

EXPLORING MOTIVATION TO DISRUPT WHITENESS IN ENTRY-LEVEL WHITE  
WOMEN STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

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Julia Ailes

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The purpose of this study was to understand how entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. As this group makes up the majority of student affairs staffs, understanding how they view themselves in relation to identities and systems of oppression, specifically Whiteness, is a critical first step to enacting transformation in higher education environments. In review of the literature, I included perspectives from both a micro- and macro-level analysis considering individual identity development as it is situated in systems of oppression, power, and privilege as well as provided context for entry-level student affairs professionals. Two major theoretical perspectives informed the study, Critical Whiteness studies and feminist methodology. Both perspectives allowed me to illuminate and deconstruct interlocking systems of oppression, specifically to understand how the White women in the study were often unaware how they could choose the comfort of their White privilege, even though they were oppressed by sexism. Data sources included two interviews and focus groups with a sample of 15 entry-level student affairs professionals who identified as White women across a wide range of institution types and functional areas. Analysis procedures were consistent with a critical narrative approach and illuminated two main themes, navigating emotions and the impact of work environments. Nuances within the themes included the navigating specific displays of emotion, such as “White women’s tears”, as well as how empathy was a driving factor for social justice work. The context situated within higher education generally presented barriers to disrupting Whiteness to participants, as a major finding from the study was that they felt their influence was limited to individual acts, which in isolation cannot

dismantle systems. I offered several implications for scholarship, practice, and future research which including grounding understanding of the unique intersection of identity in power structures, coalition building, and additional structure for professional development. These recommendations sought to address themes from the study such as power structures, expectancy, sphere of influence, and burnout, which were barriers to disrupting Whiteness.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher education institutions in the United States have continued to become more diverse, reflecting the increasing diversity in U.S. society. Although the percentage of students in the majority has fallen, campuses are still predominantly made up of individuals from majority groups they have historically served, including those who hold one or more privileged identities such as White, male, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender, middle class, and able bodied. Those in positions of power to shape higher education also remain largely homogenous, often possessing multiple privileged identities. Given most universities were founded by and for individuals with majority identities and these populations are still prominent on campuses, colleges and universities continue to be part of a system shaped by power and privilege, and students, staff, and faculty with marginalized identities face a constant uphill battle in environments that were not built for them. Student affairs professionals—the individuals who work most closely with students outside of the classroom in areas such as academic and career advising, Greek life, student activities, and residence life—are placed in a unique situation to support student success while simultaneously considering how their own unique identities are operating within these power structures. I found this quote from Mamta Accapadi's (2007) research powerful in framing my study:

If our institutions are rivers flowing in a specific direction, then the current of the river shaped by geography which enables the flow of the river and it represent the system of privilege. Consider a fish that must swim upstream versus a fish that swims with the current, arguably both fish could survive, but under what circumstances? Would one fish benefit from the flow of the current? As student affairs practitioners, it is our job to understand not only context for survival, but also the circumstances. (p. 208)

As Accapadi (2007) stated, a true understanding of the context in which these environments were constructed and who benefits from these structures is critical for student affairs work. Higher education contains many elements of White supremacy culture such as perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, and fear of open conflict (Jones & Okun, 2001). However, naming these elements is often challenging, as this culture is accepted as the status quo and there is little incentive for individuals with privilege to deconstruct systems from which they benefit (Cabrera et al., 2016; Kezar & Eckel, 2005). There are multiple barriers to student affairs professionals acknowledging their own privilege and roles in systems of oppression— structures that limit access to power due to cultural norms and values, such as legal systems and educational and financial institutions (Accapadi, 2007; Cabrera, 2017; Johnson, 2006; Pope et al., 2014; Watt, 2007). One such barrier is discussions on privilege have focused on individual experiences, such as McIntosh's (1988) "invisible knapsack" analogy of White privilege and have allowed for easy deflection of how people are complicit in oppressing others (Cabrera, 2017). This individual focus has allowed student affairs professionals to focus on their own salient identities, typically those from whom they experience marginalization, rather than acknowledging simultaneously how they benefit as part of a system that privileges certain identities (typically individuals who identify with one of more majority identities such as White, cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, men). A focus on individuals creates a culture in which student affairs professionals are socialized to view their charge as moving students with marginalized identities through barriers, rather than focusing on a goal to remove those roadblocks by dismantling oppressive systems.

## Whiteness

One such system of oppression prominent in higher education is Whiteness, which is a social and environmental norm that structures institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). For the purpose of this study, Whiteness will be defined twofold as: (a) cultural norms and experiences built through a social and political construct (Frankenberg, 1993) and (b) an ideology that structures a system of White supremacy (DiAngelo, 2011; Owen, 2007). However, Whiteness is often an invisible system to those who perpetuate it, as many individuals are not conscious of how they benefit from this system and simultaneously harm others (Owen, 2007). In this sense, White individuals often explain away any inequalities by personal rather than structural reasons, constructing a reality that “‘good’ White people” (Reason & Evans, 2007, p. 73) should ignore race. Whiteness creates an ability to center discussions of racism on the self and deflect notions of systemic oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2016), which in turn reinforces Whiteness, as White people become defensive when the reality of the system is named (Cabrera et al., 2016).

Whiteness appears on college campuses similarly to how it manifests in society (Kincheloe, 1999; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). The system of Whiteness on college campuses is problematic, particularly because the individuals who are responsible for shaping campuses (faculty and staff) are generally unaware of how pervasive Whiteness is in their environment. An example related to the study context is the national spotlight on racial injustice that occurred in the summer of 2020, with George Floyd’s murder as a catalyst, and provided a specific opportunity to view how higher education institutions were upholding Whiteness through elements such as performative acts, reluctance for systemic change, and a focus hiring diversity “experts” to solve problems related to equity on their campuses. These responses made it

apparent that institutions, and the individuals within them, are unaware how Whiteness is operating and what they can do to truly disrupt it. Institutions rarely name racism as the cause for a negative climate for marginalized populations, as many White people claim a colorblind mentality by which they place value in not seeing race and prefer to explain inequality through individual actions rather than systems that perpetuate oppression (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Reason & Evans, 2007). This mentality reinforces systems of oppression and creates significant barriers to creating equitable environments on campuses. Whiteness will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2; however, placing it at the forefront of the study emphasizes the importance in studying Whiteness is to reveal how it is operating in historical, social, political, and cultural contexts (DiAngelo, 2011).

### **White Women Student Affairs Professionals**

In the context of student affairs practice, student affairs professionals who identify as White women are one group for whom understanding identity is nuanced. White women overwhelmingly make up the majority of student affairs staffs (Talbot, 1996; Taub & McEwen, 2006) and experience significant conflict between both privileged and marginalized identities in relation to their social context, what Accapadi (2007) termed a “one up/one down” identity (p. 210). The salience of the marginalization women experience due to their gender dominates how White women frame their lived experience, creating barriers to acknowledging racial privilege (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014). White women can choose the safety of their White privilege; yet, because Whiteness is unseen, they are largely unaware of how they are operating as part of the system. The approach for the study was designed to consider these identities and within-group differences simultaneously as they were situated in intersecting power structures, specifically around race and gender. Individuals may not be conscious of how their privileged and

marginalized identities are “at play at all times” (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 15), and it is challenging to talk about identity without discussing specific identity groups. Therefore, it is necessary to provide some context to both gender marginalization and racial privilege, specifically for the unique intersection of identity in White women.

Though beyond the scope of the current study to discuss the entire history of the marginalization of women in the United States, this oppression is centered on historical issues such as the right to vote, legalization of birth control and abortion, and the right to participate in the workforce. Concerns that have continued into the modern era include but are not limited to equal pay, work–life balance, relationship and sexual violence, and a woman’s right to choose abortion. In the context of the United States, women have typically been defined as opposite to men (McCann & Kim, 2017) and, in this comparison, have been described as inferior, reinforcing male dominance and devaluing women’s voices in relation to these issues (Oakley, 1972). A consistent thread throughout discussions of gender has been men maintain power, in both individual relationships between men and women and controlling the social structures (e.g., politics, education, health care) that shape women’s lived experiences (McCann & Kim, 2017).

Movements that seek to address this marginalization, traditionally referred to as feminism, frequently leave out the experiences of women from different classes, racial groups, or sexual orientations (Schmitz et al., 1995). A major gap in mainstream feminism is that it has predominantly centered on White women, ignoring the experiences of women of color, who experience both racism and gender marginalization simultaneously (Lorde, 1981). Isolating discussions of oppression in this way reinforces White women to uphold systems of oppression as the operational norm (Accapadi, 2007), failing to acknowledge how all systems of oppression interlock (Collins, 2009; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 2000).

Whiteness can be defined as a structural advantage based on racial privilege (DiAngelo, 2011; Frankenberg, 1993; Owen, 2007) and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

White women have the ability to be protected by their Whiteness and can toggle back and forth between identities when convenient, a luxury women of color do not possess (Accapadi, 2007). In this sense, it is easy for White women to focus on the individual nature of their gender oppression without acknowledging their role in upholding racist systems. White women frequently struggle to accept their individual responsibility in oppressive systems, as discussions on privilege, specifically those around race, often create a good/bad dichotomy (Cabrera et al., 2016). For White women to accept Whiteness as a systemic reality and acknowledge their place in this system creates a feeling one is a “bad” White person (Applebaum, 2010; Tatum, 2000). Gender socialization often impacts White women’s responses to these discussions, including emotions of guilt, fear, and shame when privilege is named (Linder, 2015).

A focus on trying to be “good” and avoiding the negative emotions that come with acknowledging privilege detracts from doing social justice work (Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2011). In the context of student affairs work, this lack of self-awareness presents a barrier for White women to acknowledge how they are benefiting from Whiteness, even though they may be experiencing or have experienced significant sexism as a woman. Without this understanding as a precursor, student affairs professionals who identify as White women may avoid difficult dialogues that can challenge how Whiteness operates in their environments (Watt, 2007). As a dominant group in student affairs administration, often asked to address inclusion on campus (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Watt, 2007), White women student affairs professionals have increasing responsibility to transform campus environments but may shy away from this difficult work if not conscious of how Whiteness is operating in their own lives (Reason & Broido, 2005).

## **Context for Entry-Level Student Affairs Professionals**

In narrowing the scope of the study, I focused on entry-level student affairs professionals—that is, master’s-level new professionals who were first-time, full-time staff with 5 or fewer years of experience. This group makes up 15–20% of the population of student affairs professionals and largely come from graduate programs in higher education, college student personnel, or student affairs (Cilente et al., 2006; Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). There has been great attention paid to entry-level professionals, stemming largely from the high rate of attrition of these staff in the field (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). Adequate preparation of entry-level professionals has been a focus of both practitioners and researchers, as a deficiency in professional competencies and knowledge of the field are a significant barrier in transition to full-time work, regardless of support given by a supervisor (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). Developing a professional identity is a major challenge for entry-level professionals, and these early-career staff also experience challenges in navigating full-time work in environments where they are often at the bottom of the political hierarchy (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). Reconciling one’s own social identities, professional identity, and place in the organization is a unique challenge for entry-level staff—a task new professionals are often not prepared to do after completing graduate school. Student affairs graduate programs emphasize a competency-based approach that seeks to prepare students for full-time work by aligning program curricula with the needs of the profession (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008).

Related to understanding identity, core competencies around diversity, inclusion, and/or social justice have become more prominent in student affairs professional standards, influenced by social context and political pressures (Gansemer Topf & Rider, 2017; Herdlein et al., 2013). The Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2019) include diversity,

equity, and access as part of their core standards for the profession, stating programs using CAS will be able to “create equitable and just programs and services that help facilitate a sense of inclusion and belonging” (para. 4). The two major student affairs professional associations, NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and ACPA—College Student Educators International, outline a specific competency area called social justice and inclusion (SJ&I), described as both “a process and a goal which includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all” (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 14).

These competencies are influenced by and overlap with discussions of multicultural competency, which originates in the field of counseling but has been adapted for student affairs work. Multicultural competency includes both self-awareness and the ability to apply knowledge of diverse individuals to effectively work across difference. There has been some critique of this framework, as multicultural competency has often been described as an ideal outcome rather than a process. Implementation of the framework often remains at the surface level in promoting learning about the other without any action to understand how higher education is situated in systems of oppression that privilege those with dominant identities (Chun & Evans, 2016; Watt, 2015). This lack of critical self-reflection can leave well-intended professionals focused solely on supporting individual students, creating a reluctance to understand and disrupt the systems that pose barriers to marginalized groups (Sue & Sue, 2013). These findings and critiques are troubling and elicit questions about how prepared entry-level professionals, specifically White women, are to serve an increasingly diverse student population if they do not understand how they are upholding systems oppressing these groups.



Although entry-level staff make up a significant proportion of student affairs professionals, the literature surrounding this group has largely excluded their perspective, focusing on the assessment of entry-level work from mid- and senior-level administrators or being practitioner oriented, intended to serve as a guide for the 1st year in the field (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). Additionally, the existing literature surrounding the entry-level experience largely omits how identity impacts the support and success of emerging professionals. Considering SJ&I is a foundational value of student affairs as a profession and the increasing diversity on college campuses, a better understanding of how entry-level professionals navigate identity, as it is situated in power structures and as part of doing effective student affairs work, is imperative. Specifically, I seek to understand how entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women navigate Whiteness through the lens of their own identities and their educational, personal, and professional experiences.

### **Statement of Problem**

Entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women are a unique population in that the marginalization they experience as women and their roles as student affairs professionals complicate how they navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. White women frequently view themselves as marginalized without understanding their role in maintaining Whiteness. Unlike women of color, White women can choose the shield of Whiteness when convenient (Accapadi, 2007). The protection White women receive from their Whiteness does not provide motivation to disrupt this system; rather, it leaves the focus of their work on individual acts that portray the image of a good White person. Specifically, White women present an emotional response to their role in maintaining Whiteness (e.g., crying, apologizing)

grounded in gender socialization, which deflects focus from the actual issue at hand and maintains Whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018).

There is a small body of research that has sought to understand the experience of White women related to race, racism, and identity in the context of higher education. These studies have tended to focus more heavily on how participants viewed race and racism from an individual perspective rather than interrogating systems of oppression (e.g., Frankenberg, 1993; Robbins, 2016). In framing my study, I introduce what is currently known about White women in student affairs and provide context for how I built upon this knowledge to probe further into how this group navigates Whiteness.

Most of the literature related to r in higher education has been about college students; however, there have been a small number of studies that have focused on student affairs professionals. Themes from this research include how White women frequently shy away from discussions about race and often become defensive when their own privilege is pointed out to them (Frankenberg, 1993; Robbins, 2016). White women in these studies frequently chose to remain in a place that was comfortable related to identity, focusing on their individual impact rather than seeking to deconstruct systems of oppression (Robbins, 2016). A few authors began to explore the intersection of race and gender in White women (e.g., Accapadi, 2007; Linder, 2015, Robbins & Jones, 2016). Accapadi (2007) described how the possession of a one up/one down identity complicates how White women respond when their privilege is acknowledged, as they use their privilege to keep these conversations focused on individual acts rather than on systems that create marginalization. Linder (2015) found White women presented a gendered response as they processed guilt associated with acknowledging White privilege. Robbins and Jones (2016) found participants in their study of White women in higher education and student

affairs graduate preparation programs valued individual learning opportunities over transformative action, as conversations on privilege and oppression on a systemic level elicited an emotional response and were uncomfortable.

These studies have indicated socialization around gender complicates how White women understand their own dominant and oppressed identities and creates barriers in looking past individual experiences toward authentic discussions of systems of oppression. There is work to do in understanding how White women view themselves in relation to identities and systems of oppression, specifically Whiteness. This gap in understanding is particularly relevant for student affairs professionals, as the lack of information about this process serves as barrier to enacting transformation in higher education environments (Robbins & Jones, 2016). The current body of research on White women affirms talking about privilege, especially in a systemic way, is challenging and emotionally charged. It is also apparent White women student affairs professionals tend to gravitate toward individual acts of good without acknowledging the role they play in maintaining Whiteness.

Researchers who have studied White women have also offered insightful recommendations for areas of further exploration. Robbins (2016) argued a more critical framework is needed to build an understanding of how White women move beyond their desire to be seen as good White people (Robbins & Jones, 2016). Linder (2015) recommended further exploration of how gender socialization and sexism impact experiences related to privilege in White women. Gaps in Whiteness literature also reinforce the need for research on White faculty and staff, as most higher education literature on Whiteness has focused on students (Cabrera et al., 2016). What needs further exploration is how White women student affairs professionals

navigate the unchosen nature of Whiteness in a professional setting and what might encourage these individuals to disrupt a system from which they benefit.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

Through this study, I sought to understand how entry-level White women student affairs professionals navigate the unchosen nature of Whiteness. I sought to understand the type of rationale these women used to build a shield of being a good White person and how this notion was in direct conflict with their role in maintaining Whiteness. As part of the research process, I sought to understand how White women can be motivated to disrupt Whiteness beyond individual acts, considering their own privileged and oppressed identities in the context of power structures, including their work environments. Fine's (1994) notion to consider the "working the hyphens" (p. 72) between identities was important as I sought to move away from considering identity in isolation and proposed, as Fine suggested, they must be considered together in relation to the contexts being studied. A specific focus on systems of oppression related to individual identity—specifically, keeping my attention on addressing the complexity of multiple, intersecting identities simultaneously in the context of power structures that influence higher education—aided in working identities together. Additionally, taking a critical look at how White women entry-level student affairs professionals make sense of their unique intersection of identities in larger systems of oppression is a first step in calling out and deconstructing these systems (Watt, 2015).

The following questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do entry-level White women student affairs professionals describe navigating Whiteness in a professional setting, informed by their educational and personal experiences?

2. In what ways do entry-level White women student affairs professionals maintain Whiteness?
3. In what ways are entry-level White women student affairs professionals motivated to disrupt Whiteness?

I used a critical research approach to illuminate how both Whiteness and gender marginalization operate from a structural perspective (DiAngelo, 2011) to make explicit that which is implicit in the experiences of entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women (Carspecken, 2012). Critical Whiteness studies and feminist theory were used as theoretical frameworks. Analysis from both perspectives assisted in maintaining the notion that all systems of oppression are interlocking and seeking to dismantle one (Whiteness) can dismantle oppression of other groups—in this case, women. Narrative analysis was used to collect and analyze stories of the experiences of entry-level White women student affairs professionals through interviews, focus groups, and journaling (Kim, 2016; Riessman, 1993). Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of the methodology for the study.

### **Significance of Study**

As a scholar-practitioner, it is valuable for me to consider how my research can practically impact student affairs practice. As White women student affairs professionals are heavily represented among their peers, building the understanding I sought through this research can encourage these individuals to engage in self-reflection on how they navigate and maintain Whiteness, although their experiences with sexism may be more salient. I hope this reflection will move individuals to engage in risk taking toward transformative action in disrupting Whiteness (Ortiz & Patton, 2012). This knowledge also provides opportunities for a more effective mentoring community for White women student affairs professionals (Daloz, 2000),

including both supervisors and colleagues, to encourage and support this action, assisting professionals in “walking the walk” (Pope et al., 2014, p. 51) of social justice work. On an organizational level, this new understanding may assist in creating a reflective discourse (Daloz, 2000) that questions underlying structures and systems, rather than maintaining a focus on supporting structural diversity and changing individual behaviors (Pope et al., 2014; Watt, 2015).

Discussing constructs that are often implicit in U.S. society, such as Whiteness, illuminates how these structures oppress individuals and groups and are maintained by those with privilege. Creating additional opportunities for this type of dialogue is important in student affairs practice if those in the field seek to prioritize inclusion in their practice. Lastly, as a student affairs professional that identifies as a White woman, I have sought to create opportunities for my own reflection and learning throughout the research process, aiming to engage in more authentic reflection on my own role in maintaining and deconstructing systems of oppression. As someone responsible for hiring and supervising a large number of professionals and graduate and undergraduate students in a residential life department, this individual reflection has been critical in my own work and has potential for a significant impact in transforming my own work and environment(s).

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the relevance of the study and the gap in the current body of literature I sought to address in exploring how entry-level White women student affairs professionals navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. First, I reviewed the context for the study, introducing institutions of higher education as places that benefit those with power and privilege. I discussed how Whiteness was one system of oppression operating in this environment and how those who benefit from the system, namely White people, are largely

unaware of how it is operating. I then introduced how White women may struggle to navigate Whiteness, as their gender marginalization is more salient, and they are often hesitant to acknowledge how their privileged identity provides advantages. I reviewed context for racial privilege and gender marginalization related to this group to set the stage to explore how their privileged and oppressed identities interact as part of the study. Next, I reviewed the unique context for entry-level student affairs professionals, including the professional values of student affairs, which prioritize social justice and inclusion along with critiques of this approach which emphasizes understanding of individual identity development without acknowledgement of how marginalization is situated in power structures.

In identifying the problem I sought to address through this study, I briefly outlined what literature has demonstrated about the experience of entry-level White women student affairs professionals and what questions have remained unclear about how this group of practitioners navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. I concluded the chapter with the research questions, context for the methodology, and significance of the study. In the next chapter, I explore the literature that formed the theoretical framework for the study and informed how I have considered the experiences of student affairs professionals who identify as White women through a critical lens that considers identity as it is situated in power structures. In Chapter 3, I define the methodology for the study, building on the foundations of the previous two chapters.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant literature to the purpose of the study, which was to understand how entry-level White women student affairs professionals navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. The reviewed literature includes perspectives from both a micro- and macro-level analysis considering individual identity development as it is situated in systems of oppression, power, and privilege. In each section, subsections provide structure to the chapter. The review of these specific areas of literature offered both a theoretical framework for the current study and a foundation for the methodology outlined in Chapter 3.

First, prior to discussing the identity constructs for the study, I introduce the context for entry-level student affairs professionals to highlight challenges in developing a professional identity as a new professional and expand on values of the profession related to social justice and inclusion, including barriers to putting these values into action. I then provide context, specifically for White women, by discussing Whiteness, gender, and women's identity development as a framework for both an individual and systemic understanding of the research problem. I review theories that consider multiple identities simultaneously and discuss how these approaches can be enhanced by applying a critical lens. The concluding section of the review focuses on literature specific to entry-level White women student affairs professionals, highlighting relevant research and current gaps in the literature and ending with the importance of the study in addressing these missing perspectives.

### **Context for Entry-Level Student Affairs Professionals**

To focus the research questions on the context of student affairs, it is important to review literature related to the graduate and professional experiences of entry-level student affairs professionals. In this section, I first discuss existing literature on entry-level professionals,



introducing challenges these individuals face in their transition to full-time work. I then elaborate on the espoused values and competencies of student affairs as a profession related to social justice and inclusion, specifically exploring the relevance of these for entry-level staff. Finally, I conclude by highlighting gaps in current scholarship. This section provides a foundation for the sections that follow, which more specifically discuss concepts such as Whiteness, women, and gender identity, both as they exist separately and intersect for participants. Existing literature related to these topics for student affairs professionals is woven into these discussions and is only briefly discussed in this section.

### **Entry-Level Student Affairs Professionals**

Entry-level student affairs staff have had much attention paid to them in student affairs literature, a focus emerging from questions related to the reality that 40–50% of new professionals leave higher education within 5 years of completing graduate school (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). Research has indicated developing a professional identity after graduate school is a major challenge for entry-level staff (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). New professionals are not necessarily equipped to navigate a new role and environment while continuing to develop their own social and professional identities. Graduate program curricula are intended to prepare student affairs professionals with the foundational competencies needed to support students but are not as explicit in preparing their graduates for the transition to full-time work (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008).

The interest in retaining new professionals has largely converged in two areas: (a) improving supervision and professional development (e.g., Cilente et al., 2006; Saunders & Cooper, 2003; Winston & Creamer, 1997) and (b) providing better preparation for full-time work through a focus on competency development (e.g., Herdlein, 2004; Lovell & Kostenn, 2000).

Findings from both areas indicate the two are interconnected, as support for ongoing competency development from supervisors is essential, especially in the 1st year of full-time work (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008). For example, Dickerson et al. (2011) found both faculty and senior student affairs officers perceived gaps for entry-level professionals in competency areas such as the application of theory to practice, critical thinking, and self-reflection. To address this gap, Dickerson et al. recommended supervisors emphasize competencies in early evaluation processes and provide a focus on on-the-job training.

Gansemer-Topf and Rider (2017) found research related to competencies can serve as a guide for supervisors in supporting professional development of entry-level staff. Supervisors also have an important role in helping new professionals navigate “culture and context of the environment, including key political issues and relationships” (Gansemer-Topf & Rider, 2017, p. 51), as new professionals are at the bottom of the political hierarchy and generally lack power and influence in their organizations. However, there has been little acknowledgement of how power and privilege related to social identities impact an individual’s transition to full-time work. The literature has been consistent in emphasizing the importance of competency development and a supportive supervisor who can help entry-level staff navigate their first full-time job post-master’s. However, the body of literature on entry-level professionals has been static, as it has focused on what competencies these individuals possess (or do not) rather than how to develop or deepen competencies. This understanding has also been very general, with little to no mention of how an individual’s unique intersection of identity may impact how they develop and apply competencies. For the current study, I was concerned with understanding what student affairs has dictated as specific competency areas related to social justice and inclusion and how individuals are to develop these competencies.

## **Values and Competencies of the Profession Related to Social Justice and Inclusion**

As a profession, student affairs espouses a common set of values and standards. Related to this study, it is relevant to explore these values and standards related to social justice and inclusion (SJ&I), as they shaped both the graduate and professional experiences of the study participants. There are many different venues in which student affairs as a profession shares its values and standards. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) is one such venue that exists as a consortium of professional associations in higher education and “promotes the use of its professional standards for the development, assessment, and improvement of quality student learning, programs, and services” (CAS, 2019a, para. 1). Within these standards, CAS maintains a set of 12 general standards that are relevant to every functional area (e.g., housing and residence life, orientation, campus activities), one of which is titled diversity, equity, and inclusion. These standards include such elements as advocacy for social justice issues, removing structures that produce inequities, establishing goals for access, and implementing inclusive programs and services.

Related to standards for services student affairs units should maintain, various sets of professional competencies exist for the profession, both general and specific to functional areas. Competencies refer to the “knowledge, skills, and in some cases, dispositions expected of student affairs professionals” (NASPA & ACPA, 2015, p. 6). Because I sought to understand the experiences of student affairs professionals in various functional areas through this study, it is relevant to discuss the competencies published by NASPA and ACPA, the two major student affairs professional associations. These 10 competencies are divided up into foundational, intermediate, and advanced outcomes. The foundational competencies are most relevant in a discussion of entry-level professionals, acknowledging these individuals may achieve some

intermediate or advanced outcomes. ACPA and NASPA (2015) described, “all student affairs professionals should be able to demonstrate their ability to meet the basic [foundational] list of outcomes under each competency area regardless of how they entered the profession” (p. 3). This statement implies all professionals in student affairs should achieve these foundational outcomes.

SJ&I is one specific competency area related to the current study, which is framed by the definition of social justice as both a process and a goal (Adams et al., 2007). The foundational outcomes in this area include:

Identify systems of socialization that influence one’s multiple identities and sociopolitical perspectives and how they impact one’s lived experiences; Understand how one is affected by and participates in maintaining systems of oppression, privilege, and power; Engage in critical reflection in order to identify one’s own prejudices and biases; Participate in activities that assess and complicate one’s understanding of inclusion, oppression, privilege, and power; Integrate knowledge of social justice, inclusion, oppression, privilege, and power into one’s practice; Connect and build meaningful relationships with others while recognizing the multiple, intersecting identities, perspectives, and developmental differences people hold; Articulate a foundational understanding of social justice and inclusion in the context of higher education; Advocate on issues of social justice, oppression, privilege, and power that impact people based on local, national, and global interconnections. (NASPA & ACPA, 2015, p. 30)

The foundational outcomes both focus on understanding of self, systems of oppression, and action related to this knowledge, topics that align with the research questions for the study. They also align with many elements of social justice education, which envisions a “society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and

psychologically safe and secure” (Adams et al., 2007, p. 1). Social justice education advocates for understanding oppression, privilege, and identity to promote understanding and action. Scholars, such as Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), influenced this framework, as they described education as a practice of freedom, which demands individuals and institutions face realities of injustice and engage in dialogue about oppression outside the limitations of social structures. In these competencies exist elements of creating a liberatory consciousness, which resonates with the goals of the current study, as they include “awareness of the role played by each individual in maintenance of the system” and a goal to “practice intentionality about changing the systems of oppression” (Love, 1984, p. 599).

These competencies provide a strong foundation for social justice work in student affairs practice; however, they do not provide guidance on how to achieve the desired outcomes. Largely, professional development is recommended as necessary to maintain competency in any specific area and to advance in it (NASPA & ACPA, 2015). NASPA and ACPA (2015) recommended mastering all of the foundational outcomes should be a professional development priority. Beyond graduate preparation, there is no formal structure for this professional development to occur, which is important to note in the context for the current study of entry-level professionals who may have little guidance on how to achieve these important outcomes.

### **Multicultural Competency Development**

Competencies related to SJ&I are frequently referred to as multicultural competency, which includes three dimensions, including the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary for working with culturally different others (Pope & Reynolds, 1997). This term originated in the field of counseling and was adopted for student affairs as a foundation for practitioner-oriented literature designed to provide a framework for creating transformative multicultural

environments (e.g., Arminio et al., 2012; Cuyjet et al., 2011; Pope et al., 2014). These volumes have merged multicultural competency with student development theory and information about diverse populations and provided examples that can serve as a roadmap for individuals and campus leaders in transforming their environments to have a multicultural foundation. Although excellent resources for practitioners, there is, unfortunately, little empirical validation or further study of these models.

There has been limited research on the development of multicultural competency. One strand of this literature has a focus on a curricular approach to developing multicultural competency among graduate students, which is relevant for the population of the current study, as the entry-level, White women could apply this knowledge in practice in their professional role. These studies have shown purposeful diversity curriculum contributes to the development of multicultural competency at varying degrees, and there has been a significant amount of resistance, specifically by White students, to acknowledge privilege (Iverson & Seher, 2017; Kelly & Gayles, 2010; King & Howard Hamilton, 2003; Watt, 2007). Measurement of these competencies through quantitative measures, such as the Multicultural Competencies for Student Affairs Preliminary Form (MCSA-P), are challenging because they involve a self-reported assessment, and participants may tend toward answering questions in a socially desirable way (King & Howard Hamilton, 2003). This research has also shown great variation in the degree to which diversity and multiculturalism are integrated into program curricula (Cuyjet et al., 2011; Gayles & Kelly, 2007; King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

A search of major journals in higher education elicited little research on multicultural competency in student affairs professionals to inform the current study. One such study demonstrated a strong relationship between multicultural competencies and White racial

consciousness (Mueller & Pope, 2001). Another showed possessing multicultural knowledge was a strong predictor of multicultural skills (Castellanos et al., 2007). Professionals may hesitate to implement multicultural skills, as this work challenges existing power structures, and these difficult dialogues do not necessarily occur in higher education environments (Iverson, 2012; Watt, 2015). The lack of research in this area elicits questions on how, if at all, entry-level White women student affairs professionals apply their knowledge from graduate school as they navigate Whiteness in their work environments.

### **Summary**

This section discussed the challenges entry-level staff face in their transition to full-time work and introduced specific student affairs competencies related to SJ&I. The section concluded by exploring the limited research available on the development of these foundational competencies. Student affairs places a high value on SJ&I but provides little guidance beyond graduate school on how to cultivate these competencies, affirming the need to better understand how entry-level professionals who identify as White women navigate Whiteness—both in understanding their own identities and in disrupting systems—as part of doing effective student affairs work. The following sections complement this introduction to competency development, exploring how race and gender as constructs impact an understanding of systems of oppression, individual identity development, and the ability of entry-level White women student affairs professionals to do transformative social justice work.

### **Whiteness**

To understand Whiteness, this section provides an overview of Whiteness and explains why the concept is worth studying, specifically in the context of higher education. This section provides insight on the research questions, as I sought to understand through this study how

participants navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. Many scholars have studied and discussed Whiteness, both in and outside of higher education (Applebaum, 2010; Cabrera, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; Owen, 2007). This research includes an emerging field of critical Whiteness studies that employs a critique of Whiteness as a theoretical lens. I use existing literature to present two definitions that connect with the purpose of the current study, as Whiteness serves to inform the racial climate of institutions of higher education (Gusa, 2010).

### **Defining Whiteness**

Whiteness has many different definitions and can be challenging to define, as individuals are often not conscious of their own Whiteness or White privilege. For the purpose of this study, I previously introduced Whiteness as: (a) cultural norms and experiences built through a social and political construct (Frankenberg, 1993) and (b) an ideology that structures a system of White supremacy (DiAngelo, 2011; Owen, 2007). These two definitions are described next.

The first definition of Whiteness offered presents a challenge to White people, as part of the privilege of Whiteness is the reality of it can be put aside, embracing a colorblind worldview. An important aspect of Whiteness is it is “largely invisible to [W]hites, yet highly visible to non-[W]hites” (Owen, 2007, p. 206). In this sense, White individuals can explain away any inequalities by personal rather than structural reasons, constructing a reality that “‘good’ White people” (Reason & Evans, 2007, p. 73) should ignore race. The cultural practices that are part of Whiteness are “unmarked and unnamed” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1), making it difficult for White people to recognize they are living in a society that privileges their race and provides unearned advantages. Applebaum (2010) described an epistemology of ignorance, in which White people are not only unaware of White supremacy, but they also believe they understand systems of oppression (Cabrera et al., 2016). An example of this ignorance is White people commonly claim



reverse racism in response to attempts to deconstruct systems of oppression that provide opportunities for others who have been marginalized by Whiteness (Cabrera, 2014; Norton & Sommers, 2011).

Recognition of Whiteness is to acknowledge it is a structural advantage based in racial privilege (Frankenberg, 1993). For individuals to have a cognizant sense of Whiteness, it involves accepting the power and privilege many Whites are fearful to acknowledge (Reason & Evans, 2007). White people have difficulty seeing they have a culture, because they are accustomed to living in a society built on Whiteness (Tochluk, 2010). In this definition, Whiteness is a cultural point of view describing an assumption of the way things ought to be done (Frankenberg, 1993). Studying Whiteness is not to prove it exists, but rather to reveal how it operates in historical, social, political, and cultural constructs (DiAngelo, 2011).

The second definition of Whiteness proposes individual experiences cannot be separated from the social and structural context, which produces a system of White supremacy (Owen, 2007). Owen (2007), a critical Whiteness scholar, provided a critical theory of Whiteness informative to this second definition. This theory focuses on the social structural level of White privilege, providing a similar but contrasting approach to McIntosh's (1988) description of privilege at the individual level. In this sense, Whiteness is a system that allows White people to assert power over those who are not White (Gusa, 2010) and takes the form of entitlement and domination (Lawrence, 1997). Whiteness is defined as what is normalized or mainstream, creating a system that is often invisible to those who perpetuate it but obvious to those it harms (Owen, 2007). In this sense, people of color are aware of the reality that not all environments are open to them (Cabrera et al., 2016), whereas White people believe they have access to all spaces (Sullivan, 2006).

In higher education, Whiteness is a social and environmental norm that structures institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). However, there are barriers to White people accepting this definition. Part of the privilege of Whiteness involves the ability to center discussions of racism on the self and deflect notions of systemic oppression by claiming innocence in perpetuating racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2016). This deflection creates a feedback loop in which institutions frequently reinforce Whiteness, as White people become defensive when the reality of Whiteness is named (Cabrera et al., 2016). To truly understand and define Whiteness is to explain how it contributes to a system of White supremacy (Owen, 2007).

### **Why Study Whiteness?**

Based on the definitions of Whiteness used for this study, the importance of researching Whiteness is highlighted in that Whiteness is often invisible, and through definition and discussion, it becomes more visible (Frankenberg, 1993; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). To understand how Whiteness is socially constructed is to promote awareness and acceptance of Whiteness in a non-defensive, nonracist way (Tatum, 1994). Whiteness appears on college campuses similarly to how it manifests in society (Kincheloe, 1999; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000), and socialization prior to being in a higher education environment impacts experiences related to race for students, faculty, and staff (Milem et al., 2004).

Whiteness is often the dominant culture and climate at institutions of higher education, specifically predominantly White institutions (Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007), which creates climates designed to produce comfort for White individuals (Ahmed, 2007; Cabrera et al., 2016; Gusa, 2010). Whiteness creates practices on campuses, including social traditions and course curricula that cater to White people (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The resistance of White community members to understanding how this environment is negative for people of color

contributes to a negative campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Reason & Evans, 2007). Unfortunately, due to this construction, the isolation of students, staff, and faculty of color on college campuses appears normal and can often go unquestioned (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Racism as the cause for this negative climate often goes unnamed, as many White people claim a colorblind mentality in which they place value in not seeing race and prefer to explain inequality through individual actions rather than systems that perpetuate oppression (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Reason & Evans, 2007). This mentality reinforces systems of oppression and creates significant barriers to creating inclusive environments on campuses.

The system of Whiteness on college campuses is problematic, particularly because the individuals responsible for shaping campuses (e.g., faculty and staff) are generally unaware of how pervasive Whiteness is in their environment. There has been significant research on how to assist White students in understanding their White identity and promote antiracist actions (e.g., Cabrera, 2012; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000; Reason et al., 2005). However, the literature has largely lacked discussion about promoting this awareness in faculty and staff who are supposed to be facilitating this learning (Cabrera et al., 2016, Robbins, 2016). Student affairs professionals are often asked to create inclusive environments (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Watt, 2007) and will continue to reinforce Whiteness if they do not spend time reflecting on their White identity and racist actions. Based upon the pervasiveness of Whiteness, it cannot be assumed student affairs professionals are prepared to help students deconstruct Whiteness. Additionally, challenging the system of Whiteness frequently leads to conflict (Cabrera, 2012), which is often avoided and continues to reinforce the system. Ally development and White identity development models traditionally applied to students can be useful in understanding how to promote and support this awareness and subsequent action in professionals and are explored later in the chapter.

## **Summary**

This section defined Whiteness in the context of higher education. It is important to name Whiteness and its impact, as it is largely an invisible system. Without discussion of Whiteness, it is difficult to have conversations about race and the impact of racism on campuses. This omission does not address how student affairs professionals are complicit in perpetuating systems that privilege White people and disadvantage and harm people of color. Individuals and campuses cannot begin to dismantle systems of oppressions and serve an increasingly diverse campus community without awareness and acknowledgement of how Whiteness serves as a foundation for the marginalization of individuals and groups. Studying Whiteness does not detract from the attention needed in research on minoritized groups, which remains a critical need in higher education research. Rather, the focus on this research is to challenge the system of Whiteness that has disadvantaged these groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### **White Privilege**

Although defining Whiteness can be difficult, White privilege is something that can be explicitly defined, yet the definition is still hard for White people to accept (Evans et al., 2010). This section defines the concept of White privilege, provides some examples of what White privilege looks like, and discusses how empirical research contributes to our understanding of the concept, specifically barriers to acknowledging privilege. I also point out how White privilege merely scratches the surface of understanding racism and is analogous to a “101 course,” as it provides little discussion of how White privilege intersects with other identities and lacks structural analysis (Cabrera et al., 2016). White privilege discussions can often lead to a good/bad dichotomy for White people, which can be problematic in discussions of racism in that it does not leave room for individuals to inhabit both. The current study asked how entry-level

White women student affairs professionals navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness and how they understand White privilege to be foundational in building from what is generally framed as a conversation about individuals toward a more systemic analysis of Whiteness.

Privilege exists when one group of people has access to something of value that is denied to others because of groups to which they belong, rather than something they have done or failed to do (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Johnson, 2006; McIntosh, 1988). White privilege serves as the system that puts White people at an advantage (McIntosh, 1988). This system works in conjunction with racism, which systematically disadvantages people of color. White privilege bestows opportunities and advantages upon White people; however, this system is largely unseen in society. Higher education is a system that has historically served individuals with privileged identities—generally White, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied men. Understanding, discussing, and dismantling White privilege remains important in a higher education context due to the origins of those for whom these institutions were built and continue to serve.

McIntosh (1988) is well known for the analogy White privilege is “like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (p. 104). Prior to McIntosh’s work, White privilege was largely an abstract idea (Kendall, 2006). McIntosh’s analogy has been widely adopted as an introduction to explaining what White privilege constitutes, as has her publication of what was in her own invisible knapsack. McIntosh’s analysis is a foundational tool in social justice and antiracist education (Adams et al., 2007).

For White people with marginalized identities, the extent to which they individually experience privilege may be less overt, as it is coupled with oppression related to other parts of

their identity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion). The variations in how individuals experience privilege does not diminish the systemic nature of White privilege, yet individuals may resist their role in perpetuating the system. This conflict is important to note, as it intersects with the current study and is explored and critiqued in the following subsection.

### **Defense Mechanisms**

White privilege is a concept that can be applied to individual experiences and can be explained simply through McIntosh's (1988) knapsack analogy. Though easier to digest than White supremacy, discussions of White privilege still create resistance in White people. These reactions are frequently referred to as White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), describing White people's emotional response to learning about their racial privilege (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012; Spanierman & Cabrera, 2015). Due to the nature of how Whiteness has structured society, White people frequently hold a positive sense of self in which they do not consider they are racist (Cabrera et al., 2016). In this sense, White people often feel threatened when racism is named as White privilege, which is often passive and unseen, rather than being described as overt discrimination toward other racial groups (Lowery et al., 2007). White people are reluctant to frame racism as White privilege, as it creates personal responsibility for their role in maintaining this system (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). White people are described as "fragile," as even modest challenges to their worldview, in which they have not considered their privilege, leads to extreme reactions, including guilt and hostility toward people of color (Cabrera, 2014; Matias et al., 2014). White fragility can be particularly problematic in that more time is spent in attending to the emotional reactions of White people than fighting racism (Cabrera et al., 2016).

The privileged identity exploration (PIE) model is a useful frame in understanding reactions that may occur when privilege is named (Watt, 2007), although it is not solely focused

on examining White privilege. The PIE model identifies eight defense mechanisms used by individuals with privileged identities when they are challenged in dialogues about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Watt, 2007). The model includes three developmental phases that map onto the defense mechanisms, which are: (a) recognizing privileged identity, (b) contemplating privileged identity, and (c) addressing privileged identity. The PIE model has been well received, as it was developed empirically, resonates with other theoretical discussions of privilege (Johnson, 2006), and attempts to deconstruct the process for consciousness raising (Watt, 2007). Relative to the current study, Watt's model provides insight on how White women student affairs professionals may react when learning about their own privilege.

### ***White Women's Emotions***

Emotional reactions have been studied as salient to White women, as their reaction to discussions of White privilege are often defensive due to sexism they have experienced (Accapadi, 2007; Linder, 2015). Linder (2015) described the White women in her study attempted to distance themselves from White privilege by focusing on their marginalized identities. Accapadi (2007) termed White women as having a one up/one down identity, whereby one identity is privileged, and another is oppressed. This conflict is often a barrier to recognizing their privilege, as they can choose to move back and forth freely between identities, using their privileged identity as the "operating norm" (Accapadi, 2007, p. 210), even when experiencing significant marginalization. White women can express emotion, often in the form of tears, in a manner that does not reflect poorly on their racial group because of their White privilege. White women's reactions are also influenced by their gender socialization, which often includes emphasis on politeness and being liked (Brown, 2005, Linder, 2015). White women want to be seen as a good White people, which can result in inaction in acknowledging White privilege for

fear of damaging relationships, both with other White people and people of color (Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2001; Linder, 2015). Further exploration on how gender socialization and sexism affect experiences of privilege in White women is warranted (Linder, 2015) and is a gap I aimed to address in the current study. I explore literature on identity development and understanding racism in a later section of the review.

### **Limitations of White Privilege Discourse**

A limitation of the current discourse on White privilege is it has widely focused on the individual acknowledgement of privilege, as described by the invisible backpack analogy (Cabrera, 2017; Leonardo, 2004). Due to this individualistic nature, individuals can easily dismiss aspects of White privilege they feel do not speak to their own experiences, ignoring how they are complicit in a system of White supremacy (Applebaum, 2010; Lensmire et al., 2013; Leonardo, 2004). Lensmire et al. (2013) critiqued the knapsack analogy for this reason, stating it provides a misrepresentation of the nature of Whiteness in that one cannot remove their knapsack (i.e., relinquish their White privilege).

In response to these critiques, several authors have presented alternative ways of considering the system that led to notions of White privilege. Leonardo (2009) presented a list of conditions of White supremacy, similar to McIntosh's list of items in her "knapsack," providing 29 examples of the systemic nature of Whiteness. This conceptualization attempted to address the critiques that White privilege is frequently separated from notions of White supremacy (Lensmire et al., 2013; Leonardo, 2004). Cabrera (2017) offered another response to this critique, suggesting adopting the term "White immunity" to move the discourse toward the systemic nature of racism. Per Cabrera's (2017) definition, "White immunity means that People of Color have not historically, and are not contemporarily, guaranteed their rights, justice, and equitable



social treatment; however, White people are because they have protection from this disparate treatment” (p. 82). White immunity is a product of White supremacy and cannot end until the latter is dismantled. An important tenet of this reconceptualization is the recommendation that educators link this reality to antiracist action. In practice, this linkage would mean that White people are both committed to continually acknowledging their privilege and using that knowledge to work against racist systems.

### **Summary**

This section introduced White privilege as important for the study, as it is often used as an introduction to conversations about racism. When presented with privilege, White people exhibit a variety of defense mechanisms, including emotional responses, which are important for framing how participants may understand systems of oppression related to their own identities. I presented critiques of White privilege and related concepts to highlight how discussions of privilege lack the ability to highlight and take responsibility for systems of oppression. White privilege needed to be used with caution in the current study, as it may have been a useful frame for discussion with participants, but it lacked the systemic analysis I sought to accomplish.

### **Racial Identity Development**

Racial identity work builds off foundational theorists, such as Erikson (1959/1994) and Marcia (1980), who first explored identity development. Researchers, such as Cross (1971, 1978, 1991) and Helms (1984, 1990, 1995), were some of the first to build models to better understand how identity issues are resolved as they intersect with race. The first racial identity models focused on Black identity in response to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The best known of these theories was developed by Cross (1971, 1978, 1991, as cited in Helms, 1990) who explored Black identity through a theory of nigrescence—in essence, the process of

becoming Black. Models of White racial identity development (WRID) were not developed until later. As Whiteness is often invisible in society, it has taken much longer for literature to acknowledge White individuals also develop racial identity. In this section, I review models of WRID and their context for student affairs professionals while also critiquing these models. In relation to the racial identity development of White people, I also introduce the concept of racial justice allies and related literature about ally development in White people.

### **White Racial Identity Development**

Theories related to White identity development have generally focused on how White people understand their power and privilege in relation to oppressed groups, rather than exploring White identity independent of other groups, as Whiteness is often invisible in society. Helms (1984, 1990, 1995) developed the dominant WRID model in the field. In the following section, I discuss Helms's framework in the context of other WRID literature and conclude with gaps in the research related to the current study.

Helms's (1984, 1990, 1995) WIDM is well known and has been widely researched, critiqued, and empirically validated. Helms's model has been through various edits, reflecting the evolution of the study of identity. Helms (1990) conceptualized White identity development in two phases: (a) abandonment of racism and (b) evolution of a nonracist identity. The WIDM was originally a five-stage model in these two phases, consisting of the following stages: (a) contact, (b) disintegration, (c) re-integration, (d) pseudo-independence, and (e) autonomy (Helms, 1984). In 1990, Helms added a sixth stage—immersion/emersion (between pseudo-independence and autonomy)—in response to critiques on her original theory. Helms (1995) later changed the word “stage” to “status” in the model in acknowledgement of the critique, sharing the stages were “permeable” and acknowledging, although the model was intended to be

progressive, individuals could revert to earlier statuses. Helms (1990) also acknowledged there is no end to the process of understanding identity, as it is an ongoing journey. Hardiman (2001), seeking to understand how White people recognize racism and White privilege, proposed another WRID model. Hardiman's model has five stages: (a) no social consciousness of race, or naiveté, (b) acceptance; (c) resistance; (d) redefinition; and (e) internalization. This model describes a linear process through which White people move from no awareness of race (naiveté) to an end goal (internalization) where they understand race and racism and can integrate that understanding into their actions.

In response to some critiques of WRID models, Rowe et al. (1994) developed the White racial consciousness statuses (WRCS). This model uses the language of statuses rather than stages to describe White people's racial consciousness as a result of their environment and experiences rather than as a linear process. The WRCS is based on "variable consequences of life experiences" (Rowe et al., 1994, p. 142) rather than sequential stages, addressing some concerns with the earlier models. This model describes unachieved and achieved racial consciousness statuses, beginning with avoidance and ending with integrative. Some statuses in the model closely align with stages of other WRID models.

A critique of the literature discussed earlier is it explores how White people relate to other racial groups rather than exploring Whiteness independent of others (Hardiman, 2001; Rowe et al., 1994; Sabnani et al., 1991). These models do not consider how White people develop a racial identity, but rather how they develop attitudes toward non-White racial groups (Miller & Fellows, 2007; Rowe et al., 1994). A challenge with using WRID models for the current study was the lack of discussion of constructs such as power and privilege and lack of consideration of intersections with other identities. These models were informative for the

current study to understand how White women might have been socialized to understand their own racial identity; however, they have significant gaps in addressing the systemic nature of Whiteness I aimed to explore.

### **Racial Ally Development**

Related to White identity development and understanding White privilege, an additional body of literature has focused on development of racial justice allies. This body of literature built off research on social justice allies, who can be defined as “members of dominant social justice groups . . . who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater power and privilege based on their social-group membership” (Broido, 2005, p. 3). Racial justice allies are White people who work in the same frame to address racism. Although there are no models specific to student affairs professionals, models about college students’ development into racial justice allies are useful in understanding the process through which individuals go to acknowledge White privilege and then apply that knowledge to transform systems of oppression. This model is useful for the current study in understanding how participants might build on personal and professional experiences to disrupt Whiteness.

Building off Broido’s (2000) research on social justice allies, Reason et al. (2005) proposed a model of development for racial justice allies. Students in their study who exhibited more reflection on Whiteness participated in deeper action related to racial justice. They identified three phases of the model in relation to these findings. First, racial justice allies must understand privilege and racism at the intellectual level and understand how it affects everyday interactions. Second, allies need to develop an understanding of Whiteness by acknowledging both the positive and negative associations with it and developing “moral courage” (Reason et al., 2005, p. 62) to challenge the actions of other White individuals. The last step requires action

to actively address systems of oppression. Increased understanding of the interactions between a student's experiences at college, their own sense of Whiteness, and their racial justice actions allows higher education professionals to plan purposeful interventions that move students toward racial justice ally behaviors. Reason et al. also recommended higher education professionals reflect on their own racial identity, as they can role model their understanding of Whiteness and a racial justice orientation for their students.

Other models outside of higher education (Bishop, 2002; O'Brien, 2001) are also informative in understanding racial ally development. Each model reinforces the need to reflect on what it means to be White and the difficulty in doing ally work in isolation. Though these findings cannot necessarily be generalized to student affairs professionals, they provide some insight into how professional development and further training can be shaped to promote this development of racial justice allyship.

### **Summary and Critique of the Current Understanding of White Identity Development**

Research on White identity development allows for a starting place from which to discuss this topic with entry-level White women student affairs professionals, especially as these theories are often part of graduate program curricula in higher education and student affairs master's degree programs. However, there are important critiques of the literature to note. WRID explores how White people relate to other racial groups rather than exploring Whiteness independent of others (Hardiman, 2001; Rowe et al., 1994; Sabnani et al., 1991). These models do not consider how White people develop a racial identity, but rather how they develop attitudes toward non-White racial groups (Miller & Fellows, 2007; Rowe et al., 1994).

A more recent critique of this literature acknowledges these models do not recognize racial identity development is a continual process that may result in becoming a racial justice

ally. Rather, models focus on ally work being an end goal of a developmental model for White people (Cabrera, 2012). White people's desire to be seen as "good" in acknowledgement that White privilege is "bad" leads to ally work being done for a self-serving purpose (Reason & Broido, 2005). Due to White privilege, individuals can act when convenient (Cabrera et al., 2016), which does not actually benefit people of color and reinforces the system of Whiteness.

Acting out of convenience is acknowledged in the literature, as Reason and Broido (2005) cautioned against "fair weather allies" (p. 87) who only work against racism when it is convenient or easy. True allyship requires White people to engage in continuous self-reflection about their own privilege and go against cultural norms built on a system of Whiteness (Gusa, 2010; Reason & Broido, 2005). The concept of racial justice allies and related literature was useful for the current study in framing a concept with which many student affairs practitioners are familiar and often use in discussion around diversity and inclusion. Challenging traditional notions of allyship for White people was an important part of the study framework in understanding how White women student affairs professionals choose to act on knowledge they have about systems of oppression.

A challenge associated with using WRID and racial justice ally models in relation to the current study is that they lack discussion of constructs such as power and privilege and do not address any considerations for intersection with other identities. Through this study, I sought to understand how participants navigated Whiteness in the context of their unique intersection of identities, as more recent identity development research has demonstrated individuals do not experience identities in isolation (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). In the following section, I explore approaches that address multiple dimensions of identity prior to discussing literature that specially discusses this approach for White women.

## **Intersections of Identity**

A fault of much research around identity is it has attempted to understand development through a one-dimensional lens (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation) and has largely left out context in forming a sense of self (Abes & Kasch, 2007). The evolution of the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI; Jones & Abes, 2013) is informative to understand how research can address those gaps and provide a framework that can be applied to the White women in the current study. In this section, I provide a summary of the evolution the MMDI to the reconceptualized frame the authors proposed to situate understanding of identity in the context of larger structures of power and oppression (Jones & Abes, 2013). I conclude the section with a brief discussion of intersectionality as a critical framework that helps advance the understanding of multiple dimensions of identity and how I used this approach as a lens to deepen my own understanding but was not appropriate for an analysis of White women.

### **The Evolution of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

As mentioned previously, there is little scholarship in student affairs research addressing the intersection of identity. Jones (1997) attempted this more complex analysis in their grounded theory study, in which they explored identity development in female college students. Jones sought to understand how identity development was shaped by women's experiences, rather than by what identities had been imposed on them externally. Findings of that research aligned with the goals of the current study and included the braiding of gender with other identities and the influence of context (Jones & Abes, 2013). This model was the foundation for the MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000), which provides a lens to understand the way core identities and contextual influences intersect with outside factors to create a fluid representation of development.

The MMDI illustrates identity with a core or personal identity at the center, surrounded by social identities (Jones & Abes, 2013). The model addresses the salience of unique social identities by allowing them to be represented closer or more distant from the core identity, and these core and intersecting social identities are situated in a larger context of items such as family, sociocultural conditions, and experiences. The model seeks to provide a more fluid representation of identity and can provide a unique snapshot for understanding identity development across different points in time. The authors acknowledged the model portrays the existence of multiple, intersecting identities but is not truly intersectional.

The authors of the MMDI reconceptualized the model to broaden the focus of understanding to include cognitive and interpersonal development in addition to identity development (Jones & Abes, 2013). This reconceptualization involved adding a meaning making filter between context and identity. This meaning making filter draws from research by Baxter Magolda (2003), which discussed the interconnected domains of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development and explored if one's sense of self was internally or externally defined. Through an additional study using college women as the research subjects, the reconceptualized model demonstrated meaning making was a filter through which participants interpreted context. Participants had a wide range through which they were able to filter context—those who had a more complex meaning making filter were better able to filter external factors and develop a sense of self (Jones & Abes, 2013).

In presenting the reconceptualized model (the RMMDI), the authors invited questions about “how systemic oppression contributes to the nature of relationships among social identities” (Jones & Abes 2013, p. 120). Although the RMMDI does not provide a formula to apply critical perspectives, the authors offered a recommendation for these perspectives to be



applied to expand on the nature of context to include power structures that shape those contexts. They offered examples of three critical frameworks that could be applied to the RMMDI—intersectionality, critical race theory, and queer theory—and concluded by noting this re-analysis strayed from understanding how individuals perceived their own identities to conceptualizations that brought systems of inequity forward, of which individuals are not always explicitly aware.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is an interdisciplinary framework that grew out of the field of critical legal studies, emerging from scholarship of women of color in critique of feminist movements that were centered on the experiences of White, cisgender, middle-class women (Crenshaw, 1991). Specifically, intersectionality began with the intent to put marginalized individuals at the forefront and drew attention to systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). It has emerged as a new critical tradition to study difference (Hancock, 2007). Previous frames to study difference included looking at only one demographic category or multiple discrete categories rather than examining the relationship between categories. In higher education research, student development theory has often taken this approach, with research focusing on the experiences of specific identity groups. Many of these approaches have used a one-or-the-other approach—for example, discussion of race or gender—or an additive approach, such as race and gender. In this same example, intersectionality may integrate an analysis of race with gender. In addition to considering multiple identities simultaneously, intersectionality proposes analysis of an individual be integrated with that of the institution.

Intersectionality is critical of only addressing one dimension of identity at a time and challenges this way of examining identity (Bowleg, 2008). Bowleg (2008) provided an example to illuminate this distinction in their article, “When Black + Lesbian + Woman  $\neq$  Black Lesbian

Woman,” as she questioned how to ask about multiple identities without “resorting to an additive approach” (p. 314). Intersectional scholars generally agree multiple levels of marginalization are reinforced by oppressive social and political structures; hence, one goal of intersectionality is to design interventions that dismantle these structures (Hancock, 2007). Hancock (2007) described these oppressive systems as an “interlocking prison from which there is little escape” (p. 65).

Dill and Zambrana (2009) defined intersectionality by four theoretical interventions:

- (1) Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of the theory;
- (2) Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized;
- (3) Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression;
- (4) Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions. (p. 5)

A common misuse of intersectionality is assuming the presence of intersecting identities in a study means the approach is intersectional (Torres et al., 2009). Rather than looking at multiple identities, intersectionality centers on how experiences are shaped by structural inequality and systems of power and privilege (Jones & Stewart, 2016; Torres et al., 2009).

### ***Intersectionality and White Women***

There has been some debate among intersectional scholars about who is, in fact, intersectional—that is, whether intersectionality can be applied as a general theory of identity in which all individuals may locate themselves, or if it is primarily grounded in experiences of those with multiple marginalized identities (Nash, 2008; Wijeyasinghe & Jones, 2014). Nash

(2008) advocated for a conception of identity that acknowledges how dominance and subordination work in intersecting ways, allowing for an examination of privilege in an intersectional framework. Building from a discussion of intersectionality in feminist theory, Torres et al. (2009) wrote intersectionality opens the door for examination of both privileged and oppressed identities and acknowledges individuals can inhabit both. Those recommendations indicate intersectionality may be applied to White women and can assist in acknowledging how these individuals can be both the oppressed and the oppressor simultaneously (Collins, 2009; Linder, 2011). These recommendations also asserted the need to proceed with caution to not center privileged voices (Wijeyasinghe & Jones, 2014).

Intersectionality has become somewhat of a buzzword, specifically in student affairs and higher education, and has often been used inappropriately to discuss intersections of identities. Researchers have struggled to develop studies that are truly intersectional, focusing on multiple identities rather than undertaking a structural analysis informed by identity constructs. Those who have used it have not paid clear attention to the multiple dimensions of the theory (Collins, 2009; Davis, 2008). Crenshaw (1993) noted they did not intend for intersectionality to be a theory of identity, rather their focus was on how systems overlap to shape experiences of those with multiple marginalized identities (Lange, 2020). Intersectionality is not the only critical lens that can be used to discuss intersecting power structures and is often misused to assert the importance of considering the salience of multiple, intersecting identities.

### ***Intersectionality in Application***

For the purposes of the current study, I considered intersectionality critical to how I made sense of the topic and the goal to illuminate the invisible nature of Whiteness. The concept of intersectional feminism, which I discuss in the next section, is foundational when considering

gender as an organizing construct for the study. I drew from how authors applied intersectionality, such as a “backwards thinking” (Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014, p. 111) approach, to situate critical frameworks for the current study, in that these approaches affected epistemology, reflexivity, and research design in addition to being an analytic tool. I ultimately decided not use intersectionality as an analytic tool, as I felt using this framework in a narrative study of White women did not stay true to the origins and intent of the theory, which was to name the “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourse of either feminism or antiracism” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1243–1244). I chose to apply other critical approaches that were better suited for this analysis (i.e., critical Whiteness and feminist theory). I explore the methodology in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### **Summary**

This section introduced the MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) as one example of a theory that attempts to address multiple dimensions of identity simultaneously. I highlighted the authors’ own critiques and subsequent reconceptualization, as they are valuable in emphasizing how identity cannot be discussed in isolation of context, specifically how power structures shape external meaning making (Jones & Abes, 2013). I discussed intersectionality as a critical lens that assists in illuminating how power structures overlap to impact individuals with multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1993). It was important to introduce intersectionality and why I chose not to use it as a framework for the study, as it has become a buzzword and is frequently used to incorrectly discuss the intersection of identities, rather than the multiple, intersecting power structures the theory seeks to dismantle.

## **Women and Gender Identity**

This section introduces gender as a social construct as it has been defined in and shaped feminist theory and research, and it provides an overview of studies in higher education about women's identity development. Though higher education scholarship includes women's identity development, there has been little use of feminist theory and methodology in the field (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). First, I use scholarship from outside of higher education to define gender as a social construct, as it connects to the purpose of the current study. I briefly introduce the goals of feminism and feminist theory, which apply the construct of gender as an organizing principle for research and theory (Flax, 1988). I then review literature on identity development among women and conclude by discussing gaps in the current discourse. Throughout this section, I explore how White privilege has affected discussions of gender and feminism, essentializing the experiences of all women rather than exploring differences in contexts and environments based on race, class, sexual orientation, and other identities (Harris, 1990).

### **Gender as a Social Construct**

de Beauvoir (1953) claimed, "one is not born a woman" (p. 1). This notion inspired scholars to recognize the social construction of gender. For the purpose of this study, I briefly introduce multiple perspectives that inform how this social construction framed my approach to the research. Though there is a breadth of literature on gender and feminist theory, I review select foundational scholars and introduce perspectives that challenge traditional notions of feminism. In framing the current study, I understood gender as constructed over time in relation to one's environment (Butler, 1988; Scott, 1986). I elaborate on this next.

de Beauvoir (1953) rejected the biological determination of gender based on sex and outlined how women are frequently defined as the other to men and that men are the normal, and

women's characteristics are described in opposition to them. Oakley (1972) noted these distinctions generally describe women as inferior and interpretations of gender differences confer male dominance and contribute to the devaluation of women. Butler (1988), a well-known feminist scholar, described gender as an identity developed through a "stylized repetition of acts" (p. 519) and as constituted through these acts. These definitions have defined gender both related to the characteristics of individuals and cultural practices inscribed in social structures (Scott, 1986). Notions of gender are complex, as evolving notions of sex, sexuality, and gender identity shape how gender is discussed, defined, and understood; a consistent thread throughout discussions of gender has been the influence of power relations in how gender is defined, lived, and reproduced (McCann & Kim, 2017).

Discussion of gender difference has often been limited to notions of women as distinct from men and has not included within-group differences, such as women from different races, classes, and sexualities (Schmitz et al., 1995). Women of color have objected to a gender-only focus in feminism, which has created a universal view of women's experiences based upon White, middle class, straight women (hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1981; Spelman, 1988). This essentialism in traditional notions of gender and feminism has created tension for women with nondominant identities, forcing them to identify themselves as different from this mainstream movement with which they do not identify or to ignore their unique experiences to fit in with White women (Thompson, 2002). Considering these multiple aspects of identity in discussions of gender allows for a new conceptualization of feminism that can work to liberate all women from oppressive structures.

## **Feminism**

Feminism emerged from discussions of gender differences and the subordination of women in society. However, feminism is a loaded word that brings up many different thoughts, images, and associations for people, as it has sought to challenge the status quo in society but has also largely focused on the experiences of White women. I view feminism as centering the experience of oppression based on gender, encompassing all marginalized identity groups. hooks (1984) provided a simple definition that resonated with my goals for the research: “Feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression” (p. 17). For the purpose of the current study, it is important to expand the definition of feminism to include specific concerns for women, such as equal pay and sexual violence, to a focus on eradicating all forms of oppression by recognizing these systems are interconnected.

Feminism is often referred to in three waves, beginning with the suffrage movement of the mid-19th century, to a second wave starting in the 1960s, and concluding with the current era of feminism. There are critiques of this analogy, as these different periods have had vastly different goals, and applying the same term to different forms of activism related to gender over the past 2 centuries has essentialized the goals of feminism and ignored distinctions between movements (Nicholson, 2010). The history of feminism, originating with gender equity for White women, has often ignored experiences of women of color (Lorde, 1981), creating notions of feminism that do not resonate with all women.

### ***Intersectional Feminism***

As feminism has largely been discussed in regard to heterosexual, White women, new frameworks have emerged to consider women from an intersectional perspective, which has allowed feminism to consider variation within and across differences (Dill & Zambrana, 2007).

Scholarship has evolved to include traditions such as Black feminist thought, queer feminism, transnational feminism, Chicana feminism, and multiracial feminism. Much of this scholarship emerged during the second wave feminism period, which largely failed to make connections between the goals of feminism and the fight for racial justice of the era. The Civil Rights Movement also contained a great deal of sexism (Collins, 1990), which situated Black women in a place where they did not identify with either movement. Scholarship validating the experience of Black women has emerged from this disconnect, and the multiple levels of marginalization they experience has provided a foundation for expanding notions of feminism.

To understand the role White women have in expanding notions of feminism, it is worthwhile to consider who can call themselves a Black feminist. It is important to emphasize Black feminist thought should largely be produced by Black women and is primarily about the intersection of racial and gender oppression that result in experiences of oppression that are unique from those of White women and Black men (Collins, 1990). Black feminist thought aims to create theory that aids in Black women's specific struggles against oppression (Collins, 1990). Other groups can develop their own consciousness and standpoint through reflecting on this viewpoint. Creating dialogue about this reflection seeks to actualize a feminist standpoint that empowers both men and women to reject discrimination through their own self-consciousness. I would not suggest for White women to call themselves Black feminists; rather, they can be advocates for the goals of Black feminist thought. This suggestion aligns with hooks's (1984) suggestion that individuals reframe from claiming "I am a feminist" to stating they "advocate feminism" (p. 29) to avoid creating exclusionary ideas that might preference a particular group.

If White women understand the nuances of Black women's standpoint (and experiences of women with other marginalized identities), it challenges the generalizing of oppression in



feminism. This nuance can move feminism beyond a movement for equal rights for women to a “commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels – sex, race, and class, to name a few” (hooks, 1981, p. 194). These nuanced conceptions of feminism allow unique identity groups to be empowered through theories that speak to their social reality and create opportunity to build coalitions across differences, making connections to the multiple interconnected domains of power and oppression that operate in their lives (Dill & Zambrana, 2007).

Applying an intersectional perspective to expand traditional notions of feminism served to guide how I positioned gender as an organizing construct for the study, acknowledging a fundamental goal of feminist theory is to analyze how gender is constituted and experienced, both by understanding male domination and how women are situated within that power structure (Flax, 1988). Although intersectionality was not an analytic tool for the study, this theoretical perspective was informative for both framing how participants made meaning of intersecting power structures. The influence of feminist research on the study is discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Women in Higher Education Research**

In the context of higher education, there is a historical perspective on the role of women; discussion of representation of women among students, faculty, and upper-level administrators; and specific theories that consider identity development among women. There has been little discussion of women that has included the intersection of other identities, such as race, or specifically identified female entry-level professionals as subjects of research, a gap I sought to address through this study. Most research on women has included them as subjects, rather than applying gender as an organizing construct to understand a phenomenon. I explore existing literature on women’s identity development as it informed the current study and provide a

foundation to expand identity to consider both race and gender simultaneously. I conclude the section with a discussion of gaps in the current discourse on entry-level White women student affairs professionals.

### ***Women's Identity Development***

The origins of identity development theory (Erikson, 1959/1994; Marcia, 1980) lacked exploration of women's experiences. It was not until the 1980s when researchers began to challenge the foundational works, exploring identity to develop theories about women's identity formation. In this section, I highlight the foundations of women's identity development theories and discuss gaps in the literature related to the current study.

In 1987, Josselson published *Finding Herself: Pathways to Identity Development in Women*, which built on psychosocial theories by Erikson (1959/1994) and Marcia (1980) with a longitudinal study of women's identity that resulted in what is now a well-known model of women's identity formation. Josselson sought to explore the differences between the four identity statuses described by Marcia and why some women resolved their identity crises and others avoided or failed to move beyond these crises. Josselson's (1987) study explored what happened to women as they developed along these four pathways over the life span, focusing on the question, "How can we name and appreciate both the commonalities and differences among women as they construct their identities and, in doing so, weave their lives?" (Josselson, 1996, p. 199). Josselson described four pathways of identity formation: (a) guardians, (b) pathmakers, (c) searchers, and (d) drifters. These four pathways represented starting points for how women viewed their purpose rather than representing a lifelong categorization.

This model was updated when Josselson (1996) published *Revising Herself: The Story of Women's Identity From College to Midlife*, which followed up with the women from the original

(1987) study. Josselson eventually interviewed her participants three times—in college, during their 30s, and during their 40s. A strength of this research was the longitudinal nature (Evans et al., 2010). A limitation was Josselson conducted much of the research on the model, and there was a lack of other research validating the findings. Additional research is needed to assess if this model is still valid, as Josselson’s study was based on a social context that has changed dramatically over the last 30 years.

Belenky et al. (1986) explored cognitive development among women and identified ways of knowing that were grounded in increasing complexity in one’s understanding of knowledge. Their work was influenced by both Gilligan (1993) and Perry (1968) and was developed after lengthy interviews with over 130 women, beginning in the late 1970s. Their research presented different ways of knowing as “perspectives” rather than stages (Belenky et al., 1986). These five perspectives included (a) silence, (b) received knowing, (c) subjective knowing, (d) procedural knowing, and (e) constructed knowing. An important point in their findings was, for women, the development of voice, mind, and self is intertwined. Belenky et al. acknowledged a limitation of their theory was they could not capture the complex nature of individual thought processes (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) and acknowledged their initial theory lacked direct mention of “situational and cultural” impacts on knowing and “the relationship between power and knowledge” (Evans et al., 2010, as cited in Goldberger, 1996, p. 8). The omission of societal context and different levels of power that may impact a woman’s ability to develop her sense of knowing (Goldberger, 1996) within foundational research on women’s identity development is an important note in the context of the current study. The perspective of silence is especially salient here, as women with multiple marginalized identities likely experience the external authority described differently.

Baxter Magolda's (1992) work, *Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender Related Patterns in Students Intellectual Development*, was developed to address how cognitive development differed in men and women. Based on a 5-year longitudinal study of both men and women, this model contains four stages of epistemological reflection, with gender differences in the first three stages of the model. These differences include women: (a) learn more through interactions with peers rather than authority figures, (b) are focused on creating knowledge through interpersonal rather than impersonal relationships, and (c) place value on one's own ideas equally with those of others.

Baxter Magolda (1992) emphasized multiple differences existed within gender groups and, therefore, patterns were not always dictated by gender. A limitation of this study was its focus on traditional-age students who were majority White and middle class. Baxter Magolda also noted a concern for the implementation of the findings was educators needed to have an understanding of diverse populations, an understanding that might not be present in higher education environments. Later, Baxter Magolda (2004) noted they had overlooked race in their study. These are both important points in considering how the stages of Baxter Magolda's model relate to the current study. Educators must have some foundational knowledge of diverse populations to interpret and apply developmental models. They also need to understand identities cannot be considered in isolation. Despite these limitations, Baxter Magolda's theory is insightful, as it provides many applications for a higher education setting. Baxter Magolda (2001) continued to follow their participants and later developed an updated theory that focused on cognitive, affective, and interpersonal development intersected to create self-authorship. This analysis was also useful for the current study, as most discussions of race and racism have used a cognitive frame to understand development.

Much of the foundational research that has sought to understand women, specifically in the context of higher education, has focused on them as individual subjects of research, rather than using gender as a social construct as a lens for analysis. This is an important omission in the context of the current study, as both gender and race serve as constructs to understand the experiences of entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women. There is a body of literature on gender identity development; however, much research using this theory has focused on transgender individuals, often from a clinical perspective (Evans et al., 2010). There is also some literature on feminist identity development that has explored why college women do or do not identify as feminist (e.g., Downing & Roush, 1985; Liss et al., 2001; Myaskovsky & Witting, 1997; Quinn & Radtke, 2006). This research is largely about White college women but does not address Whiteness or other intersecting identities as part of the theory. Though informative, identity development literature related to women has lacked understanding the complexity of identity for women, specifically situated in power structures such as Whiteness.

### **Summary**

This section framed gender as a social construct and defined how intersectional feminism is important in defining how I viewed the goals for the current study. It is important to understand, for the current study, advocating for feminism did not merely serve gendered interests, but sought to highlight and dismantle oppressive structures, such as race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation, so that feminism can benefit all women and others with marginalized identities. I concluded this section with a discussion of identity development related to women to provide a foundation for understanding White women. In the next section, I explore the research that has specifically identified White women as the population for study.

## **Women and Whiteness: Investigating One Up/One Down Identity**

As I conclude this chapter, I focus on the population for the current study: entry-level White women student affairs professionals. I build from the body of literature presented in this chapter to consider this group as whole people, including Whiteness, gender, and the context for entry-level student affairs professionals simultaneously. Studies of Whiteness have largely been one dimensional and have lacked discussion of how construction of other salient identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, religion) intersect with this system. This deficiency in the discourse has created a conceptualization of Whiteness and White privilege that has not necessarily resonated with White people, specifically White women, as people tend to feel more salience toward identities around which they experience marginalization (Accapadi, 2007). As previously discussed in this chapter, a barrier to White women acknowledging their privilege is the significant marginalization they experience due to their gender. Scholarship investigating the intersection and intersectionality of identity has been growing; however, there has been little analysis of how dominant and oppressed identities intersect. In this vein, there has only been limited research that specifically addresses White women; however, a few studies have provided a strong foundation, which I highlight. I conclude by stating how the current study addresses a gap in the current body of literature.

Frankenberg (1993) provided an early exception to the lack of discourse on White women. In a life history study of 30 White women, Frankenberg produced what has been regarded widely as an example of research that shifted the conversation from experiences of people of color to how a system of Whiteness is maintained and reproduced by White women (Collins, 1995). The 1980s were a time when the White feminist movement had experienced significant critique, and Frankenberg argued this critique could no longer be ignored. This

research focused on how racism affected the lives of White women and how they could both “reproduce racism” and “become sites of resistance” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 5).

In relation to the current study, several of Frankenberg’s (1993) findings remain relevant. Frankenberg found possession of other marginalized identities did not necessarily lead White women to have empathy toward other oppressed identities. White women also revealed the system of racism was largely invisible, and it was often what the women did not say about race that was as telling as what they shared in interviews. Most White women in Frankenberg’s study operated in the essentialist racism or colorblind paradigm (Collins, 1995), creating a barrier to articulating a White identity that could be committed to antiracist actions. Frankenberg’s study reinforced the invisibility of Whiteness and perpetuation of White privilege. Limitations of applying the study were that it was over 20 years old, was from a single geographic setting (i.e., California), and was limited to a single snapshot in time. Despite these limitations, Frankenberg’s study was informative for the current study, as it illuminated challenges in deconstructing race and the experiences of White women from a privileged perspective of Whiteness, in addition to using a gendered lens in this type of analysis (Dungy & Gordon, 2001).

Accapadi (2007) published a case study analysis, previously mentioned in this chapter, of student affairs professionals’ participation in difficult dialogue. This analysis used the framework of the PIE model (Watt, 2007) and showed White women’s responses to discussions of privilege, even when well-intended, often reinforced the marginalization of women of color (Accapadi, 2007). Accapadi emphasized the complexity of exploring the intersection of race and gender and how the one up/one down identity White women possess exists as a barrier to acknowledging privilege. Although informative in addressing the structural implications the privileges White women possess have on women of color, this study only scratched the surface of this analysis

and did not explore the complexity of identity it stated exists. Although Accapadi's case study analysis was not lengthy, their approach and points remained salient for the current study. Use of the PIE model (Watt, 2007) has provided an example of how this model can be used as a tool for assessment, and their critique of White women's tears challenged expressions of marginalization by those with privileged identities. As mentioned previously, Accapadi's study also posed questions to the concept of White privilege in individuals and how it can be amplified or diminished by social context.

Linder's (2011, 2015) dissertation research and subsequent publications on antiracist White feminist identity development were relevant for the current study, both in subject matter and methodology. A narrative approach was used to investigate antiracist identity development in White women undergraduate students (Linder, 2015). Linder's (2015) study sought to understand the perspectives of individuals who engaged in social justice work from the lens of both dominant and marginalized identities, which was also part of the goal for the current study. A model of antiracist White feminist development was developed from the study, as participants experienced barriers to engaging in antiracist action, including guilt and shame, fear of appearing racist, and desire to distance themselves from Whiteness. Study participants acknowledged the importance of working through these barriers but were not always able to do so, creating what Linder (2015) described as "a cycle between engaging in activism and inaction" (p. 543).

An implication of Linder's (2015) study was White identity development is cyclical rather than linear, and individuals may move forward in understanding systems of oppression and activist work while simultaneously needing to evaluate feelings of guilt and shame. Because of the study, it was apparent there was a need to further understand how acknowledging privilege impacts putting that awareness into action. This question is particularly relevant for entry-level



White women student affairs professionals if they are to engage in social justice work. Recommendations from the study included further research on the intersection of dominant and marginalized identities and deeper exploration into the gendered nature of White guilt, as previously discussed in the chapter. These recommendations support the relevance of the current study and provide a strong foundation from which to build new knowledge.

### **White Women and Learning About Racism in Graduate School**

Robbins's dissertation and subsequent publications explore the question of how White women graduate students in student affairs graduate programs construct their racial identity (Robbins, 2012, 2016; Robbins & Jones, 2016; Robbins & McGowan, 2016). Robbins's original study closely relates to the current study and is explored in some detail, as their methodology and findings helped frame how my study could both build on existing research and provide new understanding of White women in the context of student affairs. Robbins's dissertation and subsequent publications have been referred to as examples of exemplary qualitative research (Jones et al., 2013), which was informative in developing the methodology for the current study. Robbins (2016) used a conceptual framework that included (a) resistance and (b) the PIE model (Watt, 2007) in development of a grounded theory of racial consciousness, identity, and dissonance of White women in higher education and student affairs graduate programs. Findings from Robbins's (2016) study described 16 coursework and preprofessional experiences that enhanced participants' understanding of racism and White privilege.

Robbins (2016) found graduate preparation programs contributed to White women's understanding of racism and White privilege in two main ways: "a) by 'opening their eyes' through coursework and preprofessional experiences, which generated racial dissonance; and b) by engaging their racial dissonance, which facilitated a 'hunger' for more knowledge" (p. 258).

Robbins found experiences were inconsistent across graduate programs, as some participants experienced a seamless integration of social justice conversations across program components, and others had this only in isolation, such as in a diversity course. Participants in the study also exhibited many of the defense mechanisms present in the PIE model (Watt, 2007) and, through these, minimized their own privilege by focusing on individual impact, even when they proposed they sought to learn more (Robbins, 2016).

Robbins's (2016) study offered several practical implications for higher education and student affairs graduate preparation programs, including development of both intergroup and intragroup dialogue, building learning partnerships with student and academic affairs colleagues, and an emphasis on putting knowledge into practice, which would constitute a push outside of one's comfort zone. The recommendation for intragroup dialogue in the form of race caucus groups was informative for the methodology of the current study and was a recommendation as a way for White people to engage in learning without causing harm to people of color. The suggestion graduate students need mentors in the area of racial justice is also relevant to student affairs practitioners. It would be informative to understand if entry-level White women professionals have supervisors or mentors who can push them to apply their knowledge and move outside of their comfort zone as suggested.

Robbins and Jones (2016) did a subsequent narrative analysis of the original data set to understand the theme of racial dissonance that emerged. Three themes emerged from this analysis as a response to racial dissonance, including resistance, engagement, and transformation. The model developed from the study also acknowledged participants sometimes blended all three responses. The most common strategies included engagement and combinations of resistance/engagement and engagement/transformational action. These findings suggest

participants valued their individual opportunities to learn over transformative action that would have disrupted a system of Whiteness. Keeping discussions of racism focused on an individual level allowed participants to exist comfortably as good White people, and it reinforced other literature on Whiteness as property. This analysis also highlighted White women's emotions were a barrier to transformative action and reinforced previous literature (e.g., Accapadi, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Reason et al., 2005; Watt, 2007) in which this conflict was discussed.

Both the original research and subsequent analysis were formative for development of the current study. A recommendation from Robbins (2016) for further research was to consider how White women continue to learn about racism and White privilege when they become student affairs professionals. Robbins and McGowan (2016) reflected on how an intersectional frame would have been helpful in addressing the complexity of identity in Robbins's (2012) original study, as participants could not separate race from other identities. Although I chose not to use intersectionality as a framework for the current study, using theoretical frameworks that acknowledge intersecting power structures is important to build on this research.

A critique in agreement with Robbins's (2012) own reflection is the analysis sought to explore racial identity and by placing the exploration of Whiteness at the foreground largely left out how the construction of gender affected that development, even though women were the research subjects. Robbins and Jones (2016) provided an alternative look at the original data that more prominently considered gender—specifically, White women's emotions—in the analysis and discussion. Robbins's research and subsequent publications were strong foundations from which to build to support the value of the current research. Robbin's research will be explored further in Chapter 3, as it informed the methodology of the current study.

## **Summary**

This section reviewed literature that specifically discussed White women as subjects of research. Though few in number, I drew heavily from these few studies in developing my frame of reference for the current study. These studies provided questions on how the social construction of gender affects White women's understanding of their own privilege and their ability to enact transformation in their work. It is clear from this research that White women, like many White people, are defensive when their privilege is called out, and they have a difficult time working through that emotional response. What is not clear is how White women can process their gendered emotions in developing a worldview that considers both their marginalization as women and their privilege as a White person simultaneously, which was a gap I sought to understand through the current study.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant literature to the study of entry-level White women student affairs professional and how they understand systems of oppression related to their own identities. The chapter included a review of literature related to each aspect of participants' identities, including the context for student affairs professionals. I divided the chapter into unique sections to discuss race and gender, and I discussed approaches to consider the intersection of multiple identities. Prior to discussing race and gender as constructs, I introduced the context for entry-level student affairs professionals, providing insight into the values and competencies of the profession related to social justice and inclusion. Next, I discussed Whiteness and White privilege as they exist as broad constructs to frame both higher education environments and how individuals understand themselves in relation to larger social structures. I provided an example of an approach that makes meaning of multiple, intersecting identities and

the importance of context in this type of analysis. Following that section, I discussed gender and women's identity development, providing a foundation for expanding the notions of feminism to one that considers gender as it intersects with other identities as they are situated power structures. Finally, I reviewed existing literature that specifically identified White women as subjects of research and discussed how this literature provided a foundation for the current study but also left gaps with unanswered questions I sought to answer. The following chapter builds on the theoretical framework presented here to present the methodology and methods for the study.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the critical approach for the study, which was grounded in critical Whiteness and feminist perspectives. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodology for the study to illuminate the invisible nature of Whiteness. Data collection methods included interviews and focus groups. Finally, I outline the data analysis process that led to the themes and discuss the trustworthiness of the study.

### **Study Purpose**

Through the study, I sought to understand how entry-level White women student affairs professionals navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. The specific research questions were:

1. How do entry-level White women student affairs professionals describe navigating Whiteness in a professional setting, informed by their educational and personal experiences?
2. In what ways do entry-level White women student affairs professionals maintain Whiteness?
3. In what ways are entry-level White women student affairs professionals motivated to disrupt Whiteness?

### **Epistemological and Theoretical Foundations**

It is important for qualitative researchers to reflect on perspectives that inform their research prior to designing a study (Jones et al., 2013). I explain my epistemology and theoretical perspectives prior to discussing the design of the study. Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge, including what assumptions are made and how it is acquired (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2013). A theoretical perspective can be defined as “assumptions about the nature of knowledge acquisition and existence” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 9) and is the philosophical stance

that shapes methodology (Crotty, 1998). These foundations, along with the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, shaped the methodological approach for the study, meaning they provided context for the research process and grounded the logic for the chosen criteria (Crotty, 1998).

### **Epistemological Foundation: Critical Research**

My approach for this study was a critical research orientation, which emphasizes studying the nature of power relations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and challenges notions that views are valid just because they exist (Coomer, 1989). Early origins of critical research include Marx's (1964) analysis of class structures, Habermas's (1971) work with emancipatory knowledge, and Freire's (1970/1993) writings on education as a liberatory practice. For the purpose of the current study, critical research assumes people unconsciously accept things the way they are, and by doing so, perpetuate the status quo (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In relation to the White women who were participants in the study, this means an assumption of the study was they had largely left their Whiteness unquestioned in how they developed their worldview.

A critical research orientation was appropriate to provide an opportunity for the White women in the study to reflect on how they were both simultaneously the oppressed and the oppressor (Collins, 2009; Linder, 2011), as this framework seeks to illuminate power and oppression in social structures and demonstrate how knowledge is constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Critical qualitative research seeks to understand how power relations advance the interest of one group while oppressing others and challenge these systems (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For White women, acknowledging how they simultaneously benefit from Whiteness and oppress others is part of the process of disrupting the system. In illuminating the oppressive nature of Whiteness, White women can also understand how their marginalized identity as

women differs from women of color, moving toward a more intersectional version of feminism.

Carspecken (2012) presented a definition of critical qualitative research that was foundational for the current study:

Critical qualitative research aims to understand itself as a practice that works with people to raise critical consciousness rather than merely describe social reality. A critical qualitative research project will typically be a project in conscientization. It will work with people to make implicit forms of knowing-how into explicit and criticizable forms of discursive knowledge. It will contribute to social change directly. (p. 44)

A critical perspective was appropriate for studying entry-level White female student affairs professionals, as both Whiteness and gender are organizing constructs that are largely implicit and accepted as the norm. Through a critical study of these constructs, I illuminated how they were operating from a structural perspective in relation to the experiences of study participants (DiAngelo, 2011). A critical approach supported the goals of the current study, as it was not necessarily action oriented; however, participants described their involvement as motivating, and I recommend actions for practice for student affairs professionals that have potential to disrupt Whiteness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework and Perspectives**

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 shaped the theoretical framework for the study, specifically using a foundation of critical Whiteness as an organizing principle in both illuminating and critiquing how White people are unaware of the benefits they receive from the system, Whiteness, which dominates both society and college campuses. Lessons learned from studying intersectionality informed my perspective in understanding how meaning making through gendered power structures influences how White women navigate, maintain, and disrupt



Whiteness and how their approach is different from those of White men and women of color. Drawing from Abes (2009), I employed multiple theoretical perspectives and situated the analysis in a theoretical borderland to illuminate systems of oppression from multiple viewpoints. Acknowledging White women's experience differs from that of White men, I drew from feminist methodology as an alternate way to consider the research questions and methodology.

The two major theoretical perspectives that shaped my orientation and analysis for the study were critical Whiteness studies and feminist methodology. Both perspectives have overlapping goals—to illuminate and deconstruct interlocking systems of oppression. Critical Whiteness studies was at the forefront of the study to focus on a critical analysis of Whiteness as system, rather than centering privileged voices of individuals. Feminist methodology was relevant as a second perspective, as it provided a frame to critique White women's approach to their own oppression and ignorance to Whiteness. Additionally, a feminist methodology course heavily influenced how I understand my own identity as a White woman, as it caused me to acknowledge my conceptualizations of feminism were not inclusive. These perspectives were introduced in the literature review, and this section pays particular attention to how they informed the epistemological foundation for the study and my perspective as a researcher.

### ***Critical Whiteness***

Using the foundational understanding of the system of Whiteness explored in Chapter 2, critical Whiteness studies critically examines the White standpoint (Frankenberg, 1993) and associated structures of power and privilege. Critical Whiteness as a theoretical perspective is one through which scholars interrogate and challenge Whiteness and White privilege (Cabrera et al., 2016). Despite sharing some overlapping tenets with critical race theory (CRT), it is

important to note critical Whiteness research is not a subsection of CRT, and critical examinations of Whiteness in that context can have the problematic effect to recenter Whiteness in discussions meant for scholars of color (Cabrera, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The literature reviewed introduced the theoretical components of Whiteness, including “a) Whiteness as colorblindness, b) Whiteness as epistemologies of ignorance, c) Whiteness as ontological expansiveness, d) Whiteness as property, and e) Whiteness as assumed racial comfort” (Cabrera et al., 2016, p. 20). Critical Whiteness scholars seek to deconstruct Whiteness by illuminating, challenging, and dismantling these oppressive cultural practices and structures (Owen, 2007).

Influence of this theoretical perspective kept illumination of the system of Whiteness at the forefront of the study with the goal of deconstructing the system. Attending to a critical analysis of Whiteness allowed for the use of participant narratives to illuminate and critique systems of oppression and sought to avoid centering privileged voices. The critical nature of this perspective sought to inspire action in both the participants and researcher, thus overlapping with the goals of other theoretical perspectives. In conjunction with other theoretical perspectives, a critical analysis also assisted in illuminating what was not said as important in how participants acknowledged their racial privilege.

Critical Whiteness studies was also influential in considering my positionality as a researcher. It was important for me to reflect on my own structural advantages as I sought to deconstruct a system from which I benefit. I also needed to reflect on what I might miss in the research process as a White woman by understanding the system of Whiteness is largely invisible to those who benefit from it. In addition, a critical Whiteness lens was helpful to acknowledge times when I was maintaining comfort, both for myself as the researcher and for participants.

## *Feminist Methodology*

Feminist researchers see gender as an organizing principle that influences individual lives (Creswell, 2013) and as a lens that can bring clarity to specific questions (Fox-Keller, 1985). As previously mentioned, gender is a social construct. Feminist research has acknowledged this construct differs for each individual and has emphasized studying power relationships as they impact women (Stewart, 1994). Feminist research does not employ any particular method, as any approach can be made feminist (Creswell, 2013). Critical feminist approaches include a critique of White feminism (Crenshaw, 2013), which neglects to acknowledge how White women benefit from Whiteness and can be protected by their White identity in a way women of color cannot. In a study about White women, this perspective attended to gender as a construct while also recognizing it could not be discussed in isolation of Whiteness.

Attending to a critical feminist perspective, Black feminist thought was influential in how I understood my role as a researcher, which in turn shaped the study. As previously introduced, Black feminist thought critiques traditional notions of feminism largely directed at White women and aims to put the experiences of Black women at the center of the discussion (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984). Black feminist thought expands discussion of both sexism and racism to include multiple, intersecting identities by acknowledging systems of oppression are interlocking, reinforce each other, and should be addressed simultaneously (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1984). In this sense, this study could be critical of women, specifically White women, but remain feminist in that, while deconstructing Whiteness, systems that reinforce sexism would also be confronted. In deconstructing systems of oppression simultaneously, I sought to advocate for the kind of feminism described in Black feminist thought, in which White women understand

and challenge their own commitments to patriarchy and racial privilege to build a coalition with other women across differences (Lorde, 1984).

Taking a feminist perspective influenced both the research design and how I considered my positionality as a researcher. For whom and for what purpose are frequent questions asked in feminist research (Olesen, 2011) and were important in grounding the current study as a critical one that caused discomfort for both participants and me as the researcher. I include myself because, in attending to my own positionality as a researcher, I reflected on my own narrative alongside participants. Researcher reflexivity is an important tenet of feminist research (Creswell, 2013). The influence of a feminist perspective encouraged me as a researcher to be “faithful to the words of their participants while also engaging in a critical feminist analysis of those words and the contexts in which they were developed” (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011, p. 677). Although seeking to understand White women, the study was not necessarily for White women. Feminist researchers acknowledge research is not a neutral exercise and, in attending to this perspective, I kept at the forefront the goal of the study—to illuminate and deconstruct Whiteness.

Feminist research seeks to involve participants in the research design (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011) and considers participants as activists, no matter how limited this influence may be (Collins, 1986). Keeping this in mind, I included elements in the study that both sought participant input and created opportunities for critical reflection on their responses. Through this approach, I sought to get participants’ buy-in for the research goals and hoped to inspire action through sharing of the findings.

## **Summary**

Each of the theoretical perspectives presented influenced my epistemology as a researcher, including how I understood my positionality in the research process. These overlapping traditions influenced the methodological choices for the study and shaped the research design and analysis. These choices are explored in the following section.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for a study is informed by epistemology and theoretical perspectives and is a process that guides the design of the study, its implementation, and its analysis (Jones et al., 2013). In this study, I employed a critical narrative analysis as the methodology to illuminate how entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women navigated, maintained, and disrupted the largely invisible system of Whiteness. This analysis was grounded in a three-dimensional space approach that focused on time, space, and interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as they were situated in the context of power structures.

## **Narrative Analysis**

Stories are the primary way individuals express and know who they are (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry explores the lived experiences of individuals through storytelling and seeks to let the meaning of the story become larger than the individual's experience through its retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). It is necessary to distinguish collecting narratives does not necessarily constitute a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry involves the collection of lived experiences with the analysis and retelling of these stories and seeks answers to questions that "call for exploration" (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993, p. 265). The analysis of narrative is of equal importance to the telling of the story. Narrative inquiry is an interdisciplinary methodology with influences from multiple theoretical perspectives and exists within a theoretical borderland,

as it intersects and overlaps with these traditions. As narrative inquiry intersects with and is influenced by a critical framework and perspectives from feminist and critical Whiteness researchers, it framed the methodology for the study.

### ***Critical Narrative Inquiry***

Narrative inquiry aligned with the critical framework for the study, as it both provided description and sought intervention (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and storytelling is frequently bound with elements of “power, property, and domination” (McQuillan, 2000, p. 3). Narrative inquiry allowed me to view stories through the lens of context and consequences, therefore illuminating larger society through both individual and group stories (Kim, 2016; Mishler, 1995). An important note in situating narrative analysis in a critical approach is privileging lived experience as a source of knowledge is not exclusive of the potential to analyze social oppression on a macro level (Clandinin, 2007). As I sought to inspire action through a critical approach, grounding the analysis of individual stories in narrative inquiry provided a foundation to discuss social change. Focusing on lived experience first, prior to analyzing it in a larger social context, allowed for voices from those who have been historically silenced to be heard. The current study allowed an opportunity for the women in the study to have their voices valued as part of knowledge production prior to analyzing the narratives from a critical Whiteness perspective. Clandinin (2007) also provided caution to this approach, as validation of individual narratives had the potential to support systems of oppression and aligned with concerns discussed previously about centering Whiteness in the current study. What I sought with a critical narrative approach was the opposite—an outcome that illuminated and supported dismantling systems of oppression. Attending to this concern was important throughout the research process.

Attending to the fact collecting stories from individuals with privilege had potential to reinforce systems of oppression, narrative analysis also had the opposite potential—to provide the opportunity to illuminate how members of a privileged group justify or dismiss their advantage (Delgado, 1989). In giving attention to individual stories, a critical narrative approach could provide critique through finding problematic elements in that experience (Clandinin, 2007) through multiple elements of participants’ stories, including what was not said. In sharing their experiences, members of dominant groups may be unconscious of elements of power and privilege present in their stories, or they may leave these notions out entirely (Delgado, 1989). This unconsciousness connects to the implicit nature of Whiteness, in that White people frequently shy away from discussing race and racial privilege. Through a critical analysis, I sought to make meaning of these stories in a structural context (Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014). My critical narrative analysis focused on “what is told in the story” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 202) and integrated social context in the analysis, rather than focusing solely on the participants’ interpretations of the experience.

### **Sampling**

In this study, I employed a purposeful sampling technique to locate “excellent” (Morse, 2007, p. 231) participants who could provide “information rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 230) to support answering the research questions. Excellent participants were individuals who were “experts in the experience or the phenomena under investigation [and] who know the information (or have had or are having the experience) in which [I was] interested” (Morse, 2007, pp. 231–232). This purposeful sampling was guided by the research design, including the purpose of the study and research questions (Jones et al., 2013).

### ***Primary Sampling Criteria***

The study employed the following items as purposeful sampling criteria to locate excellent participants (Morse, 2007): (a) completion of 6 months to 5 years of full-time employment after earning a master's degree and (b) identification as a White woman. To participate in the study, I required participants to have spent at least 6 months in the field as a practitioner after earning a master's degree prior to participating in the study. This requirement allowed time for them to move beyond learning the organization and institution to allow for greater opportunity to engage in social justice discourse and action. To be classified as an entry-level professional, participants could have no more than 5 years of experience in student affairs. To meet this criterion, participants needed to respond in the affirmative to a required item on the initial interest form.

As the study investigated entry-level White women student affairs professionals, all participants needed to self-identify as White women. To meet this criterion, participants needed to respond in the affirmative to a required item on the initial interest form. Diversity in the sample was important to me as a researcher and aligned with the goals of the study. Participants also identified with different ethnicities, sexual orientations, abilities, and religions, among other diverse categories they filled in through an open response item on the initial interest survey. I discuss the diversity of the sample later in this section.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

In considering a purposeful sample, I sought “groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001, p. 245). In recruiting participants, I developed a list of colleagues across multiple institution types, functional areas, and geographic regions to gain diversity in the sample. I provided these



individuals with an electronic recruitment message (see Appendix A) they could forward to individuals who met the study criteria. This message included information about the purpose of the research and an interest form to identify participants who met the study criteria. I sent multiple rounds of emails to various groups with the intent to increase the diversity represented in the sample, specifically seeking to increase representation across geographic regions of the United States, as my network was more heavily concentrated in the Midwest.

An additional strategy to recruit participants was through professional associations. I used my network to request for my recruitment message to be shared across listservs for multiple groups. This approach yielded increased interest in the study and provided additional diversity across institution type and functional area. I was prepared to use other forms of outreach such as student affairs Facebook pages and higher education and student affairs master's program alumni listservs; however, I received sufficient interest for the study through my initial forms of outreach, so I did not pursue these methods.

### ***Sample Selection***

Using the initial interest survey (see Appendix B), I generated a spreadsheet of participants from whom I selected the sample. In addition to the requirements I outlined, I attended to additional aspects of diversity in the sample by considering the complexities that emerged in this process, specifically in the relatively small sample (Jones et al., 2013). My initial outreach yielded interest quickly, and I was able to move forward with an initial group of participants within days of sending out the initial interest survey. I remained open to adding more participants as I conducted the study and settled on the final number when there was sufficient representation across the sample and themes became saturated (i.e., no new findings were

emerging; Charmaz, 2006). I discuss the diversity of the sample and the sample size in the following subsections.

**Diversity of Sample.** Jones et al. (2013) provide helpful insight into the complexities of attending to diversity in a sample in qualitative research. Because samples in qualitative research are often purposeful and value inclusion, attention to diversity when done without care can make participants tokens and further marginalize oppressed voices. Building off this point, it is also important to consider researcher positionality when constructing a diverse sample, specifically for identities that may be different from my own as a researcher. Attention to diversity in a sample can enhance the strength of the findings, which for this study was to illuminate patterns that exist across different identity groups among White women (Patton, 2002). In seeking this diversity, I proceeded with caution. I attended to my own positionality as a researcher and grounded the selection of participants in a sound rationale based upon the study purpose and methodology. Robbins (2012, 2016) provided an excellent rationale for the diversity of a sample that informed my thinking on this topic. I discuss this rationale briefly in the following section.

To understand the pervasive nature of Whiteness, the study was enhanced by the inclusion of multiple identity groups in the sample, although this was not required for participation. This diversity enhanced the understanding of both commonalities and variations in the group of White women and how they navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness. Attending to additional social identities beyond race and gender, such as ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation, religion, social class, and ability, was important in the intentional construction of the sample. Participants also shared salient identities I did not initially think of, such as losing a parent or being adopted, as part of their open-ended responses on the survey.

Making space for salient identities beyond that of being White women was important in building a foundation I explored later in interviews and focus groups.

Attention to within-group variation was also influenced by the critical perspective of the study, as it was important not to leave out voices of those who had been previously marginalized (Jones et al., 2013). Consideration of additional identities beyond race and gender enhanced the critical analysis for the study by paying specific attention to how individuals who possess a variety of social identities interact in the system of Whiteness. This intentionality allowed for participants to “work the hyphens” as proposed by Fine (1994) in which salient identities are considered simultaneously, including what is “happening between” (p. 72). This nuanced understanding allowed for the acknowledgement that learning can occur from how individuals make sense of their unique construction of self as it relates to their environment, but the experiences of a particular group cannot be represented by one individual.

Related to diversity in the sample, I proposed prospective participants would be from a wide variety of geographical locations and currently employed at a variety of institutions across the United States and internationally. I hoped such diversity would occur naturally, as it is typical in the field of higher education and student affairs for individuals to attend graduate programs outside of their home regions and conduct national (or even international) job search processes. From the pool of participants, I was intentional to select a sample with geographical diversity. Geography was one area in which the initial interest collected had gaps, thus I continued to recruit participants until I had better representation, knowing I could not represent all regions in the small sample size. Attending to this aspect of diversity addressed concerns present in earlier studies of White women (Frankenberg, 1993) and supported the idea

participants possess a wide variety of experiences in different environments both before and after earning a master's degree.

I also sought to gain participation across a wide variety of functional areas in student affairs. There was fortunately a representation across functional areas in study participants. I chose to include two participants who were not doing typical student affairs work—one working in a role that was higher education adjacent and another who was pursuing her PhD while working in multiple roles on her campus. I grounded this decision in the knowledge that many individuals in higher education and student affairs degree programs work in roles outside of what might first come to mind—such as housing, orientation, and student activities—and thought these perspectives were important to include to answer the research questions.

These considerations about diversity in the sample were important in selecting participants and understanding how this approach impacted data collection and analysis. Diversity of the sample was relative to the small sample sizes that are typical in qualitative research, as I was not seeking, nor was I be able to appropriately represent, all identity groups in construction of the sample. Rather, I sought to keep inclusion as a value at the forefront of the study, keeping true to the theoretical framework and perspectives for the study. As previously mentioned, considerations of researcher positionality are also important in assembling a diverse sample. Although I hold the same identities (White and identifying as a woman) that were required for participation in the study, I could not assume commonalities would be present with myself and participants due to the nuances of identity (Jones et al., 2013).

**Sample Size.** Much language on sampling is grounded in the quantitative research paradigm; however, discussion of sample size is worth including in a qualitative study. In qualitative research, sample size relates to developing reasonable coverage to facilitate

understanding the phenomena under study (Patton, 2002). Sample size may be oriented in the purpose and methodology of the study, in addition to what is realistic given the time and resources available to the researcher(s). Studies in the narrative tradition may include as few as one participant but can include more if the research is being used to develop a “collective story” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). I proposed a minimum sample for the study based upon these recommendations and studies with similar perspectives and methodologies. For example, Fine (2010) had 15 participants, Linder (2015) had 6 participants, and Robbins (2012) had 11 participants. I sought to have at least 12–15 participants to conduct the initial round of interviews with the idea that some individuals may not complete their participation in the study. I thought this number would provide sufficient depth to answer the research questions. Ultimately, 15 participants completed their participation in the study. Three participants did not participate in a focus group due to availability conflicts and only one participant (in addition to the 15) did not follow through on completion of the second interview.

Qualitative research also allows for flexibility in determining when saturation has been reached with data collection—that is, no new information is emerging from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this same vein, this flexibility in sample size also allows for adding additional participants if sufficient understanding of a phenomena is not apparent (Jones et al., 2013). I was open to adding additional participants throughout data collection and analysis; however, as I engaged in ongoing thematic analysis, I was satisfied with the theoretical saturation and did not seek additional participants.

### **Data Collection**

In narrative inquiry, the researcher seeks to elicit participants’ life stories (Chase, 2003). This process relies on an equal relationship between researcher and participant, allowing for a

deep understanding and a rich description of the story. This reciprocal relationship aligns with a feminist perspective that promotes participant involvement in the research process. The influence of critical Whiteness scholarship necessitates a focus on illuminating elements of this system and attending to constructs of power and privilege throughout discussions with participants.

There are a variety of methods to collect stories, such as interviews, journaling, observations, photos, and collection of artifacts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For this study, I conducted two individual interviews with each participant and two focus groups. All but three participants who had availability conflicts attended a focus group. I requested that each participant journal throughout the research process to encourage reflexivity. To provide context for participant stories, I sought background information on their work environments to develop specific questions that could illuminate what might have otherwise been left unsaid. This context supported a critical analysis to make meaning of and retell stories in a structural perspective. I also kept my own notes throughout the research process, which included thoughts on emergent themes, questions that arose related to the research topic, and my own self-reflection related to both my White identity and professional role.

### ***Individual Interviews***

One common technique to collect stories is through individual interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative inquiry, these stories are often referred to as life story interviews (Kim, 2016). I used interviews to learn about the experiences of the study participants related to the research questions and invited participants to share stories in greater depth than they had previously. I could not obtain their whole life stories as part of the process but sought to elicit accounts of their past, present, and future in which participants could decide what experiences were relevant related to the research goals. I conducted interviews via Zoom, and each interview

lasted approximately 90 minutes. I developed a rapport with participants as part of the research process by establishing a relationship that sought to facilitate a depth of sharing and turn the interview into more of a conversation that facilitated a shared construction of knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). By beginning the process with an individual interview, I hoped to set the conditions to elicit this rich telling. Narrative researchers assert the general can be learned through the particular, and these interviews were a way for me to understand how stories were both made possible and problematic by the context in which they were told (Chase, 2003).

Although these interviews had some structure, there was flexibility in the protocols to allow for participants to elaborate on specific questions. I did not necessarily ask all questions to each participant; the protocol served as a guide to the conversation and meaning-making process (Charmaz, 2006). The context for the study was also impactful in the interview process, as it elicited shared experiences navigating the COVID-19 global pandemic and racial injustice in the context of student affairs work. I was intentional in accounting for context in interview protocols and drew on it while building rapport both with and among participants to facilitate deeper narrative sharing. Grounding questions in the sociopolitical context for the study also helped to illuminate how Whiteness was operating in the environments discussed. I drew from a variety of sources in developing the interview protocols and was specifically inspired by Saad's (2020) book, *Me and White Supremacy*. Saad provided guided questions for the reader to move from an individual understanding of White privilege to a more systemic understanding of White people's role in perpetuating systems of oppression. I drew from Saad's approach as I framed the scaffolding of the research questions, specifically in the first interview.

In the first interview, I explored participants' identities and experiences by allowing them to share stories they deemed relevant to how they navigated Whiteness, specifically in the context of their identity as White women. In this interview, I invited participants to discuss salient identities and how these identities are situated in larger systems of power, privilege, and oppression. The first interview remained broad in scope to allow for participants' stories to go in the direction that was most salient. In life story interviews, this approach is referred to as the "narration phase" (Kim, 2016, p. 167), during which it is encouraged for the interview to take the course that naturally explores topics the participant wants to cover. The first interview set the stage for a more specific exploration of Whiteness in the context of their work environments in the focus group and second interview. Questions included rapport building grounded in our shared experiences in student affairs, attention to identity, and exploration of personal experiences learning about and navigating White privilege and White fragility. Because Whiteness is unchosen and unseen, hypotheticals were used in this interview to illicit stories from participants that forced Whiteness to be illuminated and explored. Hypotheticals were specifically used as a technique to elicit insight from participants when they could not think of examples related to the research questions. This technique was most useful in discussing White fragility, as some participants were not conscious of what some called a "big White fragility moment" to draw from in our discussion (see Appendix C for the first interview protocol).

The second interview built on the first by focusing on how participants navigated Whiteness, specifically in the context of their role as an entry-level student affairs professional. Like the first protocol, this interview was flexible in attending to the individual's unique stories. This interview had flexibility to pick up where the first left off or circle back to topics that were related to the goal of the second interview. I wanted to ensure participants' stories about how



they understood White privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness in the context of their own personal and professional experiences were explored in sufficient detail prior to advancing the chronology of the story of how they were navigating Whiteness in their work environment. Through this interview, I sought to move the conversation to how participants were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness in their current role (i.e., taking a more systemic look at how Whiteness was operating).

This phase of life story interviews is referred to as the “conversation phase,” during which the researcher and participant build shared meaning that in turn can “create knowledge that illuminated human experience” (Kim, 2016, p. 169). Questions focused on illuminating how Whiteness was operating in participants’ work environments and how they were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting what they described. The context for the study occurring shortly after George Floyd’s murder was impactful as I developed questions to explore organizational responses to racial injustices as another way to illuminate how Whiteness was operating. I concluded the interview with specific questions on participants’ motivation to disrupt Whiteness, building from previous responses and identities. For participants who were unable to attend the focus group, I worked some of the questions into the second interview—specifically to get their perspective on identifying as a feminist and what made White women unique in navigating Whiteness (see Appendix C for the second interview protocol).

### ***Focus Group***

In addition to individual interviews, I conducted a focus group with participants. Focus groups can help to explore concepts or themes in greater depth following individual interviews (Merriam, 2009). I conducted the focus groups between the first and second individual interviews and focused the dialogue on emergent themes from the first interview and questions I

expected to build a collective understanding, specifically around identifying as feminists and what makes White women unique when navigating Whiteness. Creating this community among participants was also an important element of the narrative interview process (Kim, 2016), especially because Whiteness often goes unnamed in everyday life.

I conducted the focus groups via Zoom, and each lasted approximately 90 minutes. The focus group also served as a form of intragroup dialogue, as conversation among individuals with shared identities (including the researcher) provides a space to facilitate learning that is not tied to relationships with marginalized individuals. In their study of White women enrolled in student affairs and higher education preparation programs, Robbins (2016) recommended intragroup dialogue to deepen learning about Whiteness and work through dissonance without doing harm to people of color. Linder (2011) also conducted focus groups in their study of antiracist White feminists. I drew from both recommendations to provide structure to the focus group for the study. Lastly, I viewed this specific type of dialogue as a form of a White caucus through which the White women in the study could learn from one another and engage in critical conversation around the research questions (see Appendix D for the focus group protocol).

### ***Journaling***

I asked participants to engage in guided reflection through a journal as part of the research process. I provided prompts after each interview, which included both questions about the research process and space for reflection that may not have necessarily occurred as part of the interview or focus group (see Appendix E). Additionally, I hoped the exercise of journaling would allow for participants to reflect on how participation in the study could translate to action in disrupting Whiteness. I chose not to collect participants' journals and instead used the prompts

to offer continued engagement across the research topic, as for most participants, study participation spanned over 3 months.

### ***Researcher Reflections***

It was important that I reflected on my positionality as a researcher and engaged alongside participants in the research process, as I also identify as a White women and student affairs professional. This reflexivity kept true to the theoretical perspectives for the study and provided an element of trustworthiness to the study (Jones et al., 2013). Specifically for a narrative approach, incorporating reflexivity into the research process is critical to maintaining both researcher and participant integrity (Kim, 2016). Writing “observer comments” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171) in a research journal provided an opportunity for reflection on my own journey in navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness and allowed me to share thoughts or questions related to my relationships with participants and their responses. My reflections were informal, as I kept a running document to identify emergent themes, questions I wanted to circle back to, and ideas participants sparked related to my professional role. I periodically went back to these notes during the research process as an opportunity for further reflection. Throughout the analysis process, I also noted where my own experiences aligned with or were challenged by participant narratives, as I did not necessarily know at the time how Whiteness was operating in my own life when I was an entry-level professional.

### **Data Analysis**

The theoretical epistemology and perspectives for the study drove the data analysis. The critical orientation for the study dictated that attention be given to the influence of power and privilege throughout the narratives (Chase, 2003). The feminist perspective pushed the analysis to consider gender as an organizing construct in shaping experience, and a critical Whiteness

perspective called attention to power and privilege related to race. In addition, influences from intersectionality prompted me to consider multiple identities simultaneously to understand how individual and collected stories of White women are situated within power structures.

Data analysis in quantitative research is inductive and comparative rather than a linear process (Merriam, 2009). Narrative research is interpretive at every stage (Kim, 2016), and I began to make sense of findings prior to concluding collection, as the process required constant movement between data and analysis, both in simple description and more complex interpretation. This approach allowed me to engage in a back-and-forth dialogue with participants as themes emerged, congruent with the tenets of feminist research, which seeks to involve participants in the research process (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). During interviews, I made observations about salient elements in participant stories and as I had more conversations noted where there was overlap in narratives, such as the prominence of empathy. These notes provided a foundation for the focus group and allowed me to explore emergent themes with participants prior to conducting a full analysis. I also often offered thoughts on emergent themes and answers to the research questions as part of the interview process—both to deepen the conversation and offer my own insights, as participants often asked about what I had been learning in the process. The narrative approach also encouraged me to develop a researcher–participant relationship that in turn helped to deepen the telling of their stories (Chase, 2003).

One approach to narrative research is to use a three-dimensional space approach, which includes analyzing data for three elements: (a) interaction (personal and social), (b) continuity (past, present, and future), and (c) situation (place; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach aligned with my perspective, as it encouraged attention to the way participants interacted with

power structures in their environment and how situational context impacted their experience. Elements of the three-dimensional space interact with one another, and my analysis situated sense making of participant experiences in relation to their interactions with others, their unique environments, and the context in which those interactions and environments existed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The theoretical perspectives for the study called attention to socially constructed elements of identity and how they impacted experience. Narrative inquiry allows for flexibility in deciding the analysis technique (Creswell, 2013) and I remained open to other methods as I began making sense of the data; however, the three-dimensional space approach continued to align with how I sought to ground my analysis in illuminating Whiteness as a power structure and acknowledging the importance of context in the study.

### ***Coding***

Once transcribed, I began coding interview data. At the initial stage of analysis, coding involves applying labels to specific components of text (Patton, 2002). I engaged in multiple rounds of coding as I made sense of the data. The initial round of coding was open, allowing for attention to how participants viewed their stories and making note of anything I thought might be useful in answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009). This round of coding was highly inductive, as at this point in the process, I was not yet concerned with how my observations “checked out” (Merriam, 2009, p. 183) across the rest of the data. Creswell (2013) recommended that initial coding in narrative analysis attend to multiple elements of the story, including chronology, plot, three-dimensional space, and themes. I grounded my initial coding in narrative analysis, attending to the details of participant stories with less focus on answering the research questions. From this open approach, I could decide how to proceed with further analysis and writing of the story (Creswell, 2013). As I engaged in the open coding process and reflected on

my notes from interviews, themes began to emerge due to their prominence across participant stories—the salience of emotions, including empathy, and the impact of work environments stood out as I began the analysis. I took advantage of commonalities across narratives to share emergent themes with participants in the focus groups. This was a form of member checking and a technique to involve them in the research process (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011).

In the second cycle of coding, I grouped my initial observations of participants stories into larger categories, a process often referred to as axial coding (Merriam, 2009). I identified connections between codes and made notes of inconsistencies in the narratives. In this stage, I began to employ the three-dimensional analysis to pay particular attention to how participants' relationships, environments, and context impacted how they were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness. It was through analysis in this round of coding that I developed a list of themes. Merriam (2009) stated categories can come from three sources—the researcher, participants, or sources outside the study such as the literature. The list of themes I developed came from all three sources—at times, it was participant words (e.g., sphere of influence, empathy), others I drew from the literature (e.g., the gendered nature of appearing racist), and some were grounded in my own sense making (e.g., the problem with White women's tears). Themes from previous studies of White women, such as resistance, engagement, transformation, guilt, shame, and fear of appearing racist (Linder, 2015; Robbins, 2016), were relevant at this point in the process to identify how my study connected to and built upon previous knowledge. At this stage of the analysis, there were more themes than I chose to include as part of the study findings. The next stage of the analysis assisted in grouping subthemes into larger categories and narrowing the themes to answer the research questions.

In the third cycle of coding, I went back through the data and relabeled codes with the themes I had generated, such as empathy as motivation and sphere of influence. It was during this phase of the process when I paid particular attention to how the themes answered the research questions and provided a collective narrative, specifically what was unique about White women. I took advice from Merriam (2009) and placed my research questions on my computer desktop to keep them at the forefront of the analysis, as it was easy to get distracted by pieces of the narratives that were interesting but did not answer the questions I sought to answer. This phase of coding was more deductive, as I took a higher level look at the data to see how the categories I had arrived at held up through subsequent analysis.

In deciding what themes to include as part of the study findings, I went back again through the data to look at how prominent codes were across participant narratives and analyze nuances and inconsistencies across themes. At this point in the process, I extracted quotes from participants into a separate document, organizing by theme and subtheme and noting with line numbers from interview transcripts, which allowed for a restorying of the data to present findings in relation to the research questions. The continual back-and-forth analysis allowed me to have a deep understanding of the data that provided themes that were sensitive, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009). Though constant comparative analysis originated with grounded theory, many qualitative researchers not seeking to build a theory have adopted this approach due to its compatibility with the inductive, concept-building nature of various qualitative approaches. I chose to integrate how the themes answered the research questions throughout, as how participants navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness was integrated across the findings.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research involves the quality and credibility of the inquiry (Patton, 2002). These notions are grounded in quantitative inquiry and are not always easily translated to qualitative inquiry, which by nature is not objective. Qualitative researchers engage in a balance of dismissing notions present in positive traditions and using familiar language from these traditionally quantitative perspectives to get buy-in for their studies (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). More traditional notions of trustworthiness include criteria, such as transferability, dependability, and credibility (Lincoln, 2001). As an alternative to these terms, Creswell (2013) described validation as the process by which qualitative researchers employ strategies to document the accuracy of their study. Patton (2002) provided alternative criteria for judging the quality and credibility of various qualitative traditions. Quality and credibility in the critical tradition include attention to elements, such as increasing consciousness about injustice, identifying the natures and sources of inequality, building capacity for action, making visible the ways in which those with more power benefit, and engaging with those with less power respectfully and collaboratively. Merging notions of credibility in the critical tradition and what makes a good narrative study, along with more traditional elements of trustworthiness, I employed multiple strategies as part of the research process to enhance the quality of my study.

Denzin (1989) advocated for the researcher to illuminate a phenomenon through thick contextual description. In data analysis, I described participants' narratives in this style to reveal multiple elements, such as interaction, continuity, and place, to shed light on their experiences. This thick description allowed for transferability of the study, as opposed to generalizability in qualitative research, in which the reader can develop their own inferences and understanding (Lincoln, 2001). In creating this thick description, it was important for me to focus on the



participant's role in the process by engaging in reflexivity (Creswell, 2013). Attending to the how being a White researcher impacted the content and context of interviews with White participants was important in acknowledging the complexity of race-based interviewing (Cabrera et al., 2016). Using a researcher journal throughout the process assisted me in addressing these criteria by focusing on my own positionality and engaging in reflection on how I was upholding Whiteness by maintaining comfort as part of the research process.

Collecting data from multiple sources, such as interviews, focus groups, and journals, enhances the dependability of a study and employs a more traditional method of triangulation to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Therefore, it was important to share the study results with participants along the way to understand if I accurately represented participant voices (Creswell, 2013). In addition to sharing emergent themes as part of the focus groups, I developed an executive summary of findings and subsequent discussion, which I shared with participants, along with their profiles, which are included in Chapter 4. Eight out of 15 participants responded to my message seeking input on their profile and the findings, and these individuals shared sentiments of feeling “community” and “validation” among the collective narratives and conclusions. Sharing the analysis with participants at multiple points in the process also allowed them to build a critical awareness by pointing out how Whiteness is a thread throughout their stories they may have not previously acknowledged (Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014). This form of member checking aspired to increase participants' own consciousness about injustice and build capacity for action, thus attending to the credibility of the critical nature of the study (Patton, 2002). Member checking to ensure participants see themselves in the data (Jones et al., 2013) is also a more traditional form of credibility present in qualitative research.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how my approach to critical analysis integrated social context in the narrative rather than focusing solely on participants' descriptions of their experience (Schwandt, 2007). I sought to go beyond individual narratives to craft a restorying that identified structures that maintain Whiteness and make visible the ways in which those with more power benefit in this system (Patton, 2002). It was important to stay true to this approach to enhance the quality and credibility of the study.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I described the methodology for this critical narrative study of entry-level White women student affairs professionals. The epistemology and theoretical foundations included a critical perspective and a framework influenced by critical Whiteness scholarship and feminist research. I then described how I used a critical narrative approach to stay true to this epistemology. This methodology influenced the sampling, data collection, and analysis I described in subsequent sections of the chapter. Finally, I discussed the trustworthiness of the study and strategies that were employed to ensure quality and credibility.

## Chapter 4: Participant Profiles

As detailed in Chapter 3, 15 individuals participated in the study by completing an initial interest form, two interviews, and a focus group. I spent time getting to know the participants through the interview process, asking them to “tell me a little bit about themselves and their journey in student affairs.” These life story interviews included “important events, experiences, and feelings” (Kim, 2016, p. 167) the participants chose to tell. By informing the participants of my goals for the research process, I helped them understand the “importance of sharing their own experiences and stories” (Kim, 2016, p. 167) as part of the narrative research process.

Throughout our conversations, we also discussed the unique context for the timing of the study, including how the COVID-19 global pandemic, 2020 Presidential election, and local, national, and global events of racial injustice had impacted their work and personal lives. When I met participants for the second interview, it felt as though I was greeting a friend, and our interview became an evolving conversation in which we coconstructed knowledge about the meaning of the experiences (Kim, 2016). Participants expressed mutual appreciation for the dialogue, stating they felt emotions such as “comfort,” “openness,” and “hopeful optimism” in talking with me and other participants about Whiteness and having “conversations that need to be had with White people.” They also described their own “uncertainty,” “shame,” and “discomfort” in talking about White privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness. In sharing their stories, I attempt to describe both their optimism and struggles related to the research questions.

Each participant described how they had been navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness in the context of their unique backgrounds, identities, and professional roles. I profile each participant in this chapter using a narrative lens (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to provide insight into their individual journeys and how what they shared contributed to my understanding

of the themes that emerged related to the research questions. Table 1 provides a summary of the study participants relative to their backgrounds, salient identities, institutional context, and functional area. The study used a critical lens (Carspecken, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which helped illuminate systemic issues that impacted how entry-level White women student affairs professionals navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. The goal of the study and this chapter was not to critique participants; the themes and analysis in subsequent chapters deconstruct Whiteness by drawing out and critiquing these systemic issues (Owen, 2007). Becoming familiar with the participants in this chapter provides context to help make meaning of the analysis.

**Table 1**

*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Functional area	Current geographic region	Institution type
Ann	Career services	Upper Midwest	Midsized public 4-year
Beth	Fraternity and sorority life	Upper Midwest	Midsized public 4-year
Catherine	Housing	West	Large public 4-year
Claire	Admissions and orientation	Midwest	Midsized public 2-year
Dani	Student life	Midwest	Large public 4-year
Elizabeth	Diversity and inclusion	Midwest	Large public 4-year
Harley	Housing	South	Large public 4-year
Jordan	Orientation	Mountain	Large public 4-year
Kasey	Housing	Midwest	Large public 4-year
Kelly	Fraternity and sorority life	Mid-Atlantic	Large public 4-year
Rachel	Financial aid	Upper Midwest	Midsized public 4-year
Scout	Admissions	Midwest	Large public 4-year
Summer	College access	Midwest	Higher education-adjacent
Taylor	Research	Upper Midwest	Large public 4-year
Violet	Housing	East Coast	Small private 4-year

## Ann

Ann is from the upper Midwest and went to a midsized public institution in the same state for her undergraduate degree. She described herself as the “typical involved student” and was a resident assistant (RA) who had done some work with admissions and career services. She shared, “I decided to take the residence life route because I didn’t want to pay for grad school,” and went to a large public institution in the Midwest for a master’s in student affairs, holding a housing assistantship during her time there. She returned to her alma matter to work professionally in housing and transitioned to career services after working there for a little over a year. At the time of data collection, Ann was in her 3rd year of a coordinator role in career services working specifically with students in the College of Business.

Ann shared she grew up in a “conservative household,” and her understanding of identity evolved as she “became more politically aware.” She shared she was “most aware of [her] identity as a White woman” and her identity as a woman was “the only identity . . . that’s not a privileged identity . . . so [she was] made more aware of it on a more normal basis.” Ann shared her motivation to disrupt Whiteness was connected to being a woman. She said, “because I think I’ve tasted oppression, but not to . . . the same extent as Black woman have. And I know that if we can bring Black women and Black people up, that will also help raise the rest of us up.” Conversely, Ann reflected, “the world works . . . for the most part pretty well for me” as a White person, so “if I don’t feel like being disruptive, then that’s easier.”

Ann had a lot of conversations about race and racial privilege in graduate school because her cohort was “really diverse,” and when she worked in housing full time they had “hot topic” conversations every week. In her role at the time of the study, conversations only occurred when she brought them up and they were “usually quickly moved on from.” Her environment in career

services was different than when she worked in housing, as everyone in the office was White. When she worked in housing, there was a more diverse group, and they talked about social justice “because that was people’s lived experiences.” Ann connected the notion of professionalism to Whiteness and shared it was frustrating to have to coach students related to that because she was “perpetuating norms that are problematic.”

Ann described how she was doing self-work in her personal life by participating in book clubs and reading articles, and she had a goal for herself to confront problematic statements she saw on social media. She had also started an initiative at work to be more proactive in reaching out to minoritized students. Ann shared she had been struggling with what she could do to impact change and felt a lack of motivation because she had been met with “silence” when she provided a critique of something her office was doing or was told, “if that’s something you want to explore go ahead and do it.” Ann shared, “I’m not saying this is a good excuse or that I’m doing the right thing. . . . I honestly haven’t had the motivation to put a lot of effort” based on her office culture, and she did not “think anybody will care.” She would be more motivated if she had “more confidence that the work [she] did would actually be used and make a difference,” but added, “if I’m the only one who wants it, then what happens when I leave and that just doesn’t feel worth it to me?” Ann described her current commitment to disrupt Whiteness as “speaking up when the opportunity arises” and said she would be more encouraged to do work “on a meaningful level” if she could “get plugged into the right resources” or had somebody “who was already doing these things” who she could “go along with.”

### **Beth**

Beth grew up in the Great Plains region in what she described as a “very small rural community of 1,000 people.” Beth attended college at a large public school in her home state and

graduated with a degree in business. She was involved in Greek life as an undergraduate—she was also a legacy for her sorority and connected that to privilege she held. Beth reflected her understanding of her own privilege did not start developing until later in her undergraduate career. She shared that she “didn’t know anyone that was Black” until she came to college, but “even then, being at a predominantly White institution, these conversations weren’t as common,” and at the time, she had a lot of “uncertainty” about starting conversations about “hot topics such as race and inclusion” due to the “blind spots” she had from her upbringing in which those things were never discussed. Beth attended graduate school for student affairs at a midsize public university in the upper Midwest, and that was when it “became apparent . . . there’s something that I don’t know but I don’t know fully know what I don’t know.” Beth worked in fundraising and fraternity and sorority life during her master’s program and transitioned to a full-time Greek life advisor position in the same office where she held her graduate assistantship and where she had been working for about a year and a half.

Beth described her identity as a woman as salient and “familial identities” of a spouse, sister, and daughter as connected salient identities. She identified as a feminist, and her experiences as an athlete and being part of a sorority were what “started that path of, of really forming that identity.” She connected her feminist identity to her motivation to advocate for equality. Beth described other identities that did not “come to the forefront” but on which she had been reflecting more recently. Specifically, she was connecting being born in the United States—being a U.S. citizen, having English as her primary language—as being connected to White privilege.

Beth’s role as an entry-level staff member was salient in how she thought about advocacy work. She shared, “as a new professional, I wanted to come in and be like . . . I can conquer

everything” and learned, “I can’t spread myself too thin,” struggling with “towing that line, in terms of like privilege and advocacy, I realize I can’t be the champion of everything.” A barrier for Beth was she was the only Greek life advisor at her institution and had been balancing “the urgent versus the crisis,” knowing diversity work “requires intentionality and strategic thinking.” Having diversity and inclusion as part of the institution’s mission and vision helped to have a “good example, being set in our office culture that should be continuously at the forefront of our minds in what we’re doing.” However, she shared it was easy to “lose sight of what’s important when you’re being bogged down with emails.” Beth found herself “challenging things at certain moments and times” as she built her confidence advocating as an entry-level professional. She shared how it can be easy to lose motivation, as “it’s completely a privilege not to have to think about racial inequality day to day,” and she was focused on a “continuous journey” of education to have better conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion topics, both with her on-campus network and her family.

### **Catherine**

Catherine identified her most salient identities as being a “White, Armenian woman” and was aware of her age as something that also impacted how others perceived her. At the time of the study, she was 25, and that combined with her height (5’1”), impacted what people assumed about her skills and experiences. She described herself as being “hungry” at an early point in her career and said others did not perceive her to have the experience to be doing the learning she was or be at the tables she was. Catherine shared she strived to be “hungry, humble, and smart” in how she approached her work.

Catherine’s identity as an Armenian both impacted how she made sense of her White identity and her female identity. She grew up in the Southwest in what she described as “white



suburbs” and said her Whiteness was never questioned because she was perceived as “being tan.” Catherine described how she understood her Armenian identity in the context of the United States and shared how, although Armenians had experienced genocide in their home country, in the United States they had been considered White, in instances where race was considered, like redlining voting districts. With that understanding, Catherine reflected on how she experienced White privilege in her day-to-day experiences. Being an Armenian Woman impacted how she viewed herself as a caretaker—a “mama bear,” as she described it—and contributed to how she viewed family as important, both with the frequency of communication and how much time they spent with one another. Catherine started her undergraduate work as a chemistry major and was one of few women in her courses, and though she felt like she was “smart enough,” the work did not “click” for her like student affairs work did. She connected that experience to being a woman and gravitating toward a “helping profession,” while also questioning that stereotype. Related to her salient identities, Catherine shared, “it’s like being a woman is what’s really salient to me. Like those are the pervasive and horrible experiences that I remember and continue to sit with me versus being White is just . . . uneventful for the most part.”

Catherine was an RA at her undergraduate institution, a large public school in the Southwest, then pursued her master’s degree in student affairs at a large public institution in the South. Catherine held a housing assistantship during graduate school and was in her 2nd year working full time in housing at a large public school on the West Coast at the time of the study. All the institutions Catherine had attended or worked at were predominantly White. She considered herself a “reslife lifer” and found a lot of fulfillment in her work supporting others.

Catherine described many ways she had been engaging in “learning and unlearning” and said she had a wake-up call when she went to graduate school, challenging her own notions of

being “woke.” She was motivated by her desire to learn and was “grateful” for opportunities to engage formally and informally on her campus. Catherine reflected on how, as a White person, students were more “receptive” to conversations with her about race, and she knew she had been navigating the systems at her institution with “ease.” She continued to wonder how she could have empathy for others without centering herself and sometimes felt guilty about why she was doing the work, wondering if she was just trying to be a “White savior.”

Catherine acknowledged how she had been upholding Whiteness through her own focus on efficiency, productivity, and perfectionism. She had lofty expectations for herself but was reevaluating if that was fair to others while also knowing she needed to “play the game” to be successful. She expressed feeling “helplessness” and shared, “knowing that there are systems so much greater than me that . . . [her] ripples may never reach.” Catherine described how she was motivated to make an impact in her “sphere of influence” and had a great supervisor, who was also a White woman, who helps motivate her. As a live-in residence life staff member, she knew she had a clear charge to focus on individual student support, which related to her personal mantra, “making a positive difference one student at a time.”

### **Claire**

At the time of data collection, Claire worked in admissions and orientation at a large community college in the Midwest, which was also in the town she grew up in and went to college. She attended another small private institution there and majored in English. Claire was involved during her undergraduate experience and felt extremely comfortable on campus because she knew faculty through her dad, who was a professor at the same institution. Claire completed her master’s degree in English from a large, public, metropolitan university in the Midwest. The move to an unfamiliar environment was impactful for Claire. She said she

experienced a lot of learning leaving her hometown for the first time. After graduating, she took a position teaching part time at her alma mater before a full-time opportunity arose in student advising. Claire moved into her current role after her advising position was cut and continued to teach part time. Claire felt she had “bounced around a lot” and was still looking to find her path but enjoyed both teaching and supporting students.

Claire identified strongly as a feminist, and her motivation to do social justice work was tied to that identity. She shared, “part of me . . . just wanted to be a revolutionary in another life to some extent.” Claire also described her educational background as salient, as both of her parents had advanced degrees. Claire also believed her analytical and critical skills from her English background gave her a critical lens she could use to examine systems.

Claire brought her feminist and critical orientations into her classroom teaching. She described a “sense of importance to bring diverse voices” into her classroom. Along that same vein, Claire described how her own empathy came from reading diverse stories. Conversely, Claire shared how she questioned her lived experiences as she drew more from academic knowledge in how she understood concepts related to social justice. Claire wondered if she could be better serving students if she had a more diverse background.

Claire described her work in admissions as “very procedural” and did not see many opportunities for discussing diversity in her current work environment, although her institution had recently gotten a new president who had “made DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] a priority” and she would “love to just be part of those conversations.” She admitted she was focused on listening and was not the most vocal at work but was also discouraged by implicit messaging from her supervisor that diversity work was not “a priority for her.” Claire was optimistic she might have more opportunities to impact change as her office returned to more in-

person interactions, such as hiring student staff. She also hoped to get more involved in her community and felt that could be motivating in her work environment.

### **Dani**

Dani grew up in the Southwest and described how, until she was in high school, she was one of the few White kids in a predominantly “Hispanic” environment. For her undergraduate education, she went to a large public school that was a predominantly White and full of “cookie cutter girls.” Dani thought she wanted to be a teacher and got a master’s degree in secondary education. She liked teaching but described how, in the state she worked in, “they don’t care about teachers,” and she had been laid off when the economy was not doing well. She went back to school, thinking she might pursue medicine, and ended up with a project manager position in a research laboratory. Dani was “pretty new to student affairs.” She had moved to the Midwest because of her boyfriend at the time and was hired to work with student government at a large public institution. Dani shared she had been hired in her current role for her “project management, budget experience, business experience, things like that.” She added, “They said they could teach me higher ed, but they couldn’t teach me those things.” At the time of the study, she had been working there for about 16 months and said, “it’s been interesting,” and working through the COVID-19 global pandemic had not “really allowed [her] to feel all that invested in the school” where she worked.

Dani talked about the importance of education in her family and said she always “went to good schools,” reflecting on how White kids have more “support from the society in general” as opposed to students of color. She said, “honestly, probably before I got this job, I didn’t really hardly talk about it much,” related to her White identity, and she shared her most salient experience with race had been working with undocumented families when she was a teacher in

the Southwest. Dani had been exposed to a different racial population at her institution, and conversations had heavily focused around the Black Lives Matter movement. She had what she described as “throw you in the fire and hope you figure it out” learning as part of her transition to student affairs. She reflected on how marginalization as a woman is “more situational than like race.” She said she did not “worry about it as much, and when somebody makes a comment about being a woman, [she would] just make a comment back and they shut up.” Dani said, “I don’t think I would say that if I was Black. You know what I mean? I would just keep my mouth shut. . . . It’d be even harder to be a Black woman. That’s like whammie.”

At the time of our interviews, Dani was navigating some challenging situations with her students. One student, who she described as “the epitome of White privilege,” had been making public statements that “hurt a lot of people,” and the university did not have any resources to stop him due to legal challenges over free speech. Dani worked with a Black female student who was personally attacked as part of this situation and “felt like there was nothing [she] could do without getting sued” and described it as “horrible experience to see how badly it affected her personally, deeply.” She was unsure what else could have been done and said the university had “done probably the best they can to support Black students.” She added, “And the thing is, I don’t know if they know how, it’s a bunch of White people, right?”

Dani saw herself doing advocacy work “more on the back end” and felt like “anything that [she] would want to do would be outside of [her] job” because her role was advising and supporting student initiatives. She shared, “most students want to be progressive,” and “there’s just a few that are difficult.” Dani described herself as “very open” and had success in sharing her learning with others. She shared:

I genuinely think people don't understand why it's . . . anti-Black to say Blue Lives Matter. So, I've had a couple conversations about that and I think people are like surprised to find out what they're doing is . . . and they're like, "oh, no, I understand why you're saying that. It's not just because you want to fight."

She shared the success in discussions with others definitely made it "easier to talk about the next time," and she had been having conversations she "probably never would have had before [she] got this job."

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth grew up in the Midwest in the "suburbs" and described her high school as "racially diverse for . . . being in . . . suburbs" due to a bussing program that was part of the city's desegregation program. She went to a small private liberal arts school in the upper Midwest for college and described how she tried to get a different experience outside of the Jewish community she had been a part of at home, but she "kind of regretted that." That experience of being one of "very, very few Jews" and "having to negotiate with faculty . . . for missing holidays or being in a predominantly White sorority" helped to increase her "knowledge and understanding" of anti-Semitism. Elizabeth also started a "student organization focused specifically for disabled students and led by disabled students," which was where she started to "develop more of a critical consciousness around" her identity as a disabled person. Elizabeth realized she could "combine [her] passion for social justice and [her] passion for education in the field of student affairs" and pursued her master's in student affairs from a large public institution in the Midwest. After graduating, she took a job at the same institution working in diversity and inclusion and had been in her professional role for about a year and half at the time of this study.

In addition to being Jewish and identifying as disabled, Elizabeth shared her racial identify as a White person was something she had been “continuously trying to think about every single day, every hour of every day.” Much of her work focused on racial justice, and she was consistently trying to navigate being a “White person coordinating this program” and shared, “it’s something that doesn’t sit well with me.” Elizabeth had been trying to mitigate that feeling in creating partnerships but was “really conscious of the emotional labor of folks” and “continuously trying to be advocating for additional funding for folks if [she was] partnering with them on projects and things like that” but would prefer if that structure had been built into her office to partner with colleagues of color on the work. Elizabeth’s salience around her Jewish identity was something she had been working on “unpacking,” as it related to how anti-Semitism and anti-Blackness were “very much part of the exact same system,” but she did not know how to “bring anti-Semitism into the conversation without . . . diverting from anti-Blackness.” She shared being a woman was something she did not think “that much about” because “it’s just kind like a given that there’s a lot of White women in student affairs.”

Elizabeth was still figuring out what her “direct sphere of influence” was in terms of “what [she could] push on, what [she could not] push on” and was dealing with a lot of frustration related to lack of support for some of her colleagues around a specific diversity initiative. She had been realizing, “as a White person, there’s very little that [she did]” that would get her “in trouble” and felt like it was “more expected of [her] to be the squeaky wheel” because her work is situated in a DEI office. Elizabeth was working to “understand there is only so little [she could] do alone” and shared, even when she was “not entry level anymore,” she needed to remember “the importance of coalition building and how can we be working for multiple different angels to try to push against this larger thing.”

Elizabeth was aware she was part of maintaining Whiteness, whether intentionally or not. She said, “I’m sure it’s literally all the time. Really, truly all the time.” In terms of her work, she talked about the need to “meet White folks where they are at” to cater to discomfort around topics such as abolishing the police. She was going “to try and challenge herself” to disrupt some of these norms in addition to pushing back on work priorities grounded in Whiteness, such as keeping meetings and deadlines when “everything else is happening in the world.” She described being “so, so mad at the lack of preparation in my grad program” and said, “no one ever really talks to you about . . . what it really means to see students as humans first . . . and not just as cogs in the wheel.” Elizabeth shared she was “continuously committed” to disrupting Whiteness and said, “sometimes I have to remind myself, I have to keep getting up to bat.”

### **Harley**

Harley was from the Southeastern region of the United States and went to college in her home state. She was originally pursuing a degree in radio and television and “learned very quickly that [she] really liked doing . . . hall council and things like that” and “too, that trajectory like . . . straight on . . . ‘oh you’re going to do student affairs one day.’” Harley changed her major to human communication and got a minor in diversity and social equity, which was impactful in her understanding of privilege and diversity. She was an RA as an undergraduate student and did housing work during her student affairs graduate program at a large public institution in the Midwest. Harley was in her 1st year of a professional role working in housing at a large regional institution in the South at the time of the study and described that environment as “very White,” a “harsher red state” than where she went to graduate school, and “in the good old Bible belt.” She described her career goal was to “just stay in housing forever” but was also job



searching at the time of her interview because she was unhappy with her current department, specifically around the climate related to diversity and inclusion.

Harley shared she identified as a “Jewish and queer woman,” and she did not “share for a long time” her queer identity due to the climate in her home state. She described the delay in sharing “really kind of shaped [her] identity” and a salient moment for her was the PULSE nightclub shooting, which happened when she was in college and “sort of questioning like heterosexuality,” and said, “it was tough being . . . a closeted unknown questioning queer person at the time.” Harley’s Jewish identity was “super salient” to her and had become even more so in the South, where she observed there were few Jewish people and “if you’re not Christian, you’re sort of like isolated.” One of the ways Harley focused on educating others was through sharing resources and related to her Jewish identity; she sent “emails all the time to [her] staff about it,” referencing education around traditions like a Passover Seder. Harley also shared she was “aware of [her] Whiteness” but wanted others to know she was “not a straight, cisgendered, White woman who’s here to tell you about feminism” and she had “a stake in this, too.” She wanted her students of color to know “we’re in this together fam,” related to how advocacy work is intersectional.

Harley described a particularly “tough” situation at work that left her feeling powerless to advocate for her students, as she did not have the power to change a policy related to working with campus police. She was having an emotional reaction to the situation and was questioning whether it was “White women’s tears” and worried people would assume “because [she was] a woman with emotions that [she was] not strong, not independent.” Harley felt she was “the only one doing anything” related to social justice advocacy in her environment and shared it was “tiring,” especially as she felt her scope of influence as an entry-level staff member was limited.

Despite that, Harley was motivated to keep doing the work because she knew “what it feels like to feel very isolated” and felt she needed “to do something because no one else will.”

### **Jordan**

Jordan was from the South, grew up in what she described as a “White suburb,” went to a large public state school in her home state for her undergraduate degree, and majored in education. At one point, she had wanted to be a teacher but was an RA and orientation leader and had “student affairs professionals pouring into her” and realized student affairs was a career option she could explore. Jordan completed her master’s in student affairs from another large public school in the Southwest and held an assistantship in orientation. She described graduate school as a “very White environment” and a time when she first started “learning about . . . and trying to understand the ways in which [she] experienced privilege.” Jordan was in her 4th year of a professional role working in orientation in the Mountain region of the United States at the time of the study. Her institution espoused social justice as one of its core values, and Jordan stated it was “something ingrained in what we do and in places where it’s not we’re working to engrain it.” Jordan also shared how impactful her supervisor, who identified as “brown,” was in terms of pushing her to examine her own Whiteness.

Jordan described her salient identities were as a “cisgender woman,” and she had become more aware of how she was showing up as a White woman, specifically because she was the only White woman in her office. Jordan described how her “queer identity [was] very salient . . . partly because [it was] still a bit of an issue for [her] parents,” and she was “very much . . . planning a wedding and every time [they called] a venue or [called] a caterer . . . we [had] to ask like, ‘hey . . . do you do this service for same-sex couples as well?’” She also described herself

as “Christian-ish” and thought a lot about “the intersection of being queer . . . being someone who attends church, and someone who cares about social justice.”

Jordan shared she was motivated by frustration that higher education was not “willing to throw away how we’ve always done things” and said it was challenging to provide feedback about ways her office could do better despite not “being in the room where it happens” when decisions were made. She described the frustration as worth it, if “being disappointed . . . at some point, you just keep chipping at it and eventually, like, the dams going to break.” Jordan shared empathy was her motivation to continue to do the work through that frustration.

Jordan described herself as “empathetic to a fault” and was conscious of her own emotions, specifically not wanting women of color to “have to do emotional labor to make [her] feel better,” specifically when given feedback around race. Jordan discussed how her experience as a “shy, closeted, queer baby in the South in college” impacted how she empathized with others. She also shared she looked “through the lens of an identity where [she was] marginalized . . . to better put that frame into areas where [she] actually [held] privilege and think about what are the ways that [she was] oppressing someone else.” Jordan saw her own rights as a queer person connected to equality for others and shared some wisdom from her supervisor: “it’s not my job to change people’s minds, it’s my job to complicate their understanding.”

### **Kasey**

Kasey was from the Midwest and had lived there her whole life. She attended a small private liberal arts school for her undergraduate work and majored in early childhood education because she wanted to teach kindergarten. That program had a lot of “social justice components to it as part of making sure [students] were advocating for families of all different backgrounds.” She described her undergraduate experience as a “predominantly White school that talked about

social justice in a way that [she] had never thought about before.” She said, “I think that’s what started me on that journey.” Kasey was an RA and in a sorority in college. She said about student teaching, “I liked it but knew that student affairs was where [she] wanted to be. [She] loved doing RA work.” She did her master’s degree in student affairs at a large public school in the Midwest and held a graduate assistantship in leadership development. At the time of the study, Kasey worked in housing at a large public institution in her home state and was in her 3rd year in her role. She shared a big part of why she wanted to go to her institution was the “social justice components and the work that [they did] related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

Kasey had come to terms with a lot of her identities in the previous 2 years, as she had been struggling with hearing loss and shared, “I think I am a bisexual woman, but I’ve never like, pursued that in any way.” Her identity as a woman was salient, as she shared, “I very much fit that, like, stereotypical sorority girl, woo, woo. If you do not take the time to get to know me, you may think that I don’t have much of a brain.” Kasey described herself as “very feminine in the way [she] presented herself,” and “that [caused] folks to just . . . to kind of cast me off.” That awareness combined with “being young . . . being a White woman” impacted how she felt others perceived her and what was salient in terms of how she was making sense of her professional identity. Although Kasey described her institution as diverse, she worked in a high-cost residence hall where her students had a lot of privilege, and those interactions helped her understand her own privilege, specifically related to her White identity.

Kasey described herself as “super emotional,” talked about having “White women’s tears,” and was processing through why she had those emotions and how others could perceive she was “weaponizing her Whiteness” when she felt like she cried because she cared about her friends. Kasey had a former Black, female colleague and good friend who was able to help her

understand her impression by telling her, “Your intention was this, but this was your impact.” That direct feedback helped her learn, and she reflected, “as soon as we get emotional, we make it about ourselves, and it’s been about us forever,” in reference to White people.

Kasey did not feel comfortable when she first started her professional role giving feedback related to issues of identity because colleagues questioned her background, given she did not have housing experience in graduate school, and she felt like they were telling her, “You don’t actually know as much as you think you know.” Kasey had become more comfortable “calling out” things she saw, as she felt trusted in her role and had good role models in her department leadership who would “have her back.” Kasey struggled with the nature of housing work; it has an operational side that is not engaging in or prioritizing social justice conversations. She said, “it’s like it’s always important, but it is also always getting pushed to the back burner of like, not the most important right now. We got opening, we got closing. Whatever it is.” She pointed out how the bureaucracy of the system and communication grounded in “White academia language” were issues at her institution that “perpetuated Whiteness tremendously.”

Kasey viewed her role was to “foster a community” among her staff where “they don’t need to be worried that someone’s going to be there to have their back” in relation to advocacy that might make people uncomfortable. Kasey shared about her charge, “I have a bunch of privileged kids who need to be brought down to reality and maybe don’t understand what identity is, what it means.” One of her goals was to have a concrete plan to do “more research and readings” rather than “learning from other people” to “disrupt more of [her] own personal thoughts and thinking.”

## Kelly

Kelly was from what she described as a “predominantly White” area that was “pretty conservative” in the Northwest. She attended a small private institution on the West coast for her undergraduate degree and majored in history and American ethnic studies. Kelly described how she “unlearned a lot of things” about race that she had been taught growing up through her undergraduate education. Kelly was a member of a Panhellenic sorority and said her growth related to her own White identity was “reliant on [her] sisters of color.” She described her undergraduate experience as “super transformative” and when she graduated, she went to a large public school in the Southwest for her master’s in student affairs. Kelly described the transition as a culture shock, “going from a very liberal institution to a pretty conservative one.” During graduate school, Kelly held assistantships in orientation and the LBGT resource center. At the time of the study, Kelly worked in fraternity and sorority life at a large public institution in the Mid-Atlantic and was in her 3rd year working full time.

Kelly described her salient social identities as situational; for example, in graduate school, “working the GLBT Resource Center, it was very obvious to me that I was a cis woman that is straight.” In her environment at the time of the study, she described being a cisgender, White woman who was heterosexual and a “recovering Catholic” as her salient identities. Kelly described learning about her White identity both through her undergraduate coursework and from her sorority sisters of color. She described how her faculty, who were mostly women of color, helped her process her White guilt, but she said, “it shouldn’t have ever been the responsibility of my professors of color to help me navigate . . . my White tears.” Kelly specifically recalled an assignment for which she had to do a presentation on “what [they had been] doing to unlearn . . . everything [they] had been taught about the racial other,” and she

“cried the entire time because it was so uncomfortable.” Kelly said the environment with her sorority sisters was one in which “they really help [her] unlearn everything . . . and didn’t really judge [her].” She shared she felt “White women are in the subgroup that continue to maintain White supremacy,” and that contributed to both her awareness of her identity and commitment to help other White women navigate the same unlearning process she had experienced.

In her work environment, Kelly consistently reflected on her racial privilege, as she served as the primary advisor for the National Pan-Hellenic Council. She spent a lot of time making sure those students felt supported and shared, “students of color . . . are not prioritized.” Kelly shared she wanted “to learn as much as [she could] without forcing [her] students to educate [her]” and was “thinking about how [she showed] up in that space as a White woman with [her] students of color who are already at a PWI and feel like they’re not a priority for [their] office.”

Kelly struggled with her role as an entry-level professional in feeling like she was not “able to question people that are in administrator positions like [their] VPSA” because she did not have the “political clout.” She also described how it can be hard as an advisor to facilitate growth related to inclusion with the Interfraternity Council and Panhellenic organizations because she was only in a coaching role, and they were generally only interested in “maintaining the status quo.” Kelly shared, “I’m doing as much as I can to make sure our students know, like, individually, we care, and fraternity and sorority life cares,” but that approach was not a cultural part of her organization due to individuals who “continue[d] to hold [them] back.” Though she described a “love/hate” relationship with her own sorority, Kelly reflected on one of their core values of “doing good” and felt she tried “to live that every day.”

## Rachel

Rachel was from the upper Midwest and grew up in an environment where she did not have conversations about race. She went to college in her home state and said her “journey in student affairs [was] not a typical one where you are, like, super involved in undergrad.” Rachel took a job at community college after graduation but “did not like that environment” so she looked for a full-time job at her alma mater and had been working there in financial aid for 4 years. She shared she “didn’t realize that [she] enjoyed working in student affairs until [she] started working in student affairs.” Rachel pursued her master’s degree in student affairs while working full time and hoped to stay at her current institution long term.

Rachel did not have anyone to talk to about her White identity during her undergraduate experience and shared she “internalized emotions . . . just kind of set it to the wayside.” She shared, “I didn’t think I had any privilege 6 months ago,” and talked about George Floyd’s murder as a catalyst for her to “figure out where [she stood].” Until recently, Rachel’s most salient identity had been coming from a low-income background; she had “come from a family where you work for everything that you earn,” and she said, “it was hard for me to understand that I had privilege just based on the color of my skin.” As of late, she had been working to educate herself on her racial privilege and had been looking at things through a lens of “yeah, you worked hard. But think about how much harder you would have to work, how much different your life honestly would be if you weren’t a White person.” She said, “it helps to acknowledge that, like, I was not the sole responsibility for all of this stuff happening,” and “that’s helped with the guilt.” Rachel’s identity as a woman was not as salient to her, as she had the mentality of, “let’s break the glass ceiling, like, let’s go” and reflected on if, as a younger woman, she had experienced less marginalization than “20 years ago.”



At work, Rachel felt like her office was “really good at doing the bare minimum” when it came to diversity conversations. She felt like those conversations “shouldn’t come from [her].” She said, “I don’t see myself high enough on like a totem pole in our office.” She recognized White privilege in her work environment related to how “students of color borrow more loans, and that’s just a fact.” Rachel reflected on how it was “demoralizing” to “think about how [she could] make this change,” knowing financial aid was connected to problematic systems dictated by federal policies over which she did not have influence. When it came to institutional dollars she works with, she said, “I tried my best to see how we can make this more equitable,” and she was piloting some different scholarship programs to retain students of color. Rachel tried to focus on “having the data” to justify change in areas where she had control. She shared, “I think the data matters,” related to having an explanation of why scholarship dollars were being given to students of color over White students. Rachel felt like she could mention concerns in her office and her director was “willing to look at opportunities as long as there will be a way to support that [they were] not going to overspend [themselves].” However, as an entry-level professional, she also felt like she was “not at the table where the conversations actually are” and felt “defeated when it [came] to just [her] voice on campus.”

Related to national events around racial injustice, Rachel expressed frustration in the lack of conversations and the way her office supported staff of color. She was beginning to process how to channel those emotions, saying, “I’m just so frustrated that I think I need to do better,” in terms of starting more conversation. Rachel was motivated by the impact she could have with individual students. She said, “I can think of 10 students for sure that would not have stayed in college if they didn’t meet, sit down with me.” Her goals included trying to have some conversations with family when the COVID-19 global pandemic was not a barrier for in-person

conversations and getting more conversation going in her workplace with staff who were not typically engaged.

### **Scout**

Scout was from the mid-Atlantic in what she described as a “very White” community and attended a small liberal arts college where she pursued music education. During her time there, she was a tour guide and “just absolutely fell in love the people in admissions” and redirected her career path to jobs in admissions. She described herself as an extrovert and shared, “talking to people in large group settings . . . was a good fit for me.” Scout took a job straight out of college at a satellite campus of a large nonprofit private institution on the west coast, which primarily offered online programs aimed at serving adult learners. Scout completed her master’s in higher education at the institution where she was employed full time. At the time of the study, Scout was working in admissions for the business school at a large public institution in the Midwest and had been in the role for about 18 months.

Scout shared being “White and female” were the two most prominent identities she held. Related to the salience of her identity as a woman, she reflected on how she was the “caregiver for friend groups” and she defined herself “internally through my relationships with people.” Scout described how “nobody bats an eye at a White female” administrator but, because she worked in a business school, she felt like, as she said, “sometimes my female identity is put before my White identity” because of the male-dominated environment. Related to her personal life, Scout reflected on privilege she had as a White woman in terms of being guaranteed safety. She also described some identities she did not have to think about as often—she was able bodied and shared, “that is one thing I’m definitely working on because I have not done enough research on that.” Scout also identified as heterosexual and had been with her boyfriend for 7 years—he

was not from the United States, which had provided some additional learning and self-reflection related to her White identity and her work with students of color.

Scout experienced a lot of learning related to Whiteness as the default system during her undergraduate classes and was exposed to systemic issues in the K–12 system during her student teaching experience, which opened her eyes to her own White privilege. Related to her educational background, Scout felt she had more opportunities as a White woman to get student teaching placements over her “friends of color” who would “grumble about it.” Scout described how she was not even aware of the problem and how it affected them until they “sat down, dissected it.”

Scout shared:

Being antiracist has been one of my priorities, especially in the last 6 months. I know that sounds upper cliché. But even before then it was something that I feel like I was trying to be more aware of. . . . I’ve been actively trying to be a little more antiracist in my rhetoric.

That antiracist approach had manifested in both her work and personal life. She was close with her family and described a “heated argument” with her mom related to Black Lives Matter protests. Afterward, she was able to provide her mom with resources and history to understand the context of what was happening. Scout also reflected on how she had to cater to her mom’s “White fragility” to provide her with context she could understand.

At work, Scout had been struggling with how to authentically recruit students of color to the program in which she worked. She shared, “It makes me feel the most uncomfortable . . . the performative acts of reaching out to our alumni of color . . . because their picture is going to look good on the homepage.” Scout was working on “just trying to have connections to hear their

story” related to building more authentic relationships with alumni of color and facilitating one-on-one connections with prospective students through those conversations. Scout described wanting to do better without putting the burden of staff of color in her office, saying, “I don’t want to put all the work on my Black friends. . . . I know they are exhausted . . . but then I don’t want to speak over them.” She added, “I think the biggest thing I need to do is shut up and listen a little bit more,” and how she had learned to listen to “people’s stories and not tone police.”

During both the interviews and focus group, Scout talked about the “physical response” she was having, thinking, “oh my gosh, am I doing enough?” She described feeling “so, so guilty” sometimes and, although that guilt elicited an emotional reaction, typically crying, it also helped her to “keep [herself] in check with the lenses [she was] looking through.” Scout described how she was still building her confidence in antiracism work and she hoped her “stamina for antiracism keeps up.” She wanted her actions to match what she said. One way Scout was doing that was through a weekly goal of “doing something to dismantle systemic racism,” from something “as little as a donation to a bail fund. Sometimes as big as a 4-hour workshop.” She said this approach was helping when she was “really tired or burned out from work stuff.” She added, “I’m not feeling guilty for taking those down valleys as much as those peaks when I can.”

### **Summer**

Summer described how she always knew she would go to college through the experience of her mom attending college as a nontraditional student when she was growing up. She went with her mom to the library on the weekends and also went to class with her. She said, “I thought it was so cool because you didn’t have to ask to go to the bathroom.” No one else in her family

had attended college and, though her mom completed her degree, Summer was the first person in her family to pursue college after high school.

Summer grew up in the Midwest, and her first experiences observing privilege were when her family moved from an urban area to the suburbs when she was in fourth grade and had noticed a difference in the school system. She said, “We moved because the education was better in that area and, you know, all the reasons people move out to the suburbs.” She attended a midsized public institution in her home state for her undergraduate work and majored in speech pathology. Summer realized she was not passionate about that field; instead, she enjoyed being an RA and working for orientation but had that realization late in her senior year, so she decided to pursue a position with AmeriCorps doing college advising. The experience with AmeriCorps exposed her to systems in higher education, and she “got to see the pipeline and how students’ transition and how different levels of parental support helped and didn’t help.” After 2 years in AmeriCorps, she transitioned back to graduate school and completed her master’s in student affairs at a large public institution in the Midwest, holding a housing assistantship during her time there. At the time of the study, Summer worked in a higher-education-adjacent role with college access in the Midwest.

Summer described, “Whiteness and being a woman are probably the two most salient identities” and “it’s very easy . . . to just default to, I know exactly what that feels like. I am a woman, we are oppressed, but those two things are really different.” Summer described herself as a “natural crier” and was working on accepting negative feelings as an important part of her own self-work, she said something she had learned as things cannot be “wrapped up with a nice little Christmas bow.” She tried to disassociate herself from terms like ally, as she would rather be “good trouble.” Summer had recently been making more connections to how negative

elements in her workplace and life were connected to White supremacy—things like a “workaholic” culture and a false sense of urgency. She described messages from colleagues asking, “Who could drop everything right now to get this done?” Making these connections provided motivation for her to disrupt Whiteness. Summer also said she saw progress as motivation to continue to work toward her goal of doing work that as truly equity focused and looking at things from a systemic perspective.

### **Taylor**

Taylor was from the Midwest and grew up in an environment that was “predominantly White, upper middle class.” She described how she grew up “poor,” but her mom “strategically” chose her high school. Taylor went to a large public institution in her home state for her undergraduate degree and was part of a summer bridge program, in which she was one of the only White students and “just didn’t know what to do with it.” That was when she “really started to think about the intersections of [her] identity and what that meant.” Taylor was an education major in college and a salient experience was when she participated in an intergroup dialogue program around race. During that program she “realized that [she] was a first-generation college student” and started to “identify these things that were challenging in navigating higher ed.” Taylor decided to pursue a master’s degree in higher education at her undergraduate institution and described, “going into higher ed gave me a framework to understand the structure of inequality that kind of cultivated a lot of those experience that my family members were having” related to drug addiction and extreme poverty.

Taylor shared, “College changed the trajectory of my life. And so, when I got into my actual career position, I, um, I was like, I realize that, like, I could serve as a facilitator for students who had come from backgrounds similar to me to say, like, you deserve to be here.”

After she graduated from her master's program, Taylor worked in college success coaching at a large public institution in her home state. She was in that role for 3 years before leaving to pursue a PhD in higher education, in which she was studying the experience of first-generation students and held multiple assistantships on her campus doing research and educational work with student affairs practitioners.

Taylor shared how her identity as a first-generation student and White woman were most salient to her. She described the salience of her Whiteness as “ebbing and flowing” and reflected on how it “[protected her] in so many different ways.” Taylor identified as “poor and first generation” but felt like she “could hide those identities” when she was in college with “predominantly White people.” As part of the interview process, she realized she had not spent a lot of time “talking about being a woman and being White” and shared, “I experience oppression and inequality and injustice, but it is mitigated by my Whiteness.” She also identified as being in recovery from alcohol and drug addiction and shared, “At the end of the day, I have to, like, protect my mental health the most,” and social justice work intersected in an “ebb and flow” with this priority. Taylor recognized how, as a White person, she had privilege she could disconnect from “work or, you know, kind of investigating some of these social identity topics.”

Taylor described the office she was working in when she was in a full-time role as “predominantly Black” and said she was “really negotiating what it meant to be White in that space, working with students” and still wondered, “How do I come into a space and learn about my Whiteness so I'm not doing harm, but I'm also not taking space from other people? And I don't know how you do that.” While in that role, Taylor's coworkers helped her to balance having empathy and relating to students of color with experiences in which she had “been

marginalized” and “as lens that [she] can look through and say, ‘that sucks, like, I am sorry that happened to you and it’s unfair and unjust.’”

Taylor shared it was “easier” in the classroom environment to call things out, and she had been “practicing” in that environment. She had been struggling with the “culture of busy-ness in higher education” and realizing her employer “[did] not care about [her].” Taylor was conscious of how, as a graduate student, she lacked power and had other priorities (e.g., her dissertation), that detracted from her motivation to disrupt Whiteness. She was motivated by the fact “the struggle and, like, the injustices are all tied together.” S shared, “The jobs that I want are in diversity,” but she felt “weird about being in those roles as a White person,” and those were “the questions that [she] will likely sit with for the rest of [her] life.” At the time of the study, she was trying to “seek out mentors of White women . . . who are not afraid of answering those questions.”

### **Violet**

Violet grew up in a “homogenous small town” in New England and identified as a “triple first gen” student. She attended a midsized public institution for college and thought she was going to “go into advertising and be like the next Don Draper . . . and then of course did an internship in an agency and hated it.” Violet realized she wanted to do work that helped people, and her supervisor as an RA asked her, “Why don’t you just go get a master’s degree in student affairs?” She didn’t know if she would be successful in a master’s program. She thought, “I can’t go get a master’s degree. Like, I have learning disabilities. I’ve barely gotten to college.” Violet graduated from a student affairs master’s program at a large public institution in New England and worked in housing at a nearby institution during her time there. In graduate school, she “fell in love with art students and creative students,” and when she graduated, she got a job in housing



at a small private liberal arts institution where theater and arts were prominent. Violet shared the “big reason” she chose to work at her institution was the “focus on antiracism . . . and a very clear mission of social justice and diversity while still also being a predominantly White institution.” At the time of the study, she was in her 2nd year of her full-time role.

Violet shared her “18-year-old self” would not have acknowledged she had White privilege because her family was on food stamps, and she approached things from the lens, “I’m a woman, I’m the oppressed gender.” She later realized, “We’re still White,” and her family did not experience additional oppression that those categorized as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) did, such as getting “dirty looks when they went to the cash register with food stamps.” Violet used that defensiveness to connect with her students and reflect on her own process, and she said, “It’s icky, but we learn, and we grow.” She had been aware of her White identity since she was young, as her mom was adopted and was the only White person in her extended family.

Violet was also in a relationship with a Black man and had moments when was with him that had been “screaming like privilege, White privilege, White lady privilege,” which made her constantly aware of her Whiteness. Violet identified as pansexual but realized she had “straight passing privilege” because she was in a “heteronormative relationship.” She had recently received more clarity on what she had been referring to as her “neurodivergences” to describe her learning disabilities and identified as on the autism spectrum in addition to having attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. Violet was still processing what that meant as part of her identity and how she could “view that as a strength rather than a weakness.” Violet also described religion as salient to her, as she grew up in a very religious Christian youth group, but her godmother was Pagan and she came to more closely identify with that group.

At work, Violet was still trying to figure out where she fell in the hierarchy. She shared, “Like, here, being a very small school . . . I still do feel like I have more input, more value . . . but I can’t stay how much . . . it would be taken into consideration versus if I was in a higher position here.” She expressed she did not feel like she had power, and “it’s all just a game” of “who has power, who likes you?” Violet described herself as “really loud and really annoying” and said she “started planting this bug in other people’s ears. . . . Have you thought about how we can dismantle Whiteness?” Violet shared, “I know that me as an RD [Resident Director], an entry-level professional is not going to be able to change the entire system here. So, like what can I change?” She also recognized “the person who brings it up is usually the one that gets it put on their plate” and pointed out “this challenge between like advocating for others and also self-preservation.”

Violet was trying to shift her focus “from these big White savior ideals” such as attending Black Lives Matter protests like she did the previous summer to “healing paper cuts” and asked herself, “What can I do right now?” She talked about how she can “change the mind and the language of [her] students for small things like noise complaints or conduct meetings or like roommate agreements.” Violet was committed to “actually showing up and using allyship as a verb” and said her motivation was to be involved in social justice advocacy outside of work. She said, “If I can’t pinpoint ways that I do the work outside of just being an RD, then like, am I actually doing it?”

### **Chapter Conclusion**

Participants shared a great deal about their personal and professional lives with me as part of the study, and I was only able to share a fraction of their unique narratives in the brief profiles of this chapter. As I illuminated their life stories, I gained their own insights, and through the co-

construction of knowledge, I helped participants validate and clarify their own personal experiences with the goal of providing motivation to disrupt Whiteness in the process (Kim, 2016). For the purposes of the study, I focused themes on areas in which participant narratives provided rich descriptions across their shared experiences as entry-level White women student affairs professionals that also answered the research questions I sought to understand. Creating community across commonalities in stories is one benefit of a narrative approach (Kim, 2016), which participants also shared they felt as takeaway of the research process. I did not include all their insights into the themes shared in the next chapter; however, some of these areas are worth noting as context to understand how I made sense of the themes.

Social media was a topic that came up repeatedly—both to engage with others and as a platform to learn. Many participants talked about engaging in content on sites like Instagram and Tik Tok that was produced by people of color to “diversify their feed” and gain insight that might challenge how they had been socialized to think about issues such as race, oppression, and justice. Participants indicated they learned things from social media that they had never been taught in formal education settings. Others discussed engaging with others on social media through platforms like Facebook, specifically sharing frustrations with friends or family who posted content they viewed as problematic. Some participants shared part of their commitment to disrupting Whiteness was to try to provide education when they saw posts that were ill informed. Participants also shared how they questioned what, if anything, they should post on social media in response when injustice occurred. This questioning was part of narratives that shaped themes presented in the next chapter related to taking up space from people of color and caution around performative activism. The unique context for the study also enhanced how social media played a role in how participants navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness as their interactions

with others in person were limited during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and social media was a major platform for activism during high-profile events of racial injustice in 2020.

Participants represented a variety of geographic regions, institution types, and functional areas. In recruiting participants, I was intentional to select individuals across these areas, recognizing I could not account for the wide range of institutions in higher education in the study. Although there were some unique insights across these differences, overall, the institution type did not have an impact on how they were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness. It was the people and structures in the institution that were important, which looked different even across remarkably similar institutions. Participants discussed some of these insights in our conversations, but these distinctions were not explored explicitly in the themes or discussion, as I felt as though I answered my own questions about if these distinctions mattered in answering the research questions through the analysis—they did not. The context being situated in higher education and student affairs, intersecting with participants' identities as White women, is what shaped the themes and analysis explored in the following chapters.

## Chapter 5: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how entry-level, female, White student affairs professionals were motivated to disrupt Whiteness. Specific research questions were:

1. How do entry-level White women student affairs professionals describe navigating Whiteness in a professional setting, informed by their educational and personal experiences?
2. In what ways do entry-level White women student affairs professionals maintain Whiteness?
3. In what ways are entry-level White women student affairs professionals motivated to disrupt Whiteness?

### **Themes**

In the previous chapter, I shared participants' stories to provide context for the themes that emerged from their collective experiences navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness. The narrative approach to storytelling provided an opportunity to understand the experiences of participants on their own terms prior to engaging in a critical analysis (Kim, 2016). In this chapter, I explore the themes that emerged related to the research questions and seek to make the meaning of participant stories larger than their individual experiences through this retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). I draw heavily on the words of the participants in the chapter to present the themes from a critical perspective by illuminating problematic elements in their experiences (Clandinin, 2007). The themes provide insights across the research questions and offer detail on how participants navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness in their interactions with others, unique environments, and the context of those interactions and environments (i.e., restorying their narratives through a three-dimensional space

approach; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In each section, I use their narratives to provide a particular focus on the impact on motivation to disrupt Whiteness.

Navigating emotions is a major theme from the study that is explored in depth in the chapter. I outline how participants understood emotional responses as White women, such as “White tears,” to be problematic and how they each struggled to understand when their emotions were acceptable versus the times when their White fragility detracted from meaningful social justice work. A major theme related to emotions outlined next in the chapter is empathy, as repeatedly, participants described it as a motivator to disrupt Whiteness.

The second two themes emerged from the contexts of participants’ work environments—both from their roles as entry-level professionals and the greater context of higher education, their specific institutions, and offices. Participants described their sphere of influence through a focus on individual acts, rather than systemic changes, as they believed they did not have access to the spaces where decision making was occurring—they were not “in the room where it happens.” I outline how they understood higher education as a system that upheld Whiteness and conclude with how expectations in their work environments shaped how participants viewed disrupting Whiteness as part of their role, or not.

### **“I Don’t Know if This Has Been a White Fragility Moment”: The Impact of Emotions**

A great number of themes that emerged from the study were related to emotions participants experienced when talking about White privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness. I analyzed these emotions looking at both interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions and made collective sense of how the time and space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of the moments that facilitated these responses were significant in building a collective narrative of participant journeys navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness. An emotional response in the form

of tears was particularly salient to participants, as they described the concept of “White women’s tears” and how they were making sense of this response as problematic. Participants also described how they had developed a greater awareness of their emotions and were building resilience to accept emotions typically associated with White fragility such as defensiveness, guilt, and shame. Awareness of their own emotions and how they could be problematic also created a great deal of uncertainty for participants—they worried they would say the “wrong” thing or “take up space” that should have been reserved for people of color to share their stories. Participants described an additional layer of uncertainty as entry-level staff—they worried about maintaining professionalism and were fearful of conflict that would hurt their reputation. These emotions often prevented them from acting, and in turn, maintained Whiteness.

#### **“It Makes Me So Angry That I Do That”: Navigating the Impact of White Women’s Tears**

Many of the participants brought up the concept of “White women’s tears” as an emotional response they understood as problematic related to conversations around race. Making sense of this concept greatly impacted how navigated the realities of Whiteness. Participants described awareness of how an emotional response centers protecting White women and detracts from listening to the experiences of people of color. Some specifically mentioned the article *When White Women Cry: How White Women’s Tears Oppress Women of Color* (Accapadi, 2007) as informing their understanding of the subject. Jordan shared, “I think about that article, *When White Women Cry*, and it makes me so angry that I do that.” Others described White women’s tears as a cultural phenomenon. Harley shared, “I always think of like a Karen and, when she’s like crying in a store, you’re like, ‘Calm down, Karen, like, you’re fine.’ It’s, Karen’s upset because she made someone upset for being like a racist.” Taylor described how she was “aware of like the White women tears.” She said, “a number of my friends for my master’s

program, they like, I don't know, had like jars, that'd say 'White tears' on them." Participants described how "White women's tears" was being used as a blanket term applied to any time White women cried, both in and outside of conversations around race, and though they understood how their tears could be harmful, they were also wrestling with when an emotional response was acceptable.

Across their diverse backgrounds and experiences, those who discussed the phenomenon built a shared narrative on their experiences and struggles with the concept. They each reflected on moments when they had reacted with "White tears," acknowledging they understood the negative impact of that emotional response, specifically in environments with women of color. Jordan reflected, "Like, I am sitting here as a White woman crying to a woman of color who is now having to do emotional labor to make me feel better." Awareness of the problematic nature of their tears was happening both in the moment, as it had for Jordan, and years later as participants recalled salient moments in their understanding of White fragility. Kelly looked back on her undergraduate experiences and shared:

Thinking back, it shouldn't have ever been the responsibility of my professors of color to help me navigate my White guilt, excuse me, my White tears when I would do my capstone projects and when I would cry from White guilt as a sophomore in college. I was unlearning everything and navigating all the experiences I've had up until that point growing up.

Summer reflected on a time where she was called out in a large group for taking up space in a group of women of color and shared:

I did the White women cry stereotype and just was like sobbing, I'm just sorry, and then people had to pander to me, which is terrible and that's not what's supposed to happen.



The only good thing that came about was I did change my behavior and people noticed that. . . . So, I think that me crying in reaction to that was a big White fragility moment, because I didn't have the ability to take myself out of it and look at it from another perspective because it was too hard at the time.

Participants talked about how tears were a main way White women held power and “weaponized” their emotions through structures in society designed to protect them. Taylor shared:

I feel like that might also be tied to the ways that in history and like the ways in which society and the structures like are created to protect us. Like whether or not we wanted that protection. And oftentimes it's like very harmful, but there's something to be said about like the ways that White women and how things play out are structured or are created to make us feel like we need protection, but also to protect us.

This reflection was part of an awareness of how it was easy for them to silo identities and focus on the marginalization they experienced as women, deflecting responsibility for perpetuating power structures with their White identity.

Conversely, participants questioned whether all tears were “White women's tears” and wondered when crying was an acceptable emotional response. Many participants described how they identified as emotional and shared how they “cried all the time” or were “a natural crier.” Kasey stated, “So it's like I'm a very emotional person. . . . It's a strength but it also sometimes can show up as a weakness.” Those who identified as emotional particularly wrestled with the impact of their emotional response, versus the intent they might have had. Participants both implicitly and explicitly described these reactions with a negative connotation connected to their gender. Harley shared, “I don't want them to assume because I'm a woman with emotions that

I'm not strong." They described tears coming from a place of empathy, care, and frustration, among other emotions. Kelly shared, "I don't feel like I'm having White tears of, like, defensiveness. It's more of, like, this is so frustrating." Participants processed the internal conflict they were having during their interviews—knowing the negative impact their tears could cause. Harley shared, "I'm going to be very honest. I don't know if this past experience has been a White fragility moment, um, I may also be wrong, because I'm internally thinking about it."

Each sat in the discomfort of their awareness differently and, as they wrestled with the knowledge that their emotional response could be problematic, had begun to develop a more critical consciousness in situations where they might cause harm. This heightened awareness also led to getting stuck in knowing how to manage their emotions, both inside and out of conversations about race, as the narrative around White tears focuses on individual responses rather than the system that creates an environment that caters to protecting White women. Violet offered a perspective that challenged the notion that her individual response, rather than the reaction to it, was the problem. She shared:

I think that goes back to like the White women's tears and that we have almost like this, we have a cop-out because people are so afraid of upsetting White women, at least in my experience. And, I often have to tell people that even if I do get upset, whether it is related to like this whole conceptual idea of like White women's tears or if it's related to all the other things going on, you know, or just being a person and because heaven forbid people cry, right? That like, not to always just to console me. Like, just let me have my moment. I will move on and, like, you know, I'll turn my camera off. I'll wipe my eyes and we'll keep going, right?

## **“I’m Capable of Doing Harm”: Building Resilience Through Moments of White Fragility**

Participants were beginning to reconcile their understanding of the problematic nature of White fragility with an acceptance of their emotions by building resilience, both in the moment and in response to situations in which they may have caused harm. Although the specific notion of the problem with White women’s tears was impactful, there was a salience of the general notion of managing their emotions in moments when they felt things like guilt, discomfort, shame, and fear associated with acknowledgement of their racial privilege. Building a shared narrative across these common responses that had occurred over a range of interactions and experiences was important in crafting a collective understanding about how participants were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness (Kim, 2016).

Many participants were working to accept that emotions were natural and not necessarily something they needed to control through this internal dialogue; it was how they navigated and processed them that was important. Taylor shared:

But I think after years of therapy, I’m also like the emotions . . . are valid in terms of like I’m experiencing them. Like, that is not something that I can undo the experience of. But why am experiencing that and how I handle that moving forward is the choice that I get to kind of make.

Scout reflected on how she was simultaneously accepting her emotional response and viewing it through a different lens with the knowledge that she carries White privilege:

Like, I can still cry. . . . Like I will cry the whole time just because I’m a very sensitive person in general. So, I don’t necessarily think those tears are bad. And having, choosing to know my privilege, I think that is, is what I want to be doing for the rest of my life. ’m just constantly keeping myself in check with my lenses that I’m looking through. Instead,

I'm trying to like, think about it, weaponizing emotions and how we can manipulate things without thinking, how we all do it, without potentially thinking of defense or something like that. So again . . . I am trying to really not center myself in these conversations about White fragility in those kinds of instances.

That awareness also looked like the ability to recognize spaces where their emotions may cause harm, versus moments when they were not causing harm. In the case of "White women's tears," as described by Accapadi (2007), harm was when their tears were taking space from women of color, but not all tears were shed in that context. Jordan shared:

I cry every freaking day, like, it is not hard. I think a lot about that and I think about how I get, I get frustrated that . . . I cry as a White woman when I receive feedback . . . that's sharing when I've done harm. And I, I think that I also, oh my gosh, I think that I also cry when I receive feedback that's positive and when I receive critical feedback from White folks as well, I think it's just my reaction, but I'm very conscious of really not wanting that to be my reaction when someone of color, specifically when women of color, give me feedback around race.

As participants gained greater consciousness of the impact of their emotional responses as White women, they also had to sit with the impact their emotions could have, whether intentional or not.

Reflecting on impact versus intent was a salient part of building resilience through emotions. Participants often reflected on how they understood the impact after the fact and were then using that awareness to do better the next time. Kasey shared how she later understood a staff member of color was upset with her. She said, "She just didn't trust me. Like, why would I cry because someone's my friend? I cried because I'm weaponizing." Participants reflected on

how they had to accept they were capable of doing harm and this was connected to the power they held as White women. Reflecting on a moment when she had cried, Summer described how she had worked through what her impact was and how she might do better in the future when faced with a moment of White fragility:

Something I try to tell myself is that I am capable of doing harm. And I think that's a big impediment that people have in these conversations is like, oh, I couldn't have done that, but like, I could have done that. So I think that experience before helped me realize that I'm capable of doing harm. So, I think I would probably think about it for a second and acknowledge that they're right and apologize and hopefully change my behavior for the future so that they can see that I'm not just doing the same thing over and over again.

Arguably, recognizing the impact that their emotions could have created more feelings of discomfort, as participants had gained the knowledge they could cause harm, which created additional feelings of guilt, shame, and fear.

Resilience in acknowledging emotions sometimes looked like apologizing after a misstep, and other times, it was an internal acknowledgement of a feeling and processing how to move forward. Violet shared a story about when she apologized to a student after committing a microaggression that left her feeling guilty. She described the moment when she apologized:

I was like, "I need to apologize. I just need to tell you that I know that what I said was stupid. And I want you to know that I am still learning and still growing as a person, but I also recognize that I had a negative impact on you. And I'm sorry for that." And he just looked at me, he was like, "you're the first professional at this school who has ever apologized for microaggression to me," and he was a senior. I was like, "that's a problem." But anyway, so I think, like, that was, like, a moment that I both felt White

fragility but also saw, like, what happens when you recognize it and, like, actually do something about it.

Other participants also described stories of how they went back to apologize to someone after a misstep, needing to move from being stuck in their guilt to initiate what would likely be an uncomfortable follow-up. The follow-up did not change the impact of their experience, but acknowledging their missteps was generally described positively, both toward whom they had harmed and for their own learning. Participants had varying levels of comfort addressing their emotions in the moment and sometimes wondered if following up would make the situation worse. Dani described how she was worried something she had said to a Black student “came across really wrong.” She said, “but, that’s not what I meant,” and she was questioning whether apologizing “would make it worse.” She said, “I don’t want to assume that he assumes.” Like Dani, participants described the internal acknowledgement of emotions such as worry, shame, and guilt in interactions with others, even when these emotions did not project outwardly.

White fragility was not always salient for participants as an outward emotion, as they did not all necessarily have a “big White fragility moment” to share. Regardless of whether they could come up with a specific example of a time when they had experienced emotions associated with White fragility outwardly, they all had an awareness of how their internal responses were grounded in their White privilege. Ann described how she had developed an awareness of her emotions and shared, “I think when it comes to topics that are related to race, if I begin to feel shame, that can be a trigger to me that that’s an area that I need to explore more.” Elizabeth described feeling “guilty” when she strayed from her goal of pursuing racial justice—for example, choosing to watching an escapism movie instead of choosing a documentary about race. Related to her own White fragility and guilt for her role in racist systems, she shared, “It’s

something that I'm consistently just like on a daily basis, little things that I'll do, little things that I'll say," and acknowledging her emotions helped to reflect on her own intent and motivation to do racial justice work. Rachel shared the emotion she felt the most was guilt related to her White privilege and described:

I'm not uncomfortable talking about anymore. I definitely would have been a year ago. But now I'm just like I have it, I gotta use it. You know, I gotta, I gotta do good things with it. Basically. Still a little sad. I have it, because again, I worked really hard, but I promise I'm understanding that I do have it. But I think I'm more just like I should be doing more. What else can I do for students of color, for my colleagues of color, to make them feel valued, heard things like that?

Social media was also a forum that prompted an internal acknowledgement of emotions such as defensiveness or guilt. Those feelings were sometimes prompted by not knowing how to engage in those platforms around racial justice in a way that was not performative. Other times, reading posts that were critical of systems perpetuated by White people prompted an emotional response. Clare shared how some social media posts that made sweeping generalizations about "all White people" prompted "a defensive reaction." She described how she had begun to "think about how power [was] playing into that reaction . . . then take a moment to think about why [she was] having that reaction."

Both internal and external awareness of emotions prompted action for participants and contributed to their motivation to disrupt Whiteness. For internal processors, that was more of a "now what?" moment, whereas those experiencing outward displays of emotions they understood as harmful committed to not repeating the same mistakes and repairing harm when possible. Many participants described both external and internal processes for recognizing and

moving through emotions typically associated with White fragility. They described learning to work through these emotions by making mistakes they understood were inevitable. Many times, the confrontation of emotions was facilitated by others with whom they had deep relationships and could call them out for their White fragility.

***“No One Said This Is Easy”: The Value of Deep Relationships in Encouraging Action***

Many participants described the value of having trusted others with whom to process their emotions with. Frequently, these others were women of color with whom they had deep relationships; other times, these others were White people—friends, colleagues, supervisors, or partners—with whom they felt they could be open about their missteps. Participants who described these support people shared how these individuals had pushed them outside of their comfort zone to take action to repair harm. Violet shared how she had texted a White friend when she “messed up,” who told her, “Pull up your pants and go apologize and tell him you are still learning,” and “it was going to suck. . . . No one said this stuff is easy.” Taylor reflected on how a former supervisor, who was a person of color, pushed her to address a situation “head on” even if the conversation was filled with “difficult emotions” and, in that moment, she had to be “willing to face some really gross things” in terms of how she had been socialized around race. Many participants described their experiences in higher education from the lens of salient relationships they had cultivated and described the environment as learning focused—offering opportunities to learn and grow through what would be inevitable mistakes in navigating their own White privilege. Overall, participants who described having a network of others with whom they could openly process emotions related to White fragility had developed more specific strategies to recognize, confront, and move past emotions rather than getting stuck in guilt, shame, and defensiveness.



## **Saying or Doing the “Wrong” Thing: Uncertainty as a Barrier to Confronting Whiteness**

Participants experienced a great deal of uncertainty as they navigated Whiteness in both personal and professional settings. They experienced varying degrees of uncertainty related to their emotions, as described in the previous section, were worried they would say the “wrong thing,” and often did not know where to start in terms of applying what they had learned to disrupt problematic systems. Specifically, participants discussed how the wrong thing would be a perception they were racist, their attempts at allyship would be called out as performative, or they would “take up space” intended for people of color. Their identities as women also impacted how they hesitated to confront Whiteness. Ann described, “Women are often socialized to be liable and not upset anybody. So, we use that as a cop-out, too. You often hear, I just don’t want to upset anybody, so I’m not going to say anything.” This uncertainty coupled with their status as entry-level professionals put many participants in a place where they felt stuck, as they felt their actions would be more highly scrutinized because they were not well established in their environments, and as women risked being perceived as a “bitch,” as one participant described, if they were direct in their critiques. Participants even described how they worried they would say the wrong thing in their interviews or focus groups as part of the study—finding commonalities across their stories helped illuminate just how significant this uncertainty was as a barrier to disrupting Whiteness.

### ***“Fear and Trepidation When I Do Talk About Race”: A Desire Not to Appear Racist***

Not all participants described their hesitancy as fear; however, they all struggled with the notion that how they would show up related to their Whiteness would be wrong. This fear was intensified in environments where there were more people of color. Ann shared she felt “fear and trepidation when [she talked] about race, especially with people of color,” and Rachel described

how she was “careful” with her “words around students of color or colleagues of color.” Taylor described an experience from early in her undergraduate years, when she was one of few White students in a program and was “scared most of the time, not like for fear of safety, but that I was going to say something wrong.” Catherine shared, through her attempts to be in learning spaces, she was around more people of color and described:

The fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. . . . I’m now putting myself in spaces where I’m having these conversations more often, I’m surrounded by more people of color. And so there is, like, a more likely a chance that, like, I can and will say something, like, whether or not I am saying or doing anything explicitly racist.

An added layer to this uncertainty was, in addition to a fear of saying something wrong, participants acknowledged, as a White person, they might talk too much in conversations that necessitated hearing from those with marginalized identities.

### ***“I Should Be Quiet and Listen”: Taking Up Space From People of Color***

The concern they would “take up space” was grounded in the understanding of it being problematic to center the experiences of White people, similar to how participants understood the impact of their White tears. Participants wrestled with the notion they should not be centering themselves in conversations with the idea that their silence was also problematic. Kelly shared:

I think it’s, it’s like there’s a fear of, like, “oh, if I speak, then I’m taking up too much space and I’m not learning, like, I should be quiet and listen,” which I agree. I do think it is important to listen. It’s important to engage in conversation. But, I think also, at some point, you’d have to take the step, the next step, to be willing to lead the conversation.

Participants identified this internal struggle and were questioning moments when they wanted to “step back” with the notion that “silence is violence” and acknowledged not speaking solely for

the reason they were White was a “cop-out.” They did not necessarily have a clear answer for how to best help without centering themselves and articulated how this uncertainty was a barrier to creating change, although action was still occurring throughout this uncertainty. Ann described how she had wrestled with the notion of taking up space as a White person in an initiative she spearheaded in her office:

I started satellite hours over in our center for multicultural education, which is where a lot of our students spend time. And, at first, it was really uncomfortable because that was the space I hadn't spent a lot of time in. I didn't really know the students over there, and there was some nervousness about, like, am I taking over their space? Like, is this even the right place for me?

The struggle with taking up space was also salient for participants on social media platforms, as they described difficulty engaging in those spaces. Ann expressed a hesitancy to post in response to current events related to racial injustice, sharing, “I don't want to be blamed for, like, being performative or something like that; we're adding to the problem.” However, she also questioned how her silence in those spaces would be perceived. Many participants cited the Instagram “#blackouttuesday” challenge, which involved people posting black squares in solidarity with Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020, as an example of a performative action. Summer described, “there's no, like, action or changes that happen because of that, other than taking up a bunch of space.” Some participants described not posting much on social media because they were unsure how to avoid appearing performative, and others described the strategy of “amplifying” diverse content to respond to what was going on in local, national, and global contexts but not to center Whiteness. This amplification of voices was like what others described

as their strategy for addressing the problem of taking up space in person environments—using their own privilege to bring others whose voices have less power to the forefront.

***“You’re Going to Do Something in a Meeting That’s Going to Be Talked About With Other People”: Uncertainty as Entry-Level Professionals***

Another layer of hesitation for participants was regarding their roles as entry-level professionals. Some were still building their confidence when it came to more difficult conversations around identity and described hesitation to speak in environments where they perceived others were more knowledgeable about diversity and inclusion. This hesitation showed up as being silent in spaces around coworkers they perceived as more knowledgeable or had greater years of experience and specifically with colleagues who had roles in diversity and inclusion. Kasey described:

There’s fear that as a newer professional, you’re going to say something and that’s going to be your reputation at a school. Or you’re going to do something in a meeting that’s going to be talked about with other people.

Not knowing how to approach something in a professional way was also something that came up in the context of doing something wrong. Participants acknowledged how “fear of open conflict” was grounded in White norms around workplace culture and, as Summer described:

It’s like people don’t want to say something wrong. So, we just don’t say anything at all. I think I’ve been guilty of that, too, is like, I don’t know how to necessarily approach this in a professional way, so I just won’t say anything at all, when really, that’s not how things should go.

This hesitation in the context of their role contributed to how participants were maintaining Whiteness in their work environments. The intersection of their power and influence

as entry-level professionals with the uncertainty of how they would be perceived if they did speak up was something participants viewed as an ongoing struggle, even when they recognized how their desire not to make a mistake was holding them back. The impact their power and influence as entry-level professionals had on their ability to disrupt Whiteness is explored in more detail in a later section.

### **“Heart Work”: Empathy as Motivation to Disrupt Whiteness**

The previous themes outlined how participants described navigating Whiteness as an emotional rollercoaster and how often these feelings presented barriers to moving toward disruption. However, as participants detailed the salience of their own emotions, it was clear that the empathy they felt for others was a significant motivator to engage in work that contributed to disrupting Whiteness. Understanding where this empathy came from and how it impacted their motivation to disrupt Whiteness was an important element in storying the collective narrative of the White women student affairs professionals in the study. Empathy often originated from a place where participants were conscious of the oppression they had experienced as women and from other marginalized identities. Many participants identified as feminists and, although they approached how they viewed this label from different perspectives, it significantly contributed to how they were motivated to disrupt Whiteness. Violet shared a perspective that resonated across multiple participants’ stories: “If we think about the people who are sitting on the margins in any identity group, everyone else is going to succeed.”

### **“I Have an Obligation to Do Better”: Motivation Through Seeing Others Hurting**

Participants described how seeing others hurting was a main contributor to their motivation. Unfortunately, opportunities to see this pain were frequent during the timeframe in

which I conducted the study, and participants outlined countless examples of times when they saw their colleagues, friends, and family in pain. Rachel described:

My motivation comes from my Black and brown colleagues, where I see them sharing these thoughts on Facebook or I see them upset at work, knowing, gosh, this happened again kind of thing. So, knowing that they feel so insignificant, devalued, not appreciated.

Participants described feeling empathy toward a variety of individuals in their lives and those with deep relationships with people of color felt particularly called to do social justice work.

Violet shared:

I think my biggest motivator, though, too, is just like the people around me. Like, my partner is a Black man, and my best friend is a woman of color. And, so, just seeing these people and knowing that I have an obligation to do better for them is something that is really important to me.

Participants struggled to see why others did not feel the same empathy they did. Kasey described being motivated by empathy as “heart work” and wondered, “How do you explain that to somebody?” Scout questioned why everyone was not motivated to disrupt Whiteness:

Motivation-wise, because, like, shouldn't everyone just want everyone to be treated equally? And, so, I don't know, what is my motivation? Not killing people that don't deserve to be killed? I mean, other than that, like, I want my friends to feel safe and comfortable and to not have to be scared about driving and all of that. That's it. Yeah, I think that's a stupid question, but it is important to remember.

Participants were motivated through empathy by hearing the stories of those around them with marginalized identities. They also felt empathy through examining their own experiences with oppression, both as women and through their other marginalized identities.

### **“I Think I’ve Tasted Oppression”: Motivation Driven by Their Own Experiences**

As women, participants discussed how the oppression they had experienced produced empathy for others, and this marginalization was salient in their experiences. Jordan described, “It’s easier to reflect on, like, areas where we’re oppressed rather than where we hold privilege.” Participants shared how they were making sense of this oppression as White women in comparison with women of color as one way in which they felt empathy. Summer described:

I think empathy, like, I try to picture how my life might be different if I had different identities. And sometimes when I think about it, my life could be different than what it looks like now. And not by virtue of me changing anything else. Like, I could be the exact same person but be Black and my outcome might be different.

Participants articulated how, as White women, their marginalization was situational. They understood there was another layer of oppression for Black women, whereas they were “protected by Whiteness.” Ann shared how acknowledging her White privilege was connected to her motivation: “There’s an additional, like, motivation because I think I’ve tasted oppression, but I recognize not to the same extent as, like, Black women have.” Multiple participants described learning moments related to sharing their own marginalization as women with women of color and how, although they were trying to be empathetic, they ended up “taking up space” in those moments. Taylor described how former colleagues who were women of color gave her good advice to make sense of this conflict:

My co-workers were like, you have to think about that you do have experiences that are not the same, but where you have been marginalized. And so in some ways you have to negotiate the line of being like that is awful. Like that is not right. And not being like this

is something that happened to me...but it is a lens that I can look through and say that sucks, like, I am sorry that that happened to you and it's unfair and unjust.

The empathy they felt for others due to the moments they had also experienced oppression was a significant motivator to disrupt Whiteness. However, participants were also gaining understanding that how those experiences were shared with others needed to be done with caution to avoid some of the same pitfalls they had already developed awareness of related to their emotions.

Outside of their identity as women, participants described how they were making sense of other oppressed identities and their White privilege and how this impacted their motivation. In relation to her queer identity, Jordan described:

I'm aware that I benefit from being White and I benefit from Whiteness in society . . . except that at the same time I don't because if someone has the ability to take a right away from someone, they have the ability to take that right away for me.

Taylor described, "Like, even though my Whiteness protects me in a lot of ways, I'm still harmed by Whiteness. And I'm still harmed by, like, the way that the patriarchy functions." This sense that oppression was interconnected was prominent in how many participants described their identities as feminists and how that feminism was a catalyst to their motivation to do "justice-oriented" work.

### ***"Just Existing as a Women Does Not Make Me a Feminist": Advocating Across the Intersection of Identity as Motivation***

Participants had various feelings about labeling themselves as feminists. Some were challenged to identify with the term due to the problematic roots of White feminism. Others did not view their gender marginalization as salient and were more focused on making sense of their



White privilege. However, regardless of their feelings about the label, participants described how they framed their desire for women’s equality from an activist orientation focused on benefiting marginalized groups across the intersection of identities. This feminist identity was tied to how participants were motivated to disrupt Whiteness. Catherine shared:

So, feminism for me is more than just this, like, a state of being. Me just existing as a woman does not make me a feminist. It’s me actively educating myself, unlearning those biases, like, doing any antiracist work . . . and saying, “Okay, like, what are the questions that we are asking to actively change those systems?”

As participants talked about their feminist orientations, it was important to them that their feminism was intersectional. That intersectional orientation also grounded participants’ motivation in the understanding that Whiteness and the patriarchy, and other oppressive systems, were interconnected, and by working to dismantle one, they were working toward undoing them all—benefiting everyone who is experiencing injustice.

**(Not) “in the Room Where It Happens”: Navigating Their Sphere of Influence as Entry-Level Professionals**

Participants made sense of how they were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness in their work environments through understanding what they believed to be their sphere of influence as entry-level professionals. Although each participant had distinct experiences and insights related to their identities and environments, this theme clearly emerged as a commonality across their narratives as a place where the time, space, and interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of their stories coalesced. This influence was largely enacted through individual acts, as participants described they were not at the table or “in the room where it happens” for systemic decision making. Participants reconciled their perceived lack of power

as entry-level staff members with the intersection of their identities as White women, recognizing where they had more comfort and safety to bring things up than their colleagues of color. Their motivation to disrupt Whiteness was decreased when thinking about their spheres of influence, as participants described how they did not see a way to make a systemic impact.

### **“How Am I Supposed to Change It?”: A Focus on Individual Acts as a Form of Disruption**

Participants described their sphere of influence as individual acts they could do to challenge problematic structures and support students to move through those systems. Each wrestled with the fact they “were not in those spaces” where they might impact systemic change and had each developed different approaches to navigating in their sphere of influence. This navigation looked like conveying frustrations and observations to supervisors and supporting individuals to move through systems that they could not dismantle. Participants discussed how they saw the ability to impact systemic change on a more local level when in the scope of their role but struggled to view this work as helping to disrupt Whiteness, especially when they worried their work was tied to them as an individual, rather than a structural change their office would carry on when they were gone.

Participants described being comfortable sharing observations related to problematic systems and structures and areas where their organization could do better with their supervisors. For some, this request to do better involved asking, “why?” For others, it was pointing out systemic issues or missteps in the organization and offering solutions. The tactic to work through supervisors was more comfortable for participants as entry-level staff members than bringing things up in front of a large group, such as in a staff meeting. Summer shared:

I think I'm afraid of, like, being completely shut down or just being told, like, "this isn't the time for that," which is why I, like, I think I kind of test the waters by bringing up with my boss and then she can do what she wants with that information.

A main frustration with this tactic was participants did not have confidence anything would come from their feedback. Jordan shared she did not think her director would advocate for change due to campus politics and said, "So anyway, I will bring it up. We will talk about it. Will anything happen? Thoughts and prayers, I guess." Participants also wrestled with what their responsibility was to follow through when they did mention things, with the acknowledgement the burden to address the problem would be put back on them. Violet described:

I'm learning more as I work in higher ed, about this whole like open-mouth-insert-foot scenario, where, like, you say something needs to change ,and then people are like, "cool, you change it." Like, no, like, I get paid minimum wage. And you know, already overworked, so, like, how am I supposed to change it as an entry-level RD?

This concept of burden and burnout impacted participants' motivation to initiate conversation about systemic change. This fact combined with the uncertainty of whether their feedback would have any impact left them wondering where they should focus their energy.

As participants realized bringing things up to supervisors was not always the most effective approach, they reflected on how they could integrate their commitment to disrupting Whiteness more in the context of their role. Participants described their sphere of influence as with the individual students with whom they worked. Supporting students was the easiest area in which participants saw how they had influence and was work from which they could see an immediate impact. Violet described how she tried to bring an antiracist perspective into her "daily interactions with students" to help reverse the impact of microaggressions and the "little

paper cuts” that people experience. She described how she did not think she could “heal the entire arm” but could “bandage up one paper cut and then tomorrow another.” Other participants echoed Violet’s approach to show individual care. Kelly shared, “I feel like I’m doing as much as I can to make sure our students know, like, individually, like, we care, and Fraternity and Sorority Life cares.” A realization many participants had was, through this individual support, their sphere of influence was to get students through a problematic system they did not have the power to dismantle.

As entry-level staff members, participants also articulated they understood their charge to be working with individual students and student groups, which was a motivating factor when they could see the impact they were having, even if they were not as Scout described, “dismantling all of the systemic racism that prevails through everything.” They wrestled with the realization they were part of the hierarchy they sought to dismantle and continued to come back to their sphere of influence to deal with the awareness they had of the problematic structures in higher education. Participants had awareness moving beyond individual acts was necessary to disrupt the system, rather than just moving students through it; however, this was hard for them to actualize in practice due to power dynamics in their environment. They could and often did share what they observed as problematic with those above them in the hierarchy but rarely knew what to do beyond that to create lasting change.

### **“That’s How You Get Fired”: The Impact of Power and Identity on Disrupting Whiteness**

Participants viewed their sphere of influence as related to the power dynamics in their organizations. As entry-level professionals, they viewed themselves as having a lack of power. Jordan shared:

And so, I think, positionally, it's frustrating because there are things, like, I can tell my supervisor, who tells her supervisor and then it stops, like, it dies there because neither of us have the power in our positions like that.

As discussed in the previous section, participants felt, as entry-level professionals, they were not at the table for decision making and, because they were a newer staff member, they lacked the "political clout" needed to challenge upper-level administration. This sentiment varied depending on the culture and size of the organization. Power also impacted how participants viewed their role in disrupting systems, as they were relying on leadership to take a stance or "do something" when injustice was occurring and did not necessarily view that as their role due to their lack of power.

Participants also acknowledged they had to be more intentional when they called things out because they lacked power. Related to Whiteness, Taylor shared:

I am actively trying to call it out. . . . You're very careful with how you word things and how you frame it. And, because if someone perceives it, if the wrong person perceives it in the wrong way, like, the whole thing can be shut down or just completely disregarded.

Other participants felt like their job would be in jeopardy if they critiqued their departments directly due to the political nature of their environment. Harley shared how this concern was limiting in terms of providing support to her students:

You want to say all these things to students. That's how you get fired, especially if it's over email. Again, not fired, but, like, that's how you get into a lot of trouble because you're basically one of the faces of the university.

The political nature of their organizations created hesitancy for participants to confront problems head on and contributed to how they were maintaining Whiteness.

Participants described how they were making sense of their professional identity as it intersected with their salient social identities in terms of power. Violet described how she had come to terms with calling others out and how her White privilege was an advantage in doing so, even when she had hesitation to speak up knowing it could impact her professional reputation:

I'm going to tell you if you're racist. Like, if you are being racist, I'm going to say you're being racist, right? Like some places don't appreciate their residence directors out and about, you know, at marches and sitting with student protests. And, but that's, that's me, right? Like, I'm not going to let that go. So, it is challenging, but . . . there are just some things that we have to decide, and, like, I have the privilege of deciding that. Whereas, like, my BIPOC colleagues don't. And, I think that's what kind of changed that mindset from you going out of undergrad, because I definitely was that RA that was like, "What about the fact that I'm a woman? I'm oppressed too." That took a lot of . . . conversations with myself, to, like, make that decision.

As Violet alluded to, participants viewed their racial and gender identities as salient in terms of how they impacted power dynamics. She added:

When I'm thinking about not only like lack of power as an entry-level professional, like, it's so complicated to also balance that with not only being a White woman and having the privilege of being a White person but being viewed as the young woman in this field.

Participants viewed their identity as White women impacting power dynamics situationally.

Similar to Violet, some participants shared, because they looked young and were a woman, they did not feel like their opinion was valued and had less power. Conversely, although participants expressed hesitation to call things out as entry-level staff members, they also recognized where they had "safety" in challenging things as a White person. They saw how, being White, they

would be less likely to be perceived as problematic if they offered critique but also reflected on how their comments would be received if they appeared too emotional as women. Participants also described how they could use their White identity to get through to other White people, specifically White students, and they understood this was a form of power.

Although they connected their lack of power to their position in the hierarchy, participants questioned whether moving up in the organization would provide them with the power to impact change. Not all participants viewed power in this way; some participants described themselves as future focused and were optimistic in terms of “moving up the ladder” or being invited to be part of conversations as they gained more experience in their current environment. Those who had negative perceptions of their ability to make change, even as they rose up in the hierarchy, connected this to their identities as White women and the intersection of their other salient identities, as they saw straight, cisgender, White men as the individuals with the most power and influence in their organizations. Participants also described how individuals they believed held power still claimed they did not have the power to create change. This realization connected to how participants were making sense of higher education as a system—it was set up to maintain Whiteness.

### **“What Can I Actually Do?”: Using Individual Acts to Enhance a Commitment to Disrupting Whiteness**

As participants described how they were making sense of their role in disrupting Whiteness, they articulated how the nature of the system and their lack of power impacted their motivation negatively. Catherine said, “I just try to focus on my spheres of influence because it can feel really debilitating and helpless if I think too far out.” As entry-level staff, participants did not view themselves as having any power to change the system, and many felt as though they

would not be working in the same office or institution long term because there was no room for advancement. This reality left participants feeling defeated and apathetic. Clare shared how it made her feel: “apathetic. . . . It’s like, well, what can we do, what can I actually do?”

Conversely, when participants did focus on their sphere of influence, they expressed greater motivation to do social justice work. They described a “responsibility” to “do something about it.” Taylor shared:

I always think about, like, the Wizard of Oz with the curtain and drawing the curtain back. Like, once you’ve seen it, that you can’t forget that you saw, and if you do try to forget, that’s an internal thing that you need to reckon with.

This sense of personal responsibility connected to how participants viewed their spheres of influence and their commitment to disrupt Whiteness. Scout described how she could still care about current events, such the Derek Chauvin trial, but she wanted to focus on “things that [she] can actually control today, right now.” Seeing an impact in real time in their spheres of influence was motivating. Rachel described, “Knowing how much I can have impact in a single life is really motivating to me and kind of keeps me going on those tough days, bad days.”

### ***Stories of Individual Acts***

Many participants struggled to see where they could impact systemic change, but others had begun to see how they could dismantle oppressive structures in their own offices when it was in the scope of their role. I expand on a few examples in this section to provide insight into these acts from the participants’ perspective. Understanding the nuances of their stories also helps to illuminate what elements were impacting and maintaining their motivation to dismantle Whiteness and what, if anything, could transition an individual act into systemic disruption.



Ann offered reflections on how she felt bound by notions of professionalism in her role as a career services professional and the ways in which she attempted to create change in her environment. She described “a lot of apathy” for changing things at her institution and in her department, sharing, “Most of our student are White, and most of the students who use our office are White.” Ann described how when she brings up to employers and colleagues, “maybe people of color will experience the job search differently than White people . . . they don’t feel that it’s that relevant to them.” Though she could not necessarily change how notions of professionalism were grounded in her office or the business world, Ann took initiative in the form of an individual act that also could serve to disrupt the system she had pointed out as problematic.

Ann described how she had started satellite career services hours at her institution’s center for multicultural education, as that was where many of their students of color spent their time. Her goal was to bring the service to those who were not using it previously as a way to address the fact mostly White students were visiting their offices. Although it began as an individual act, she shared she was “definitely the one who [had] spearheaded it,” the hours had “gained traction” and attention from their vice president for student affairs. She said, “There’s a little bit more groundword laid for it to continue happening,” and academic advising would move that direction. Ultimately, Ann was still unsure if it would continue if she left, offering “I wouldn’t be surprised if it didn’t because it’s definitely me taking the lead,” but she was “hopeful” the service would continue when she moves on, as she did not see herself staying in that role long term.

Other participants recognized ways they served as a “gatekeeper” and even how information was communicated was grounded in Whiteness. Kasey reflected on how information was communicated to students through “White academic language” and noted the number of

processes students and their families are expected to navigate was problematic. She reflected on a story from move-in and shared:

I have this young woman who's at the desk, and her parents share, "We're here to move in." It's eight o'clock at night, and I'm like, "Well, it doesn't look like you have a booking. Can I see your e-mail that you have?" It just says they signed up for a contract. They never picked a room. I'm reading this e-mail. I realize I can barely understand what is coming at me in this email. And, both of the parents tell me, "We're sorry, this is our first daughter in college." And, I have to pretty much say to them, "Well, we have rooms, but you're going to have to go online and book a room for tomorrow and then come back."

Kasey offered how she gave feedback to the director of her department related to that situation and the fact that her office and institution made things too "complicated" for people. She recalled asking herself, "Why can't you just do it all at the same time? Like, why can't we just make it an easy-peasy, one-step process where you can sign a contract and pick a room simultaneously?"

Kasey described a "shuffle" whereby students and families were passed between offices and processes rather than being provided an easy path to navigate getting what they needed. She offered, "[higher] education says challenge them to do it on their own" as part of a "learning environment," and questioned why student affairs practitioners could not be more proactive in helping. She shared:

I think that it is probably is also rooted in whiteness the notion of, like, we're in college, so we have to be independent. People can help you. People help me all the time. Like, why is there a problem? So sometimes I just make an executive choice that I'm like, I'm going to be customer service representative today, and I'm just going to make sure

everything gets done, even if that means that gives the student the easy way out. If that's going to make this simpler on their behalf, simpler on my behalf, I don't see what the problem is, and then letting them know how they can do it on their own the next time.

Like Kasey, participants were noticing, pointing out, and trying to help students through problematic elements in their environment, yet still acknowledged they were operating as part of oppressive structures.

Another way participants attempted to disrupt Whiteness was through challenging notions work was always a priority and operations should proceed as "normal," even when there was continued collective and individual trauma occurring. Elizabeth described how she created disruption in her own sphere of influence:

Trying to figure out, like, what I can push on, what I can't push on, what is like within my direct sphere of influence. What I can do is to remind my facilitators that I work with to provide community of care and that if they, if they're not Black, for example, if they're in a space to be able to take on some extra work from their Black cofacilitators, to please do that. And, it's like, give folks the time and space that they need. And, just ensuring that also the Black facilitators know that they can take that time that like if they don't want to go to that meeting, they don't want to facilitate the dialogue that week like, I'm not going to be docking your pay. You do you.

It took time for Elizabeth to come to terms with this type of disruption. She described:

My supervisor when I first started was trying to get me to dock students pay when they had like very legitimate reasons for not facilitating a particular week. My 1st semester, I did it and looked back. I should not have ever told her. And, so, since then, I've not ever told her. And, I just don't dock facilitators pay. They know they have legitimate reasons

for not showing up and like they deserve that grace. So, thinking about what's in my sphere of influence and who is going to be an ally in that and who is not looks like when I tell a supervisor certain things, I'm just not gonna tell her and try to move forward from there.

Elizabeth also acknowledged that she was trying to be more “strategic” about “what I do say, what partnerships I'm talking to” as she described understanding “there is only so little that I can do alone.”. She talked about future goals to “work closely with campus partners to try to push up against White supremacy” and “trying to remember the importance of coalition building and how we can be working at multiple different angles to push against this larger thing.” Elizabeth also expressed being motivated to ensure her colleagues knew they had her support. She shared, “[I want to make sure that my colleagues [from minoritized groups] know that I have their back and I am here to stand in solidarity with them.” She added, “Especially as a White person, there's very little that I do that will get me in trouble. That's kind of the point that I'm realizing. And so just too getting gutsy with the things that I do say and when I say it.”

Summer offered some reflections regarding how her relationship with her supervisor and their shared intersection of identities was supportive of acts of disruption. She shared:

I think one thing that I think makes me feel maybe a little bit more bold to say the things I want to say sometimes is my boss and I share a lot, share a lot of identities. She's also a White woman. We have similar educational backgrounds and upbringings. And she's not like a ton older than me—like, maybe 10 years older than me—maybe even less, like 8 years older than me. So, her and I have a very good relationship. So, I feel comfortable, like, maybe pushing on some things, so just saying some extra things. I would say I say more things to her as an individual than I do in front of the whole group, but I think that's

fine because I know that she is the deputy director of the organization. So, if I'm getting it to her, it's basically at the top where it can go.

She provided an example of how this relationship allowed her to take individual observations of problematic elements into her environment and transform them into policy change.

Summer described how, in her role in a higher education-adjacent organization, she worked with high schools and noticed she was uncomfortable with how Native American mascots were portrayed in school communication. She shared bringing the issue up with her boss and communicating at the time it “[felt] like it’s going against some of the things that we’re working for as an organization,” and “it was like this huge mistake because we support Native students. We have [X] number of students in the state that are native, but [X] number are graduating college.” Summer shared discussing the issue led to a “conversation about what that might look like about where we’re putting our funds in terms of schools with native mascots” and added, “Now, we’re writing a policy for working with schools with native mascots.” She had been able to implement the policy and had begun communicating with schools about its implementation and implications for receiving future funding. The process involved wanting “to work collaboratively with them to like write new policy related to mascots and navigate their board and things like that,” which in essence was hoping to facilitate additional change by removing Native mascots altogether rather than just not working with schools that had them.

Jordan shared a story of feeling limited by her power as an entry-level professional. She described discussing as a department opening their orientation reservation system later, as they had observed:

We are unfairly benefiting rich White people, essentially, like people who have already taken their tests know to apply early, are able to apply before [our state’s] free application

day. And, so, we wanted to wait until after spring break because more students would have have a decision and they would know more about their financial aid packages by then. So, we had all of these great reasons were like, yes, this is really going to help our students, especially the ones who don't find out that they're going to even be able to come until later. A lot of times, that's our students of color. A lot of times, that's our first-gen [first-generation], low-income students.

Despite what Jordan felt was a commitment to changing the system from her departmental leadership, a decision was made to open the reservation system early, as in past years. She described:

The director of our office said, "no, actually, the housing application opens on this day," and, so, [she] said that [the orientation reservation system] will open on that day, too, which was in January, January 19th. And, aside from being pissed because she just made this decision without us involved, we were really upset because all of good, intentional work went into making the decision that was going to help a lot of people. And, you know, the department says, like, "Oh, yes, we care about our first-generation students; we care about our low-income students; we care about our students of color. And then, this action directly went against that by saying, "Oh, no, we just need to look good." That was literally the reason we're going with this date is because we need to look like we had our shit together.

Jordan worked with her direct supervisor to try and provide feedback about the change. She described:

We are, in an effort to look good, we are actively hurting students that we profess to care about and that we profess to support and want to help close achievement gaps. We're

actively saying fuck it, and then walking away. And, I think, that to me, it was Whiteness that was very present in that decision making of just wanting to look good.

She and her other colleagues who directly planned orientation provided her supervisor with “like, 16 bullet points” of reasons they should have been opening in March instead of January. That feedback was provided to the director and was dismissed; Jordan described the answer was, “Well, I already said we would do it,” in reference to opening the reservation system early.

Jordan expressed frustration with how the situation was handled and described:

There was no, at no point has there ever been an apology and no point has there ever been a, like, reflection that we had been made aware of from the director who made that decision. It was just, even after presented with the 16 reasons, that we should be opening in March rather than January. We provided the feedback, and nothing happened, which is like . . . rage.

Despite the disappointment, Jordan shared she would try again the next year but was not optimistic her director would advocate for them. She described thinking she would “still cave to the system,” and the problem was they were “not in the room” where the conversations were occurring. Jordan described a “brick wall” she and her colleagues were up against, due to their lack of power:

I think, positionally, it’s frustrating because I can tell my supervisor, who tells her supervisor, and then it stops. Like, it dies there because neither of us have the power in our positions like that. That’s not within our sphere of influence to be able to make that call or, like, actually make a difference.

The stories in this section provide insight into how participants took advantage of opportunities for resistance and how their work environments, including their relationships with

their supervisors, supported or hindered their action. The identities of participants and those in their environment were also impactful in the stories shared, as they described how they perceived power and identity impacting their ability to create change. A theme across the stories was participants needed support from others to transform their individual acts into something larger that would disrupt a problematic system. They were both hindered and helped by elements in their environments, specifically the power they perceived they had as entry-level professionals. Kasey shared after the focus group she was “realizing that [she had] an opportunity to make some more movement” due to her environment; conversely, Harley stated, “Hell, I’ve told my supervisor things so many different things, and I sort of just get shrugged at and passed along. I don’t have the power to change anything. That is so hard.” The impact of work environments is described in more depth in the next sections.

### **“It’s Easier to Just Be on the River and Keep Going”: How Work Environments Maintain Whiteness**

Participants described their work environments as having a significant impact on how they were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness. They each described separate ways in which higher education as a system, including their specific institutions and departments, upheld Whiteness and struggled to see how they could separate their individual acts from being part of the system. Participants’ work environments also impacted how they viewed disrupting Whiteness as part of their role, or not, and these expectations, or lack thereof, impacted their motivation. These institutional contexts (Kim, 2016) were central elements that were critical to making sense of the collective stories to answer the research questions about how entry-level White women student affairs professionals navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness.



## **“I’m Going to Have to Play the Game if I Want to Continue This Work”: Understanding Higher Education as an Oppressive System**

Participants articulated many problematic elements in the system of higher education and wrestled with the fact that it was supposed to be transformative, and, for many, had a significant impact on their own lives. Taylor shared, “I just, I was really motivated . . . because college changed my whole life.” This understanding of what higher education was “supposed to be” was coupled with the knowledge, as Clare described, it is “an institution and a system that’s been very, very, White and very male dominated for a long time and still is.”

Participants articulated how they understood higher education to be connected to other systems such as business, K–12 education, and federal aid. They described awareness of the political nature of these interconnected systems as being grounded in Whiteness and capitalism.

Catherine shared:

I absolutely hate the political nature of higher education, but something that I am very aware of, that I’m going to have to play the game if I want to continue to do this work. And so, it yeah, it’s realizing, okay, as I move up, in what ways am I willing to compromise my values and morals to maybe in the long term benefit my students, staff, faculty?

The political nature of higher education left participants feeling as though their institutions were “image focused,” and they were maintaining systems that “benefited rich, White people,” such as standardized admissions processes and notions of professionalism.

Participants described how this focus on image left higher education in a place where it was performative in addressing oppressive structures—creating task forces or putting out statements rather than enacting change. They also observed higher education compartmentalized

diversity work, creating diversity positions and offices rather than this value being integrated throughout the system more authentically. Participants described how their work was often catering to people other than their students—alumni, state and federal governments, employers, and parents—and in their institutions, there was a notion of politeness that prevented conflict, which they viewed as necessary to disrupt Whiteness. Participants observed higher education was not willing to “throw away how we’ve always done things” and how it was like a river. As Taylor described, “it’s easier to just be on the river and keep going.”

Participants’ perceptions of higher education as a system grounded in Whiteness negatively impacted their motivation and often left them to maintain the system in the scope of their role. Although participants described challenges with navigating bureaucracy in higher education, they also acknowledged how they navigated the system with ease as a White person. Though most participants described the system as negatively impacting their motivation, some maintained an expectation that the system could be transformative as intended. Scout described some optimism for the role higher education could have on intersecting systems and shared:

Empowering the people that I can within higher education, it helps you dismantle systemic racism hopefully quicker than what I think it’s going to take by having more people that are . . . going into the workforce, especially being in the business school. If we can instill that into our students as they go into the workforce, they start getting promotions. They start making those changes within their own business settings. Like, that’s going to be so much quicker than potentially if we weren’t doing that.

Others mentioned higher education was a learning environment and expressed how this was supportive to self-work that would build the resilience needed to disrupt systems. Many elements

participants observed in the system of higher education were also present in their organizations, although the unique cultures and people impacted their motivation in more nuanced ways.

### **“Are We Really Equity Focused or Are We Whitewashing Things?”: Navigating Whiteness in Organizations**

Participants described with detail how they were navigating Whiteness in the context of their organizations, both on a more local level in their departments and in their institutions. Although their organizations reflected some of the same systemic problems that existed in higher education more broadly, there was more nuance to how participants were navigating these environments. Institutional and organizational responses to both the COVID-19 global pandemic and racial injustice occurring during the time of the study also provided participants great insight into workplace culture and receptiveness to change, which in turn impacted how they described their motivation.

### ***“How Are We Supporting the Institution’s Mission and Vision?”: The Impact of Espoused Priorities***

Participants described a mixed impact from institutional and organizational priorities around diversity and inclusion. Participants who had explicitly seen a commitment to diversity and inclusion in their institution’s and department’s vision expressed they viewed those values as positively impacting their motivation. Some participants described how these priorities positively impacted change. For Dani, this realization occurred after hearing from other participants in the focus group and she shared, “I don’t know if I’m at a different type of school or what, but I mean, our entire school, like, our entire university has committed to antiracism agenda. They’ve made a bunch of changes in my department.” Others shared how these big-picture priorities facilitated conversation in their offices. Beth described:

A lot of our conversations in our staff would look like, “How are we supporting the institution’s mission and vision?”—one of the pieces of the strategic plan being diversity and inclusion. So, I think we at least have a good example, being set in our office culture that that should be continuously at the forefront of our minds in what we’re doing.

Participants who described clear values around diversity and inclusion in their organizations also recognized when these values were not always priorities and still appeared performative.

Participants shared how their organizations did not prioritize these values and their organizations were often reactionary, short staffed, or distracted by competing priorities. Kasey described how the work was “always getting pushed to the back burner of like, oh, not the most important right now.” Others connected their organizations’ lack of ability to impact systemic change to these values being merely performative. Jordan shared:

And I’m not saying that we aren’t better, better is the wrong word. But I’m not saying that we’re not trying harder than a lot of other institutions. But I am saying that . . . some of it feels like, I guess performative.

This performative nature connected back to what type of change was palatable for White people. Summer shared:

In our mission, it says that we’re equity focused. And so, a lot that myself and some of the other coworkers . . . have been having conversations and just trying to challenge of like, are we really equity focused or are we whitewashing things?

Despite critiques of how their organizations were enacting their values, participants described having these clearly articulated as positively impacting their motivation to disrupt Whiteness, especially when compared to those who did not describe these as explicit in their environment.

### ***“Stupid Politics”: How Office Culture Perpetuates Whiteness***

More localized culture in their offices or departments was another element that was salient to participants as they described navigating Whiteness. Participants shared how feeling their offices and leadership were receptive to change positively impacted their motivation to bring up concerns and follow through on goals of disrupting Whiteness. How participants viewed workplace culture also connected to how leadership prioritized values around diversity and inclusion through actions.

Some participants described a culture in which others in their office ignored things and left the response up institutional leadership. Others said leadership at their institutions were doing nothing to address racial injustice. Less common was what some participants described as a part of the culture in their office to talk about social justice or how current events were impacting staff and students. After the focus group, Kasey reflected on how her departmental leadership had created an environment where she could bring things up and shared:

No one’s going to be upset or think that you’re out of line for bringing up, you know, systemic racism. And so, it was very interesting to me to hear from other women in the field that they often feel like they have to wait for the right time or find the right person or the right outlet to, like, have that conversation.

The ability or lack thereof to push conversations was salient among participants and impacted in what context, if at all, they chose to bring up injustice. Summer shared how her organization’s commitment to equity supported her ability to push others:

In the beginning, I was like, I don’t know how far I should push people or how much I should challenge people. But my boss, after I talked to her about it, she basically empowered me to say, “you’re either coming with us on this ride or you’re not.”

Participants' stories illuminated how, even with an espoused commitment to diversity and inclusion, their workplace culture was still limited by politics, which prompted feelings of frustration. Jordan shared:

There's still stupid politics, honestly. And there's this whole culture of, "well, we can't really call someone out in the all-staff meeting because then they won't speak anymore. It'll hurt their feelings." At some point I don't really give a shit if it hurts someone's feelings.

Others echoed the sentiments of their environments being ones where they were asked to frame their programs carefully to ensure their content was palatable for a wide range of people, which they described as code for making sure it did not offend White people.

This perception of caution in the environment was not always demotivating, but it created hesitation and forced participants to pause and rethink their approach. Elizabeth shared how she was working on "being more strategic" and was "really going to try and challenge" herself to avoid upholding Whiteness in her environment. She was not alone among participants in describing coalition building as a strategy she was motivated to implement as a workaround to address culture that was upholding Whiteness.

The unique context of the study occurring during the COVID-19 global pandemic and high-profile events of racial injustice put a spotlight on problematic office norms participants were beginning to understand were connected to Whiteness. Many described a culture that ignored what was going on in both local and global contexts. Catherine shared how she viewed this on her campus: "You're emailing about this event that's coming up . . . and are not going to acknowledge the atrocious hate crimes that are happening in our world or on our campus." This culture impacted how work was done, specifically through how Elizabeth described how she and

her colleagues were asked to just push through, “regardless of everything else [that was] happening in the world,” and it was a priority “to get to the topic that [they were] meeting about for the day . . . because what [they] prioritize most [was] the institution and the work that [they were] doing for the institution and having to live it and breathe it.” These norms facilitated what Summer described as a “workaholic culture” associated with Whiteness. Participants repeatedly described how this culture negatively impacted their motivation to disrupt Whiteness because they were “so tired,” yet they wrestled with how they had the privilege to engage in “self-care” in ways that non-White colleagues did not. This empathy provided motivation for them to look for ways to work through the exhaustion to maintain their commitment to disrupting Whiteness.

Making the connection they were also being negatively impacted by White supremacy culture in their work environments was also motivating for participants. Summer described:

And so, when I’ve been able to, like, connect those as a function of White supremacy, it starts to make more sense of why some of those things are happening. So, I think, you know, to be honest, there is a selfish component of it, is, there’s a lot of these things that are tied to White supremacy that are not enjoyable for me.

Challenging and/or changing this culture of “busy-ness” in their work environments that was contributing to burnout was something participants mentioned as a strategy that could enhance their motivation. Participants described how they wished they had more energy to devote to racial justice work, especially outside of work. Jordan questioned “What does outside of work even mean?” This burnout caused participants to be inconsistent in how they were motivated to disrupt Whiteness because, as Catherine described, “I need to pour as much empathy and compassion as I can into these other parts of my job.”

## **“If You’re Not Here to Do This Work, We Don’t Want You in Our Department”: The Impact of Individuals on Motivation**

Participants described numerous ways individuals in their work environments played a role in how they navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness. They described how leadership in their environments was “very White,” which perpetuated maintenance of the status quo. The impact, or lack thereof, of supervisors was noticeable in how participants described their motivation to disrupt Whiteness, as supportive supervisors were a main source of encouragement for participants to overcome negative feelings associated with their White identity and move toward action. Participants who did not view their work environments as supportive of disrupting Whiteness described how they “wished people care more” and described how a “team” approach might be more motivating.

Participants described how the leadership in both their offices and institutions mirrored the predominantly White nature of their institutions. Beth shared, “I think we use that term often to describe students, but that’s also a reflection of staff as well.” Participants articulated how White leadership had a “very narrow perspective” and “[did not] always recognize” what a student of color might need. Elizabeth described how leadership was “not willing to take a stand,” and Clare shared, “Direction from higher above would be a way to kind of put some more energy into our school.” Without leadership encouraging change, participants felt apathy toward disrupting Whiteness. In places where there was more diversity represented in leadership positions that did not necessarily mean the culture of the institution or organization was different as those organizations relied too much on individuals to change the system that still was predominantly White. Though frustrated with her leadership, Elizabeth shared, “I can’t, I can’t



even imagine what it is like to be a Black man in a senior leadership position at a predominantly White institution, all the pressure that's there.”

Although participants recognized it was unfair to place the burden on individuals to shift the culture of their organizations, those who had worked with leaders who had created an environment that was supportive of conversations around diversity described how these people positively impacted their motivation to put that talk into action. Kasey described how the tone her director set supported her commitment to disrupt Whiteness as part of her work. She said, “So her big thing was, like, if you're not here to do this work, we don't want you in our department. And when she said that, I was like, ‘I am at the right place.’” In environments where those in leadership positions did not initiate conversations about social justice topics, these conversations were not occurring in ways that would have a systemic impact. As she reflected on the multiple environments she had been in, Ann shared, “I think it had to do with the people because . . . it was a while ago. I don't remember having conversations about race in staff meetings, and I don't remember ever having them with leadership.” Participants who described environments where they did not perceive social justice as a priority felt “discouraged” which impacted their motivation to make their offices “more equitable.”

Participants made a distinction between how they viewed the impact of their direct supervisors and organizational leadership, as they had more direct contact with supervisors, who some described as “role models” for how they were navigating and disrupting Whiteness in their environments. Participants shared the impact of supervisors who encouraged them to grow and held them accountable to their own goals around disrupting Whiteness. Catherine described how she “had a really awesome supervisor who also [identified] as a White woman” and she felt “supported that [her] department and [her] supervisor [were] offering these opportunities and

spaces.” She added, “And by naming that, I have these goals and want to do this work, gives me more of that internal motivation.” Supervisors also impacted how individuals prioritized social justice work. Jordan shared:

I also think one of the things that my supervisor made very clear in my interview for this position 4 years ago was that if I was going to be working with her, I was going to be doing social justice work.

The most impactful supervisors were ones who not only prioritized social justice work but also partnered with participants to address concerns they brought up, rather than placing the burden back on individuals to fix a systemic issue. Participants who lacked these impactful supervisors did not always recognize this void in terms of how it affected their motivation; however, others were actively seeking mentors for this work, specifically White women who could help them “figure things out” and help them navigate institutional politics to create change without placing the burden of learning on women of color.

Participants described how their colleagues impacted their motivation to disrupt Whiteness, both by who was at the table and how much they felt like others “cared” about social justice work. In environments where there was more diversity of identities, participants shared this diversity impacted the frequency at which conversations about social justice topics were occurring because it was part of people’s “lived experiences.” These diverse environments were positive for participants, as hearing from others with marginalized identities contributed to how they were motivated by empathy to make their offices more supportive environments for their peers. Some participants described how their offices were “all White” and they felt as though they were responsible for educating others in their environments because they were “further along in education, process, and journey.” This responsibility to bring others up was perceived

with mixed emotions, as some participants felt as if their colleagues were open to learning, whereas others felt as if their peers were comfortable maintaining the status quo was demotivating. Ann shared how she would be more motivated if others cared in her office and if she felt that “work I did would actually be used and make a difference.” She added:

I think that would be motivating. Maybe there’s a team project instead of just me. That would be helpful, too. I mean, even just if it was something that was wanted by more than just me. Like I said, that goes into, like, if I’m the only one who wants it, then what happens when I leave and that just doesn’t feel worth it to me?

If participants perceived no one else around them cared, it was increasingly hard to find motivation to do the work.

#### **“None of That Is in the Job Description”: How Disrupting Whiteness Is “Extra” Work**

Participants described how they made sense of their expectation to disrupt Whiteness as part of their professional role. They expressed they did not feel there was an expectation for them to disrupt Whiteness and this work was something extra; they could choose to engage in it when they had the time and energy. Much of how social justice work was presented in their environments was considered optional and lacked accountability. As mentioned previously, participants described operating in an environment where they were exhausted all the time, but as White people, they recognized they had the luxury to “turn things off” and could have an “easier time at work” if they opted out of trying to disrupt Whiteness.

Participants reflected on how disrupting systems of oppression was hard to categorize in a job description, which impacted how they understood social justice work as part of their role—it was not necessarily something expected of them. Taylor shared, “I feel like there’s a degree of supporting people of color and affinity group spaces versus questioning the ways that White

supremacy is built into the structure, which is kind of a hard job description to put in.”

Participants described how they were socialized to believe they “needed to be inclusive,” but there was no expectation to disrupt Whiteness as part of their role. Most opportunities participants described to engage in conversations around diversity and inclusion as part of their work environments were either optional or lacked accountability.

Committee work and attending events were ways in which participants described engaging in social justice work, but this work was not specifically part of their role. Dani shared, “I don’t mind being, like, on committees, but god, I’m on a lot of committees. . . . Maybe that’s just normal for higher ed. I just want to do my job.” Participants described how this type of opting in was problematic, as it both created additional work for those who chose to engage and allowed people to easily opt out when they did not have the time and energy to commit. Participants shared how it was demotivating to engage in this social justice optional environment because work they felt was important was not prioritized, and they were experiencing intense burnout that did not make space for this kind of work. Summer wondered, “Why don’t we just do a better job at integrating it into what we’re already doing, so that it’s a more foundational part of the work?”

This burnout participants experienced stemmed both from the “workaholic” culture of higher education and an added layer of fatigue that had been brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic and emotional exhaustion they felt from engaging in social justice work in a context where injustice was such a prominent reality. Kelly described how this reality impacted her:

Sometimes it, like, doesn’t really motivate me because it’s so much time I have to invest. . . . Sometimes, I just want to sit in bed all day because I’m so burnt out. So, I think the different dynamics of COVID and like the pandemic of racial injustice, and then having a

job where I'm doing too much work and overworked and have too many responsibilities because we're understaffed, doesn't allow me to do timeouts, like refresh, or make me feel rejuvenated.

Participants recognized how they had the privilege to "turn those things off" when they wanted a break, and being "consistent" in how they approached social justice work was hard due to that reality. Jordan described her internal dialogue about her ability to opt out:

I can opt out. Like, I can, I can choose not to do this. And I was like, "oh, hey, you can't, because other people can't, like they can't." I can come home and, like, forget about that. But, you know, folks can't go home and stop being Black. That's not how that works. And, so, I think I've reflected a lot on that and how because I have the ability to not do the work and to turn away from it and could just have an easier time at work, makes me want to do it more.

This realization she could opt out but others could not was motivating for her to continue to do the work. Other participants expressed the same sentiment and a similar internal conflict in how they got to a place where their privilege to opt out provided motivation to opt in.

This back and forth was prominent among participants in terms of how they viewed their ongoing commitment to disrupt Whiteness and came with a realization they may need to give up something up to change the system. Violet shared having a moment when she asked, "What am I am going to sacrifice?" She described ongoing "conversations with [herself]" in which she had to push herself to "take an intentional stance and actually try and do [her] best with what [she had] and what [she knew]." It required a great deal of awareness of both themselves and their environments to, as Violet shared, "balance between doing that work and challenging systems, but also still existing in that system." Summer shared her realization: "If I want things to truly

improve for the greater good, I might have to give some things up. And, [that's] where people have a really big stopping point.” The emotional energy needed to navigate their own expectations and that of their role related to social justice work was challenging and, although participants expressed a desire to be more consistent in their commitment to disrupting Whiteness, they acknowledged maintaining it would need to be an ongoing process and would bring discomfort.

### **Chapter Summary**

The themes presented emerged from convergences across participant narratives to present a larger story of how entry-level White women student affairs professionals are unique in how they navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness in their personal and professional lives. The themes largely fell into two spheres—navigating emotions and the impact of work environments. I separated those areas into four main themes in relation to the research questions.

Participants’ stories revealed how their emotions were salient to how they navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness. These emotions were often an impediment to moving toward disruption. Participants were frequently stuck in a place of uncertainty where they understood an outward display of emotion could distract from authentic support of others with marginalized identities but were unsure what to do with that knowledge. Developing resilience through those feelings and encouragement to acknowledgement mistakes from those with whom they had deep relationships was impactful for moving through emotions to a place of action.

Empathy was something that participants described as having a major impact on their motivation to disrupt Whiteness. Participants identified how their experiences with oppression as women brought empathy for others experiencing marginalization, although they acknowledged how, as White women, they were often protected by Whiteness. Motivation to disrupt Whiteness

also emerged from participants' identification as feminists. Specifically, they described how they viewed their feminism as intersectional, as Whiteness and patriarchy were interlocking systems which, when dismantled, would allow for liberation across identity groups.

Participants felt restricted by their sphere of influence in their work environments. They believed they were limited to individual acts of disruption due to power dynamics in their organizations—they were not at the table to impact systemic change. As entry-level staff members, participants acknowledged they had low positional power but also recognized, as White people, they held more power than their colleagues of color. Work environments—from higher education as a system to individual supervisors and colleagues—played an influential role in participants' motivation to disrupt Whiteness. The nature of the system of higher education and the culture and hierarchy in their organizations impacted how participants viewed these environments as supportive to change. Participants described how they did not view it as part of their role to disrupt systems—they understood their charge to be “inclusive”—but what that looked like in practice often lacked clear structure and accountability. Unclear expectations in how social justice work was part of their role combined with intense burnout contributed to inconsistent motivation to disrupt Whiteness.

The women who participated in the study possessed a wide range of identities, backgrounds, and experiences, yet also had the shared context of working in student affairs, which assisted in crafting a collective narrative (Kim, 2016) that could illuminate how Whiteness was operating. Though their stories diverged in many areas, their narratives affirmed each other in many ways, as they described the same emotions—empathy and uncertainty—and feeling limited in their ability to impact change by the nature of the system in which they were working.

In the next chapter, I discuss and critique these findings related to the literature and the context of higher education and provide implications both for scholars and student affairs practitioners.



## Chapter 6: Discussion

The previous chapter presented the themes that emerged from the study related to the research questions. This chapter discusses those themes to make sense of the findings in relation to the literature, student affairs context, and social identities of the participants. Situating the narratives in a lens of time, space, and interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is helpful to frame how I made sense of participants' stories through the context, environments, and people they discussed. A narrative analysis also helped to make sense of the past (i.e., how White women student affairs professionals were socialized; Kim, 2016) and critique norms related to how Whiteness operates, specifically for White women. Narrative inquiry requires consideration of multiple audiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As I answered the "so what?" question to make sense of the data, I continued to think about the audience(s) for my dissertation. This final chapter considers multiple audiences, including myself as the researcher, the participants as storytellers, and the imagined readers (Kim, 2016) I hope to be student affairs scholars and practitioners who can impact how White women entry level professionals disrupt Whiteness.

The study context—including the COVID-19 global pandemic and racial injustice—of student affairs and higher education brings together some of the prominent themes across participants related to emotions and challenges inherent in viewing Whiteness from an individual perspective. Insight into the environment and values inherent in student affairs provided a unique lens through which to understand how socialization into the profession impacted participants' motivation to disrupt Whiteness. Interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships were impactful in making sense of emotional responses, identity development processes, and the impact of colleagues and supervisors. Viewing these narrative elements through a critical lens that acknowledged power structures provided an opportunity for recommendations for practice and

scholarship to emerge. I conclude the chapter with a summary of recommendations, my own reflections on the research process, and directions for future research.

### **Focusing on Individual Emotions Won't Disrupt Whiteness**

The research questions were designed to facilitate my understanding of how entry-level White women student affairs professionals navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. Themes from the study illuminated navigating emotions was a major focus for participants in making sense of their role in disrupting Whiteness. This cycle of emotions was often a barrier to action for participants, as they focused on wanting their individual responses to be right and knew they could do harm because they held power as a White person. This finding is congruent with other literature related to White women, allyship, and privileged identity exploration (Accapadi, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Reason et al., 2005; Watt, 2007) that discuss how privileged individuals can get stuck in their emotional response and a focus on being a good White person (Cabrera et al., 2016) that detracts from meaningful social justice work. In this section, I discuss some of the major themes related to emotions as they connect to relevant literature and offer critique on how the framing of these conversations reinforces the focus on individuals rather than systems.

### **Have You Heard of a “Karen”? The Problem With the Dialogue on White Women’s Tears**

Participants described the concept of White women’s tears as almost a cultural phenomenon. They were very aware, as White women, crying was a problematic response in conversations about race. Many participants made sense of the problem with White tears through the literature (Accapadi, 2007; DeAngelo, 2018); however, this understanding was also shaped by how problematic White women have been portrayed in everyday conversations related to race and White fragility. The concept of a “Karen”—generally used to refer to an often racist, middle-aged, White woman who feels entitled due to her privilege—gained popularity in recent years

and has been highlighted by viral depictions in the media of White women making claims of safety or righteousness toward people of color. Participants also discussed how the phrase “White tears” was used in everyday conversation—often as casual critiques or making fun of any emotional display from White women, regardless of the context.

The problem with the understanding of White tears being grounded in the notion of Karens is it misses the mark on how White people, specifically White women, can acknowledge their reactions and move toward more productive dialogue (Accapadi, 2007). The conversation around White women’s tears also leaves out how the reaction to White women’s emotions differs from the reaction to emotions of women of color and how these reactions are grounded in racist systems. As the critique of White women’s tears has morphed into something discussed in popular culture, it has lost the purpose of addressing the problem with these emotions.

Study participants knew their display of emotions could detract from the goal of difficult conversations, which is something Accapadi (2007) highlighted as important to keep the focus off privileged individuals. Although they did not always know what to do in the moment to mitigate their emotions, they were not ignorant to being part of the problem. Many had employed some of the strategies Accapadi suggested to have more productive difficult dialogue, such as recognizing what behaviors are associated with Whiteness, reflecting on whose emotions are more “acceptable,” acknowledging when tone policing (i.e. criticizing someone for expressing emotion, often directed at Black women) is happening, and acknowledging the value of White people discussing race with other White people. They were, as Accapadi suggested, holding themselves accountable for their actions in privileged spaces and naming the cause and impact of their emotions, but they were often missing the tools or guidance to know what to do with that acknowledgement, often leaving them stuck in a cycle of guilt and inaction.

## **Reframing the Conversation Around White Fragility**

Participants were familiar with the notions of White fragility and built their understanding of this concept from their knowledge of White privilege. As participants described their own experiences and learning moments, they had developed self-awareness to name problematic emotions, even at times to understand when, as White women, they might have been weaponizing their feelings. However, through practice or with mentorship, participants learned how to be resilient through emotions typically associated with White fragility, such as defensiveness, fear, and guilt.

As participants described how they understood White fragility, the conversation mainly focused on individual responses, rather than grounding those responses in a systemic understanding of how Whiteness frames challenging reactions to privilege. One participant pointed out how talking about White fragility is primarily, if not solely, for the benefit of White people—it does not offer anything to frame this understanding in a way that dismantles systems and benefits marginalized individuals. One review of *White Fragility* described the book as something people of color could have written in their sleep, implying how privilege manifests is obvious to everyone except those who have it (Waldman, 2018).

The invisible nature of Whiteness allows for discussion to center on individuals and their own sphere of influence, rather than considering how their responses are connected to a larger cycle of socialization that needs to be dismantled (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2016). Participants were largely focused on their individual emotional responses and impact on others, and though they had developed some understanding of their role in oppressive systems due to their education and experience, they did not necessarily have the tools to move from that acknowledgement to action. The problem previously described with the conversation about

White women's tears is one example of how the narrative on White fragility misses the mark in advancing antiracist action.

### ***The Gendered Nature of the “Fear of Appearing Racist”***

One emotion often associated with White fragility is fear, and fear of saying the wrong thing was prominent among participants. This fear often connected back to a desire to get things right in terms of how they showed up as a White person and be liked in the context of their work environments—these gendered notions were discussed in other studies related to White women. Linder (2011) recommended additional exploration of how the fear of appearing racist might be gendered, as the phenomenon was prominent in their study of antiracist, White college women. Although not explicitly explored in the study, how participants described navigating Whiteness provided insight into how this fear might be uniquely positioned for them as White women.

Participants described how, through their socialization as women, they understood they were expected to manage—which often meant hiding—their emotions, especially at work. Participants also shared norms of their work environments involved perfectionism and conflict avoidance, which they associated with Whiteness. This socialization combined with an awareness of how outward displays of emotions were problematic in conversations about race contributed to how this manifestation of fear was gendered. Participants' education and experiences also gave them greater understanding of how they could cause harm, giving them pause before speaking and, although this was often well intended, it contributed to another problematic notion—White silence.

### **Empathy as Motivation: Limitations and Opportunity**

It was clear participants' empathy toward others was a motivator to do social justice work. This empathy came from their own experiences with marginalization and from seeing

others they had relationships with—friends, colleagues, and partners—hurt. Empathy did not always lead to action, however—participants were motivated to do social justice work because they understood oppression and its impact, but they did not necessarily have the tools to disrupt the systems causing it. How White women entry-level student affairs professionals in the study describing being motivated by empathy provided insight into what might be unique about this population when presented in conversation with relevant literature.

### **The Limits of Empathy and a Racial Reckoning That Wasn't**

Relevant literature provides some contrasting views on the value of empathy in contributing to meaningful social justice work—these contrasts align with how participants were both moved and limited by their emotions. In her study of White women, Frankenberg (1993) found possessing other marginalized identities did not necessarily lead to having empathy toward other oppressed identities. The findings from the current study differ from Frankenberg's due to the student affairs context—the education and experience participants had and the context for the study gave greater insight into the impact of systems of oppression. The narratives shared from participants in the current study contrast Frankenberg's findings, as many discussed how their marginalization as women and feminist orientation contributed to viewing social justice work through an intersectional lens—they saw how disrupting one system of oppression would benefit all experiencing marginalization. This type of empathy is similar to what Reason et al. (2005) recommended in their study of the development of racial justice allies in encouraging action through viewing forms of injustice as interrelated.

The current context for the study may have also impacted how participants described empathy impacting motivation. George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020 and the subsequent spotlights on the continued killing of Black people by police impacted the frequency

of the conversations participants were having about their own White privilege. Participants also described how the increased attention to oppressive systems impacted their sense of urgency to do something to disrupt these systems. There was a wide range of responses in how participants were making sense of the political climate—for some, it was the first time they had really understood their own White privilege, and for others, it was a catalyst for deeper advocacy work and coalition building.

Chudy (2021) described being surprised by the reckoning they saw among White people in the summer of 2020, as it contrasted with their research about racial sympathy impacting political attitudes, which revealed a small percentage of White people actually cared about “every flavor of Black suffering from microaggression to physical altercations akin to what George Floyd faced” (Demby & Meraji, 2021, 13:28). As Chudy explored what was happening with White activists in summer of 2020, she did not necessarily find any definitive characteristics that impacted how White people were motivated by sympathy or guilt, except for higher levels of education (Chudy, 2021). Chudy’s findings are informative for understanding the current study—participants seemed to be further along in their understanding of their own White privilege and systems of oppression than the average White person due to their education and experiences.

Chudy’s (2021) research also presents pause to whether my study participants already had strong values related to social justice or if their education impacted how they were motivated by empathy. I would propose it was likely a both/and scenario, especially for the women in the study. Participants described their motivation to enter the student affairs profession largely due to a desire to help and mentor others, which is not surprising given the nature of education as a helping profession and the gendered nature of caretaking. Although classroom learning was

described with varying impacts, the higher education environment had direct connections to how they were motivated to disrupt Whiteness. Participants described how they better understood how they were socialized, were exposed to more diverse individuals than where they grew up, and had structured opportunities to learn and engage in their work environments.

### **The Problem With Striving to Be a “Good White Person”**

Empathy as motivation had a similar cycle for participants, as did their other emotions—one of action and inaction (Linder, 2015). Empathy and the sense of urgency to address racial injustice during the unique time frame of the study gives pause to consider how participants would be able to maintain this motivation or if they would have had the same motivation in a different sociopolitical context. Many of them recognized they had the luxury as White people to choose when they wanted to engage and, when considering how burnt out they were, it was hard to maintain their motivation, especially when considering the daunting task of dismantling systems of oppression. In this sense, participants could fall into the category of “fair weather allies” (Reason & Broido, 2005, p. 87) who only work against racism when convenient or easy.

### ***Insights From the Model of Racial Justice Allyship***

To avoid fair-weather allyship, participants would need to maintain their reflection about their own privilege and simultaneously challenge norms around Whiteness in their environment. As an aside, participants rarely, if ever, used the word ally, although much of what they described in terms of their goals aligns with how this concept has been described in the literature. The concept of allyship has been critiqued more recently due to what authors such as Reason and Broido (2005) described in terms of allyship being done for self-serving purposes. Although participants did not necessarily identify with the term, the model of racial justice allies (Reason



et al., 2005), when applied to the current study, provides excellent insight into the process participants engaged in while navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness.

Participants described how they were making sense of their own privilege and how systems of oppression were showing up in their work environments, and their educational and professional backgrounds gave them the language to describe the impact of Whiteness. This sense making aligns with the first step in becoming a racial justice ally, which is understanding privilege and racism at the intellectual level and how it affects everyday interactions (Reason et al., 2005). There is alignment between Reason et al.'s (2005) study and mine in terms of what facilitates the development of racial justice allies—deep relationships across racial groups, formal learning related to race and racism, and self-reflection on race.

### ***Socialization Into a Good/Bad Dichotomy***

Participants both explicitly and implicitly brought up their desire to be seen as good White people—they were defining this for themselves with things like doing social-justice-oriented work, confronting problematic individuals, or being seen as trustworthy to people of color. As they talked about their motivation to disrupt Whiteness, participants questioned if their motivation was coming from a place of wanting to benefit marginalized individuals or if it was self-serving. Participants also discussed wanting to avoid being performative in their activist work, citing social media and university responses to injustice as places where they saw this a problematic. There was a gendered element to being liked that was more nuanced in terms of how participants described it—this was more often connected to their desire to avoid conflict, gain promotion by being seen favorably by supervisors, or assuming marginalized individuals would, by default, see them as allies because of their past social justice work and shared experiences with oppression.

Participants described multiple ways in which they were socialized to view White people through a good/bad dichotomy. One way was generational differences they observed related to how their older family members defined themselves as good White people—these individuals often used a colorblind worldview to claim they were not racist or, in some cases, experienced reverse racism (Reason & Evans, 2007). This worldview is something participants understood was problematic and grounded in Whiteness but was also how many of them were raised—they never talked about race until college in most cases.

White privilege was generally the first concept participants were exposed to in formal spaces to learn about racism and, in this sense, their understanding was built on a good/bad distinction. For some, this good/bad orientation caused a denial of White privilege until much later in life, and for others, it presented a mirror for the type of White person they did not want to be (i.e., they could only be good or bad). How participants were socialized to understand White privilege is problematic in that it does not provide a helpful frame to understand, to disrupt Whiteness, they need be consistently reflecting on how they benefit from Whiteness while working to dismantle it (Cabrera et al., 2016; Reason et al., 2005).

In terms of their socialization into student affairs, the popularity of the term ally—especially in introductory social justice conversations—and the difficulty of allyship being an end goal for White people, rather than a continual process, is another area in which participants needed to combat a problematic frame to move toward more authentic antiracist work. Many of them expressed understanding there was not necessarily an end goal, but this knowledge was also shared in the context of social justice work being exhausting and hard to keep up—participants acknowledged it was hard to maintain consistency and momentum in this continual process.

### ***Individual Acts Aren't Enough***

Participants' focus on individual acts in their sphere of influence keeps their motivation focused on being good White people. They were striving to do what they could—which they felt was limited—in a system designed to maintain the status quo. This is not to say there is not value in these individual acts, especially as the need to support marginalized students is clear. Reason et al. (2005) discussed the importance of celebrating all levels of action when developing others as a racial justice allies—this idea aligns with a notion that doing something is certainly better than doing nothing. Robbins and Jones (2016) similarly found the White women in their study valued individual opportunities to learn over transformative action. However, the current study provided an explanation of why the focus was on these individual acts—work environments of participants were set up to maintain Whiteness, creating barriers to transformative action. However, some environments had elements described in the previous chapter such as supportive supervisors, clear mission and vision, and opportunities for coalition building that helped to transform individual acts into system disruption.

### **Contrasting Values and Reality in Student Affairs**

Participants described the context of student affairs, as it is situated in higher education, as impactful on their motivation to disrupt Whiteness. The environments participants described generally had a negative impact on their motivation to create change at work. There were elements in these environments—colleagues, supervisors, and opportunities to learn—that motivated participants, so there is still optimism for the potential to create change in the field. Although many of the observations participants shared were not unique to the experiences of White women, because White women dominate the profession—specifically in entry-level positions—it is important to consider the responsibility White women have for systemic change.

## **The Impact of Expectations on Motivation**

The way participants described their work environments illuminated their low expectations of systemic change occurring in their organizations. This low expectancy impacted their motivation to do work that would dismantle Whiteness, even though they inherently valued the work. Literature on teaching and learning is helpful to understand this phenomenon.

Ambrose et al. (2010) described how motivation can be broken down into two parts—how much we value a task and how much work we expect the task to be. Because participants viewed their environments and the people in them as resistant to change, they also expressed, if they were to engage in systemic disruption, it would be hard. They often felt like they were in it alone and questioned their reasons for doing this hard work if no one around them cared.

Connecting expectancy to motivation helps to understand why participants focused on individual acts through their sphere of influence. It was much easier for participants to know what to expect from this type of work and, as many of them described, it was not as difficult to “heal paper cuts” through making social justice a lens through which they viewed their own work. This expectancy also intersected with how participants understood their roles—as student affairs practitioners, they had a clear directive to support students, but as previously discussed, job descriptions do not exactly include dismantling systemic oppression. In this sense, participants expected creating broader change would be outside of the scope of their day job. Taking on what would be perceived as extra in a climate where they were already experiencing burnout was not something they could envision and impacted their motivation negatively. As women, participants were socialized to be conflict averse and this avoidance was magnified in the political environment of higher education, where relationships were prioritized over action.

Participants expected negative outcomes from being a disrupter, both due to their gender and from the environment, which was demotivating.

### **Inclusion as a Value, Whiteness as the Reality**

Participants described understanding inclusion was a value of the profession, one that connected to their socialization into the field and messaging from their institutions. Even at institutions where values around diversity and inclusion were explicitly stated, Whiteness and White supremacy were still the reality related to who held power, maintenance of power structures, conflict avoidance, notions of perfectionism, and a focus on individuals rather than systems (Cabrera, 2012; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Jones & Okun, 2001). This observation aligns with what Harper and Hurtado (2007) described about Whiteness as the norm that structures institutions. There were also elements of what Cabrera et al. (2016) described as feedback loops—where Whiteness is frequently reinforced as White people become defensive when it is pointed out and named.

Student affairs has multiple robust professional associations that provide a foundation for the values of the profession. However, it is unclear what the impact of those values, specifically those related to equity and inclusion, have in practice. The environments participants described seem to indicate student affairs as a subculture of higher education has not been able to impact structures in a systemic way—professionals are generally only able to support individuals in moving through the oppressive system. The focus on individuals maintains Whiteness and keeps the focus on the self (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2016). Participants described their sphere of influence as individual impact—they focused on “what could I do?” rather than “what could we do?”

Student affairs practitioners have the language to perform—they know the words to use and what they are supposed to do to display inclusion as a value. An example is using land acknowledgements—formal statements recognizing Indigenous People as traditional stewards of land and that seek to honor those individuals who were living and working on prior settlers arriving—at the beginning of presentations. One participant did not have a traditional student affairs background and, though she expressed similar sentiments and awareness to the rest of the participants, she did not have the same shared language. The importance of shared language came up in the focus group, as she acknowledged she did not know the words or context others were using, such as BIPOC, intersectionality, and abolition, among others. This observation also points out another problem with socialization in student affairs—individuals with degrees or training in student affairs are only a small portion of those working with students on college campuses, which creates an environment where many are focused on the language used—such as the debate about the word ally or using POC v. BIPOC—rather than enacting change. One participant described how student affairs professionals are guilty of “cancel culture” in that there is little forgiveness for individuals when the wrong thing is said due to a focus on a correct set of language and performative actions. This trend creates a focus on policing individuals, rather than directing that energy toward action that dismantles systems.

In response to ongoing racial injustice, there have been attempts to set values that move from inclusion to an antiracist approach. One such example is ACPA’s (College Student Educators International) Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization, which focuses on “reducing the oppression of communities of color at the intersections of their identities knowing that all of our oppressions are linked and that the work is ongoing.” (ACPA, 2019, para. 1). Although ACPA’s messaging clearly articulates an antiracist approach and sets a

clear priority for the association, a question remains regarding the impact it would have on practitioners, especially those in entry-level roles.

Engaging with professional associations can often be seen as optional and requires financial resources for engagement that are not always accessible to all—especially entry-level staff. This type of engagement also keeps the focus on individual acts, allowing for oppressive systems to be maintained. This critique is not to say associations should not attempt to make bold statements as ACPA has done, which goes back to how expectations impact motivation. If practitioners see associations are committed to antiracist work, it may provide motivation for them to do that work in their own practice. A similar sentiment was expressed by participants in that having strong values related to social justice in their institutions or departments.

### **The Impact or Lack Thereof of Supervisors**

Participants articulated a clear impact their direct supervisors had on their motivation to disrupt Whiteness. This impact occurred in setting the tone for social justice work as a priority and in reflective conversations, encouragement to engage in professional development, and direct feedback when mistakes were made. Student affairs literature has described the importance of ongoing competency development (Renn & Jessup Anger, 2008), yet this intentional support was generally lacking among study participants. Sometimes supervisors even contributed to apathy or a lack of motivation to do social justice work. The few who described impactful supervisors reaffirmed their importance in supporting ongoing development in areas described in the literature such as application of theory to practice, critical thinking, and self-reflection (Dickerson et al., 2011).

The way one participant described her supervisor was powerful—she shared her supervisor made it clear in her interview, if she was going to be working with her, she “was

going to be doing social justice work.” This promise was followed through on with action—her supervisor (a woman of color) had her read *Teachings for Diversity and Social Justice* when she started the job and had consistent conversations and challenge related to her privilege and positionality as a White woman. I share this example because it was an outlier among participants—many described how they knew inclusion was a value in student affairs, but this value was generally not communicated as a priority from direct supervisors as day-to-day tasks and problems took precedence.

Student affairs literature has described supervisors as having an important role to help entry-level professionals navigate culture, context, politics, and relationships (Gansemer-Topf & Rider, 2017). This type of support was rarely discussed by participants, as their direct supervisors—many of whom were also White women—were often described as struggling to navigate their environments due to power dynamics and resistance to change. There were times when supervisors did help participants transform individual acts into systemic disruption by helping them navigate bureaucracy to get buy-in or building coalitions to create sustainable change. More often, though, participants did not describe a supervisor who was effective in supporting systemic disruption. This reality kept participants feeling stuck in their sphere of influence, viewing institutional politics and power dynamics as barriers to meaningful change.

Participants needed more individuals with whom they could have open conversations about navigating Whiteness and the unique intersection of their identities. One described how she was looking for “White women mentors” to help her understand how to do social justice work in a way that was not performative or only done when convenient. Another described in the focus group how “letting [herself] be vulnerable [had] been really helpful” and recommended to others to seek out “somebody who gets it, gets the political-ness of the environment, gets the



infrastructures . . . that are barriers.” She added, “Maybe they’re not directly in your office or functional area ,but I hope you all have that ability [to find that person].” This need aligns with what Robbins (2012) recommended for graduate preparation programs to encourage White women to have conversations about race with role models and mentors—acknowledging this support should not end when full-time employment begins. Reason et al. (2005) recommended that White student affairs practitioners serve as role models to undergraduate students on racial justice allyship. In addition, White practitioners are also needed as role models for each other—both among entry-level professionals and in advancing leadership roles. The notion of learning through interpersonal, rather than impersonal, relationships resonates with Baxter Magolda’s (1992) findings related to how women develop knowledge and may point to insights in how this acquisition differs from their male counterparts. Almost all participants described the research process as motivating by engaging in conversations with others—both myself and other participants in the focus group—who cared about doing something with our White privilege.

### **Making Sense of the Intersection of Identities**

Participants described multiple components related to their unique intersection of identities that impacted how they navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness. There were patterns and divergences in how the women in the study described their identities as feminists and how they were making sense of their White privilege combined with marginalization they experienced as women. Relevant literature helps make sense of the narratives participants shared and illuminates gaps that exist in the current discourse around White identity development. Much of the literature that informed the study compartmentalized understanding identity development; however, I attempt to draw from existing scholarship to make sense of the findings.

## **Internalization and Integration**

Congruent with White racial identity development models (Hardiman, 2001), participants often viewed their commitment to disrupting Whiteness with an end goal of internalization, whereby they understood race and racism and could integrate that understanding into action. Participants generally acknowledged there was no end to their own learning process—they were constantly having to evaluate their own privilege and consider how it impacted their actions. Participants generally recognized a finite end goal reinforced the fact there is a state where a “good White person” is done thinking about their own privilege and role in systems—although they struggled to make sense of the continual effort needed without such an end state. Acknowledging that, integration is another status used by White racial identity development (WRID) models (Rowe et al., 1994) that resonated with participant narratives—this status was described by a focus on engaging in the process, rather than a state of self-actualization. The way participants were engaged in the process, as described by Rowe et al., helps explain the integrative type status was not an end goal, as described by other White identity development models, but rather a process.

Participant narratives toggled back and forth between integration and the precursor reactive status of the White racial consciousness statuses (WRCS) model, which discusses White people’s desire to “appear knowledgeable in conversation with one’s minority contacts” (Rowe et al., 1994, p. 140). They were focused on having the right language to discuss race and racism and were afraid of saying the wrong thing. This description also resonates with the notion White student affairs professionals are generally socialized to say the right thing and are hyper-focused on calling out others when they use what might be perceived as incorrect language to discuss identity and systems of oppression. Individuals in this state would be the performative White

people of whom participants were critical but also worried they might be, as their narratives illuminated they were often trapped in this stage. They were fearful of actualizing tropes such as appearing to be a White savior, yet they often got stuck in emotions such as guilt and shame that did not allow them to move to a more integrative status.

The WRCS (Rowe et al., 1994) model is a useful tool to support the narrative analysis for the study because it helps make sense of how participants moved through their development based upon environment and experiences. The unique timeframe of the study occurring during the COVID-19 global pandemic as it intersected with a spotlight on racial injustice in 2020 gave a specific context for the study, where the participants had shared experiences—what the model describes as a “social condition.” This social condition was a catalyst for development (Rowe et al., 1994). Individual experiences in which dissonance occurs also prompt development in the context of the model. This frame helps to make sense of patterns and divergences in participants’ development. The social context they were experiencing was intensely similar, yet their individual interactions diverged in their environments to create a unique sense of self.

### **Consciousness of a “One Up/One Down Identity”**

Participants also described how they had a better lens to reflect on privilege due to their own marginalization as women and other marginalized identities they held. This reflection often manifested as the empathy previously described. Others described how this empathy was also an opportunity to reflect on ways, as a White person, they could be oppressing someone else, as they understood how they were being oppressed by a system that privileged men. This simultaneous awareness of how they were both privileged and marginalized fits with what Accapadi (2007) described as a one up/one down identity—they toggled back and forth between identifying as privileged with their White identity and identifying with their marginalized

identity as a woman. There was an impact when participants sat with what the intersection of what their identity meant—what did it mean to be White and a woman? The best way participants were able to make sense of this intersection of identities was by comparing their experiences to those of women of color.

### *Advocating Feminism*

Reflecting on how their experiences as White women differed from women of color was foundational for participants to develop a critical consciousness that considered the intersection of race and gender in oppression (Collins, 1990). hooks (1984) suggested individuals move from claiming, “I am a feminist,” to stating they “advocate feminism” to avoid creating exclusionary ideas and allow for advocacy across intersections of identity groups. This more nuanced version of feminism that allows for coalition building across difference (Dill & Zambrana, 2007) was a powerful notion participants described in terms of how their activism was grounded in their feminist orientation.

The participants’ feminist identities grounded their motivation to disrupt oppressive systems when they could see how interconnected domains of power and oppression were operating in their lives (Dill & Zambrana, 2007) and is one area in which White women are perhaps unique from their male counterparts. Developing this consciousness, specifically independent of external comparisons, was not easy. Participants had been socialized to understand themselves in compartmentalized ways, which generally detracted from their ability to engage in authentic activist work, as this awareness made sense of identity without consideration of the impact of intersecting power structures.

## **External Meaning Making**

The participants in the study did not have the frame to reflect on the unique intersection of their identities without comparing themselves to other groups, most specifically women of color. One of the most impactful experiences participants described was learning from and with women of color—doing so consistently deepened their empathy and motivation compared to participants who did not have such relationships from which to draw. This limitation is congruent with how White identity development models are grounded in exploring how White people develop attitudes toward non-White racial groups (Miller & Fellows, 2007; Rowe et al., 1994). This framing does not provide a lens for White people to explore their identity independently of other racial groups (Hardiman, 2001; Rowe et al., 1994; Sabnani et al., 1991).

The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (RMMDI; Jones & Abes, 2013) resonates strongly with how I made sense of participant narratives in the context of environments and relationships. In particular, the model describes how individuals filter context—such as peers, norms, and sociopolitical conditions—through meaning making as they develop their sense of multiple, intersecting identities. This model provides a tool to acknowledge the impact of context for the study, and the meaning making filter allows for an understanding of how the socialization participants had as White women and student affairs practitioners impacted how they perceived their multiple identity dimensions. Applying the RMMDI to participants' narratives provides an opportunity to understand capacity for internal meaning making as they develop their sense of multiple, intersecting.

As I reflected on participant narratives, how they made meaning of their identities was largely externally defined—both due to the context of the study and their socialization. Specifically, in the context of the study, they were developing consciousness through experience,

both in their own lives and through media depictions, learning about how racism was negatively impacting people of color. Learning about the pain Whiteness was causing others was how participants were making sense of their own identities, and subsequent privilege and oppression, as White women. Learning through the experience of others left their meaning making reliant on comparisons to people of color, rather than an internal definition of their own identities grounded in systems of power and oppression. Without a more systemic lens to make sense of their identities in power structures, participants were limited by how they had been socialized in understanding their identities and generally viewed race and gender as two separate rather than integrated parts.

Although many participants had developed a more intersectional understanding of feminism, how they were socialized to understand gender came from a place that was single issue focused (Luft, 2009), and it was not salient to participants how their White identity was “braided” with gender as it might have been with marginalized identities such as religion, sexuality, or ability (Jones, 2007). Their socialization as student affairs practitioners also provided expectations on how they should act as entry-level professionals to obtain positive performance reviews or supervisor approval, which generally prompted them to be risk averse in disrupting Whiteness. This external meaning making is disconcerting for multiple reasons. It relies on learning from the pain of others and is situational—if they had not been exposed to diverse individuals or if injustice had not dominated the national narrative, participants may not have had the same depth of development.

As student affairs professionals, they fell into traps worrying about what others thought of them, which combined with a desire to be seen as a good White person, created an environment encouraging performative action and lacking in facilitating real change. I am

concerned they would revert to defining themselves through a lens of what it means to be a good White person—relying on individual conceptualizations of privilege, rather than understanding their unique intersection of identities in the context of oppressive power structures. If participants continue to rely on external factors to make meaning of their identities, they may not sustain the consciousness they have developed, which resonates with earlier discussion of White people as fair-weather allies and motivation being connected to wanting to be seen as good White people. Specifically, as Chudy (2021) described, in the current sociopolitical context, enthusiasm among White people to do racial justice work seems to be fading quickly. As context changes, it leaves a question of how participants would use external definitions to make meaning of their identities.

There were varying levels of how much impact external factors had on their meaning making, however. Participants who described a more complex journey with their development had fewer elements of external definition—for example, Violet challenged the individual narrative on White women’s tears in favor of a focus on the systemic way White women’s safety is prioritized. Participants also applied their own critical understanding of power structures to how they were making sense of their identities—Summer described how she was both upholding and hurting from problematic workplace norms that were grounded in White supremacy. It was by making meaning through a lens that included power structures individuals could make sense of their identities in a way that was not bound by external factors—they had begun to understand the reality of how a system of oppression impacted who held power in society (Jones & Stewart, 2016). There is not an explicit integration of power structures in the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013); however, the authors recommended an application of critical lenses that takes into account how individuals make sense of their unique intersections of identity in the context of power structures.

## Now What?

As I conclude the chapter, I provide a brief synthesis of recommendations for scholarship and practice that emerged as they connect to the prior discussion of findings, keeping in mind the multiple audiences I had in mind for the study—including the participants, myself, and student affairs scholars and practitioners. As I made sense of the findings, I reflected on how things we often recommend for our students we do not practice ourselves. The same can be said for how leaders in student affairs, such as myself, can role model practices that motivate entry-level professionals to disrupt Whiteness and, in turn, change their expectations around social justice work. Student affairs practitioners can also do some internal reflecting on how the language used in the profession to have these important conversations may not be accessible to partners in the higher education environment. Expanding the conversation to be more accessible may build more momentum for changing the system among a coalition of individuals. As a scholar practitioner who supervises entry-level professionals, I can envision what taking action with this new knowledge would look like in practice and am enthusiastic about the potential for further conversation related to the research findings. Recommendations for practice included in this section can address barriers to disrupting Whiteness that emerged from participant narratives such as power structures, expectancy, sphere of influence, and burnout.

Findings from the study illuminate areas where related literature—specifically around identity development, White privilege, and White fragility—can be deepened to support White women making meaning about their multiple, intersecting identities through a lens that includes power dynamics. Because student affairs is a practice-based field, deepening the complexity of meaning making has direct impact on practice—specifically how entry-level, White women navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness at work. I summarize the recommendations,



integrating a discussion of scholarship in the context of student affairs, acknowledging the emotions and empathy that were a prominent theme of the study make these recommendations specifically relevant to entry-level White women student affairs practitioners. However, I envision these recommendations would also serve to benefit the profession and individuals in it more broadly.

### **Reframing White Fragility**

Cabrera (2017) offered a critique and reframing of White privilege I recommend be applied to the conversation around White fragility based upon how participants described their own understanding of and experience with the concept. Cabrera's critique and that offered by others (Applebaum, 2010; Lensmire et al., 2013; Leonardo, 2004) described how the narrative about White privilege has focused on individual acknowledgement of privilege, which allows for an easier dismissal of aspects White people believe do not speak to their own experience. These insights are impactful for how I understand the need to shift how White people understand their identity from a place of individual responsibility to one that acknowledges power structures.

The White immunity frame provides a model to reconsider how White people understand emotions generally categorized as White fragility, which Cabrera (2017) illuminated were frequently a barrier for White women to do authentic social justice work. This reframing would situate emotions in the context of the system of Whiteness. Participants acknowledged emotions were natural and their reactions were not likely going to go away as long as Whiteness was still the dominant system in society—it was the process of how they made sense of these feelings in the context of power structures they could control. Reframing the conversation about White fragility and associated emotions, like White women's tears, shifts this narrative from policing individuals to a process that acknowledges the impact of emotions in a systemic context. This is

one area in which student affairs practitioners have an opportunity to create more disruption—as they are starting from a place of greater awareness due to education and experience that allows for the conversation to shift from problematic individuals to changing systems.

### **Applying a Critical Lens**

An additional recommendation for scholarship is to apply a critical lens to identity development theories, specifically those that address White identity, and provide additional education around these critical theories so they can be applied appropriately to deepen complexity of internal meaning making (Jones & Abes, 2013). This idea builds from the recommendation to situate foundational concepts like White privilege and White fragility in power structures to acknowledge how systems impact individual experiences of power and oppression. Applying critical lenses to models that acknowledge context, like the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013) is an excellent starting point to understand how individuals are making sense of their multiple, intersecting identities in power structures. Jones and Abes (2013) acknowledged the “context in which identities are situated is laden with inequitable power structures, resulting in privilege and oppression” (p. 113). Specific applications for White people are important to allow privileged individuals to engage in internal meaning making rather than relying on sense making through external sources, such as the experiences of people of color. This application is challenging, as there is no one-size-fits-all way of doing this critical analysis. For example, applying tenets from intersectionality provides a helpful systemic lens to understand how the experiences White women and women of color diverge, but applying intersectionality as a critical lens to understand individual experiences of White people misses the mark in terms of how the framework is intended to be used.

### ***Critical Approaches in Practice***

Student affairs preparation programs and subsequent competency development should spend more time exploring critical approaches so that individuals, specifically White people, are better prepared to apply these perspectives. Because Whiteness is invisible in society, addressing critical approaches that can analyze Whiteness is important to illuminate the systemic ways in which it operates. Individuals with marginalized identities are generally much more aware of how systems of oppression impact their lived experiences. For White women, having a lens to make sense of how their White privilege is situated in a system of White supremacy is important, as they have likely been living with and understood sexism long before attending graduate school. Applying power as a critical lens to discuss identity development can assist White women with an internal sense making of the unearned power they have, regardless of their experiences with sexism. Coordinators of student affairs graduate programs need to reconsider how they talk about identity in the context of power structures and consider how they can facilitate the continual process of self-reflection and action that exemplify antiracist orientation.

### **Enhancing Professional Development**

A consistent approach for professional development is an essential recommendation that can be implemented in student affairs environments. Additional structure for how to develop professional competency related to antiracist work can combine the need for simultaneous reflection and action and builds off recommendations to reconceptualize understanding of White privilege, White fragility, and White identity from a systemic perspective. Proactive development and action around equity and inclusion aspire to disrupt how change is often only proposed when an activating event occurs. This recommendation also addresses the importance of supervisors and mentors around recognizing and dismantling Whiteness, as when participants

were encouraged by their supervisors to follow through with acts of disruption, they felt more confident in their ability to create lasting change. Integrating clear expectations around professional development, specifically related to disrupting problematic systems such as Whiteness, embeds this work as part of student affairs practice rather than something extra. It would be especially impactful for White women to serve as mentors and role models to other White women, both in and outside of formal hierarchies, shifting expectations around how this work can be actualized.

Professional associations and researchers that produce literature related to competencies need to integrate direction for how to develop competency, both for supervisors and individuals, specifically related to skill development around equity and inclusion, often referred to as multicultural competency. As competency literature is often focused on entry-level professionals, further development of these tools to include how to develop competency, rather than just what defines it, has the potential to make a significant impact on the largest group of professionals in the field, many of whom are White women. Better professional development tools that emphasize equity work as essential to student affairs roles can make this mentoring process easier to implement for supervisors as part of work expectations, rather than being seen as something extra, which can mitigate how doing activist work contributes to burnout and in turn increase motivation to disrupt Whiteness. Increased structure for professional development, a recommendation participants offered in focus groups, is an opportunity to create sustainable action and build on ongoing learning opportunities, rather than one-off conversations that are often reactive and retraumatizing to minoritized groups.

Reframing White privilege and White fragility in a way that grounds these concepts in power structures to facilitate self-reflection in tandem with action is critical to push learning

outside of comfort zones. Although models of allyship and the “knapsack” analogy of White privilege are easily digestible for White people, these conversations also allow for maintenance of comfort in avoiding learning about how Whiteness and White supremacy create White privilege and injustices necessitating allies. Generally, participants were exposed to concepts of White privilege and allyship in diversity trainings during their undergraduate years, likely led by entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women due to their dominance in the profession. Practitioners could both enhance their own advocacy work and the learning of others by bringing this reconceptualization into their own practice—in essence changing the cycle of socialization of student affairs practitioners. This reconceptualization aligns with the recommendation Reason et al. (2005) shared the responsibility of White student affairs professionals is to both foster racial justice allyship among undergraduate students and role model action.

### **Coalition Building**

Leaders in student affairs units can facilitate coalition building—an insight into which participants themselves offered—to create change outside of their spheres of influence. Coalition building could actualize in a variety of formats, and barriers to disrupting Whiteness such as power dynamics and expectancy could be addressed. These groups can also provide opportunities for entry-level staff to have a seat at the table when change is proposed and facilitate coalition building across different stakeholders if groups comprise staff from across departments or campus.

White caucuses or White accountability groups were examples of such coalitions participants described as motivating—it was meaningful to be in a space with others with shared identities they knew cared. White women at higher levels in organizations should lead and

participate in these groups, ideally across departments or functional areas, to role model self-reflection and an activist orientation. Participation in difficult conversations by leadership allows entry-level staff to see this work is possible in the systemic barriers of the higher education environment.

Coalitions across shared purposes that include individuals across identities are another recommendation for practice. Higher education professionals are often guilty of doing work in silos, and identifying areas where collaboration can occur to address systemic issues is one way to use resources more effectively. An effective coalition will break the mold of typical student affairs committees, which are often used as a performative measure to address hot topics, yet outcomes lack any systemic impact. It would be important for coalitions to have a clear charge for action and be established in an environment that is open to uncomfortable conversations related to oppressive systems (Iverson, 2012; Watt, 2015). Those with power in organizations can role model what an effective coalition might look like in practice—addressing power dynamics and welcoming discourse. Setting this type of tone would contribute to a paradigm shift (Pope et al., 2019) that models change is possible and shifts expectations that in turn can impact motivation and action (Ambrose et al., 2010).

### **Researcher Reflections: Limitations and Strengths**

There were two specific areas—context and my subjectivity as White woman and student affairs practitioner—that prompted insight into the strengths and limitations of the study, some of which overlapped. The temporal context for the study—during the COVID-19 global pandemic and ongoing racial injustice—was critical in shaping how participants were making sense of their unique intersections of identity and in turn how this impacted their motivation to disrupt Whiteness. This context was not a limitation, but rather a reality of the study that cannot be

ignored—a different sociopolitical climate may have facilitated different meaning making processes (Jones & Abes, 2013; Rowe et al., 1994). My subjectivity as a researcher shaped how I approached all aspects of the study—both in my role as a student affairs practitioner and a White woman. There were both benefits and limitations to this subjectivity, specifically around the identity I shared with the participants as a White woman and student affairs professional. The importance of both areas highlights how the study is unique and leaves unanswered questions that could be addressed in future research.

As mentioned throughout the chapter, the context for the study was particularly unique with the intersection of the COVID-19 global pandemic and ongoing racial injustice. Literature supports the importance of context (Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & Stewart, 2016), and as I analyzed the data, it was apparent that the timing of the study played a large role in how participants were navigating, maintaining, and disrupting Whiteness as entry-level White women student affairs practitioners. Participants had more time to think about their role in promoting racial justice during periods of isolation, and the national climate and specific environment in higher education and student affairs placed a spotlight on activist work, placing this work as something participants aspired to do. Context also shaped the conversation about disrupting Whiteness largely around a Black/White dichotomy, as murders of Black individuals had gained significant attention beginning in the summer of 2020. Although research questions did not specifically ask about anti-Blackness, these particular injustices were at the forefront of participant reflections, and their motivation was greatly impacted by the empathy they described toward colleagues and friends of color. As a researcher I only scratched the surface of how participants understood Whiteness as the cause of oppression for other identity groups and how

this impacted their motivation. The context for the study greatly impacted the meaning making process—both for participants and for myself as a researcher.

My subjectivity as a researcher shaped all aspects of the study and provided some strengths and prompted questions about how I was maintaining Whiteness, even while conducting the study. A benefit to having shared identities with participants was rapport building was generally easy, and most participants described the interviews and focus group as spaces where they felt comfortable and open to sharing about themselves due to my identity as a White woman. Shared experiences working in student affairs, specifically during the COVID-19 global pandemic, also allowed for me to connect with participants. Participants also described how having conversations about Whiteness with other White women—me and other participants—was motivating. Though the research process was not intended to be action oriented, it facilitated ongoing reflection and development for participants and provided community in which to see others cared about this work, aligning with findings from the study about areas where student affairs can be more intentional with supporting entry-level, White women in student affairs.

As I was conducting interviews, I also reflected on how my shared identity with these other White women impacted the framing of the research questions. I acknowledged, both during the study and as I did my analysis, for some participants, I reframed the questions when I felt they were not prepared to go deeper or did not have the shared academic language to discuss the research topics. My intent was to keep the space as one where participants felt comfortable sharing further with me, rather than shutting them down, and to be mindful of using academic language that was not accessible. I did not set out to critique individuals as part of the study; however, I wondered if I was unintentionally allowing individuals (and myself) to maintain comfort. As I analyzed interview transcripts, I noted it felt more challenging to discuss



Whiteness with participants who had less exposure to these topics during the interviews, but their responses often elicited deeper insight than those of individuals who had been socialized with the right language around diversity and social justice. These reflections left me with some unanswered questions that could be addressed in future research.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The study generated many additional questions to explore and provided insight into additional lenses through which I could analyze participants' narratives. The impact of context, understanding how motivation connects to a sustained commitment to action, and a deeper application of the RMMDI through critical lenses are areas that could be explored further. Additionally, a specific examination of practice-based elements that are part of the recommendations for the study such as coalition building, White caucus groups, supervisors and mentors, and professional development would be insightful for a more nuanced understanding of how these elements impact motivation to disrupt Whiteness.

The impact of context is also worth exploring further. Such exploration could be through a similar study with a different participant group to understand how the evolution of sociopolitical context impacts motivation to disrupt Whiteness. It would also help illuminate the impact of context to revisit conversations with the same participant group to understand how they have maintained (or not) their commitment to disrupt Whiteness as context and environments changed. Context would also change as participants advanced in the profession, and it would be insightful to engage in a longitudinal study or sustained follow-up with participants to assess what happens when they become midlevel managers or change environments.

Conducting research with White women who are midlevel managers would be interesting to further understand the impact positional power has on disrupting Whiteness as it intersects with their identities. Multiple participants were job searching during the study—doing some follow up with these individuals to understand the impact changing environments had on their motivation to disrupt Whiteness and subsequent action would continue to deepen the understanding of context on meaning making and identity development. Multiple other researchers (e.g., Linder, 2011; Robbins, 2012) have recommended studying White women in a longitudinal way, but those recommendations have not yet actualized into scholarship.

A re-analysis of the data using the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013) and critical research orientations to develop a grounded theory for White women would also be an exciting new direction for this area of research. This type of analysis is not what I intended for the study; however, as I made sense of the narratives, this model became an excellent tool to make sense of what is unique about entry-level White women student affairs practitioners. I was only able to scratch the surface of using this model for analysis as part of this research. Using the RMMDI would also assist in illuminating the impact of context through a critical research orientation. Developing a grounded theory through applying the RMMDI would also meet some of the recommendations stemming from the research by giving White women a model to better understand their unique identity development processes that is both situated in power structures and does not rely on women of color for external meaning making.

Lastly, a more focused study that digs into the impact of practice-based elements that are part of the study recommendations would assist in understanding how these recommendations enhance motivation to disrupt Whiteness and in turn contribute to systemic change in student affairs and higher education environments. Two specific areas stand out as future research

opportunities: (a) White accountability groups as a type of coalition building and (b) professional development. A deeper look at White accountability groups would help illuminate the impact of these spaces for White women student affairs professionals—analyzing if the processing they provide contribute to the antiracist action they seek to actualize or if they merely allow for participants to sit with the emotions that trap them. Analyzing motivation to disrupt Whiteness through the lens of professional development would provide greater insight into the impact supervisors and mentors have on the motivation of entry-level professionals to do social justice work and build understanding of how sense making of the unique multiple identities individuals possess integrates with their professional identity and competency development.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I explained the research findings related to relevant literature and the student affairs context. Specifically, I highlighted how a focus on individuals is problematic and allows for Whiteness to be maintained. As participants in the study struggled to navigate through their emotions due to how they had been socialized, both as women and student affairs practitioners, I recommended reframing discussions of White privilege and emotions associated with White fragility to ground them in understanding of power structures. I proposed this reframing would situate emotions in the context of Whiteness and move the conversation from individual critique toward systemic disruption. Additionally, I highlighted the need to apply critical approaches to understand how individuals are making sense of multiple, intersecting identities. I shared how this approach would help White women understand how Whiteness operates in their lives without having to use external sources for meaning making.

In terms of implications for practice, I highlighted the need for additional guidance for professional development and the importance of coalition building as ways to address themes

from the study such as power structures, expectancy, sphere of influence, and burnout, which were barriers to disrupting Whiteness. I suggested practitioners apply to their own practice and leadership a reframing of White privilege and White fragility to account for power structures to engage in self-work done in tandem with action to disrupt systems. I proposed both practitioners and student affairs graduate programs could change the cycle of socialization of entry-level professionals by integrating these recommendations into scholarship and practice.

I reflected on some strengths and limitations of the study, in relation to the study context and my shared identities with the research participants. The study context was unexpected when I initially proposed the study; however, it greatly impacted how participants made meaning of their unique intersection of identities as they navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness. My shared identities with participants were both a strength in building rapport and enhancing motivation and limitation in how I maintained Whiteness in allowing participants (and myself) to remain comfortable in our conversations.

Lastly, I outlined implications for future research. I described how it would be impactful to deepen the understanding of how context impacts meaning making for entry-level White women. I proposed conducting a similar study in a different sociopolitical context, as the timing for the research was especially unique due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and ongoing racial injustice. Additionally, I shared how a longitudinal look at this group would provide insight into how their meaning making process may shift as they transition environments and/or advance in the profession. I recommended a goal for future research include a re-analysis of the study, specifically using the RMMDI model to develop a grounded theory to make sense of the unique intersection of identities of participants in the context of power structures. Finally, I shared how

a deliberative look at practice-based recommendations, such as professional development and White caucus groups, would be impactful.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment E-Mail to Share with Prospective Participants

Hello!

Happy New Year! I hope this message finds you taking good care. I am in the process of recruiting participants for my dissertation research. The purpose of my research study is to understand how entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women, navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. I would be grateful if you would share the below message, which includes an initial interest survey, with anyone in your network that may meet the criteria. If you are interested in participating, you are also invited to complete the survey below.

Please reach out with any questions! Thank you!

Julia

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Hello!

My name is Julia Ailes and I am currently a doctoral candidate in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University Bloomington. I am writing to solicit participants for my dissertation research. The purpose of my research study is to understand how entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women, navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. Through this study I hope to understand the motivation for White women to disrupt Whiteness, specifically within their work environments. I would like to ask for your participation in my dissertation research study and/or your assistance in sharing my email with those that you know who meet the outlined criteria.

A little bit about me and why I chose this topic. I identify as a White woman and have over 10 years of experience as a practitioner in student affairs. My particular interest in this topic arose from observing how the salience of the marginalization that women experience prevented White women from acknowledging their racial privilege. As student affairs and higher education promotes social justice as a value and White women make up a large percentage of student affairs professionals, I am interested to understand how this population views their role in disrupting Whiteness, i.e., enacting racial justice.

If you self-identify as a White woman and are currently an entry level professional in the field of student affairs, then I invite you to express your interest in participating in this study by completing the initial interest survey at the end of this e-mail. For the purposes of this study, an entry level professional is defined as a master's level new professional who is in their first full time staff with 5 or fewer years of experience. I seek a diverse sample for this research study, including participant's geographic location, functional area, institution and institution type, and social identities (i.e. ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation, religion, social class, and ability).

If selected for the research study, I will ask you to participate in two 90-minute interviews, conducted via Zoom or phone, as well as participate in a focus group with other participants.

These interviews would take place in the first half of 2021. Participants will also participate in reflective journaling as part of the interview process. Participation would be confidential, and all participants would be asked to provide a pseudonym for the study. More information is provided on the initial interest form.

By submitting your interest for this research study, you have the opportunity to both contribute to new understanding in student affairs and higher education and engage in critical self-reflection regarding your own identities.

Interested individuals can complete the initial interest survey here:  
<https://iu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/xxxxx>.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, [jjoshel@indiana.edu](mailto:jjoshel@indiana.edu), or my faculty advisor, Dr. Tom Nelson Laird, [xxxxx@indiana.edu](mailto:xxxxx@indiana.edu).

Take care,

Julia

Julia Ailes  
Doctoral Candidate  
Higher Education and Student Affairs, Indiana University Bloomington  
[xxxxx@indiana.edu](mailto:xxxxx@indiana.edu)

## Appendix B: Initial Interest Survey

### **Initial Interest Form: Motivation to Disrupt Whiteness in White Women Entry Level SA Professionals**

Q25 Hello and thank you so much for your interest in participating in this study!

#### **About me and this study**

I am currently a doctoral candidate in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University Bloomington. The purpose of my research study is to understand how entry-level student affairs professionals who identify as White women, navigate, maintain, and disrupt Whiteness. Through this study I hope to understand the motivation for White women to disrupt Whiteness, specifically within their work environments.

#### **About this form**

The purpose of this survey is to collect some initial information about you. It should take no more than 10 minutes to complete the survey. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, not all those who complete the survey will be selected to participate in the study.

#### **If selected**

I will ask you to participate in two 90 minute interviews, conducted via Zoom or phone, as well as participate in a focus group with other participants. These interviews would take place in the winter and spring of 2021. Participants will also participate in reflective journaling as part of the interview process.

#### **Informed consent**

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Indiana University Bloomington 2010523661. If selected to participate in this study the information you provide will be shared in aggregate or with a pseudonym. To learn more about the rights of participants, you can view the consent form [here](#).

Additional information will be shared if you are selected to participate.

Q24 Please answer the following questions. The survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Q1 Full Name (First and Last)

---

Q2 E-Mail Address

---



Q16 I have a master's degree in higher education, student affairs, or related field.

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q17 From what institution did you receive your master's degree?

---

Q23 What year did you receive your master's degree? Please indicate year in the form XXXX.

---

Q4 For how many years have you worked FULL TIME in higher education/student affairs?

---

Q5 What is the name of your current institution/employer?

---

Q15 Understanding that individuals have many dimensions of identities to consider, do you consider yourself a White woman?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q18 Where did you spend the majority of your childhood years (city, state, country if outside the United States)? Please list locations where you lived for more than 1 year.

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Q20 From what college or university did you receive your bachelor's degree?

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Q22 What year did you receive your bachelor's degree? Please indicate year in the form XXXX.

---

Q6 How would you describe yourself in relation to the following areas of social identity? This information is optional to provide, any information shared will be utilized to build an inclusive sample for the research study.

Q7 Race

---

Q8 Ethnicity

---

Q9 Sexual Orientation

---

Q10 Social Class

---

Q11 Religion

---

Q12 Ability

---

Q13 Gender

---

Q14 Anything else you would like to share about your salient social identities not listed above.

---

Q26 Anything else you would like to share about personal identities that are important to you? (i.e. being a parent, a non-traditional college student, a veteran, etc.).

---

Q27 Thank you for completing this survey! I will be in touch with you soon regarding your interest in my research study. If you have any questions in the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me at [xxxxx@indiana.edu](mailto:xxxxx@indiana.edu). Additionally, you can contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Tom Nelson Laird, at [xxxxx@indiana.edu](mailto:xxxxx@indiana.edu).

## Appendix C: Interview Protocols

### Interview One: White Privilege, White Fragility, Whiteness

#### Possible Interview Questions and Topics

[Prior to interview, introduce myself, review human subjects consent, ask if participant has any questions, share that I will be recording interview]

- Rapport Building
  - Thank you for agreeing to participate.
  - Ask rapport building question(s) based on initial interest survey.
  - Tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey within student affairs.
  - Can you tell me about what prompted your interest in participating in the study?
- White Privilege
  - We're going to be talking about privilege related your social identities. Tell me about how you understand these terms (privilege and social identity).
  - Tell me about what social identity (or identities) was most salient for you as a young person?
    - How did that evolve through college, graduate school, and now?
    - What experiences influenced the understanding of these salient identities?
    - What identity do you think most affects how others see you? How you view yourself?
  - Tell me about a time when you became aware that you were privileged due to your racial identity. Recall specifics such as who you were with, what environment you were in, and how this memory made (and makes) you feel.
    - Tell me about other similar experiences related to your racial privilege.
  - Tell me about how you benefit from white privilege.
    - In what ways have you used your privilege to your advantage?
    - In what ways have you held on to your privileges, knowing that they cause harm?
    - What have you learned about your white privilege that makes you uncomfortable?
  - In what type of environments and with what types of people are you most comfortable discussing your racial privilege?
    - Tell me about how recent events (killings of Black folks without justice, refusal to condemn White supremacy from Trump, etc.) impacted the frequency of your discussions about racial privilege. With whom are these discussions occurring?
  - Tell me about how the salience of your other identities impacts how you understand your racial privilege.
    - Do you think about any of your identities more prominently than your race or other privileged identities?
    - When you think of activism related to racial justice tell me about what identities are salient for you? Why is that?
  - Tell me about your current role and work environment.

- Tell me about how your racial privilege intersects with your professional identity as an entry level student affairs professional.

### White Fragility

- The emotions that White people experience when talking about White privilege are frequently referred to as White Fragility. Tell me about how you understand this term.
- Describe your most vivid memory of experiencing white fragility.
  - How old were you? Where were you? What was the conversation about? Why did it bring up white fragility in you?? How do you recall feeling during and after the interaction? How do you feel about it today?
- Describe the emotions you have had during racial interactions at work where your privilege is acknowledged.
  - Can you recall an incident(s) where you experienced White Fragility in your work environment?
  - What about your White privilege makes you feel these emotions (uncomfortable, shameful, angry, etc.).
  - Can you describe how those emotions impacted your ability to acknowledge your racial privilege?
  - Tell me about how you navigated processing these emotions?
  - How did your emotional reaction impact your work?
  - Are there additional examples that are salient to your own understanding of White fragility?
- Do you have any examples where you have more effectively controlled your emotions related to White fragility? What did that outcome look like?
- Hypothetical Example (controlling emotions versus not?)
  - Describe the emotions you would have if a Black person confronted you about a bias you presented in a meeting where you only acknowledged the ideas of other White people.
    - Has this situation or something similar ever happened to you or in spaces you've been present in?
  - Describe how you would react if a Black woman confronted you about your “tone policing” of them in a meeting where they became angry about the ideas of others being acknowledged over their own.
    - Has this situation or something similar ever happened to you or in spaces you've been present in?
  - Describe how you would react if a Latino student confronted you about feeling tokenized by being the only student of color in a marketing campaign for your office.
    - Has this situation or something similar ever happened to you or in spaces you've been present in?
- Whiteness
  - Tell me about any experiences where you connected the privilege you hold to a larger system? Can you elaborate about how you understand this system?
  - Tell me about how you understand the term “Whiteness.”
    - Tell me about how you understand the difference between individual White privilege and Whiteness.

- What do you think it means to be a “good White person”?
  - How does this impact the ability to actually disrupt Whiteness?
- Wrap Up
  - As you reflect on what we discussed today, is there anything you want to add?
  - What emotions were present for you today in discussing white privilege, white fragility, and Whiteness?
  - Discuss journal reflection, focus group follow up, and second interview.
  - Do you have any questions for me?

## Interview Two: Whiteness at Work and Exploring Motivation

### Possible Interview Questions and Topics

[Prior to interview, review human subjects consent, ask if participant has any lingering questions, remind that I will be recording interview]

- Reflecting
  - From our first interview or the focus groups, are there topics you want to talk more about?
- Recall from first interview
  - To set the stage for our interview today, can you recall for me how you understand the term “Whiteness”?
- Student Affairs Context
  - Tell me about any observations of your institution and work environment related to Whiteness.
    - How do processes, systems, and structures within your organization connect to Whiteness?
    - What are the racial identities of individuals in your department with formal leadership roles? Informal power?
    - What are reactions from those in power when their position or ideas are challenged by BIPOC? Other White people?
    - How has your institution and/or department responded to recent events related to racial injustice?
      - What does that tell you about how Whiteness is pervasive within the organization?
  - As a White person, how have you navigated these systems?
    - How have you benefited from structures built on Whiteness?
  - Tell me about ways in which you maintain Whiteness within your organization.
    - Individually? Systemically?
  - What messages have you received about the role of entry level student affairs professional in disrupting Whiteness?
  - Tell me about a specific time in the context of your current work environment when a well-established system or process was critiqued for being grounded in Whiteness (with coworkers, students, supervisors, etc.).
    - How did individuals in the environment react to this conversation?
      - Describe the responses you observed.

- How did you react to the conversation?
    - What identities were salient to you as you engaged in the conversation?
    - Was there anything you wish you would have said/done and did not do?
      - What held you back in that moment?
  - Describe how your understanding of Whiteness impacts your professional practice.
    - How do your unique identities shape what this looks like for you?
    - Tell me about how you perceive the social norms to be in conversations around Whiteness and related topics.
  - Tell me about your motivation to change systems grounded in Whiteness, specifically in your work environment.
    - What value is there in creating more racially just systems in higher education (i.e. dismantling Whiteness)?
    - What do you expect from work that dismantles Whiteness (i.e. racial justice work)?
      - How do your identities impact your expectation of the work?
    - How does the value and expectancy impact your motivation?
    - How has your motivation to disrupt Whiteness been dependent upon what other people think of you or how you are perceived?
    - In what ways have you been apathetic when it comes to disrupting Whiteness?
    - Tell me about any times where you have taken steps to disrupt Whiteness?
    - If you haven't taken any steps to create change, tell me about why not?
      - What specific barriers exist for you? How do these connect to your social identities?
    - Tell me about any factors that decrease your motivation to disrupt Whiteness? How is this related to your racial privilege? Other identities?
  - As we wrap up and you reflect on our conversation, how would you describe your commitment to disrupting Whiteness in the future?
    - Describe what factors would enhance your motivation to disrupt Whiteness?
    - Do you have any goals for yourself related to this work?
    - Tell me about your confidence level in doing this work?
      - What could increase your confidence?
- Wrap Up
  - Is there anything else you want to share with me at this time?
  - Can you choose a pseudonym for the purposes of the research study?
  - Share information about member checking results and follow up.
  - Thank participant for their time.

## Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group:

Possible Discussion Questions and Topics

[Prior to focus group, review human subjects consent, ask if there are any questions, remind that I will be recording focus group]

- Please share your name with the group. You can utilize your pseudonym, please only share what you feel comfortable in terms of your institution/employer/role
- Share goals for the focus group:
  - Share themes I've learned so far and get your thoughts on them
  - Explore what is unique about White woman in thinking about White privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness
  - Discuss Whiteness in Higher Education and how we navigate it
  - Discuss our thoughts on feminism as it relates to Whiteness
- *Review ground rules for engagement*
  - What's said here stays here. What's learned here leaves here.
  - This is a learning space- none of us are experts at this topic, including the researcher
  - Safe space v. Brave space- The conversation may feel uncomfortable at times
  - There are no right answers
  - Acknowledgement of how we've been socialized can help move past fear and discomfort in conversations related to our privilege as White people
  - Others from the group to add?
- Share some emergent themes with participants from the first interviews related to White privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness in White Women Entry Level SA Professionals. What do they think about those themes?
  - Emotions
  - Work Environments
  - Individuals versus Systems
- What is unique to the experience of White women when thinking about White privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness?
- How are you navigating Whiteness in your work environment?
  - Where are you starting in doing your work to disrupt Whiteness?
  - What is holding you back?
- Do you consider yourself a feminist? If so, how do you define what that means for yourself?
  - Can you all discuss what your definition of feminism is?
  - Are there different types of feminism?
- Have you heard of the term white feminism (or mainstream feminism?). What does that term mean to you?
  - How does this connect to what you understand about Whiteness?
  - How has your feminism been White centered?
  - What does intersectional feminism look like?

- How does intersectional feminism disrupt Whiteness?
- Anything else that folks want to share prior to concluding the focus group?



## Appendix E: Journal Reflection Prompts

### Journal Reflection Prompts

#### Journal Reflection One (after Interview One):

- What are some general reflections about the first interview?
- Did you gain any new insights in to yourself and how you view your own identities in relation to White privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness?
- Is there anything that you didn't have time to share or didn't remember at the time of the interview?
- Describe how it felt to discuss White privilege and White fragility, related to your own identities and experiences
  - Describe what emotions arose for you during these questions and in reflecting on past experiences related to your own White privilege and White fragility.

#### Journal Reflection Two (after Interview Two):

- What have you learned about yourself, specifically, how you have navigated, maintained, and disrupted Whiteness as a result of participating in this study?
- Describe what emotions were present for you throughout the study.
- What areas do you still need to more reflection about?
- What (if anything) do you plan on doing with this new knowledge?
- Do you have any new or ongoing commitments that you will continue after participating in this study?
- To yourself?
- To dismantling Whiteness (i.e. racial justice)?

# Julia M. Ailes

## Education

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- Doctor of Education,** July 2022  
Indiana University, Bloomington IN  
Higher Education  
Minor: Qualitative Inquiry  
*Dissertation: Exploring Motivation to Disrupt Whiteness in Entry-Level White Women Student Affairs Professionals*
- Master of Science in Education,** May 2009  
Indiana University, Bloomington IN  
Higher Education and Student Affairs
- Bachelor of Science,** June 2006  
University of California, San Diego  
General Biology

## Teaching Experience

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### Instructor

EDUC-U559, Seminar in Residence Life (3 cr.)  
Fall 2016 – 2021  
Indiana University

### Instructor

EDUC-U450, Foundations of Residential Leadership (2 cr.)  
Spring 2008 – 2009, 2013 – 2021  
Indiana University

### Teaching Assistant

EDUC-U549, Environmental Theory and Assessment (3 cr.)  
Fall 2015  
Indiana University

### Instructor

LC-201, Residence Life: College Student Development (2 cr.)  
Spring 2010, 2011, 2012  
Butler University

### Teaching Assistant

HPER-F255, Human Sexuality (3 cr.)  
Spring 2009  
Indiana University

## **Professional Experience**

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### **Enrollment Management Leader (Sr. Associate Director)**

March 2022 – present

#### **Kelley Direct Programs**

Kelley School of Business, *Indiana University Bloomington*

- Serve as a member of the Kelley Direct leadership team to ensure implementation and completion of strategic admissions and enrollment management initiatives
- Supervise and direct admissions team in goal oriented admissions processes
- Manage data-focused enrollment management initiatives within Kelley Direct programs including: data pertaining to admissions, financial aid/scholarships; course registration/enrollment, persistence, retention, graduation; and alumni relations
- Collaborate with Kelley Direct student experience staff members on transitioning newly admitted students through to matriculation into the program and registration for courses
- Assist with admission and financial aid decisions including: reviewing applicant files to project enrollments and shape class profiles and allocating financial aid funding

### **Residential Life Leader (Assistant Director)**

July 2016 – March 2022

#### **Residential Life**

*Residential Programs and Services, Indiana University Bloomington*

#### **Staff Supervision and Departmental Leadership**

- Serve as member of Residential Life leadership team to support over 350 full-time, graduate, and undergraduate staff in promotion of student engagement and community to an on campus population of 12,000 students.
- Supervise 5 full-time masters' level professionals in management of residential complexes of over 1000 students.
- Direct central office support staff in management of recruitment and training processes.
- Plan, request, and allocate operating budgets in excess of \$15 million annually for both residence centers and recruitment and training areas.
- Collaborate and promote healthy relationships with other residence life areas such as leadership, diversity programs, academic initiatives, student conduct, training, and logistics.
- Provide emergency response support to professional and graduate staff for student needs such as mental health concerns, alcohol and drug use, bias incidents, and major facilities issues.

#### **Recruitment and Training**

- Coordinate hiring processes for undergraduate staff, leading teams of graduate and professional staff in recruitment, application review, interviews, and selection with an applicant pool of over 400 students.
- Collaborate with faculty in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program to lead application review, interviews, and hiring for over 30 graduate assistants across 14 residence centers and multiple functional areas.
- Implement year round training and development for all levels of staff in the department, including developing learning goals, coordinating with presenters, and learning assessment.
- Provide vision for 2-credit Foundations of Residential Leadership course through supervision of Graduate Assistant for Curriculum; including coordination with over 30 instructors, course development, and assessment.
- Develop on-boarding program for new full-time staff to assist in their transition to IU

**Residence Manager**  
**Spruce Residence Hall**

January 2013 – June 2016

*Residential Programs and Services, Indiana University Bloomington*

- Managed co-educational residence hall of 450 students through supervision of 25 plus staff members to provide safe, secure, and academically supportive environment, focusing on needs based residential experience.
- Coordinated with center team including custodial supervisor, maintenance, interior design, dining, learning community, & library staff to ensure open communication; facilitate prompt responses to student needs & concerns.
- Managed budgets of over \$4,000,000; assist with budget preparation and monitor monthly operating statements.
- Collaborated with School of Education faculty regarding operation of INSPIRE Living Learning Center.
- Oversaw center desk operations, including implementation & management of online systems.
- Advised staff in on-call crisis management & emergency response for building.
- Coordinated summer conferences for internal and external clients in conjunction with Conference Services.

**Assistant Residence Manager,**  
**Briscoe Residence Center**

July 2012 – July 2013

*Residential Programs and Services, Indiana University Bloomington*

- Managed a predominantly first year co-educational building of 700 residents in conjunction with Residence Manager through supervision of 30 plus staff members to provide a safe, secure, and academically supportive environment.
- Cultivated and maintained working relationships with academic advisors, learning community staff, IU Athletics, maintenance, & building custodians.
- Served as Conduct Coordinator for building; including training, charging, hearing, and tracking cases.
- Advised staff in on call crisis management and emergency response for building.

**Residence Life Coordinator**  
**Schwitzer Hall**

June 2009 – May 2012

*Residence Life, Butler University*

- Implemented comprehensive residence life program in first-year, female residence hall of 450 residents.
- Supervised 14 Resident Assistants in wellness based programming, conflict mediation, & personal development.
- Managed front desk operations; including hiring, training, and evaluation of 15 desk attendants.
- Collaborated with Faculty in Residence and Faculty Allies on educational and social programs for hall residents.
- Acted as a member of campus crisis management team through on call duty rotation

## **Institution and Departmental Service**

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**Student Service Recognition Task Force**, *Indiana University Bloomington*

October 2021 – March 2021

**Family Forum Facilitator**, *First Year Experience Office, Indiana University Bloomington*

Summer 2013 – 2019

**Annual Report Committee**, *Residential Programs and Services, Indiana University Bloomington*

February – August 2019

**Diversity Initiatives Committee**, *Residential Life, Indiana University Bloomington*

September 2015 – May 2016

**Women's History Month Celebration**, *co-chair, Butler University*

January 2010 – March 2012

**Assessment Committee**, *Division of Student Affairs, Butler University*

August 2011 – May 2012

**Commission on Undergraduate Residential Life**, *Butler University*

January 2011 – May 2011

## **Presentations and Publications**

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Burton, J. & **Ailes J.** (2018, October). *Managing up: What no one told you about being supervised*. Great Lakes Association of College and University Housing Officers (GLACUHO). Bloomington, IN.

**Ailes, J.** & Maul, J. (2018, July). *Thriving, not just surviving, when your friend becomes your supervisor*. Association of College and University Housing Officers International Annual Conference. Denver, CO.

Ailes, J. (2018, July). *Theory to practice: HESA faculty and residence life partnerships*. Association of College and University Housing Officers International Annual Conference. Denver, CO.

Bottoms, M., & **Joshel, J.** (2016). Change is hard: Leading individuals through organizational change. *Talking Stick*. 34(2), 28-30.

Joshel, J. (2015). Education for domesticity: Women in the Indiana University halls of residence: 1945-1960. *Indiana University Student Personnel Association*, 9-18.

**Joshel, J.** & Connor, P. (2014, November). *A vision becomes reality: ACUHO-I's 21st century project*. Great Lakes Association of College and University Housing Officers (GLACUHO). Peoria, IL.

**Joshel, J.**, Maul, J. & Gonzalez, T. (2012, November). *Professional development 101*. Great Lakes Association of College and University Housing Officers (GLACUHO). Columbus, OH.

Joshel, J. (2011, June). *Student/Faculty relationships outside of the classroom*. Confederation of Student Services Ireland Conference. Dublin, Ireland.

**Joshel, J. & Graham, L.** (April 2009). *Hitting a home run with millennial students*. National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) Region VII Conference. Evansville, IN.

**Joshel, J. & Godfrey, C.** (April 2008). *A Facilitator's Tool Box*. National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) Region VII Conference, Waterloo, CAN.

### **Professional Organizations**

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**Association of College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I)**  
August 2012 – Present

**Great Lakes Association of College and University Housing Officers (GLACUHO)**  
November 2009 – Present

**National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)**  
November 2007 – Present

**National Orientation Directors Association (NODA)**  
March 2008 – May 2009