racist White feminists. Participants in this study shared several influences on their White anti-racist feminist identity development, including women's studies and ethnic studies classes. Women's studies scholars might further explore the ways women's studies classes influence anti-racist identity development in an attempt to recreate those opportunities in future classroom experiences. Additionally, because participants named both women's studies and ethnic studies classrooms as having significant influence on their development, women's studies scholars may explore potential partnerships with ethnic studies departments and faculty to further the development of anti-racist White feminists.

Implications for student affairs, intersectionality, and women's studies scholars provide opportunities for collaboration, further research, and classroom implications. Understanding the experiences of White anti-racist feminists contributes to further dismantling racism and building inclusive classroom and feminist spaces. Additionally, the implications provide insight into directions for future research related to anti-racist White feminist identity development.

### **Directions for Future Research**

As with most constructivist and transformative research projects, this research generated more questions than answers. In talking with participants about their experiences with anti-racism, feminism, and social justice, I developed several additional research questions and project ideas. Stemming from participants' experiences with isolation, one future project includes exploring the transition experiences and community development processes of recent college graduates engaged in social justice work. Participants' significant and sometimes overwhelming "fear of appearing racist" also warrants more attention. Because participants' stories and experiences largely focused on the transition between understanding oppression and integrating a commitment to social justice to their lives, a longitudinal study with participants post-college may shed insight into the experiences that influence a stronger integration of concepts and ideas related to anti-racism. Finally, activists described personal transformation as a result of participating in this study, demonstrating the potential for additional or longitudinal research related to the influence of transformative research on participant lives at regular intervals for decades after graduation.

### **Transition Experiences**

Participants' stories and experiences highlighted their struggles to find community upon graduating from college. Activists described the strength they discovered in community with others committed to social justice work and the isolation they felt in their workplaces and friend groups upon graduating from college. Each of the women in this study minored in women's studies and described having a community of like-minded people to talk with on a regular basis in their women's studies classrooms;

however, this community was harder to find away from the college campus. In my relationships with other recent college graduates, I have heard similar struggles. To better understand how to support students as they graduate and move into the next phase of their lives, research exploring the experiences of college graduates who have successfully built community that supports their social justice pursuits is needed.

### **Gendered Nature of the “Fear of Appearing Racist”**

These women activists described an overwhelming “fear of appearing racist,” sometimes resulting in an inability to engage in anti-racist activism. During the focus group, Miriam aptly stated, “as women we’re super hard on ourselves and as white people we have to be the best, those together, it’s a recipe for disaster.” Miriam’s insight highlights the intersection of her racial and gender identities and provides a foundation for future research related to the gendered nature of the “fear of appearing racist.” If, in fact, this phenomenon is something unique to White women, the implications for women’s studies faculty and student affairs professionals are important to consider. Recognizing the additional ways gender influences the racial identity process changes ways educators engage students in developmental activities. By further exploring the “fear of appearing racist,” scholars will better understand its implications for practice and the gendered nature of the idea.

### **Longitudinal Research Related to White Anti-Racist Identity**

The feminists in this study provided insight into the developmental process between the final two stages of White identity development and two stages of social justice ally development. In the design of the current research, I asked participants to reflect on their experiences, providing insight into the influences on their identity

development processes. While reflection proves to be an effective tool for recalling significant events and influences, engaging with participants in on-going, observational research may provide even more depth to the stories participants shared during this process.

Previous studies on anti-racist White identity development did not highlight the experience of hyper-awareness and over-analysis these women described. A longitudinal study would allow the researcher to engage with participants over a longer period of time and to understand if experience contributes to activists spending less energy on analysis. Longitudinal research would likely result in the researcher and participant making meaning of experiences in the moment, in addition to understanding experiences through reflection processes. Engaging with White anti-racist feminist women over time to understand their developmental processes will shed light on the kinds of support students need to further engage in anti-racist work.

### **Influence of Transformative Research on Participants**

Activists in this study briefly shared how the process of reflection and discussion contributed to furthering their commitment to anti-racist feminism. In the final interview for the study, I asked participants to reflect on what they learned through the research process and their renewed commitment to anti-racist feminism. Each participant shared appreciation for the space to further explore and engage in self-awareness related to anti-racism and described renewed commitment to anti-racist activism. Rhonda eloquently shared:

It made me think about a lot of things that I don't do and a lot of, I have these ideals and beliefs but I put them to the side a lot and it made me realize that they could be in the forefront of how I live my life a lot more.

She continued explaining how she reflected on a comment that Georgia shared in the focus group about an article she read. Georgia described an article she read that challenged White women to understand the privilege associated with not speaking up because of discomfort. Georgia said, “The idea that you need to wait for your environment to be comfortable before you address something is an incredible privilege.”

Rhonda reflected on the idea after the focus group:

That comment really resonated with me that Georgia said about we have to feel uncomfortable everyday so if you get to think about when you feel uncomfortable, that hit me hard because we have our staff meeting every Thursday from 1-3 and so many things are said that I get out of there with a headache from biting my tongue and being like, “you people are so...” and I don’t, for the majority in that setting, I don’t say anything because I do feel uncomfortable and I do feel so alone, but realizing “how do those kids feel if I feel like them talking about it in a professional setting? How do those kids feel when it’s like their day to day thing that they’re getting treated like that?” Who am I to, I feel uncomfortable right now, so I’m just going to let it slide. That hit me really hard.

Several participants shared examples of renewed commitment or deeper understanding of an issue or an idea related to the conversation that throughout the study. For example, Alice shared she intended to “be more intentional about not being racist. Merely trying not to be racist is not enough because it means that one is just ignoring his/her unintentional racism.” Several participants discussed the importance of not being so hard on themselves because they are always learning. Miriam shared her insight related to this:

Something that I’ve held onto after the focus group is the notion that just as men are raised to be sexist because of the society they’re brought up in; I was raised to be racist because of the society I’ve been brought up in. Even though I have really great parents who tried to bring me up anti-racist, I’m still a white person and I carry that privilege with me regardless of if I want to or not.

Additionally, participants appreciated the space developed by the focus group to explore their ideas in the context of supportive community. “The focus group was particularly nice because it proved to me that I’m not alone in most of the feelings, concerns, and experiences I’ve had,” Georgia shared in a written reflection. In fact, the women in this study continued to meet after the formal study concluded, indicating their need for community related to anti-racist feminist work.

Future research dedicated specifically to understanding the influence of the research process on participants through transformative research warrants attention. Engaging in participatory action research with women related to anti-racist White identity contributes to understanding the developmental process of anti-racism. Further, examining the influence of research on participants in a study provides a significant contribution to scholarship on methodology.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I explored implications and directions for future research based on the current study. Specifically, I highlighted the importance of integrated learning in higher education, providing spaces for students to explore both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning. As participants in the current study highlighted challenges related to over-analysis and inauthenticity in their anti-racist ally development, I also described the importance of building communities of social justice advocates, including inter-racial relationships. Because participants and previous scholarship on ally development emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and reflection, I also highlight the need for continued opportunities for reflection.

In terms of implications for scholarship, I highlighted the connections of the current study to student development theory, intersectionality theory, and women's studies. Student development theorists may use the current study as a foundation to further explore the developmental process between the final two stages of White racial identity development and ally development, a shift from awareness to integration.

Because participants clearly articulated struggles between understanding the issues that contributed to racism and integrating that knowledge into their everyday lives, scholars may further explore the influences related to this developmental process. Additionally, the women in this study expressed concern about articulating their experiences with sexism because they feared failing to acknowledge their White privilege.

Intersectionality theory scholars may integrate this idea into further scholarship exploring the intersections of dominant and subordinated identities. Finally, women's studies scholars committed to building a more inclusive feminist movement may further explore the relationship between ethnic studies and women's studies scholarship, highlighting the importance of recognizing the intersections of racism and sexism.

Finally, I described directions for future research based on the themes in the current study. Specifically, I intend to further explore the transition experiences of anti-racist college student activists to their post-college experiences. Participants described challenges related to developing social justice community after college, resulting in a need to further understand the ways recent graduates engage in social justice work to support students in similar transitions. Additionally, exploring the gendered nature of the "fear of appearing racist" contributes to further understanding the intersections of race and gender as described earlier. Activists in this study described their development by

reflecting on previous experiences. Future research might explore the developmental process of anti-racist activists by observing and reflecting on current behavior, as well as recalling previous experiences. Finally, the transformative research process clearly influenced participants' understanding of themselves and a renewed commitment to anti-racism. Further research about the influence of transformative research on participants in the study contributes to methodological scholarship.

## **EPILOGUE**

My advisor regularly shares a story about her job interview process after she finished her PhD. Someone at one of the universities at which she interviewed asked the question, “How is your dissertation autobiographical?” I often thought about this as I wrote my own dissertation. The stories the activists in this study shared closely reflect many of the things I would include if I wrote my autobiography. As I approach the end of my investigation of anti-racist White feminists, I share my reflections on this process and the ways in which my dissertation is autobiographical. In addition to reflecting on the ways in which participants’ stories closely align with my own, I also share the ways I have adapted my own pedagogy to address challenges raised by participants.

### **Looking in a Mirror**

The women in this study shared the struggles and challenges associated with their development as anti-racist White feminists. Contrary to these participants, my story of transformation and understanding of my own White privilege took place much later than what they shared. As I described in Chapter I, I had many experiences related to race as a child, yet I did not have a context in which to explore and understand those experiences until much later in my life. I began to truly understand and reflect on my White privilege after I finished my master’s degree and began working as a full-time professional in student affairs. More specifically, similar to many of these participants, I found a context for understanding and exploring White privilege through feminism. As I understood my

own experiences with marginalization related to my gender, I also started to see how people with other subordinated identities, including race, might experience oppression. While I will never actually know all of the ways I perpetuated White privilege and unintentionally and unknowingly contributed to systems of racism throughout my life, I do recognize the importance of working to address systems of oppression through my privileged identities in my life and work.

Additionally, I recognize the important work of the Women of Color in my life and the activist movements in which I previously participated in my own development. Participants in this study named their families and educational experiences as more salient than relationships with People of Color in their development. However, our processes of anger and resistance, guilt and shame, and creating our own versions of whiteness matched. I distinctly remember feeling anger and resistance at the anti-racist training I attended in the fall of 2005. I felt angry at the facilitator and believed I was *different* than the White people to whom she was referring, when in fact, I was *exactly* who she was describing! After the training, I continued to reflect on what I learned and eventually came to understand I had serious work and reflection to do to understand my own racial identity and White privilege.

I also experienced feelings of guilt and shame and struggled to find outlets to explore these complex feelings. While I recognized it was not appropriate to dwell on my guilt with my Friends and Colleagues of Color, I struggled to find other White colleagues with whom I could explore the intensity of these feelings. Sometimes my guilt and shame showed up in my work as tokenization, similar to participants in this study. Because of my intense feelings of White guilt, I sometimes worked too hard to

include Women of Color in my work, resulting in tokenization and further marginalization. For example, in the classes I taught, I received feedback from Students of Color that I focused too much on racism within the feminist movement, resulting in them feeling “depressed” or further marginalized as a result of the discussion. I worked to incorporate this feedback in my work. By discussing the agency of Women of Color in my classes, White students were introduced to the ways in which feminism historically excluded Women of Color and Students of Color saw examples of people fighting racism, rather than falling victims to oppression.

Similar to participants in this study, I also struggled to find pride in my racial identity. I learned about the concept of over-familiarization at a conference I attended. Over-familiarization refers to the idea of over-identifying with a group of people of which you are not a member because you have close relationships with people who are members of the group, influenced my development in this area. I became close friends with two Women of Color and found myself over-identifying with their experiences – believing that I was somehow an extension of their group because I was so familiar with their experiences. Longing for pride in one of my own identities and a community with which to connect, I quickly learned I could not adopt another person’s culture to make up for my own lack of knowledge about my culture.

Additionally, I can relate to participants’ experiences of over-analyzing situations involving race and their fear of appearing racist, which closely related to my feelings of shame and guilt. I recall many instances in my relationships with colleagues of color when I would reflect on an interaction for hours, wondering if I demonstrated my understanding of White privilege and racism clearly enough so they would know I was a

“good” White person. Similar to what Georgia shared in the study, I was seeking a pat on the back from my Colleagues of Color, largely stemming from my need to quash the guilt and shame I felt associated with my whiteness.

Finally, in working to create my own version of whiteness, similar to the activists in the study, I discovered ways to describe my version of White culture. For so long, I did not associate many of my practices, rituals, and “likes” with White culture – I just saw them as my experience. Because a central tenet of White socialization is individualism (Lawrence, 1997; Watt, 2007), of course I would see my culture as “my experience” rather than a set of ideas and beliefs with which I was raised. Whiteness is invisible in so many ways, often resulting in my misunderstanding my “culture” to be the norm, rather than my culture. I also believe that because “not all White people” like or do these things, they could not be “White culture.” Reflection prompted by the People of Color in my life helped me recognize many of the ideas White people (including me) hold about “other” cultures are rooted in stereotypes. There might be experiences that many people from various ethnic backgrounds have in common, yet it does not mean that every person who identifies with this particular ethnic background shares the belief or custom (Evans et al., 2010). Once I understood this, I could better describe my understanding of White culture, because I finally understood I was describing what White culture meant to me, not all White people.

I learned to describe my experience as a White person being closely tied to individualism, intellectualization, and traditional experiences of leadership. Another example of my White culture is my love of folk music. While not all White people love folk music, and not all people who love folk music are White, the lyrics and nature of a

folk festival largely center around the experiences of White folks, even if it is not named as such.

I continue to explore my White racial identity and relationship to White privilege. While I believe I have developed strong self-awareness related to whiteness, I also know I sometimes fall back to acting on my guilt and shame. At this point in my life, I think I should not be surprised by the acts of racism I see and observe in my work; however, I sometimes find myself shocked at the latest story of blatant or covert racism. In these moments of shock, I feel guilt associated with my skin color and shame related to the acts of people who share my heritage, culture, and socialization. In most cases, the guilt and shame motivate me to act, addressing racism within my circle of influence, which often involves students in classrooms and colleagues in work settings. In the next section, I explore the ways this research has influenced my pedagogy and interactions with students, specifically White feminist women.

### **Improving my Work**

As I talked with the women in this study, I often reflected on the ways in which I could use the information they shared with me to inform my practice and improve my work with undergraduate students. During the study, a few things struck me as particularly significant. First of all, the significance of the fear with which participants engaged in anti-racist work prompted me to reflect on the ways in which I describe accountability and consequences of inaction in my work with students. For example, I routinely highlight examples from this study where participants shared experiences when their fear prohibited them from speaking up. Secondly, I reflected on the ways I could contribute to helping students have a smoother transition between college and their

experiences with social justice – whether that be non-profit work, community activism, or continued education. Finally, I recognized the intellectualization present in many of their stories, and reflected on the importance of incorporating emotion and feelings into our social justice work in classrooms.

**Addressing fear.** As I reflected on ways to address the fear the activists expressed, I could not help but think of Miriam’s quote, “As women we’re super hard on ourselves and as White people we have to be the best, those together, it’s a recipe for disaster.” For six years, I worked as the director of a women’s center, where one of my major roles was to support college women in rediscovering the voices we often lose in adolescence. Part of this support came in the form of continual validation and encouragement. Because women are socialized to question themselves and their abilities (hooks, 1984), I spent a lot of time helping women to discover their strengths and to push women students beyond their socialized expectations of themselves.

In addition to the validation and encouragement I provided, I also worked to ensure I pushed White women to recognize and address their internalized superiority by challenging them to see their White privilege. As I listened to the women share their frustration, confusion, and fear related to understanding White privilege, I wondered if I unintentionally pushed them to the point where they feared hurting others, resulting in an inability to act. I recognize the ways I have perpetuated this fear in my own classes and support of White students, and consciously shifted my focus to attempt to acknowledge the fear of causing someone pain while also addressing the consequences of inaction. In addition to supporting and validating students in their process of discovery, I also create opportunities for students to gather based on identity to share stories and experiences

related to understanding their privilege. For example, in the women's studies capstone course I teach, I incorporated race caucusing in the class. The White students gather in one room and the Students of Color in another and discuss their experiences navigating and managing racism in their lives. The caucuses result in Students of Color finding community to discuss their experiences with racism and White students finding a place to voice their experiences with guilt and shame and confusion about White privilege without the fear of further marginalizing Students of Color.

**Transitioning beyond college.** After talking with the activists in this study, I noted ways I could support students as they transitioned from college to the next steps in their lives. Four of the six participants graduated from college and worked in various jobs in the community. The activists expressed disappointment in the support they received for engaging in social justice in their workplaces and through their personal support systems. Because participants each engaged in social justice activism through various roles on campus, they struggled to find communities to support and validate their experiences with anti-racism. Additionally, many of the women worked on campus in social justice-related programs, resulting in high expectations for engaging in activism in the workplace. Much to the dismay of the activists, their current workplaces did not reflect the same level of critical analysis to which they were accustomed. Listening to participants' frustration with their current work situations prompted me to add a component on transitions to my women's studies capstone class. Each week, we discuss everyday activism and brainstorm ideas for building community after leaving the comfort of a built-in community on a college campus. Throughout the semester, I share situations and examples of recent college graduates who have continued to engage in social justice

work beyond their college experience. We will also have a panel of recent college graduates to share their strategies for building a new community outside of a university setting. Finally, we discuss challenges students find in engaging in social justice or activist work in their communalities for the final 20-30 minutes of class each week.

**Privilege associated with intellectualization.** The conversations I had with the women in this study also revealed the privilege associated with intellectualization and the influence formal education had on their anti-racist identity development. Throughout the study, participants regularly referred to things they read or learned in classrooms as influencing their development. Additionally, when things came up they wanted to learn more about, the women often said, “I need to research that more” or “I need to read about that.” While I appreciated participants’ commitment to self-education, rather than relying on people with marginalized identities to educate them, I often wondered if reading about something was the easy way to learn. At the time of the study, the women all lived in the same mid-sized, predominantly White community. However, I often felt as though the desire to read more about racism and White privilege resulted in them not engaging in authentic relationships. I perceived some of these women’s intellectualization of the issues as distancing themselves from the emotions associated with a topic or the hard conversations they would need to have with a person to better understand their experiences.

A group in a nearby metro area offers free training on anti-racist feminism, something I raised numerous times throughout the data collection process. I sensed fear associated with attending such training, a fear of saying or doing something wrong, a fear of engaging in authentic relationships with People of Color. As a result of my concerns, I

often name the privilege of intellectualization and the distance it creates between emotions and knowledge. My intent in naming this privilege is not to further contribute to White guilt, rather to challenge students to consider the possibilities of engaging in grassroots community organizing and other opportunities where they can learn first-hand about White privilege.

Engaging in conversations with the women in this study influenced my thought processes and way of being. Hearing their stories and sensing their feelings of frustration, shame, guilt, anger, and pride motivated me to continue engaging with White women feminists striving for anti-racism. Additionally, their stories challenged my perspectives and made me think about ways to improve my practice and pedagogy.

### **Conclusions**

After I finished collecting the data for this study, I received a copy of the book *Do It Anyway* (Martin, 2010) as a gift. In the book, Cortney Martin profiles eight activists in their 20s and 30s striving to make a difference in their communities. I opened the book to read a bit of the introduction, knowing that I needed to wait until I finished writing my dissertation before I got to read for “fun.” I could not put it down. Her descriptions of the eight everyday activists she profiled so closely mirrored the experiences of the women I had been spending time with over the past three months, I felt compelled to read until I finished the book. Reading the book provided an excellent reflection opportunity, allowing me to connect my own experiences with the stories the women in my study shared with me. Martin argues the generation of people in their 20s and 30s (the ages of the participants in my study and me) have been taught to “save the world,” often resulting in feelings of impossibility. In my researcher journal, I reflected:

In many ways, we were raised as a generation afraid of failure. I can't help to wonder how much this is related to whiteness. As White people, are we socialized to fear failure? Because we're supposed to be "right" and "successful" does that prevent us from engaging in true activist work? Learning to "do it anyway" is an important lesson for activists today – we're going to fail, we're going to mess up, and we may not see change on a grand scale. That does not mean we should not engage in activism. Learning to celebrate the everyday victories as we keep "the revolution in our hearts" (Martin, 2010, p. 180) pushes us to keep going, striving, working towards the ideal.

Because so many of the participants had shared their insecurities about not being "good enough" and I recognized my own fear of not being "good enough," Martin's perspective about "doing it anyway" resonated with me in a deep way.

Additionally, Martin stresses the importance of community in activist work. Knowing that others are engaged in this work and that activists are working hard in many corners of the world to address injustice encourages continued dedication. The women in this study shared a similar sentiment – after the focus group, many of them shared feeling rejuvenated and re-motivated as a result of engaging in a community of like-minded people where they found support and validation for their work.

Finally, as highlighted by the activists in both Martin's book and my study, being aware of our own identities and the causes that we should and should not be engaged in provides another layer of consideration for activists; however, over-analysis can lead to unintentional paralysis. I reflected in my journal:

When we are doing what we are called to do, not what we "think" we should be doing, we achieve greater results. Our generation has been taught to critically analyze everything, leaving opportunity to stew longer than we should before engaging in activist work. Similar to the participants in my study who have been schooled by amazing and thoughtful teachers, we learn to focus on the whys and hows rather than the "just do it" attitude that allows us to explore, make mistakes, experience failure, and ultimately engage in meaningful and important work.

Activist work challenges us emotionally, spiritually, and cognitively. Learning to listen equally to our heads and our hearts, finding and building community, and moving through our fear of failure might propel us to “save the world” without even knowing it.

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**APPENDIX A**

**GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

Interview One:

- a) Tell me a little bit about you and what prompted your interest in participating in this study.
- b) How do you describe yourself?
  - o Additional prompts, if needed: What kinds of things excite and motivate you? What do you do for fun? For work or school? Socially constructed identities?
- c) What kinds of things have influenced the person that you are today?
- d) Tell me about your interest in feminism and social justice. What kinds of issues are you passionate about? What kinds of feminist-related activism are you currently involved and interested in?
- e) What does feminism mean to you? What about social justice?
- f) Talk about how you discovered your passion for feminism and social justice. What are some of the events that led you to identify as a feminist?
- g) Tell me about your gender. What does it mean to be a woman to you? What experiences have influenced your understanding of your gender identity?
- h) Tell me about your racial identity. What does being White mean to you? What experiences have influenced your understanding of your racial identity?
- i) How do you notice your race and gender intersecting?

Interview Two:

- Have you thought any more about the conversation we had when we last met? What kinds of things have come up for you around that discussion?
- What other things have you thought about related to your development as a woman?
- What about as a White person?
- How do you understand White privilege? In what ways have you observed White privilege in the feminist movement?
- Have you noticed any instances of anti-racist feminism since we last met? What were those things?
- Let's go back to talking more about your identity as an anti-racist feminist. What does that mean to you?
- Share some examples of times you witnessed or participated in anti-racist feminism.
- What experiences have influenced your development as an anti-racist feminist?
- What role does feminism play in addressing oppression?

Interview Three:

- What have you learned about yourself as a result of participating in this study?
- Would you please share your creative representation of your identity as an anti-racist feminist?
- After participating in the focus group, do you have any additional stories or experiences related to this study to share?
- Pick a pseudonym.
- The rest of the questions for the final interview will be developed after the initial two interviews and the focus group is conducted.

**APPENDIX B**  
**GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP**

### Focus Group Question Guide

- Please share your name and reason for agreeing to participate in this study.
- Please share something about yourself with the rest of the group – something you like to do for fun, a fun fact, something to help the group get to know you better.
- Share the themes from the individual interviews with the participants. Discuss participant reaction to the themes.
- Ask what additional ideas this raises for people – did you think of additional examples of anti-racist feminism from your own experiences? What about experiences that influenced your development as a woman, White person, feminist, or anti-racist?

**APPENDIX C**  
**GUIDED JOURNALING**

### Guided Journaling Reflection 1:

- Please write a brief version of your racial auto-biography. Use the following questions to prompt your thoughts (Richards, 2009):
  - What can you recall about the events and/or experiences related to race, race relations, and/or racism that may have affected your current perspectives and/or behaviors?
    - What did you feel during these occurrences?
    - Where did these events/experiences occur? Home? School? Were you alone or surrounded by family or friends? With colleagues?
    - Were these occasions personal and immediate or were they more distant and broad in nature?
  - How do you experience yourself as a racial being?
  - What are the situations and circumstances in which you believe yourself to be most racially aware?
  - The degree to which your personal racial awareness impacts your relationships with people of your own race as well as those of a different race than your own?

### Guided Journaling Reflection 2:

- Please prepare a creative representation of what anti-racist feminism means to you. This can take the form of a poem, drawing, collage, gathering of artifacts related to your identities, or any other creative representation.

### Guided Journaling Reflection 3:

- What have you learned about yourself while participating in this study?
- What are your renewed hopes and goals as an anti-racist White feminist?

**APPENDIX D**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Exploring the Stories of White, Anti-Racist Feminists  
 Researcher: Chris Linder, M.A. Higher Education and Student Affairs  
 Leadership Program  
 Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX E-mail: [christina.linder@unco.edu](mailto:christina.linder@unco.edu)  
 Research Advisor: Florence M. Guido, Ph.D., School of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
 Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX E-mail: [flo.guido@unco.edu](mailto:flo.guido@unco.edu)

**Purpose and Description:** The purpose of this study is to understand ways White feminist women understand their racial identity. More specifically, I will talk to you (a White feminist woman) about how you learned about what it means to be White through feminist-related activities and events. I will ask you a series of questions about your race and gender and how you define White privilege and anti-racism. I am asking each participant to complete three (3) individual interviews (60-90 minutes each), one focus group (90-120 minutes), and three (3) guided reflections (less than 30 minutes each) during this research process. You could expect to spend about 8 hours on the research over the course of two months.

During the first interview, I will ask you to select a pseudonym for the study and to describe yourself and your understanding of feminism and social justice. After the first interview, I will ask you to write your "racial autobiography" using specific prompt questions. Next, we will meet for a second interview, where we will explore your racial and gender identities. After the second interview, you'll develop a creative representation of what anti-racist feminism means to you. Next, we will explore the concepts raised in the individual interviews in a focus group discussion. Finally, we will wrap up with a guided reflection and interview about your experience in the process. A detailed description of each session with sample interview questions is attached.

I will audio-record the individual interviews and focus groups and collect the guided reflections, with exception of your creative representation. If your representation is a poem or writing that I could collect, I will do so. If the creative representation is a collection of your personal artifacts, I will take a picture of your representation. I will store the digital files on my password protected computer and only my research advisor and I will have access to the information. You will choose a pseudonym for this study so your name will never be attached with what you share. I will hide any identifying information about you and will conduct "member checks" before sharing the information with anyone else. This means you will have a chance to read what I wrote as the themes of the study to ensure I am protecting your identity in a way that feels comfortable to you. After the study is over, I am happy to provide you with a completed copy of the dissertation if you are interested.

Potential risks in this project are minimal. You may experience some discomfort related to sharing memories from your past about racism and White privilege. Additionally, you may experience discomfort when recalling events in your childhood that influenced your understandings of your racial and gender identities. During the focus groups, you may experience discomfort when sharing personal information with others whom you may not know well, though you are not expected to share anything they do not feel comfortable sharing. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you experience discomfort or need additional support, please contact the National Directory of Hotlines and Crisis Intervention Centers, 800-999-9999 or the Larimer County Community Connections line at 970-407-7066.

You will not benefit directly from participating in the study. Indirect benefits may include a better understanding of your own identity and empowerment from a sense of community with other study participants. You will not be compensated for this study; however, I will provide dinner during the focus group and a non-alcoholic beverage and/or snacks during the individual interviews.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

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Subject's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date