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## Exploring ways White children are taught about race and racism

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Angela Clark  
Exploring ways White children are  
taught about race and racism

### **ABSTRACT**

In this theoretical study, I will explore ways White children are taught about race and racism, and ways this subject can be explored with White youth in therapeutic contexts. In the United States, racism continues to have a significant negative impact on the material and psychological experiences of people of color, limiting life chances while it is largely ignored by White individuals and White-dominated institutions. One factor that serves to maintain the existence and influence of racist systems is White people's ignorance of the degree to which racism is present in our institutions, dominant discourse and ideology, and in ourselves. There is a need for research on ways White children are taught about race and racism, and ways to support children in developing the intellectual awareness and emotional and social abilities to engage in working toward racial justice. I will examine literature on how children are commonly taught about racism, how they learn to understand race, and on how clinicians have addressed race in therapy. I will use critical race theory and the theory of self psychology to analyze factors that influence the learning of children on the subject of race and racism, and offer suggestions for White therapists who choose to talk about race and racism with young White clients in clinical practice.

**EXPLORING WAYS WHITE CHILDREN ARE TAUGHT ABOUT RACE AND  
RACISM**

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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2014

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Dominant narratives among White people in the United States maintain that racism is a historical problem the United States has moved beyond (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). Despite this widespread belief, the impact and prevalence of racism is very much the same as it has been for many years. White people and people of color in the United States receive disproportionate access to many material resources such as healthcare, housing, and jobs (Abrams & Moio, 2009) and to experiences that shape psychological well-being, such as hearing their stories told in the media and having their presence valued in educational institutions. All of these and other significant factors contribute to variances in rates of physical and mental illness between White people and people of color; with White people also having a higher life expectancy than people of color (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Rates of poverty and homelessness are also higher for people of color, with higher access to jobs, more wealth, and greater access to housing going to White people (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Segregation rates are as high in neighborhoods and in schools as they were prior to the Civil Rights Movement (DiAngelo, 2012) with stereotypes and discriminatory practices continuing to impact the self-esteem of children of color from a very young age (Dulin-Keita, Hannon, Fernandez, & Cockerham, 2011).

The pervasive impact of racism on people of color's material, physical, and emotional well-being, and the extensive privilege White people receive in each of these areas is continually

ignored by most White people. Silence on the subject of race and racism is a primary way the system of racial oppression is maintained (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; DiAngelo, 2012), and silence typically characterizes the way White people educate their children on race and racism (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Despite White people's lack of verbal acknowledgement of racism in the education of their children, race is a salient identity and salient concept for all children (Ramsey, 1991; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) and White children learn a great deal from their parents', teachers', and community silence. White children typically come to learn that whiteness is normal and superior, and they learn to believe that relationships between White people and people of color are as they should be (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). When children grow up learning this and are not taught to recognize or try to interrupt racism, they grow up uncritically participating in institutions, interpersonal relationships, and narratives that privilege White people and target people of color. There is a great need for White people to think critically and take a more active role in teaching their children to understand, recognize, and act against racism.

Literature addressing the subject of how to talk with and teach White children about race and racism exists primarily in the field of education, illustrating how to design educational curricula as well as providing instructional materials on teaching children of all ages and stages. Anti-racist and multicultural curricula used by educators often do not distinguish between ways White children should be taught and ways children of color learn about race and racism, despite documented differences in their levels of awareness of racism and their learning processes (Dulin-Keita et al., 2011). In addition, these curricula tend to focus on historical information and learning about cultural and racial difference. They rarely acknowledge racial oppression

adequately, particularly not systemic oppression based on race (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

In the field of clinical social work, literature addressing race primarily focuses on practice with clients of color. The limited amount of literature addressing the relevance of race to White people's emotional health and to the therapeutic process focuses primarily on social work practice with adults (Altman, 2012; Harris, 2012; Liu, Pickett, & Ivey, 2007; Suchet, 2012). Further, literature addressing the process of learning about racism for White adults overwhelmingly calls for an integration of attention to White people's emotional experience and attention to their intellectual learning to ensure that their learning is most effective (Cabrera, 2012; Dalal, 2006; Laszloffy & Hardy, 2000; Liu et al., 2007; Tatum, 1997). Additional research indicates that helping White people maintain a positive self-image supports their ability to stay engaged when learning about institutional racism and about privilege (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008).

Research and theoretical literature in the field of social work have yet to address ways that clinical social workers can talk with young White clients about race, White privilege, and racism in the context of a therapeutic relationship. White youth need education on race and racism that attends to their emotional experiences when their previous beliefs are challenged; that explores the specific emotional meaning and usefulness racism has to them as individuals; that examines the realities of systemic racism that are so frequently ignored by White people; and that offers critiques of the idea that racism is a historical problem and not only a problem of individual prejudice. In the field of social work, there is a need for greater attention to social justice perspectives and social justice work; social workers who do not only serve individual clients, but the communities those clients are part of. They play a role in shaping communities

they work in, such as hospitals, schools, group therapy sessions, and residential programs, and they play a role in shaping the larger communities they serve. It is the professional responsibility of social workers to engage in work that supports greater equality and health for vulnerable populations (National Association of Social Workers, 2000), and White social workers in particular have a responsibility to address racial oppression. Some authors have argued that for patterns of racism to change in the United States, White people must work together to interrupt dominant ideology, relational patterns, and institutions (DiAngelo, 2012; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). This analysis will address the question of how White clinical social workers can support young White clients' development as individuals who can gain understanding of the impact of racism and work toward a more racially just society.

For this analysis, I have chosen to use critical race theory for its efficacy in examining systemic racism, its analysis of how racism is reproduced through discourse, and its ultimate goal of greater racial justice. I will also use the theory of self psychology for analysis of the impact of significant relationships on emotional development, and for its emphasis on the use of empathy and emotional attunement to promote relational growth, strength, and the ability to stay engaged in difficult work. Analysis using these two theoretical frameworks may contribute to an understanding of how to best support the growth and development of White youth as racial justice allies, and as people who are emotionally and intellectually able to notice and work to transform racism in themselves and in their communities.

In Chapter II, I will discuss theoretical frameworks and methodology used in this analysis. Chapter III will provide background information on the phenomenon of education on race and racism for White children, and their learning processes, White identity development, and the relevance of racism to White clients' emotional and relational experiences as well as the

relevance of White clients' racism to psychotherapy. In Chapters IV and V I will provide information about critical race theory and the theory of self psychology, and Chapter VI will include an analysis of each theory's applications to the phenomenon as well as a synthesis of the two theoretical frameworks and implications for clinical social work practice with White youth.

## CHAPTER II

### Conceptualization and Methodology

In this chapter, I will describe the methodological approach used to examine the issue of how White therapists can talk with and teach White children about race and racism in therapy. First, I will provide an explanation of the two theoretical perspectives used in this analysis, critical race theory and the theory of self psychology. I will provide definitions of terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader, and terms that have particular meanings within the two theories. Next, I will explore potential biases and assumptions that may have influenced this study. Finally, I will identify strengths and limitations of this analysis.

#### **Theoretical Frameworks**

**Critical race theory.** The first of two theories I chose for this analysis is critical race theory, a framework that was developed out of critical legal studies in the 1970s to analyze and critique ongoing systemic racism following the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). I chose this theory because of its systemic conceptualization of racism and because its ultimate goal is greater racial justice (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Salter & Adams, 2013). Critical race theory can offer an understanding of how racism shapes institutions and ideologies, as well as the ways individuals understand and interact with systems and discourses about race and racism (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). In the field of education, critical race theory offers an analysis of when and how students are commonly taught

about race and racism, as well as ideas about deconstructing dominant discourses and reconstructing more accurate and useful narratives for understanding the impact of racism in everyday life (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). This theoretical perspective also offers an analysis of the negative impact of colorblind racial ideology, a common way of responding to the subject of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and one that has influenced the field of clinical social work. Critical race theory can contribute to clinical social work with White clients by helping White clinicians learn to recognize their own privilege, socialization, and perspectives. Finding more complex, accurate, and healthy language to describe experiences can also be a useful aspect of therapy (White & Epston, 1990).

**Self Psychology.** Self psychology is the second theoretical framework selected for this study. It is a psychoanalytic theory developed first by Heinz Kohut in the 1970s that focused on a new conceptualization of the impact of significant early relationships on emotional development, and the deficits in the self that result when emotional needs are not met (Flanagan, 2008). I chose self psychology for its strength as a theory of emotional development, its explanation of the process of internalization of role models, and its analysis of the factors supporting emotional strength or pathological narcissism (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). This theory is useful in understanding the relationship between emotional development and how people learn new information, particularly the impact of internalized relationships on an individual's ability to accept and cope with challenging information. Self psychology can offer clinicians insight into the role of emotions in shaping an individual's ability to engage in relationships and in work with strength, humility, self-reflection, and empathy (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), which are all necessary for White people who wish to engage in ongoing anti-racist education and work. It also offers insight into the formation of narcissistic tendencies and their impact on an individual's behavior and

relationships (Kohut & Wolf, 1978); the self psychological concept of narcissism can be understood as similar to the impact of whiteness on White people's thoughts and behavior regarding race. Additionally, this theoretical framework offers therapists an explanation of the role and power of early or significant relationships in shaping an individual's emotions and sense of self, and it provides insight into how therapists can use empathy and emotional understanding to stimulate growth (Kohut & Wolf, 1978; Flanagan, 2008).

### **Definition of terms**

**Oppression.** Groups of people have used the term oppression in various ways at different points in history (Young, 2006). In this paper I use the definition constructed by social justice and civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements have come to define oppression as a set of interrelated experiences of systemic constraints on and discrimination toward a particular (oppressed) group and set of benefits to a privileged group (Young, 2006). Oppression shapes everyday experiences, existing in progressive contexts, and is perpetuated even by those with good intentions (Young, 2006). It shapes the unconscious, everyday interactions and relationships, the media, the economy, and political and cultural institutions (Young, 2006).

**White.** In this paper, I use the term White to refer to people who are designated as White in racialized society, who are placed in a position of power in a racially oppressive society, and who benefit from racial oppression. The term White, and the concept of White people as a racial group is not based on any biological evidence supporting different racial groups; race is a socially constructed concept that has historically been loosely based on perceived differences in physical appearance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). I use the term White to indicate a group of

people of White, European descent who are privileged and socialized in specific ways based on meaning that has been assigned to this perceived and socially constructed difference.

**People of color.** This is a term used to refer to the larger group of people who are oppressed by racism. It includes people of Asian, African, Latin American, Native American, and mixed or multi-racial heritage, among other groups. It is also a socially constructed term not used to describe a biological difference between people of color and White people, but used to draw attention to the different experiences resulting from socially constructed racial categories and racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

**White privilege.** This is a concept explained most famously by Peggy McIntosh (2005) who defined White privilege as a set of unearned, often invisible benefits White people receive on a regular basis as a result of racism. Despite socialization that teaches White people their experiences are normal and they deserve what they earn, society is structured in a way that provides countless benefits to White people each day at the expense of people of color (McIntosh, 2005).

**Dominant group/Dominant group culture.** I use these terms to refer to White people as a group, and the extent to which White norms, values, habits, and narratives have been socially constructed as superior, normal, and ideal in United States society. Dominant groups typically have the greatest influence over the values, norms, and structure of society (Tatum, 2000).

**Colorblind racial ideology/Colorblind racism.** Colorblindness is a term given to a dominant method for understanding and responding to racism in the United States since the Civil Rights Movement. Though this ideology acknowledges the historical existence of racial prejudice and discrimination, it does not acknowledge the continued existence or systemic nature of racism; it maintains that the best response to racial difference is to pretend it does not exist

and treat all individuals as though they are the same (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). In practice, this ideology denies people of color's expressions of their personal experiences of racism, denies that people still experience systemic oppression based on race, and denies that White people benefit from racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It is sometimes referred to as colorblind racism because this ideology contributes to ignorance of racism and lack of action to address racism, effectively perpetuating the system of racial oppression (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011).

**Social identities.** When I use the term social identities, I am referring to a concept of identity that relates to experience of oppression or privilege, including identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and others. Social identities are identities related to a category of difference that is assigned meaning by a society, and either privileged or oppressed depending on the value assigned to that identity (Harro, 2000).

**Clinical social worker, therapist, and clinician.** I undertake this study as a clinical social worker who plans to practice psychotherapy. The profession of social work has articulated a commitment to social justice that I share, and I refer to this profession's values and code of ethics in later chapters. However, because practitioners in other fields such as psychology and mental health counseling may also share this value, and also practice psychotherapy in various contexts, much of the material I present is relevant to these practitioners as well, and I use the terms clinical social worker, therapist, and clinician interchangeably.

### **Method of Evaluation**

In Chapters IV and V I will provide information about key concepts from each of the theoretical frameworks, and apply these concepts to common patterns in the education of White children, White identity development, and learning processes discussed in Chapter III, critiquing

common patterns in the ways White children are taught about race and racism. In Chapter VI I will use these key concepts to argue that therapists can and should talk with young White clients about racism, and to provide suggestions for ways White therapists might do so. Following this, I will provide a critique of each theoretical framework's application to the phenomenon, and a synthesis of recommendations based on the two theoretical frameworks. I will argue that critical race theory and self psychology offer different but complementary perspectives on the phenomenon, and can be used together to shape our understanding of ways to engage in conversations about race and racism with young White clients. Using a set of examples presented in Chapter III, I will use a synthesis of the two theories to address possible ways White therapists can respond to and initiate conversations about race and racism with White youth.

### **Potential Biases**

There are several potential biases that may influence this investigation, including those related to my personal experience. I am a person who receives White privilege and has been socialized as White; these experiences have shaped my perspective and level of awareness in many ways. This may have narrowed the focus of the project, and may influence my ability to present material objectively. I have been educated primarily by White people in White-dominated institutions, using educational materials written by White authors, and though I have tried to select research and theory written by authors from a variety of backgrounds, this history may have influenced the materials I have had access to and what I have chosen to use in this investigation. My previous and current educational and practice experiences have contributed to and informed my interest in the topic of how to talk with and teach White youth about race and racism in therapy. My professional values and theoretical orientation have contributed to my choice of the two theoretical frameworks used in this investigation.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

As a theoretical investigation, this project is able to offer an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of White children's learning about race and racism, and how this subject can be approached in therapy by White clinicians. There is a great deal of research on the subjects of how children learn about race and how educators approach teaching about race, and this investigation analyzes only a limited portion of such research. There are very few empirical studies examining how or why clinicians address the subject of race in therapy with White children, and therefore, I have not been able to address the effectiveness of talking with White children about race and racism as a clinician. Future empirical studies could provide more concrete information about the impact of these conversations on understanding of racism and on the therapeutic relationship. The purpose of this investigation is to explore some of the reasons White therapists should address this topic with White children and youth, and to explore some of the ways they could initiate conversations about this topic and respond to questions and comments youth bring to therapy.

There are additional strengths and limitations to the scope of this investigation; I have focused primarily on the phenomenon of talking with White youth about racism as a White clinician, and this allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon related to White identity. However, I have not addressed intersectionality of multiple identities. Many other privileged or oppressed social identities shape the ways White clinicians and White youth experience and interact with their White privilege and with each other. Identities such as national origin, languages spoken, and socioeconomic status can be visible identities that can influence the experience of White privilege and the therapeutic relationship in ways this study does not acknowledge or address. Further, there are people who identify as biracial, multi-racial, or mixed

race who hold whiteness as part of their identity and who may experience some aspects of racial privilege while also experiencing racial oppression. This investigation does not address the experiences of multiracial people and the results will not all be applicable to people who hold multiple racial identities.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **The Phenomenon**

Racism is often thought of as a problem that belongs to people of color, or a problem that people of color must solve (Dyer, 2005). In human service fields such as education, social work, and mental health counseling, racism tends to be viewed as a problem that people of color need support with. In social work, the largest body of literature addressing race is literature about cultural competence, a subject that focuses on providing knowledge to social workers about various cultures. This literature does not fully acknowledge racism as a system of oppression, the ways race affects White people, or the responsibility White people have to educate themselves and each other to enact less racism. In this chapter, I will summarize literature on how White children learn about race, racism, and White identity, ways White adults and schools commonly teach White children about these topics, and literature on White racial identity development. I will also summarize psychoanalytic literature on the relevance of White identity and racism to emotional health; and argue that racism is often a relevant topic for therapists to explore with White clients. Finally, I will provide examples of literature addressing ways in which social workers and other mental health professionals have addressed the topics of race and racism with White clients.

## **White Children Learning About Race**

The ways in which adults view children influences the ways they teach children about race and racism, and currently in the United States it is common for White adults to view White children as people who are not capable of understanding or enacting racism. In their observational research in a racially diverse preschool, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) found that even when adults – both parents and teachers – witnessed students' overtly racist behaviors, parents maintained that the students were repeating things they had heard from adults and did not understand what they were doing. Adults commonly see the "child as imitator, not as creator" (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, p. 2). These researchers argued that Piaget's developmental theory relates to common misconceptions about the capability of children to understand and use racial concepts at a young age, particularly the beliefs that development is linear and that preschool-age children are capable of only concrete thought. In their study, they also found that Kohlberg's theory of moral development – and the idea that children are not capable of moral thought until age seven – influenced the ways in which teachers and parents understood concepts of race and racism held by young children (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Adults tend to view children as, at best, passively taking in adults' concepts of race, identity, and racism, or they view children as simply unaware of race, difference, and inequality.

Adults' views of young children as people who are unaware of race and incapable of enacting racism lead them to talk with children about race and racism too infrequently (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011) and to talk with children about race and racism in ways that are based on adults' perceptions of children rather than their actual understanding or needs. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) observed preschool teachers and spoke with parents, and found that White

adults in their study frequently ignore even overtly racist behavior observed among their children. Many parents questioned the need to actively teach children about racism at all, and parents as well as teachers believed that children would not, and do not, talk about race without adults present (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). When teachers at this preschool actively taught children about race, they frequently taught in adult-centric ways, rather than by noticing and responding to behaviors, questions, interests, or educational needs of children. For example, a teacher led an activity in which children were asked to select a picture of a person who looked like them based on their race or ethnicity. During the activity, she encouraged children to select the picture based on her understanding of identity categories. When children viewed their own identities differently than their teacher saw them, or when they expressed discomfort with how she encouraged them to identify, she responded to them as though they had chosen the wrong answer, rather than inviting her students to share their thoughts with her or with each other (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). In another observation, researchers noticed that the teacher's interventions in the spontaneous conversations of students about race usually focused on stopping them from making comments teachers perceived as prejudiced, rather than taking the time to listen for their meaning or for ways to open up the conversation (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996).

In contrast to the common view that children operate only as imitators of adults' racism, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) proposed the application of social learning theory to our understanding of how children learn race and racism. They discussed Mead's idea that children learn through relationships and through human interaction, as well as Vygotsky's belief that children are active participants in their own developmental processes (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). These theories lead us toward viewing children as much more capable of understanding

and enacting racism in complex ways that go beyond simply imitating adults' comments and behavior. In fact, throughout their study, Van Ausdale and Feagin observed children as young as three and four years old using racial concepts their parents and teachers did not believe they could understand, such as teasing Asian children in their class by implying they all looked alike, or insisting that a Black child act as a maid during play.

Additionally, it is important to know that children are not merely passive recipients of knowledge in their interactions with adults; they are active participants in interactions around race and they learn through their relationships with others. In the Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) study, researchers frequently observed children changing the subject or becoming quiet in response to adults' expressions of discomfort around talking about race. Monteiro, de França, and Rodrigues (2009) conducted two studies of White children and their tendency to discriminate, and whether their likelihood of discriminating was influenced by what researchers refer to as the "anti-racism norm," the verbal expression that it is wrong to be racist. Similar to students in the preschool, children in these studies, ages 6-10, all expressed racism by choosing to discriminate against Black people when there was no adult present or no adult prompting about how they should view Black people. Children in the older group, ages 9-10, were less likely to discriminate in the experiment if they were prompted by an adult who expressed that White and Black people should be treated equally, or if an adult was present (Monteiro et al., 2009). Children of all ages learn actively about what they should believe, as well as what it is okay for them to express, and they do this through experimenting in relationships with peers and with adults. Though they may not understand the social or moral impact of their actions, the process of social learning leads them to gain and utilize an understanding of complex social concepts,

such as using racist behavior in at times when it is acceptable for them to do so, and masking racist beliefs at other times.

It is crucial for parents and teachers to recognize the ways in which children learn and express racism at a very young age so adults can begin to talk with and teach children differently; ignoring racism of children and ignoring their anti-racist education supports the existence of racism in their communities and in the larger society. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) suggested that "children's actions also create and re-create society" (p. 3). Based on their observational research, they argued that ignoring children's racism causes harm to children of color who are targeted by it, and teaches White children to grow up to support and perpetuate existing racist systems (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). In addition, there is denial from White people of their responsibility to work toward ending racism when they ignore the ways in which children learn and express racism (DiAngelo, 2012). Children do express a tendency to want to learn about race and racism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011) and when their natural curiosity is ignored or dismissed in favor of adult-centric ways of talking about – and not talking about – race and racism, it limits and discourages the engagement of children with the subject of race at all (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Finally, the curiosity and comments of children could be viewed as useful to adults (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) who often experience counterproductive feelings of discomfort, guilt, and shame around the subject of racism, which cause them to avoid acknowledging it (DiAngelo, 2012). Since children clearly can and do engage actively with racial concepts from a very young age, it would be most beneficial for adults to engage with children by providing accurate information and being willing to both teach and learn from children.

From a young age, children begin to learn to categorize people as similar to the self or as "others;" and despite what some adults believe, race is a category that has significance to children as young as preschool students (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). In a study of White children living in a predominantly White neighborhood, Ramsey (1991) found that race was more salient than sex in preschool students' categorizations of people they viewed in pictures. She also found that White children were more likely to refer to an individual's race if they were categorizing that individual as someone they would not want to be friends with than if they were making positive statements about the individual pictured. Children's understanding of racial categories shapes the information they are able to learn and remember about people they categorize differently from themselves. In another study of White children, ages 4-9, researchers found that children do still know and use negative racial stereotypes (Bigler & Liben, 1993). When presented with information about individuals of color, children were less likely to remember information that counters negative stereotypes, and more likely to remember information consistent with negative stereotypes. In addition, researchers found that children who utilize more stereotypes of people of color are less likely to notice or to remember individual differences among people of color (Bigler & Liben, 1993).

Though the attitudes of White children toward people of color are typically related to their parents' attitudes, the relationship between child and parent attitudes is complex. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) suggested that children learn racial concepts vicariously through their parents' beliefs and life experiences even when their parents do not explicitly teach racist beliefs, and this idea is supported by research on how children learn racism. In two experiments, Castelli, De Dea, and Nesdale (2008) examined the impact of adults' nonverbal behaviors toward a Black individual on preschool children's feelings about and behaviors toward the same individual, as

well as toward other Black adults. Children participating observed an interaction between a White adult and a Black adult; the White adult's verbal and nonverbal behaviors varied. Children were then asked to rate how they felt about the Black adult and how they would act toward him. The researchers found that the feelings and behaviors of children were influenced by the White adult's nonverbal behaviors; if he seemed comfortable and trusting of the Black person, children rated him positively, but if the White adult seemed uncomfortable, angry, or fearful, children responded in the same way. This was true even when the White adult's verbal behaviors did not match his nonverbal behaviors; children were most sensitive to and most likely to imitate attitudes that the White adult did not state explicitly. In a second study, researchers found that children generalized what they learned from the White adult's nonverbal behaviors toward other Black people they had not seen him interact with (Castelli et al., 2008). Children's ability to notice and their tendency to imitate adults' nonverbal behaviors is particularly important to note in a culture in which it is common for White people to hold implicit attitudes they do not explicitly express.

Similarly to the ways children learn from individual adults' unspoken behaviors, they observe and learn racial concepts from larger systems, including from their schools and from the media, even when institutions do not explicitly acknowledge that they are expressing racial concepts. When White children leave their homes and enter the larger community, or when they watch television or movies, they often see people of color who have been hired to serve or to clean for White people (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). White people are more likely to work in or to be depicted in roles where they have more status or power, or where they can be seen as heroes. Children notice this inequality whether adults acknowledge it or not, and children learn to believe that this inequality is natural and acceptable (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). It is

common, even among schools that wish to teach children anti-racist ideals, for children to learn negative stereotypes about people of color and to learn that racism was a historical problem no longer present. In many schools, classroom materials such as books and dolls often depict people of color in stereotypical ways if they depict people of color at all (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Curriculums often provide minimal historical information about people of color in other areas of the world without addressing accurate or current information about people of color in the United States or information about the continued presence and impact of racism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). It is rare for schools to include teaching actively and explicitly about difference, sameness, inequality, or oppression (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) and it is particularly rare for schools to encourage any critique of their own classroom materials or curriculums. When White children are exposed to superficial messages that everyone is equal, and when they are not taught to engage in critical thinking or action to address inequality, they are more likely to learn from implicit messages they receive from exposure to negative stereotypes and from lack of exposure to accurate and varied information.

In addition to forming concepts about racial identities of people of color, White children also begin forming a sense of their own identity as White when they are very young. Their concepts of what it means to be White are shaped by already existing systems and discourses, and their sense of White identity can shape their behavior throughout their lives. Children observe racial differences beginning in infancy, and typically learn the concept that they are White by age three (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Concepts young White children typically have about whiteness include the beliefs that as White individuals, they are normal, natural, and superior (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Literature on White identity in adults exposes the same phenomenon, that White adults engage in maintaining the invisibility of their own

identities by not naming or talking about whiteness, and by doing so, reinforce the common White belief that White people are just normal (Dyer, 2005). White preschool children also tend to identify whiteness with being American (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011) and White preschool children have been observed telling children of color that they cannot be "American" because they are not White (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). The pattern of White children and adults seeing themselves as normal has the effect of maintaining and re-creating systems that keep White people in power (Dyer, 2005).

Researchers also observed another common aspect of White identity – the possessive need to claim White identity as superior and protect it from others who critique whiteness or are perceived as trying to share its benefits (Lipsitz, 2005) – in preschool children (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). In their study, Van Ausdale and Feagin observed a White student who became worried when she noticed her skin was darker than her friend's skin, and repeatedly sought reassurance from peers and adults that she would not become Black. Another White preschool student became angry and defensive when she believed a Black student had misidentified his own race, and she repeatedly reminded him that she was White and therefore he could not be, because he did not look enough like her. These and other interactions observed among preschool students led researchers to believe that the concept of whiteness is very important to White children, who learn that it is a positive identity that they hold and must protect from others who they see as different. Lipsitz (2005) argued that this "possessive investment in whiteness" (p. 67) continues to exist because White people benefit from whiteness socially, economically, and materially in a variety of ways. Children as young as preschool students are learning to identify with whiteness in ways that White adults do, and these ways of viewing themselves and

maintaining their White identities as separate, normal, and superior contribute to maintaining whiteness and racism.

Others talk about White children as less aware of race and racism than children of color because they do not experience racism personally and so are less impacted by racism and required to do less work to understand what racism means in their lives. Despite the documented tendency of children to use racial concepts to hurt others and to recreate social hierarchies among their peers (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), White children have been found to be less skilled than children of color at identifying and articulating racial stereotypes and power imbalances based on race. Dulin-Keita, Hannon, Fernandez, and Cockerham (2011) conducted a study of children ages 7-12 who identified as White, Black, or Hispanic to assess their abilities to define and articulate concepts like race and racism, to identify stereotypes, and to identify the impact of racial discrimination in their lives. These researchers found that White children were significantly more likely to ask researchers to define race and racism for them, and were less able to identify racial stereotypes than children of color who participated in the study (Dulin-Keita et al., 2011). In addition, Black and Hispanic children reported experiences of racial discrimination and of being affected by negative stereotypes, such as being thought of as less intelligent and less hardworking than their White peers. However, White children in the study were significantly less able to identify discrimination and negative stereotypes, and White children did not report being affected by racial discrimination or negative racial stereotypes (Dulin-Keita et al., 2011). White children often grow up learning racial concepts and actively using these concepts in their lives, while simultaneously remaining unaware that they are learning and perpetuating racial concepts. Without having experiences which help them learn to identify racism in the larger society as well as in their own thoughts and

actions, White children are likely to grow up to remain unaware of racism even as they contribute to it.

### **Children Learning Anti-Racism**

Though children learn racism from adults and from society around them earlier than most adults would imagine, they can also learn to identify racism, to understand that it is a problem, and even to act against it. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) emphasized that even as children learn racist beliefs and actions, they also have a capacity to care about the feelings and experiences of other people, and this capacity can help children learn to take new perspectives. Children learn more accurate ways to understand racism from seeing others identify and take action against racism, and from having space to ask questions and share their ideas about racism in relationships with others (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Children whose ideas and social critiques are taken seriously by others in their lives are more likely to be able to sustain the ability to critique racism as they see it, and to generalize their critiques to other situations in society. Further, children learn about racism through connecting to their natural sense that the world should be fair and just, and through learning to understand their own experiences of being treated unfairly (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Finally, children learn the most about how to take action against forms of oppression such as racism when they have opportunities to evaluate communities they are part of, such as their schools, and to become involved in actions toward making their own communities more fair and just (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

### **Racial Identity Development Theory**

Racial identity development theory and research supporting it illustrate patterns common for White people as they learn about race and racism in adulthood. It is important to note, however, that many White adults remain unaware of racism as a continuing problem, and a

majority of White adults do not see racism as something they need to actively challenge (Cabrera, 2012). Tatum (1997) described typical White attitudes and behaviors that she sees among her college students who are in the first phase of racial identity development, saying many of them have not yet thought about their own race and think of themselves as "normal" and even ideal. When White people think of themselves this way, they are more likely to treat people of other racial identities as inferior, and to feel comfortable when they see other White people do the same. White people in this phase of identity development often do not notice racism, particularly their own. When White individuals do not see race as relevant to their lives, and when they are not able to recognize racism in their own and others' thoughts and actions, they continue to act in ways that perpetuate racism. Earlier education about race and racism could support White individuals in better understanding the reality that racism does exist, and that they have a relationship to racism in which they receive privilege and they act in ways that support and maintain racism.

The feelings of discomfort with whiteness and frequent returns to overtly racist views which characterize the next two phases of racial identity development (Hardiman, 2001; Tatum, 1997) further demonstrate a need for earlier education about racism for White individuals. The second phase, disintegration, begins to happen as White individuals begin to notice that racism is more prevalent and powerful than they had previously believed (Hardiman, 2001). During this phase, people often experience feelings of discomfort, guilt, shame, and anxiety in response to their privilege, as well as feelings of anger and disbelief (Tatum, 1997). These emotions can lead White people to return to idealizing people of their own racial group and to a greater intolerance of people of color, behaviors that characterize reintegration, the third phase of White racial identity development (Hardiman, 2001). Early and explicit education on racism could help

prevent some of the defensiveness White adults respond with when they are finally confronted with some of the realities of racism that they had previously been taught existed only in the past. Earlier education could also help normalize some of the discomfort White people feel in response to learning about racism in society and in themselves, and it could support White people in learning to cope with this discomfort more constructively.

The fourth phase of White racial identity development is called pseudoindependence, and White people in this phase typically remain committed to whiteness but outwardly act as though they believe people of all racial identities should be equal (Hardiman, 2001). Behaviors reflective of this phase of identity development also show up frequently in students during college courses addressing racism (Tatum, 1997). It is common for White students in such courses to use students of color to meet their own educational needs and to tokenize individuals of color by taking their opinions out of context and using them to support their own views (Tatum, 1997). White students in these courses also commonly dominate conversations and restructure conversations to meet their own needs (Tatum, 1997). For example, White students often interrupt lectures or dialogue about people's experiences of racial oppression to start a conversation about what they perceive is wrong with the ways they are being taught or spoken to about racism (DiAngelo, 2012). All of these behaviors, typical of the fourth phase of identity development, have a powerful impact on the maintenance of racism and White privilege, and demonstrate a need for earlier engagement in anti-racist education for all people.

### **White Adults and Learning About Racism**

Research on the experiences of White adults engaging in anti-racist education or activism demonstrates the effort it requires for White people to unlearn beliefs they have held throughout their lives and to change behavior patterns they have always engaged in. Cabrera's (2012)

qualitative study of White male college students shows how few members of this population are actually engaged in anti-racist education or action; a majority of students screened for the study were described as normalizing whiteness rather than trying to learn about or interrupt the existing power imbalance between White people and people of color. Cabrera's fifteen study participants who were engaged in educating themselves or taking action against racism all described a process of deconstructing whiteness or unlearning the racism they had learned from their families, friends, schools, and communities. Some participants identified they continued to receive powerful messages from peers and family that White people are superior to people of color, and that they should not be trying to learn about or take action against racism (Cabrera, 2012).

Cabrera's study and another qualitative study that examined racial justice ally development among White college students both identified factors that support White students' abilities to reflect on whiteness and to engage in anti-racist action. White students were more likely to be actively engaged in their education about racism, and to be involved on their campus or in their community if they had experienced an interracial relationship with a significant person in their life, such as a close friend or a partner, if they had experienced coursework that addressed whiteness and racism, or if they had personally experienced another form of oppression such as oppression based on their sexuality or their disability status (Cabrera, 2012; Reason et al., 2005). Students also cited having been given an invitation or opportunity to take action against racism, and experiencing a sense of "safety" to speak up about racism as factors that supported their ability to take action as racial justice allies (Reason et al., 2005, p. 543). It has also been also argued that it requires an "intersection of emotional and cognitive preparation" for White college students to begin to take action (Cabrera, 2012, p. 394).

These two studies, demonstrating factors that support and inhibit White college students' abilities to engage in anti-racist education and in anti-racist action, have implications for colleges that may wish to better support anti-racist education and activism in their communities (Cabrera, 2012; Reason et al., 2005). However, their findings can also be used to direct our attention toward how White college students' earlier life experiences may have shaped development as racial justice allies. Most White children in the United States grow up in communities and attend schools that are predominantly White, and most White children are not exposed to academic coursework that addresses systemic racism or encourages students to take action in their own communities (DiAngelo, 2012). By talking with children about race more often, and by providing more accurate information about the realities of systemic racism, adults can better support White children's development as racial justice allies. Furthermore, as Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) explained, children need opportunities to think critically about their own environments and to take action within their own communities. It is common for White adults to feel uncomfortable while learning about racism, and to talk about feeling unsafe when asked to speak up about racism; this leads many White people to avoid engaging at all in conversations about or actions against racism (DiAngelo, 2012). Early and repeated life experiences in which children are encouraged to ask questions, make comments, and take action as racial justice allies could support not only their intellectual understanding of racism, but also the emotional preparation that Cabrera argued is important for White adults to begin to act as racial justice allies.

### **Race and Psychotherapy**

Most theory and research addressing the relationship between understanding racism and psychotherapy discuss ways in which therapists can support clients of color who experience

racism. However, racism is also relevant to White people, and clinical social workers have a professional responsibility to these individuals and to the communities of which their clients are a part. Social workers also have a broader responsibility to work toward social justice. The field of relational psychoanalysis, in particular, has explored the emotional meaning and usefulness of racism to White individuals, and many tend to characterize racism as a defense that is ultimately maladaptive for the individual as well as harmful to the larger society (Altman, 2012; Dalal, 2006; Harris, 2012). Some analysts and relational theorists have come to conclude that psychoanalysts have a potential, and therefore a responsibility, to use their understanding to work toward racial justice in the world (Harris, 2012; Suchet, 2012). Though most of the literature addressing talking with White clients about racism during psychotherapy is written about adult clients, racism has an emotional and political impact for children as well, and it is just as important for therapists working with children to learn about racism and to be willing to explore the meaning and impact of racism with their clients. In this section, I will explore recent work addressing racism and psychoanalysis, I will argue that clinical social workers have a responsibility to be able to talk with their White clients about race and racism, and I will provide examples of some ways in which psychotherapists have explored race and racism with clients in treatment.

Psychoanalysts have not always agreed about the causes of racism in society, the meaning of racism for particular individuals, or even about how racism should be defined. However, much of the psychoanalytic literature addressing racism has maintained that racism is learned in both conscious and unconscious ways, it often serves a defensive function, and by exploring its function individuals can improve their own emotional health as well as the health of their relationships. Dalal (2006) has critiqued common psychoanalytic views of the etiology of

individual racism based on his understanding of racism as a form of systemic oppression. He concluded that because systemic racism is so pervasive, individual racism can be seen as “a natural outcome of a universal developmental process,” (Dalal, 2006, p. 140) and that racism is present in everyone. Dalal argued, at the same time, that racism has particular meaning for each individual in the context of their own relationships. Altman (2012) described a common psychoanalytic view of how White people learn racism, arguing that our attitudes and behaviors are shaped outside of our conscious awareness by the ways we are socialized, and so some of them are pre-reflective, and many are difficult to unlearn. Coming to a greater understanding of the ways in which racism and our socialization in a racist society have a universal impact on our individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors can help make White individuals more conscious of the racial meaning and the impact of their words and actions, and more conscious of racial meaning in their relationships.

One of the most dangerous effects of racism on the psyche of the White individual is the way it pushes White people toward silence and lack of action in response to racism. Harris (2012) agreed with other psychoanalysts that racism is learned at least in part unconsciously, and she wrote about the "intergenerational transmissions of guilt and disavowal" (p. 197) which, when left unacknowledged, make it harder for White people to repair their mistakes or change their patterns of interacting with others and with society. Harris described an example of her own silence as a White person with the power to speak about racism in a particular context – an academic conference – and explained her silence as a racial enactment which was not simply based on her own experience, but which was old, inherited, unconscious, and a problem. She concluded that it is her responsibility, and the responsibility of other White people to notice the ways in which we have inherited racism, guilt, and silence, and to move out of this pattern and

into dialogue and action. Altman (2012) pointed out that another risk of maintaining silence and not acknowledging guilt is that when people avoid feeling guilt, they often cope by blaming the victim. Suchet (2012) also argued for the necessity of acknowledging guilt and discomfort as a way to move out of silence and inaction. She wrote about a phenomenon called the "melancholia of the beneficiary" (Suchet, 2012, p. 206) which is a melancholia related to the loss of our sense of self as we learn to understand how we benefit from privilege and whiteness and to recognize our attachment to them. Suchet (2012) argued that White people must fully experience this melancholia with awareness in order to improve our relationship to racist systems, saying "it is only from a place of acceptance, not of the other but of the self, that we move forward" (p. 207). For White people, recognizing one's own participation in racism can be painful, particularly when doing so alone, and it can be beneficial for people to work toward recognizing and trying to change their own racism within the context of a therapeutic relationship. Without acknowledgment of the ways that White individuals benefit from, perpetuate, and deny racism, patterns of White silence and disavowal will only continue.

In addition to writing about the ways White people become paralyzed by guilt and by attachment to privilege, psychoanalysts also discuss ways in which White people use racism defensively, such as through projection, and argue that White people may feel benefits from these defenses in the short term, but they are ultimately maladaptive for individuals as well as for society. A common belief about White people's defensive use of racism – discussed by psychoanalysts and also by other social critics – is that White people project their own unwanted feelings and drives onto people of color in order to help themselves feel more acceptable and to control unacceptable aspects of themselves by controlling other people (Baldwin, 1993; Mattei, 2012). Altman (2012) also argued that the fantasy of White superiority is similarly useful to

White people because it helps them ward off feelings of being ordinary and feelings of not being good enough.

The cost of these defenses to White people manifests in a lack of integration of the whole self, and in the depleted energy that is the result of renouncing and distancing from significant parts of the self (Altman, 2012). More importantly, use of these defenses comes at a significant cost to society and particularly to people of color. In using these defenses, White people completely deny the subjectivity of people of color, dehumanizing people and treating them solely as objects (Altman, 2012). These defensive processes can also shape social systems; Kita (2012) argued that the racism of the United States prison system may be seen as an effect of White people's projection of violent impulses onto people of color and their perceived defensive need to control people of color by imprisoning them. An important critique of these perspectives is that they should not be used on their own as explanations for the origin or continued existence of systemic racism (Dalal, 2006). However, Dalal stated that in his clinical work, these concepts have been useful. As a psychotherapist working with individuals who express racist views or engage in racist behaviors, it could be useful and important to explore with individuals the ways in which their racism may be defensively or emotionally useful to them. This exploration can help clients gain insight that could lead to more adaptive behaviors, and also to actions contributing to a healthier society.

Racism can be viewed as another example of the ways in which people structure their experiences around power to the detriment of all people, and acknowledging and healing from racism can contribute to greater health of individuals, of interpersonal relationships, and greater health of communities. Altman (2012) referred to our "organization of experience around power" (p. 126) as a disease in society that will only worsen if left untreated. Van Ausdale and Feagin

(2001) referred to a similar phenomenon they witnessed in their observations of White preschool students creating social hierarchies based on race. They stated that "for young children, social power of this sort is extraordinarily rare" (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, p. 138) and explained how White preschool students used their social power over students of color as a way to cope with their own lack of power as children. Van Ausdale and Feagin as well as Altman have suggested that social identity hierarchies cause psychological harm and contribute to a need for individuals to use and potentially abuse power over others in the same way that others have used power over them, perpetuating other social identity hierarchies and forms of oppression. Exploring ways in which power relationships have been internalized can be healing for individuals, particularly when this is done in the context of another relationship, for example in a relationship with a psychotherapist. Moreover, engaging in this kind of work can support individuals in their ability to engage in social justice work on their own behalf or as allies. Dalal (2006) argues that gaining insight into ways the external world causes internal distress can lead people to transform the ways in which they engage with the external world, and that engaging in social justice work can be healing.

Psychoanalysts and other therapists have begun to write about ways in which they have assisted clients with reflecting on the emotional meaning of their own racism, and ways they have supported clients in beginning to change the ways they act in relationship to racism. Wright (2003) wrote about the case of a young adult who had been acting and speaking in overtly racist ways, offending and frightening others in his life. Wright used psychoanalytic therapy which helped his client identify ways in which his own racism was a defense against painful feelings of inferiority and fear. This psychotherapist argued that with his encouragement, his client was able to examine the role of his own racism, to consider the impact of his racist comments and actions,

and to decrease some of the hatred he had been directing toward people of color (Wright, 2003). In this case, the client Wright describes was experiencing significant emotional suffering due to a physical injury that limited his ability to engage in activities he cared about. However, until he was able to recognize his racism as a maladaptive defense, he expressed his suffering in ways that were violent toward others and ultimately alienating for him.

Liu, Pickett, and Ivey (2007) describe a very different case of another young man whose treatment was supported by his therapist's ability to help him recognize the positive and negative effects of privilege in his life. This client was referred to his college counseling center because of excessive drinking and because he was not managing his schoolwork or other responsibilities. His therapist helped him examine his privilege, and he was able to identify that the high expectations of his family and social culture contributed to stress and a lack of confidence that led him to drink and avoid his responsibilities. Gaining a better understanding of how social dynamics such as power and privilege operated in his life helped him make more informed choices about what was important to him. He was able to improve his grades and attention to activities he cared about, and he was able to turn more attention toward acting more ethically in the world, by wasting fewer opportunities and resources (Liu et al., 2007).

In addition to providing individual psychotherapy, many clinical social workers also engage with clients in groups or in milieu settings such as in schools or residential programs. It is perhaps even more important for these social workers to be able to respond to and share information about racism with their clients, because ignoring a White client's racism in a group context will have an even more direct impact on the client's community and relationships than ignoring a client's racism in an individual session. Peacock and Daniels (2006) argued that because racism is systemic, applying anti-racist analysis and practice to social service systems is

crucial to avoid reproducing racism and reproducing the kind of emotional harm clients of color have likely already experienced in their lives. Speaking about a residential setting for youth, they also pointed out that programs which do not actively and openly acknowledge and address racism will allow White clients to benefit disproportionately from the program, and will allow them to express racism toward clients of color who are also there for help and support (Peacock & Daniels, 2006). Laszloffy and Hardy (2000) expressed equal concern for the responsibility of family therapists to be able to recognize and address racism in family therapy sessions. They also argued that even when seeing all-White families, a therapist has a responsibility to address racist views as they are expressed, because staying silent and watching racism happen in session is effectively supporting the existence of racism in clients' larger communities. Laszloffy and Hardy recommend a three-step model for addressing racism in family therapy that includes providing validation, challenging and encouraging clients to challenge their own views, and helping clients construct a plan for change.

In the practice of psychotherapy with White children and adolescents, race and racism can come up in a variety of ways, and conversations about these topics can be initiated by the client or by the therapist. Common ways children bring up the subject of race and racism include by asking questions of adults, by mentioning the race of people of color in passing (though it is not relevant) as they tell stories or talk about people in their lives, by talking about their learning about civil rights movements or racism (in school, for example), or by talking about well-known incidents of racism they hear about in the news or through other media. Additionally, youth can unintentionally or intentionally use stereotypes about people of color, and make comments that normalize whiteness, make White people sound superior, or use whiteness as synonymous with being American. They may make racist comments or jokes, or refer to racist actions, while

clarifying that they are not racist, or they may intentionally and unapologetically use racism in their stories and comments. Older youth may also express or exhibit signs of emotions common among White people who are learning about racism, such as sadness, guilt, shame, anger, and defensiveness. All of these are examples of occurrences that can serve as opportunities for therapists to talk about racism with White youth. In Chapter VI, I will discuss potential ways to respond to each of these examples, as well as ways White therapists can initiate conversations about race with White youth.

Though there is little written about talking to White children about racism in therapy, racism is just as relevant and emotionally meaningful for children as it is for adults, and it is just as important for clinical social workers and other therapists working with children to be able and willing to engage in conversations about race with children. Young children often have little choice about or control over the communities and relationships of which they are part, but they do play a role in co-creating those relationships and communities. Also, children learn racism actively and through relationships. Finally, children are in an earlier and more critical part of their development. For all of these reasons it is perhaps even more important for young children to have a space in which they can open up, share, ask questions, and explore the emotional and political meaning of racism in their lives and in their communities.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory is the name given to the group of scholars and activists whose aim is to understand, deconstruct, and ultimately equalize power relations between White people and people of color (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The concept of systemic racism is central to critical race theory, and critical race theory also centralizes a critique of common, even liberal understandings of race and racism such as the tendency White people in the United States have to utilize a colorblind ideology (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; McDowell & Jerris, 2004; Salter & Adams, 2013). In this chapter, I will provide background on the history of critical race theory, its origin, and fields it has influenced. Scholars writing from a critical race theory perspective reference a set of themes shared by many theorists; I will explain each of these themes and contrast them to dominant views of racism in the United States. Following this, I will provide information about the ways in which critical race theory has critiqued and also informed knowledge of racism in the fields of social work and education. Using the concepts of systemic racism and critical race theory's critique of colorblindness, I will discuss common patterns in White children's education on race and racism that were discussed in Chapter III.

## **Background and Important Themes**

Critical race theory originated in the United States in the 1970s, and emerged partially in response to the Civil Rights Movement of the previous decades (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Critical race theory emerged out of the field of critical legal studies, and was also influenced by radical feminism, among other philosophies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory questions the processes by which race is constructed and used to benefit Whites while limiting the life chances of people of color (Orelus, 2013). It uses a broad perspective to gain understanding of these questions, drawing from information on economics, history, psychology, and questions about the impact of self-interest and the interest of the dominant racial group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It questions common and foundational ways of thinking about race and racism, including liberalism and multiculturalism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This theoretical perspective also examines the reasons behind the slow pace of racial reform since the Civil Rights Movement as well as the backlash against this movement. In the decades since this theory originated, it has been applied to many other disciplines, including the social sciences and education (McDowell & Jeris, 2004). Several small groups have originated within the field of critical race theory, including perspectives that centralize understanding of the experience of particular racial groups, such as Asian Americans, and groups that emphasize understanding of intersections of race and oppression based on other forms of identity such as gender or disability (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The ultimate aim of critical race theory is greater racial equality and social justice (McDowell & Jeris, 2004).

Though most argue there is no set of tenets shared by all who contribute to critical race theory (McDowell & Jeris, 2004), many who write about this perspective describe and utilize a set of themes that are part of critical race theory. One of these is the understanding that racism is

ordinary, embedded in the structure of United States society, and an everyday experience for people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Salter & Adams, 2013). Many have argued that racism is so embedded in society that it is often invisible, especially to those privileged by racism (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Dominant perspectives in the United States tend to describe racism as synonymous with prejudice or stereotyping, and focus more on blaming individuals for racist words or actions (Salter & Adams, 2013). In contrast, critical race theory maintains that racism is more than just an individual problem, it is present in all aspects of society, including the structure of the law, educational systems, and other institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Additionally, critical race theory emphasizes acknowledging and transforming the impact racism has on people of color (Salter & Adams, 2013).

A second theme of critical race theory includes the ideas of material determinism and interest convergence. Theorists have used the concept of material determinism to illustrate the many ways in which White people benefit from racism, both materially and psychologically, and to argue that this benefit is a primary reason racism is maintained (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Specific examples of racism can be deconstructed and understood as serving to maintain the ongoing existence of racism; for example, colorblind ideology serves to produce ignorance about the realities of racism in the United States (Salter & Adams, 2013). Along with this analysis, the concept of interest convergence serves to illustrate ways in which progressive social change often only happens when the interests of oppressed groups match the interests of the dominant group (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; McDowell & Jeris, 2004). For example, some have argued that the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* benefited the dominant group because civil rights protests were gaining increasing attention and the United States needed a better reputation abroad to gain allies during the Cold War (Delgado

& Stefancic, 2012). Dominant culture has also been critiqued for appropriating civil rights discourse, for example the work of Dr. King, and using that discourse in ways that are inconsistent or even in opposition to the purpose of the Civil Rights Movement (Salter & Adams, 2013).

Many critical race theorists have also shared the concept of social constructionism, pointing to scientific evidence that there are no distinct racial groups, and arguing the concept of race has been constructed to benefit White people (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Salter & Adams, 2013). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) argued that racial categories are the "products of social thought and relations," (p. 8) and others have critiqued ways in which science has been used to contribute to concepts of race, analyzing ways in which racism disguises itself as scientific knowledge (Salter & Adams, 2013). A fourth theme in critical race theory is the concept of differential racialization; theorists have argued that race is not just socially constructed, but it is constructed in a way that reflects the interests of the powerful (McDowell & Jeris, 2004). At various times throughout history, groups of people have been described and treated in different ways based on the material and psychological needs of the dominant group, for example, the needs of the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Antiessentialism and a focus on intersectionality make up another significant theme among critical race theorists, who critique the tendency to focus on one aspect of identity and oppression while ignoring others (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). An individual's experience with racial oppression will depend on factors such as their ethnicity, appearance, national origin, languages spoken, and where they live; racism will also be experienced differently in relation to other identities and resulting experiences of oppression or privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critics of common ways of addressing oppression have

argued that no person has one single identity that can be used to describe all of who they are (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012); experiencing multiple oppressions results in a complex social location and individuals need a cultural space to deconstruct and describe these complex experiences (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Further, the tendency to focus on one identity can force individuals to choose which experience of oppression is most important for them to address, and the silencing of other narratives can ultimately serve to maintain other forms of oppression (Abrams & Moio, 2009). A final theme common to critical race theory is the emphasis on promoting narratives from voices of color, both as a way to counter the silencing effects of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and to provide society with counter stories, stories that deconstruct dominant narratives of race and serve to decrease the power dominant stories have (McDowell & Jeris, 2004). Because of people of color's experiences of oppression, they have unique voices when it comes to describing oppression; these voices are almost always systematically excluded by the dominant culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory advocates for a rewriting of history to include oppressed people's perspectives, told in their own words (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

### **Critical Race Theory in Education**

Educators who apply concepts from critical race theory to the ways college or graduate students are taught about race and racism critique the lack of emphasis on structural racism, lack of emphasis on whiteness and White privilege, and lack of integration of content about race into all subjects. Researchers who work in the field of teacher education conducted two studies of White student teachers in which they used critical race theory to inform ongoing conversations about race with student teachers during their practicum year (Marx & Pennington, 2003). Students in these studies reported having been exposed to curriculums that taught multicultural

perspectives as a single course, separate from other areas of the curriculum, and they were not taught to recognize whiteness or reflect on their own social locations. Participating students received supervision during which they were encouraged to reflect on the ways their race impacted their life and their work, and their supervisors served as models of individuals who were able to reflect on their own whiteness, racism, and learning process around these subjects. By the end of the school year, participants had improved in their ability to recognize racism in their own thoughts and actions, in the structure of the schools they worked in, and in the teaching materials they were given (Marx & Pennington, 2003). They also developed more descriptive language for talking about the racism in their actions and environments (Marx & Pennington, 2003). Researchers found that when given the space, participants were eager to process their experiences and to learn more about racism. Many reported feeling entirely unprepared by their previous education to teach in diverse classrooms and connect with their students' families, and all reported feeling grateful to have had ongoing supervision that addressed racism (Marx & Pennington, 2003).

Experiences of participants in this study are consistent with information on White racial identity development discussed in Chapter III; White participants had never been put in a position where they needed to examine the relevance of their race to their lives or their teaching. Though participants understood that their work in their first year of supervision was just the beginning of their work to understand and fight racism, they did report improvements in their abilities to teach their students and connect with families (Marx & Pennington, 2003). Participants also reported having felt more defensiveness when learning about racism at the beginning of the school year, and prior to the start of the school year; they explained that trusting relationships with their supervisors and having supervisors act as role models helped them

practice setting aside their defensiveness (Marx & Pennington, 2003). In an experimental study, researchers found that when White participants were given feedback that was threatening to their self-image, they were less likely to accept or agree with information about institutional racism, and more likely to think of racism as an individual phenomenon (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). Researchers argued this happened because the concept of institutional racism raises White people's awareness of privilege, and considering their own racism and privilege can lower self-image (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). Because White children and adults are commonly socialized to ignore the significance of race and to think of racism as an individual phenomenon, they learn to associate racism with being a bad person (DiAngelo, 2012). Concepts from critical race theory, such as the idea that racism is embedded in various aspects of everyday life, when taught to White children and youth, could help counteract racist and inaccurate socialization that leads to White adults' defensive inability to learn about racism. In the study of student teachers, ongoing critique of their own racism and their own work environments led some participants to accept that racism was part of them, and this helped them become more empowered to change the ways they were acting (Marx & Pennington, 2003).

In the field of children's education, education about racism and social justice work is often viewed as something separate from other goals of education, for example, literacy frameworks and social justice frameworks can be viewed as separate and incompatible (Rogers & Mosley, 2006), particularly because the education system places so much more emphasis on teaching skills such as literacy. In their study, Rogers and Mosley worked with a second grade classroom and used critical race theory to integrate developing students' racial literacy with developing age appropriate reading skills. Critical race theory helped these authors recognize that the messages children receive about race in various sources, and the lack of

acknowledgement and critical inquiry they are exposed to, contribute to a dominant narrative that race and racism are unimportant, as well as powerful narratives about what people of color are like (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Based on their critical views, Rogers and Mosley worked with a second grade class to counter some of the problems they recognized in children's education. During literacy classes, they had children read texts that addressed racial difference as well as racial oppression, and modeled critical inquiry, which served to help students develop this ability for themselves; students began noticing stereotypical depictions of people of color as well as the fact that White characters' race was not usually mentioned, and they began asking more questions of each other and their teachers.

Though critical race theory recognizes the pervasiveness of racism in all aspects of society, and acknowledges creating racial justice as an enormous task, recognizing the ways we teach children can have an important impact. Children are exposed to powerful narratives from their families, schools, communities, books, television, and relationships they witness happening around them, but they can also be exposed to critical narratives that acknowledge and question the presence of racial oppression and privilege. The more variety children are exposed to in the narratives they hear about race, the less stable dominant discourses will be for them, and the more open they will be to changing and improving their own actions (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). In their study of a second grade classroom, Rogers and Mosley found there was no linear process or set of stages for developing skills in critical inquiry of race; White students all noticed race, enacted racism, and disrupted racism at various times, sometimes within the same conversation. Though racial identity development theory describes a set of stages, it also acknowledges that learning about racism and transforming actions is not a linear process (Hardiman, 2001; Tatum, 1997), and that White adults can simultaneously embody White supremacy, analysis of racism,

and resistance to racism. Educators applying critical race theory have advocated for increased awareness of the pervasiveness of racism in the self (DiAngelo, 2012; Marx & Pennington, 2003) and in society, and they have argued for construction of counter narratives to engage the aspects of White individuals that are willing to acknowledge racism (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

### **Critical Race Theory and Social Work**

Critical race theory has been used to examine the ways in which psychologists and social workers produce knowledge about what racism is and how racism is experienced by people of color; it has also been used to critique models for teaching social workers how to respond to racism, such as the cultural competence model. In this section, I will describe critical race theory's critiques of and contributions to social work theory and practice models, and I will use concepts from critical race theory to critique common ways White children learn and are taught about race, racism, and whiteness.

Critical race theory questions claims of objectivity, including those made in social science research, because racism and White privilege are embedded in the many structures that contribute to the production of such research (Salter & Adams, 2013). The increasing emphasis on providing evidence-based practice leads social workers to locate the cause of suffering in individual rather than systemic problems and draws their attention toward individual rather than institutional change (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Further, it privileges a method of gaining knowledge that people of color have systematically been given limited access to, and a method that takes a colorblind approach by not acknowledging race or racism.

A primary model for responding to racism and to varying needs of clients in the field of social work is the cultural competence model, which has been critiqued for its tendency to use a deficit model in understanding the impact of racism, its lack of structural analysis, its simplistic

and general views of clients' experiences of culture and race, and its lack of emphasis on recognizing whiteness and privilege. Williams (2006) used critical race theory to argue that the cultural competence model does not analyze racism at multiple levels, as it should to give social workers a more adequate understanding of their clients. Because it emphasizes general knowledge of culture and individual experience, education in cultural competence does not provide social workers with enough practical skills to intervene effectively with individuals or with agencies and systems (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Cultural competence emphasizes a deficit model that, even when it acknowledges racism rather than just race or culture, does not recognize the value or knowledge that people may gain from having been marginalized (Williams, 2006). Since critical race theory emerged, it has grown to include an examination of whiteness, how whiteness has been defined, and how it has been constructed as positive, superior, and normative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In contrast, the cultural competence model rarely calls social workers to attend to the meaning or impact of whiteness and race privilege; the model implies that race is only relevant when people of color are present. Using critical race theory, scholars within the field of social work have begun to call for more attention to the ways in which White norms are used to create practice models that are then applied to people of all racial groups (McDowell & Jeris, 2004). They have also articulated the need for individual White social workers to gain awareness of their own privilege and their own defensive denial as it impacts their work and their learning (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

The cultural competence model is the most commonly used model for responding to differences in race and culture in the field of social work; learning and practicing cultural competence is viewed as a standard in the profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2001). According to this model, social workers are expected to gain self-awareness around their

own values and beliefs, but not necessarily their own privilege (National Association of Social Workers, 2001). Because education and professional standards in cultural competence do not address whiteness, and do not assume that race is relevant unless people of color are present, social workers do not typically expect themselves or each other to address the concept of race with White clients. However, the profession's standards for cultural competence and its code of ethics require social workers to engage in political and social justice work, and to view work that will impact their clients' communities as part of their work on behalf of clients (National Association of Social Workers, 2000; National Association of Social Workers, 2001). Engaging in work with White clients around their own racism, helping them develop language to name and confront racism, and helping recognize healthier ways to engage in their relationships and with their communities can all be viewed as part of how social workers can meet their ethical responsibilities to work toward social justice with and on behalf of the communities they serve.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Self Psychology**

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of self psychology, including its history, some of its main concepts, and its relevance to the subject of racial oppression and the development of White individuals as racial justice allies. Self psychology is a theory of emotional development, emotional health, and pathology developed by a psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut (Flanagan, 2008). Unlike earlier psychoanalytic theories, self psychology focuses on the development of the self as a cohesive whole, and defines healthy development and functioning by the individual's subjective feelings of cohesion, strength, and wholeness rather than prioritizing a professional definition of health (Flanagan, 2008). Kohut also emphasizes the role of empathy in healthy development and in maintaining healthy functioning throughout life (Kohut, 2010). Though self psychology does not explicitly address either the impact of oppression or the impact of privilege on the development of the self, the theory has been well received by those who are interested in exploring the psychology of oppression and privilege (Flanagan, 2008). Self psychology has a great deal to contribute to an understanding of the harmful ways oppression and privilege can influence development, and also to building our understanding of how to support healthier development of individuals growing up in an oppressive world. In this chapter, I will discuss theoretical perspectives and research addressing some of the main concepts of self psychology, including conceptions of healthy and pathological development, the three selfobject functions of

mirroring, idealization, and twinship, and the role of therapy. I will also discuss recent literature that applies concepts from self psychology to development of social identities. Finally, I will review the need for development of new ways of educating White children and youth about race and racism, and will connect this need to developmental concepts from the theory of self psychology.

### **Background and Main Concepts**

Heinz Kohut published the majority of his work in the 1970s and 1980s, and though his work was in some ways a continuation of the psychoanalytic methods of his earliest training, he also provided a critique of these theoretical perspectives (Flanagan, 2008), and added a great deal to earlier psychoanalytic understandings of health and how to support healing of those who experience pathology. Kohut's theory began to emerge as he worked with those who experience what he calls narcissism, who were not helped by gaining insight in therapy (Flanagan, 2008). His work began to focus on providing empathy for his patients rather than focusing on insight, and empathy became the foundation of his theory. Kohut's work is different than other psychoanalytic theories in that he focuses on individuals' experiences of shame, the experience that there is something inherently wrong with the self, rather than guilt at thinking and behaving in ways not sanctioned by society, as was Freud's focus (Flanagan, 2008). Kohut also moved away from the belief that people repress impulses or desires, and argued that people instead repress unmet needs (Flanagan, 2008). As a psychoanalyst, he believed in helping patients heal by investigating what their needs were, rather than what their unconscious might be hiding (Newman, 2007). Greater health can come from acknowledging earlier needs and circumstances in which those needs were unmet, and in having emotional needs met through new and empathic relationships (Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

A central concept of Kohut's theory of self psychology is the concept of the tripolar self, and the role of what Kohut called selfobjects in supporting healthy development in childhood and throughout life (Flanagan, 2008). Selfobjects are others we encounter in life who are significant enough that we experience them as part of the self (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), and they are used to meet important developmental selfobject needs. Often these people are parents and caregivers for young children, but throughout life selfobject needs are met by others such as peers in adolescence (Asakura, 2010), and even by music, nature, spirituality, and broader communities (Grady & Cantor, 2012). Selfobjects meet the needs of what Kohut called the tripolar self, which needs mirroring, idealized selfobjects, and twinship (Flanagan, 2008). The first pole, the grandiose self, needs others to respond to and confirm its value (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). The second pole, the pole of ideals, needs others who are strong, calm, and powerful (Kohut and Wolf, 1978) and who embody the qualities the self aspires to gain (Grady & Cantor, 2012). The third selfobject need is for twinship, the need to see others as similar to the self and to share experiences and growth with other people (Flanagan, 2008). Kohut's belief was that individuals must have emotional needs met by each aspect of the tripolar self. When a person's emotional needs are met enough of the time, the self becomes strong enough to handle challenges that occur during situations in which their needs are not met, that is, the challenge of what Kohut called selfobject failures (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Kohut called this process of growth transmuting internalization, and explained that growth happens as the self is able to recognize minor selfobject failures and meet its needs on its own through previous, positive selfobject experiences that have been internalized (Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

Self psychology offers descriptions of psychological health, as well as the range of experiences of those whose selfobject needs are not adequately met, from those who experience

stress to those who experience severe pathology. Kohut argued that early childhood experiences of having selfobject needs met or unmet could make an adult strong and healthy or damaged and fragmented (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), but most have also argued that people have similar emotional needs which must be met throughout the lifespan to maintain optimal emotional health (Asakura, 2012; Flanagan, 2008; Kohut & Wolf, 1978). When an individual is healthy, they experience vitality, harmony, cohesion, ambition, and self-esteem (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). They are capable of dealing with challenges, maintaining hope in difficult situations, and viewing themselves as skilled and potentially helpful to others (Grady & Cantor, 2012). Knox (1985) described a healthy adult, according to a self psychological perspective, as someone who is capable of functioning alone, able to engage in healthy relationships and in community with others, and also able to find their own healthy balance of individualism and community. In contrast, those whose emotional needs have not been met are more likely to experience themselves as powerless, to feel fragmented, to fear failure as well as success, and to experience a sense of confusion and chaos (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Extreme narcissism characterizes the most pathological individuals in Kohut's view (Flanagan, 2008). It is important to note that however pathological behaviors may seem, they always come from a legitimate need (Newman, 2007). In self psychology, even extreme emotions and behaviors such as rage, aggression, and violence are always viewed as responses to unmet needs (Flanagan, 2008).

### **Self Psychology and Oppression**

Despite the fact that Kohut himself has had little to say about the impact of social identity, oppression, and privilege on development and emotional health (Flanagan, 2008), Kohut's ideas do leave space to examine the effects of oppressive social systems on the self. Kohut's theory has been well received by those who centralize an understanding of oppression in

their clinical work (Flanagan, 2008; Knox, 1985). Feminist therapists appreciate that self psychology acknowledges the crucial role of others in addition to a child's mother in shaping healthy development (Flanagan, 2008). Knox argued that self psychology can be more easily combined with identity theory than earlier psychodynamic theories, and wrote that Kohut acknowledged that society provides more mirroring to people of some identities than others. In addition, she wrote that Kohut was able to reevaluate Freud's idea of penis envy and acknowledge envy as a result of the psychological impact of being denied social power (Knox, 1985). More recently, theorists and psychotherapists have expanded the body of work that acknowledges the developmental and emotional impact of social identity for members of oppressed populations (Asakura, 2012; Bennett & Rizzuto, 2012). Bennett and Rizzuto used a clinical case example to illustrate how lack of mirroring, having few LGBT role models to look up to, and difficulty in finding twinship contribute to anxiety and lack of self esteem in a gay young adult. Asakura wrote more broadly about the experiences of the population of queer youth, how homophobia and structural factors limit their access to normative developmental experiences, and how queer community spaces can help meet selfobject needs of oppressed youth.

In addition to applying self psychology to an understanding of the emotional experiences of oppressed people, researchers have also begun to turn their attention to the development of privileged people's identities and abilities to engage in professional and activist work (Grady & Cantor, 2012; Lee 2013). Grady and Cantor used self psychology to examine factors that support the professional development of social workers, their ability handle challenging and triggering situations, and their ability to remain engaged in social work without experiencing burnout. Grady and Cantor argued that factors such as having a supervisor who can mirror positive

qualities of a new clinician's work, opportunities to get to know and idealize multiple experienced clinicians, and spaces to share and discuss work with other social workers are important for a new social worker's success and enjoyment of their work. They found that these factors can support new social workers in learning skills, knowledge, resources to turn to, self-care strategies, and confidence. Social workers who do not have access to experiences of mirroring and twinship as part of their professional development are more likely to experience burnout and low self-esteem about their work (Grady & Cantor, 2012). Based on a self psychological perspective, Grady and Cantor argued that organizations should implement policies and practices that support new social workers' selfobject needs as related to their profession, as this will support their ability to serve their clients and to remain engaged in social work for longer.

Lee (2013) also discussed self psychology as it relates to the development of social workers' professional identity and skills, focusing specifically on social workers' engagement in multicultural education and learning about privilege. Lee observed multiple classrooms in graduate social work programs, and provided case examples of class discussions in which students were able to engage and learn as well as case examples of discussions in which students became too distracted by anxiety and resistance to take in new information. Based on his observations, Lee argued that social workers' healthy narcissism is challenged when they learn about racism and privilege for the first time, and that the discovery of new and negatively received information about the self can lead to feelings of fragmentation and anxiety. These feelings can contribute to a loss of strength, a loss of energy, or narcissistic rage or anger, and a resistance to engage in multicultural education. In his case example of a successful classroom discussion, Lee noted that the professor used herself and the structure of her lesson to meet her

students' selfobject needs, for example by starting the lesson asking about and normalizing students' feelings about discussing racism. Lee's work uses self psychology to provide an analysis of common circumstances around White people's engagement in and resistance to learning about racism, and also uses self psychology to create recommendations about how to more effectively engage privileged social work students in education about oppression (Lee, 2013).

### **White Identity Development and Self Psychology**

In this section, I will apply concepts from self psychology to the development of White racial identities, including the development of racism in White youth and the development of anti-racist views and anti-racist action in White youth. Using ideas discussed in Chapter III, I will refer to common patterns in the education of White youth – both the intentional education provided in school curriculums and the (often unintentional) education provided by parents, caregivers, schools, media, and communities. I will also refer to common patterns in White children's behavior, and common patterns in the emotions and behaviors of White adults, particularly as they are exposed to education around realities of racism. I will argue that self psychology, particularly ideas of unmet selfobject needs, can be used to explain common patterns in White people's relationship to racism, including silence and lack of action, anxiety, resistance, and inability to take responsibility for a system they benefit from.

When looking at common patterns in how White children learn to understand racism and anti-racism, it is useful to examine the ways in which the process of mirroring shapes children's development as individuals who perpetuate racism and as individuals who may engage in the world as racial justice allies. When children enact racism in their play, or express racist views, adults often ignore their racism (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001); when this happens, the mirroring

children receive tells them there is nothing noticeable, unusual, or wrong about their behavior. In other circumstances, their natural inquisitiveness and sense of fairness leads children to notice and question racism (Derman Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). When children and adolescents acknowledge race and racism, White adults often respond with nonverbal expressions of discomfort (Castelli et al., 2008) or active efforts to silence them (Cabrera, 2012). Shame, discomfort, and silence, (and occasionally defensiveness and anger) characterize adults' responses to young people's interest in learning about and acknowledging racism (DiAngelo, 2012). Therefore, the mirroring children most often receive around their efforts to acknowledge racism does not acknowledge, as it should, their strength, caring, insight, or other positive qualities. Without mirroring of important aspects of themselves, people begin to feel shame and discomfort about those parts of themselves, and grow to feel fragmented and out of touch with their emotions and needs (Hertzberg, 1990). Lack of mirroring can help explain how often White adults are unaware of racism, unengaged with anti-racist work, and silent about racism when they do notice it. Moreover, there is a pattern described by Tatum (1995) and Hardiman (2001) in which White adults experience a split between their intellectual and emotional understanding of racism; they may acknowledge facts of racism and their own White privilege, but they do not choose to act differently in the world. After years of growing up in a culture that does not mirror or support allyship or racial justice work, fragmentation of the self is a natural response.

The selfobject need for idealized others can also be viewed as a need young people have to support their development as racial justice allies. This is another selfobject need that is, for most White youth, often left unmet by their families, schools, communities, and cultures. When adults do talk with White youth about racism, conversations are often brief, infrequent, and about historical events rather than current problems or ways to engage in racial justice work

(DiAngelo, 2012). Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) pointed out that most White youth receive so little formal education about racism that they are never exposed to role models of White racial justice activists or allies, in school or in the media. Additionally, since most parents did not grow up with models of White racial justice allies, they are not able to serve as role models for their children in this way, or to recognize that their children may need help finding positive role models. Lack of others to idealize means White youth experience less growth in their understanding of racism and how to act against it. Hertzberg (1990) describes a common phenomenon in which adults unconsciously make their children responsible for meeting their own previously unmet and unacknowledged needs. This is similar to a common pattern described by DiAngelo (2012), in which White parents teach silence around race to their children through shame. When children have adult role models who feel shame, discomfort, anger, or anxiety any time race is mentioned, children tend to respond to those adults' emotions by dismissing the relevance of race, dismissing critiques of racism, and disavowing any need to address racism. Adults who remain stuck in their own discomfort are unable to act as positive selfobjects by recognizing children's needs and supporting their growth.

Kohut argued that the third selfobject need, twinship, is the most prominent need later in development (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Togashi and Kottler (2012) described twinship as being about a process of mutual recognition, finding and recognizing oneself in another person. Asakura (2012) argued that particularly for adolescents, the selfobject world expands to include not just caregivers but peer and community relationships. Hertzberg (1990) explained the need for twinship throughout life as a need to remain part of various networks of interrelationships. Twinship can be especially important during experiences of new places and new ideas; for example, when people begin a career in social work, experiences of twinship can support their

ability to gain knowledge as well as development of the emotional ability to stay engaged in difficult work (Grady & Kantor, 2012). Twinship can also support people's ability to regulate their own anxiety around learning about oppression and their positions of privilege in society (Lee, 2012). Because it is so uncommon for children to be given enough time and support to engage in discussions about race in schools (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) it is unlikely that many White children grow up having positive experiences of twinship that support their development as racial justice allies. Flanagan (2008) argued that twinship is so important that when an individual's need for twinship is unmet in positive spaces, they find other ways to meet their needs that may ultimately be harmful. Flanagan provided the example of youth of color turning to gangs to meet this need. White youth all witness racism in a variety of contexts at home, in school, and in their larger communities. Witnessing racism and doing nothing to stop it is an inherently anxiety-provoking experience (Lee, 2012) that everyone has to learn to deal with in one way or another. The concept of twinship may help explain why it is more common for White adolescents to share experiences of telling racist jokes or bullying youth of color than to share experiences and interest in working for racial justice. White people feel guilt, discomfort, and anxiety when they see racism happening, and most White youth grow up in communities where it is far easier for them to connect with others who ignore or perpetuate racism than to connect with others who are engaged in anti-racist efforts.

Kohut focused his understanding of psychopathology around the concept of narcissism, arguing that when selfobject needs are left unmet in significant enough ways, the self can become weak, confused, fragmented, and less able to deal with challenges (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Even a person whose sense of self is healthy overall can have areas of weakness in which narcissism is the result of having particular needs unmet, and for many White people who have

not grown up with a sense of how to act as racial justice allies, being confronted with information about the realities of racism can expose such an area of weakness. According to Kohut's theory, anger, aggression, and even violence can be responses to stress for people with a weakened sense of self (Flanagan, 2008), because stress triggers emotions and memories related to unmet needs. Grady and Kantor (2012) have argued that when an individual's sense of self is weak or fragmented, small insults can do a significant amount of damage, or at least be seen as a significant threat, to the self. People writing about White identity development theory (Hardiman, 2001) and those who have taught White college students about racism (Tatum, 1997) have described a common pattern of anxiety and defensiveness that can often lead to anger and to blaming and criticizing people of color when White young adults are confronted with information about racism they have never learned before. Lee (2012) noticed this pattern in his observations of multiculturalism courses in social work programs; White students in some classes became so anxious and defensive they shut down and refused to engage in learning about how to apply the course's concepts to their social work practice, and they blamed their social work programs for wasting their time. White people commonly grow up with so little exposure to accurate information about racism and with little sense of responsibility to address racism; it is a natural consequence of the ways White people are typically raised that being confronted with accurate information about racism, of the expectation that they should do something about racism, can be experienced as a threat to a weakened part of the self.

In this chapter, I have discussed the theory of self psychology and ways self psychological concepts can be applied to the development of White identity. I have focused on common patterns in White children's education and experiences around race and racism, and on common patterns in White racial identity development, applying self psychology to areas of

deficit in White children's development as people who are capable of acting as racial justice allies. In the following chapter, I will integrate concepts from self psychology with the previous chapter's discussion of critical race theory, and I will focus on what these two theories can offer our understanding of how therapists can proactively support White children's development as potential racial justice allies.

## CHAPTER VI

### Discussion

Chapters IV and V have provided information about the relevance of critical race theory and the theory of self psychology to the phenomenon of talking with White children about race, including a critique of common ways White children are taught about race using each theoretical framework. Critical race theory offers a systemic analysis of racism, tools for understanding the impact of language on racial ideology and actions, and an analysis of factors that support the ongoing existence of racism. Self psychology offers ways to understand the connections between significant internalized relationships, emotional functioning, and ability to learn about one's own racism; an understanding of the relationship between narcissism and an individual's racism, and empathic techniques to support engagement in anti-racist education. In this chapter, I will apply each theoretical framework to the phenomenon, and discuss what each theory offers our understanding of how to talk with White children and youth about racism. Next, I will synthesize the new theories and discuss a new way of understanding White children's learning about racism and White therapists' role in supporting their learning, and I will examine clinical implications of this synthesis.

#### **Analysis of Theories**

**Critical race theory.** Critical race theorists have argued that racism is present in all aspects of society, from political, social, and economic systems to our everyday interpersonal

interactions and use of language (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Given this reality, it is crucial that racism be addressed in all areas of society, and this includes the field of mental health, the practice of psychotherapy, and in the therapeutic work with people who attend therapy.

Therapists who work with children and youth are part of those children's socialization, in fact, the purpose of many relational therapies is often to provide an experience for clients that works to counter other socialization they may have received about relationships (Stark, 1999).

Therapists can have a powerful influence on children's understanding of race and racism by providing space to talk about it, and treating the subject as important. Using critical race theory to inform teaching practices for a second grade class, Rogers and Mosley (2006) argued that teaching children to critique racism in society is a political action, but that maintaining a typical race-neutral curriculum is a political action as well. The task of educators is to consider the impact they hope to have and make political decisions accordingly (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

This analysis can be applied to the practice of psychotherapy as well, and to all conversations adults have with children. The choice to address race and racism in therapy with White clients as a way to work toward greater social justice is political; not addressing racism is a political choice as well, and it is a choice that serves to maintain racism.

The theme of the ordinariness of racism can be used to understand White children's process of learning about racism; racism is an everyday occurrence for people of color, and therefore participating in or silently witnessing racism is an everyday occurrence for White people. White children witness racism and its effects daily, and as some researchers and educators have argued, they are far more aware of race than White adults commonly believe (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Therapists can support a child's ability to recognize and speak about the racism they see by responding to and asking for

the child's critique of their own school and community, making it acceptable and positive for children to directly interrogate and comment on what they see (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

Children need to develop language and skills to describe and also to confront racism (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Any practice they have in identifying and speaking or acting against racism in their own spaces will support their development as people who can grow up to confront racism in more effective ways (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Therapists can and should encourage and support youth to develop skills and confidence to speak about what they see, so that instead of silently participating in racist actions and institutions, confronting racism can become an ordinary practice for White youth.

Critical race theorists have articulated a critique of the dangers of colorblind racial ideology, a dominant way of responding to racial difference among White people in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012); therapists can work to counter children's socialization into colorblind ideology. The most important way to teach children that race and racism matter is to talk with them about these topics, to respond and extend conversations children start rather than shutting them down, and to serve as a model of someone who can notice and point out the relevance of race to various areas of life and relationships (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). White children are rarely exposed to conversations about race, and when they are, it is typically during brief history lessons in school, during which they are taught that racism is a problem of the past (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). This phenomenon of treating race like it no longer matters, and the absence of discourse on race, serves to reinforce colorblind ideology (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Further, therapists should talk with children about racism rather than just racial difference, and they should acknowledge racism in contemporary contexts similar to contexts clients may encounter in their lives.

In addition to colorblind racial ideology, there are many other damaging narratives about racial identity that therapists can help clients learn to recognize and interrogate. Critical race theory emphasizes the importance of learning from voices of color, and also of deconstructing dominant White narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012); even in the absence of outside materials, White adults and White youth can still work together to destabilize these narratives and create new ideas about what it means to be White. This process is crucial for White youth, because although they will always be exposed to negative views of people of color and ideas that reinforce whiteness as normal and superior, having a model of someone who engages in critical inquiry and being exposed to alternate narratives can be a powerful experience as well. The more narratives a child is exposed to as they learn about race and racism, the less stable dominant narratives will be in that child's understanding, and the more likely that child will be to change their actions in the future (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Because White children often learn narratives that whiteness is normal and synonymous with being American (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), therapists can use White clients' references to whiteness, being culturally normal, and being American as opportunities to initiate dialogue about what these terms mean and whether clients really want to see them as synonymous. When White youth use stereotypes of people of color, therapists can ask questions about how they arrived at their beliefs about people of color, and ask youth to come up with examples of alternate ways of thinking. If they talk about having witnessed a racist comment or action, therapists can help them develop language and skills for responding by asking them how they would like to respond and practicing things to say.

The emphasis placed on intersectionality by critical race theory can also have implications for therapeutic practice with White youth; though it is a complex concept that will

not likely be taught by many therapists, it can be used to inform therapists' interactions with White clients who have other oppressed social identities. Like other authors discussed in Chapter III, Rogers and Mosley (2006) have argued that power differentials and hierarchies contribute to the production of more power hierarchies, and an individual's experiences with lack of power may lead them to contribute more effort toward maintaining power structures they do benefit from (Altman, 2012; Baldwin, 1993; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Critical race theorists have maintained that people need space to understand all of their complex social identities, and the ways these identities relate to each other (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Therefore, therapists can support White children's ability to learn to understand racism by providing space for them to talk about experiences of other identities as well, and attention to the ways children's oppressed identities shape their lives. They can help children learn to articulate these experiences with oppressed identities, and reinforce the idea that their feelings about them are important to support children's attention to the impact of oppression and to social justice.

To support their ability to engage in conversations with White children about these topics, it is crucial for White therapists to remain engaged in learning about their own privilege and their own racism. Critical race theorists have cautioned educators about the impact of their own privilege and perspectives on their teaching pointing out that educators, just as much as others, carry knowledge that has been shaped by and will continue to perpetuate racism (Marx & Pennington, 2003; Zembylas, 2012). White therapists must also interrogate their own histories and how they have come to their own knowledge, beliefs, and values so they can be more deliberate in the ways they allow their values to be passed on to White youth they work with. Self-reflection on one's own process of learning about privilege and racism can help a therapist better understand other White people's processes of learning (Marx & Pennington, 2003). To

support their own ongoing learning, therapists can work to counter the effects of White-dominated professional education by seeking out scholarship by social workers of color to learn from. They can also work to create communities among colleagues of others who are in the same processes of working to understand the impact of racial privilege or doing anti-racist work. Working for agencies and other mental health systems, therapists will be exposed to ideologies and methods of practice that pathologize individual clients for suffering in ways that may be caused by experiences of oppression or lack of access to material and emotional resources. Agencies and systems also privilege aspects of White culture, White values, and White relationship patterns. To be able to recognize the systemic and often invisible impact of racism, and to counter the colorblind ideology mental health systems are built upon, it is essential for therapists to find and create relationships with others who can support each other in deconstructing dominant ideologies and creating new ways to interact with racism. Furthermore, because it is a common pattern among White people who care about the impact of racism to engage primarily in conversations about other people's individual racism, critical race theorists have argued that White individuals should move toward interrogating their own racism and systemic racism to gain a more complete understanding of the way racism operates in United States society (DiAngelo, 2012). Therapists who are engaged in this process will be better able to support young White clients' understanding of racism and how to engage productively in working against racism in their communities.

**Self psychology.** As I discussed in Chapter V, the theory of self psychology provides explanations of various needs that must be met in some way by significant people, groups, or the larger culture to support an individual's strength, capacity for empathy, and energy to persevere through challenging situations. White individuals are commonly socialized to be ignorant of the

realities of racism and disengaged from anti-racist work; many White people can be viewed as being in an early stage of development when it comes to understanding racism, and self psychology considers understanding and transforming one's relationship to racism to be a significant aspect of personal development (Lee, 2013). Psychologists who study child development have argued that gaining understanding of difference and sameness among groups is an important developmental task for youth of various ages (Davies, 2011), and understanding difference is therefore interesting, meaningful, and relevant to many youth.

Being curious and open with White youth about a topic they are not typically encouraged to be open or curious about can help show them that therapy is a space where they can talk openly about anything and have meaningful conversations. It can also help demonstrate to youth that their therapist is attentive to issues of fairness and justice, something that is important to most children, particularly those who may have other oppressed social identities. For adolescents in particular, especially those who are not in therapy by choice, engaging their sense of social justice can be a crucial strategy for engaging them in the therapeutic process (Malekoff, 2005). Self psychology can offer strategies for engaging White youth in conversations they can learn from about race and racism while continually supporting the therapeutic process.

Mirroring is the first selfobject need that must be met to support emotional ability to engage in anti-racist learning and action, and therapists can support this need for youth by providing space for them to talk and about racism, asking them questions they are not typically asked, and reflecting back positive aspects of their engagement with the subject. Because White children are commonly shut down or ignored when they try to talk about race and racism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), it is important to mirror their curiosity, commitment, and compassion when it comes to talking and learning about racism.

Therapists should recognize that children may be eager to talk about the subject, and should provide opportunities by asking questions and by noticing when children may be referring to race; when children bring up the topic, therapists should respond with interest, and allow children to make the choice to change the subject if race is not what they want to talk about. Knowing how much children learn from adults' nonverbal communication around race (Castelli et al., 2008), therapists should be attentive to their own nonverbal communication, and should try to use their tone and body language to communicate curiosity and caring rather than discomfort with the subject. Therapists can also ask questions on topics that children are not typically asked about, such as what it is like to be White in their school or community, what their school, family, or friends teach them about race, what it means to be White, what they think about racism, how they experience having or not having power, and what they see in their communities that is unfair. These questions can support the development of a child's ability to think critically about their social environments and messages they are receiving about race and racism. They can also provide material for therapists to notice and mirror to children; most children do think critically about racism and rarely have the opportunity to share their thoughts with someone who will respond positively to hearing them. In addition to developing the ability to critique their environments, it is important for children to learn to imagine something better, and to develop their own ideas about how to make their communities more fair and just (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Therapists can ask children what they would change in their families, schools, and communities, and talk with children about what they like about their ideas.

The selfobject need for idealized others of children can also be met in part by therapists who are attentive to the importance of race; therapists' use of self can provide children with an example of new ways to relate to power and more empathic ways of engaging in conversations

about racism. Without exploring their own histories of learning about racism, most people tend to teach about racism in the same ways they were taught (Lee, 2013). In order to be more deliberate in how they communicate about racism and the emotions they raise when talking with children about this subject, therapists should take the time to explore their own histories and identify which aspects of their learning they would like to share with, or avoid passing on to, the youth they work with. Many have identified a connection between a person's experiences of being oppressed or being without power and control and the ways they engage in oppressive acts or using power over others (Altman, 2012; Baldwin, 1993; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Knowing this, therapists can serve as a model for youth by using the power they have as therapists and adults in less oppressive ways; they can allow children to make as many choices as possible, respect children's boundaries, be willing to name power imbalances within their relationship, and collaborate with children around how to respond to these differences in power. They can openly acknowledge their own mistakes with children and work to repair those mistakes. Additional research has identified that engaging in liberatory work around one's own experiences of oppression can support a person's ability to engage in social justice work around forms of oppression they do not personally experience (Cabrera, 2012). Therapists should also be attentive to and able to talk with children about children's oppressed social identities. Using these strategies as a therapist can simultaneously serve to meet children's emotional needs as people who may have experienced lack of power and oppression, and to provide children with a model of someone who strives to acknowledge their own power, to use compassion toward others, and to transform their own relationship to oppressive social systems.

Twinship is a crucial selfobject need that must be met to support an individual's strength and continued engagement in the challenging work of learning about racism; therapists can help

meet a youth's need for twinship by being willing to self-disclose about their own emotions, learning processes, and mistakes they have made. The need for twinship is particularly relevant to work with older children and with adolescents; it is the most prominent selfobject need in adolescence (Asakura, 2010; Togashi & Kottler, 2012). For White individuals, learning about the impact of racism and White privilege on their lives and the lives of others is an ongoing and lifelong process (Tatum, 1997). Therapists can be helpful to youth by being open about their own learning processes, using self-disclosure and providing examples of things they have learned, how they learned, why they care about engaging in anti-racist education and work, and mistakes they have made, particularly examples that are relevant to the experiences of the youth they work with. Additionally, they can be openly willing to learn from youth. These actions can contribute to a sense of twinship for youth, which provides a sense of security with the self that enables risk-taking and further learning (Lee, 2013). Emotions such as sadness, anger, fear, confusion, shame, and guilt are all common for White people to feel as they learn about racism, and people are often unable to express these emotions to others because conversations about race and racism are so often shut down by White adults. Another crucial aspect of twinship is knowing that others experience the same emotions as the self, and therapists can help by using self-disclosure and by providing space for youth to feel these unpleasant emotions. Learning that the world is unjust, and learning that you benefit from and play a role in maintaining injustice toward others is a painful process (Suchet, 2012), and it is easier to mourn, cope, and grow with others than it is to do these things alone (Lee, 2013).

Responding empathically and effectively to resistance is an important skill for anyone teaching privileged people about systems of oppression, as resistance is a common and recurrent response to learning about racial oppression (Hardiman, 2001; Tatum, 1997). Using concepts

from self psychology to respond to difficult emotions that come up when White individuals are exposed to information about racism can be an effective way to reduce resistance or to use it as a catalyst for change. Anxiety, guilt, shame, confusion, and anger are common emotions White people experience (Hardiman, 2001; Tatum, 1997), and while most therapists may not choose to challenge their White clients' views on race to the point of provoking these emotions, clients may attend sessions having had their racism challenged by others (Liu et al., 2007; Wright, 2003). Normalizing resistance and describing common emotions as soon as or before clients experience them can help people feel more accepting of their emotions and reduce resistance to new perspectives (Lee, 2013). Learning about one's own privilege and role in maintaining racial oppression can be experienced by White people as a narcissistic injury; when narcissistic resistance happens, talking with a trusted person who is attentive to providing experiences of mirroring and twinship can help people learn to understand perceived threats to the self (Lee, 2013) and grow into a greater sense of the self as a person who has both positive and negative qualities. This growth strengthens the ability to remain engaged in anti-racist education and practice (Lee, 2013).

Concepts from self psychology can also make an important contribution to our understanding of how White therapists maintain their own engagement in social justice education and anti-racism work even as they practice psychotherapy. Both social justice work and practicing therapy are difficult forms of work that demand extensive knowledge, self-reflection, compassion, and energy as well as a willingness to continually engage in learning. In addition, both of these practices involve working against systems that are considerably more powerful than any individual; social justice-oriented work is particularly difficult in agency and managed care settings that many therapists work in. Though White clinicians receive race privilege in

these contexts, recognizing and working against one's own privilege and socialization can be difficult and tiring, and White therapists must consider factors that support their ongoing ability to do so. These factors and others make burnout common and almost inevitable (Grady & Cantor, 2012). To support their ongoing ability to engage in social justice-informed psychotherapy, White clinicians can seek out supervisors and mentors who can mirror positive aspects of their work and serve as examples of how to engage in this work in an effective and emotionally sustainable way (Grady & Cantor, 2012). To support others in their own profession, they can serve as mentors to less experienced therapists and attend to their selfobject needs as well. Twinship is particularly important for new clinicians (Grady & Cantor, 2012) and for those working toward a more socially just practice (Lee, 2013). Therapists can work to establish and maintain relationships with as many peers as possible, because having one's own experiences and sense of professional self seen and understood by others who are similar has a powerful impact on the ability to regulate anxiety (Lee, 2013) and to maintain a strong professional sense of self to stay engaged in social work (Grady & Cantor, 2013).

### **Synthesis of Theories**

Critical race theory and the theory of self psychology can be used together to support an understanding of the role of our education of White youth in maintaining a system of racial oppression, and of ways we can change how we teach White youth to interact with this system. Self psychology can offer an understanding of how racism continues to exist within individuals, and how individuals come to engage in the world in ways that maintain systemic racism; critical race theory explains more broadly how and why racism continues to thrive, and it helps us see that we need a systemic approach to changing how we talk with, teach, and respond to youth around this subject. Critical race theory offers useful information that can be taught to children

and adolescents, as well as skills to deconstruct dominant narratives and construct new ways of talking about racism. Self psychology offers techniques for supporting children's emotional development as people who are able to engage in anti-racist education and action, and ways to respond to challenging emotions White people frequently experience without shutting down their engagement in learning. In this section, I will provide a brief critique of each theoretical framework, discussing what is missing from the way each framework has been applied to education of White youth. Following this, I will synthesize the two theories and apply them to various opportunities White therapists have to talk with youth about race and racism.

Pedagogies based on critical race theory focus on critical analysis of racism, and of the ways it is present in and reproduced by various systems and discourses. An area critical race theory does not address on its own is how to address the emotions of White people that contribute to their resistance to learn about racism. A common question for anti-racist educators is how to remain supportive of and open to hearing White students' emotions as they are exposed to information about racism and privilege without undermining their goal of expanding students' knowledge of anti-racism work. Zembylas explained that pedagogies based on critical race theory tend to treat racism as a set of social and political issues that should be understood through systemic intellectual analysis. This way of teaching is incomplete because White people's racist beliefs and actions have emotional roots that must be addressed, and because creating space for White people's emotional expression leads to increased openness to learning about racism (Zembylas, 2012). More than educators, therapists are in a position to help clients experience, name, and learn from their emotions, and therapists of course must prioritize their clients' emotional experiences.

The theory of self psychology, alone, would also not be enough to inform our understanding of racism and how to talk with White youth about the subject. Psychological perspectives on racism typically treat racism as the result of complex emotional experiences and emotional needs of each individual who behaves in racist ways (Zembylas, 2012) and this is true of self psychology. This perspective ignores that the emotional experiences of White people around learning about racism and privilege are shaped by systemic political and social forces, and are not simply individual experiences (Zembylas, 2012). The existence and maintenance of a system of oppression cannot be fully understood as having psychological causes (Dalal, 2006), and social workers and educators should not attend to White people's emotions at the expense of reducing the impact of White people's racism on the material and psychological experiences of people of color (Zembylas, 2012). Self psychology primarily offers an understanding of how to attend to the emotional development of White children in a way that may help prevent them from learning so much racism, and how to attend to the emotions of White people in a manner that enables them to stay engaged in learning about their own racism and privilege.

**When youth ask questions about race or racism.** When children or youth ask questions or are looking for information about race or racism, therapists should answer their questions using a social justice perspective and express appreciation for their curiosity. Many White children do not have access to adults who are willing or able to talk with them about racism (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) and the information they are systematically taught in classrooms and through the media often reflects an inaccurate and colorblind perspective (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). For this reason, therapists can set aside the discomfort they may have in teaching or being too directive, and provide youth with complete answers to the questions they have; their questions likely reflect a real need for information. If

the therapist does not know the answer to their question, they can find out and respond to the child at a later time, meeting the child's need for accurate information and reinforcing the idea that the subject and the child's interest in the subject are important. Appreciating and mirroring any positive aspect of the way children ask questions is crucial; White children are commonly taught to respond to racism with shame and with silence that eventually leads to an inability to act against racism (DiAngelo, 2012; Harris, 2012). When children ask questions, their interest and desire for information, their caring, or their critical thinking should be recognized so they continue to exhibit and develop these tendencies. Therapists should also respond to the questions of children with enthusiasm, interest, and caring; children do not always have positive selfobjects who exhibit interest in or commitment to social justice.

**When youth mention the race of people of color in passing.** White people commonly mention the perceived racial identity of people of color when telling stories about people they know or interactions they witnessed, without explaining why they believe this information to be relevant. When children do this in therapy, it provides an opportunity for them and their therapist to explore the beliefs that led them to do this, and to develop new ways of speaking about people that are less influenced by White supremacy. Therapists can respond in this situation by asking about the race of other people in children's stories, as naming White people as White is an important practice in working to deconstruct the idea of whiteness as normal (Marx & Pennington, 2003; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Therapists can also ask youth what made them think to mention a person's race in a curious and non-confrontational way, and they can ask questions about what their clients think it might be like to be a person of color in the context they are describing in their story. Working to extend conversations about race with youth is an important way to counter socialization to colorblindness and silence (Rogers & Mosley, 2006), and doing

so in a collaborative way that models curiosity and kindness can provide youth with a model of someone who thinks critically or an experience of twinship in exploring internalized beliefs about race.

**When youth are learning about civil rights or anti-racist work.** Though most White children and adolescents are not exposed to accurate or adequate information about racism or anti-racist efforts (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011), many do have some exposure to learning about racism in United States history as well as abolitionist and civil rights movements, and many children enjoy learning and talking about civil rights leaders and successes. When children talk about these topics, therapists can and should respond with interest and enthusiasm, mirroring their interest, compassion, and anything else positive they see in children's engagement in these conversations. They can ask children questions about what they are learning, and learn with them, to provide an experience of twinship. Therapists can also share additional information about historical or contemporary civil rights leaders who are less likely to be included in school curriculums and whose work has not been appropriated in the same ways the most famous civil rights leaders' work has (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). They can talk with youth to critique what they are learning, and in these ways introduce the idea that what youth might learn in school is not always accurate or adequate, and support their interest in learning more. In addition, therapists can explore the role of White people in supporting or damaging anti-racist efforts, engaging youth in conversations about which White people they would most want to be like and helping them search for White role models, which are an important and often overlooked aspect of White people's anti-racist education (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

**Normalizing whiteness.** White children commonly learn to think of being white as normal, better than being a person of color, or as synonymous with being American (Van

Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Therapists can respond to expressions of whiteness as normal by wondering with youth how they came to think of whiteness in this way, and by practicing naming the racial identity of White people to decrease the amount of power given to the idea that whiteness is normal. They can also work to counter this pattern by talking with youth about their own racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, as well as their values. Having a positive sense of identity, and being taught to value difference in these areas, can help counter other messages children receive about White identity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

**Use of stereotypes of people of color.** When White youth talk about or use stereotypes or negative beliefs about people of color, therapists can partner with youth to explore how they learned their beliefs. Working with youth to brainstorm examples of times they have learned stereotypes from other people in their lives, media, school, and other places is a way to model and teach critical analysis of the use of racism in language and social systems (Rogers & Mosley, 2006); this is an important skill because racism is so often noticed by youth but unacknowledged by adults (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Therapists can also ask youth for examples of people who do not fit stereotypes, or examples of times they have learned something different from typical stereotypes. To help teach the concept of stereotypes and emotional understanding of the impact of stereotypes, therapists can ask youth about their experiences of having stereotypes applied to them based on their identities or personality traits. They can then plan and practice with youth potential ways of responding to hearing others use stereotypes.

**When youth actively make racist comments or describe taking racist actions.** In these situations, therapists should be careful to not ignore or dismiss clients' comments as unimportant, and they should also be careful that they do not shut down their clients' expression. Actively racist comments or actions should be treated as meaningful and important enough to

explore and try to resolve over time; the goal should be to extend the conversation rather than respond immediately and completely then moving on. Therapists should also be careful about overloading clients with intellectual information about why their comments were wrong; individual acts of racism typically have emotional meaning and defensive usefulness to people (Altman, 2012; Mattei, 2012; Wright, 2003). Additionally, they should be cautious about shutting down conversations before they happen or responding with superficial statements about treating everyone equally. Children are sensitive to adults' desire to avoid acknowledging racism, and may avoid expressing racist opinions in front of particular adults but still allow those opinions to shape their actions in other contexts (Monteiro et al., 2009).

When youth make racist comments or talk about engaging in racist action, therapists can focus on being curious about the meaning of the statement to the particular individual. They can work with clients to explore how they feel when they make those comments, how they want others to feel, how they think others will feel, and times they themselves have felt similarly. Even if the client does not choose to engage in working on decreasing their own racism, this kind of response at least demonstrates that racism is very serious and that all people have a responsibility to change their relationship to it; ignoring the racist comments of children sends the message that racism is and should be an ordinary occurrence that does not require a response. If clients do engage in working on their own racism, therapists can help them explore some of the social and political forces that shaped their racist beliefs (Zembylas, 2012) and share examples of their own mistakes and process of learning about how to express less racism (Lee, 2013). The goal of engaging in these conversations should be to work with clients to hold an anti-racist perspective and also to hold their emotional experiences as valid at the same time.

**Responding to youth's emotions.** Common responses from White adults include ignoring the unpleasant emotions of White youth, minimizing them, insisting that things are better now than they were in the past, and telling people they are too sensitive if they care about the impact of oppression. If White youth express emotions related to witnessing racism in the world, recognizing they are part of a racist society, or feeling defensive about having been challenged to learn more about racism, it is important for therapists to allow expression of these emotions, be curious, help youth name their feelings, and help them understand how common their feelings are among White people learning about racism. Feelings of guilt about racism are common and important to acknowledge before they lead to defensive behavior (Suchet, 2012) and the therapist's use of self as an example of someone who accepts uncomfortable emotions, or who has experienced and responded to these emotions can help facilitate a youth's acceptance of their own position. When people are open to their own emotional experiences, they are more open to examining their beliefs about race and the ways they benefit from racism (Zemblyas, 2012). Uncomfortable emotions can be an important catalyst for learning (Zemblyas, 2012); if White youth feel guilty about racism, they can begin to think about what they would like to change about themselves, if they feel angry with someone else, they can think about what their values are and how they would like to impact the world. Zemblyas shared the idea that pain and uncomfortable emotions often come from having a sense of responsibility to others. Learning to recognize and act on this responsibility is a challenging process, and a process that can benefit from the support of a trusted therapist.

## **Conclusion**

Many factors influence White adults engagement in conversations about race and racism with White children, including ideas about what is common and socially acceptable to talk about

among White communities, adults' views on the ability of children to learn about racism, adults' emotional discomfort with talking about race, and their lack of cognitive understanding of the subjects. More often than not, these factors lead White adults to avoid talking with children about the subjects of race and racism, contributing to environments in which children learn the same discomfort, social norms of silence around the subject of racism, and little cognitive understanding of the realities of race and racism in United States society. By initiating conversations about racism, modeling comfort with the subject as well as willingness to become uncomfortable in the interest of learning, and by responding to efforts children make to engage in discussions about racism, therapists and other adults can contribute to the emotional and intellectual growth of the youth they see as well as to a community that is better able to work toward racial justice.

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