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Annie Bachrach  
An Exploratory Study of the  
Life Experiences and  
Motivating Factors of White  
Antiracist Organizers and  
Educators

## ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to explore the life experiences and motivating factors of White people who organize and educate for racial justice. The research was a qualitative study with a sample of 13 White self-identified antiracists who spent at least five hours per week on antiracism work. Through face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to reflect on life experiences relevant to the development of an antiracist identity and to identify sources of hope and motivation in doing this challenging work.

The findings of the study increase our understanding of what it means to be a White antiracist, the complex process of developing a White antiracist identity, and the many ways that Whites can work towards a more racially just world with the leadership of People of Color. Many of the participants pointed to the existence of structural racism within social services and the need for transformative changes in the way social workers understand and attempt to help oppressed communities. Through the powerful words of these White antiracist organizers and educators, this researcher hopes to increase awareness of the potentially destructive nature of social work (despite good intentions) and inspire White social work students to enact antiracist behavior by taking action for racial justice.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE LIFE EXPERIENCES AND MOTIVATING  
FACTORS OF WHITE ANTIRACIST ORGANIZERS AND EDUCATORS

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2009

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been written without the support of many individuals. Thank you to my parents, Peter and Susan, and my brother, Ben, for your support and love, and for instilling in me the desire to make a positive contribution to the world. Thank you to my roommates and friends, Addie Liechty and Cat Hurley, for your encouragement and much needed stress relief. Thank you to my supervisors, Dan Buccino and Danna Carroll, and my fellow intern, Stephanie Rogers, for your willingness to have difficult conversations about race and your enthusiasm for my antiracism project at the clinic. Thank you to my colleague and friend, Mohammad Arefina, for your kind words and for challenging me to think deeply about what it means to be a White antiracist. Thank you to my classmates and teachers for your hard work and commitment to undoing racism, especially to my thesis advisor, Fred Newdom, for your positive feedback and advice over the last few years. And last, but certainly not least, thank you to the participants of the study for your openness, courage, humility, and inspiration.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to explore the question: are there common identifiable life experiences and motivating factors among White people who actively organize and educate for racial justice? This topic is relevant to the field of social work because it is a predominantly White profession committed to values of social justice and social change as detailed in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2006). The Code's (2006) preamble states: "fundamental to social work is the attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living...Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (p. 1); social justice is listed as one of the six core values of the profession. Additionally the Code (2006) explains: "social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people" (p. 5). This document suggests that all social workers should seek to address issues of racial injustice and to act for social change.

Several social work institutions such as the Smith College School for Social Work and the New York City NASW chapter recognize the importance of furthering racial justice and have antiracism mission statements built into their policies. These institutions take steps to confront racism at the institutional level. This includes initiatives such as hiring practices, recruitment for admissions, staff development, and curriculum adjustments. These efforts also carry over to the personal level and help to foster

consciousness of racism in social work students, clinicians, educators, and administrative staff.

Given that the national organizing body of the social work profession advocates that social workers be social change agents and challenge social injustices like racism, and that various social work institutions are taking steps to uphold these values, there should be many White social workers involved in the antiracism movement. In reality, not all White social workers choose to actively organize for racial justice, and research shows that White social workers are as equally racist as the rest of society. Green, Kiernan-Stern & Baskind (2005) surveyed 257 White NASW members from all parts of the United States. Results showed that most respondents were positive and supportive of people of color and the concept of multicultural diversity. However, their “cognitive attitudes were more positive than their affective attitudes, they possess the same ambivalence and social distance about race that characterizes contemporary American society, and 12% do not believe racism is a major social problem in the United States” (p. 47). The researchers compared the responses from state and national chapters (to prevent a regional bias) on various demographic and professional variables and found no significant difference. Green et al (2005) stated:

Although professional social workers were almost unanimous in their support for the equality of People of Color in the workforce, many were also hesitant about affirmative action in general, and many were reluctant to express a desire for more closeness and interaction with People of Color. (p. 62)

This thesis will seek to explore many important questions. What motivates some Whites to take a stand against racial injustices while other Whites choose to ignore or passively acknowledge the existence of racism in society? What factors enable antiracist behavior? How can social work institutions uphold the values of social work by

increasing the numbers of professionals who choose to proactively address racial oppression rather than idly sit by? How can social workers foster a greater sense of need and urgency to address racial issues at the institutional, professional, and personal levels?

Chapter two will review literature pertinent to this thesis topic. The third chapter will detail methods used by the researcher to conduct the study. Chapter four will highlight major findings of the study. Lastly, chapter five will discuss the findings within the context of the literature, limitations of the study, and implications for the field of social work.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this thesis is to ask the question: are there common identifiable life experiences and motivating factors among White people who actively organize and educate for racial justice? In order to answer this question, it is important to examine the language used in the antiracism movement, and to look at the history of racism in the United States, as well as the history of White resistance to racial injustice within that context. Literature that points to the dearth of White antiracist history and role models in educational curricula will be highlighted. Helms' (1990) theory of White racial identity development is also discussed. Lastly, this researcher will examine various biographical accounts of White antiracist organizers and educators and attempt to draw common threads across these individuals' lives.

#### *Definitions and language*

The Safehouse Progressive Alliance (2005) defines *antiracism* simply as “the act of interrupting racism;” *ally* as “a member of the dominant group who works to dismantle oppression from which s/he benefits,” and *whiteness* as “a racial identity created by upper-class colonialists to distinguish themselves from indentured servants and slaves.” ([http://www.colorado.edu/cu-diversity/committees/Safehouse\\_Pres\\_CACMA06.pdf](http://www.colorado.edu/cu-diversity/committees/Safehouse_Pres_CACMA06.pdf)).

Hartigan (2000) states that “antiracism is the term for a movement that covers a broad range (historically and contemporarily) of efforts by whites directly to counter the reproduction of racism in its manifest institutional and personal forms” (p. 374). Beverly Tatum (1994) defines a White ally as “an antiracist activist, a White man or woman who

is clearly identifiable to People of Color in the struggle against racism” (1994, p. 462); and bell hooks defines White ally as someone who "daily vigilantly resist[s] becoming reinvested in white supremacy" (1995, pp. 157-158). In this study, the words “White allies” and “antiracists” will be used interchangeably. Additionally, the term “antiracist” will be used as an adjective describing the person or noun identifying a type of person and “antiracism” will be used to describe the broader movement for racial justice.

Labanowski (date unknown) identifies several characteristics of “active anti-racist ally behavior” which include:

Names issue as racism; recognizes and makes unearned privilege visible; dismantles internalized dominance and the belief in the racial superiority of self as a white person; challenges other whites; interrupts collusion with other whites who seek to maintain their power and privilege; breaks silence and speaks up; seeks and validates critical feedback from People of Color; facilitates the empowerment of People of Color; consistently challenges prevailing patterns; takes personal responsibility; acts intentionally and overtly; is consistently conscious; behaves as a change agent; [and] promotes and models change for other whites. (<http://www.antiracistalliance.com/allychar.html>)

Andrea Ayvazian’s (1995) essay “Interrupting the Cycle of Oppression: The Role of Allies as Agents of Change,” uses similar language. Ayvazian (1995) explains that allies take personal responsibility for injustices that need to be addressed in our society rather than choosing to ignore them like so many other individuals that benefit from the privileges that a hierarchical society may provide to them. Ayvazian (1995) points to the important role of allies as modeling positive behavior and offering young people from dominant categories a “positive, proactive, and proud identity...Rather than feeling guilty, shameful, and immobilized as the ‘oppressor,’ whites and other dominants can assume the important and useful role of social change agent.”

(<http://www.antiracistalliance.com/whiteness.html>)

Malcolm X provided another important perspective to add to the concept of White allies:

Whites who are sincere don't accomplish anything by joining Negro organizations and making them integrated. Whites who are sincere should organize among themselves and figure out some strategy to break down the prejudice that exists in white communities. This is where they can function more intelligently and more effectively, in the white community itself, and this has never been done. (Breitman, 1965, p. 221)

The existence and importance of White caucus work will be further discussed in the findings and discussion chapters of this study.

A discussion of the terms *institutional racism* and *White supremacy* are also important to this research topic. Tatum (2003) describes institutional racism as a “system of advantage benefitting Whites in subtle as well as blatant ways” (p. 95). Miller & Garran (2008) state:

institutional racism leads to exclusion from neighborhoods, jobs, schools, politics; health and mental health care; greater exposure to environmental hazards; higher risk of arrest and incarceration; and lower life expectancies...institutional racism can occur in any form of society, including democracies. (p.32)

Tatum (2003) describes how Whites typically understand *White supremacy* as being embodied by the Klan and individuals who demonstrate overtly racist behavior and advocate for racist policies, but that White supremacy is more subtly ingrained into socialization processes. For example, White culture typically values individualism, structure, materialism (e.g. owning a big house) to name a few, and normalizes this way of thinking as superior to other ways of thinking and living.

### *Historical context of the antiracism movement*

This section will begin to outline the historical context of the antiracism movement. It is important to note that the following information is not a comprehensive review of the literature due to the vastness of available texts and resources on this topic, and instead will provide a brief overview from which to examine the lives of Whites who have been socialized in the United States. Cynthia Stokes Brown (2002) provides a succinct summary of the development of race and White supremacy in the United States. She hypothesizes that Dutch and English colonists began to see themselves as “White” sometime between 1650 and 1700. Initially, colonizers rationalized that enslaving non-Christians was acceptable, and those who converted to Christianity could gain their freedom. In order to stop losing slaves to conversion, slave owners:

shifted the definition of who could be a slave from someone who was not a Christian to someone not European in appearance, and they made this enslavement hereditary... Thus, enslavement based on skin color began in the American colonies before there was any comprehensive formulation of what the so-called races were supposed to be. (Brown, 2002, p. 10)

Brown (2002) documents how the races became more defined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as scientists began to make arguments for supposed racial differences grounded in cultural, sociological or psychological terms. White supremacy became entrenched and endured through the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the United States. Reconstruction after the civil war was abruptly ended and freed slaves in the South were stripped of any hope of political and economic power forced by Whites to adhere to Jim Crow laws that segregated Blacks as completely as possible from Southern White society (Brown, 2002).

The period 1890-1930 marked the height of expression of White supremacy and racism in the United States with the rise of racist propaganda, minstrel shows, and Ku Klux Klan (KKK) membership – more than 4 million in the 1920s (Brown, 2002). The KKK was responsible for tens of thousands of lynchings with virtually no legal repercussions (Brown, 2002). White racial superiority was supported by the development of the field of racial science and the eugenics movement in the U.S., and used by the Nazi party in justifying the killing of six million Jews during the Holocaust (Brown, 2002). By the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of anthropologists agreed that race has no scientific validity, further supported by the human genome project that provides evidence of racial similarity amongst various groups of people from different regions of the world (Brown, 2002). However, the social construction of race continues to impact the lives of People of Color in destructive and often violent ways; just yesterday, June 10, 2009, a self-identified White supremacist walked into the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and killed an African American security guard on duty.

Despite all of the racially-charged events in recent news regarding fatal police brutality, racially-based school violence and segregated proms, and anti-immigration raids and rhetoric, the current social discourse on race has been heavily focused on the campaign and election of our first biracial president, Barack Obama, and the discussion of whether or not the United States has entered into a “post-racial” society. Wise (2009) indicts the media and White America for this overly-simplistic and completely false ideology. Wise (2009) states:

The 2008 presidential election may not have been a contest in which racism was vying against antiracism, so much as one in which two different types of racism were competing for predominance. On the one hand was old-fashioned bigotry, or Racism 1.0, which could have caused enough whites to vote against Obama for

racial reasons as to ensure his defeat. This is the kind of bigotry that has long marked the nation's history: the kind that, in its most extreme moments has precipitated racist murder, lynching, and terror on a grand scale; the kind that led to dozens of white-on-black riots in the city after city for much of the early 1990s; the kind that precipitated restrictive covenants and 'neighborhood improvement associations' to block people of color from moving into white neighborhoods; the kind that even now animates hate groups and hate crimes when taken to its illogical conclusion. (pp. 9-10)

Wise (2009) explains that although Racism 1.0 may have lost in this election, that a new form of racism (which he calls Racism 2.0) "may have been in full effect, and ultimately the reason for Obama's victory" (p. 10). This version of racism manifests in a variety of ways. One is the tendency of Whites to exceptionalize "acceptable" People of Color, such as Obama, who fit into their notions of goodness and success, and who are not threatening to Whites (Wise, 2009). Wise (2009) also discusses the notion of responsibility for the social problems of today and how Obama's call to Black fathers was very appealing to Whites because it removed responsibility and guilt from White people and placed blame on the individuals impacted by racist structures. Wise (2009) explains that this election leaves Whites with an important decision at this point in our history:

While overt racists will counsel backlash, and use Obama's rise to suggest that America is descending into a pit of cultural decay, and while mainstream commentators will counsel celebration, and use Obama as proof positive that racism is no longer a potent social force with which we must grapple, there is another option, at once more level-headed and yet aspirational, to which we might turn. That option is to seize the moment, to channel the energy unleashed by the Obama campaign, to focus those who have believed so much in him and his mantra of 'change' into productive antiracism and social justice work. The choice is to use this opening to develop and strengthen white antiracist identity, to insist on the audacity of truth and not just hope, to demand better of ourselves than perhaps even we thought possible. (pp. 11-12)

### *History of White Resistance to Racial Injustice*

“The pervasive quality of racist thought and practice throughout the history of the United States is clear, but it has never been without substantial challenge” (Aptheker, 1992, p. 16). Aptheker (1992) chronicles the history of antiracism in the United States; detailing the various players and organizing efforts that comprised the abolitionist, suffrage, and civil rights movements. First, Aptheker (1992) gives much evidence to dispel the idea that the races have always been divided, and in fact, shows that races mixed socially (as proven by records of racially mixed church congregations) and intermarried frequently until anti-miscegenation laws were created in 1705. One of the better-known conspiracies, Bacon’s uprising in 1676, involved Black and White participation.

Aptheker (1992) gives countless examples of people who have resisted racism throughout U.S. history. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on some of the actions of White resisters. Richard Baxter, a chaplain in Cromwell’s army, represented the views of traditional 17<sup>th</sup> century theology and preached equality and fairness to slaveowners (Aptheker, 1992). Presidents Jefferson and Madison and Bill of Rights signer George Mason all owned slaves but denounced the institution of slavery as undermining the ideals that the United States were founded upon (Aptheker, 1992). Benjamin Rush was one of the founders of a Philadelphian antislavery society in 1775 (Aptheker, 1992). Ben Franklin was the president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and fought for schools for Black children; his final political act was the signing of a petition to end slavery in 1790 (Aptheker, 1992).

During this period, examples of White antiracist activities included speaking and writing against slavery, petitioning legislatures to free slaves, helping enslaved men buy their freedom, resisting slave patrols, assisting in the escape of slaves, and sacrificing life to withhold information about escaped slaves (Aptheker, 1992). Additionally, state antislavery societies began springing up around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Aptheker, 1992). The abolitionist movement initially focused its efforts on disproving the myth that Africans were inferior; anti-slavery organizers had determined that slavery could not exist without this assumption (Aptheker, 1992).

During the pre-civil war period, William Shreve Bailey established an anti-slavery newspaper in Kentucky, the *Newport News*, spread information that encouraged rebellion and fleeing, and was jailed for incendiarism; after getting out on bail, he moved to England to give anti-slavery lectures (Aptheker, 1992). At around the same time during the 1850s, two White churches in Bracken County, Kentucky, voted to integrate their congregations (Aptheker, 1992). Anti-slavery organizers made efforts to create integrated schools such as Berea, founded through the American Missionary Association, but faced great barriers to keeping these schools integrated during the post-Reconstruction era (Aptheker, 1992).

After the civil war, at least 40 percent of White men voted for suffrage for Black men in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Connecticut, Ohio, Missouri, New York, and Iowa (Aptheker, 1992). Wendell Phillips, a White abolitionist and orator, stated in front of supportive audiences of tens of thousands of people: “I despise an empire resting its claims on the blood of a single race. My pride is in the banner that welcomes every race



and every blood, and under whose shelter all races stand up equal” (Aptheker, 1992, p. 18).

Brown (2002) describes the massive organizing campaigns that began in the 1910s with the formation of the NAACP (1909), the National Urban League (1910), the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (1919), the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (1930), the YWCA, and the Communist Party (with the most active chapter in Alabama), to name a few. Whites were involved in all of these groups – Jane Addams and John Dewey helped found the NAACP; Will Alexander, a Methodist minister, founded the Commission on Interracial Cooperation; and Jesse Daniel Ames led the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching.

Thompson (2001) interviewed nearly forty White antiracists and describes the development of the antiracism movement over the last fifty years. Thompson’s (2001) study outlines the spectrum of activist work – the civil rights and Black Power movements (1950s to the mid-1970s), the women’s movement (late 1960s to early 1980s), antiracist trainings since the 1970s, sanctuary work with Central American refugees during the 1980s, and organizing for prison reform since the 1980s. While she emphasizes that People of Color are the primary leaders in racial justice movements and does not want to override that with her study, she argues the importance of learning about White antiracist history to help create positive White identities that are not based on oppressive models (Thompson, 2001), a topic that will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

One of the areas of focus in the antiracism movement today is antiracism trainings and workshops, practices that emerged in the 1970s to teach Whites about their

complicity in maintaining the structures of racism (Hartigan, 2000). These trainings are usually held in institutional settings such as social service agencies, corporations, and higher education (Hartigan, 2002). George Sefa Dei (1996) defines this version of antiracism as:

An action-oriented strategy for institutional systemic change that addresses racism and other interlocking systems of societal oppression. It is a critical discourse of race and racism in a society that challenges the continuance of racializing social groups for differential treatment. Antiracism explicitly names the issues of race and social difference as issues of power and equity, rather than as matters of cultural and ethnic variety. (p. 4)

### *Critiques of Antiracism Movement*

Antiracism discourse is relatively new and not often critiqued, however, the following examples demonstrate different ways of looking at racism and ideas about how to dismantle racial oppression in a transformative way.

Hartigan (2000) speaks to the limitations of the methods of antiracism (in workshops and classrooms) and its focus on understanding how “whites perceive particular situations and identities to be ‘racial’” (p. 399). He believes that the idea that Whiteness is uniform and can be studied is problematic, because it takes on different meanings with different Whites; just as one cannot define other racial categories, Whiteness is also ambiguous and should be treated as such (Hartigan, 2002). Hartigan (2000) explains that:

scholars and activists who engage the subject of whiteness need to develop a means to negotiate the gulf between analytical/political insights and the murky realms of daily life where people are compelled to make sense out of their lives...we still need to generate a form of social knowledge that attends to less-than-perfect forms of social interaction based on changing modes of identification and differentiation. (pp. 399-400)

Hartigan (2000) acknowledges the “tensions over whether the emphasis should be placed on changing the world or understanding, first, exactly how it is operating” (p. 400) as well as the complicated political process of movement-building that requires some collective identification; however, believes that people engaging in this process should always be mindful of the ambiguities of racial identification and the dangers in trying to define Whiteness.

While Hartigan (2000) challenges the antiracism movement to consider ambiguity, Barbara Love’s (2008) *critical liberation theory* reframes the notion of fighting *against* oppression by using liberatory language to work *towards* a more equitable society. Love (2008) defines liberation as:

the creation of relationships, societies, communities, organizations and collective spaces characterized by equity, fairness, and the implementation of systems for the allocation of goods, services, benefits, and rewards that support the full participation of each human and the promotion of their full humanness...[and liberatory consciousness is] a way of living in the world characterized by oppressive systems with awareness and intentionality. It enables us to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of oppression without giving into despair and hopelessness and an awareness of the roles played by each individual in the maintenance of that system without blaming them for the roles they play. And it enables humans to live outside of the patterns of thought and behavior learned through an oppressive socialization process to support us in being intentional about our role in working towards transformation. (p. 1)

Love (2008) explains ten assumptions and propositions about liberation including: “we can envision liberation for our lifetime, and achieve it” (p. 2); “liberation benefits all of us” (p. 2); “human are inherently good and do not want to be caught in the grip of beliefs, attitudes, and behavior patterns that lead to enacting oppression” (p. 2), and “enacting liberation helps to recover connection with our own humanness and with other humans” (p. 2). Love describes ways to practice liberation which involve knowing and understanding systems of oppression to be able to examine our own behavior and the

ways institutions perpetuate oppression; committing “to our own sustenance; to hold ourselves with compassion, love, and validation; to nurture joy, gratitude, vision, and rest; to put our attention on our healing and growth” (p. 3); fostering community connectedness to other human beings; and “having love for ourselves, those close to us, our communities at large, and our environment...successful liberation work stems from a love for all humans” (p. 4.).

### *Absence of racism and antiracism in educational curricula*

Loewen (2007) analyzed eighteen U.S. history textbooks and discusses the presentation (or lack thereof) of racism and antiracism in these texts. Loewen (2007) gives numerous examples of events and details throughout U.S. history omitted from current textbooks including: multiracial revolts against slaveholders; the fact that Jefferson was a slaveholder (only mentioned as a side note in a handful of textbooks usually after praising him or describing personality quirks) and was torn on the slavery issue; the influence of slavery on our foreign policy; political campaigns run on racist platforms; White supremacist ideas expressed by Lincoln; and photographs of smiling lynch mobs during Reconstruction.

Loewen (2007) points out that, until the civil rights era, American history textbooks basically agreed with Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (a book that was voted best book of all time by an American Library Association in 1988) version of slavery – that it was “an ideal social structure whose passing is to be lamented” (p. 137). Loewen (2007) notes: “today many school boards, curricular committees, and high school history departments include African Americans or white Americans who have cast off the ideology of white supremacy” (p. 142), thus today’s textbooks generally describe

slavery more realistically as a horrific and immoral time in our past. Despite this shift however, textbooks: downplay slavery in the North so it does not come across as a national problem, but rather one isolated to particular regions; “have trouble acknowledging that anything might be wrong with white Americans or with the United States as a whole” (p. 142); and do not discuss the lasting legacy of slavery – “the social and economic inferiority it conferred upon blacks and the cultural racism it instilled in whites” (p. 143). Loewen (2007) states: “unlike slavery, racism is not over yet...To function adequately in civic life in our troubled times, students must learn what causes racism” (p. 143). In all of the eighteen textbooks there is only one sentence that attempts to connect history and racism.

In regard to antiracism in U.S. history textbooks Loewen (2007) explains: “just as textbooks treat slavery without racism, they treat abolitionism without much idealism” (p. 173). One prominent example is that in the eighteen textbooks reviewed, John Brown, one of the most radical White abolitionists, is mentioned twice (in one instance portrayed as a violent, obsessive, hot-headed criminal); few Americans would recognize his portrait because the images of him in textbooks usually depict him as deranged (Loewen, 2007).

Loewen (2007) states:

quite possibly textbooks should not portray this murderer as a hero, although other murderers, from Christopher Columbus to Nat Turner, get the heroic treatment...Textbook authors’ withdrawal of sympathy from Brown is perceptible; their tone in presenting him is different from the tone they employ for almost everyone else. (p.180)

The effects of omitting White antiracists from history textbooks or portraying them in a certain light are significant. Ayvazian (1995) speaks at high schools frequently and typically asks students if they can name a famous living White racist which proves to

be an easy task. However, when asked to name a famous living White antiracist (or civil rights worker, or someone who challenges racism), the vast majority of students are stumped. Occasionally, students are able to name family members or community members who are antiracist. Ayvazian (1995) explores this pervasive problem:

I believe that it is difficult for young people to grow up and become something they have never heard of. It is hard for a girl to grow up and become a commercial airline pilot if it has never occurred to her that woman can and do fly jet planes. Similarly, it is hard for young people to grow up and fight racism if they have never met anyone who does.  
(<http://www.antiracistalliance.com./whiteness.html>)

There have been many White people who have organized for racial justice throughout the history of the United States, and many White antiracist activists alive today who can inspire others to join in their important work. Ayvazian (1995) lists many role models that White students “can claim with pride:”

People like Laura Haviland, who was a conductor on the Underground Railroad and performed unbelievably brave acts while the slavecatchers were right on her trail; Virginia Foster Durr, a southern belle raised with great wealth and privilege who, as an adult, tirelessly drove black workers to and from their jobs during the Montgomery bus boycott; the Rev. James Reeb, who went south during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 to organize and march; Hodding Carter, Jr., editor and publisher of a newspaper in the Mississippi Delta who used his paper to battle for racial equity and who took considerable heat for his actions... There are also many contemporary anti-racists like Morris Dees, who gave up a lucrative law practice to start the Southern Poverty Law Center and Klan Watch in Alabama and bring white supremacists to trial; Anne Braden, active for decades in the civil rights struggle in Kentucky; Rev. Joseph Barndt, working within the religious community to make individual churches and entire denominations proclaim themselves as anti-racist institutions.  
(<http://www.antiracistalliance.com./whiteness.html>)

These important and inspirational individuals are often left out of U.S. history curricula, giving young Whites the idea that Whites do not have a responsibility or role to play in the movement for racial justice and equality. Young and Rosiek (2000) point to

the lack of discussion of contemporary White antiracists in their review of the book *White Reign*:

One is given the impression that, to date, we have no living and breathing models of fierce anti-racist people who identify as White to whom we can look for inspiration (among other things). No one was identified [in *White Reign*] whose practical struggles with things like cultural disequilibrium, being pathologized by other Whites, or dealing with racist family members could at least provide an occasion for these issues to be discussed...readers who are interested in meeting the challenges raised by authors [of essays in *White Reign*] are not only left to reinvent themselves with no tangible models, but we are also given no information as to what kinds of supports or resources one might need to make such a transformation. What kinds of communities or resources will individuals with these white identities need in order to practice anti-racism and work for equity and social justice? (Young and Rosiek, 2000, p. 43).

Tim Wise (2008) describes this problem in his autobiography “White Like Me:”

One of the biggest problems in sustaining white resistance is the apparent lack of role models to whom we can look for inspiration, advice, and even lessons on what *not* to do. Growing up, we don’t often see many whites taking up the banner of racial equality, fighting for an end to unjust privileges and institutional racism. Although there have always been whites who fought for these things, we typically don’t learn of them in school nor from our parents...Not knowing of white antiracist history, and not seeing many examples of the same in our own families, we sometimes can feel alone, even crazy, for thinking the way we do about racism and privilege, if we find these things enraging. And for whites in general, lacking a historical perspective on antiracist resistance makes it all the easier to go along with things ‘the way they are’ and have long been. (p. 91-92)

Tatum (1994) argues that the stories of White allies must be highlighted in order to create a new model of Whiteness other than the three that she theorizes currently exist. She calls these models “White supremacist,” “what whiteness?” (a lack of awareness of one’s White racial identity) and “guilty White.” She posits that the “White ally” model is the only one by which Whites can achieve a fully positive White identity. More of Tatum’s ideas on White identity development, as well as Helms’ (1990) theory of White Racial Identity Development will be explored in the next section of the literature review.

### *White Racial Identity Development Theory*

Several scholars have attempted to theorize White racial identity development. Tatum (2003) states that Whites have two developmental tasks: “the abandonment of individual racism and the recognition of and opposition to institutional and cultural racism” (p. 94) and cites Helms’ (1990) stages of *White racial identity development* as the process through which Whites will complete these tasks.

In the *contact* stage, Whites take a colorblind stance and are unaware of their own racial prejudices (Helms, 1990). The second stage, *disintegration*, is marked by an increased awareness of racism, White privilege, and family prejudices (Helms, 1990). This time is characterized by discomfort and is usually triggered by a learning experience (such as a college course or an unlearning racism workshop). During the third stage, *reintegration*, Whites may be reactive and direct anger toward People of Color and this period is when overt racist remarks are more commonly expressed (Helms, 1990).

Whites reach the *pseudo-independent* stage when they have committed to unlearning racism (Helms, 1990). Frankenberg (1996), a White antiracist educator, elaborates:

I viewed my racial privilege as total. I remember months when I was terrified to speak in gatherings that were primarily of color, since I feared that anything I did say would be marked by my whiteness, my racial privilege which in my mind meant the same. (p. 14)

The fifth stage is *immersion and emersion* which is characterized by anger towards Whites and rejection of White identity (Helms, 1990). The sixth and last stage, *autonomy*, is described by Tatum (2003) as:

[Incorporating] the newly defined view of whiteness as part of a racial identity. The positive feelings associated with this redefinition energizes the person’s efforts to confront racism and oppression...we neither negate the uniqueness of



each person, regardless of that person's group memberships, nor deny the ever-present effects of group memberships for each individual. (p. 112)

Helms' (1990) model is limited because it only refers to the Black/White dichotomy and cannot be generalized to Whites' relationships with people from other racial groups. Critics of Helms' model argue that her stages are too linear and assume that there is a starting point and ending point, as if once an individual reaches the autonomy stage, they are fully transformed and have no further room for growth and development (Thompson, 2003). Thompson (2003) argues that all White racial identity development models are problematic because they imply that there is a moral hierarchy of White people, that the Whites in the autonomy stage are "good" Whites, and better than Whites located at other points in their racial identity development. This method of *othering* functions as a way to absolve Whites of their guilt and separates them from the group of Whites supposedly responsible for racism. With all of the White identity-focused research that has emerged in the last ten years, Thompson (2003) postulates that the focus of the antiracism movement has shifted from racial justice and equity to how Whites can create a positive White identity, which requires relieving Whites of their pain and guilt associated with their racial identity. Although Thompson makes an interesting argument and brings up some issues within the antiracism movement that Whites need to maintain awareness of, there seem to be few alternatives to Helms' model.

### *Biographical Accounts*

#### **Tim Wise (1968-)**

Tim Wise (2008) analyzes his life experiences and the current state of race relations in the United States through an antiracist lens and with a deep understanding of White privilege in his bestselling autobiographical book "White Like Me." Wise (2008)

was born and raised in a White community in Nashville, Tennessee, where Black families were not allowed to rent or buy homes. Wise (2008) describes his family as working-class; his father was an inconsistently employed actor and stand-up comedian, and his mother worked for a marketing research company. Due to his White privilege, he was able to access extracurricular activities in grade school, something that he says he would not have succeeded in school without; he was a mediocre student (Wise, 2008). These clubs, debate and drama, also prepared him for a career in public speaking (Wise, 2008).

Wise (2008) grew up in a family that basically denied racism except for an aunt who taught him about “an abolitionist in [his] family tree who had stood up against her family and convinced them to free their own slaves” (p. 56). Wise (2008) states that his mother’s modeling for him “though not of the dramatic type provided by white activists in the civil rights movement, was nonetheless critical to [his] own development” (p. 100). He describes going to a rally with his mother to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, civil rights activists (two White men and one Black man) who were murdered for their organizing efforts in Mississippi, a significant moment in his life:

I had never in my life been in the presence of so many white allies in one place, so many whites who had put their lives on the line for justice. Growing up in this country, one learns very little about the role played by such persons. Not only are the contributions of people of color to this nation’s history minimized in favor of a narrative that prioritizes the things done by rich white men, but those whites who resisted and joined with black and brown folks to forge a better way are similarly ignored...To have taught us about these people – and not merely the ones who had died, but the ones who had lived and continued the struggle – would have been dangerous. It would have signaled to those of us born in the years after the height of the movement that we had a choice to make. It would have dared those of us who were white to dream of different ways to live in this skin. It was no coincidence that school boards and principals and the lawmakers who make educational policy wanted no part of such an enterprise, and still don’t. (Wise, 2008, p. 100)

Wise (2008) was in third grade when he received one of his earliest lessons about race; he describes how his Black friends played monkey in the middle with him and let him intercept every pass, repeating the phrase “my nigger Tim.” Wise (2008) describes feeling proud at first that he was catching every ball, confused that they were calling him “nigger,” and twenty years later realizing that his friends, for a few moments, “had been able to flip the script on the racial dynamic that would, every other day, serve as the background noise for their lives” (p.26); by making him run around, they had used him for their amusement.

Wise (2008) went to college at Tulane in the racially turbulent city of New Orleans, LA; “When [he] went away to college, [he] considered himself a hip liberal, aware of racism and committed to fighting it” (p. 46), but he took little action to confront racism during the first couple of years of school and opted to study U.S. foreign policy. In 1988, Wise (2008) became involved in the formation of the Tulane Alliance Against Apartheid. Wise (2008) began his career in antiracist organizing on a national level straight out of college. His first job was Youth Coordinator for the Coalition Against Racism and Nazism, a job he got through connections to a Tulane professor and grad student (Wise, 2008). Today, Wise is a nationally renowned author, essayist, public speaker and blogger ([www.timwise.org](http://www.timwise.org)).

Wise (2008) addresses an excellent point that his entire career as an antiracist is only possible because of the racist society we live in. He recognizes that the success he has experienced in this field is largely due to his White privilege – that he had the connections to enter into the field, the education, the financial support (due to wealth passed down from family members), and is taken seriously by other Whites based on the

color of his skin, despite the fact that People of Color generally know a lot more about racism than he does based on their lived experience (Wise, 2008).

In the chapter entitled “Resistance,” Wise (2008) states:

Make no mistake, resisting injustice is never easy. Sometimes we don’t have the faintest idea where to begin, or how to fight injustice especially when the source of that injustice is so systemic, so ingrained in the society that its gears, its engine, seem far from our immediate reach. Because resistance is so difficult, and because we have many other day-to-day concerns, many whites who care deeply about issues of racism and inequality will find ourselves paralyzed either by uncertainty, fear, or both; as such our resistance will be rare, short lived, and often ineffective. The fear often felt by whites when it comes to speaking out about racism is palpable. It is a fear of alienating family, friends, or colleagues who may not understand why we feel as we do. (p. 90)

Wise (2008) also comments on the notion of breakthrough moments in discovering one’s White racial identity: “When people ask me if there was a particular ‘light bulb’ moment where I suddenly understood the issues of racism and privilege, I always say no. Coming to understand either is a lifelong process” (p. 136).

### **Anne Braden (1924-2006)**

Fosl (1999) provides anecdotal evidence from the life of Anne Braden, a White, Southern civil rights activist and feminist. Through extensive interviews, Fosl (1999) is able to detail the pivotal moments in Braden’s life that led her towards a career in social justice movements and her contributions to racial change in the post-World War II South.

Braden (1958) describes her transformation into an anti-racist activist:

Finally I came to realize that... no one can go untouched by segregation in the South. No white person, then as now, can be neutral on this question. Either you find a way to oppose the evil, or the evil becomes a part of you and you are a part of it, and it winds itself around your soul like the arms of an octopus...if I did not oppose it, I was...responsible for its sins. There was no middle ground. (p. 30-31)

Fosl explains how Braden's education at a women's college and her mentors there helped her through her development process. Fosl's interviews with Braden illustrate initial feelings of dissonance that are described in Helms' (1990) White identity development model:

I had to come to terms with the fact that my whole society—one that had been very good to me—my family, friends, the people I loved, and had never stopped loving, were just plain wrong. It's a searingly painful process, but it's not destructive, because once you do it, you are free...for all of us who got involved in the social justice movement, the starting point was race because that was so obvious...once you recognize the painful fact that you have benefitted because African Americans have suffered, the entire structure you've identified with begins to crumble, and everything in society comes into question... I remember crying – and I don't cry easily, wondering about whether I was turning against my own people. (Fosl, 1999, p. 29-30)

Throughout the interviews, Braden discusses the importance of learning the historical context of White resistance to racial injustice and becoming attached to a community of people with similar values and goals:

[William Patterson] told me I had a choice. I could be a part of the world of the lynchers, or I could join the 'other America' – the whole lineage of people who had opposed slavery and injustice. That's what I joined...it gave me a connection to a past and a future to be part of a long chain of struggle that was here before [me] and will be here when [I'm] gone. That became a very real concept to me all my life; it still is (Fosl, 1999, p. 32).

### **Jeffrey Ring (unknown-)**

Jeffrey Ring (2000) illustrates memories throughout his career as an antiracism educator. Ring (2000) describes letting go of the fear of making mistakes:

The paramount cognitive shift...has been moving from a place of inhibition-of fear of making insensitive remarks-to the recognition that, despite my best efforts to engage others as respectfully as I can, the nature of my white, male upbringing will very likely betray my intentions: that I am bound to behave or speak in an insensitive, even oppressive way with others at some point. It has been liberating to realize that. (p. 76)

Ring's (2000) moment of epiphany was hearing Black South Africans describe the differences in how racism has manifested in South Africa and the U.S. and saying they at least had numerous examples of White people speaking out against racism. He "took their comments as a self-directed challenge to find [his] own voice against racism in [his] personal and professional life" (Ring, 2000, p. 76). Like Anne Braden, he also recognizes the importance of being connected to a broader anti-racist community: we "cannot travel the field alone" (Ring, 2000, p. 80). Similar to Wise (2008), Ring (2000) describes coming to terms with his White racial identity as a "lifelong process" (p. 75).

### **Virginia Foster Durr (1903-1999)**

Brown (2002) provides a biological account of the life of Virginia Foster Durr, a well-educated, aristocratic Southern belle and housewife. Growing up in the South, Durr had two Black servants and was raised on the "overly romantic tradition of a benevolent slave system" (Brown, 2002, p. 26). She played with all of the children on the plantation, Black and White, and at six years old, she was told about the racial divide (Brown, 2002). Her Black nanny left because of her racist aunt, which was a traumatic experience for Durr (Brown, 2002). Her father, a Presbyterian minister, was fired from the church because he was not a literalist and was seen as somewhat of a radical among his parishioners (Brown, 2002).

There was a clear divide among upper and lower classes in Birmingham, Alabama, and this was made clear to Durr early in her childhood (Brown, 2002). Referring to the lower class, Durr's "parents taught her that they were born to be 'white trash'" (Brown, 2002, p.28). Durr describes her experience of this at a young age: "it was

a very comforting thought...because when you saw people starving and poor and miserable, you thought, 'well it isn't my fault. I didn't do anything to cause it. God just ordained it this way'" (Durr, 1985, p. 32).

Durr's transformation was brought on by the Great Depression:

Up to this time I had been a conformist, a Southern snob. I actually thought the only people who amounted to anything were the very small group I belonged to. I valued the idea of being well-born. What I learned during the Depression changed all of that. I saw a blinding light like Saul on the road to Damascus. It was the first time I had seen the other side of the tracks. The rickets, the pellegra – it shook me up. I saw the world as it really was. (Sullivan, 1996, p. 110)

Durr first became politically active with her involvement in the action to eradicate the poll tax and expand voting rights to people who were being disenfranchised by this unjust policy (Brown, 2002).

### *Potentially Impactful Life Experiences*

Based on the life stories of the aforementioned individuals, this researcher will now draw some conclusions about some experiences and factors that may impact the lives of the research subjects. The neighborhood or region where one grows up seems to be particularly salient. White people who grow up in segregated White areas in the South seem to know from a young age that skin color has meaning in this society. These individuals tend to have flagrantly racist family members or loved ones who disagree with or are unsupportive of their causes.

Prior to the 1900s, the literature shows that most political activism was initiated by men. However, as women took greater power in politics, more White women became involved in the antiracist movement, particularly as the African-American suffrage movement coincided with the women's suffrage movement. Today, it seems as though

many White antiracists are also involved in the struggles of the queer community, women's issues, prisoners' rights, and other movements to support oppressed groups. These individuals expressed the importance of connecting to a larger activist community to push each other to keep going and to avoid feeling overwhelmed and isolated in the struggle. A common thread across contemporary White antiracists is a liberal arts degree from a four-year college. Additionally, each individual had important mentors and teachers in their lives that encouraged their growth and the strengthening of their racial consciousness. As for motivational factors, most of these people identify spirituality as a source of strength and hope in their lives.

### *Summary*

This chapter has reviewed some of the literature on the historical context of racism in the United States, the history of the antiracism movement and the important role that Whites have historically played in the movement, White identity development theory, personal accounts of White antiracist organizers, and potentially impactful life experiences in the lives of antiracist organizers and educators. There clearly is a need for antiracism work, and some common themes emerge from the biographical accounts, but what propels people through the process of White racial identity development? What motivates them to help others through this process? And how do they continue to persevere in the face of great adversity? The answers to these questions may contribute to an understanding of what forces must be in play to engage people in this important field of work. The next chapter will describe the problem, methodology used, and any ethical concerns that may arise through this research.



### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

Using qualitative research methods, this study explored the question: “Are there common identifiable life experiences and motivating factors among White people who actively organize and educate for racial justice?” The purpose of the study was to understand and describe any life experiences that may have motivated and influenced this population. This researcher encouraged participants to consider their racial identity development and the elements of their lives that led to their participation in the anti-racism movement.

This researcher conducted thirteen qualitative interviews using a semi-structured format and employing an interview guide that included questions about family history, religious background, educational and work experiences, and how these individuals maintain hope and stay motivated despite the many challenges they face. The guide included seven demographic questions, ten background questions, five questions exploring participants’ racial justice work, and three forward-looking questions regarding participants’ hopes and visions, and what social work education must encompass in order to move towards an antiracist society. One of the questions, “describe how you came into this work?” was intentionally open and ambiguous and often required further questioning. The questions did not address educational background and “real world” work experience so that they could apply to social work students who had not yet completed their graduate or undergraduate schooling. The last question, “what do social workers need to know?” was intended to draw out some clinical implications from the data.

Since this population has not been frequently studied, the research question was exploratory and qualitative methods were most appropriate for obtaining descriptive data. Interviews allowed for more flexibility in extracting data and uncovering unpredicted themes within the research, as well as important areas for future studies. Information from this study is meant to provide a greater understanding of how White people enter into racial justice work and remain strongly committed to antiracist principles.

### *Obtaining a Sample*

This researcher used professional contacts, online networks, and non-probability sampling techniques – convenience and snowball sampling – to obtain the sample for the study. This researcher sought out individuals within established antiracist organizations in several east coast cities, and also identified participants at conferences and events that focused on racial justice issues. Ideally, the sample would have included subjects from different regions of the United States, but this was not within the scope of the study due to the researcher’s location and financial constraints.

Since the research question is specifically focused on White people, all participants had to be White to meet the criteria for the study. The lack of racial diversity in the sample evokes the question: “Why study only White people?” As acknowledged in the literature review, there are some differing opinions as to what role Whites should have in the antiracism movement. However, this researcher believes that there is a visible need for Whites to be involved in antiracism work in some capacity that is agreeable to the People of Color who are at the forefront of this struggle, and is interested in why some Whites choose this line of work when most others do not. This researcher

also acknowledges a bias due to her desire to talk to other Whites about their experiences as a source of mentoring, role modeling, and inspiration. Prior to writing this thesis, this researcher could name many People of Color throughout history involved in racial justice struggles but could not name a single White civil rights activist and wanted to learn more about White antiracist history. This researcher believes that this apparent lack of education about White involvement in antiracism work is intentional and inhibits White access to engagement in this work. The same interview guide could be used for future research on antiracism organizers and educators of Color and from different regions of the United States.

Apart from being White, subjects had to be U.S. citizens. This is due to the fact that each nation has their own unique race constructs and this researcher is concerned with examining antiracist history and race dynamics that are specific to the United States. More important than being a U.S. citizen was the need to have been raised in the United States; this researcher realized this after conducting the research, however, all of the participants were raised in the United States. Additionally, research participants had to be over the age of eighteen, identify as “antiracist” and devote at least five hours per week to paid or unpaid antiracist work (organizing, education, etc.). This researcher determined “five hours per week” to allow for individuals who were not participating in racial justice work as their full-time job, as well as students who may be trying to engage in this work while still in school full-time. As this researcher was only able to conduct interviews in English, all interviewees had to be able to speak English. The sample was an expert sample; subjects answered questions about their life experiences as antiracist

organizers and educators and also spoke about antiracism work – past, present, and future.

Participants were recruited through the distribution of announcements explaining the study (See Appendix A), as well as through word of mouth. This researcher forwarded the announcement through email to friends, family, and professional contacts, who then forwarded the announcement onto racial justice listserves and other individuals who they believed met the criteria for the study. These individuals then contacted the researcher through email to set up a time and location for the interview. Additionally, this researcher announced the study at events where there were large numbers of self-identified White antiracists, obtained email addresses of potential participants, and emailed these individuals to confirm that they met the criteria of the study and to set up time and locations for interviews. The final sample was a convenience sample which may have contributed to homogeneity in the sample; for example, seven of the thirteen participants were affiliated through one organizing group and consequently, were working on projects that overlapped to some degree.

Of the final sample, three participants heard about the study at events, four were directly contacted by this researcher, and six heard through word of mouth via email. At the events, this researcher obtained email addresses and contacted the potential participants. The six participants who heard about the study through listserves and personal contacts emailed this researcher to express interest in the study. Interview screening was done via email to ensure that participants met the criteria of the study. In all instances, email was used to negotiate times and locations of interviews.

### *Sample Description*

The final sample consisted of thirteen participants. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 67. Three men and ten women were interviewed. Everyone interviewed had at least some graduate level coursework, four were about to complete their MSWs, five had MSWs, six had doctoral degrees (in the fields of social work, education, and divinity) and seven had multiple graduate degrees. Four identified as upper-middle class, seven identified as middle-class, and two identified as poor. Five acknowledged that their socioeconomic status has changed over their lifetimes; three perceived an upward movement in class and economic status while two experienced working class or middle class backgrounds and now identify as poor due to their current unemployment. Seven participants have children and/or stepchildren. Six participants identified their childhood religious affiliation as Catholic, two Jewish, one Methodist, one Southern Baptist, one Presbyterian, one Christian, and one Protestant. The participants currently self-identify their religious or spiritual affiliations as: Methodist (n=3), Catholic (n=2), reconstructionist/reformed Jewish (n=2), spiritual (n=2), non-religious (n=2), “loose...expanding Christian” (n=1), secular humanist (n=1), and practitioner of meditation (n=1). Three participants grew up in rural environments, three in urban environments, six in suburban environments, and one grew up half the time in an urban environment before moving to the suburbs. Five participants grew up in the Midwest, two in the South, and six in the Northeast. The number of hours spent on antiracism work ranged from five to more than fifty hours per week. Ten participants spend more than twenty hours each week on antiracism work, and four people said that antiracism work was their full-time career and primary source of income.

In answering the question “how many hours per week do you spend on antiracism work?” participants had difficulty naming an exact number and often described a range depending on their activities that week. Participants were encouraged to explain what they considered to be antiracism work and met the criteria if they thought they were participating in antiracism work at least five hours per week. Demographic questions regarding socioeconomic statuses, and religious or spiritual affiliations were also ambiguous due to the natural changes that occur in these areas throughout one’s life course. This researcher encouraged participants to answer the questions in whatever way made sense to them and allowed participants to have multiple answers. All of the participants in the study were White. This researcher did not ask participants to state their ethnic identity which could have been interesting data. However, two people self-identified as Jewish, one as Portuguese, and one as Italian.

### *Data Collection*

Each person who responded to the study and matched the criteria participated in interviews that ranged from 45 to 80 minutes. Each interview consisted of four segments: demographic questions, background information, current projects and actions, and the future of the antiracism movement (see Appendix C). The latter three segments were guided, open-ended questions that allowed this researcher to maximize the data obtained from each participant and cater the interview to their personal experiences. Although each participant was asked the same questions, this researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify responses and explore important areas of questioning. By using the

interview guide, this researcher was able to maintain consistency throughout the interviews.

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board at the Smith College School for Social Work (see Appendix D), this researcher conducted thirteen face-to-face interviews in three East Coast cities from January 2009 to March 2009. The interviews were completed in relatively quiet, public areas or in participants' homes and offices. All of the interviews started with a distribution of consent forms and a list of referrals for mental health resources in the area (See Appendix B). The consent form outlined the study, guaranteed confidentiality, and described the potential risks and benefits of participation. Participants were able to read the consent form and ask questions about their participation. The letter also informed participants that they could choose not to answer any question, stop the interview at any time, and withdraw their data from the study anytime before March 15, 2009. Both participant and researcher signed and dated the consent form and participants were given a copy of the form for their records.

The risks of participation in this study were minimal. The questions asked participants to be reflective on their past life experiences, their racial identity development, and what currently motivates them to do their work. There was a possibility that the interviewing process could be distressing for some of the participants. This researcher provided a list of referral sources in case participants felt they needed assistance due to the introspective nature of the interview. One participant inquired if the list was of known antiracist psychotherapists, which was an important point. This researcher did not consider the importance of including referral sources that would be

mindful of issues of racial identity development and would include this information should the research be further developed in the future. There were no incomplete interviews, consequently, all of the data was used.

Participants may have benefitted from participation by gaining new insight into their personal development and considering what forces guided them along the way. Additionally, participants may have gained the satisfaction of knowing that the data collected could help to identify some of the ways that White anti-racist organizers can encourage other White people to care about the work they do and to enter into the field. Compensation was not provided to study participants.

This researcher audio-recorded and manually transcribed the interviews and removed all identifying information. Confidentiality was provided and the consent forms were kept separate from the data. All participants' names were concealed and participants could not be identified by their direct quotes. All materials were locked and secured according to federal regulations and will remain secured until their destruction in three years.

#### *Data Analysis*

This researcher audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. After completing the transcriptions, the researcher analyzed the data using content/theme analysis. The researcher first read through all of the transcriptions and made notes of common ideas and themes. Then the researcher reread the transcriptions, applying one or more codes to each section of text, and used codes from previous transcriptions while also adding new codes. Then this researcher read through the transcriptions a third time to make necessary additions and in order to maintain consistency throughout the coding of all of



the transcriptions. Then this researcher charted the codes found within all of the interviews and identified the number of times each code arose during the interviews while simultaneously identifying important themes within each of the codes. Then the researcher selected appropriate direct quotes that illustrated each of the themes.

Some of the themes that emerged through the coding process included: similarities and differences among childhood environments and parents' employment; similarities and differences in perceived messages about race; parallels in White racial identity development; and parallels and differences among participants' challenges, and sources of hope and motivation. The most prevalent themes were chosen for discussion in this thesis and will be further addressed in the following chapters. It is important to acknowledge that this is a small sample size and the following analysis cannot be generalized to all White people who organize and/or educate for racial justice.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the life experience and motivating factors of White antiracist organizers and educators. This researcher encouraged participants to be reflective about their life experiences and their racial identity development process. The interview guide was designed to draw out some of the important influences, educational experiences, and sources of motivation and hope of the participants. Although the sample size was small, there are some common threads across the participants' lives. The following themes will be discussed in this chapter: definition of antiracist, childhood experiences, parents, messages, antiracist identity development; projects/actions, working with White folks, challenges, hope/motivation, importance of relationships/community, liberation, critiques of the social work profession, and advice to future social workers.

#### *Definition of Antiracist*

Although this researcher did not specifically ask participants to define what it means to be antiracist, various explanations did arise during the interviews (n=7). Five people described antiracist identities as a lifestyle choice or something that they strive to be mindful of at all times. Participant #13 described how he infuses his professional identity as an educator with antiracist values:

I don't think I would consider myself antiracist as much as I would say though I think that is part of what I am as a person. So, I wouldn't identify that but I think through my actions and through what I do, it- it's a really important piece of education. Like to me I can't- I can't teach teachers, without teaching anti-bias, anti-racist ideology...they go hand in hand. And so, I can't do one without the other...And I couldn't talk about being antiracist without bringing in education either...that's probably where I identify myself, you know, antiracism in the

context of education and that's probably more so where my identity lies as an educator uh and a teacher of teachers.

Participant #10 explained how he describes *antiracism* to his peers:

I just say it's a lifestyle that kinda forces me to try and keep rebelling against the norm um to understand race as a construction...I don't define things a lot. What I explain to people in my little spiel is that a lot of times these conversations around racism are very difficult because- like I sat with a group this week...and said half the reason why this conversation's so difficult sometimes is 'cause there's fifteen of you here and every single one of you has a different definition of what racism is, but we start at step five in our arguments instead of step one. So antiracism is kinda starting at step one. Kinda looking back at history to understand how to have these conversations more authentically now. 'Cause if we're just arguing about Obama and things that are in the news right now it's just gonna get passionate and enraging and...it's gonna be- hit a different chord with a Person of Color than a White person and they're gonna have different passions in those arguments and antiracism is really just kinda breaking down what racism is and how do you define it and how do you try and live, now that you know that it is and you're part of that system, how do you try and live an antiracist manner and behaviors, knowing that you're still gonna keep kinda unequally getting what you need 'cause you're White?

Four people described having an antiracist identity as talking about it all the time, and three of these participants also stated that they do not talk about it all the time, suggesting the difficulty in staying accountable to this identity. Participant #7 described how she tries to model antiracist behavior, but perhaps does not talk about it enough and explained: "I guess I don't talk about it at all. I just like- I don't feel like it. Because I know that it would take a lot of explaining." Participant #11 stated that she talks about it all the time: "If I'm at happy hour, that's what I'm talking about. If I'm- anybody I meet, that's what I'm talking about. I talk about myself as a White person all the time, which most other White people are like huh?" Participant #13 described the difficulty and ambiguity of identifying as antiracist and discussing it with other Whites:

I'm thinking what does my anti-bias, anti-racist um ideology mean, what does it mean? Does it mean I challenge every time? Or does it mean that I- I challenge when I think it's at the- there's a real benefit to come from it or there's someone

that's gonna be hurt by it if I don't challenge? And I think I definitely step up at those times, but- but the other ones seem to be a real judgment piece. I don't think for me- I don't identify as antiracist myself, because I don't challenge every opportunity because a lot of the opportunities would just lead to conflict and conflict that you can't build from just seems like knocking your head against the wall. You know so I think I try to pick the battles and challenge when either there's a chance of someone being hurt, or the system hurting somebody, or if I think someone really has the potential to grow.

Three people spoke to being antiracist in different capacities other than being an antiracist organizer or activist. Participant #7 described her current position:

For me it's being a human service professional with an understanding of how structural inequality has...shaped this field, and how this field reflects and perpetuates structural inequality and bringing that...awareness and working for change- working for progress in all aspects of the work. And so that's the work and then, you know, it trickles into life too because um at least in my class we are always identified as our profession.

Participant #6 described the need for antiracists in all aspects of public life:

No matter what our methods, whether it's like clinical work or community organizing or admin or policy or whatever it is, I think that there's something that each of us can do, and I hope that social work students can kind of look at how the different parts are connected and see how we all like have a role to play, so it's not just the social work students who are like the activists or the organizers, that it's up to them. It's up to everyone, like everyone can help.

Participant #8 echoed this sentiment:

I wanna do policy implementation to make sure it's like in an equitable way...I mean my feeling is that this kind of lens, being an antiracist means doing it in jobs that aren't necessarily antiracist jobs, like outside of community organizing. Like I consider myself a community organizer, I do a lot of community organizing. But if people can start to do this work in the system than I think that's when things start to get undone, and that's when things start to change.

### *Childhood Experiences*

This researcher asked participants to describe the neighborhoods where they grew up, specifically focusing on race relations and racial dynamics as perceived by the interviewees. Three participants grew up in rural environments, three in urban

environments, six in suburban environments, and one grew up half the time in an urban environment before moving to the suburbs. Five grew up in the Midwest, two in the South, and six in the Northeast. Five participants identified their communities as all Christian. One individual grew up in a Jewish family in an almost exclusively Christian environment.

Every participant grew up in White-dominated neighborhoods. The majority of participants (n=10) grew up in all-White areas. These individuals described their environments in various ways. Participant #1 stated “it was clear that People of Color weren’t welcome.” Participant #4 described the concern her family had about bringing a Black friend into their neighborhood. Participant #9 described her neighborhood as “highly tense, and overtly racist...people could say whatever they wanted and we lived in a very hyper-segregated area.” Participant #11 explained that she grew up in “an incorporated village where the taxes were higher to keep it all-White...in my neighborhood if there was a Black person on the street, everybody would go to the window and wonder what they were doing there.” Participant #5 described the environment growing up in the rural South:

It was strict and enforced by any means necessary; separation of the races...There was no aspect of my life that was not determined by race and White supremacy and what began uh or later would be called White privilege was an all encompassing um way of life. It tolerated no, um nothing in the middle. It tolerated nothing that was uh that called for some moderate or much less active integration. I grew up as about as uh White supremacist environment as you can imagine.

These responses highlight some examples of implicit (n=2) and explicit (n=3) ways that Whites have historically excluded People of Color from White communities.

Seven participants lived in White-dominated blocks and neighborhoods but were part of integrated school districts and described contact with diverse groups in educational and extracurricular settings. Participant #9 described attending a newly integrated high school: “when I went to high school...that was the first time that we were forced to...interact with people from all over you know Latinos, African-Americans, Asians...it was very tense. And once again, it was hyper-segregated and um there wasn’t really much um interracial interaction.” Participant #7 described going to a school that was 60 percent Black but where the tracking system placed her in advanced classes with all White students. Participant #4 described her racially-mixed charter school where students were accepted based on academic merit and how this experience learning from and working with bright students from diverse backgrounds helped to debunk many of the prejudices and racist messages projected by the segregated communities in the district and by the larger United States society.

Four individuals observed that there was an awareness of Black-White relations in their communities, with very little awareness of other racial groups. Three individuals described growing up in racially diverse environments. One of these participants grew up in a neighborhood where 20 percent of the population was Asian. Another individual lived in an area with a large number of Latino immigrants. Both of these participants acknowledged the limited presence of Blacks in their communities. A third participant grew up in an area where racial demographics were trickier to identify because of varying skin tones within the dominant ethnic group of the town.

## *Parents*

This researcher inquired what each of the participants' caregivers did for a living to see if any of the participants' had actively antiracist parents or parents involved in racial justice work. Over half of the participants (n=7) had mothers who were unemployed. Six had mothers or stepmothers who worked in the helping professions (two nurses, two social workers, one educator, and one special education teacher). One mother worked in a meat-packing house. One stepmother worked in Public Relations. Four fathers or stepfathers worked in helping professions (one physician, two social workers, and one educator/rehabilitation counselor). Four fathers or stepfathers did manual labor (carpenter, factory worker, construction worker, plumber). Six fathers worked in business or finance positions (two accountants, one corporate manager, two stockbrokers, and one CFO). In total, ten of the 29 reported caregivers worked in the helping professions. Participant #13 observed: "both of their jobs [required]...interacting with people with very different cultures and diverse backgrounds. So part of their jobs to be successful meant that they had to get past some of their own assumptions."

Additionally, four participants reported having parents actively involved in volunteer and charitable work. One participant's family manages and finances a non-profit family foundation. Another participant's parents helped organize an annual Martin Luther King Day celebration in their city. One participant shared that both parents came from a serving model that involved having a commitment to doing charitable deeds. Another participant's mother was heavily involved in civic duties including PTA president and school board positions.

## *Messages*

This researcher asked participants several questions regarding the messages they have received in regards to race such as “what did you learn from parents and other family members about race?” and “what did you learn in school about race?” These questions were intended to determine whether various external forces had any significant impact on the individual’s racial identity development and in what capacity.

Two participants had no explicit messages about race due to the complete lack of diversity in their communities. Six people described learning subconsciously (n=3) or consciously (n=1) that one was not supposed to talk about race, or that the topic made other people uncomfortable (n=2). Participant #3 described the historical context of her community and learning covert messages about race that she did not fully understand at the time:

I just remember like growing up in Chicago like in the neighborhood that I did um you know like terms like blockbusting and like white flight and these other words that I think of as def- like describing institutional racism- were pretty commonly spoken like they were just like I guess they were common enough phenomena that like I remember them being talked about when I was really young...I think when I was little I remember having an understanding that a neighborhood *going black* was a bad thing. It meant that that neighborhood was decreasing in value.

Participants described explicit (n=8), implicit (n=4), and contradictory (n=2) messages about race from their family members. Only one participant received explicitly antiracist messages; participant #2’s parents actively talked about “racial prejudice and that it was wrong and...would talk about things that were on TV or whatever around race.” Three participants were taught explicitly White supremacist messages. Participant #5 was taught that: “separation of races was natural...there’s scientific basis for that belief. That separation of the races was god’s will. It was expressed in many different



ways.” Participant #11 learned “that we were better than Black people, that um they were largely not to be trusted.” And participant #12 stated that she was taught to “prepare for kind of a segregated society...people had rights to live and the pursuit of happiness but had to kind of...know their place. There are Black people here and White people there. White people were superior.” Two people mentioned learning about other overtly racist Whites and learning that their families were the “good kind” of White people. Eight participants have heard their parents or family members say something that they found to be racist and offensive.

The following four participants provided examples of implicit messages from family members about race. Participant #4 stated: “my mother could express sadness at images in life that conveyed to me that something was wrong here. That there was abuse here, that there was an evil here, that there was a suspect that no one should be treated like that.” Participant #12 shared: “I remember my mother having kind of concerns...some kind of worries about me being in...the big city. She didn’t so much as say, but I’m sure there were some kind of racial worries that I might be attacked or raped.” Participant #3 described:

I definitely feel like there are things that I remember now like that I look back on as far as I don’t know things like like giving money to someone who asks for money on the street like that like I was always taught that you should never do that, like that was like a sin. And which again not that anyone would overtly say that that was about race but I think it’s connected.

Participant #7 explained her family’s cultural values:

I think a cultural element in the way I was brought up that is partly from culture and religion that has to do with questioning. My grandfather was a civil rights lawyer who was very active in um desegregating suburban Philadelphia...[My parents] were on a task force that produced a Martin Luther King birthday service every year that was um sponsored I think by the synagogues and churches but it was a truly integrated and diverse event...I don’t think my parents ever like

engaged me or my siblings in a discussion about um race and inequality. Although you know it's something my mother is very conscious of. I don't know. I think my mother certainly engaged us in- in learning, like- in learning about history and figures and um reading and going to plays and going to movies um you know that weren't only like commercial, white kinds of stuff. So in that way I think um I don't know she had my horizons somewhat opened.

Two participants described contradictory messages from family members about race.

Participant #6 explained:

My dad's side of the family was known to be very active politically and um and they had like- I'd grow up hearing about how they had attended the March on Washington and seeing Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream speech...my mom never talked about it...she doesn't really recognize that racism exists I don't think. My dad didn't really talk about it uh. Like as I've gotten older I've noticed that he'll make comments that I think are like pretty offensive but he- but he still looks at himself as one of the good non-racist White people type of thing. But there's very much like a distance and I don't- neither one of my parents were ever close with any People of Color...I dated a Black guy last year and my mom, you know, met him and she- she was never happy with it, it was really obvious and she never came out and said anything about it, 'cause that's her thing, she doesn't like talking about this.

Participant #11 explained:

My mother's husband, my stepfather, had- his business partner was Black, so there was a kind of very contradictory messages where like G. and his family were fine and all other Black people were suspect...that we were better than Black people, that um they were largely not to be trusted except for G. That you like to live in a place where they're not. That we moved away from the city you know because there were too many People of Color. Um there was...a lot of negative language used, in spite of the exceptional people. My mother also had- later on had a very good friend, a Black woman, but they were always exceptions, she still in general, they um didn't- not they didn't like Black people, they were racist, overtly, behaviorally racist.

The majority of participants (n=7) acknowledged the importance of messages from family members and religious communities about treating people with respect and doing good deeds. These individuals identified as Catholic (n=3), Methodist (n=2), Christian (n=1), and Jewish (n=1). Participant #6 embodied this perspective:

I think that growing up it was- even though now I look back and I criticize it for being very colorblind and not getting to the root of the problem, I was taught to, you know, like treat people well and- and care- to care about people and to help people... So I think in that sense it kind of laid the groundwork cause if you don't really like care about people in general, then why would you even care about racism?...I don't want to discount that foundation. I think a lot of people you know it's easy to criticize that but I do think that for me it played a big part 'cause like I said why else does it matter? Who even cares?

Seven participants described learning that everyone was equal and everybody was to be treated equally regardless of skin color. Four people spoke to the generic, simplistic and mythical quality of these messages. Participant #1 described some of the myths that are often understood as truths by White Americans: "I believed, you know, the national myths of, you know, equality for all. Slavery was in the past. All of that was in the past."

This researcher posed the question "what did you learn in school about race?"

Eleven participants described learning a skewed version of U.S. history. Participant #9 described feeling that history lessons felt irrelevant and uninteresting:

I don't remember anything other than the Pilgrims. You know the same stories everybody got, *The Lies My Teacher Told Me*. The winners, you know, and things happen for the best and how helpful we are so I was one of those kids that found history boring, history was a bunch of lies. I really got that it was boring, the same story over and over.

Seven participants discussed learning about slavery and the genocide of the Native Americans but with no connection to how that history impacts the lives of Native Americans or African descendants today. Two participants described going to racially mixed schools where they learned about African American history. Participant #7 illustrated:

In early years there were sections of the curriculum on like colonial Alexandria and stuff like that which I'm sure skirted over slavery but I don't really remember. But later in high school, um I think there was an elective, a full really

good course on um the history- something like Black history in Alexandria or something like that which I took....And I was one of the few White students who took it. But I remember it was a good experience because it gave me a chance to build more relationships and friendships with some Black students. And it was a good course, like taught by a progressive young teacher, a White teacher...and we read some good books.

Participant #3 shared:

I think when I was in school in Chicago when there were more Black students and more Black teachers I think I learned a lot more about like historically Black people and their accomplishments and stuff like that and I think less so when I was in the suburbs. I know there were definitely things in history that I can remember like in history classes that I can remember learning that like like when we talked about um um you know desegregation in schools and how like the supreme court ruled they had to desegregate with all deliberate speed like that quote really stands out for me because I remember like a history teacher being like yeah it was this really important thing that they said it was with all deliberate speed that means it wasn't just like they had to desegregate, they had to do it right away, they made it sound like that language was really a good thing but now I find it interesting to read antiracist writers who had a different critique on that like actually all deliberate speed was this really confusing language that didn't really have a concrete way of articulating.

Five participants shared that they learned nothing about race in grade school, college, or graduate school, despite there being many potential opportunities to discuss race issues in the types of courses they were taking. Participant #2 stated: "I would say in everything I took there was never a focus on race. I majored in English so there was a lot of literature and there could have been opportunities you know to bring out issues of race in the literature you know, but it was never done." Participant #12 explained what she learned about in grade school and later during her graduate studies:

The Civil War, and Emancipation Proclamation...History was much more kind of bashful. We knew that it was bad I mean to uh- we learned that it was bad that Black people couldn't vote you know uh and that there were slaves, we knew that that was bad and part of what the Civil War was fought. And also that we learned that Abe Lincoln was actually more interested, in fact he might have been more ambivalent about the slave issue than kind of keeping the Union together...I think there was a course [in the doctoral program] we took on cultural and ethnic differences. I don't think we talked much about race.

Participant #11 expressed:

I learned nothing about race in school. We didn't learn about slavery except oh by the way, the Civil War was won and then everything was equal. I learned the same lies that everybody else learned. The same kind of things that allowed me to be unconscious about my privilege and that were confusing to me when um went to [graduate school for social work], I learned nothing about race. Not one thing...And I got my Phd in [social work], I didn't learn anything about race...you can still go through the school of social work today and learn nothing about race unless you chose to.

Participant #13 explained:

Not that often were things tied into- to race, to diversity. It wasn't brought up- it wasn't brought up as a- a content area or a learning focus that we should be doing- it didn't get brought up in general. School forums of any kind um...it was like something that in my school was like this slight pretense that there was no diversity and the few kids I- I guess I did have a few friends that- or acquaintances that were diverse at that time and uh it just wasn't- it wasn't really talked about, it wasn't um provisions weren't made in the school there was nothing visible that identified diversity as being something that needed to be addressed in any way nor was it something that was an issue either.

Five participants spoke about the nature of their education being very Euro-centric and White supremacist. Participant #3 stated: "I definitely learned the White man's version of what happened...in college I still I think a lot of what I was learning was still pretty Euro-centric and not necessarily critiquing the racism of the history of our country." Participant #1 shared: "I mean all we heard about Black people was that White people brought them over here to be slaves and that was sort of the end of their story with an implied you know they- they were people destined to be slaves and you know there's a reason for that, kind of attitude." Participant #13 stated: "It was very classical Western civilization of White people as far as um history, learning, teaching, literature. When it came to instructional pedagogy, now knowing instructional pedagogy, it was very- very

White-oriented. Uh you sit and you listen and you watch and you think um very analytical.” Participant #5 explained:

Well school as I said in total justification around uh White supremacy although that exact language or term wasn’t used but there was uh- the teaching that that White people were smarter, more successful, on down the line, at no inkling that- in school- that Black people even had a culture or a history, that it was all- one of the classic methods of Black people’s history starting with slavery, I had no idea about anything else. In the White South, Native peoples were romanticized now that the uh extermination efforts were almost totally successful. You then began to romanticize uh as many White southerners did, and as many people do, our connection to an Indian uh relative. I realized later that we were trying to grapple with uh um race issues that we knew somewhere in side of us were wrong, and that was our way. We never would’ve said we have kinfolk that were Black, that means you wouldn’t be White because of the one-drop rule, so we would transfer that to the Native Americans, but only after- because they didn’t constitute any threat to White supremacy.

Participant #10 spoke to institutionalized racism in education that has resulted in a lack of race discussions in schools: “the fact that the teachers can’t actively identify as antiracist and I’ve had teachers tell me that. I- I lead a student group...and I’ve had teachers show up and say I can’t actively identify as antiracist, that’s not professional.”

### *Antiracist Identity Development*

This researcher wanted to understand each participant’s racial identity formation and asked exploratory questions that allowed the interviewees to explain what life experiences influenced who they are today in terms of their anti-racism work including: when did you first recognize racial differences; when did you first understand White privilege; and more generally, describe anything that you think influenced your process of becoming an antiracist educator or organizer? This section will be grouped into several sub-themes: developing awareness of racial inequality; understanding White privilege and racism; personal disposition and character; other anti-oppression work; self-

education and independent learning; and racial identity development as an ongoing process.

### *Developing Awareness of Racial Inequality*

Most of the participants (n=9) began to recognize how different races are treated in elementary school (n=5) and middle school (n=4). Five participants remembered feeling a sense of injustice when learning about the genocide of Native Americans (n=2) and slavery (n=1), and when realizing that there were separate and inferior facilities and schools for people of color (n=2). Three participants had early memories of knowing about different races but could not articulate or remember exactly what they understood at the time. One person learned about racial differences through history books. Another individual had mixed extracurricular activities but experienced discomfort when realizing that there was a social boundary around her community that excluded People of Color.

Two participants shared that they had no consciousness of their racial identity and racism during their childhood. Participant #1 knew that different races existed but had not met any People of Color until she moved away from her community for the first time:

I was 17 when Martin Luther King was assassinated and I don't even remember hearing about MLK even when he was assassinated. I mean it was just not part of my world view. I was in a very uh kinda White enclave and those weren't our concerns and people didn't talk about it...I grew up in a time when you respect what the teachers said and what books said especially, you know, books were um almost God, so I really took it at face value.

Two participants stated that they always were aware of their White identities and racial dynamics in their community. Both of these individuals lived in overtly racist, segregated environments. Participant #5 described:

I had always been fascinated by race because it was so predominant...Race was the determining factor of life...there was never a time when I wasn't kind of internally asking why things were the way they uh were...I was aware of them at

a very young age because the White South was in their opinion, uh under attack, by integrationists and the federal government and what became known as civil rights workers, I guess is the best way to put it. So there never was a time that I wasn't conscious about race...I was constantly being schooled. Ironically in my work later, this would be a help not a hindrance 'cause a lot of us who were White over the years would grapple with the fact that they grew up in progressive White homes, uh that they were unaware of certain things, and I could never say that, I was always aware.

In the same vein, participant #2 stated:

I don't ever remember not being aware because of the kind of community I was raised in...my parents were very actively um I guess I would say antiracist for their time...so I was always aware that racism existed. And even if it wasn't kind of named the way we would name it now...I probably recognized it as- as a dynamic as a child because I was so aware of how Black people were treated and understanding that being White meant you didn't get treated that way. So I was always very aware on that kind of a level.

### *Understanding White Privilege and Racism*

Six participants began to recognize White privilege when they realized how much easier their lives were in comparison to the lives of People of Color. Although this researcher did not directly ask participants to define White privilege, participants described this racial privilege manifesting in various ways: not having to think about one's racial identity (n=5), ability to organize social actions around issues such as peace, feminism, and queer rights without having to consider race issues (n=4), freedom of movement and being able to go wherever one wanted without being stopped (n=2), being placed in advanced classes with all White students for no other reason than skin color (n=1), living in a nice house and having a car (n=1), living in a nice neighborhood where people paid higher taxes to live there (n=1), ability to build wealth over several generations of privilege (n=1), not having to work as a child (n=1), having other Whites' assurances that one is a good person and that there is nothing wrong with one's behavior



(n=1), having a relatively easy time obtaining food stamps and then having a professor suggest trying to get an article published about the experiences (n=1), and being able to find a job with little difficulty (n=2); one woman recalled an anecdote where her employer explicitly told her that she was hired over another qualified candidate because of her race. All six of these individuals observed these differences during their youth and five pointed out that although they recognized these privileges, they did not have a real understanding of the concept of White privilege until later on in their lives. One participant had a moment during a training where the facilitator encouraged her to let other people share their stories and she realized that her privilege as a White person amounted to her having more power in the room and that part of relinquishing that privilege was to be aware of it and witness the voices of the people of color in the room. Another participant shared that she finally began to grasp White privilege through dialogues with a black female colleague when the colleague identified as black first and the participant identified as a woman first; she then understood that having White privilege means not having to have an awareness of one's White racial identity and its impact on one's life. Participant #11 stated: "I probably, in retrospect recognized that as privilege. I um you know the fact that I always got any job I applied for. But when did I first frame it as that? Probably ten years ago, how sad is that?" Participant #8 made the distinction of being aware of White privilege and "owning it without feeling guilty," a phase that began less than two years ago for her. Participant #7 described her guilt of having unearned privilege which manifested in panic attacks during her childhood; she also stated: "I've been doing community based work for a long time and certainly

grappling and struggling with issues of White privilege um but only, only fairly recently have like seen a place for me to bring that into my identity.”

Four participants first became aware of White privilege in college and graduate school through taking a course (n=3), readings (n=2), and involvement in the women’s movement (n=1). Participant #6 read Peggy MacIntosh’s article entitled “Unpacking the White Privilege Knapsack” and commented:

I had always been taught to see racism in terms of individual acts of racism or discrimination and never a systemic thing. And I think that was really important because that really spoke to my experience...if you just said this or didn’t say this word...then you were kind of safe, an OK White person and that’s where it ended and you didn’t really have any more responsibility than that. So that really, really spoke to me. And I would say- I think but you know it wasn’t until a couple years ago really that I began to get more of- like I’d always kind of- I didn’t really examine White privilege, I’d always looked at it as we have to kind of work towards like the equality of people of color, but I didn’t factor the White privilege part into that at all... ‘cause I’d always been taught not to see it.

Participant #1 explained the painful process of discovering White privilege while raising a biracial child:

It wasn’t until I started watching my older son you know have these experiences which you know for the first ten years of his life, I actually blamed him for them you know I was like you must have done something cause people wouldn’t treat you like that if you didn’t do something, you know, so I was really contributing to his problems. But uh you know after awhile you start to see you know, you start to witness things, like he was out riding his bike and some White guy came out and spit on him and and called him nigger...and after an accumulation of you know like you start seeing these things and part of it too is you’re growing up, you know, I grew up in a world that made sense. You know that things happen for a reason, you know there’s cause and effect. If you’re good, good things happen, and if you’re bad, bad things happen. And my son’s world was starting not to make any sense to me you know and I finally you know when you start kinda, it’s not something like all of a sudden one day I was like OH this is White privilege and racism going on here it’s like you sort of start to, uh you know, absorb this idea that the only way to make sense of all of these you know occurrences is through a lens of racism and White privilege. You know that if- if you use that lens, you can explain every single thing that happened and if you use some other lens, you can’t. And it was sort of that accumulation of experiences observing *his* experiences that kind of led me to the understanding of White

privilege. Now I didn't actually have a name for it until I hooked up with you know, some other antiracists but the whole idea that this is not something of the past was kind of sinking in on me.

Seven individuals described feeling like they knew something was wrong but did not have a language for it. Participant #2 spoke to the relative newness of the language of White privilege:

There are two different things, one is recognizing it as a concept, but not having a name for it. And then there's having a name for it (laughs)...it was only after I got into antiracism work, and even then in the early days – I've been doing this work for over twenty years – in the early days of doing it, White privilege wasn't so much part of the language and that only happened I don't know. Maybe ten to fifteen years ago, that white privilege became a very dominant concept, theme, and lens for looking at racism and how it operates.

Additionally, four participants expressed not having an outlet to discuss what they were thinking or how they were feeling with anyone in their lives; participant #9 stated she "didn't have a way out of the box that I was socialized in." Five individuals expressed feeling relieved after finding outlets and antiracist mentors with whom to discuss these concerns; participant #10 shared:

Instantly within 2 to 3 months, I had 20 people that I knew in my life who were White who called themselves antiracist and talked about it...I think one of the constant things you realize or at least I feel anyway and I see...undergrads struggling with this issue is when you start reading antiracism literature or education you think you're the first White antiracist that ever existed.

### *Personal Disposition and Character*

This researcher was curious if any participant would talk about their personal disposition and character. Three participants described various aspects of their personality that impact their work and how they came to be antiracist. Participant #3 described herself as "a cynical anarchist." Participant #8 talked about her innate optimism and desire to help others as being integral to her work:

I've always been a kind of person that likes to take care of people and make things better which is probably why I was drawn to social work. Uh and not to say I feel like they need to be taken care of, like all People of Color in the world. But I- I just think that, I'm always like trying to make things better, and that's just what I've been doing forever. And that something in my family like the nonprofit they run I've seen it ever since I was young, like doing volunteer work like those kind of things. And I think I mean what draws me to this is what I said before, it just makes sense to me...So I think just a desire to make things better. I know that sounds kind of trite and cheesy, but I don't know, that's how I feel, gotta try, gotta change the world...I'm a ridiculously optimistic person too, it's my biggest fault. I'm too optimistic so that would be how I stay hopeful.

Participant #13 noted his curiosity in people from different backgrounds and cultures than his own:

I um I don't know if that was- that's part of my own personal disposition that I just- it's something that was in me that I wanted to do um- I mean it could very well go back to the idea that I was taught to value other people and that other people bring their own ideas and their own values, their own culture to- to the table and that those should be respected um. The seeking out, I don't know if that's a little bit of the Curious George in me?

#### *Other Anti-Oppression Work*

Eight individuals were involved in activist causes that did not focus specifically on racial justice issues. These efforts included: gender equality (n=6), world peace (n=1), queer rights (n=1), religious equality (n=1), refugee resettlement (n=1), and HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention, and treatment (n=1). Three female participants (one of whom additionally identified as queer), spoke to how dealing with gender oppression on a daily basis has made it easier to understand how white privilege and racism functions.

Participant #3 woman shared: "when it was clear to me that oppression was real and that other people had privilege, it became undeniable that I also had privilege and was an oppressor um you know in other ways." Participant #11 stated: "when I became exposed to anti-racist ideas it was a little easier for me to get my mind around it because I had a

feminist analysis so I understood kind of structural oppression, so it was easier to understand how race fits in there than if I didn't have that background.” Participant #2 pointed to the structural racism within one White dominated peace movement group and how the experience of working with this group shaped her professional development:

Within that organization which was very predominantly White um there was a – what at that time was called third world caucus which was where People of Color in the organization came together to strategize about how to ach- how to inject their voice into the strategies of the organization in a way that would help move things forward. And I just started watching how they did their work and kind of aligned myself to be an ally with them in whatever ways I could and learned a huge amount from them uh but just saw how the organization as a whole kept ignoring their voices and just feeling really really frustrated with how all that was going. So when I left there um I decided what I wanted to do was prepare myself somehow to work with White- predominantly White organizations who said they wanted to be able to bring people together across race to, you know, achieve progressive goals, but weren't able to do it.

### *Self-Education and Independent Learning*

Participants described ways that they learned about race, White privilege, and racial identity through typical channels; three of the younger participants had teachers or courses in college or graduate school that led them to begin to examine their racial identity; and three participants experienced a steep learning curve around issues of race during their first job experiences in the field of social work. However, most of the participants described seeking out resources and methods of learning about race through dialogues with People of Color and White antiracists (n=6), reading (n=7), and participating in workshops and conferences (n=7). Participant #9 described her experience:

I would say it was the college experience, when you started reading beyond the textbooks and interacting with other people...up until that time, it was self-education, it was you know, depending on who you're hanging out with...it's not going to come to you, you have to kind of figure it out on your own.

Participant #10 described a similar experience:

The past couple years in grad school has been a lot of self work. I've skipped classes and done things and that to go to conferences, to do readings, to challenge myself more. So it's been more individual if I want to find out about this stuff and really pound out the concept of trying to help students because I'm still young and I'm still a student and I just went through the same process that they did in undergrad...I read every single thing Tim Wise wrote and in his biography I was like how does he get where he was? And in his book and in his website it's like 'was trained with the People's Institute' and I was like, I gotta find this group.

Participant #5 illustrated his college experiences:

In my sophomore year I began to frequent a coffee house on...campus that had some campus ministers that were very progressive around issues of race...I began to be a hanger-on, you know, I'd be in groups all the time, just talking about these sort of things...I would hear of them, some that were known. I would hear about either themselves or their organization like CORE and SNCC and groups like this. And after awhile I would purposely try to put myself in- in their presence. Although I was not recognized, I was just a part of the crowd, I was eating it up.

Lastly, seven participants identified travel within the country (n=4) and internationally (n=3) as being significant learning experiences particularly around the notion of race and White privilege. Participant #7 described how going to different areas exposed her to new ideas:

I learned how to get into Washington, and I was going to Adams Morgan, and that's not really about antiracism, but it's about like getting out of the small-mindedness of Alexandria and having the experience of being a minority in some settings.

### *Racial Identity Development as an Ongoing Process*

Five participants described developing their racial development as an ongoing process. Three of the younger participants described being new to the work and described where they are currently in their identity process. Participant #6 stated: "How do I talk about this work and do this work with people of all different backgrounds? It's

definitely a work in progress.” Participant #8 commented on managing frustrations during the learning process:

I’m still definitely in the phase of I get the theory really really well and I try to act – think about my antiracist principles all the time, but things pass me by a lot, more than I’m happy with. So, but it’s pretty new, this stuff, it’s only about a year and a half...It’s a process...you’re not going to learn it right away.

Participant #10 explained:

I don’t think it’s a process that stops because people talk about this feeling of guilt that they have when they find out...what was worse for me was not so much the White guilt aspect that people talk about a lot but is the constant need of validation. Once you say, ok this makes sense...it’s not so much the guilt factor, it’s the needing to be validated by folks of Color at all times...that was a struggle for me for awhile when I was trying to do the work initially...how do you kind of now create your own White identity that’s positive that’s not like mimicking like what you’ve been told and romanticizing and always needing to be validated by folks of Color you know.

One participant described the need to constantly think about White privilege and accountability to avoid being complicit with White supremacist institutions and systems.

Participant #9 described her process of developing a positive White identity:

I went through my own racial identity development, I first started out doing it because I was guilty. And as I became clearer and clearer that I was doing it to save myself and to save my people you know us as humanity um my conviction grew. And so now when I say that I’m a White antiracist organizer, I say it with pride. I really feel like it’s the only way that I can live with some sense of integrity um so I just want to say that I went through many evolutions.

Three participants described the feeling that upon learning about racism, White privilege, and their complicit or direct role in upholding racially oppressive systems, there “was no turning back” as one participant describes below. The following three excerpts illuminate various “turning points” in the lives of the participants. Participant #11 explained:

It’s kind of like you know the song amazing grace? ...I really do think it’s- I was blind and now I see. And once I see, I see racism everywhere. And I don’t think

that means like you know I don't think I have a psychiatric disorder and I don't think I'm overzealous, I just think it is everywhere, so I see the Black guy that's not getting the cab. I see the woman who crosses the street because a Black guy's walking down. I see my own inclination to do that. I see you know who gets paid what, I see who gets tenured...I see where people get to live and how they get to live. I see...what all the data shows, all the statistics, on health, on housing, on income. Um I see who's getting killed in Iraq, I see who's coming back and committing suicide.

Participant #5 stated:

I had an uncle...who was murdered...because he had come home early from work and came upon a burglary in his house and a fight ensued. It was a young Black man who was later found to be severely mentally retarded. [His] death uh set off a wave of violence...It affected me deeply, um still does...As I was becoming involved in what people would call civil rights, I went to visit this young man that was found guilty of killing my uncle. I visited him in [X] prison and tried to get some sense of what's this race thing all about. And uh he was- we were really not able to have a conversation he was- uh but we did find a commonality around our faith, so it allowed us to have a conversation. Uh when his automatic appeal came up, um I went and testified on his behalf because uh, you know, this feeling...I didn't have an analysis at that time, but I knew that what was going on in Mississippi was wrong and needed to stop. I had to go into the courtroom, this gauntlet on both sides of the sidewalk on entrance. I had to walk that gauntlet with a couple of my extended family in that mob. Uh after that there was no turning back.

Participant #10 shared a turning point in his White racial identity development:

I probably started actively or at least identifying as White...when I was the end of freshman year-sophomore year in college and I had a teacher that put it out there for me and started talking about what it actually meant to be White um yeah...Yeah um. That was actually probably I mean to this point, I guess a turning point for me and then um I think um when you're doing like racial identity and you're starting to learn about White privilege and different things like that, kind of the biggest privilege is to be able to rationalize everything you hear and I could go home and people could rationalize it for me you're a good person, you're doing good things, why are you thinking about all of this other stuff. Um but to this day I would say if it didn't come from my professor who was White, if it didn't come from her it wouldn't have just sunk in.

### *Projects/actions*

This researcher wanted to identify the many ways that White antiracists contribute to racial justice movement building. Eleven individuals were directly involved with four



different organizations working for racial justice. Nine individuals were involved in organizing events with antiracist programming. Seven individuals identified writing and research interests as antiracist projects; two of these individuals also stated concerns about conducting research given the potentially exploitative nature of research; and four participants criticized academia for creating a large mass of literature on racism and other oppressions without encouraging any real transformation of institutional systems. Six participants are involved in organizing in various capacities including networking at events and workshops (n=4), creating antiracist student groups (n=4), recruiting people for events and trainings (n=6), and organizing social workers (n=6). These six individuals all spoke of movement building within the schools of social work in New York City; participant #9, a clinical social worker, illustrated this effort:

We said we were going to bring social workers through this process until we got the schools of social work to organize themselves to bring about a paradigm shift. We want future social workers to be antiracist social work educators and practitioners which means that...[the People's Institute framework] would be a defining characteristic of social work. And we're not gonna stop until we're done so we've had 2500 social workers go through, we've had 54 workshops and...we're not giving up 'til the schools of social work here finally get it, and come to the point where we've reached critical mass within each institution. That this institution will say we're gonna organize among our profession, other institutions within our profession. I think we have a long way to go.

Six participants included self-work in on-going projects. All six of these participants emphasized that they have to examine their White privilege and challenge their antiracist identities on a daily basis. These participants tended to report having recently started identifying as antiracist within the last two years (n=4). Three of these participants are involved in White caucus groups to gain a better understanding of how White privilege is manifested and how to hold each other accountable for the work. One

individual described wanting to explore their ethnic roots through reading and eventually journeying to their ancestor's countries of origin.

Five participants were involved in planning and facilitating antiracist workshops, trainings, and courses; these ranged from several hours to eight-week courses. Five individuals described working with their family and friends to increase awareness of racism and White privilege; participant #10 shared: "on Thanksgiving we always have to have a moment of silence for the national day of mourning for the genocide of the Native peoples and my family's like oh god there she goes again, but they have it." Three individuals do consulting work with agencies striving to implement antiracist policies. Three individuals are conducting assessments of their work settings to better define the needs of the group in an effort to achieve equity and cultural competency in their various institutions. Two individuals teach antiracist curricula through institutions of higher education. One of these educators is interested in increasing the number of community organizing classes at the school with an emphasis on an antiracist community organizing model. Both of these educators want to engage their students to encourage the development of future antiracist teachers and social workers. Other actions include: letter-writing to media outlets to provide a counterpoint to claims that we live in a "post-racial society" now that Obama is president (n=1) and to the deans of the schools of social work demanding antiracist curricula (n=2), working with prison reform groups (n=4), compiling a CD of antiracist singer-songwriters (n=1), producing a DVD on White privilege to show at church events (n=1), working with student groups on housing creation and rehabilitation (n=2), grant-writing (n=2), integrating a race analysis into psychotherapy practice (n=1), developing a culturegram tool to use when working with

immigrant families (n=1), and creating opportunities for People of Color through equal hiring practices (n=1). One participant described her personal goal of bringing an antiracist framework to the corporate world. Another participant described her commitment to the Judeo-Christian tradition called Jubilee which means that she will try to even the playing field by not leaving her wealth to her already privileged family members but instead it to people who need it more.

### *Working with White Folks*

Most of the participants (n=11) noted intentional work within White communities which includes consulting with predominantly White, progressive or politically neutral agencies to implement antiracist policies (n=7) and helping Whites to understand White privilege and the history of racism in the United States (n=11). Ten participants belong to White caucus groups that engage around racial justice issues. Participant #10 described these forums as: “a support system because White people need to talk about what it means to be White.” Participant #6 explained:

I feel like I lack courage a lot in like the kind of work I do because I am afraid of making a mistake, and I do make mistakes, all the time. And...this is maybe why I keep saying like I feel like we need a space for like White antiracists to kind of help work through some of that. Because I don't think it's fair to put that burden on People of Color like teach us or validate us. It's not their job to do that. And I think oftentimes like White antiracists will go to People of Color to validate them and like what they're doing and let them know that they're a good person. 'Cause it's like traumatizing when you see stuff, obvious things going on around you, it's a traumatizing thing, to have to see that, and to hear your family members say things, and to hear you know people, to see what goes on, to me it's traumatizing, but at the same time I don't know if the space is right to like be kind of like you know putting that burden on People of Color to help us get through it you know. 'Cause it's different level of trauma, it's not a survival issue that People of Color deal with when you talk about racism, it's more like discomfort and- and you know, like confusion, it's not survival.

Five participants commented on the various difficulties they have encountered when working with White people. All of these individuals spoke to some degree about the frustrations they faced when talking to White people about racism who did not fully understand their analysis of race in the United States. Participant #5 noted how White culture actually impedes organizing efforts: “organizing Whites...this is a very difficult thing to do, ‘cause we’re taught to compete, we’re taught to be separate from each other, you know there’s this thing about who’s the most serious antiracist?” Four participants explained various stages of learning how to talk to White people with compassion rather than a place of anger. Participant #10 explains:

I try and engage in it more patiently now than I used to. ‘Cause it’s one of those things that like you find out that you’re White that you’re so aggravated about things and systems sometimes if you choose to go down that path that I think you lose patience with people. And the people you lose patience with the most time is the people you love and your friends and your family that you want to get it more than anyone else. So there was someone who said something to me this year that I’ve kinda always try and use is kinda doing this work with compassion and leadership, knowing that you weren’t always that uh oriented and always have the lens that you did so other people aren’t going to also.

Two participants who identified as Jewish commented on their frustration when speaking with other Jews who deny their whiteness and the desire to help those individuals come to terms with their racial identity (n=1). Participant #13 described an effective method of teaching White students about White privilege:

I think part of helping them challenge their White privilege is saying here’s mine, here’s where I thought of this at this time. In retrospect you can be open and honest about where your own White privilege is, and then that tends to lead into some really good discussions about getting individuals to challenge themselves.

Five people discussed historical perspectives of White participation in racial justice movements. Participant #4 explained:

SNCC [the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] said to [White activists] thanks but how about going back and doing the really hard work. Why don't you go back to your White communities and deal with the White racism and deal with the white privilege?...I have to stay in my own White community and do the work with my White brothers and sisters and move forward in the multicultural setting where I can give witness with other Whites and build trust with Persons of Color that we're doing our work. That you know, that we are committed to that work.

Participant #5 stated:

There were always White people uh in the circles I travelled, although there was often discussion about whether that was appropriate or not, whether Whites were-got in the way, uh whether they were helpful. This was a big issue...when we were first formed there would be folk who either coming out of a nationalist ideology or who would say...[we] shouldn't be working with White people at all and others who very much believed it took everybody, well there were so many White people and we were in such positions that could get money and things like that but you had to involve us. That was hopeful for someone like me, I wanted to be involved, but later we would be uh told that we really need to start organizing in the White community. See I had no idea what that meant. Nothing. What do you mean, go back [home] and talk about racism?...Well damn I'd rather be beaten and arrested. [My colleague] would have this litany that he would do in the training, he said have you ever seen a hundred White people speaking out against racism, no People of Color around, no civil rights workers, no ministers? We'd say a hundred? Shit. And he'd say fifty. We'd- it'd get down to ten and by then we'd have an attitude. And one of the reasons that European Dissent was formed was to be able to say yes to that when he would ask.

Participant #1 described the history of the course she facilitates:

You know we started that confronting racism course out as uh mixed you know Black and White and we recognized that the White people were benefitting from the Black people's pain but the Black people weren't getting much out of it so we separated the confronting racism course into two separate uh by caucuses. One for Black people to do healing, or venting, whatever it is they need to do. Education. Uh you know how to be productive in a White supremacist society and another one to teach White people about White privilege, but in the process of doing that, you know of course the world is more complicated than Black and White and we ended up with people of Mixed race who were like you know where am I gonna go? So now we are working on a course called 'what is Mixed race?'

Lastly, participant #9 noted the importance of involving White people in racial justice movements:

We need to get White young people involved in undoing racism because those are the people of the future that are gatekeepers. They will inherit the gates that their fathers leave them and that their mothers leave them and we need to influence them before they get to that place.

### *Challenges*

This researcher asked interviewees “what are the biggest challenges you face on a daily basis?” Ten participants described experiencing negative feelings associated with their antiracist identities including anger (n=5), frustration (n=4), exhaustion (n=4), feeling inadequate (n=3), sadness (n=3), need for validation from People of Color (n=2), fear of making mistakes (n=1), guilt (n=2), and paranoia (n=1). Participant #6 described her fears: “I will never be able to avoid like saying something stupid or like insensitive or racist or like acting racist, it’s always a risk. It’s really scary that that’s a risk, and scary to come to terms with that.” Participant #8 explains:

I have to be really conscious about it, and things are still passing me by and it’s really frustrating, it’s really hard. Something just happened last week where looking back at it I was like oh my god this was all about race and I as a White person, not only did I not stand up and do something about it, I think that I was part of the problem. And that is awful. And I think the fact that I’m thinking about it is great, but what I find really frustrating is that I’m not 100 percent there.

Three people described the various challenges of engaging people around racial justice issues. Participant #1 explained:

In the early nineties...we would throw these antiracism parties and no White people would come...My experience has been that White people don’t want to talk about it because you know they don’t want to feel guilty they don’t want to hear a bunch of stuff that’s you know all negative and everything and that’s how they picture it. And Black people don’t want to talk about it because it’s painful. So, and they especially don’t want to talk about it with a White person.

Other observations were that People of Color are often understandably skeptical of White people working on race issues, and that Whites have difficulty admitting that they have

benefitted from a racist system. Six people spoke to the need to “pick your battles” when engaging others about racism in order to avoid burnout and to be effective organizers; participant #13 stated: “I try to pick the battles and challenge when either there’s a chance of someone being hurt, or the system hurting somebody, or if I think someone really has the potential to grow.” Three of these individuals observed that when they are with their family they sometimes let things slide for the sake of trying to keep a positive mood while spending time with loved ones and maintaining these important relationships.

Five participants noted the challenge of accepting that progress will be slow and maintaining a sense of hope despite facing a deeply embedded system that will probably not be transformed in their lifetime. In the same vein, two participants conceded that some people will never change. Participant #1 described her beliefs around this issue: “Some people just aren’t gonna see it. You know and part of that is just based in my background in psychology too you know there are like different personality types and some of them just aren’t willing, they’re just not gonna be, they’re just not gonna get there.”

Eight individuals described conflicts with friends and family members since developing an antiracist identity. One participant lost friends while learning how to effectively approach discussions about race. One participant described raising a young biracial child and the complex conversations with his partner about how to raise the child. Three people described negative changes in their relationships with family members. Five people stated that their family members did not understand their work. Participant #8 described how her antiracist identity placed some strain on her family relationships:

They hate it. They do. I mean they’re supportive of what I’m doing but I think that the fact that I think about race so much now and I have this race lens with

everything I do, I think there's some pushback with them feeling like they haven't gone through this process at all...I mean they're happy that I'm doing something that I'm interested in but uh I think they definitely wish I didn't bring up race all of the time. You know, the what does that have to do with race? All the time in our conversations. I think they're so, they're tired of it.

Five participants described the problem of getting liberal, progressive Whites to first admit that they are racist and have race-based privilege and then to do anything about it. Participant #1 explained:

I think the hardest thing is that most people I encounter see themselves as good people and the idea that they might be perpetuating racism does not fit into their, you know, self-identity. And so breaking through that, you know, this doesn't mean you're a bad person you know, but you know you're still perpetuating, you know, racism. Um that's the hardest thing. Breaking through that wall of I'm a good White person so this doesn't apply to me.

Participant #9 expressed struggling with well-educated individuals who understand racism but not the part they play inside of and benefitting from racist structures: "I have a friend who's a very very leftist um attorney- so smart, and he knows all about racism and because he doesn't organize, because he doesn't understand that he could organize the law profession and make a difference, he gets nervous about that and so he jokes.

Participant #6 explained the challenges of working with White antiracists:

With White antiracist activists, it's really hard to like keep a focus on yourself and think about like the role that you play 'cause there's always a White person who's more racist than you, like easily. And it's so- there's so much like egregious racism that's going on everyday all the time, that it's so easy to point fingers and be like oh my god, I can't believe they said that and oh my god, I can't believe they did that. And I think it's really hard to kind of stay grounded and not separate yourself from other White people and to think that you're like one of the good ones and you get it, and other people just don't get it. Because I think that that's when we lose, when we isolate people and we really lose touch with what racism is all about.

Two participants spoke the challenge of accountability and being committed to the work all the time; participant #10 stated:



Personally I worry about accountability because there's no one to hold me accountable; I can stop this work whenever I want. If I don't decide to call someone out on a nasty comment I hear one day, no one's gonna hold me accountable...[Recently] I was just exhausted and didn't want to go [to a meeting] and it had zero to do with the fact that I love these conversations but I just didn't want to get on the train the next morning wake up early again, do the whole thing and I went in late and I said you know no one could ever say I'm a bad antiracist 'cause I just did a whole workshop over the weekend and organized it...but I didn't have to be here this morning and no one would have called me on anything um and I can afford to do that because it's not my survival that I'm talking about for the most part, when I'm having these conversations.

### *Hope/Motivation*

Four participants described being motivated by outrage at ubiquitous injustices committed against People of Color. Participant #1 described how anger can be effective when controlled: "It's more of uh it's more of uh motivator- staying factor...the anger doesn't go away, but that hot anger gets mediated, let's put it that way. You know you learn to kind of keep in under control because it's not strategically helpful." Participant #6 described:

Basically no matter what area of social work you go into...is affected by institutional racism. So I was working in child welfare last year and in New York City over 97% of children in foster care are Children of Color. So you saw that everyday, like everyday I saw families getting treated differently you know...so I would see children taken away for the same types of reasons that happen on my street in my suburbs because they didn't live in the projects like no one had heard about it, it was somehow OK. So seeing those effects I think- that really motivates me in doing antiracism work in general because I know that it affects that in a very big way.

Four people said that they had very little hope of dismantling racism. Six people expressed ambivalent feelings of both hopelessness and optimism. Several individuals (n=5) stated that they did not expect to see racism eradicated in their lifetimes. Two people felt a sense of responsibility to try to change the world despite thinking that nothing would change. Four individuals were motivated to do the work because of a

refusal to be complicit with harmful systems. Participant #1 described her source of motivation:

I've kind of resigned myself to I can only do what I can do. And if it never makes a difference in the world, my son used to ask me um you know why do you do this? It's such- I mean 'cause he had come to the conclusion that nothing's gonna change a long time ago and it's like why do you waste your time? And- and I just think because to not try is to die. So I might as well just lie down and die if I don't do something.

Twelve participants noted the election of Barack Obama as a source of hope.

Four participants stated that apart from Obama being the first black president, his campaign was an inspiring example of extremely effective community organizing; participant #8 explained:

I mean the whole experience of what he did, especially for community organizing was amazing. He made us- we're like a real thing again. So that's not about antiracism, that's about being an organizer, but I think that's inspiring that you can really do grassroots organizing and apparently it will work really well so.

Four participants described an energy shift and the desire to hold onto the momentum of Obama's inauguration; participant #2 expressed:

I also feel like...there's a shift of I don't even know what to call it, just a shift in sort of the spirit of the country that I think we need to be able to kind of tap into and use it to help people you know move forward in terms of their understanding about racism and their willingness to dismantle it in all the places where it still exists, which is everywhere...So let's move on to making justice, you know, creating justice out of that sense of what is possible.

Four individuals observed that Obama's election has absolutely no impact on structural racism but that it does indicate that at least on a surface level, more White people were willing to vote for a Black candidate than in past elections.

Seven participants spoke to maintaining a sense of hope by remembering past progress that has been made and observing positive changes which include: increased dialogue around race (n=2), increased numbers of biracial couples (n=2), more People of

Color in leadership positions (n=2), and examples of transformation in agency settings (n=1).

### *Importance of Relationships/Community*

Nine participants highlighted the importance of relationships and the strength of the antiracist community to maintain hopefulness; participant #8 shared: “I mean for sure it’s the connections that I’ve made with...other antiracists that’s like- these guys are so energized and just seeing like the passion in them, that keeps me going.” Participant #1 stated: “I would say my major influences as far as doing antiracism work have been other antiracism workers who have begun doing it you know long before me.”

Participant #5 explains:

We try to tell young- people who are new to this organizing- whether they are younger or older- that you can’t equate success, that can’t be the basis in your hope, because you’ll be destroyed, so your hope has got to come from your organizing, from the personal relationships that are hopeful in and of itself and will fuel what will become your life’s work... You gotta find your wells to fill you and give you hope and spirit. You have to be very disciplined about it I think.

Four people described having enriched, more authentic relationships with people from all different backgrounds. Six people described feeling that they restored part of their own humanity and have been transformed through this work; participant #9 stated: “It’s been the most exciting thing that I have done. It is the most humanizing thing I’ve ever done, and every time I talk about it, I feel alive again.” The following excerpts illustrate transformative experiences.

Participant #10:

I stay hopeful because I think it’s a better way of life. Um the more I find out about myself like it’s just one of those things where because the work is kind of countercultural sometimes like there’s a lot of richness in the simplicity in the work of getting to know people better... And I learn a lot about myself and others and I realize that a lot of my old relationships when I was younger with Folks of

Color were not as authentic as they could have been. And I just want authentic relationships across racial lines no matter who it is. Um and because every time I do the work...I take back a little piece of my humanity that was robbed of me.

Participant #11:

I have never felt so grounded in my life, I have never been around so many people, so many groups of people that I feel connected to, grounded with, that I- that are responsive, that I engage in a level of dialogue that I never did before with people, I feel more integrated...antiracist work helps us find our own humanity.

Participant #13:

I think of this as a mission, me going out to help uh help others, but my biggest thing I want people to understand why when I talk about this type of um issues and issues of diversity is that um I feel like I'm- I'm giving back rather than, I'm not being a liberal going out and trying to help others because that's what makes me feel better. Um those kids in New Orleans like transformed me. They made me outgoing, they made me um- they challenged me and that's how I got there, like they challenged me and they were difficult and some of them had horrible horrible um life circumstances and they would get to school everyday and um they would work hard and we would build a relationship. And so I guess the biggest thing for me is people think oh this is going out and helping others, but the fact is you could change yourself by going out and giving and learning about others that are way different- way different than you. And so, I- I just, I mean part of my mission is saying, this is a transformative effort that- it's not about you giving anymore than- that what you'll get. I mean you'll get back tenfold what you give out. And I think by accepting that, um it feels more like a you know, it's a relationship, it's an evolving relationship that is awesome, I mean it's uh anybody who's in a relationship that is healthy, even when it's unhealthy sometimes, you know, you're benefitting and you're learning, compared to sitting on the outside and thinking about it, or thinking you're going in to do some good...I'm just a huge advocate for it being a transformative experience, rather than like this social justice piece or a service piece. You will be changed, you will understand yourself better by doing this.

### *Liberation*

This researcher was inspired by Love's (2008) critical liberation theory as well as a thesis from a former Smith student (Hornowski, 2008) in which the researcher postulates that using positive language for racial justice movement building could be

potentially more effective than oppositional language such as “antiracism” and “fighting racial oppression.” Using this theoretical perspective, this researcher posed as a question to participants “what is your vision of a liberated society?” Nine participants expressed having difficulty articulating or envisioning what that would look like. Participant #1 shared: “most people would call that heaven.” Many of the participants spoke about equity (n=8) in food, housing, clothing, health care, criminal justice, and education. Participant #3 stated, “basically it would be living in a way that wasn’t putting all other life forms to the benefit of rich White men.” Participant #11 described the inevitable complications that will arise while addressing the problem of inequity:

I don’t know...that’s a hard one. I mean I think you know when I first started really working with groups of people and going on retreats and looking at this I was like well what does it really mean? Does it mean that I’m willing to throw everything that I have in the middle of the pile and redistribute it fairly? I don’t know if I’m ready to do that but I think that’s what it means. And I’m not talking about socialism or communism because as we’ve seen it, it hasn’t really worked. Um and I don’t think reparations are the answer because they’re- it’s not enough right? So you know, so creating equal ground now, but we have to go back right? Because all of the things that I have um I got through privilege. So yeah I worked hard, yeah I did this, but you know so do lots of other people and I had opportunities that other people didn’t have so I think that’s what I think it means. Do I think people even my antiracist friends are gonna do that? No I don’t...I think this whole movement is creating a new kind of antiracist racist which is kind of scary to me. I’d much rather have an old Klans-person who really knew where they were at and I you know and I always god I’m so scared when I do things like I have to call up my friends and say alright is this my privilege, is this my racism, um and probably they don’t always know right? And probably we’re not perfect at keeping each other accountable. Um so I think equity is far more complicated than if we just really- if we started tomorrow morning, we all woke up and said OK, everyone really gets to live wherever they want, everyone really gets to have any job they want, it won’t make up for these last hundreds of years, where we’ve been able to accumulate wealth and other people have not. It won’t make up for the genocide of people’s um you know the native people and under slavery- the level of genocide and kind of the lingering effects of that in the- in the black community. The lingering effects in the American Indian community are like stunning so. I don’t know, we have to fix that...And in the end, I don’t think white people want to share so, right? So I think it does come down to, you know people don’t want affirmative action because maybe on some level, they know

that they're not any better than anyone else, and yet they get treated better. So if we actually have to share, that means that, you really do have to like develop some merit right? That- that and you know, I don't think people want to do that... why do we pay wall street brokers all this money to lose our retirement accounts and we don't pay teachers money? It's very- very complicated. I don't know what we do to fix it.

Four participants stated that they could not envision reaching liberation in their lifetime (three of these participants were under 30) and four participants spoke to innate qualities of humanity that would make it difficult to achieve full equality without having checks in place and ways to hold people accountable for their actions. Participant #2 described her thoughts about liberation:

It would be nice to say one in which none of the differences, none of the isms, matter. It's really hard for me (laughs) to imagine that we'll reach a point where some kind of differences don't create inequities, so to me, a liberated society would have to have safeguards. I don't, I just don't imagine human beings arriving at the point where they don't replay some of those in group/out group kind of things so I think it would have to have safeguards for whomever might happen to be the next other that's created. So you know, I have some hope that we could arrive at a fairly equitable society, but to never forget, that that has not been the history of the human race (laughs) and how to prevent going back.

Three people described a society where every individual was celebrated for their unique perspective and identities, whatever they may be. Participant #9 emphasized the importance of having People of Color be the judges of how equitable our society is: "it is only when those communities [of color], without being coerced, speak out and say, we're being treated with equity" that we will know that we have achieved liberation.

Participant #6 stated what she believed to be a crucial step towards liberation through education:

What's most important for liberation is like a real understanding of history... we can't get anywhere or move anywhere towards liberation if we don't come to terms with what happened in this country. Um and I think there's just such a denial of that um and... how it affects People of Color and White people, in terms of you know internalized racial inferiority but also internalized racial

superiority...it's like kind of engrained I think in our psyche. So I think if we don't understand that and come to terms with it, as painful as it is, and learn from that and learn from history, then I don't think we can get towards any kind of liberation.

### *Critiques of the Social Work Profession and Advice to Future Social Workers*

Every participant critiqued the profession of social work. Five individuals spoke to the paternalistic element of social work, particularly when adding the racial dynamic of White social workers entering into Communities of Color to be helpers and saviors. Similarly, eight individuals spoke to the disempowering nature of social work systems and how the profession currently trains students to essentially maintain the status quo rather than encourage transformational change. Several participants identified racial bias and a White supremacist framework in the DSM-IV (n=3) and the NASW Code of Ethics (n=1). Participant #11 noted the recent legislation passed in New York that has altered social work licensing and “created privilege within the social work profession:”

Licensed clinical social workers [are]...more valued than licensed masters of social work. They make more money. They're more sought out in agencies and they're not organizers...we've created a disincentive for people to engage in antiracist activities or community organizing or social action, social justice activities, that the only thing that has value now you know is- is um clinical work. And clinical work as it applies to the DSM-IV.

Participant #8 illustrated how current clinical service delivery models and evaluation practices are biased towards White people:

White people in general like structure, right? We're a much more structured kind of culture where in therapy you should be sitting face to face in an office and that's what we've been taught to do, but a lot of People of Color that's not like their culture like sitting in an office, maybe we should be sitting in a park bench. You know, or accepting a gift if actually you didn't accept it would be like we're taught in our textbooks don't accept gifts rights? If your clients give you gifts you can't accept it, if a client gives you food you don't eat it. But in most cultures, if you don't accept a gift, and you don't eat their food, it's like a huge insult and that like clinical bond that you're trying to have happen totally gets

altered. So, I think- I think what they're trying, people are trying to bring to light in clinical practices is that you can't necessarily push other races, cultures, and identities into this white framework that social work was built on...Say a Clinician of Color is working with their Client of Color and her supervisor his or her supervisor is White and she has to evaluate the clinician. She ends up giving her a bad evaluation because she's doing it outside. Or she went to this person's house...or she accepted the gift of cookies or whatever it is. So...you're being evaluated by your supervisor with a white framework of what's right and wrong. So then when you look at like structural issues of racism, how's that Clinician of Color ever going to get promoted if their evaluations are never as good as their White counterparts?

Three participants highlighted the need for social workers, particularly students, to recognize that their clients are experts in their own lives and that they know what they need and want better than anyone else. Participant #11 elaborated on this point: students "need to understand that there's not a deficit in communities where they're going to work but that in fact the communities where they're going to work are extremely resilient. Um, how any one Black, African-American, descendant of a slave survives, really speaks to huge resilience."

Many of the participants (n=8) pointed out that it is not necessary to be a full-time community organizer to work on racial justice issues and highlighted the importance of making an impact in whatever capacity possible including: policy work, social service administration, research, clinical services, child welfare, education, outreach to family and friends, holding government positions, organizing religious communities and college campuses, and continually doing self-identity work. Four individuals discussed how to bring antiracist principles into clinical work; participant #9 explained how she does this:

I'm a clinical social worker. The macro piece and really understanding structural racism, then you understand the pathology that People of Color are forced to live with everyday. So when you see depression, you can't just say oh this is an individual assessment, you have to take a look at what racism is doing. And there's so much research out there about...the impact on health that racism as an individual health factor you know the wearing effect, the depression, the



overeating, you cannot disconnect people from the macro...A friend of mine...ran a clinical dependency unit. After he did the [undoing racism] workshop, he understood that the people in his clinic who were receiving treatment needed to understand what was done to them. So instead of saying, man what did you do to get yourself into treatment, as part of the treatment, he does the power analysis and they go through what has been done to you? So...they're looking at all of the institutional pressures that they've had to live in – you know an oppressive racist power structure, constantly on them – and they understand that the circumstances of their lives is not their fault. They may be responsible for certain individual acts, but generally speaking when they look around and see in this White hospital, every person in this treatment setting is Black and all of the administration is White, they don't – they see that this is what's been done. This has been done to you.

Seven individuals described the need for social work students to have at least some training in community organizing; three individuals wanted to encourage students to begin forming networks and alliances while in school to better mobilize groups for future movement building. Participant #9 detailed why action and organizing should be a major part of social work education programs:

There was a profound sense of outrage that I had been through one of the finest schools of social work, I was doing good work, that I was in a position uh to make enormous differences, and I didn't have the education and the training and the clarity that I needed to do the – the work of social work. We say that we're agents of change but with the education we get, all we could do is tweak. You're relegated to tweaking but to really understand what it's going to take to undo racism while we're delivering services...you need to transform systems...You can go to any one of these universities and hear you know, a whole analysis, but you're not moved to action, so what good is it? You've just become knowledgeable about it, you know?... I think that what's inherent in undoing racism is organizing, is by taking something on - tenant's rights, organizing something in your program, transforming the way you're staffed. You know, something has to happen. You just can't learn about something and then just sit there. You know, we find out that somebody is being raped and we do something. They have protective services. You know you are obliged to take an action when you know that something very destructive is happening... we're told that we are like what do they call it? Mandated reporters. Yet we see this stuff, we see people dying, we see people starving, we see AIDS epidemics and yet we're not mandated reporters on that because it isn't the same structure. But really, I think you should be mandated – a call to action.

Nine participants described a need for social work education curriculum change. Six of these individuals were involved in a movement for curriculum change (and ultimately a paradigm shift) in social work education and training. Eight participants stated that students need to understand institutionalized racism and how racism is embedded in social work systems. In the same vein, six individuals spoke to the need for students to know about the history of social work and how the profession has historically perpetuated racism. Five individuals discussed the need for White social work students to understand White privilege and how it is manifested in professional settings and consequently the impact it has on service delivery. Six participants pointed to the need for courses that encourage racial identity work and experiential, process-oriented learning. Many of the aforementioned themes are summed up in the following excerpt from participant #2:

I think most teaching institutions would have to be completely, completely transformed to really give social work students what they would need. Yes, because even if you add something about – and I know social work schools for the most part are adding a lot about race and class and those things to their curriculum and some of them may be even changing sort of the model of what social work is but, as long as you have the model of our role is helping the other and defining what they need, rather than those who are facing serious life problems defining for themselves what they need and who can fulfill that...it's upside-down to begin with. And then when you layer race on that and it's mostly White people getting the degrees, working in communities of color, um, it's just so problematic and you know in the current and foreseeable future context of race dynamics in this country that, you know...I would love to see White social workers working in White communities and dealing very directly with the ways in which White culture keeps perpetuating this racial inequity. But that's not gonna happen (laughs). So meanwhile, I mean, curricula have to be changed, who is listened to as experts has to be changed, there's a lot of things (laughs). And certainly if there are schools that are still ignoring the issue altogether, they oughta just be shut down (laughs) cause there's no excuse for that at this point.

Five participants recommended that all students read Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege" article and one suggested that it be

distributed and discussed at orientation weekend to start the discussion of racism and racial identity on the first day of school. Other noted writers and readings were: *Cold Anger*, Paul Kivel's *Uprooting Racism*, Harvey Cox's *God's World, Man's Responsibility*, Barbara Ward's *Rich Nations/Poor Nations*, Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, James Baldwin's *Another Country*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart*, Amiri Baraka's plays, "Blaming the Victim," Martin Luther King's writings, bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Miles Horton's *The Long Haul*, Tim Wise essays, Paul Glorsky, Michael Eric Dyson, Cornell West, Malcolm X, Howard Zinn, *Troy Leary's Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome*, racial identity theories (n=3), Rosie Perez Foster, Ron Chisom, Michael Washington, *People Know My Name*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, *The Color of Wealth*, Bertha Reynolds, Andrew Hacker's *Two Nations: One White, One Black*, *Unequal*, Jonathon Kozol, Gloria Billings, Langston Hughes, and Tupac Shakur.

Seven individuals spoke to the barriers faced in antiracist organizing within the field of social work. Three of these participants stated the problem that social work educators and administrators could not openly identify as antiracist. One of these participants explained that declaring an antiracist identity could be seen as "unprofessional," a concept that the participant understands to be maintaining racial oppression by discouraging individuals from openly organizing to undo racism in their schools and agencies due to the potential threat to their careers. An extension of this dilemma is that social work educators do not have the freedom to openly teach an antiracist curriculum (n=1) and must teach topics that take precedence over racism, which many participants noted (n=5), is always the last subject on the list to be discussed. Four

individuals described the difficulty of organizing students who are only in social work programs for two years and who are disrupted by school holidays and breaks where people often leave the school community. One participant felt that if a school tried to implement curriculum change to include more antiracist, process-oriented coursework, that there might be backlash from White students who do not see the importance of this type of education. Six participants, however, noted that the increasing student interest in antiracist workshops and events indicates that the majority of social work students feel the need to supplement their graduate studies with antiracist learning. Two participants identified problems within NASW, the social work profession's organizing body; one highlighted the need for Black and Latino NASW task forces as evidence that NASW is not examining structural racism within the agency.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The previous chapter described the findings of the research. In this chapter, the researcher will discuss major findings within the context of the literature review as well as how participants' responses have implications for the field of social work. This chapter will be organized by themes found in the previous chapter and will be followed by a discussion of limitations of the study.

#### *Definition of Antiracist*

The definitions provided by interviewees are concurrent with the literature and at the same time indicate that there are multiple perspectives about what it means to identify as antiracist and how this identity manifests in one's daily behavior (i.e. naming racism every time one witnesses racially-biased acts). This leads to the question of who has the right to identify as antiracist. Some of the participants were educators who identified as antiracist; however, participant #9 felt that teaching antiracist curricula is not enough because "you can't teach racism away." This ambiguity around language and identity indicates the relative newness of the antiracism movement and the potential need for more cohesive movement building among antiracist institutions, and consequently, clarification around the goals of the movement. In the meantime, participant #10's explanation of *antiracism* seems to be effective for him when working with students and could perhaps be replicated and shared with social work students and other individuals who are unsure about *antiracism* to encourage engagement in racial justice issues:

I just say it's a lifestyle that kinda forces me to try and keep rebelling against the norm um to understand race as a construction...I don't define things a lot. What I

explain to people in my little spiel is that a lot of times these conversations around racism are very difficult because- like I sat with a group this week...and said half the reason why this conversation's so difficult sometimes is 'cause there's fifteen of you here and every single one of you has a different definition of what racism is, but we start at step five in our arguments instead of step one. So antiracism is kinda starting at step one. Kinda looking back at history to understand how to have these conversations more authentically now...antiracism is really just kinda breaking down what racism is and how do you define it and how do you try and live...knowing that you're still gonna keep kinda unequally getting what you need 'cause you're White?

The three participants who spoke about the need for antiracist professionals in various systems and institutions indicated the potential value of antiracist teaching in all collegiate and professional programs (particularly human service programs). Social workers in particular who do not feel comfortable in community organizing or activist roles should be encouraged by these words and look for other venues to infuse antiracist beliefs (and incidentally, uphold the professional values stated in the NASW Code of Ethics (2006) and described in chapter two) into their various careers.

### *Childhood Experiences*

The findings on childhood experiences show that the majority of participants grew up in environments that were very racially-segregated. Six people recognized implicit and explicit efforts by their communities to enforce racial segregation. The individuals who grew up in more diverse neighborhoods were all younger and expressed other ways that their communities remained segregated; whether it was an all-White block, or segregation in the classroom that occurred by creating college tracks for White students.

The literature is concurrent with these findings in that three of the four White antiracists reviewed – Tim Wise, Anne Braden, and Virginia Foster Durr – grew up in

racially-segregated neighborhoods where Blacks were not welcome. Interestingly, the participant (#5) who grew up in the most overtly White supremacist environment commented that he had had less difficulty understanding White privilege and institutionalized racism because of these early experiences growing up in a highly segregated area, as opposed to some his counterparts who grew up in more diverse, liberal areas such as New York City and its suburbs.

The findings and the literature review reveal that the environments where people are raised are not necessarily indicative of whether individuals in that community will develop antiracist beliefs. However, the data and biographical accounts clearly demonstrate the many ways that racism impacts *all* communities in the United States whether they are overtly segregated or not. Based on this conclusion, we can assume that no individual White person is free from having some degree of White supremacist beliefs, but that Whites have the potential to challenge and transform these beliefs throughout life. This assumption has many implications in the field of social work.

First, it shows that if White social workers are truly committed to undoing racism in the United States, that they will have to do so in all types of communities, not just poor, disadvantaged communities where the impact of racism is apparent and where social work agencies usually target their resources. White social workers will have to work in White *overprivileged* (a word used by Tim Wise in speeches that is the logical counterpart to the frequently used catch-all word in social work discourse, *underprivileged*) communities where people are benefitting from a racist system without any awareness of this dynamic as well in overtly racist White communities where People of Color are not welcome to travel freely.

Second, social work educational institutions should encourage students to consider the environments where they grew up and how those environments are impacted by racism as part of a process of learning about one's social and racial identity. Apart from the work we do with clients, social workers can still have quite an impact on friends and family from the neighborhoods where they grew up and can help these loved ones to understand and acknowledge the covert or overt racism that exists in the community.

Lastly, White social workers from liberal, diverse communities should be able to identify the ways in which racism has impacted and continues to affect their childhood environments so as not to distance themselves from other Whites who perhaps grew up in more segregated neighborhoods. This researcher believes that until we can all understand the ways racism has impacted this society and acknowledge our common experience of being socialized in a racist society (and how Whites have benefitted at the expense of People of Color), we will not be able to undo racism and consequently, all other oppressions.

### *Parents*

This researcher wanted to identify any influences on the participants' antiracist identity development, and parents' or caregivers' beliefs seem to be potentially significant. Over one-third of the participants' caregivers worked in helping professions as nurses, social workers, and educators. An additional third was involved in civic engagements including charitable work, PTA positions, and organizing community events. Several participants acknowledged that these values of helping people and respecting people were transmitted in various ways through discussion, membership in religious communities, and modeling behaviors. This finding may have implications for



the field of social work because it indicates that antiracist values could be passed on generationally and that parents will need support in how to teach these beliefs to their children amidst all of the other messages children are receiving from society.

### *Messages*

There are two major findings from the research that are supported by antiracist discourse about the ways in which racism has been institutionalized and perpetuated in this society: most Whites grow up in households and neighborhoods that do not explicitly talk about racism and Whiteness; are socialized to believe that everyone in this country is treated equally; and are taught in schools that the genocide of Native Americans and slavery are bad events from our country's past that have no impact on the present day. The lack of conversation around issues of race (growing up and often through adulthood) naturally leads to awkward, uncomfortable, and difficult conversations about race with White people. Several of the participants expressed fear that one of the potential negative outcomes of the antiracism movement is that it will simply teach Whites how to be articulate when talking about racism and that actual behavioral change will be much harder to implement. This may prove to be true, however, it is indisputable that this country will never be able to dismantle racism without open and authentic dialogue around racial matters which White social workers can practice and learn to facilitate with others. Furthermore, we will never begin to undo racism if Whites generally deny the existence of racism and the extremely destructive and inhumane effects it has on the lives of People of Color. Thus, it is imperative for White social workers to learn about the history of racism in the United States and a course on this topic should be included in all

social work programs. From there, White social workers will be better informed to analyze systems that affect many of their clients, can organize to change school curricula (at all levels of education), and will develop resources and tools to debunk cultural myths with other White people (including friends and family). Participant #1 stated:

If I could do one thing, it would be to get...colleges and universities around the country and high schools and frankly grade schools to teach this history you know...so that we understand you know realistically what the history has been, what the impact has been, and you know hopefully you can get some of these really bright minds to you know guide it in another direction. But as long as we're still teaching White supremacy, we'll never get there...It's not about trying to tell people they're bad, it's about trying to make people change, to see the world the way it is as opposed to that myth that we've grown up with and adjust their behavior accordingly.

#### *Antiracist Identity Development*

One of the major points from the findings is that children are aware of racial differences from very early on and are capable of understanding conversations about race from an early age. Social workers in schools and agencies that serve youth can be a part of this solution to undoing racism. Individuals working with youth can encourage dialogue around race issues, help students of all backgrounds to learn about their racial identity and its implications in our society, and share with students antiracist historical perspectives and values that will help develop leaders of the future that will advocate for a more racially just society.

The question "when did you first recognize White privilege?" produced some interesting findings. In general, participants understood that they had privileges, but did not have a language to describe this concept until later on. The participants provided various examples of the ways White privilege manifested in their lives: freedom of movement and being able to go wherever one wanted without being stopped (n=2), being

placed in advanced classes with all White students for no other reason (apparent to the respondent at the time) than skin color (n=1), living in a nice house and having a car (n=1), living in a nice neighborhood where people paid higher taxes to live there (n=1), not having to work as a child (n=1), having an easy time finding a job (n=1), and not having to have an awareness of one's racial identity (n=4). These are examples that can be used by social workers to help Whites understand what it means to have White privilege in the United States. Five individuals stated that Peggy McIntosh's (1989) *Unpacking the White Privilege Knapsack* was helpful in understanding the many ways that they have benefited from being White in this society. Participant #6 highlighted how this article really clarified systemic racism for her (whereas prior to reading the article, she thought racism could only occur in individual actions). Participant #8 felt that this article should be presented to all social work students at orientation to place this issue at the forefront of social work education and to lay a strong foundation for entering into the profession of social work.

One trend in the findings was that by the time they were adults, most of the participants had a sense that structural racism existed but did not have a language for it until they began to explore independent venues of education such as articles, essays, books, plays, workshops, and honest dialogue with People of Color. Five people felt relief after finding White mentors to process and validate all of their feelings around their White identity. Additionally, none of the participants had heard of any White antiracists until adulthood despite the fact that, as stated in the literature review, there is a long history of Whites participating in racial justice movements in the United States. This finding gives credence to the arguments of Loewen (2007), Ayvazian (1995), Tatum

(1994), Young and Rosiek (2000), and Wise (2008), that state the need for Whites to have positive White role models who are active in racial justice movements. Along with teaching a realistic history of the United States that includes multiple perspectives, ideally educational curricula should include the rich history of White resistance. Secondly, White antiracists need to continue what they have been doing which is to expand their circle through education and compassion, and to become a more visible community as it grows in numbers and in strength.

### *Working with White Folks*

Concurrent with Malcolm X's (1965) challenge to Whites "who are sincere" to work within White communities, many of the participants described working with predominantly White agencies, communities, focus groups, and families. Ten participants belonged to White caucus groups as a means of holding each other accountable and discussing issues relating to Whites such as how to challenge White privilege, and to practice having conversations about race with other Whites. Many people may have an initial reaction to this practice as segregationist and enforcing racial categories. However, most of the participants also spoke to collaborating with People of Color and described the historical reasons for this practice – that White people have to go through an exploratory process and develop antiracist identities before conversations in mixed groups can move forward. In other words, meeting in separate groups is part of the process and will make multi-racial work more effective.

### *Challenges, Hope, and Building Relationships*

This researcher grouped these themes together because challenges and hope are two opposing forces, and building relationships seems to be a solution to the former and bolsters the latter. Two major challenges that came out of the findings were: difficulty talking to Whites about race; and increased tension with family members and loved ones after developing an antiracist identity. Many of the participants shared that they had difficulty working with family members around these issues and were learning to talk to loved ones with compassion and from an understanding of where people are in their racial identity development process. There is hope that through these relationships, we will grow and challenge each other and will be willing to do that because of the love we have for one another. Additionally, building relationships with other antiracists can be a huge support by validating difficult feelings, and helping individuals to develop effective tools and methods for talking about race especially with family members and other Whites. Based on the participants' responses, hope also lies in the success of Barack Obama and particularly how his campaign exemplified extremely effective community organizing. Most of the participants were wary of putting all their faith in Obama, but some shared Wise's (2009) perspective that this is an opportunity to grab onto the momentum and desire for change he has created in this country to work towards transforming the United States into a more equitable society. As participant #9 stated, there should be "a call to action" to all social workers in this crucial time.

One of the other major themes that arose was a sense that we will not achieve racial equity in our lifetime in addition to feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness, which suggests (as aforementioned) that social justice workers should try to develop a *libratory*

*consciousness* (Love, 2008) to avoid burnout and work from a vision of compassion and love rather than in opposition to hate and injustice. The examples of individuals who described feeling more connected to humanity through the work could be shared and used as daily affirmations of the collective and individual healing aspects of this work.

### *Liberation*

The participants generally shared beliefs that liberation would be an equitable society, where resources would be distributed in a fair way, and where people could have self-determination and power over their own lives. An interesting finding was the difficulty that participants had describing their vision of liberation, as well as the notion that it is not attainable in the foreseeable future. It may be beneficial to the antiracism movement, and to social workers as well to identify long term goals and to envision on a daily basis what liberation would look like. As Barbara Love (2008) says: “we can envision liberation for our lifetime, and achieve it” (p. 2).

### *Critiques of the Social Work Profession and Advice to Future Social Workers*

Every participant critiqued aspects of the field of social work. Among the problems identified were: paternalism towards Communities of Color; disempowerment of clients; racial bias and White supremacist framework of the DSM-IV (the mental health diagnostic manual) and in the same vein, the disproportionate diagnosis of People of Color with certain illnesses (i.e. ADHD, schizophrenia, and antisocial personality disorder); the hierarchy that exists within the field that places greater value on clinical social workers and consequently creates a disincentive for social workers to become

community organizers; typically White models of delivering clinical services (despite the fact that a disproportionate number of clients are People of Color) and in turn, unfair evaluating practices that could disadvantage Clinicians of Color; and the often used deficit-based practice (rather than a strengths-based approach) that problematizes communities rather than highlighting and bolstering the strengths that already exist within the community (and with that, the assumption that *every* community has strengths).

Participants suggested that social work education should include courses that teach about institutionalized oppression, the history of social work (and how the profession has historically perpetuated racism), and how to be an effective community organizer. Students must learn how to examine and analyze systems within an antiracism framework, but a major piece of that is then feeling compelled and responsible to take action against oppressive systems. As participant #9 stated:

Something has to happen. You just can't learn about something and then just sit there. You know, we find out that somebody is being raped and we do something. They have protective services...you are obliged to take an action when you know that something very destructive is happening...we're told that we are like what do they call it? Mandated reporters. Yet we see this stuff, we see people dying, we see people starving, we see AIDS epidemics and yet we're not mandated reporters on that because it isn't the same structure. But really, I think you should be mandated.

Advice to social workers included: read Peggy McIntosh's *Unpacking the White Privilege Knapsack* (especially for White social workers); make strong networks with students and teachers while in school (begin organizing your class *now*); implement social change and antiracist principles in any capacity you can (whether in policy, clinical service agencies, etc.); and advocate for curriculum change – express to the

administration what your educational needs and interests are and organize other students to do the same.

Participant #2 summed up the huge changes she would like to see in social work education and in the field:

I think most teaching institutions would have to be completely, completely transformed to really give social work students what they would need. Yes, because even if you add something about – and I know social work schools for the most part are adding a lot about race and class and those things to their curriculum and some of them may be even changing sort of the model of what social work is but, as long as you have the model of our role is helping the other and defining what they need, rather than those who are facing serious life problems defining for themselves what they need and who can fulfill that...it's upside-down to begin with. And then when you layer race on that and it's mostly White people getting the degrees, working in Communities of Color, um, it's just so problematic and you know in the current and foreseeable future context of race dynamics in this country that, you know...I would love to see White social workers working in White communities and dealing very directly with the ways in which White culture keeps perpetuating this racial inequity. But that's not gonna happen (laughs). So meanwhile, I mean, curricula have to be changed, who is listened to as experts has to be changed, there's a lot of things (laughs). And certainly if there are schools that are still ignoring the issue altogether, they oughta just be shut down (laughs) cause there's no excuse for that at this point.

### *Conclusion*

This study reveals that the field of social work, and White social workers in particular, have much to consider if we actually want to create transformational change in this society. The findings also show the important role that education plays in not only teaching valuable and relevant content, but socializing students to become members of this society. Do we want to continue teaching students false notions about our country's history, or face the facts and allow individuals to grapple with difficult and painful issues, with hope that we will be better for it? Do we want social service delivery to stay the same, or can we envision a new way of living in this world and taking care of each other



in an equitable and respectful way? As Tim Wise (2008) and several of the participants have stated, we are at a crucial time in American history where we can use the momentum of Obama's presidency and the desire for real change in this country to move forward towards liberation, and experience it in our lifetime.

*Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research*

This study had various limitations relating to the sample, ambiguous criteria for the study due to developing language, and researcher's bias. The ability to generalize the findings is limited by the small sample size and lack of regional diversity. The researcher used snowball sampling techniques, which may have affected the diversity of responses because almost every participant in the study was connected in some way (through antiracism networks, working on similar projects, and educational institutions). Since there are varying definitions of what *antiracist* means, and participants were self-identified antiracists, there may have been participants in the study that would not be identified as antiracists by other individuals in the study or in the community.

This researcher's bias included a desire to portray these individuals in a positive light (as White role models for the researcher and other White social work students); and a tendency to identify with the young, female, social work students, and consequently, perhaps give more weight to their words and opinions in the findings section (although, it seemed appropriate to give voice to antiracist social work students since this is the population that is likely to read this study).

Since the questions focused on race and racism, topics that tend to evoke feelings of discomfort and vulnerability for most people, there could be a concern that participants

were not entirely honest in their responses. However, since the subjects practice antiracism work and are knowledgeable and experienced with these topics, it is likely that they are more comfortable than most White people when discussing them. In other words, the effectiveness and success of their work is contingent upon their ability to speak openly and honestly to these issues, so it is likely that they gave honest responses during the interviews.

Future studies should include larger samples and participants from all over the United States. Additionally, participants should be asked to define abstract concepts such as *antiracist*. Since this was an exploratory study, qualitative research was more appropriate, however, future research might involve quantitative research methods to remove some of the researcher's bias in interpreting findings.

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Appendix A  
Recruitment Materials

Email to somebody I know who I believe could be a potential subject:

Hi----,

[personal note]

I am emailing you today because I am currently in the process of recruiting subjects for my thesis research that is required for partial fulfillment of my Master's degree. The research question I am studying is: "Are there common identifiable life experiences and motivating factors among white people who actively organize and educate for racial justice?"

All participants of this study will be white, English-speaking and -writing, U.S. citizens over the age of eighteen who identify as antiracist and devote at least ten hours per week (paid or unpaid) to antiracist organizing and/or education. To the best of my knowledge, you meet the criteria for my study, and I would greatly appreciate the opportunity for an interview, if you are willing to participate.

I am interested in your responses and reflections of how your life experiences affected or led to your choice to educate or organize against racism. The purpose of this study is to understand and describe this development in a meaningful way as well as to understand the interactions between these issues. You will be asked to reflect on aspects of your personal and professional life including: family, racial identity, class, gender, education, spirituality, and projects that you are currently working on.

If you choose to participate in this study I will need to interview you for approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio tape recorded and transcribed. Confidentiality is very important to me and the data obtained will not be connected to any personally identifiable information.

Please respond in a timely manner if you are interested in participating in the study. Also, please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns you have regarding your participation in this study. Lastly, if you do not think you will be able to participate in the study at this time, but that you might have a friend or colleague who you think would be interested and meet the criteria for participation, please pass their names and contact information along. Ideally, my sample will include a diverse range of gender identities, socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, and geographic areas, but any referrals would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time,  
Anne Bachrach

Email to somebody I do not know who has been referred to me as a potential subject:

Hi----,

My name is Anne Bachrach and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work located in Massachusetts. I am currently in the process of recruiting subjects for my thesis research that is required for partial fulfillment of my Master's degree. The

research question I am studying is: “Are there common identifiable life experiences and motivating factors among white people who actively organize and educate for racial justice?”

All participants of this study will be white, English-speaking and -writing, U.S. citizens over the age of eighteen who identify as antiracist and devote at least ten hours per week (paid or unpaid) to antiracist work (organizing, education, etc.). I am contacting you because [referral source] suggested that you would be a good candidate for my study.

I am interested in your responses and reflections of how your life experiences affected or led to your choice to educate or organize against racism. The purpose of this study is to understand and describe this development in a meaningful way as well as to understand the interactions between these issues. You will be asked to reflect on aspects of your personal and professional life including: family, racial identity, class, gender, education, spirituality, and projects that you are currently working on.

If you choose to participate in this study I will need to interview you for approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio tape recorded and transcribed. Confidentiality is very important to me and the data obtained will not be connected to any personally identifiable information.

Please respond in a timely manner if you are interested in participating in the study. Also, please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns you have regarding your participation in this study. Lastly, if you do not think you will be able to participate in the study at this time, but that you might have a friend or colleague who you think would be interested and meet the criteria for participation, please pass their names and contact information along. Ideally, my sample will include a diverse range of gender identities, socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, and geographic areas, but any referrals would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time,  
Anne Bachrach

To friends, family, Smith faculty, and colleagues:

Hi everyone,

I am emailing you today because I am currently in the process of recruiting subjects for my thesis research that is required for partial fulfillment of my Master’s degree. The research question I am studying is: “Are there common identifiable life experiences and motivating factors among white people who actively organize and educate for racial justice?”

All participants of this study will be white, English-speaking and -writing, U.S. citizens over the age of eighteen who identify as antiracist and devote at least ten hours per week (paid or unpaid) to antiracist organizing and/or education. Ideally, my sample will include a diverse range of gender identities, socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, and geographic areas.

Participants will be asked to reflect on aspects of their personal and professional life including: family, racial identity, class, gender, education, spirituality, and projects

that they are currently working on. Interviews will be confidential and approximately 60 minutes long.

If you think you have a friend or colleague who meets the criteria for participation and might be interested and available to participate in the study, please pass their names and contact information along.

Thank you for your time,  
Annie



Appendix B  
Informed Consent Form and List of Mental Health Resources

Date

Dear Participant:

My name is Anne Bachrach and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work located in Massachusetts. I am doing this research in order to write a thesis in partial fulfillment of my Master's degree. The research question I am studying is: "Are there common identifiable life experiences and motivating factors among white people who actively organize and educate for racial justice?" The research may be used for future presentations and publications on the topic.

I am interested in your responses and reflections of how your life experiences affected or led to your choice to educate or organize against racism. The purpose of this study is to understand and describe this development in a meaningful way as well as to understand the interactions between these issues.

If you choose to participate in this study I will need to interview you for approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to reflect on your life experiences including: family, class, gender, education, and spirituality. Confidentiality will be provided in this study. All participants' identities will be concealed and quotes will not personally identify them. The consent forms will be kept separate from the data. All interviews will be audio tape recorded and transcribed. Anyone transcribing tapes or analyzing data in which participants could be identified will sign a confidentiality agreement. The research advisor will have access to the data after names have been removed. All materials will be locked and secured for three years as required by federal regulations and all documents will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

You may benefit from this study by gaining new insight into your personal development. In addition, you may gain a more general understanding about how people develop the ability to organize for racial justice. Compensation will not be provided for the participants of the study.

You may face minimal risks if you participate in this study. My goal is for you to reflect and report on your personal life experiences, which may cause some distress or uncomfortable feelings. Because of this risk, I am providing a list of counseling resources for you to access.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question asked during the interview. You may decide at any point during the interview that you do not want to participate in this study and I will destroy any data collected during your interview.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. You may also contact the chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee, Ann Hartman, at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you in advance for participating in this study.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS, AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Anne Bachrach

[Contact info omitted]

Please keep a copy of this consent for your records.

## List of Mental Health Resources

### Baltimore, MD:

Hopkins Bayview Community Psychiatry	Baltimore	MD (410) 550-0104
Harford Belair Comm. Mental Health	Baltimore	MD (410) 426-5650
Daniel L. Buccino, LCSW-C, BCD	Baltimore	MD (410) 235-9200
Mary Faith Ferretto, LCSW-C, C-ASWCM	Baltimore	MD (410) 662-4357
Jacob Dover, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (443) 765-6647
Carlton Joel Davis, LCSW-C, QCSW	Baltimore	MD (410) 347-1062
Kimberly Yamas, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 576-9191
Nicholas P. Conti, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 727-4668
Gabrielle Evering, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 426-6370
Judith Sheagren, PhD, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 323-4266
Rachel Beck, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 433-8027
Ashley Varner, LCSW-C, MBA	Baltimore	MD (410) 955-8371
Amy L. Kopel, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 377-6370
Nicholas P. Conti, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 342-6965
Steven B. Wechsler, LCSW-C	Baltimore	MD (410) 532-4540

### Washington, DC:

NW: North Comm. Mental Health Center	Washington DC	(202) 576-6512
NE: 35 K Street	Washington DC	(202) 442-4202
Walter D. Teague, LICSW, LCSW-C	Washington DC	(301) 439-6755
Jeanne Mitchler-Fiks, LCSW, LICSW	Washington DC	(202) 588-9885
Sarah H. Pillsbury, LCSW	Washington DC	(202) 332-9473
Susan S. Roth, LCSW, DCSW	Arlington VA	(703) 516-0304
Dorothy Van Dam, LICSW	Washington DC	(202) 319-4342
Anita Gadhia-Smith, PsyD, LICSW, LCSW-C	Washington DC	(202) 342-1762
Mary Lee Zetter, LCSW-C	Washington DC	(443) 822-6100
Susan Berlin, LICSW, CASAC	Washington DC	(202) 333-1787
Jane Baxter Cibel, PhD, CPT	Washington DC	(202) 744-4381
Nahida Hadeesh, LICSW	Washington DC	(202) 441-5827
Margaret R. Stohner, LICSW	Washington DC	(202) 686-6335
David G. Sternberg, LICSW	Washington DC	(240) 393-1148
Chris Paranicas, LICSW	Washington DC	(202) 277-3381
Alicia J. George, MSW	Washington DC	(202) 328-9055
Jeanine M. Lamb, MSW, LCSW-C	Washington DC	(301) 518-6947

New York, NY:

St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Centers	New York	NY	(212) 604-8220
Lynn Radov, LCSW	Brooklyn	NY	(718) 965-0273
Debra J. Harris, LCSW	Brooklyn	NY	(917) 647-8352
Iris Lipner, LCSW,BCD	Brooklyn	NY	(718) 857-5717
Marjory Slobetz, LCSW	Brooklyn	NY	(718) 768-2900
Georgine Gorra, DSW, LCSW	Brooklyn	NY	(718) 783-8247
Michelle S. Desir, LCSW	Brooklyn	NY	(917) 578-0894
Ernest Fried, Ph.D., LCSW	Brooklyn	NY	(718) 624-6507
Regine Podrizki, LCSW, QCSW, BCD	Brooklyn	NY	(718) 467-2094
Anita Lavie, LCSW	New York	NY	(212) 280-1715
Hilary Marshak, MSW, LCSW, QCSW	New York	NY	(917) 825-5791
Yehuda Lieberman, LCSW-R, SAP, QCSW, DCSW	Brooklyn	NY	(718) 258-5317
Manny Rich, PhD, LCSW	New York	NY	(212) 966-7830
Rowland A. Hill, LCSW	New York	NY	(212) 674-5621

Other locations:

Search online for services @ [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

Appendix C  
Semi-Structured Interview Guide

*Demographic (7)*

Age:

Gender:

Years of education completed:

Socioeconomic status:

Number of children:

Job Title/description:

Hours/wk spent on antiracism work:

*Background (10)*

What is your religious/spiritual background?

Describe the neighborhood where you grew up specifically focusing on race relations as you perceived them.

How much contact did you have with people of color during your childhood?

When did you first become aware of racial differences and what did you make of them?

What did/do your caregivers do for a living?

What were you taught by your caregivers and other family members about race?

What did you learn in school about race?

When was the first time you recognized white privilege?

Is there any particular person(s) who has influenced you? Tell me about him/her.

Describe how you came into this work.

*Your work (5)*

What actions/projects are you working on?

How do whites and people of color respond when you tell them what you do?

How do you react to these responses?

How do you engage people around issues of race in your personal life?

What are the biggest challenges you face on a daily basis?

*Future of the antiracism movement (3)*

How do you remain hopeful?

What is your vision of a liberated society?

What do you think social work students need to know?

Any other thoughts? Any questions for me?

Appendix D  
Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

November 17, 2008

Anne Bachrach

Dear Anne,

Your revised materials have been reviewed by the committee. You have done a good job with their amendment and all is now in order. We are therefore happy to give final approval to your study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. This was a very creative thesis idea and it will be very interesting to discover more about your population.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Fred Newdom, Research Advisor