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Bronwyn Shiffer  
An Exploratory Study of Motivations  
of White People Engaged in  
Antiracism Work

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore the question: What motivates White people in doing antiracism work? The research was a qualitative study with a sample of 12 participants who self-identified as White clinicians or teachers and as engaging in antiracism work. Participants reflected on their motivations for entering and staying engaged in antiracism work during in-person or phone interviews.

The findings of this study offer insight into the many factors of motivation of White people involved in antiracism work as well as what support structures sustain long-term action and engagement. Nearly all participants spoke about personal benefits from the work and the presence of supportive personal relationships as an important factor in maintaining engagement in antiracism work. Through the experiences of these teachers and clinicians, I hope to highlight important components of motivation for White clinicians engaging in antiracism work.

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MOTIVATIONS OF WHITE PEOPLE ENGAGED IN  
ANTIRACISM WORK**

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

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2013

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

This study seeks to explore the question: What motivates White people in doing antiracism work? The role of a social worker includes engaging in social justice; the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) cites social justice as a core value and exhorts social workers to "challenge social injustice" (2006, p. 5). One component of social injustice is racism; therefore, it can be argued that challenging racism is part of a social worker's role. It is especially important for White social workers to engage in anti-racism work since it is White people who participate in and benefit from the perpetuation of racist systems and everyday interactions. As early as 1944, Myrdal realized that racism was a "White man's problem" (Myrdal, 1944). The role of a clinical social worker includes providing a supportive space for clients. White clinicians cannot provide a fully supportive space for Clients of Color unless they have examined their own White privilege and the impact of racism. This study seeks to explore motivations of White people who engage in some form of anti-racism work. I wish to provide White clinicians and social workers with more examples of what motivates White people to continue engaging in anti-racism work in spite of significant resistance and lack of societal support.

Some institutions, including Smith College School for Social Work, have implemented an antiracism mission into their policies. As a White social worker at the Smith College School for Social Work, I have wrestled with issues of racism and privilege and have appreciated the

support that my education at Smith College School for Social Work has provided me in creating space for dialogue, reflection, and action on issues related to racism. Anticipating a lack of similar support in the professional world of social work, I seek to examine what has motivated other White social workers in this work in the hopes that it will provide me with similar motivation as well as provide other White social workers with resources to either begin or continue engagement with antiracism work.

Anti-racism work can be difficult to sustain given the extent to which racism is entrenched in U.S. institutions and society. Providing White social workers with a more full account of what motivates other Whites to engage in this work will provide a number of benefits for White people and People of Color. It will increase the likelihood that a greater number of White social workers will continue anti-racism work for a longer period of time; it will help support Whites by outlining what kinds of structures support attitude and behavior change of Whites; it will support Whites by exploring what kinds of attitudes create behavior change and what behaviors create attitude change in doing anti-racism work.

Anti-racism work, for the purpose of this study, is defined as embracing an analysis of racism that includes awareness of individually- and systemically-perpetuated racism; active engagement in building relationships and accountability with People of Color; critically analyzing and/or working to address racism in the institution in which they work.

This study addresses the following questions: 1) What motivates White people to engage in anti-racism work? 2) Is empathy a motivating factor in antiracism work? 3) Do motivators include a desire to help others as well as a desire to help oneself?

Chapter two will explore relevant literature to the study. Chapter three describes the research methods used in the study. Chapter four outlines the findings of the study. Finally,

chapter five discusses the findings within the context of relevant literature and the field of social work as well as the limitations of the study.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **History of Racism in the United States**

As Barndt (2007) notes, it is necessary to understand the history of racism in order to begin to dismantle it. Although racism looks different than it did 50, 100, and 150 years ago, racism in the United States still exists and simply manifests in different forms. Racism began with colonialism in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, manifesting itself in things such as slavery of Africans, genocide of Native Americans, lynching of Blacks and Latinos and denying citizenship to all “non-Whites” (Barndt, 2007; Cobas, Duany and Feagin, 2009). The United States explicitly formed itself as a nation benefiting Whites (Barndt, 2007; Alexander, 2010). As Alexander (2010) points out, the Whites that benefited most fully were Whites from the elite class. Slaveholders in the south would not join a union that did not allow slavery, and northern elite Whites wanted their private property protected (Alexander, 2010). The division of power between the federal and state governments was a way to protect slavery and the power of slaveholding states (Alexander, 2010). All legal and other structures are based in an ideology that benefits White people and subjugates People of Color (Barndt, 2007). In order to rationalize this ideology, White elites propagated People of Color in the media as non-human. Native Americans were portrayed as savages; African-Americans were made out to be a separate, dangerous, and lesser race (Alexander, 2010). Denying the humanity of People of Color allows

for differential treatment. If someone is not human, they do not need to be treated equally; in fact, “brutality, torture, and coercion” were justified (Alexander, 2010, p. 26).

Between 1492 and the mid-1800’s, colonialism exterminated nine million (90%) indigenous people and between 16 and 24 million Africans brought forcibly as slaves (Barndt, 2007, p. 17). All indigenous people who survived the genocide were forced to either live on parcels of land “given” to them or to attend boarding schools for the purpose of being socialized as second-class citizens (Barndt, 2007).

The creation of racial categories followed the classification of people as “White” or “non-White” and reflected a hierarchy based in White supremacy (Barndt, 2007). The U.S. annexed Mexican land in the southwest in 1848, and Puerto Rico and Cuba became U.S. territories in 1898 (Barndt, 2007). Soon after these acquisitions, the racial category of Hispanic/Latino was applied to anyone whose native tongue was Spanish and who came to the U.S. from Latin America. The category of Asian American began with the arrival of Chinese workers in the mid-1800’s, followed by immigrants from the Philippines and Japan. As non-white temporary laborers, citizenship was not open to them and they faced “enormous legal rejection and social oppression” (Barndt, 2007, p. 21). This oppression continued when anti-Asian sentiments during WWII incited deportation and incarceration of Japanese-Americans, most of whom were U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents (Barndt, 2007). The category of Arab American has fluctuated in U.S. history and is the most recently created racial category in the U.S. (Barndt, 2007). Dependent mainly on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, Arabs and people from the Middle East have sometimes been classified as White and sometimes not (Barndt, 2007). More often than not, Arab Americans have recently been classified as nonwhite and associated with being terrorists (Barndt, 2007).

After slavery was abolished, U.S. laws and structure of power sought to keep African-Americans out of political system participation and to ensure that they were available for “the low-cost labor pool” (Barndt, 2007, p. 20). Many laws and practices have changed since slavery was legal and since the Jim Crow era, and one could argue that life for a Person of Color is better than it was in the years following the Civil War and into the early 1900’s. However, following the Civil war, racism manifested systemically in Jim Crow laws and most recently the War on Drugs (Alexander, 2010). In fact, Alexander (2010) posits that life for People of Color was not necessarily worse during Jim Crow than it is today. It is impossible, says Alexander (2010), to measure which is better: living with one’s family with the threat of Klan violence or spending years in prison for a minor drug offense.

While African-Americans were racially classified under the “one-drop rule” of 1896, Mexican-Americans, says Gomez (2009), were “white enough to naturalize” and be granted citizenship since 1897. Mexicans were also granted federal citizenship when immigrants from Asia, Africa and others could not (Gomez, 2009). Although Mexican-Americans had greater legal rights as citizens, in reality their citizenship was second-class (Gomez, 2009). In this way they became a “wedge group,” stuck in between Whites and African-Americans, receiving honorary White status in exchange for enforcing the one-drop rule (Gomez, 2009). As has been true for most of the 20th century, Gomez (2009) also notes that Mexicans’ White status was influenced by Whites who were interested in Mexican labor.

Barndt (2007) asks how past racist actions are influencing us today; how historical racism continues to benefit White people and hurt people of color, and if historical racism has been eliminated. Alexander (2010) argues that while the United States no longer uses race explicitly to discriminate, racism simply manifests itself in different forms throughout history and in the

present. Since the civil rights movement, the United States has used the criminal justice system to disproportionately label people of color as criminals. The label of felon subjugates people of color in the same ways that U.S. structures have done for centuries, including housing and employment discrimination and denial of voting, educational and public assistance rights (Alexander, 2010). This relegation to the margins of society appears strikingly similar to a “segregated, second-class citizenship in the Jim Crow era” (Alexander, 2010, p. 4).

### **Anti-Racism Endeavors**

The United States’ legacy of racism is not without significant and consistent efforts of resistance, led by people of color and joined by some White people. As early as Columbus there was indigenous resistance to genocide; Native Americans fought defensive wars against White colonial aggression (Barndt, 2007). Similarly, resistance to slavery began with its inception in Jamestown in 1619 (Barndt, 2007). Although resistance has always been led by People of Color, Aptheker (1992) gives examples of both inter-racial efforts of resistance and examples of White resistance specifically. Aptheker (1992) also notes that generally, anti-racism work is most common among women, people in lower classes, and White people “who have had significant experiences with people of African origin” (p. xiv). The greatest concentration of movements for change however, occurred in the 1950’s and 1960’s during the Civil Rights movement (Barndt, 2007). Most well-known of the movements was the Black Civil Rights movement; however, the American Indian Movement, the United Farm Worker Movement, the Brown Berets, La Raza, the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, and the Yellow Power movement “paralleled and co-defined the civil rights movement” (Barndt, 2007, p. 30). Unsurprisingly, although the Civil Rights movement produced significant legal and social change, its life was cut short by U.S. government-launched Counter Intelligence Programs (COINTELPRO), which

“systematically and intentionally dismantled” the individual and collective movements, leaving most leaders of the movements either “dead, in jail, or in exile” (Barndt, 2007, p. 32).

Aptheker (1992) shows example of Whites resisting racism “decades” (p. 2) before the Revolutionary era and argues that anti-racism endeavors have been present and persisted throughout U.S. history. Aptheker (1992) points to numerous examples of Whites and Blacks not only working harmoniously together but living together and even marrying as early as the late 1600’s, in spite of legislation that made cohabitation between Whites and “Negroes” illegal (p. 16). Black slaves, White indentured servants, and Indian slaves worked together against oppression, including efforts to escape slavery and servitude (Aptheker, 1992). Aptheker (1992) notes that, among other incidents, in 1795, three White men were convicted as “accomplices of...slaves” (p. 40) and sentenced to seven years in prison in Louisiana. Other Whites participated in slave conspiracies and were “charged as subversive” (Aptheker, 1992, p. 43). Other Whites, including the French revolutionary Henri Gregoire, worked to disprove the dominant notion that African-American people were less than human (Aptheker, 1992). Although there existed numerous examples of African-Americans who defied the image of themselves as inferior humans (Aptheker, 1992), this image and idea of inferiority remains today.

Whites were involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), but only under Black leadership (Thompson, 2001). SNCC had never more than 20% White membership (Thompson, 2001). Blacks involved in the Civil Rights Movement encouraged Whites to work within White communities, although most Whites preferred to work and live with other activists and in Black communities (Thompson, 2001). In 1964 the White Folks Project was established, under sponsorship of

SNCC, as a movement of White people to counteract the Klan and White Citizens Councils (Thompson, 2001). Another White group created by members of SNCC in 1964 was the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) (Thompson, 2001). Members of SNCC were divided on whether creating a new, White-only organization was prudent (Thompson, 2001). The reasoning of the students was to create a less threatening organization that would reach more White people, as SNCC had a radical reputation (Thompson, 2001). Some thought SSOC was suspect based on the fact that only Whites were a part of it; some thought the Whites involved were seeking power; some thought it an appropriate way for Whites to organize separately (Thompson, 2001).

In the mid-1960's, SNCC began to intentionally use White race privilege to benefit the civil rights struggle, given that the media followed White people and that "segregation and racist violence in the South would not be significantly undermined until [W]hite people believed that [W]hite people were at risk" (Thompson, 2001, p. 55). "Black leaders created strategies that defined what [W]hite people were supposed to do to be a part of the struggle" (Thompson, 2001, p. 56).

Some argue that the integrationist ethic that occurred in the 1950's and early 1960's worked to cover up differences between Whites and Blacks without addressing the implications of difference in opportunities available to each (Thompson, 2001). Also in the mid-1960's, more and more Black leaders were coming to the conclusion that integrationist ethics, as well as peaceful revolution, were unlikely to produce results (Thompson, 2001). SNCC began to rethink its integrationist tactics as the Black Power Movement grew (Thompson, 2001).

Thompson (2001) speaks of significant ruptures in the 1960's among people working in the Civil Rights Movement. By the late 1960's, most White people who had been involved in

the Civil Rights Movement were now working in White-led organizations, working for a variety of causes including anti-poverty, anti-war, and White militancy. Thompson (2001) argues that White organizations did not rise to the occasion of working independently to keep anti-racism on the domestic agenda. One rupture was involvement in the anti-war movement (Thompson, 2001). Although anti-war movements made many gains, this agenda distinctly departed from a domestic anti-racism agenda in addition to being largely led by middle-class Whites (Thompson, 2001). Another rupture was disagreement in strategy, specifically militancy (Thompson, 2001). Some members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a White activist organization in the North, turned to militancy in order to “stop falling back on the race and class privileges that had so far protected them in ways Black activists had not been insulated” (Thompson, 2001, p. 94). Militants and non-militants were unable to talk with each other in a “principled and sensitive” way (Thompson, 2001, p. 108). A third rupture was the “pervasiveness of racism” itself (Thompson, 2001, p. 110). White people working in these arenas often struggled with understanding the distinction between “helping” and “standing in solidarity” since as White people, they both wanted to support People of Color and at the same time being inherently part of a structure that undermined them (p. 82).

Some White women who gained race consciousness through the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements “did not see the early feminist movement (1966-1970’s) as a location to continue antiracist work” (Thompson, 2001, p. 121). One of these women, Anne Braden, a White woman involved in anti-racism work since the 1940’s, felt that “all issues are ‘women’s issues,’ including war and peace, economics, and racism” (Thompson, 2001, p. 128). Thompson (2001) discusses the development of “multiracial feminism”, characterized by the following:

1) an international perspective which recognized the role of...imperialism and drew links between women in Third World countries and Black, Latina, Asian, and Native American women in the United States; 2) a political analysis that treated race, class, and gender as interconnected and refused to consider sexism the ultimate oppression; 3) a wariness about single-issue organizations that did not account for women's multiple identities; and 4) a recognition of the need for racially autonomous caucus groups through which various identity groups could come together to form coalitions (pp. 128-129).

The feminism developed by Women of Color, says Thompson (2001), paved the way for the emergence of White antiracist feminism.

An important more recent movement of White people is that of antiracism trainings and workshops (Hartigan, 2000). Begun in the 1970's, they teach White people about their role as perpetrators of systemic racism (Hartigan, 2000). Love (2010) offers another framework for anti-racism work, that of critical liberation theory, which works toward equitable and fair communities and societies using liberatory language. Discussed more in following sections, one of Love's (2010) goals is both to raise awareness of the roles played in the system of racism and also to avoid becoming hopeless.

### **White Identity and White Privilege**

Haro (2010a) outlines a cycle of socialization in which each of us is born into a set of "social identities" (p. 45) which are categorized into dominant groups (those who have more social power and are given greater access to opportunities) and subordinate<sup>1</sup> groups (those who are exploited and victimized by structural obstacles), each of which play a role in keeping a "dis-

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word "subordinant" instead of "subordinate" following Love's (2010) distinction. Love (2010) says, "I prefer the spelling subordinant because...[it] parallels dominant" (p. 601). Subordinate, as an adjective, describes what is done to subordinants. "If we were to parallel subordinate, then we would need to write dominate; and using the modifying adjective to refer to groups of people seems to further objectify and reduce" (Love, 2010, p. 601).



equal” system in place (Love, 2010, p. 599). Harro (2010a) characterizes the socialization process as “pervasive (coming from all sides and sources), consistent (patterned and predictable), circular (self-supporting), self-perpetuating (intradependent), and often invisible (unconscious and unnamed)” (p. 45). Socialization, or “brainwashing,” says Harro (2010a), is “woven into every structural thread of the fabric of our culture,” (p. 48), often reinforced by parents, other influential individuals, and institutions. Conforming to the rules of socialization is enforced by punishing those who challenge it (for example, burning Black churches for becoming too powerful) and by rewarding those who don’t (for example, being considered normal) (Harro, 2010a). The results of this socialization are harmful for both dominant and subordinate groups (Harro, 2010a). Subordinate groups suffer from anger, hopelessness and disempowerment; dominant groups suffer from guilt, fear of payback and rising crime, and dehumanization (Harro, 2010a, p. 49).

Rothenberg (2005) notes that White privilege is “the other side of racism” (p. 1) and that the more we understand the nature of how White people benefit from racism, the greater ability we have to dismantle it personally and institutionally. Generally, Whiteness is invisible to White people; this in turn reinforces White privilege since, unexamined, White privilege will not be dismantled (Rothenberg, 2005). Once people come to see White privilege, says Rothenberg (2005), they are motivated to give up some of those privileges and work against racism because of a sense of fairness and justice. Part of understanding White privilege includes acknowledging that race is socially constructed (Rothenberg, 2005).

McIntosh (2005) highlights racism not just as something that disadvantages People of Color but that specifically advantages Whites. Some of these advantages, like the feeling of belonging in the human circle or the expectation that your race will not be held against you in

court, should be rights of all people, while others, such as the privilege of “ignoring less powerful people” are damaging not only to People of Color but to White people since they distort White people’s humanity (McIntosh, 2005, p. 112).

Helms (1990) defines racial identity not as racial classification (White, Black, etc.), but as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (p. 3). Racial identity theory explores the degree to which people identify with the racial group with which they are assumed to share racial heritage (Helms, 1990) and the “belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential racial-group membership” (p. 4). White racial identity theories “attempt to explain the various ways in which Whites can identify (or not identify) with other Whites and/or evolve or avoid evolving a nonoppressive White identity” (Helms, 1990, p. 5).

Racial identity theories examine the interaction between “personal identity, reference-group orientation, and ascribed identity” (Helms, 1990, p. 6). Personal identity refers to the way people feel about themselves (Helms, 1990). Reference-group orientation describes the degree to which people identify with a racial group’s beliefs and definition of appropriate behavior (Helms, 1990). Ascribed identity describes the degree to which people determine their racial-group membership to be relevant to them as well as their commitment level to other people within their racial group (Helms, 1990, p. 6). Racial identity theories “also attempt to predict the varied feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviors that correspond to the differential weightings of components. The resulting variations might be called racial identity resolutions” (Helms, 1990, p. 6).

Initially, Helms (1990) researched racial identity as a “developmental process” (p. 6) of stages, in which it is possible for people to move among identities. Later, Helms (1995)

amended this language to reflect greater nuance around the developmental process. Helms (1995) now uses “status” instead of “stage” in order to more accurately reflect greater movement among the statuses, including “dynamic interplay between cognitive and emotional processes” (p. 183) and the possibility that statuses are not mutually exclusive. I use “status” throughout.

Helms (1990) identifies three types of racism: individual, institutional, and cultural. Individual refers to “personal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (Helms, 1990, p. 49) that reinforce feelings of White racial superiority and non-White racial inferiority (Helms, 1990). Institutional racism includes legal systems and policies that “maintain economic and social advantages of Whites over non-Whites” (Helms, 1990, p. 49). Cultural racism is societal beliefs that “promote the assumption that the products of White culture...are superior to those of non-Whites” (Helms, 1990, p. 49). Helms (1990) describes the development of a healthy White identity as involving two processes: rejecting racism and developing a nonracist White identity. The first requires that White people must not only reject individual racism but also acknowledge and actively oppose institutional and cultural racism. The second necessitates that White people “accept [their] own Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and define a view of Self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another” (p. 49).

Helms (1995) organizes White racial identity into six statuses: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudoindependence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy (p. 185). As soon as White people become aware of the idea of actuality of People of Color, they are in the contact status (Helms, 1990). In contact status, White people are oblivious to racism and satisfied with the racial status quo (Helms, 1995). White people take in stereotypes about People of Color from the dominant culture without questioning them and acknowledge only individual acts of

prejudice, not institutional racism (Goodman, 2011). People in the contact status usually think that theoretically People of Color should be treated fairly; however, due to the plethora of vicarious negative information about People of Color available to White people, White people in contact status are often afraid to have contact with People of Color (Helms, 1990).

The disintegration status is marked by awareness of White privilege, personal prejudice, and the social significance of race (Goodman, 2011). In disintegration, White people become aware of a number of dilemmas that bring to light the inconsistencies of White culture and society, including “the belief in freedom and democracy versus the belief in racial inequality” (Bowser and Hunt, 1981, p. 78) and “the desire to show love and compassion versus the desire to keep Blacks in their place at all costs” (Bowser and Hunt, 1981, p. 78). White people are faced with racial situations, such as speaking out against prejudice, that force them to choose between being loyal to the White racial group and acting out of humanism (Helms, 1995). These dilemmas and new awarenesses usually result in disorientation and anxiety (Helms, 1995), dissonance (Helms, 1990), and can cause discomfort and confusion (Goodman, 2011). Dissonance may be reduced by avoiding contact with People of Color; making an effort to change the minds of friends and family that People of Color are not inferior; or trying to deny the existence of racism or White people’s culpability in racism (Helms, 1990).

The reintegration status occurs when Whites idealize other Whites at the expense of other racial groups which distorts information and is characterized by selective perception (Helms, 1995). In reintegration, Whites accept their superiority as a race based on the belief that Whites have worked for their privileges and that People of Color have inferior “social, moral, and intellectual qualities” (Helms, 1990, p. 60) that cause “race-related negative conditions” (p. 60).

Pseudo-independence marks the beginning of an anti-racism identity (Goodman, 2011). Whites begin to question the inferiority of People of Color, but their actions may still unconsciously act in ways that support this belief, for example interacting with People of Color in ways that teach them how to “function more like Whites on White criteria for success” (Helms, 1990, p. 61). This focus likely causes suspicion from People of Color, who wonder why Whites are not changing other White people (Helms, 1990). In pseudo-independence, Whites also acknowledge Whites’ role of perpetuation of racism (Helms, 1990).

Racial activism may begin during immersion/emersion (Helms, 1995). Whites in immersion/emersion work to change inaccurate beliefs about race and may educate themselves about White anti-racists as well as engaging in White consciousness-raising groups (Helms, 1990). White people in the immersion/emersion status are not focused on changing People of Color but work to change other White people (Helms, 1990).

Autonomy is characterized by Whites no longer experiencing race as a threat to them (Helms, 1990). Whites in the autonomy status understand that “racism is a White problem” (Helms, 1990, p. 52) and make an effort “to eliminate it” (Helms, 1990, p. 52). Autonomy is an ongoing process and does not end in perfection (Helms, 1990). In addition, it often leads to the exploration of other forms of oppression (Helms, 1990).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Barndt (2007) discusses the origins of the concept of race and notes that its inception marked not the beginning of human oppression but another way in which people could determine superiority and inferiority. Race, says Barndt (2007), “has always had something to do with determining who gets how much of what in any society” (p. 71). Two paths, says Barndt (2007), defined race as a concept: race as an academic and scientific idea and race as a political ideology

(p. 66). As scientists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries developed botany, biology, and anthropology, classifying all things living and non-living, they also classified humans into races. Importantly (and unsurprisingly, as all the scientists positing the theory were Caucasoid), the scientists who developed these races placed Caucasoid as superior in all ways and classified Negroid as sub-human. This completely erroneous theory of Caucasoid supremacy “maintain[ed] overwhelming consensus” in the Western world for the next 500 years. This theory was incredibly useful to European colonizers as they sought to justify their “right to appropriate the land, the people, and the resources” of the places they colonized (Barndt, 2007, p. 68). Omi and Winant (1994) describe this use of race as highly significant:

The conquest, therefore, was the first – and given the dramatic nature of the case, perhaps the greatest – racial formation project...just as the “big bang” still resonates through the universe, so the overdetermined construction of the world ‘civilization’ as a product of the rise of Europe and the subjugation of the rest of us, still defines the race concept. (p. 62)

This concept that Europeans had “not only the right, but the responsibility to subdue and rule over the rest of the world’s ‘lesser’ peoples, while also claiming full proprietary rights over the land and the resources” remained a prominent ideology and went on in history as the “White man’s burden” (Barndt, 2007, p. 68).

Barndt (2007) notes that although race was not the only oppressive social classification in the United States (class, gender, and religion being other main players), it certainly held a central role in the formation of the American colonies. Alexander (2010) illustrates the intention with which races were created and subjugated by elite Whites in the early colonial years. Initially, both Whites and Blacks were indentured servants on plantations. However, when it became

obvious that slavery was what plantations needed in order to thrive, elite Whites realized that non-English speaking Africans were the people with the least power and therefore the best candidates for slavery: White Europeans would be less likely to voluntarily immigrate to America to become slaves, and Native American tribes had the ability to fight back (Alexander, 2010). Although the position of working and poor Whites was barely better than that of Black slaves, White elites (notably following Bacon's rebellion of 1675 which was carried out by an alliance of Blacks and Whites, bondsmen and slaves, and condemned the White elite for oppressing the poor) "deliberately and strategically" increased the position of poor working Whites by giving special privileges to them, including rights as slave patrols, rights to Native American lands, and lack of competition with slave labor (Alexander, 2010, p. 25). This gave poor Whites just enough incentive to stay motivated to protect their now racially privileged position.

Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (1995) describe critical race theory as challenging "the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal structure and, more generally, in American society as a whole" (p. xiii). Its two common interests, state Crenshaw et al. (1995), are to understand how White supremacy has been created and maintained in America (the "bond between law and racial power") and to change this bond (p. xiii). As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) say, critical race theory works to "ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines" as well as how to "transform it [society] for the better" (p. 3). Critical race scholarship's goal is not one of neutrality or objectivity but rather to create new, "oppositionist accounts of race" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) define the critical race theory movement as a "collection of

activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power” (p. 2).

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) outline six largely accepted foundational principles of critical race theory. First, racism is the normal experience of most People of Color, which makes it difficult to address except in blatant manifestation (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Second, White racial supremacy serves both psychic and material purposes (interest convergence); racism serves White elites materially and White working class people psychically, which gives White people little incentive to work against it (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Third, race is socially constructed and consists of “categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Barndt (2007) notes that from the beginnings of the legal system in the U.S., resources were “reserved exclusively for [W]hite people” while all other races “existed for the sole purpose of serving the interests of [W]hite people” (p. 70). In spite of the repeal of the Naturalization Act of 1790 (which “limited new citizenship to [W]hite people”) (Barndt, 2007, p. 71) and the civil rights laws that challenged discrimination on the basis of race, the concept of race remains in mainstream thought as a biological and scientific reality. Fourth, society differentially racializes people, for example for shifting labor market needs (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Fifth, the notion of intersectionality and anti-essentialism states that no one has a single identity and that “everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). A final tenet of critical race theory is the idea that People of Color have a unique perspective on oppression to offer White people (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

Following the Civil Rights Movement, racism was legally defined as only individual acts of discrimination (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Colorblindness being the goal, even the recognition of



race was considered racism, which, juxtaposed with affirmative action, posed conflicts (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Liberals and conservatives agreed that racism was characterized by a lack of colorblindness; they disagreed only on the degree to which it was present (rampant and rare, respectively) (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In the late 1970's, a group of "openly leftist law teachers, students, and practitioners" formed the Conference on Critical Legal Studies in order to challenge the ways in which "law served to legitimate an oppressive social order" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xviii). Critical race theory has some roots in critical legal studies, specifically the idea of legal indeterminacy, which states that each legal case can be decided in favor of either party based on different interpretation of facts or by "emphasizing one line of authority over another" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 5). Critical race theory also draws from radical feminism, namely the "relationship power and the construction of social roles, as well as the unseen, largely invisible collection of patterns and habits that make up the patriarchy and other forms of domination" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 5). Civil rights thought also contributed to critical race theory in its "concern for redressing social wrongs" and the belief that "legal and social theory have practical consequences" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 5).

Bell (1995), critical race theory's "intellectual father figure" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 5), argues that the U.S. government would not have desegregated schools unless there was an advantage to White people for doing so. African-Americans had been saying for a hundred years that Black schools were inadequate; why the change in policy? First, a desegregated school system would make the U.S. look good internationally, specifically to developing countries where the U.S. was vying for support against communist countries (Bell, 1995). Second, the U.S. needed to maintain some consistency in its public embracing of the ideals of equality and freedom; African-American veterans of World War Two had just fought a

war espousing these principles only to return home to significant discrimination and violence (Bell, 1995). In an effort to appease negative sentiments in reaction to this dissonance, the *Brown* decision would seem to help (Bell, 1995). Third, segregation was seen as a divisive state-level barrier to full industrialization in the south (Bell, 1995). Bell (1995) clarifies that this self-interest was not the sole precipitant of *Brown* but that a moral motivation was insufficient; although there were Whites who pushed for de-segregation from moral grounds, there were not enough of them to bring de-segregation to fruition. Therefore, argues Bell (1995), self-interest in the *Brown* decision, as in the decision to abolish slavery, was also a necessary component in racial reform.

### **Psychological Theory of Motivation**

Allport (1954) defines prejudice as “thinking ill of others without significant warrant” (p. 6). Humans have a tendency to form oversimplified categories which can be based in reality but also on “hearsay evidence, emotional projections, and fantasy” (Allport, 1954, p. 27). In-groups (sex, religion, family tradition, etc.) can be simply defined as using “the term *we* with the same essential significance” (Allport, 1954, p. 31). All groups, says Allport (1954) “develop a way of living with characteristic codes and beliefs, standards and ‘enemies’ to suit their own adaptive needs” (p. 39).

McClelland (1985) states that in order for learning to happen, conscious intent increases learning but may or may not be necessary for any learning to take place. Further, due to unconscious motivations, people “often do not know what their motives are” (McClelland, 1985, p. 21); even if people consciously state a number of motivations, the stated motivations may be inaccurate.

McClelland (1985) outlines four categories of motivation: achievement, power, affiliative and intimacy. Achievement motives “focus on one’s own ability to produce a performance result” (McClelland, 1985, p. 247). People with high achievement motivation generally show “less interpersonal sensitivity” (McClelland, 1985, p. 247) and have been shown to be innovative and to seek challenging tasks (McClelland, 1985). People with high achievement motivation also show high occupational and entrepreneurial success (McClelland, 1985). Power motives include the desire to “impact, control, or influence...another person group, or the world at large” (McClelland, 1985, p. 272), including prestige, anticipation of actions to attain power (McClelland, 1985). Notably, people with strong power motivations view themselves negatively, self-describing themselves as “coarse,” “cynical,” “complicated,” and “resentful” (McClelland, 1985, p. 282). People with strong affiliative motives value people highly and “learn social relationships more quickly, are more sensitive to faces than to other objects, and engage in more dialogue with others” (McClelland, 1985, p. 352). McClelland (1985) also notes that people with strong affiliative motives often act to avoid conflict, may fear rejection and seek approval yet also be self-assertive and confident. Intimacy motives are characterized by “love, friendship,” “dialogue,” “psychological growth,” “commitment and concern for another not rooted in guilt or a sense of duty,” and “harmony” (McClelland, 1985, p. 360). People with strong intimacy motive have shown to be “warm, sincere, appreciative, and loving and less dominant and self-centered” (McClelland, 1985, p. 361). Interestingly, studies have shown that having greater power motive than affiliative motive is associated with poor health, whereas having greater affiliative motive (having more “capacity to love and be loved”) (McClelland, 1985, p. 368) than power motive is associated with having better health (McClelland, 1985).

Rogers (1942, 1951) found evidence of a self-actualizing motivation in humans, in addition to the needs of growth, love, and self-respect. Maslow (1954) echoed this, categorizing needs into basic (food, water, safety) and growth (belonging, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization). Once basic needs are met, humans are driven to growth-oriented endeavors, ultimately self-actualization.

### **Costs of Racism to White People**

Rothenberg (2005) suggests that it is helpful to understand how White people benefit from racism in order to dismantle it. The ways in which White people benefit from racism are numerous. Johnson (2005) describes privilege as increasing the chances of getting what you want; being able to set the agenda in a social situation; giving the authority to make influential and lasting judgments about People of Color; the ability to decide who gets taken seriously and who gets attention; as granting the social permission to act on a “presumption of superiority” without fear that it will be challenged (p. 103). McIntosh (2005) includes the following examples as White privilege:

I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed... I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair... I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them... I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial... If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race. (p. 111)

Jenson (2005) notes that White privilege includes the ability “to acknowledge that you have unearned privilege but to ignore what it means” (p. 115). Jenson (2005) also cites the ability to “seek admission to a university, apply for a job, or hunt for an apartment” and voice critical opinions without appearing threatening (p. 116).

Goodman (2011) outlines numerous costs of racism to White people. First, material and physical costs exist, including social violence and unrest: “As people feel increasingly mistreated, hopeless, and disconnected from the larger society and its benefits, violence and anti-social behavior increases” (Goodman, 2011, p. 95). White people have made huge efforts to seclude ourselves so we can ignore this reality, but the result is that we spend more and more energy on protecting ourselves, and our world becomes smaller and smaller as we restrict the places in which we feel safe (Goodman, 2011). Second, White people have high stress levels as a result of feeling disconnected from other people (Goodman, 2011). Third, racism wastes resources. Legal, judicial, penal and healthcare systems all cost more under an unequal system (Goodman, 2011). This in turn leaves fewer resources and energy for addressing societal well-being, including environment, education, health (Goodman, 2011). Unions are an example of how excluding groups hinders the possibility for effective collective action (Goodman, 2011); (Feagin and Vera, 2001). Fourth, racism comes at a moral cost to White people. Feagin and Vera (2001) note that “Whites’ strong sense of [W]hiteness comes from a denigration of blackness” (p. 226) and therefore comes at a cost to Whites’ humanity. Fifth, racism comes with political costs (Feagin and Vera, 2001). Racism denies equal rights for Americans of Color and tolerates violence done to People of Color, which puts all Americans at the same risk (Feagin and Vera, 2001). Finally, Whites experience a psychological cost of racism, most notably our “obsessive fear of [B]lack men as criminals” (Feagin and Vera, 2001, p. 228). Whites, say

Feagin and Vera (2001), show a lack of full mental health in part due to their likelihood to be “lacking in introspection and empathy” (p. 228). Learning about these costs do not necessarily cause White people to desire change as there are many reasons to uphold the status quo (Goodman, 2011). However, they do open a space for “critical thinking and for challenging the win-lose paradigm” (Goodman, 2011, p. 100).

### **Benefits of Anti-Racism Endeavors**

Harro (2010a) argues that each of us has a choice to either continue the cycle or to challenge the system. As Love (2010) says, thoughts and behaviors that support and maintain racism are not inherent but learned (p. 599). Fear, ignorance, confusion, insecurity and power or powerlessness are things that Harro (2010a) says get in the way of challenging the system. People in subordinate groups fear retribution for challenging the existing power structure in the form of being deported, beaten, imprisoned or killed; they also may feel powerless and unable to make a difference (Harro, 2010a). People in dominant groups fear losing existing privilege by challenging the same system that gave them power (Harro, 2010a). People in both groups are inhibited by lack of understanding of how oppression works, and even if individuals do have an understanding, it is confusing to know what to do and to know that an action will help and not harm; interrupting oppression is not a skill that is often taught (Harro, 2010a). Once people gain awareness of oppression however, action becomes more likely (Harro, 2010a).

Although awareness may initially come accidentally, continued challenge of oppression requires intentional noticing of our thoughts, behaviors, and lives (Love, 2010). Love (2010) outlines awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/ally-ship as the four components of developing a liberatory consciousness. Once individuals begin to regularly notice what happens on a daily basis, they must then figure out “why it is happening and what needs to be done about

it” (Love, 2010, p. 601). If what needs to be done is an action to challenge what is happening, this action could take a variety of forms, including individual response, “encouraging others to take action”, or finding resources to empower the appropriate people for action (Love, 2010, p. 601). Love’s (2010) description of accountability includes reciprocal efforts both from White people and People of Color as both groups engage in self-awareness and liberation work. Accountability, says Love (2010), “means that we support each other to learn more about the ways that the internalized domination and internalized subordination manifests itself in our lives, and agree with each other that we will act to interrupt it” (p. 603). While affirming the right and need for People of Color to avoid the role of teacher to White people, Love (2010) challenges People of Color to strategically offer their unique perspective to White people for the purpose of furthering the work of liberation. Love (2010) argues that if White people “had access to and were able to hold a perspective that allowed them to change systems and patterns of domination, they would have done so already” (p. 602). It is in People of Color’s interest, states Love (2010), to assist White people in recognizing their oppressive actions. Similarly, Love (2010) posits that White people also have perspectives to share with People of Color that will help to “recognize and eliminate those patterns of thought and behavior that originate in internalized subordination or domination” (p. 602). Neither group should focus their energy on the other group; rather, each should offer perspective when appropriate in order to further the work of liberation (Love, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Harro (2010b) posits that self-love, hope, self-esteem, balance, “joy at our collective efficacy,” support and security in knowing we are not alone, having a spiritual base, and authentic love for others is crucial to challenging systems of oppression (p. 53). These strengths

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<sup>2</sup> Love (2010) discusses liberation in the context of oppression in general, not racism specifically. Since racism is a form of oppression and since this study examines racism specifically, I have translated her ideas to address racism specifically.

allow people to gain knowledge and develop analyses of oppression; speak out and take stands against oppression; build coalitions against injustice; and act to create change (Harro, 2010b, p. 53).

“Unlearning racism” is a now common term used to describe anti-racism efforts of White people. Goodman (2011) defines unlearning as a process encompassing “both self-reflection and social analysis” (p. 102), one that examines “one’s biases, socialization, attitudes, behaviors, and worldview” (p. 102). Unlearning, says Goodman (2011), seeks to understand “historical and contemporary manifestations” of racism, systemic and institutionalized racism, and the privilege and oppression experienced by White people and people of color, respectively (p. 102). Usually when a White person thinks about unlearning racism, they assume they will experience only negative effects, including guilt and being blamed for racism. However, Goodman (2011) found that the benefits of unlearning privilege and oppression correspond with the costs of oppression to people from privileged groups. Goodman (2011) identifies the main costs of maintaining racism as “loss of mental health and authentic sense of self, the loss and diminishment of relationships, the loss of developing a full range of knowledge, the loss of moral and spiritual integrity, and the loss of safety and quality of life” (p. 103). Goodman (2011) categorizes the benefits, which diminish the costs, as: “knowledge and clarity; an enriched life; greater authenticity and humanity; empowerment, confidence and competence; and liberation and healing” (p. 103). Since racism is a form of oppression, Goodman’s benefits of unlearning oppression/privilege are used here to show benefits of unlearning racism specifically.

Unlearning increases knowledge and clarity by helping to make sense out of systems that “feel confusing and irrational” (Goodman, 2011, p. 103). “People know something is wrong but cannot necessarily name it or articulate it. A greater understanding of oppression helps people



figure out the world in which they live and their role in it. It ‘creates meaning in a system that doesn’t make sense’” (Goodman, 2011, pp. 103-104). Unlearning also increases self-knowledge by exploring parts of the self that have been “hidden, distorted, or ignored” (Goodman, 2011, p. 102). Unexplored, these biases and behaviors perpetuate systems of oppression; uncovering and understanding that one unconsciously participates in oppression makes enacting that oppression less likely (Goodman, 2011).

Goodman’s (2011) second category of benefit, an enriched life, comes about both by increased relationships with people from different social groups, increased sense of community, and decreased sense of isolation. Unlearning allows people to be comfortable in a wider range of social situations (Goodman, 2011). Although sometimes people who are unlearning racism will discontinue friendships that are not supportive, people ultimately feel more connected after joining social justice networks (Goodman, 2011). Not only do people feel more connected, but they also report having a more vibrant, stimulating, and engaging life (Goodman, 2011, p. 107). These benefits support Rogers’ (1942, 1951) and Maslow’s (1954) theories of growth and self-actualization, fulfilling needs of togetherness, achievement, understanding and insight.

Authenticity and greater humanity as a result of unlearning comes about in a variety of ways, one of which is seeing people from subordinated groups as human. As Alexander (2010) has pointed out, racism’s crucial tenet is the de-humanization of some human beings. White people who are aware of their learned (and false) superiority are able to experience not only a more full sense of others’ humanity, but of their own (Goodman, 2011). Another benefit of authenticity comes from increased empathy (Goodman, 2011). This comes not only from an increased ability to open up emotionally (feeling the emotions that racism causes us to deny) but also from an awareness of systemic inequality, which challenges the false perspective that people

who are oppressed are responsible for their situation (Goodman, 2011). Unlearning allows individuals to be authentic in their motivations for challenging oppression. Individuals report that approval from people in oppressed groups no longer remains a driving force behind unlearning work; relationships and accountability become more important (Goodman, 2011). Authenticity also comes in the form of moral and spiritual alignment, allowing people to feel confident that they are doing what they should be doing (Goodman, 2011). This increased alignment creates an increased sense of inner peace, which in turn allows individuals to grant others more peace (Goodman, 2011).

Although a common fear of exploring issues of oppression is feelings of guilt and being overwhelmed, people who have engaged in unlearning privilege/oppression have found the opposite to be true (Goodman, 2011). People report increased empowerment and ability to address social justice issues, feeling less internal conflict and more ability to take constructive feedback (Goodman, 2011). This experience of not being afraid to make mistakes is central to increased liberation, in which individuals are not afraid of deeper self-knowledge or how they might offend others (Goodman, 2011). As two individuals cited by Goodman note, “White supremacy depends on so many things that are bad for us – numbing, violence, silence” (Goodman, 2011, p. 112). The other states, “Privilege looks like it just makes life easier but really it increases fear, stress, and soul death” (Goodman, 2011, p. 113). Overwhelmingly, people who engage in unlearning report that the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs; “the joy of reclaiming one’s humanity, living an enriched life, and creating a better world is a satisfying and motivating force” (Goodman, 2011, p. 113). An important component of staying engaged is self-compassion; similar to meditation, individuals state that the unlearning work got easier when self-judgment, which “compounds fears and bad feelings,” diminished (Goodman, 2011, p. 115).

Instead of fear and bad feelings, people find they “feel more powerful, more aligned with their values, smarter, more passionate, more effective, and more authentically connected to themselves and others” (Goodman, 2011, p. 116).

### **Anti-Racism Motivators**

Goodman (2011), in her study of individuals engaging in unlearning privilege/oppression, found that discomfort was a motivator, since racism is a bad thing and as such should create discomfort. “Change requires discomfort,” said one individual, and seeing discomfort as a teacher and not an enemy allows for growth (Goodman, 2011, p. 118). Discomfort could be seen as empathizing with the discomfort of People of Color (Feagin and Vera, 1995). Drawing from Martin Luther King Jr.’s statement that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” (Corbett, 1990, p. 343), discomfort also manifests as reactive violence toward White people. As Sister Souljah says, “If the social and economic system has neglected your development and you have become a casual killer who will kill even your brother, in your mindset, why not kill a [W]hite person?” (cited in Feagin and Vera, 1995, p. 127).

Bell’s (1995) interest-convergence hypothesis states that Whites will eliminate racism only if it is in our interest to do so. Whites must be “confronted again and again with the enormous loss of life, talent and energy of African-Americans in ways they cannot evade or deny” (cited in Feagin and Vera, 1995, p. 191). Barndt (2007) makes the idea of self-interest more personal by claiming self-interest as his long-term, deep motivator for engaging in anti-racism work:

[I]t was only when I began to know that racism was also destroying me...only when I began to know how deeply racism also had a destructive and lasting effect on me and was preventing me from being the kind of person I want to be, that my deepest self-interest

began to be touched and my lasting commitment to dismantling racism began to be reached. (p. 142)

Goodman (2011) found some evidence of this as many people in her study of unlearning privilege/oppression reported that it addresses personal needs, ranging from wanting to make amends to dealing with pain to keeping a job. Similar to unlearning work being motivated by personal interest or need, Feagin and Vera (1995) found that people's experience with their own oppression makes them more likely to empathize with People of Color, and empathy then acts as a motivator. Kivel (2005) notes a parallel motivator, that of realizing that racism puts People of Color's "lives...at stake" and wanting to do something about it (p. 140). Goodman (2011) agrees that empathy can be a motivating factor, stating that people who engage in unlearning work make a connection with their own oppression to another's and are motivated by not wanting to inflict similar pain on others. Tatum (2005) also speaks of motivation coming from within. Many of her White students express fear of speaking out against racism, and in response, Tatum (2005) says that individuals must fight for themselves, not for People of Color, since White people have been damaged by racism as well (p. 128). As one of Tatum's (2005) students states, "the consequences of not exploring racial issues are ultimately far more damaging" than the consequences of engaging in the process of unlearning and speaking out (p. 131).

On a national level, self-interest has been a motivator recently in the statements of the Supreme Court, specifically in the 2003 case of *Grutter v. Bollinger* (Crosby and Blake-Beard, 2004). Sandra Day O'Connor's majority opinion in the case (in which a White University of Michigan student contested her lack of admission to the school based on "reverse discrimination") included arguments outlining the numerous benefits that White students gained by having a "critical mass of minority students", including increasing White students' ability to

function in the world (Crosby and Blake-Beard, 2004, p. 151). Notably, the Supreme Court reviewed *Gratz v. Bollinger* at the same time and ruled its point-based undergraduate admission policy as an unlawful quota system (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003). The point score scale for undergraduate admission included up to 22 points for having attended academically strong schools, whose parents or other relatives attended the school, and for taking difficult courses (Crosby and Blake-Beard, 2004). These points were not contentious. What the Supreme Court found problematic were the 20 points given to students who were members of a minority group, poor, or who had attended a minority high school (Crosby and Blake-Beard, 2004, p. 149). Arguably, the former possible 22 points privileged middle- and upper-class students as well as White students while the latter 20 points privileged poor students and students of color. This suggests that the Supreme Court is not interested in challenging the privileges (points) given to White and wealthy students but claims privileges (points) given to poor and minority students are illegal. As Crosby and Blake-Beard (2004) ask, “Why do we hear outcries when the criteria are race and gender but no such similar uproar when legacy status?” (p. 152). Bell’s (1995) interest convergence theory is confirmed in these two Supreme Court cases.

Goodman (2011) speaks about the importance of support along the way to sustain unlearning work. This shows up in the form of staying connected with others who share a similar commitment, encouraging families and partners, membership in supportive groups and organizations, and inspiration from past and present role models (Goodman, 2011).

## **CHAPTER**

### **Methodology**

Using qualitative research methods, this study explored the question, “What motivates White counselors and teachers to engage in anti-racism work?” The purpose of this study is to provide White clinicians and social workers with more examples of what motivates White people to continue engaging in anti-racism work in spite of significant resistance and lack of societal support. Goodman (2011) has done substantial research on what motivates people in doing anti-oppression work, also using qualitative research, and found that a variety of motivators, including increased quality of life, were present. However, this population and research topic has not received a substantial amount of research, so I chose to also use qualitative exploratory, deductive research in order to capture as many nuances to a complex topic as possible. I encouraged participants to reflect on their motivations for doing anti-racism work.

I conducted twelve qualitative interviews using a semi-structured format and following a guide of interview questions that included a brief background of antiracism work done, a general question about motivation, and more specific questions distinguishing between initial and current motivations, empathy, and support structures. The guide included five demographic questions, one background question, five directive questions about motivation, and one question asking participants to name support structures that have been helpful in their antiracism work, designed to give social workers examples of where support can be found. One question asked if empathy was a motivator, and one question asked about White privilege.

## **Obtaining a Sample**

I used personal contacts (referred by friends and colleagues) and snowball sampling to obtain a research sample for this study.

Since the study focused specifically on White people, all participants needed to identify as White. White people have a tendency to see racism as a problem for People of Color which made me particularly interested in the ways in which White people found ongoing motivation to do this work that is not socially supported. I was also interested in what motivated people in the dominant role to work against racial oppression as opposed to people in the subordinate role. It was also imperative that participants self-identified as engaging in anti-racism work. Anti-racism work, for the purpose of this study, is defined as embracing an analysis of racism that includes awareness of individually- and systemically-perpetuated racism; active engagement in building relationships and accountability with People of Color; critically analyzing and/or working to address racism in the institution in which they work.

In addition to identifying as White and engaging in anti-racism work, participants needed to be U.S. citizens living in the U.S. so that it would be relevant for social workers living and working in the U.S. In order for me to adequately communicate with participants, it was also necessary for them to speak and write English, since I speak and write only in English. In order to obtain relevant data, participants needed to be at least age 18 and to have worked as a counselor or an elementary, secondary, or post-secondary teacher for at least two years. Because the reality of a White social worker's job likely includes working with Clients of Color, I required participants to have worked with at least 30% Clients or Students of Color. In order to increase the sample size, I included teachers as well as counselors. The role of teacher and

counselor parallel each other enough that I considered the motivations and experiences of each to be adequate for relevant data.

The sample was not racially diverse due to the nature of the research relying on experiences of White people. Gender, age, sexual orientation, income, and other demographic factors of the sample were also not representative of the general population.

Participants were recruited through word of mouth. I emailed friends and colleagues, who then referred potential participants who they believed to fit the criteria to me. Any interested individuals contacted me and set up a time for an interview.

### **Sample Description**

I interviewed 12 participants for the study. Participants ranged in age between 23 and 68. Median age was 35. Eight participants identified as female, two identified as woman, and two identified as male. Four participants described their ethnicity as White; three described ethnicity as European American or from European descent, one of whom named four countries of ancestry; one identified as White European American and Jewish; three identified as Caucasian; one identified as Irish American. Participants' descriptions of the length of time engaging in antiracism work ranged in their own self-descriptions; some participants described the length of time engaged in antiracism work as a range of years, giving a conservative smaller number and a larger generous number. For example, participant #9 stated that, depending on how "engaged in antiracism work" was defined, she could report between nine and 50 years of experience. Using conservative estimations, length of time ranged from 2-17 years and averaged about 7 years. Using generous estimations, length of time ranged from 2-50 years and averaged about 11 years. Percentage of Students or Clients of Color was very difficult to ascertain; however, this ranged from 30-100%.



## **Data Collection**

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board at Smith College School for Social Work (see Appendix D), I conducted 12 interviews over the telephone or in person between February and April 2013. All participants had given informed consent prior to the interview, obtained via mail or in person. The consent form briefed participants on the study, guaranteed confidentiality, and included risks and benefits of participation. Prior to the interview, participants were given a copy of the consent form for their records and invited to ask any questions about their participation. The consent form also told participants that they could stop the interview at any time, decline to answer any question, and withdraw their data up to 30 days after the interview. Each participant and I signed and dated the consent form. Because the potential risks of the study were low, participants were not given a referral list of mental health providers but instead given a list of reading references that I found helpful in my research.

The risks of participation in this study were minimal. I asked participants to reflect on their anti-racism work and what motivates them to continue this work. I also asked questions about White privilege. All interviews were complete, and all data was used.

Participants may have benefitted from the study by reflecting on their personal experience. Two participants named that the interview was helpful and that they were grateful for the opportunity to reflect and talk about their experiences. Participants also may have benefitted by knowing that their contribution would help others in doing antiracism work. Some participants were interested in knowing what other participants' support structures were. Participants did not receive compensation for the study.

I audio-recorded all interviews and manually transcribed them, removing all identifying information. Confidentiality was maintained, and I kept consent forms separate from data.

Participants could not be identified from their quotes, and all names were removed. All materials were password protected on my laptop computer and secured according to federal regulations and will remain so for three years when they will be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

I audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews. I analyzed the data using content/theme analysis. First I read through all transcriptions, noting themes of each interview. Then I re-read the interviews with the themes in mind and applied appropriate codes to each interview. I read each interview multiple times in order to gain an accurate understanding of the meaning of interviewees' responses. I revised the codes as needed throughout the multiple readings. I counted how many times each code occurred. After finishing the coding, I selected quotes to illustrate the themes discussed.

Some of the themes that emerged from the coding process were: sense of justice; psychological benefits; working against the costs of racism; connection to spirituality; witnessing other people's process of self-awareness; and spurring action from others. It is important to note that because the sample size was so small, these findings cannot be generalized to all people who identify as White and engaging in antiracism work. I report the themes that occurred the most frequently in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify motivating factors of White people engaged in antiracism work. Participants were encouraged to reflect on what motivates them in their work. Interview questions were designed to explore initial motivators and sustaining motivators. Themes that will be discussed in this chapter include invitation; having been taught by parents or professors; sense of justice; anger; psychological benefits; working against the costs of racism; connection to spirituality; ability for people to self-determine their identities; witnessing other people's process of self-awareness; and spurring action from others.

#### Initial Motivations

Initial motivations of participants were similar but not identical to sustaining or current motivations. Over half of the participants (n=8) named the presence of an invitation, whether from friends, parents, or professors, as an initial motivator to explore their Whiteness and engage in antiracism work. Four participants named a sense of fairness or justice as an initial motivator, three of whom named it as also a sustaining motivator. Other initial motivators were anger, a connection to the Civil Rights Movement, spirituality, and childhood racialized experiences.

**Invitation.** Participant #4 describes a close friend extending an invitation and a charge: And so she [a Friend of Color] said I need in my friendships to be able to talk about race and racism and I need to be able to talk about this stuff with you, and I want you to be able to understand and I invited you to see the film [about racism] so I'll certainly sit here

and process it with you. And also, racism hits me every day all the time, and I can't always be the one educating white people, it gets tiring to do that, so you need to continue to read and educate yourself and not lean on me or other People of Color for that. So she was able to again both give me that charge and set that boundary, and also give me the invitation with a lot of grace, to be in conversation with her, and to take my place at the table and to have a stake in working for racial justice..... They [the invitations] happened in the context of close friendships. I think that helped.

Participant #11 was invited by a respected colleague to examine issues of racism:

He [my colleague]....really kind of challenged some of my thought process and recommended some books for me to read....so he really challenged me to look at some antiracism work, looking for myself....So I was just thinking about how important that is, that you have somebody in your life who will expose you to a different viewpoint, and will help guide you and ask almost reflective questions, not say this is the way it is, but get you to start thinking on your own...I remember being very open and receptive to it because we had a really good relationship and so it was presented more in a friendship, I had some admiration for him, so there was this kind of affection towards him that then really helped me embrace more of what he was saying.

Five participants named being taught, either by parents or college professors, about racism. Two participants spoke about being explicitly taught by their parents about racism and White privilege. Participant #6 states, "I was born and raised with an awareness around the differences between how white people are treated and how People of Color are treated."

Participant #8 says:

Most essentially my parents were both deeply involved in the civil rights movement and the antiracism framework was really explicit in my home growing up...so that sort of wasn't necessarily that I came to but something that was pretty explicitly taught.

Four participants stated that professors and classes in college were influential and transformative in their antiracism thinking. Participant #1 talked about a particularly influential image given by a college professor:

In college I was in a class and one of my professors described society in a way that after I heard it, was a really helpful...image for me, as I was starting to think about my own identity and then all of the things about my identity that have benefited me without me like seeing them. So, she describes a show, with a stage in the front, and with the people who had paid the most money sitting in the front, and all the way in the back were people who hadn't paid that much money and couldn't see the stage as well, but then you could see everything in front of you, so you could really see how everything was working even though you didn't have that great of a view of the actual event.

Participant #4 mentions specific classes as influencing him:

I took a number of courses that were about race, there was a history of race and racism in the U.S. course, in the sociology department. There were a couple courses - and I think these were pretty transformational for me - there were a couple courses in the sociology or psych, they were cross-listed, they were sort of community activism or community service pieces with a seminar, so the ones I chose were going to prisons, and we did a lot of reading about racism and classism in the criminal justice system.

Participant #12 states:

When I got to [undergraduate university], I started getting involved in a lot of things that were related to access to education and what it means to have higher education be accessible to you...and it started to open my eyes to the fact that there are a lot of barriers for certain students, so for me it started to be really eye opening in terms of I just really started to learn that there are a lot of entire groups of people that there are a lot of barriers for them in terms of access to higher education, and that really grabbed my interest and was really bothersome to me.

**Sense of justice.** Four participants stated that a sense of justice or fairness was an initial motivator for them. Participant #10 talked about growing up with a racialized experience:

And in the middle of that I knew – I couldn't have told you then – but I knew I had privilege. I knew we were all experiencing something and yet I was going to be ok. And I don't think I realized that I felt that way until later, but I also think that many kids weren't sure they were going to be ok. And they also knew that I was going to be ok. So that experience of privilege was really clear and unfair. And I'm a twin, so I have a pretty unique sense of justice.

Participant #12 says a sense of justice is something she has always felt about racism: “My initial reaction was always just that's unfair. I feel like that's sort of my key, my gut instinct is the fairness piece, and that bothers me a lot.”

### **Sustaining Motivations**

Sustaining motivations included: psychological benefits; anger; a sense of fairness or justice; working against the costs of racism; connection to spirituality; ability for people to self-determine their identities; and spurring action from others.

**Psychological Benefits.** Nearly all participants (n=10) named at least one motivation of psychological benefit. Examples of psychological benefits include personal enjoyment; increased self-knowledge; greater meaning and authenticity in relationships; increased ability to care for others; a sense of wholeness; finding a personal voice; increased meaning and fulfillment; and an awareness of the interdependence of humanity.

Some participants describe the enjoyment they get from antiracism work. Participant #1 says:

Maybe I haven't emphasized and I do want to emphasize that I have just really enjoyed – I haven't been thinking of it as this is what I have to do as a White person who has privilege – I have just really enjoyed it. I can be reflective and look back and understand that I have really learned a lot, but it hasn't felt like that in the moment, you know in the moment it feels like, this is really fun. I just really enjoy it.

Other participants (n=5) echo this sentiment of enjoyment and specify that the enjoyment comes from watching other people transform. Participant #6 says:

So I really enjoy meeting with folks and watching these shifts change, especially around antiracism stuff. And then it's also extremely gratifying when I see people catching themselves, or saying, 'Oh that's kinda like what you said before when you were saying this.' You know, when they start making the connections themselves, it's *extremely* gratifying.

Participant #10 states, "I think also it's just – I like it. I like this stuff. It's just personal. I like it! I like watching people transform. I *love* transformation, I'm like a junkie for it, I think it's amazing." Participant #7 also says:

Well people motivate me, people who are coming into, the unveiling that happens with white people when they kind of ...they're like, 'Oh wow!' When the guilt goes away and you realize that you can really take action – that is really touching.

Two participants talked about their lives having increased meaning as a result of engaging in antiracism work. Participant #11 states:

I think that it gives me more of a sense of purpose sometimes in that I'm in some way...it makes me feel like I'm generating something that's contributing to my society, my world.

Participant #10 says:

I think it's interesting to think about who it is we need to be in order to be in the world you want to be in. I think we do that in ourselves and in our institutions as well, to bring that new world, but we have to have to really fundamentally change our identities. I think our identities have gotten really static, and I think it's this whole trick around identity politics is understanding who we've become, who society has constructed us to be, and having a sense of humor, and accountability at the same time. Being a little bit acrobatic about it, and being quite responsible about the reality of those social locations as well. And in the process of going back and forth, pushing the boundaries, getting more fluid, getting more playful, opening doors, opening gates, articulating more expansive, agile and also joyful humanity in this.

Some participants acknowledged a mutuality of relationships. Engaging in antiracism work to them has an end goal of healing all of us. Participant #1 stated:

I'm really not motivated out of guilt, or charity – it always points back to me, and what do I feel like is healthy for me. And also just my values of that what's healthy for me is also healthy for my community, you know, and if something that I think is good for me is



actually really bad for someone in my community, then it's probably not good for me and I really need to take a look at that.

Participant #10 said, “[I’m accountable] to the ideas that we don’t survive, if not for each other.”

Participant #3 stated:

I can’t underestimate the notion that I see this on such a spiritual level, and that’s the really serious difference for me, that it’s that I’m not a whole person if there are people in the world that are, you know other people that are oppressed then I can’t be whole either.

Four participants spoke about an improvement in relationships as a benefit of engaging in antiracism work. Relationships improved, became more authentic, and provoked more complexity and genuineness. Participant #9 says, “But for sure it goes on enriching my life, in that sense. Relationships get better, if you’re consciously trying to make them better.”

Participant #11 said:

But I think it has made me a deeper, more complex person – I think that my relationships are more real, I know that might sound weird, but I think I’m more genuine with myself b/c I’ve engaged in it, b/c I kind of see the world for what it is, and so also engage with people who see that, see the world on a deeper level, and those relationships tend to be more meaningful for me in my life than some of the more superficial relationships I’ve had in the past.

**Costs of racism.** Four participants were very clear that racism did not benefit them and affected them negatively. They stated that engaging in antiracism work was in part motivated by a desire to work against the costs of racism to White people. Participants mentioned that racism was a problem in their life and also that loss of culture had been experienced. Participant #4 says:

Racism lessens the value and the beauty in our lives as White people. That's not the same as being oppressed by racism. It's also for White people to know and to be clear with themselves about – I mean I think about it as a sickness in our souls as White people, and that to be very clear about that that's a motivator for me, is to get that sickness, to work on that sickness, to begin to heal that sickness, to be part of healing communities, and because the job of sort of rescuing the poor, People of Color, is so again so seductive and so easy to fall into.

Participant #10 said:

I think that it alienates me. I think I feel tentative about connecting with Communities of Color, like I'm not going to be politically bright, I'm going to be hesitant, I'm not as bold. I think also what it does, it lumps a lot of emotions and fears onto cultural differences so that we don't know how to listen to each other very well,...I lose – it *is* harder to figure out what I lose – I lose the potential for my kids to live in a diverse society that's successful and can communicate with each other and make decisions for our own mutual survival....It's interesting the ways this connects with things like climate change and sustainability. The less we're able to communicate, the less we're able to actually make sustainable decisions for a larger community.

**Anger.** Half the participants (n=6) noted anger as a sustaining motivation. Participants talked about being angry with unfairness and mistreatment as well as being angry with other people who voiced racial misperceptions about people or who made offensive racial comments. Participant #10 talked more specifically about how anger is used as a resource for antiracism work:

So it makes me angry, that's why I do it, I'm angry. But anger's not going to fix it either...It's an important response. It's an important resource. It can be sometimes a motivator toward a strategy...I can get lazy. I can feel myself get more complacent, a little bit whiny...when I'm not surrounded by it. And I need to go remind myself of what's happening and remember that I'm angry about it. And then use the anger to get up off my ass.... yah, it pushes me through comfort zones, the anger does and the commitment. And it keeps me a little truer and less lazy. It keeps me sharper, and makes me braver, and less invested in my own comfort.

**Sense of justice or fairness.** A majority of participants (n=8) spoke about a sense of fairness or justice as a strong motivating factor. Some talked about wanting equal opportunity, and some stated they could not imagine *not* engaging in antiracism work. Participant #6 says:

“[N]ot that it's just the right thing to do, but it is...it is the *only ethical thing*, it is the only ethical way a clinician could work, in my opinion. That's just my opinion. It's an ethical, like it is my *charge*, one of my charges, just as do no harm is one of my charges, as a social worker, it is one of my ethical, integral commitments. And it's doing harm to not address those things.”

Participant #4 says:

But it definitely comes from a sense of fairness and justice...When things are unfair, or when there's been an agreement and people aren't living up to that agreement, it really bothers me. It irks me.

Participant #9 said, “My motivation in general is to do justice...It's a belief that we should all be trying to improve the world, for everybody, not just ourselves and our children.” Participant #11

says, “So I think that [the school to prison pipeline] really motivates me, that we’re creating this school system and allowing it to maintain, that is really disadvantaging students of color.”

## **Empathy**

I asked participants if empathy was a motivating factor in their antiracism work. Feagin and Vera (1995) found that many White people were motivated by empathy to engage in antiracism work. Eight participants stated that empathy was a part of their motivation, and three stated that it was not. Participant #12 stated, “I think that’s [empathy] probably maybe even deeper rooted than the justice piece.” Participant #4 said, “I draw on those experiences [of being an ‘other’]... I don’t think it’s parallel at all, it’s not the same, but I can draw on experiences. But yes, empathy is hugely important.” Participant #10 said:

It’s about imagination and...wanting to connect, wanting to understand, wanting to be beside people, especially people that are really different than me. Wanting to understand and to be able to walk beside, and to – you know, walk beside physically and metaphorically, in different ways politically...But I also don’t think that means I understand necessarily very much about the person I’m trying to be with. But I think it’s an emotional imagination. An intuitive imagination, an intuitive stretching and opening. And I think I just find it - I learn from it. And the result of it is I just think it’s ultimately loving, and I think there’s just something satisfying to me about that, about connecting and intuitively learning from my students, and from my co-workers, from the people I live with. I think it’s actually really important, although I think people probably do it in different ways. But I think it’s a resource, for sure, I think the emotional in the political is undervalued. And I think empathy is very fundamental in being able to be emotionally mature and present and mobile, I guess is what I mean – sort of emotionally imaginative.

Being able to emotionally remember who's in the room, not just politically, and to be able to connect, to try to be a bridge so that people can recognize themselves in what's being said and also therefore hopefully recognize themselves next to each other, with people they would not necessarily find an easy connection to. It's another level of coalition building I think.

Participant #5 talked about drawing from his experiences of being mistreated as a resource for his empathy:

[T]here was a lot of anger and stuff that I understand that I connect a lot of that anger that I had as a kid to some of my perceptions of what I think is right and wrong about how to treat people. And so a lot of my stuff, I kind of empathize with, I don't empathize with someone's *racial* experience necessarily, but I empathize with how it feels to be manipulated emotionally and intellectually, and so I think that's really messed up.

Participant #8 stated:

When I see things that I think are unjust, it angers me and makes me hurt...I feel very deeply and personally connected to this sense of justice, and also this idea that people have been working really, really hard to make things different for a long time, and if I look around myself and I see how bad things still are sometimes, it gets me really upset.

Most participants (n=7) clarified that, whether or not empathy was a motivating factor, they could not actually identify with the experience of a Person of Color, that is, participants acknowledged the impossibility of actually knowing or understanding what it is like to be a Person of Color and that the experiences participants drew from were not identical experiences.

Participant #7 says,

I don't know if I would call it [empathy] a motivation, I mean I do empathize, but I'm also trying – I think I'm really clear that other people's experiences are not my experiences. So I try not to, I don't know – I know empathy is not the same as sympathy, but there's just something about it that you're taking on someone else's experience or that you're really understanding it, and I don't know that – I think there's a fine line there.

Participant #6 states:

[Empathy] doesn't really operate inside of me, I don't know why. Not that I don't have empathy with folks, or that I don't express or you know, actually experience empathy with people, but I definitely try not to engage that, I purposefully try not to engage that component in myself when I'm working with Folks of Color because it just really can be extremely damaging I think...It [guilt] sort of freezes people up in a way that also keeps racism completely engaged because they're busy just feeling bad about it instead of doing something about it. And so empathy kind of feels as though it's a distant cousin to guilt.

### **Support Structures**

I asked participants what support structures, formal or informal, they have found helpful in keeping them engaged in antiracism work. Most participants (n=11) named personal relationships as an important support. Participant #4 states, "I have worked on some friendships in my life, with other White people, where we draw support from one another. Yah, I would say that personal relationships are very important." Participant #7 stated, "A community of people that really trust and are open with each other and are able to be accountable and hold each other accountable and have hard conversations. I think that's huge."

A majority of participants (n=7) found support professionally, whether in peer group supervision, a mentor or co-worker, or work-sponsored action groups. Other supports mentioned included organizations (including church), accountability partners, spiritual practice, books and articles, informal process groups, and trainings. Participant #12 stated:

The things that keep me energized are talking to other people doing similar things, or other people who have similar ideas and belief systems. Talking to people who have been doing the work for a little bit longer, who have a little bit more insight, that usually energizes me, and reading about different types of programs and trying to learn about different types of things that *are working* also energizes me, because otherwise you just get so stuck in the ‘there’s nothing we’re going to ever do to actually change things.’

Participant #3 talked about a need for support in the form of accountability:

So if you’re coming to the notion that allies need other allies as support, then I say yes. That would probably be another reason why I’m knowing that I’m going to stay engaged in the work because I don’t think I ever had that notion or had that structure before....I was challenged to think about a time when I actually was held accountable for something and realized that that isn’t really what White culture does much.

Participant #7 noted the importance of a spiritual practice:

I think a spiritual practice is extremely supportive, because it connects you to something that is much larger than yourself...I think it connects me to the larger purpose, it’s beyond you as an individual and beyond the earth per se, it’s larger than that, it feels like something larger. And it grounds you in purpose. It just helps you be really open to going where it’s hard to go, because it supports that practice of really going deep. And so then when you discover that oh, you know this thing that I believed is not true, or I did

this and this was really painful to this person because this was the way my Whiteness showed up in this way that I didn't know, it becomes bearable in some ways because you have a foundation of support with your spiritual practice. It's a grounding, it's like a holding.

Three participants voiced a lack of support and a desire for more.

This chapter presented predominant themes found in research data. The next chapter will discuss these findings within the context of the reviewed literature.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study were presented in the previous chapter. A discussion of the findings in the context of the surrounding literature and implications for social workers is presented here, organized by the same themes presented in the previous chapter. Following this discussion, limitations of the study are discussed.

#### **Initial Motivations**

Given that many participants (n=8) cited some kind of invitation as an initial motivator for doing antiracism work, it is extremely important for clinical social workers to foster relationships with colleagues that create space for dialogue about antiracism work. The findings also reflect the importance of social workers who are parents to impart an awareness and framework of antiracism to their children. Finally, since social work students are not guaranteed to have grown up in an environment where an antiracism intention was fostered, social work coursework must provide a solid framework of antiracism work so that clinicians have at least some basis to begin or continue engaging in antiracism work.

Only four participants noted a sense of justice as an initial motivator; however, since social justice is a part of the social work Code of Ethics, it seems particularly important to foster this sense in clinicians, specifically as antiracism work.

## **Sustaining Motivations**

Goodman (2011) categorizes the benefits, which diminish the costs, as: “knowledge and clarity; an enriched life; greater authenticity and humanity; empowerment, confidence and competence; and liberation and healing” (p. 103). These themes are reflected in participant responses. Goodman’s (2011) second category of benefit, an enriched life, comes about both by increased relationships with people from different social groups, increased sense of community, and decreased sense of isolation. The practice of unlearning racism allows people to be comfortable in a wider range of social situations (Goodman, 2011). Although sometimes people who are unlearning racism will discontinue friendships that are not supportive, people ultimately feel more connected after joining social justice networks (Goodman, 2011). Not only do people feel more connected, but they also report having a more vibrant, stimulating, and engaging life (Goodman, 2011, p. 107).

My hypothesis in conducting this study stated that in order for White people to sustain a long-term commitment to antiracism work, they need a self-interested motivation. Barndt, (2007), Tatum (2005) and Bell (1995) agree that Whites need a self-motivation. Barndt (2007) notes that “as human beings, we are generally motivated to act when we understand how we are directly involved” (p. 141). In his personal experience, Barndt (2007) found a long-term commitment to engaging in antiracism work

only when I began to know that racism was also destroying me, along with everyone else, only when I began to know how deeply racism also had a destructive and lasting effect on me and was preventing me from being the kind of person I want to be. (p. 142)

My hypothesis is biased in that I believe that all of our actions, engaged in antiracism or not, are self-interested. Not all motivations were explicitly stated as self-interest; however,

looking at them through the lens of self-interest, some could potentially provide a positive sense of self for participants. Motivations that were not explicitly stated as self-interested were anger; a sense of fairness or justice; connection to spirituality; witnessing other people's process of self-awareness; and spurring action from others. If anger is a motivation, presumably doing something to channel that anger serves a person in that the anger becomes less bothersome. If a sense of justice is a motivation, working toward justice would potentially support a positive self-image. If spirituality is a motivation, then people may be living out their values (which supports positive self-image) or becoming more whole, which enhances quality of life. Witnessing other people's process of self-awareness is a motivation that presumably benefits people in that they receive enjoyment from the witnessing. Spurring action from others reflects McClelland's (1985) category of motivation of both achievement, which "focus[es] on one's own ability to produce a performance result" (p. 247), and power, which includes the desire to "impact, control, or influence...another person group, or the world at large" (p. 272). Certainly this perspective is an interpretation of participants' responses and should not be seen as support for the hypothesis but rather as food for thought.

McClelland (1985) states that intimacy motives are characterized by "love, friendship," "dialogue," "psychological growth," "commitment and concern for another not rooted in guilt or a sense of duty," and "harmony" (p. 360). Motivations of psychological benefit seem to fit in this category.

Only four participants noted being motivated by working against the costs of racism. This reflects that individuals are motivated by things other than only avoiding pain. However, Feagin and Vera (2001), Rothenberg (2005), and Goodman (2011) outline numerous costs to White people of racism. In addition, the instances of systemic change of school integration and

*Gratz v. Bollinger* suggest that large-scale change may require the inclusion of self-interest. If so, it would be important that these costs be widely publicized in order for White people to use them strategically. Social work educators should include this in their framework of antiracism. As social workers, we should keep the costs of racism to White people in mind when working to create systemic change. Nevertheless, as Feagin and Vera (2001) note, Whites are motivated by a sense of morality in addition to any desire to minimize any costs to White people.

### **Empathy**

The four participants who stated that empathy was not a motivating factor for them provoked interesting ideas. Participant #7 was wary of empathy because, although not the same, was too close to sympathy. Feagin and Vera (2001) offer a distinction between the two and posit that empathy is not the same as sympathy and is in fact an important factor in engaging in antiracism. Sympathy, say Feagin and Vera (2001), “means feeling sorry for someone” (p. 229). In contrast, empathy “involves identifying strongly with the circumstances and pain of another human being” (Feagin and Vera, 2001, p. 229). Feagin and Vera (2001) posit that empathy is necessary in order for “racial oppression and conflict” (p. 230) to be resolved. Feagin and Vera (2001) suggest that people who have “some comprehension of personal experiences of being exploited, discriminated against, or oppressed in everyday life are more likely than other [W]hites to understand the situation of and empathize with African Americans”(p. 231). This experience, although certainly not a direct line to antiracism work, posit Feagin and Vera (2001), “can be used in antiracist action” (p. 231). Empathy, to Feagin and Vera (2001), seems not to be a motivating factor but a necessary component in antiracism work. This idea supports Aptheker’s (1992) findings that historically, White women and White people in lower classes are more likely to have engaged in antiracism work. It also reflects Goodman’s (2011) findings that

empathy can be a motivating factor, stating that people who engage in unlearning work make a connection with their own oppression to another's and are motivated by not wanting to inflict similar pain on others. Finally, it is reflected in the answers of participants #3, #7, and #9, who all stated that although empathy was not a motivator for them, it was present in their antiracism work in some way.

Empathy is a cornerstone of clinical work, a concept that clinicians study, builds rapport between clinician and client, and without which is difficult to practice. In critically examining what empathy implies and involves, it seems that Participant #10's discussion of empathy is helpful here:

But I also don't think that means I understand necessarily very much about the person I'm trying to be with. But I think it's an emotional imagination. An intuitive imagination, an intuitive stretching and opening...I learn from it. And the result of it is - I just think it's ultimately loving.

### **Support Structures**

Harro (2010b) posits that self-love, hope, self-esteem, balance, "joy at our collective efficacy," support and security in knowing we are not alone, having a spiritual base, and authentic love for others are crucial to challenging systems of oppression (p. 53). These themes are echoed in responses of participants. Goodman (2011) speaks about the importance of support along the way to sustain unlearning work. This shows up in the form of staying connected with others who share a similar commitment, encouraging families and partners, membership in supportive groups and organizations, and inspiration from past and present role models (Goodman, 2011). These themes are reflected in participants' responses.

The overwhelming importance of personal relationships to participants, both as an ongoing support and as an initial motivator, is striking to me. Clinical social workers who engage in antiracism work, or who even have it in their consciousness, may do well to engage in dialogue with colleagues and friends, or to seek relational support through contacts made from activist or unlearning racism endeavors.

The fact that a majority of participants found support professionally suggests that social workers may also do well to seek out and create support groups with other colleagues. This could not only provide clinicians engaging in antiracism with ongoing support, it could also serve as an invitation to other clinicians, simply through making the group public. The fact that most participants had found colleagues who were supportive suggests that people engaged in antiracism work exist and should be sought out.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the stated motivations and stated support structures of this study, I make the following recommendations for consideration. For individuals beginning to engage in antiracism work, exploration of motives, costs, and benefits seems productive in order to maximize the possibility of making the work successful long-term. For individuals wishing to invite others to join in antiracism endeavors, utilizing personal relationships is a good place to start. Social work educators should provide a framework of antiracism that includes benefits of antiracism work, costs of racism to White people, and suggestions for support.

## **Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research**

In order to increase the feasibility of the study, the criteria for inclusion of participants were extended to both teachers and people who self-identified as doing antiracism work, as opposed to narrowing criteria to clinical social workers and stating a specific definition of

antiracism to which potential participants had to subscribe. A clear definition of “teacher” for the purpose of inclusion criteria turned out to be more challenging to reach than originally anticipated. Participants who identified as teachers worked in many different settings, and defined “teaching” in a variety of ways.

This entire research study was based on participants reflecting on what motivates them to engage in antiracism work. However, McClelland (1985) notes that, due to unconscious motivations, people “often do not know what their motives are” (p. 21). The relatively short duration of the interview may have missed depth and nuance of participants’ responses about motivation.

Defining “antiracism” also poses an interesting position for the study. I have defined antiracism for the purpose of the study; however, I did not require participants to subscribe to this definition as a criterion for inclusion but rather required them to self-identify as engaging in antiracism work. Certainly some variations in interpretation would occur even in the presence of a prescribed definition of antiracism; however, the variance is greater with no definition at all. I intended to broaden the scope of data by allowing participants to self-identify.

The criteria for participation of having worked with at least 30% Students or Clients of Color was meant to capture a reality that nearly all White social workers will work with Clients of Color. I wanted participants to have a practical base of experience with which to explore the questions of the study since it is important to approach these relationships with an antiracism intention. However, the requirement excluded anyone who worked only with White people, which some people argue is the only way to engage in antiracism work. In this way the data was not broadened but restricted.

Regardless of definition, it behooves all White people engaging in antiracism work (and especially for White clinicians who work with Clients of Color) to consider their motivations in light of Barndt's (2007) definition of "unintentional" racism (p. 139). Barndt (2007) states that unintentional racism often involves "activities of charity or advocacy, aiming to help People of Color on their path toward greater freedom" (p. 139) and "professions that are aimed toward defending, rescuing, protecting, or empowering People of Color" (pp. 139-140). Often unintentional racists have an analysis of racism that is limited to "the power of racism to hurt People of Color, and does not include an understanding of White power and privilege" (p. 140). The solution then, says Barndt (2007), "is based on efforts to fix or heal People of Color" (p. 140). This echoes back to the experience of White people involved in the Civil Rights movement as Thompson (2001) describes. White people often struggled with understanding the distinction between "helping" and "standing in solidarity" since as White people, they both wanted to support People of Color and at the same time being inherently part of a structure that undermined them (Thompson, 2001, p. 82).

Two participants alluded to this difference. Participant #4 noted that "the job of sort of rescuing the poor, People of Color, is...so seductive and so easy to fall into." Participant #7 reflected that "empathy is not the same as sympathy, but there's just something about it that you're taking on someone else's experience or that you're really understanding it, and...I think there's a fine line there."

Certainly it is possible to engage in relationships and work with People of Color that reflect the authenticity of an antiracism intention. This work reflects what Love (2010) and Harro (2010b) describe as liberation. Love (2010) posits that White people have perspectives to share with People of Color that will help to "recognize and eliminate those patterns of thought



and behavior that originate in internalized subordination or domination” (p. 602). The trick, it seems, is for White people to decipher which efforts and interactions are actually trying to fix People of Color and which are working toward liberation of both White people and People of Color. It is essential for White people to do our own self-reflections and examination of motivations. In addition, it may be that, as Love (2010) states, it is in People of Color’s interest (while affirming the right and need for People of Color to avoid the role of teacher to White people) to assist White people in recognizing their oppressive actions.

In asking participants if empathy was a motivating factor for them, I did not define what empathy meant to me in the study, nor did I ask participants to define it themselves. Given the variance of answers and discussion provoked by responses, it would have been helpful to do both so that more specific reflections on how empathy can be utilized and what Whites might be cautious of could be collected.

Future research could use pre-existing themes that have emerged as motivating factors for White people engaging in antiracism work for quantitative studies on which motivations are most crucial. Since a majority of participants (n=8) spoke about a sense of fairness or justice as a strong motivating factor, future research could explore ways in which this sense of justice was fostered and learned initially and sustained over time. Most participants also affirmed that empathy is a motivating factor; therefore, future research could examine more closely what empathy means to White people and focus on the origins of that empathy and how it has been fostered.

### **Final Words**

I was motivated to do this research in part so that I could find examples of motivation for my own work as a social worker once I graduate. All the interviews gave me food for thought

and things to consider as I enter the professional world of social work with an antiracism intention. All participants also confirmed the importance of seeking out support in some way. I look forward to finding my own supports in the future.

As a clinician who values empathy as an integral piece of therapy, I also take very seriously the distinction between empathy and sympathy made by participants and Feagin and Vera (2001). I have been socialized to show sympathy, not empathy, for people in oppressed social locations, and I have been socialized to equate the two. Since power is given to me in my position as clinician, understanding and examining this distinction is critical to me with all clients, but especially Clients of Color and clients in any other oppressed social locations.

Goodman (2008) noted the presence of benefits in engaging in anti-oppression work. I was struck by the majority of participants' responses echoing this factor. Although self-interest was not explicitly named by all participants as a motivation for engaging in the work, most participants did explicitly name that the work was either enjoyable to them or benefitted them in some way. Since talking about racism is generally thought to be a difficult topic, and since engaging in the work is not always enjoyable, this seems an important point to underscore. My hope is that I continue to experience this truth and that other White clinicians do the same.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Materials

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

Hi----,

My name is Bronwyn Shiffer and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently in the process of recruiting participants for my thesis research, specifically, “What motivates White counselors and teachers to engage in anti-racism work?”

I am contacting you because [referral source] suggested that you would be a good candidate for my study. I am interested in your responses and reflections of what motivates you in your anti-racism work. If you identify as White, have worked as a counselor or an elementary, secondary, or post-secondary teacher for at least two years with at least 30% Clients or Students of Color, self-identify as engaging in anti-racism work, and you are interested in participating, please contact me and we can talk further.

Also, if you are unable to participate in the study but have a friend or colleague who you think would be interested, please feel free to pass this invitation to them or give me their names and contact information. Any referrals are greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time,

Bronwyn Shiffer

To friends, family, Smith faculty, and colleagues:

Hi everyone,

I am emailing you today because I am currently in the process of recruiting participants for my thesis research, specifically, “What motivates White counselors and teachers to engage in anti-racism work?”

All participants of this study will identify as White, speak and write English, and be U.S. citizens living in the U.S. and aged eighteen or older. Participants will have worked as a counselor or an elementary, secondary, or post-secondary teacher for at least two years and will work with at least 30% Clients or Students of Color. Participants will self-identify as engaging in anti-racism work.

Participants will be asked to reflect on aspects of their personal and professional life. Interviews will be confidential and approximately 60 minutes long. If you think you have a friend or colleague who meets the criteria for participation and might be interested and available to participate in the study, please pass their names and contact information along.

Thank you for your time,

Bronwyn



## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent Form and List of Antiracism Resources**

Dear Participant,

My name is Bronwyn Shiffer, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting research for my master's thesis, which explores motivations of White people in counseling or teaching professions doing anti-racism work. This study will be presented as a thesis and may be used in possible future presentations, dissertations and publications.

Your participation in my study is voluntary. I am asking you to participate in an interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. You may refuse to answer any or all of the questions. In order to participate, you must identify as White; be aged 18 or older; be a U.S. citizen living in the U.S.; speak and write English; have been a counselor or an elementary, secondary, or post-secondary teacher for at least two years; work with at least 30% Clients or Students of Color; and identify as engaging in anti-racism work. I will ask you some demographic questions and a series of questions about your motivation to participate in anti-racism work. I will audio record and transcribe the interviews.

You may benefit from this study by gaining new insight into your personal development. In addition, you may gain a more general understanding about what motivates White people to engage in anti-racism work. You may face minimal risks if you participate in this study, including some distress or uncomfortable feelings. Unfortunately, I cannot offer compensation for participation in the study. I will offer a list of anti-racism readings that have been helpful to me.

All responses are confidential. If you wish to talk about specific students or clients, please do not identify them in the interview. Your identity will be concealed and quotes will not

personally identify you. The consent forms will be kept separate from the data. My research advisor will have access to the data after names have been removed. All materials will be locked and secured for three years as required by federal regulations. If data are needed after three years, data will be kept secure until they are no longer needed and subsequently destroyed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question asked during the interview. You may decide at any point during the interview that you do not want to participate in this study and I will destroy any data collected during your interview. You may also withdraw from the study up to 30 days following the interview. If you withdraw before this date, all data collected from your interview will be destroyed. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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

Thank you in advance for participating in this study.

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

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

Bronwyn Shiffer  
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Please keep a copy of this consent for your records.

### **List of Resources: Readings to further anti-racism study**

Alexander, M. (2010). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*.

New York, NY: The New Press.

Aptheker, H. (1992). *Anti-racism in U.S. history: The first two-hundred years*. New York, NY:

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Goodman (2011). *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Demographic questions:

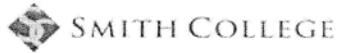
- 1) Please describe your gender.
- 2) Please describe your ethnicity.
- 3) What is your age?
- 4) How many years have you been a counselor or a teacher working with an anti-racism intention? What brought you to this place of intention?
- 5) What percentage of your clients or students are People of Color?

Questions for interview

- 1a) What motivates you to keep doing anti-racism work?
- 1b) Does empathy motivate you? If so, how and to what extent?
- 1c) Do you find yourself more motivated to fight against racism or to work toward a more just community? In what ways is [your answer] a greater motivator?
- 1d) Is there a difference in what motivates you to speak up in the moment and what motivates you to keep taking an anti-racism stance long-term? If so, what is the difference and how did each evolve?
- 2) Are there specific kinds of behavior changes that create a change in attitude for you, and vice versa? If so, what are they and in what ways do they affect attitude and behavior changes?
- 3) How do you define White privilege? How do you feel about your White privilege? Feagin and Vera (1995) argue that eliminating racism requires that Whites give up privileges that they have gained at the expense of People of Color. Do you feel the need to give up some or all of your White privileges? Why or why not? If so, in what ways do you give up your White privilege?
- 4) What structures support attitude and behavior change for you?

## Appendix D

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



School for Social Work  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 20, 2013

Bronwyn Shiffer

Dear Bronwyn,

Thank you for making all the requested changes to your Human Subjects Review application. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is an interesting proposal. I hope your data collection goes easily for you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Marsha Kline Pruett /dkw'.

Marsha Kline Pruett, M.S., Ph.D., M.S.L.  
Vice Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Fred Newdom, Research Advisor