Becoming Racially Aware: A Social Process of (Re)constructing an Alternative White Identity

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BECOMING RACIALLY AWARE: A SOCIAL PROCESS OF (RE)CONSTRUCTING AN ALTERNATIVE WHITE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Structural and systemic mechanisms reinforce institutionalized racism, whiteness, and white supremacy in the United States. These mechanisms prove adaptable and resilient, shifting and changing to continuously restructure and reinforce the material reality that people experience within a racialized social order. White people’s incomprehension of complicity in racism and privilege, along with color-blind ideologies, perpetuate racialized disparities resulting from this social order and render white superiority as “normal” and “universal.” This underlies an often internalized sense of normative, white American identity interconnected with racism and white supremacy. In a society where many white Americans remain sheltered from and/or resistant to acknowledging the material realities of institutionalized racism and white supremacy, how and why do some white people become racially aware and take action in favor of equity? That was the focus of this research project. In applying a multifaceted theoretical and methodological framework rooted in critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, grounded theory, and narrative approaches to the analysis of 33 interviews of white Americans, it emerged that the process of becoming racially aware is a complex process of ongoing identity (re)construction. Participants actively push against a normalized white identity to (re)construct an alternative white, racially aware identity, making sense of this identity (re)construction through three components of this process: (1) becoming aware through several stages; (2) making sense of the meaning of being racially aware; and (3) engaging in social action. Together, these components formulate this process of identity work and expand existing critical whiteness studies scholarship by deepening our understanding of how some white Americans attempt to deconstruct systemic inequities through their own identity (re)construction. Such understandings inform potential interventions that could be utilized for collective social change.
Key Terms: identity work, identity construction, white identity, race, racism, white supremacy, critical whiteness studies, white racial awareness, social action
This work is dedicated to my study participants, friends, family, colleagues, professors, and everyone out there fighting for racial equity and the systemic deconstruction of whiteness, white supremacy, and racism. It can be an arduous and lonely process, and the support, love, and solidarity of everyone who is in this work together is one of the main things that keeps me going and serves to remind us that we are not alone. I am so grateful for the support these individuals show me and each other. You inspire me to avoid complacency, be resilient in my own growth, and engage in regular, collective collaboration in this work.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context of a global pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and calls for policing reform in response to the disproportionate killing of Black Americans, some white Americans have become more aware of the impact and oppression that whiteness, white supremacy, and institutionalized racism have had on Black and Brown communities. Not only has the pandemic disproportionately impacted the health outcomes of the Black community, but the culmination of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery was a tipping point in American society in 2020, one that resulted in ongoing protests in support of Black Lives Matter and long-awaited calls to address state-sanctioned structural violence and police brutality (McCoy 2020; Sobo et al. 2020; Taylor 2016). Dialogues about racism and white supremacy sprung up across online outlets and social media, workplaces, educational institutions, personal conversations, and through the media (Sobo 2020). Books such as white Fragility by Robin DiAngelo (2018), How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi (2019), and Me and white Supremacy by Layla Saad (2020) became the topics of book clubs and ongoing discussions, and lists of antiracist actions that white Americans could take as allies, activists, advocates, and accomplices were published across the internet.

This environment of stay-at-home orders, a global pandemic, racial protests, and increased access to social media outlets characterized the socio-historical timeframe and context in which this research project occurred from 2020-2023. Though these events contextualized the 33 interviews I conducted in early 2021, most participants in this study have long engaged in antiracism, activism, and racial awareness. My goal was to understand better how such awareness of systemic inequities came to be, particularly in a society where many white Americans are intentionally or unintentionally “unaware” of the material realities of
institutionalized racism and white supremacy. How and why do some white Americans become racially aware? What does that social process look like, how is it maintained, and how does it impact social change towards greater equity? These questions formulated the crux and focus of this research project. And, as a white researcher and white American, I include myself within the “white” group throughout this discussion, as an effort to recognize my own role and journey in this research and to remain reflexive.

While the environment of 2020 and the following years may have been a unique context in which many Americans found themselves, the life-threatening impacts of racial disparities are not new realities for Black and Brown communities in the United States. Racial inequalities in the United States are rooted in the oldest system of racial oppression dating back approximately 400 years: that of white domination and oppression of Black Americans/Africans (Feagin et al. 2001). Despite some progress towards racial equity over the years, institutionalized racism is resilient and adaptive, and it continues to exist in different forms (Bobo 2017; Bonilla-Silva 1997). Racism forms the foundation of the social construction of race and a racialized social order in which white Americans have long maintained and occupied positions of power in the United States. This system of advantage enables white people to control resources and focus efforts on our economic, political, and social interests, which reinforces white Americans’ social position while often harming and oppressing people of color\(^1\) (Feagin et al. 2001; Harris 1993; Rollock and Gillborn 2011).

In the post-Civil Rights era, some scholars argue that white Americans have been socialized to ignore or avoid race-based explanations for social phenomena, which in effect

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\(^1\) For the purposes of consistency within this paper, I am following in the tradition of Feagin et al. (2001) in using the term “people of color.” And, this is an oversimplification as it groups a wide array of racially and ethnically diverse people into one category.
masks the underlying structural mechanisms upholding white racism and white privilege. This can make everyday experiences of white privilege appear “invisible” to some white people, contributing to reinforcing white supremacy and systemic racism (Bonilla-Silva 2012; DiAngelo 2018). As a result, white people continue to be complicit, and even willfully ignorant, in the perpetuation of racial inequalities (DiAngelo 2018). While Black Americans can also perpetuate this social order, the positionality of white people in the United States as disproportionately comprising positions of power and controlling most of the economic wealth and resources means that white Americans are in a unique position to reinforce institutionalized racism and white supremacy in ways that Black and Brown people are not (Bonilla-Silva 2014; DiAngelo 2018; Taylor 2016). Therefore, our complicity in the mechanisms that reinforce and perpetuate racial inequities requires an awareness and accountability to help address these issues if we are to achieve real, lasting social change as a society. All the work cannot fall to people of color alone. White Americans, too, must own our part in making changes (in collaboration with people of color), and that begins with white peoples’ increased awareness of our racialized status, positionality, and identity.

Therefore, the purpose of my study was to critically examine whiteness, white identity, consciousness, and privilege within the United States to understand better how these mechanisms reinforce, and in some cases potentially even deconstruct, racial inequities. Such a critical research project is important for advancing social change and examining aspects of white supremacy that have been less examined by scholars. While race scholars in various disciplines have long argued the importance of centering the voices and experiences of marginalized groups in analyzing racialized systems of power, some scholars also argue that a holistic understanding of institutionalized racism and white supremacy is incomplete without also critically examining
whiteness, white identity, and white consciousness; this can help us further understand how these mechanisms reinforce, but also potentially deconstruct, the racialization of ideological, cultural, and epistemological phenomena (Andersen 2003; Ferber 1998; Frankenberg 1997; Niemonen 2010). According to feminist sociologist Ruth Frankenberg (1993:234), though examining whiteness may risk recentering such processes rather than decentering them, “Naming whiteness and white people [also] helps dislodge the claims of both to rightful dominance.” To deconstruct normative white identity and dislodge the dominance of whiteness, we as white people must both examine the stark visibility of the history and influence of the structures of whiteness, alongside of the seeming "invisibility" of white privilege due to conflation of whiteness with what has been deemed as "normal" or morally "good." Therefore, critically examining the knowledge and experiences of some white Americans in deconstructing their own internalized sense of whiteness and white identity is important complimentary work that contributes to existing scholarship on whiteness, white identity, and white racial awareness, and furthers how we can collectively address racialized systems of inequalities.

Specifically, I sought to examine the social process that some white Americans undergo in becoming more **racially aware**, which involves identifying the ways in which these individuals shift and deconstruct these structures in favor of racially equitable approaches or actions. While this study followed an emergent, qualitative approach, the sensitizing research question that guided the data collection was: *What are the social processes by which white Americans come to (a) understand whiteness, (b) become racially aware of our own white identity, and (c) understand how our own racial identity is situated within the broader socio-historical context?* The accompanying objectives for this research included:
(i) Applying a combination of critical whiteness studies (CWS), grounded theory, and narrative approaches to obtain a deeper understanding of white racial awareness, whiteness, and white identity;

(ii) Identifying mechanisms or “components” that lead some white Americans to become more racially aware;

(iii) Analyzing why some white Americans engage in social justice actions; and

(iv) Applying a socio-historical lens through which these processes and mechanisms could be better understood and examined.

To address these questions and objectives, I collected over 700 pages of qualitative data through 33 semi-structured interviews of white Americans who met criteria of self-identifying as racially aware in terms of wanting to achieve racial equity and participating in some level of social action towards that goal. I wanted to understand not only how and why people become aware but how and why they ultimately take action too. I conducted this research within a theoretical framework of CWS, which is a growing field of theoretical and empirical work that advances a foundation of critical race theory (CRT) in critically examining whiteness. I also draw from grounded theory and narrative analysis approaches in analyzing my data, which better enabled the themes and findings to emerge from the rich stories and narratives of the participants. I found that for some white Americans, the process of becoming racially aware is a social process of constructing a white, racially aware identity, in contrast or opposition to a normative, hegemonic white identity often characterized by a lack of racial awareness, covert and overt racism, and/or color-blindness. This process consisted of three key components that enabled participants to make sense of this identity (re)construction by: (1) becoming aware through several stages, (2) making sense of what it then means to be aware, and (3) engaging in social action as part of that identity.
work. Together, these components formulate this process of identity work and expand upon existing CWS scholarship by deepening our understanding of how some white Americans work to deconstruct systemic inequities through identity (re)construction and resulting actions.

To contextualize these findings, it is important to define a few key terms up front. Throughout this study, **racism** is understood through a sociological lens as an institutionalized system of power relations and material advantage/disadvantage that perpetuates the **racialized social order**, a social hierarchy and system of stratification in which people within society are organized and afforded certain power and privileges over others based on racial categories (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Burton et al. 2010; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Rollock and Gillborn 2011). Within this order, white people often occupy social locations of power and control over resources and institutions. This is intertwined with **white supremacy**, an ideology that white people are superior to people of color, which (re)produces a system of white domination reinforced across multiple facets of everyday life (political, economic, and social) (DiAngelo 2018; Mills 2003; Rollock and Gillborn 2011).

This system is also reinforced through **white privilege**, the benefits or advantages that white people enjoy because of their whiteness and social location within the racialized social order (Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Harris 1993; McWhorter 2005). **Race** refers to the perceived or assumed division of individuals into groups based on their phenotype or genotype, and these group differences have socially ascribed meanings that impact individuals’ life chances and experiences (Burton et al. 2010). Race is examined through a sociological lens as a socially constructed category with real material consequences; as a key component of social organization, stratification, and social systems; and as playing a significant role in the construction of
American society and its institutions (Burton et al. 2010; Christian et al. 2019; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Harris 1993).

It is also important to define “racist.” Racist is often conceptualized as individuals being overtly discriminatory and prejudiced towards another group who is different from them based on skin color; from this definition, anyone and everyone can be “racist” and have prejudice/bias (Bonilla-Silva 1997; DiAngelo 2018). However, that definition of racist obscures the power relations between white people and people of color and the institutionalized nature of racism at the societal level. A sociological definition of “racist,” therefore, is based on an understanding that racism is institutionalized and rooted in white supremacy. In this regard, being racist refers to a macro-level understanding and means having “collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color” in the United States; in this vein, only white people can be systemically and institutionally “racist” (DiAngelo 2018:22). This also means that white people are not born inherently racist, but rather, through interaction within an institutionalized racialized social order of power relations, white people are knowingly or unknowingly “racist” through actions and mechanisms that uphold institutionalized racism. This may include internalizing socio-cultural racist ideologies and norms, voting for politicians who uphold structurally or institutionally racist policies and practices, reinforcing housing practices that enable white and Black segregation in neighborhoods and school districts, and/or enacting workplace policies that minimize job options for people of color, just to name a few (Metzl 2019; Taylor 2016).

Some scholars have argued that the definition of “whiteness” is problematic within existing scholarship because there are numerous definitions, and it is therefore inconsistently defined (Arnesen 2001; Gallagher 1996). Understandings of whiteness have also been critiqued by sociological scholars as being essentialized down to traits that then appear intrinsic, rather
than complex (Andersen 2003). To account for complexities, a multidimensional definition of whiteness will be used for this study. Therefore, **whiteness** is defined as a broad, socially constructed concept, racial category, and social process, which is dynamic, relational, and encompasses aspects of historically conveyed white power, privilege, identity, and consciousness that have cultural, political, and economic consequences (DiAngelo 2011; Frankenberg 1993, 1997). Whiteness can therefore refer to a broad array of cultural practices and norms, interactional mechanisms, and even a “standpoint” or way in which white people look at themselves and the world around them (Frankenberg 1993).

Whiteness and its relationship to the racialized social order underlies a normative, hegemonic white identity interconnected with white supremacy, racism, and American identity (Metzl 2019; Morrison 1992; Thompson and Neville 1999). In a study on white supremacist discourse, Abby Ferber (1998) states that white supremacy and racism cannot be fully understood without also exploring the social construction of white identity. Ferber (1998:60) states that **white identity** is defined and constructed “in opposition to [perceived] inferior others.” Normative white identity thus is a mechanism for maintaining and reinforcing racism and white supremacy, and it is further backed by institutional power (Crenshaw 1988). Such structures of power are legitimated through the ways in which whiteness and white identity become internalized as normal/universal and not attributable to race and are recreated regularly at the interactional and institutional levels (Dyer 1997; Kolber 2017; Leonardo 2004).

Participants in this study were continually (re)constructing their white, racially aware identity in opposition or contrast to this normative white identity. This process of **social identity**

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2 The term “American identity” will be used to reference associations with United States national identities, in order to reflect common parlance, even though “American” is acknowledged to be associated across North and South American countries.
construction, also known as “identity construction” or “identity work” (which I use interchangeably throughout this paper), generally refers to how individual and collective identities are (re)produced, performed, and/or accomplished through social interactions, discourse, and the internalization of cultural stories (Goffman 1967; Howard 2000; Hughey 2011). I further explore the meaning of social identity construction in Chapter Two. Finally, this study itself is not simply an academic work but a social action itself, intended for the purpose of knowledge construction and advancing sociology, but also for the purposes of aiding in advancing social change. My critical examination of the processes discussed in this paper are therefore an important part of what Collins (2019) refers to as praxis - critical social theory and empirical work intended for the pursuit of antiracism, activism, liberation, and resistance in efforts to achieve social change. Inquiry for the purposes of scholarship and social change is a key theme throughout this research.

In the chapters that follow, I detail the existing scholarship and how this research advances sociological work, the theoretical framework that guides this research, my methodological and analytical approach, and my findings. Chapter Two covers existing literature relevant to this study. I first frame my research within a socio-historical context through a brief historical overview. Next, I explore theoretical and empirical understandings of identity construction more broadly and the factors that shape normative white identity. Third, I discuss whiteness and white racial awareness through scholarship on the consciousness and experience of people of color. Finally, I conclude by examining white racial awareness and social action. In Chapter Three, I outline my theoretical framework that guides the methodological and analytical approach taken. This study was conducted through a CWS framework, a fairly new empirical and theoretical field that grew out of CRT and whiteness studies more broadly. I discuss the
background of the framework as well as the primary tenets that guide this research. Chapter Four builds upon the theoretical framework by discussing its application to my methodological approach in data collection and analysis, demonstrating another example for how CWS can be conducted methodologically (also known as critical whiteness methodology or CWM). My approach to CWM integrates components of qualitative grounded theory and narrative analysis to provide a systematic yet flexible and emergent approach to the collection and analysis of the data. I conclude this chapter with a personal statement of reflexivity.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven detail my primary findings, the key components of understanding white racial awareness as a process of constructing a white, racially aware identity. Chapter Five covers the component of becoming racially aware through three stages of: (1) identity traits and participants’ own experiences of “outsiderness” as the foundation to becoming aware, (2) turning point moments of exposure, particularly “relational exposure,” as the spark or catalyst to that awareness, and (3) the development and utilization of empathy to make these moments meaningful enough to inspire change and action within participants. Chapter Six covers the second component of this process, which explores how participants continue to make sense of this identity through what it means to be racially aware. Chapter Seven concludes the findings chapters by reviewing the third component, which focuses on the motivation for, and types of, social action participants engage in as part of this identity work. I conclude this investigation in Chapter Eight by summarizing how these chapters connect to one another and the broader aims of this research project, as well as implications these findings have both within and outside of academia.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research study addresses several important gaps in the existing literature in critical whiteness studies (CWS) more broadly and specifically within sociology. In this chapter, I first set the stage with a brief historical background as to how the social process of becoming racially aware is situated within the broader socio-historical context, a key tenet in the CWS framework. Second, I review how identity construction is understood within existing literature more generally and then how white identity formation is understood within the CWS literature more specifically. I explore how declining European ethnicities, color-blind ideology, identity politics, and American identity have shaped normative white identity and thus many white American’s understanding of race and our own whiteness (whether consciously or not). I will also explore the literature on turning points, which is relevant for understanding how white racially aware identity and racial awareness are constructed. This discussion then segues into how white racial awareness, Black consciousness, and the experiences of people of color are conceptualized in existing literature, their relevancy to this research study, and opportunity areas for advancing this work further. Finally, I provide an overview of how existing scholarship has analyzed the relationship between white racial awareness, identity, and action for social change, focusing on key areas relevant to this study: antiracism and activism, critical self-examination, becoming “race traitors,” and healing meditative approaches.

**Historical Context and the Wages of Whiteness**

A critical analysis of the dynamics of whiteness, white identity construction, and white racial awareness begins by establishing the socio-historical context in which these concepts arose in the United States (Guess 2006). Such a critical reflection on whiteness looks closely at how
biological, ideological, and material understandings of race, racism, whiteness, and white supremacy have emerged and evolved through ongoing socio-historical relationships between Europeans and various populations around the globe (Bailey and Zita 2007). In this section, an historical overview of the evolution of these racialized relationships and the construction of whiteness, racism, and race in the United States will be covered. Though brief mentions of various groups will be included, this historical analysis will focus primarily on the relationships between European colonists and enslaved Africans, which is central to an understanding of contemporary racialized social systems (Feagin et al. 2001; Mills 2003).

Colonization and Economic Exploitation

Racism, race, and whiteness as socially constructed concepts are relatively new phenomena within human history, emerging from the economic exploitation, conquest, and colonization of various peoples and lands around the globe during European colonialism and the rise of Western capitalism (Alexander 2012; DiAngelo 2018; Doane 2003). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans set out in search of new lands to escape persecution, poverty, and death (D’Souza 1995; Morrison 1992). The lands they encountered often had physical and cultural resources that Europeans desired. They justified their economic exploitation and colonization practices because they viewed local peoples as inferior, barbaric, savage, and/or wild, while viewing themselves as biologically, technologically, and civilizationally superior (D’Souza 1995; Morrison 1992). Such perceptions of inferiority/superiority grew from long-held beliefs that physical characteristics indicated intelligence and that lightness was superior to darkness, which predated colonization (D’Souza 1995). As a result, the justification for colonization became rooted in the social relationships between white Europeans and “others” perceived to be primitive and inferior, and racism thus emerged as Europeans asserted their dominance through
arguments of their intrinsically superior biological and civilizational characteristics (D’Souza 1995; Morrison 1992). Furthermore, such superiority was also claimed in the name of Christian religious discourse, ideology, and symbology and used to legitimate the superiority and power of Christian Westerners and the inferiority of pagan “others” (Schneider and Bjork-James 2020).

In the United States, such beliefs were solidified through the economic interests of white European settlers in developing the American economy, which was built by dislodging and killing Indigenous populations, enslaving African peoples and forcing them to work for white European landowners, and conquering and taking lands from Mexico (DiAngelo 2018). Because such exploitation and destruction were contradictory to a rising American society built upon ideals of freedom and equality for all, biological racism first emerged – often legitimized through “scientific study” – to justify the treatment of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans (Alexander 2012; Coates 2015; Malat et al. 2018). White supremacy further evolved through global eugenics as well. Anglo-Saxon nations, including the United States, were conducting research as recently as the twentieth century to determine ways to proliferate a white-only race, and various forms of ethnic cleansing have occurred throughout history to perpetuate whiteness and reinforce the superiority and power of people with a white identity (Memmi 2000). Over time, these inextricable ties between economic exploitation, colonization, eugenics, and socially constructed racism formed the basis of racialized social stratification within the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

*The Wages of Whiteness: Intersection of Race and Class Inequalities*

This racialized social order was, and continues to be, closely intertwined with class inequalities. Two scholars at the forefront of this work include sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois and American Studies scholar David Roediger. Both Du Bois ([1935] 1962) and Roediger (1991) sought to
understand why working-class white laborers and Black laborers have never found common ground in their shared class position, and their answer to this was the symbolic “wages of whiteness” (Roediger 1991). In the early centuries of United States history, enslaved labor undergirded the American economic system, and the subhuman status of Black people was written into the constitution as three-fifths a human being (Alexander 2012; Gotanda 1991). At the same time, treatment of poor white laborers, while different, was also adverse (Roediger 1991). In his work Black Reconstruction in America, W. E. B. Du Bois ([1935] 1962) discusses the economic, social, and political exploitation and differentiation between white and Black workers. Building on portions of Marx’s analyses of capitalism, Du Bois extends Marx’s analysis to race relations between poor white laborers and Black enslaved people in the South, both prior to and after the Civil War. As white laborers emigrated to America looking for new opportunities, these laborers were in competition for work with the unpaid labor of enslaved Black people. During the Reconstruction period after the Civil War and Emancipation, the exploited working class of poor white and Black people comprised a large enough percentage of the population that, if they were to unite, could fight together for better working conditions and higher wages; yet this would negatively impact the economic profit of wealthy landowners.

To prevent this from happening, wealthy landowners afforded certain privileges to poor white laborers over Black laborers, which perpetuated the idea of white laborers’ racial superiority, even though they also continued to be economically exploited by the wealthy upper class. Du Bois referred to this as the public and psychological wage that white workers enjoyed. Their whiteness was afforded a certain “compensation” that enabled them to be distinguished from people of color (specifically Black people) who were perceived to be inferior. This psychological wage encompassed things like better jobs and titles (despite still receiving low
material wages), public deference and better treatment, leniency from the law, the right to vote, and better schoolhouses. Du Bois argued that this separation enabled capitalism to continue in the United States. Roediger (1991) expanded upon Du Bois’s work in his landmark publication, *The Wages of whiteness*, a historical examination of white working-class racism and its relationship to economic privilege, psychological mechanisms, and ideology that underpin the identities of the contemporary white working class. Like Du Bois, Roediger argues that the identity of the white working class is rooted in racialized stereotypes and opposition to Black people that positions white people as superior. One critique of these works is that they essentialize white and Black people and ignore the differences contained within each of these groups (Arnesen 2001). Despite this important critique, these works do offer some important insights into understanding normative white identity more broadly in the United States. Even almost thirty years later, racial tension and fear still exists among many white Americans, continuing to shape how they may identify themselves, actions they take, and the racialized understandings of “others” that they internalize (Metzl 2019; Taylor 2016; Wray 2018).

This brief historical background regarding the relationships between European economic exploitation, slavery, colonization, and the wages of whiteness is necessary for understanding contemporary conceptions of racism, race, and whiteness in the United States. And, because these relationships have never been fully deconstructed, this context establishes a foundation for which scholars can continue to study white identity, white racial awareness, and relations of power (Guess 2006). How the literature conceptualizes identity more broadly, and normative white identity more specifically, is discussed next.
Identity Construction and White Identity

The examination and exploration of identity is a primary focus in this research project. Within this section, existing literature is utilized to contextualize scholarly understandings of identity construction and normative white identity formation, establishing a baseline for the various factors white Americans may need to overcome throughout the process of becoming racially aware, developing a racially aware identity, and taking action. This begins with an overview of how existing literature on identity construction more broadly is conceptualized, before diving into how declining ethnic identities in the United States have contributed to commonalities in and formation of a more specific, normalized white identity. Second, I explore color-blind ideology and the “invisibility” of whiteness in the development of a normative white identity. The term “invisibility” became prevalent in sociology, almost as a shorthand for explaining the lack of acknowledgement, incomprehension, or even ignorance by white people of the structures and privileges of whiteness. The depth, complexity, and significance of this lack of acknowledgement, alongside color-blindness, will be discussed. Third, additional sociological explanations for how white identity formation is conceptualized within the whiteness scholarship are explored. Next, I examine the scholarship on identity politics and American identity and tie it to contemporary understandings of normalized white identity. Finally, I briefly explore the relationships between identity, role exit, and turning points.

Identity Construction and The Decline of White Ethnic Identities

Scholarly work on identity construction, or the social construction of identity, is interdisciplinary, cutting across social psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, and more. In contemporary times, identity refers to one’s sense of self or how someone defines who they “are” (e.g., core traits) (Howard 2000). As first defined in the introduction, the social
**construction of identity**, also known as “identity construction” or “identity work” (used interchangeably), generally refers to how individual and collective identities are (re)produced, performed, and/or accomplished through social interactions, discourse, and the internalization of cultural stories (Goffman 1967; Howard 2000; Hughey 2011). As Schwalbe (1996:105) explains, identity work is “anything we do, alone or with others, to establish, change, or lay claim to meanings as particular kinds of people.” Identity construction / identity work occurs within various settings through social interactions and performances that attempt to express and uphold desired selves; they are received, reinforced, and (re)defined discursively through the responses and reactions they elicit. Further, how individuals and groups construct and make sense of both individualized and collective identities can relate to a group’s position of power (or lack thereof) within a social hierarchy, as well as to how one thinks of oneself in relationship to such collective cultural categories (Howard 2000; Hughey 2011). Therefore, identity work can reinforce and reproduce systems of oppression, whether individuals are cognizant of this or not.

As defined in Chapter One, a normative white American identity is continually being (re)constructed and (re)produced, oftentimes unknowingly to those who perpetuate it. At the same time, our contemporary environment is challenging and calling into question the normative and universalized state of whiteness and white supremacy, in effect bringing greater awareness to whiteness and the processes of white racialization and white identity construction. As a result, critical examinations of and challenges to white supremacy, white identity, and white racial awareness within and outside of academia have been increasing. This examination, which sociologist Woody Doane (2003:5) refers to as the “crisis of whiteness,” began in the 1970s and ‘80s and continues alongside an increased focus on identity politics in the political arena and shifting conditions in the economic arena. Together, these mechanisms brought attention to the
material disparities across various racial and ethnic groups and made whiteness and white identity more visible for examination.

This examination has illuminated the white racialization that some European ethnic groups have undergone over time and the resulting decline in unique ethnic identities and rise of a more homogenous “white” American identity. The “crisis of whiteness,” which is also a crisis of normative white identity, is occurring at a time when unique ethnic identity and solidarity for many white Americans has all but disappeared (Doane 2003; Gallagher 1996). Such “identity crisis” can be understood within the context of the ongoing process of racialization that has occurred throughout the history of the United States with respect to Europeans who immigrated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The racialization of European immigrants is an ongoing process because racial categories shift and change over time within historical contexts (Doane 2003; Guglielmo 2003). Initially, such groups were viewed as racially different, and yet over time, the boundaries of whiteness and white identity expanded to include many European groups (Doane 2003; Kolchin 2002). An example that is Irish immigrants, who some scholars argue were considered initially “non-white” but “became” white over time as they assimilated into white American culture (Arnesen 2001; Kolchin 2002; Roediger 1991).

Others, however, challenge the assumption of this “in-between” status of European immigrants (Guglielmo 2003:49). In discussing Italian immigrants, Guglielmo (2003) argues that Italians, from the perspective of skin color, were already white upon arrival to the United States. However, racially, Italians experienced deep discrimination and prejudice. While they experienced racial discrimination, Guglielmo states that Italians’ ability to be accepted as “white,” and to naturalize as United States citizens over time, has conveyed certain benefits and privileges in terms of social status and access to resources. This racialization process is important
to understanding how whiteness and white identity have evolved and been maintained. As white European ethnic identities and solidarities have declined, a more common, normative white identity has been constructed in its place (Gallagher 1996). Such an identity, as it has become normalized and internalized, can act as a mechanism for maintaining white racial dominance as certain groups come to enjoy the power and resources conveyed to them by means of “becoming” or “already being” white (Doane 2003; Gallagher 1996).

Color-blind Ideology and the “Invisibility” of White Privilege

Understanding color-blind ideology and how structural mechanisms of whiteness, like white privilege, appear “invisible” to many white Americans are other important factors in understanding white identity and white racial awareness. Although various events throughout contemporary history have shown a critical light on whiteness, the normalization and universalization of whiteness as the “standard” can make the power, privilege, and status that white people often enjoy appear “invisible” to most white Americans (Feagin et al. 2001). Since these structures were constructed to benefit white people, the benefits of this system can appear “invisible” when they function accordingly, as we can view them as simply “working” as they should. Therefore, white Americans may more easily ignore, be ignorant to, and even resist acknowledging the everyday inner workings of white racism and white privilege, despite embodying the benefits of, and being complicit to, the ongoing perpetuation and reinforcement of systems of power and privilege daily (Feagin et al. 2001; Memmi 2000). Such ignorance emerges from deeply engrained ideas, or ideology, about race (DiAngelo 2018). More specifically, a color-blind ideology underlies the historical “invisibility” of white privilege.

The relationship between white identity, consciousness, and color-blind ideology is better understood through the analyses of critical legal scholars. Early discussions of color-blind
ideology emerged from critical legal studies in the post-Civil Rights era as a critique of how laws and the constitution enacted color-blindness, an unwillingness or inability to view situations through a racialized lens and/or admit that a racialized lens is being applied, to obscure the role of race and racism in various legal proceedings (Gotanda 1991). This does not mean race and its consequences are truly “invisible,” but rather these mechanisms become so normalized that when confronted with their realities, white people predominately deny or avoid admitting their complicity in these processes and hide what is very visible to people of color. In her article Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988) underscores these concepts by discussing the centrality of race consciousness in legitimating white racial domination and perceived superiority in the United States. Crenshaw argues that systemic racism legitimates the control and domination of Black people by white people while also reinforcing white Americans as privileged members of society. This then reinforces a white racial consciousness and identity rooted in privilege which leads white Americans to identify with dominant interests and continually reinforce their dominant position. As they are normalized and universalized, whiteness, white identity, and white consciousness become synonymous with popular consciousness, which makes it difficult to separate a white racial consciousness from a public one. Thus, white racial consciousness and identity are mechanisms that are not only deeply rooted in racist ideology but are also so normalized that it becomes difficult to question and address these forces in the face of racialized issues, which reinforces inequalities and injustices that plague Black Americans.

Beyond legal proceedings, scholars in various disciplines argue that such color-blind ideology underlies social, economic, political, and religious facets of life (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Doane 2017; Schneider and Bjork-James 2020; Taylor 2016). Color-blind ideology results in
**color-blind racism**, an often covert (versus overt) racism that centers non-racial dynamics and/or perceived individual and cultural limitations of people of color as the reason for racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Khare et al. 2015). These ideologies are learned and spread through socialization, over time becoming internalized to the point of appearing normal or natural; this obscures the institutionalized and systemic nature of racism and white supremacy and therefore can render these issues “invisible” to many within the dominant group, and even at times to individuals within marginalized groups as well (Bonilla-Silva 1997 and 2012; DiAngelo 2018; Harris 1993; McIntosh 2001). Thus, rather than being understood as racialized constructs with real material consequences, white power, privilege, and superiority are simply “what is.” In internalizing these constructs as normative, some white people then adopt color-blind arguments to explain social issues. Adopting such a framework, whether through willful ignorance or a lack of awareness or education, has the effect of hiding the structural mechanisms that (re)produce a racialized status quo. This makes it appear as though American society is now post-racial (race and racism are issues of the past), which further upholds white racial dominance and institutionalized racism (Taylor 2016).

Color-blindness and the perceived “invisibility” of mechanisms of white power and privilege can make it challenging for white Americans to become aware of how whiteness operates, both more broadly within society and as an internalized and embodied part of enacting normalized white identity traits, behaviors, and actions. Because white identity is associated with ideals of white superiority, Thompson and Neville (1999:195) argue that attempting to pierce that veil can cause “distortions of the self for whites.” Cognitive dissonance may occur when external forces or experiences challenge white people’s subconscious beliefs of superiority and color-blind understandings of the social world (Metzl 2019; Thompson and Neville 1999).
Instead, white people may operate within a “climate of dysconsciousness” that allows us to separate ourselves from race and see it as something external, all while often unknowingly internalizing and acting upon white racialized constructs (Thompson and Neville 1999:182).

Understanding how color-blind ideology influences racism, whiteness, and internalized white identity is important to this research for three reasons. First, it highlights some ways in which relations of racialized power and privilege become reinforced and institutionalized within society. Second, it demonstrates underlying mechanisms that both shape and are shaped by white American identity. Third, it illuminates some challenges that may have to be overcome when white Americans seek to become aware of and even deconstruct their own racialized white identity and sense of self in favor of a more racially just, equitable, or antiracist identity. Particularly, this can mean acknowledging the “invisible,” and the otherwise highly visible, to truly become aware.

*Other Explanations of White Identity*

The formation of white identity in the United States is a complex and multi-dimensional process, as white identity itself is complex and dynamic, continually fluctuating across space and time. Understanding the construction of a white racial identity through a lens of declining ethnic solidarities and emerging color-blind ideologies are just a couple of ways in which the existing scholarship conceptualizes a normative white identity. Within this section, I explore several other key sociological studies that bring greater understanding to the complexities of white identity and its formation.

Sociologist Matthew Hughey (2010) discusses some of these complexities in his article titled *The (Dis)similarities of White Racial Identities*. In this article, Hughey examines how white racial identity is formed through a comparative analysis between a white nationalist organization
and a white antiracist organization. Despite differences among the members of each organization, Hughey found that white identity within both organizations was constructed and reproduced through a variety of racist and essentialist ideologies, and that individuals within both organizations were held accountable for performances of the expected white identity. Therefore, he argues that there is a white “groupness” that reinforces certain commonalities across members’ identities within both organizations. First, Hughey found that people within both organizations demonstrated a surprising amount of racial solidarity, engaged in white victimhood, and pathologized Black and Brown people as \textit{culturally} inferior in the antiracist group and \textit{biologically} inferior in the nationalist group. He also found that people within both groups utilized white-centered emotional expressions (\textit{sadness} over the pain of racism in the antiracist organization and \textit{anger} over reverse discrimination in the nationalist group). Further, members in each organization often simplified \textit{material} understandings of whiteness while engaging in \textit{cultural} understandings of whiteness centered on individualism, freedom, equality, objectivity, and rationality. These discussions served as powerful discourses that shaped the white identities and connections of members.

White identity can also be viewed through what sociologist Joe Feagin (2010) calls the “white racial frame.” The \textbf{white racial frame} is a dominant cultural frame that, like color-blind racism, is more subconscious than conscious and encompasses elements such as: (a) individual biases and stereotypes; (b) values; (c) racialized images; and (d) emotions that reinforce ideas of white superiority and white dominance through \textit{favorable} images of white people and \textit{negative} images of people of color (DiAngelo 2018; Feagin 2010). Because white people typically occupy positions of power and control within all major institutions, the white racial frame is perpetuated through these institutions, which also reinforces whiteness as normal, unremarkable, and
universal (DiAngelo 2018; Feagin 2010). DiAngelo (2018) argues that the white racial frame becomes so internalized and engrained that it is almost never challenged by white people. Therefore, the lack of challenge to the frame, as well as its frequent expression within back-stage settings (typically reflecting all-white contexts and situations), perpetuate a shared sense of white, normalized identity among many white people (Feagin 2010).

Identity Politics, Whiteness, and American Identity

In this section I further connect the normative white identity to American identity and politics, demonstrating how these connections are another way in which white supremacy and racial inequality are (re)produced within the United States. This is important to further understanding the formation of white identity and white racial awareness, and it also highlights other potential barriers that white Americans may have to reconcile in reformulating a white racially aware identity. Normative white identity is not necessarily synonymous with American identity, as American identity is complex and multi-faceted. However, American identity does have an important connection to race that has been shaped by the racialization of white people and people of color throughout American history.

Toni Morrison (1992) illustrates the connections between early American ideals and racism in her book Playing in the Dark: whiteness and the Literary Imagination. In discussing early American literature, Morrison explains how early American writing was fascinated with depictions of whiteness/lightness and Blackness/darkness. The New World offered European settlers freedom and escape from persecution to start anew. This also came with a sense of power and control over one’s future that Europeans did not experience back home; therefore, the New World was often romanticized for its rough, raw opportunity, which for many was both exciting and terrifying. Morrison argues that the enslaved population became a representation of both the
allure and elusiveness of freedom, as well as the fear of powerlessness that many Europeans harbored upon claiming and working these new lands. This is an example of how conceptions of whiteness and white identity evolved against the backdrop of Blackness and a perceived wild, savage “other.” The new, white male in the Americas evolved with a sense of power and domination over this “wildness,” a power Morrison states, “he had not known before” (1992:83). Thus, “Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery [is what] provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity” (Morrison 1992:84).

Though contemporary normative white identity further evolved from declining European ethnic identities in the twentieth century, the foreground for this evolution was a history of racial separation, eugenics, and comparative “otherness” that, over time, has become deeply embedded in what it means to be American. American identity, therefore, is also connected to internalized notions of white supremacy, dominance, power, and superiority (Thompson and Neville 1999; Wray 2018). As Thompson and Neville (1999) state, “whites' socialization is deeply embedded within the American ethos. Regardless of race, to be American is to negotiate and, too often, absorb an ethos of white supremacy” (1999:196-197). Therefore, whiteness is embedded not only within a racialized system that has social, economic, political, and ideological consequences, it also operates at the level of an internalized white identity interconnected with the American ethos (Malat et al. 2018; Metzl 2019; Thompson and Neville 1999; Wray 2018). In the Foreword to the book *White Fragility*, Michael Eric Dyson summarizes this sentiment well by quoting Beyoncé Knowles, who stated: “It’s been said that racism is so American that when we protest racism, some assume we’re protesting America” (DiAngelo 2018:xi).

The close ties of racism and what it means to be white in America have implications within the political arena, where it is often difficult to separate politics and identity. Throughout
history, politics have frequently been based upon the interests of different groups. Such identity politics have typically referred to focused political action on the unique interests of marginalized groups stemming from shared experiences of intersecting oppressions across race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (DiAngelo 2018; Somers 1994; Taylor 2017). This does not mean such “identities” are fixed or essential; at the same time, there are aspects of common experience shared across a collective group of people that, while they may operate in different ways at the interactional level, reinforce similar patterns of marginalization and oppression at the macro level (Collins 2000; Somers 1994). The Combahee River Collective, an organization of Black women feminists and activists who emerged in the 1970s, were believed to be the first group to use this term “identity politics” (Taylor 2017). The term evolved in reference to the ways Black women’s unique and interlocking experiences of oppression were often excluded from the activist and political agendas of white liberal feminism and Black liberation movements frequently led by Black men (Taylor 2017).

Identity politics are important to understand because they have implications for how white identity and racial awareness continue to be shaped. The rise of white conservative backlash and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement are contemporary examples of a continuation and expansion of identity politics in relationship to racial identity (e.g., Black and white). This is evident not only in the BLM movement itself, which continues ongoing work to address the inequities faced by Black Americans and Black people globally, but also in the counterattacks to such movements led (predominantly) by white conservative and neoconservative groups. These groups have co-opted the idea of identity politics to position white identity or whiteness as that which is being “suppressed” in order to spark support and push back against actions intended to bring greater equity to marginalized groups. Such identity
politics grew from feelings of anxiety and discontent over policies and practices perceived as benefiting people of color at the expense of white Americans and has bred a (re)emergence of conservative political behavior referred to as white backlash conservatism (Metzl 2019). Metzl (2019:8) argues that what were once more “fringe agendas” (such as unregulated gun usage or the dismantling of various social initiatives) have arose in the wake of the Trump administration and cultural backlash to comprise a unified form of backlash conservatism that has,

advanced politically through overt or implicit appeals to what has been called white racial resentment. In other words, these agendas gained support by trumpeting connections to unspoken or overt claims that particular policies, issues, or decisions served also to defend or restore white privilege or quell threats to idealized notions of white authority represented by demographic or cultural shifts.

Such cultural backlash has led to a distorted form of identity politics further fueled by the Trump administration’s capitalization on undercurrents of racialized fear that immigrants and people of color threaten white Americans’ social, economic, and political status (DiAngelo 2018; (Doane 2017; Hughey 2014; McCoy 2020; Taylor 2016). References to the BLM movement and its members as “terrorists” is just one example of how the administration attempted to further instill racialized fear (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2017). While BLM is referred to as a terrorist group, white nationalist groups are applauded by retweeted videos of people yelling “white power,” statements of “We’ve done a great job in Portland” in reference to violent tactics used against police brutality protestors, and Trump personally tweeting statements such as “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” (McCoy 2020).

These activities display how hegemonic whiteness and white identity continue to be constructed in opposition to people of color as “other,” even co-opting work on race and identity
politics by people of color for people of color to further white conservative agendas. This backlash has thus mobilized whiteness and white supremacy in ways that further legitimate their institutionalized power by conveying white identity and experience as stigmatized, victimized, discriminated against ("reverse discrimination"), and as white suffering (Hughey 2014; Kitschelt and Rehm 2019; Metzl 2019). These connections between whiteness, white identity, American identity, and identity politics are important for not only understanding contemporary mechanisms that reinforce racialized stratification, but also in comprehending potential challenges white Americans face in (re)formulating a white racially aware identity in the contemporary context.

Identity, Role Exit, and Turning Points

The final area related to identity that I want to explore is the sociological research on the process of role exit. Influenced by Robert Merton’s work on anticipatory socialization and the centrality of roles in social analysis, sociologist Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) wrote a book about the process of role exit called Becoming an Ex. In this book, Ebaugh analyzes the experiences of individuals going through voluntary role exits, outlining the common components of a social process for role exiting that people undergo across a diverse array of roles within society. She finds that identity is an important component of this process, as role exiting or “becoming an ex” is about shifting an area of one’s life that is often viewed as fundamental to who one is. In the Ebaugh (1988:xiii) states that,

the phenomenon of being an ex is sociologically and psychologically intriguing since it implies that interaction is based not only on current role definitions but, more important, past identities that somehow linger on and define how people see and present themselves in their present identities.
While people may voluntarily shed past identities or components of their identities related to the roles they exit, they are often dealing with these past identities as they are developing their present identity. Such life and identity shifts are often influenced by turning points, a definitive point in one’s life in which they make the decision to exit a role.

A more extreme example of such a role exit relevant to this research project is that of former white nationalist Christian Picciolini. Picciolini was a neo-Nazi who, as an adult, shifted away from this group and founded the group Life After Hate (Picciolini 2017). Both in his book white American Youth (2017) and an NPR interview (NPR 2018), Picciolini describes different moments throughout his life that helped him awaken to his own empathy. One particular moment involved a fight he got into with a Black man when he was younger; he had an epiphany that this was a person he could love or have empathy for and began to see him and other Black people as human beings. While he did not refer to these as “turning points,” such moments in his life are reminiscent of Ebaugh’s description of turning points, as they sparked awareness that eventually contributed to Picciolini’s decision to exit his neo-Nazi life.

Becoming Aware of What? Black Consciousness, Experience, and “Beingness”

In understanding how white Americans become racially aware through the construction of a racially aware identity, it is also necessary to examine scholarship on white racial awareness through the lens of people of color. This includes not only understanding whiteness and white racial awareness through the knowledge and experiences of people of color, but also examining what some white Americans may be becoming aware of or to in terms of the knowledge, experiences, and consciousness of people of color in the United States. This is important because identity work often means orienting ourselves in the construction of a “new” identity to something that we are not in order to make sense of what we are becoming. In other words,
individuals often construct their awareness and identities in terms of an alternative or counter identity – what we are not, rather than what we are (Stets and Burke 2003). In this case, one “counter” to constructing a white racially aware identity is understanding the experience, consciousness, and identity or “beingness” of people of color. This pertains to Black Americans in particular, given the role of antiblackness in the historic construction of systemic racism, white supremacy, and normative white identity. Therefore, in this section I build upon the previous identity literature by discussing various scholarly works on these topics, much of which has been advanced by scholars of color across various disciplines, to further frame the relationship between the (re)construction of a white racially aware identity and the experiences, knowledge, and consciousness of people of color.

Though there is no singular common experience, knowledge, or consciousness of people of color, there are some common threads that help describe what white people may become aware of in formulating a new racially aware identity. One thread is understanding the real, lived experiences of Black Americans in the aftermath of slavery and the ongoing impacts of that aftermath. Christina Sharpe (2016) uses the metaphor of “the wake” in various ways, both as a theoretical tool and an analytical / methodological tool, to bring to life the material reality, consciousness, and way of being or “non/being” for Black people in the United States within the aftermath (or “wake”) of chattel slavery. Slavery has not disappeared but morphs with the times to continue to impact all facets of Black lives. Sharpe uses various metaphors of the “wake” to describe a place for Black non/being to emerge/insist, exist, and resist, a paradox of “Blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity” (Sharpe 2016:14). Such legacies of slavery for Black people living in the wake refer to living the realities of ongoing murder and criminalization of Black people; premature Black death due to national policies that
negatively impact Black people; continued global migrations of Black communities due to natural and unnatural disasters and socioeconomic inequity at the hands of ongoing imperialism and colonialism; and conducting “wake work” in the form of insistence, existence, and resistance. Sharpe (2016:15) summarizes the assault on Black minds, lives, and bodies that such living/being entails,

Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased.

Though Sharpe’s portrayal goes beyond what many white Americans may be becoming aware of, her deep examination of Black experience, knowledge, consciousness, and “beingness” provides relevant insights into at least some of the experiences white people may be becoming aware of in (re)constructing a racially aware identity.

Sharpe’s work also speaks to the importance of understanding the deeply traumatic ways in which whiteness continues to terrorize people’s lives and the conflicting feelings around being Black while living in a white dominated world that may emerge or exist. In “Representing whiteness in the Black Imagination,” bell hooks (1992) describes how whiteness is formulated in the minds of Black people, and in doing so, sheds light on Black Americans’ experience. hooks argues that white people are socialized within the institutionalized normalcy of white supremacy, leaving white people to see a fantasy of whiteness as normal and non-threatening. However, Black people perceive whiteness very differently as terrifyingly real presence in Black life (1992:341),
They [white people] do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in Black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness. To protect themselves, hooks (1992:341) argues that Black people often wear a mask, pretending to “be comfortable in the face of whiteness only to turn our backs and give expression to intense levels of discomfort.” People adopt this mask to live within and survive what hooks calls the “bush of ghosts,” referring to the ways in which Black people must live among white people and whiteness, making it sometimes difficult to separate themselves even from whiteness. However, even though Black people are coerced by systems of domination and oppression into “internalizing negative perceptions of Blackness, to be self-hating,” hooks (1992:341) states that most Black people still view whiteness overall with suspicion and fear because of the negative ways in which it terrorizes their minds, souls, and lives. hooks argues, therefore, that Black people throughout history have obtained a special knowledge of whiteness and white supremacy gained through their experiences and consciousness. This gives marginalized groups a unique position from which to critically evaluate and think about whiteness. For example, hooks further describes an encounter with a progressive Black woman and a white male colleague during a conference. As Black women, she and her one colleague drew upon their own experiences to discuss the importance of white people becoming more aware in order to perceive the world differently. Using the white male colleague as an example, hooks (1992:346) states,

Understanding how racism works, he can see the way in which whiteness acts to terrorize without seeing himself as bad or all white people as bad, and Black people as good. Repudiating ‘us and them’ dichotomies does not mean that we should never speak the ways observing the world from the standpoint of ‘whiteness’ may distort perception …
what we are asking for is … holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other.

hooks (1992:341) further states that this process of repositioning has the capability and power to: deconstruct practices of racism and make possible the disassociation of whiteness with terror in the Black imagination. As critical intervention, it allows for the recognition that progressive white people who are antiracist might be able to understand the way in which their cultural practice reinscribes white supremacy without paralyzing guilt or denial.

Without the capacity to inspire terror, whiteness no longer signifies the right to dominate. Here, hooks shares hope that white people who shift their subject position and consciously come to understand how white supremacy and whiteness impacts people of color, without feeling guilty or denying others’ experience, may be able to help deconstruct and reimagine whiteness to “make possible the disassociation of whiteness with terror in the Black imagination.”

Kendi (2019) also talks about the experience of Black people in the United States and the idea of wearing (or not wearing) a “mask” in relationship to Du Bois’ idea of double-consciousness. In *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois (1903:12) describes the sensation of living as a Black person,

The Negro is sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world… this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings;
two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Kendi builds upon this idea and calls it **dueling consciousness**, the idea of holding two otherwise contradictory ideals in the same space or mind – that of being Black and that of being American, which he argues are opposing constructs. Kendi argues that this idea still exists, describing its existence within the contemporary Black consciousness as a duel “between antiracist and assimilationist ideas.” Whereas Du Bois saw assimilation as part of the solution to Black people’s plight, Kendi argues that “assimilationist ideas are racist ideas” because assimilating into a standard that positions white as superior is not resolving the problem of white supremacy. This continues to be a dueling ideal that many Black Americans navigate. Kendi shares a personal story of his parents, who dreamed of traveling the globe as activists doing Black liberation work but instead settled (or “assimilated”) into corporate careers as part of the American, predominantly white, middle class. This is similar to hooks’ idea of “wearing a mask,” though Kendi (2019:28) argues,

> They joined other Black people trying to fit into that white space while still trying to be themselves and save their people. They were not wearing a mask as much as splitting into two minds.

Another thread relevant to the process of (re)constructing a white racially aware identity and understanding what one is becoming aware of in this process is recognizing experiences across intersecting systems of power relations and oppression. Black women in particular occupy a unique position within a disparate social order, and their experiences are critical in understanding systemic racism and these intersecting systems more broadly. In her work on Black feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins (1989; 2000) centers the experience and situated
knowledge of Black women in advancing critical scholarship on power, intersecting and institutionalized systems of oppression, and Black women’s empowerment and resistance. Collins analyzes the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality intersect to create what she calls the matrix of domination, the understanding that experience occurs at the intersection of multiple structures and systems of oppression; one’s social location in society is not tied simply to one identity and one system of oppression but can be based on experiences within multiple concurrent systems of inequality.

Collins advances these understandings specifically through the intersectional experience of Black women due to their unique positionality within these interlocking systems of oppression. For example, Black women’s intellectual work, knowledge, and experiences have been shaped by intersections across their race, gender, and class, as well as their sexual orientation and objectification as sexual objects (Collins 2000 and 2005). They have been and continue to be exploited for their labor and bodies in advancing capitalism and science and are continually excluded from various realms of life—workplaces and leadership opportunities, government and public office, “white” spaces and locations, public policy, and educational institutions. Their experiences as mothers and family members, community members, religious church-going women, teachers, partners and spouses, workers, and more have also shaped their sense of being, self-definitions, and knowledge production. Such resulting experience and knowledge Collins describes as oppositional knowledge, intended to counteract and resist these intersecting systems of oppression within and across these experiences. Though diversity in experience and individuality exist, navigating similar waters has shaped a collective experience of oppression that formulates a Black women’s consciousness and knowledge, born from a common social location and opposed to the dominant manner of thinking. Collins’ work first and
foremost advances and centers Black women, though she also encourages white people (as one example) to draw from such perspectives to critically examine our own understanding and awareness of systems of institutionalized oppression and power. Such an examination can also be applied as part of our own identity work in becoming racially aware, as well as helping us to further understand some of the experiences we are becoming aware of or to.

Finally, some literature also argues that the white imagination cannot fully empathize with nor comprehend the lived realities of racially marginalized groups. In a *New York Times* article, “The Conditions of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Claudia Rankine (2015) explains this when she describes the vulnerability and fear expressed by herself and friends as they became mothers of Black children and Black sons. Her friend summarizes this fear by stating that “the condition of Black life is one of mourning,” to which Rankine (2015:np) responds,

> Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about Black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a Black person you can be killed for simply being Black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while Black.

Therefore, part of the racially aware identity work for white people can also mean recognizing that the experiences of Black Americans are not something we can fully comprehend.

Throughout this section, the work of people of color has been utilized to explain their knowledge, experiences, and consciousness living in the wake of slavery in the United States, navigating intersectional systems of oppression in all facets of life, and making sense of the
continuously conflicting ideals of fitting in / surviving and being Black in the United States. Much work exists on these topics, and these few examples begin to highlight the ongoing struggle and resistance that people of color experience in trying to achieve and construct a sense of self, being, and quality of life. In the context of the social construction of a white racially aware identity, these examples contextualize what people of color (specifically Black Americans) experience in the United States, and therefore what white people may be awakening (and/or constructing in relationship) to as they develop this new identity.

The previous sections thus far have highlighted in-depth the various ways in which whiteness, white identity, white racial awareness, and the consciousness and experience of people of color in the United States are conceptualized and discussed within existing literature. While much of the existing literature, both internal and external to sociology, focuses on white consciousness and white identity, my study differs in several ways. First, there are few studies that specifically look at the social process of becoming racially aware as a process in general, let alone as a process of (re)constructing an alternative white racially aware identity. Second, there is little sociological research that ties the processes of whiteness, white identity construction, and white racial awareness together and to the contemporary context. Third, most studies that do discuss identity focus on how white intersectional identity reinforces power structures and inequities rather than deconstructing them. In examining this as a process of identity (re)construction, I build upon scholarly understandings of white identity by describing the construction of an alternative white racially aware identity and identifying components of this process that could be incorporated into interventions and taught to other white people. How this process intersects with taking action towards furthering racial equity is also a key component and will be the focus of the following section.
White Racial Awareness and Action towards Racial Equity

In his article *More than Prejudice*, Bonilla-Silva (2015:83) argues that years of living in a racialized world in which white people are positioned as superior has created a “deep whiteness” that may even be difficult for white antiracists and activists to see. At the same time, investigation into this deep whiteness is important for identifying ways in which it may be shifted or transformed. Such an investigation can be understood through the lens and experiences of white Americans who are attempting to shift their own white consciousness and take more equitable actions. In discussing racial consciousness and racial behavior of white “race traitors,” Bonilla-Silva poses some important questions that are at the heart of this research: why *would* someone become a “race traitor,” particularly when white Americans seemingly benefit from the social status their whiteness allows them? What characteristics, events, or experiences lead some racially aware white Americans to relinquish their “wages of whiteness” and take action?

This section analyzes the existing scholarship related to these questions and highlights some of the key gaps that this research seeks to fill. Though some scholarship on this topic exists, current sociological scholarship is somewhat limited. Within the literature that does exist, scholars typically cover how white people confront whiteness, white supremacy, and racism through their actions in four different ways. First, scholars examine how some white people engage in various “antiracist” and other activism activities. Second, particularly in the field of education, scholars attempt to deconstruct their own whiteness by conducting critical self-examinations of their own racialized identity, awareness, and actions. Third, scholarship both within and outside of sociology discusses the idea of becoming “race traitors,” and finally, some researchers outside of sociology explore mindfulness and meditation as techniques for (re)constructing a more racially aware sense of self and healing from their own internalization of whiteness, normative white identity, and white supremacy.
Antiracism and activism have been key themes in the whiteness studies scholarship for over 20 years. Even earlier than that, American intellectual-activists such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper were engaging in antiracist analyses and actions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Collins 2019; Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019). Whether specifically referred to as “antiracism,” “whites against racism,” “activism,” or another term, this scholarship examines several ways in which some white Americans are striving to be more active in achieving greater racial awareness and equity. While sociological research exists, there is an opportunity to conduct more recent studies that account for ongoing socio-cultural changes, as well as advance deeper understandings between the processes of becoming racially aware, identity construction, and engaging in antiracist action.

Different from being “racist,” which was defined in Chapter One, antiracism, or antiracist, means taking actions that further policies, practices, politicians, education, ideology, and knowledge that lead to racial equity. As Kendi (2019:23) discusses in his book How to Be an Antiracist, “these are not permanent tattoos… being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.” In this way, to be antiracist involves a “radical choice … requiring a radical reorientation of our consciousness” (Kendi 2019:23). Antiracism therefore can be both a process of identity work and a type of action.

One of the studies within the sociological antiracism scholarship that is closely aligned with this research project is Eileen O’Brien’s (2001) study on white antiracists, presented in her book whites Confront Racism. This study is couched within Afrocentric, critical race, and feminist theories, and it focuses on the experiences of thirty white antiracists within two different white antiracist organizations. Similarly, O’Brien defines “antiracist” as “people who have committed themselves, in thought, action and practice, to dismantling racism” (O’Brien 2001:4).
Recognizing at the time the lack of academic scholarship in understanding white antiracist experiences, O’Brien interviewed different white antiracists to understand how and why these individuals come to do the work they do, along with the implications this has for dismantling institutionalized racism and white supremacy. O’Brien states that white people who want to do something about racism and white supremacy are often left at a loss of what to do because of a lack of visibility into the actions of important role models. She explains that such role models have existed throughout history but have been forgotten over time.

Throughout her work, O’Brien utilizes the narratives of these thirty white antiracists to outline key themes for how white people can do something in addressing racism and white supremacy, and she argues that there is no one “correct” profile for a white antiracist, but that such action is multidimensional. She identifies factors such as the importance of organizations and activist networks, workshops, and life experiences with people of color that enable empathy as key motivating factors for white antiracists. This is relevant to my research because empathy was an important part of my findings in understanding the construction of a white racially aware identity, and I expand upon this more in Chapter Five.

O’Brien also describes specific actions that these white antiracists take at the personal/interactional and macro levels. At the personal or interactional level, antiracists frequently interrupt racism by addressing racist comments and jokes while also being strategic in picking one’s battles, illustrating these “antiracist strategies” as a continuum that goes back and forth between direct and delayed responses. Here O’Brien discusses the concept of privileged resistance, or the idea that white people can be more vocal and confrontational in addressing white supremacy and racism without the same repercussions that people of color may experience. O’Brien next discusses action themes at the institutional level, like challenging
workplace settings, schools, churches, and other institutional settings. In general, O’Brien (2001:106) states that becoming antiracist is an “ideological shift where [white people] begin to see issues of race differently than the majority of whites… this process is not only a cognitive one but an emotional-psychological one as well.” My research contributes to and builds upon O’Brien’s work by expanding this understanding of “antiracist” as not only a cognitive and emotional-psychological shift, but a deeper process of (re)constructing a racially aware identity.

Another study that discusses antiracism is sociologist Teresa Guess’s (2006) work on whiteness studies itself as a form of antiracist scholarship. In her article The Social Construction of whiteness, Guess employs Giddens’s structuration theory in outlining the social construction and institutionalization of whiteness in the United States. She argues that much of the sociological literature on the racialized social hierarchy and race relations in America has problematized the “othered” status of people of color, yet failed to critically examine whiteness and white racial status more directly. Guess examines several scholars within the discipline that are engaging in these antiracist conversations and concludes that whiteness studies can act as a form of antiracist scholarship itself. Even still, there are few scholars and studies within sociology that are empirically investigating whiteness for the purpose of antiracist scholarship. Collins (2019) also supports this sentiment, discussing how much of the scholarship on race within the social sciences has focused heavily on explaining the racialized social order but has remained silent about antiracism and what people can do about it. Critical social theory and analyses that are antiracist can help further antiracist work within the academy and beyond.

Critical Self-Examination, Awakening, and Deconstructing Whiteness

Another theme across the existing literature on social action is a focus on critical self-examination as a form of deconstructing internalized whiteness. This focus occurs most
frequently in the shape of education scholars’ autobiographies, where they examine their own complicity in perpetuating the racialized social hierarchy, particularly within the classroom and education. Education is an important site for examining how whiteness, white supremacy, and racism are perpetuated and reinforced, and these scholars seek to educate themselves on these issues while actively combatting whiteness within themselves and their teaching. This typically occurs at the individual level and has been critiqued for lacking the sociological understanding of racism as institutionalized systems of power and privilege (Andersen 2003). Despite this, self-examination is a relevant part of examining broader structures reinforcing white supremacy and racism because such examinations, when brought together in conversation with others, can lead to collective action. Kolchin (2002:154) discusses how collectively scholars are examining “pedagogies of whiteness” in their own teachings and as a result, an emerging “counterhegemonic act” is underway that seeks to address and reconfigure “whiteness in antiracist, antihomophobic, and antisexist ways” within education.

As an example, Johnson (2002) uses narrative analysis to analyze the autobiographical narratives of six different white, female teachers in racially diverse classrooms across the Pacific Northwest United States. These narratives centered around teachers’ antiracist actions and experiences as they became more racially aware, focusing on the influences that shaped these teachers’ racial awakening. The influences included: (1) the importance of relationships and personal experiences with individuals and communities of color; (2) working for social justice organizations; and (3) empathizing with racially marginalized groups by connecting to their own experiences of marginalization, even if those experiences were different. Johnson also conducted classroom visits in which she found that teachers strived to avoid color-blind approaches to classroom instruction by providing culturally relevant teaching, engaging in critical self-
examinations of their own white privilege, and acknowledging race and racial dynamics in the classroom. Johnson argues that autobiographic narrative can be a strong pedagogical tool for white teachers seeking to engage in more equitable and racially diverse teaching approaches.

Summer’s (2014) autobiographical narrative offers another example by which Summer outlines her experience of racialized awakening as a white kindergarten teacher. The event that began this journey was an experience of being called racist by a parent. In this article, Summer shares the process she went through to recognize her racism, and she describes the actions she is now taking to disrupt racism in the classroom in favor of a more socially just approach to teaching. This process included dealing with the emotions of guilt, fear and anger that came along with the awakening; naming and reflecting on her own racialization and engagement in racism; and ultimately taking action through “anti-oppressive teaching,” which meant interrupting racial disparities in her classroom, talking with children about race, and listening to others’ experiences (Summer 2014:197). These examples highlight commonalities in some educators’ processes of becoming racially aware, which could be occurring beyond the classroom as well.

Outside of education, other scholars are discussing the importance of critical self-examination in developing racial awareness and consciousness among white people. As a white nurse, Gustafson (2007) engages in a critical self-examination of her own white identity construction in her article white on whiteness: Becoming Radicalized about Race. She identifies four characteristics of her white identity: (1) the absence of whiteness/race as personal descriptors; (2) the reproduction of whiteness and white identity in everyday interactions that reinforced racialized beliefs of white superiority; (3) the construction of her identity in opposition to that of people of color, which was often reproduced and normalized within
everyday interaction; and (4) the denial of this oppositional identity as a salient part of maintaining the dominant position of white people within the racialized hierarchy.

Existing literature on whiteness scholarship and critical self-examination of white people’s actions, behaviors, and social locations can shed light on understanding the social construction of a racially aware identity. This literature talks about the importance of recognizing and naming one’s own engagement in white supremacy and racism, engaging in empathy, listening/talking to others about race, and identifying and engaging in antiracist activity. While these autobiographical narratives indicate potential influences on racial awareness among white Americans, the current literature as it stands focuses more on micro processes and will be expanded upon through this research to analyze impacts on both micro and macro processes.

Race Traitors and Treason to Whiteness

Another way the existing literature examines the social justice actions of some white people is as “race traitors” or “white traitors.” Race or white traitors are white people who consciously engage in activities that defy whiteness and expectations of normative white behavior, while seeking to dismantle or escape their white privilege completely (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Ignatieve 1997; McWhorter 2005). “Race traitor” scholarship critiques ideas around relinquishing one’s privilege as a form of action at the individual level and favors action centered around dismantling power structures. Though there is some controversy with respect to the term itself, which originated from white supremacist organizations as a term referring to white Americans who supported the Civil Rights movement, this scholarship does provide another vantage point from which to understand the different ways that taking action is contextualized within the literature.

For example, Race Traitor magazine authors and theorists Noel Ignatieve and John Garvey (1996) state that solving racialized social issues begins by abolishing whiteness and white race as
social constructs in general. They argue that white subjectivity is based on a network of power relations that position white people in locations of power. As such, race traitors can choose to embrace their white positionality or commit treason to whiteness by entirely deconstructing and dismantling whiteness as a racial construct. This “treason to whiteness,” they state, “is loyalty to humanity” (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996:7).

Somewhat similarly, McWhorter (2005:547) discusses the work of “race traitors” as also focusing more on the disruption and realignment of structures and networks of power, critiquing other types of antiracist work as too often seeming “simply” like a project of “ridding oneself of ‘unearned assets’” at the individual level. Instead, she argues that we need to focus more on the structural dismantling and destruction of existing power relations, racialized categories, and the idea of “race” itself as a social construct. That starts by building alternative pathways, memories, and experiences that counteract current conceptualizations of raced existence. She further expands upon Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) by stating that their concept of “treason to whiteness” is not only about committing treason in, say, a legal sense, but is also about “violating the customs that create and maintain [white] group cohesiveness” more broadly. Through violating these customs, by “not playing by the social rules set by the white supremacist power structure … in placing Black, Brown, or yellow people’s lives or interests or dignity above white people’s claims to entitlement,” white people can commit treason to whiteness in subtle or overt ways. At the same time, she also recognizes the challenge inherent in betraying such power structures, which are easily maintained by even the smallest of gestures. This makes it difficult for even those who want to deconstruct whiteness to betray its deeply engrained structures.
Niemonen (2010:68) also critiques the perspective that taking action is “simply” a process of individual action and/or personal choice, stating that such action often ends up amounting to no more than,

a self-referential concern with values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors – a personal therapeutic in which whites are to purge themselves of their claims to superiority… awareness of privileges does not lead necessarily to the desire to relinquish them: Unless we are prepared to talk about what whites have had to lose to become and remain white in the first place, we will do little more than amuse ourselves with our own brilliance.

In general, Niemonen is also critical of how whiteness studies scholars focus on racism as the explanation for all social issues while ignoring the intersectionality of other challenges, such as class-based challenges for example. Further, he argues that whiteness scholarship often positions white people into an “either/or” category where they *either* resist whiteness and its (re)production in favor of social justice *or* risk perpetuating it instead. Niemonen discusses that throughout this process, whiteness and white people are demonized and may only “redeem themselves” by engaging in race treason as race traitors.

Bonilla-Silva (2014) actually addresses this issue, stating that his work is not intended to demonize or label all white people as the monolithic “racist.” At the same time, these discussions *are* about recognizing the collective patterns, behaviors, and ideologies that reinforce the racialized social order. Escaping the “good/bad” binary and this “either/or” perspective could be an important part of the process white Americans undergo to engage in racial equity more actively. As hooks (1992) discusses, white people can see how whiteness oppresses others, and their own role within it, without necessarily seeing themselves as “bad.” These examples of “race traitors” provide another perspective on how existing literature makes sense of the actions that
white people take in support of racial equity and dismantling white supremacy and encourage
further critical examination to determine of work on oneself is “enough” to address systemic
forms of inequity. In the next section, I explore what the literature says about this question
further by evaluating self-healing approaches to dismantling white supremacy.

*Healing Approaches to White Supremacy: Mindfulness and Meditation*

The final social action theme focuses on self and collective approaches to healing from, and
addressing, the reproduction of whiteness through mindfulness and meditation. Bailey and Zita
(2007:x) specifically discuss resistance as *mindfulness*, defining it as “reflective vigilance of
daily habits and customs” related to reproducing whiteness. Some examples include mindfulness
through motherhood and raising children with race consciousness, and through vegetarianism
and veganism. Polinska (2018) also discusses the application of mindfulness meditation and
community-engaged mindfulness as techniques for dealing with systemic racism and addressing
white ignorance. Polinska argues that racial prejudice affects the physical and psychological
well-being of both Black people and white people, concluding that mindfulness and loving-
kindness meditations may be useful approaches for reducing implicit and explicit bias. This
article adopts a theological and psychological approach, meaning there is opportunity to apply a
sociological understanding of how such meditative practices of resistance and mindfulness can
address not only individual bias or prejudice but also structures of power and oppression.

Further, some organizations also offer courses and webinars on healing from internalized
whiteness. For example, Sandra Kim, founder of the online platform *Everyday Feminism*, offers
workshops and webinars on addressing whiteness and white supremacy for white people who
may not otherwise feel equipped to address and heal from the repercussions of internalized
whiteness. Specifically, her free webinar on *Healing from Internalized whiteness* (Everyday
Feminism 2020) offers information and practices on how white people can become more racially aware and heal from internalized whiteness as a mechanism for dismantling it. This includes steps for letting go of guilt, entitlement, and learning how to be an effective change agent in partnership with people of color.

The existing literature throughout this section explored racial equity actions aimed at addressing whiteness, white supremacy, and institutionalized racism in various ways. At the same time, the depth of scholarship from an empirical and sociological perspective is lacking. Much of the work in this area comes from disciplines outside of sociology, and many of them are theoretical versus empirical, with few concrete examples. For the relevant studies that do exist and are like my research, they are over 20 years old. My research expands upon the literature and addresses gaps by advancing a contemporary theoretical and empirical work that not only indicates other types of relevant actions that white Americans can take to address social inequities, but it also describes social action as a broader component of the process of constructing a racially aware identity.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the previous chapter, I explored the existing literature relevant to this study, identifying the opportunities and gaps this research addresses and builds upon. In this chapter, I lay further groundwork by explaining the theoretical framework that informs this research project. This study is couched within a framework of critical whiteness studies (CWS), an emerging arena of cross-disciplinary theoretical and empirical work that has grown out of critical race scholarship and broader whiteness studies. Therefore, this section covers a brief historical overview of the emergence of CWS within sociology and other disciplines, as well as the key tenets of CWS that guide my research on white racial awareness and social identity construction.

Whiteness Studies

Whiteness studies within sociology is still a relatively emergent area, growing from academic disciplines such as education, history, legal studies, philosophy, and cultural studies (Andersen 2003; Arnesen 2001; Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019; Doane 2003). Though systemic whiteness and white supremacy scholarship has long existed, this field as a specified area of examination emerged more recently in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This occurred in response to intellectual social movements and shifting economic contexts that illuminated whiteness, white supremacy, and white privilege within conversations about systemic racism, American culture, and racialized power structures (Andersen 2003; Doane 2003; Gallagher 1996). Though more white scholars joined the foray into critically examining whiteness, it was predominantly scholars of color who have paved the way and continue to do so.

The emergence of whiteness studies arose from critiques and examinations of scholars within critical legal studies, critical race theory (CRT), and feminist scholarship (particularly
feminist women of color) who sought to amplify the voices and perspectives of marginalized
groups across race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw 1988; Delgado and Stefancic
1997 and 2001; McWhorter 2005). Much of the initial whiteness studies scholarship focused
solely on white consciousness and identity, sidelining relations of power and material interests in
the analysis of racial inequality (Andersen 2003). Therefore, a sociological lens is critical to
analyzing whiteness, and sociologists are more and more approaching understandings of race and
whiteness as socially constructed relations of power embedded within institutions and material
structures (Andersen 2003; Mills 2003).

Critical Whiteness Studies: Background

whiteness studies scholars are also adapting a critical lens through which to view whiteness and
accounts of whiteness are recognized to be a vital and necessary corrective to a sociology of race
relations that myopically explored colour-based racisms with little attempt to reflect on
constructions of whiteness.” This emerging scholarship is known as critical whiteness studies
(CWS). Like whiteness studies more broadly, one of the precursors to CWS was critical race
theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic 1997). CRT in contemporary times has increasingly been
inaccurately misrepresented and appropriated, framing CRT as a theory that encourages hate and
disparaging white individuals, alongside of being “anti-American.” This has fueled conservative
political crusading against race-based teaching in educational institutions and corporate
organizations that is perceived to threaten the very power structures CRT seeks to address. The
fact that it is viewed as threatening by those who maintain and occupy the power positions and
structures it calls out only further demonstrates its relevance and applicability in this work. CRT
is both a theory and a movement that grew out of critical legal studies in the United States in the
1970s and 1980s (Brown and Jackson 2013; Christian et al. 2019; Rollock and Gillborn 2011). Originating from the work of Harvard Law professor Derrick Bell, CRT was also influenced by several legal scholars (mostly scholars of color) such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Angela Harris, Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, Neil Gotanda, and Patricia Williams (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Rollock and Gillborn 2011). Their core arguments originated from critically questioning how people of color have been treated within the legal system and academic legal scholarship (Crenshaw et al. 1995).

Core Arguments of CRT

Like other sociological theories, CRT scholars acknowledge race and racism as socially constructed ideas that can change over time and are historically driven, viewing these concepts as social products of the modern era (Delgado and Stefancic 1997 and 2001; Mills 2007; Nayak 2007). They therefore often take a socio-historical perspective in analyzing the racialized social order and how race and racism are (re)produced through changing historical mechanisms (Christian et al. 2019). Critical race theorists are also critical of current methods of knowledge production and validation, arguing that what counts as “knowledge” is typically that which is produced by the dominant group (historically and currently white people), and such knowledge claims are universalized to all or viewed with neutrality (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Harris 1993). CRT is also anti-essentialist and provides a vehicle through which a diversity of marginalized voices may be heard (Christian et al. 2019; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Rollock and Gillborn 2011). CRT emphasizes the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class in understanding racism and how it operates in society, often arguing that racism cannot be separated from other systems of power such as sexism, heteronormativity, and classism (Christian et al. 2019; Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw et al. 1995). Finally, CRT is
more than a theoretical and methodological paradigm; as defined in Chapter One, it is also “praxis,” or research intended for the pursuit of social justice, liberation, and change (Christian et al. 2019; Collins 2019; Delgado and Stefancic 1997).

**Critical Whiteness Studies: Key Tenets**

While CRT focuses on understanding the experiences of people of color, critical whiteness studies evolved to critically examine the experiences and relationships of white people in upholding structures of racism. This is important because a lack of critical examination in existing research, incidentally, further perpetuates whiteness as “normal” or “universal,” rendering structural mechanisms of whiteness (like white racism and white privilege) seemingly “invisible” to white people who are complicit in and benefit from these relations of power. CWS seeks to address and remedy this. There are several key tenets within CWS that are common across sociological literature, and many of these tenets overlap with and stem from CRT. At the same time, while these themes appear common within the literature, there is also no consistent agreement on what exactly constitutes CWS, and so this remains a theoretical and empirical area that continues to develop and evolve. Within this section I will outline four key tenets that are relevant to my research and will serve as the theoretical framework for this study. As will be seen in the next section on my methodological approach, this framework also informs the methodology for this research.

1. **Real Impacts**

According to Mills (2003), racial stratification has real impacts on various aspects of life, including economic opportunities, political and juridical policies and decisions, cultural norms and interactions between groups, and social constructions of the self and one’s identity.
Therefore, a key foundational tenet of CWS within sociology is that race, racism, and whiteness are socially constructed phenomena that have real, material impacts on everyday life (McWhorter 2005). These phenomena are flexible and adaptable, continuing to change over time and place within the context of the current socio-historical environment (Feagin et al. 2001; Mills 2007; Nayak 2007). This means that a grounding in the socio-historical context is also important for understanding the real impacts of whiteness and racism. Though CWS focuses more centrally on race and the social construction of whiteness, CWS, like CRT, also incorporates aspects of intersectionality for a more comprehensive understanding.

2. Whiteness as Normative

A second tenet of CWS argues that the structural mechanisms that perpetuate and reinforce whiteness – such as white racism and white privilege – are conveyed as normative, universalized, and central, meaning it is the standard or expectation against which white people and people of color are held; being or being perceived as white conveys an unspoken set of privileges and benefits due to white peoples’ social position within the racialized social order (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Dyer 1997; Nayak 2007). When people are unaware of, ignorant, or even resistant to acknowledging these mechanisms, they can appear “invisible” to those who enjoy their benefits. As a result, whiteness becomes an unexamined category within many analyses, which contributes to the ways in which whiteness and white supremacy both structure and operate through everyday social interaction to reinforce the racialized social order (Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019; Mills 2007). CWS seeks to analyze and address how the power dynamics and mechanisms reinforcing whiteness can be rendered as normative and universal (and accordingly “invisible”), with the goal of making such mechanisms explicit for critical examination.
3. Critical Examination

As discussed throughout this paper, it is important that CWS researchers avoid decentering people of color in focusing on and examining whiteness (Andersen 2003; Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019; Schneider and Bjork-James 2020). This is key to the third tenet of CWS: to avoid uncritically centering whiteness within whiteness studies, scholars can engage in critical examinations of how whiteness, white supremacy, and white privilege reinforce institutionalized systems of power, domination, and oppression (Foste 2020; Gallagher 2000). As such, CWS can be included within the cannon of critical social theories within sociology. Collins (2019:4-5) states that “critical social theory both explains and criticizes existing social inequalities, with an eye toward creating possibilities for change … critical social theories aim to reform what is in the hope of transforming it into something else.” Being critical in this manner therefore has two aspects: (1) being critical of, or critiquing, a practice, behavior, or idea, and (2) being critical in the sense of important or necessary for something to occur (for example, critical for social change to occur). Scholars can engage critically by seeking to understand and analyze human experience and how this informs the behaviors and actions people take. Collins argues that critical analysis can be done by anyone. The key to this is recognizing one’s own social position while “being self-reflexive not only about other people’s behavior but also about one’s own praxis” (Collins 2019:17). Therefore, self-reflexivity is also an important aspect of CWS.

4. Research as Praxis

Another important tenet of CWS, then, is that as a critical social theory, CWS is conducted not just for the purpose of analysis but also as praxis (Collins 2019; Delgado and Stefancic 1997). Like CRT and other critical social theories, CWS is about taking action – shifting consciousness,
policy, economic factors, and social interactions – for the purpose of collective social change. I describe this further in point four below.

**Application of CWS Tenets to this Research**

While whiteness, white identity work, and white racial awareness have been explored throughout the existing literature, few have directly applied a CWS framework to a specific study about understanding white racial awareness as a process of constructing a white racially aware identity. Therefore, the CWS tenets outlined above have been applied to this research project in several ways. First, I outlined the socio-historical background and context that underlies this research project, as laid out in Chapter Two. Second, I incorporated understandings of the material realities of systemic racism, whiteness, white identity work, and white racial awareness in this study by centering the work of scholars of color throughout my analysis and talking directly to white Americans about their experiences. Third, I applied a critical lens throughout the entire research process, as will be discussed further in the next chapter. Fourth, I discuss potential applications for my findings in Chapter Eight, as I intend to utilize my findings to support collaborative, collective efforts towards social change (as “praxis”). Finally, CWS tenets were applied not only *theoretically* but also *methodologically*. While a critical whiteness methodology (CWM) has been outlined by some scholars, there was opportunity to further conceptualize such a methodology within sociology, which my research helps to advance (Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019). This methodological approach and the connections to CWS are discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Within sociology and other disciplines, the specific process by which to apply a CWS framework methodologically is still being explored and defined, although an emerging discussion about how to conduct a critical whiteness methodology (CWM) within higher education has started to take place (e.g., Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019). Much of the development in this area has taken place in the field of education, rather than sociology, creating greater opportunities to advance CWS methodologically within sociology. Therefore, my research not only adds to the scholarship on the social processes of white identity and white racial awareness, but also to how researchers may conduct CWS methodologically within sociology. Next, I provide a detailed overview of my methodological and analytic approach and its connections to grounded theory, narrative analysis, CRT, and CWS, before concluding with my own statement of reflexivity.

Frameworks Guiding the Methodological and Analytic Processes

I adopted a qualitative methodological and analytical approach to CWS that combines aspects of CRT, the emerging CWM (which is also influenced by CRT), constructivist grounded theory, and storytelling/narrative approaches. This combined approach enabled me to critically analyze white racial awareness/consciousness and white identity construction as it pertains to white individuals constructing a social process and identity around being racially aware and promoting racial equity in the United States. Since CWS is closely related to CRT, I utilized some of the methodological tenets of CRT within my CWS framework. At the same time, CRT methods are intended to amplify the voices of the marginalized and obtain data from historically underrepresented sources using methods that have often been undervalued in academia, such as storytelling or analyzing creative artistic expressions from various groups of people across
different social locations within society. In being reflexive throughout this discussion as a white researcher critically analyzing whiteness within an academic setting, my intention was to utilize methodologies from CRT to employ a critical analysis of structures of whiteness, power, and white privilege rather than employing a methodology that would reinforce such structures.

Therefore, in alignment with key foundations of CRT and the CWS tenets discussed in the previous section, I approached collecting and analyzing the data according to these core principles: (1) grounding data collection and analysis within a socio-historical understanding and context; (2) viewing the primary analytic terms as socially-constructed (i.e., whiteness, white supremacy, race, racism, etc.); (3) engaging in ongoing critical analysis for the purposes of challenging hegemonic whiteness and advancing collective action and social change (research as praxis); (4) utilizing non-traditional and non-hegemonic approaches as relevant sources of analytic material, such as peoples’ lived experiences, stories, and narratives; and (5) recognizing my own positionality, subjectivity, and biases as a white researcher and remaining critically self-reflexive throughout the entire research process, which is outlined further in my Statement of Reflexivity at the end of this chapter (Collins 2019; Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019; Gallagher 1996 and 2000; Foste 2020; Solórzano et al. 2000).

Participants: Criteria, Sampling & Recruitment

I began recruiting participants after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB; see APPENDIX A). The target population for this study was white people who self-identify as “racially aware” and are actively engaged in organizations, activities, or actions intended to bring about greater racial equity and change. One challenge in identifying the participants was that “racially aware” is subjective. I mitigated this somewhat by using established criteria for identifying participants to interview (see APPENDIX B and APPENDIX
Another challenge was that this population of racially aware white people in the United States who are actively engaged in racial equity and/or racial justice was also a “hard-to-reach” population, meaning not readily identifiable. Accordingly, as a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) practitioner, I utilized my own network to establish an initial convenience sample to begin the interview process and then utilized snowball sampling to identify the remainder of participants. I began by first making a list of potential people from my network that could be my initial convenience sample. I had hoped to have a list of about 3-4 people to start with but given my own experience in DE&I work, academia and activist organizations, I found I had a larger network of people I could reach out to. My initial list ended up being about 13 people that I had a professional and/or friendly relationship with and were people that I had previously had some kind of conversation with about race and racial inequity. These initial participants came from academic institutions, DE&I organizations, and the company that I worked for at the time.

From there I sought additional participants through snowball sampling. It was important to me to be thoughtful and reflexive as I continued to obtain more participants because I wanted to avoid identifying only people who were like me to make my sample as varied as possible. I therefore tried to identify people who had a range of experiences, jobs, education, and knowledge around being racially aware and socially active. I was able to obtain more diversity in my participants by asking my convenience sample to recommend diverse people from their networks and by seeking out other people in my network that might have recommendations for a variety of people. I asked not only white people but also colleagues and friends of color to recommend people they thought might fit my criteria. I also reached out to two social justice organizations that I participate in or were recommended through my network, one in Florida and
one in California. All these efforts resulted in more than 20 additional recommendations from a broad range of backgrounds, professions, geographical locations, and experiences.

I recruited participants by first reaching out via email using my recruitment materials (see APPENDIX B). The nature of the study and the expectations of participants were explained in the email, and potential participants were asked to respond if they were interested and felt they met the established criteria. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary and no compensation was provided. In total, I recruited 40 people; of these, 5 did not respond and 2 did not want to participate. I concluded my interviewing when the sample size reached a point of saturation, or when it was deemed no longer analytically necessary to continue interviewing additional participants (Charmaz 2014). My final sample size was 33 participants and interviews, and my data were robust enough that further theoretical sampling later was not needed (see Table 1).
Table 1: Pseudonyms and Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Above 150,000</td>
<td>Associates (pursuing Bachelors)</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Above 150,000</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>37</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>100,001 - 150,000</td>
<td>GED, Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
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<td>Some college</td>
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<td>Bruce</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<td>Celeste</td>
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<td>100,001 - 150,000</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Above 150,000</td>
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<td>Above 150,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Above 150,000</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>100,001 - 150,000</td>
<td>GED, Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>19</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Some graduate</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Cisgender Woman</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>100,001 - 150,000</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Cisgender Woman</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<td>HS Diploma (pursuing Bachelors)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
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<td>Steve</td>
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<td>Taylor</td>
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<td>Lesbian</td>
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<td>Wesley</td>
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<td>Graduate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>Cisgender Man</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>100,001 - 150,000</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though my sample size is smaller and nonrandom, this is common in qualitative research. The intention of my study was not the traditional scientific goal of achieving population representativeness, but rather to obtain relevant information about social life through an analysis of interpretative experiences. Merriam (1995) states that qualitative research with
smaller, nonrandom sample sizes can still be valid and reliable if researchers view validity and reliability through a lens of qualitative research, rather than the more traditional positivistic approach to scientific research. I considered the non-generalizability and subjectivity of this research and dealt with these issues through systematic and well-documented analysis. Since my study sought to uncover a subjective and interpretative reality versus a fixed objective reality, validity was achieved through a robust analysis that ensured the data were consistent with what the study was intended to measure. I describe this robust analysis further in the analytic strategy later in this chapter. Merriam (1995) also argues that reliability through a qualitative lens can be thought of as consistency, meaning ensuring that the results of the research align to and are consistent with the data, which also occurred in my study through robust analysis, feedback, and carefully documenting my research processes and actions along the way.

Collection Method & Data

I conducted all 33 interviews via a semi-structured and somewhat flexible approach, as this method enables researchers to analyze people’s experiences, perspectives, stories, and even the meanings they attribute more deeply. Interviews are one of the best ways to explore macro-level social structures, processes, and practices through individual lived experiences and personal biographies, which was one of my goals in this study (Gerson and Horowitz 2002). Utilizing personal narratives to explore macro processes is consistent with the tenets of symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, which indicate that to understand macro-level social processes like structural racism and awakening to whiteness and race, scholars may begin at the level of micro-level understandings of lived reality (Berg and Lune 2012; Charmaz 2014; Gerson and Horowitz 2002). Overall, this methodology enabled me to account for and understand the deep complexity of social phenomena and processes through individuals’ lived experiences.
while still producing systematic, reliable, and valid research. This approach is also consistent with CWS and race scholars within sociology who often focus on qualitative methodologies, including interviews, to conduct studies.

Each interview lasted anywhere from 1-2 hours, averaging about 90 minutes per interview. I selected virtual interviews via zoom over in-person interviews because of COVID-19 conditions and due to research participants being geographically dispersed across the United States. While video functionality was used in all interviews but one (video functionality was not working for this individual), I elected to record the interviews as audio only. At the beginning of each interview, I first explained the intent and purpose of the research and assured participants that the interviews were voluntary, and they may withdraw their consent at any time. I then obtained each participant’s written and verbal consent to voluntarily participate in the interview, to which everyone agreed (see APPENDIX C for a summary of what was discussed and consented to for each interview). The interview itself followed a set of pre-determined demographic and interview questions, with flexibility to ask follow-up questions as needed (see APPENDIX D for a complete list of interview questions). The topics at times were emotional and uncomfortable for participants, and I established comfort, trust, and rapport by engaging active listening skills (nodding visibly or reassuring verbally) throughout the discussion and making the interviews more conversational. I also actively took notes during each interview, which I referred to throughout my analysis and even at times during the interview process. This helped me highlight key things participants were saying and potential ideas or themes to potentially revisit later based on similar things participants were discussing. It also helped me focus and pay greater attention during the interviews.
To maintain confidentiality and protect participants’ identities, I assigned participant codes and pseudonyms to each participant, as described in Table 1 earlier. Actual names and contact information were collected only in the case that I might need to follow-up with a contact after the interview for clarification purposes. Participant information was stored in two separate excel files located in the same password-protected OneDrive folder mentioned earlier. One file was for the contact information and associated participant code (no pseudonym) and a separate file was kept for the pseudonyms, associated participant codes, and demographic information. All zoom recordings were stored in the OneDrive folder as well. Finally, to ensure privacy and avoid distractions, all interviews were conducted one-on-one between the participant and myself. Participants were encouraged to select a quiet, private place that felt comfortable and secure to them. I also agreed to conduct interviews in a place that was quiet, private, and free from distractions to help maintain the privacy of participants and ensure they felt comfortable throughout the interview.

Once the interviews were completed, I reviewed the audio recordings and transcribed the interviews. In total, I took approximately 160 pages of typed notes during the interviews, and the final transcriptions totaled about 714 pages of interview data. All notes and transcripts contain only the participants’ participant code and pseudonym, and all personally identifiable information was removed. Data will be retained for a minimum of 5 years after this research project per UCF policy. Once the data were collected and transcribed, I began my detailed analysis, which is described in the next section.

**Analytic Strategy**

The analytic strategy blended tenets of constructivist grounded theory and narrative analysis approaches while staying grounded in CWM. I utilized aspects of grounded theory, including
initial and focused coding, frequent memoing, and regular consultation of the literature to ensure findings were rooted firmly within and emergent from the data. This framework was adopted in my data collection and throughout all phases of my analysis, and it involved a non-linear yet systematic process of going back-and-forth between the data/coding, writing/memoing, and reviewing the literature. This allowed my analytic process to be immersive, interpretative, and flexible, ensuring I avoided assuming or hypothesizing on specific data results and allowing findings to truly emerge from the data.

My analytical strategy also evolved organically to incorporate tenets of a narrative analysis approach. Narrative analysis is an analytic tool that enables researchers to analyze large amounts of text by using stories, accounts, or narratives as the unit for analysis (Riessman 2003). As interviews were being coded on a rolling basis, the analytical process was allowed to be informed by ongoing findings. Therefore, I applied narrative analysis approaches to help code larger chunks of data according to the participants’ stories and detailed explanations, or “narratives,” and during memoing and final writing, to better analyze participants’ lengthy narratives and address emergent findings. Receiving lengthy stories in response to interview questions is common, and such accounts help researchers understand how people draw from socio-cultural stories and materials around them to interpret and make sense of their own experiences and identity construction (Lawler 2002; Riessman 2003). Additionally, because I wanted my research to not only further CWS theoretically but also methodologically, I stayed close to the core CWS principles throughout my data analysis. This hybrid approach was beneficial because I was able to start from an overarching question and have some initial structure for the data gathering and data analysis, yet it still allowed me to have a degree of flexibility in the research process. The CWM components reminded me to continue to view my
data through a socio-historical and socially constructed lens while staying critically reflexive (of myself and the data too) throughout the analysis.

The first step in the analytic process after interviews were collected and transcribed was to begin initial coding, which involves going through the data line-by-line or chunk-by-chunk and identifying preliminary “codes” that represent what is being said (Berg and Lune 2012; Charmaz 2014; Weston et al. 2001). Coding is utilized because it is an effective method for synthesizing large amounts of qualitative data and allowing researchers to take the first step towards connecting data to analytic understanding (Charmaz 2014). Since I had so many data, and the transcription process was very time-consuming, I started doing some initial coding as I was transcribing. I took more of a high-level initial coding approach that was less line-by-line and more by every couple of sentences or short paragraphs if they related to each other. The codes I assigned were somewhat of a hybrid of one or two-word codes, as well as high-level thoughts or notes associated with those codes. I also integrated “in vivo” coding, where I pulled short phrases from what the participants said that stood out to me. This process also helped me solidify and hone my code book. During the interview process, I had started a code book with an "Initial Codes Ideas" tab where I created a very preliminary, initial code book based on what I was seeing from my interview notes. These adjusted and shifted over time, especially when I began to transcribe the interviews and do more coding. I also did some high-level memoing during the initial coding phase as potential ideas struck me.

After I had initially coded 12 interviews, I realized that some of my codes were long or more note-like, and I needed to limit these more to one-or-two-word codes. I decided to revisit my code book and go back through the initial coding I had already done and do some quick re-coding to help me limit some of my notes down to specific codes. I was able to do this somewhat
quickly, and it helped me improve my codes. This also gave me a better sense of what some of the emerging codes and descriptions for those codes were, and I continued to update my code book as a result. Because I wanted to stay flexible and allow the codes to truly emerge from the data, I revisited the code book often, even as I moved into more focused coding, and allowed myself to update the code book as needed (see APPENDIX E for the full analytic code book).

I proceeded with this approach to faster-round initial coding until I had coded about 23 interviews. By the time I completed initially coding these interviews, I was hearing some of the same things over-and-over from participants and developed a sense of what I thought the primary emerging categories were, though I did not yet know how they were interconnected. These included: (1) the process of becoming racially aware, (2) the meaning of being aware, (3) turning points and relational exposure, (4) empathy, (5) identity, and (6) social actions. I also did some more memoing and initial concept mapping to initially categorize these into three potential themes: (1) the process of becoming aware, (2) identity, and (3) social actions. Though it is important to be reflexive in the initial coding and to avoid drawing conclusions too early, I had gone through enough of the data to reach a level of saturation that indicated the appropriateness of these themes (Berg and Lune 2012; Charmaz 2014; Weston et al. 2011).

Once the initial coding was completed, I conducted more focused coding. My focused coding process took the approach of coding all the interviews according to the three themes I had identified. I began by going back through my interviews one-by-one to do focused coding within the theme of “becoming racially aware,” which was my most complex and largest theme. I got through about 13 interviews and then decided to move on to focused coding the “social action” and “identity” sections of my data, finishing the “becoming racially aware” focused coding later. I also updated my code book throughout the process, creating more specific descriptions and
adding and updating new codes where needed. I still had a lot of codes at this point (more than 80), but I did not use them all in my final analysis; I just focused on the codes from the three themes instead. I continued to write deeper memos throughout this process as well, switching between coding and memoing. My analytic process became less and less linear as I dove deeper into my analysis, as I wanted to stay close to the data yet also allow ideas to truly emerge from the data. I found bouncing around between data and writing in this phase very helpful. I did pull small amounts from the literature too, but I felt I was not quite ready to revisit the literature yet since I wanted the themes and ideas to be emergent from the data and not overly influenced by the literature at this point. Therefore, I allowed myself to focus on what the data were actually telling me before I revisited the literature too heavily.

It was this process that resulted in some breakthroughs on what some of the categories under the themes might be. For example, I recall focused coding Esther, Nelson, and Celeste’s interviews for the “becoming racially aware” theme. I paused from coding and wrote a memo on “exposure,” which was a code underneath “becoming racially aware” that I felt was becoming more of a category because it had a lot of sub-codes underneath it. One of the primary initial sub-codes was called “close personal relationships, meaningful connections,” which I was not sure was the right name for this code. Through this iterative and emergent process, I had the epiphany that this initial code was more about “relational exposure,” which combined the idea of close relationships and exposure. Through this memo I also began recognizing that “relational exposure” was likely a type of “turning point.” Other potential connections included “outsiderness” and “empathy,” though I still was not sure how they were all connected yet. I then created my first concept map to explore some of these relationships more deeply, which enabled me to visually outline some of the potential connections between categories and themes. This is
just one example of how my themes and categories emerged from the data through non-linear coding and writing processes.

My analytic process continued in a non-linear way as I moved deeper into writing and more next-level, or theoretical, coding. The purpose was to take large amounts of data and organize them further into categories, developing descriptions of my findings that were grounded in the data for these categories (Berg and Lune 2012; Charmaz 2014). I did not do axial coding as I did not have a specific, preset structure that I was following to link subcategories to broader categories. Instead, I approached this portion of the analytic process by taking a less structured and more flexible approach (Charmaz 2014). This process was still systematic, however, as I continued to document my approach throughout the process and stay close to the data.

Memoing and writing also became a more frequent occurrence in this phase, and I started outlining and drafting some of the thematic chapters. To do so effectively, I needed to ensure I was capturing the relationships between the themes and categories appropriately. Through ongoing analysis using some of the tools in NVivo, I further analyzed the relationships between my themes and their subcategories, reviewing both the connections across subcategories within themes and also across themes. The most useful tool to help me do this was the query matrix tool in NVivo, which allowed me to compare frequencies of code occurrences across participants, themes, and subcategories to see where the highest frequencies were occurring, which then indicated potential relationships. For example, I created comparisons using query matrices between the themes of “identity” and “becoming racially aware,” between “social action” and “becoming racially aware,” and across the sub-codes of “identity.” I then exported these matrices to excel and compared codes across each other to see where both the most frequent codes were occurring and also where the most frequent connections or potential relationships were
occurring. Then I would go back to the data to understand the specifics of what was happening and why to further understand the relationships. I occasionally used concept maps as diagrams to help me make connections too, but they were more informal. I typically only used them when I was having a hard time visualizing the connections.

As I was analyzing and visualizing these relationships and categories, I began looking closer at the data in terms of participants’ stories or narratives. Memoing evolved into writing potential outlines of findings chapters and starting to identify quotes from the data to support my findings. I also compared my findings more and more with the literature to see if what I was finding was aligning with my initial research purpose and the gaps in the literature I sought to address. Though my initial research question was more of a guideline than a specific question, I also wrote it down on a sticky note to help remind me what it was I was trying to address with my findings. One of the things I kept wondering throughout this process is if I still had the “right” research question or if it had changed. I consulted my advisor at this time, and she helped me recognize that it was not necessarily about changing the research question itself but speaking more about how it had evolved through the analytic process. Though my findings still related to understanding the social processes by which some white Americans come to understand whiteness, become aware of their own white identity, and understand how their racialized identity is situated in a broader socio-historical context, the specifics of that and particularly the piece around social action were a bit broader than my initial research question. Although my research focus evolved through the analysis, this was acceptable because the research question was only intended to be a guideline, which guided more of the data collection aspect of my research and evolved through the data analysis portion.
The last phase focused on writing the final dissertation, which was still non-linear and iterative as I frequently went back and forth between the data and the literature. I mentioned earlier that I started with three initial themes of “becoming racially aware,” “identity,” and “social action.” As I wrote more and consulted advisors, these themes evolved and shifted slightly as I solidified the interconnections between them. Though I had been looking at stories throughout the process, I drew from narrative approaches at this point, writing analytically about their particular stories or accounts in support of key findings. This helped me see that participants’ personal narratives were describing the process of becoming racially aware as a process of constructing a racially aware identity. Identity therefore became the primary thematic category and missing piece that connected all the other themes and sub-categories.

In the chapters that follow, I provide a detailed overview of the resulting findings from my data collection and analysis. I found that participants make sense of their process of becoming racially aware through the social construction of an alternative racially aware identity, in contrast to the normative white identity. The following chapters each outline one of the three components that comprise this process and include a rich discussion of the stories that explain how participants make sense of this important identity work.

Statement of Reflexivity

An important part of my research approach, both in terms of theoretical and methodological alignment to CWS and CRT, was to be continuously reflexive throughout this process as a white researcher talking about race and racial inequity. When I decided in early 2019 that I wanted to study whiteness, white identity, and white racial awareness, I had no idea that I would be studying this within the context of a global pandemic and mass racial protests in response to ongoing violence against Black Americans. While the latter unfortunately is not a new issue for
Black Americans, the combined presence of such issues with enhanced media outlets and a global pandemic was a new socio-historical context in which Americans found themselves in 2020 when I began preparing this research. Thus, past and recent historical events make this a relevant topic of study. This can be tricky to navigate, given that white-centering can be a mechanism for erasing people of color’s experiences and reinforcing white supremacy. My goal, therefore, was to strike a balance throughout this process and remain critically reflexive.

Corces-Zimmerman and Guida (2019:93) state that “aspects of whiteness and white supremacy permeate every step of the research process.” As a white researcher doing research on whiteness with white subjects, and as a scholar activist who is writing this work for the purposes of social change, I would be remiss if I did not incorporate a statement of reflexivity as well. Engaging in critical reflection is part of the ongoing work that those of us who occupy privileged social locations can continually engage in as partners for greater social equity. Berger (2015:220) defines **reflexivity** as “the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome.” Throughout my research collection, analysis, and writing, I continuously engaged in self-reflexive and critical dialogue with myself and trusted others to maintain awareness of my own potential biases and subjectivity and avoid reproducing the very same structures my research seeks to break down.

One way in which I remained critical and open was by first recognizing my own positionality as an insider within the space of researching whiteness, white identity, and white awareness among people who participate in social justice initiatives. According to Roegman et al. (2015), an **insider** is someone who identifies with the social group in which they are studying, while an **outsider** is someone who is different from and/or does not identify as part of the social
group in which they are researching. As a white, cisgender woman who is also heterosexual, able-bodied, educated, middle class, millennial, and a working professional, I shared many commonalities with my research participants, particularly across race, education, income level, and profession. Like my participants, I as a white person have also been socialized within a system of white supremacy and institutionalized racism in the United States that I am actively trying to disrupt in favor of socially just and equitable actions and behaviors. This is a life-long journey in which I will continue to have moments of bias, complicity, and unconsciousness that reinforce these systems. In addition to doing this work personally, I also take on this work professionally as a DE&I leader. This combination of factors enabled me to relate to my participants as an insider, which impacts my research in a couple of ways. First, it was easier for me to identify research participants from my own network and connect with them as someone who is “like them.” Second, based on my own experiences, I had sensitizing concepts going into the data collection and analysis that I had to be mindful of. Though having some sensitizing concepts about potential research results was helpful in that I knew I was knowledgeable about the topic and had personal experience related to the social processes I was exploring, I also had to be aware of potential biases or judgments that may result.

Furthermore, since I only interviewed non-Hispanic white individuals for this study, it was important to ground my data collection and analysis in a methodological process that incorporated perspectives on whiteness from marginalized groups as well. This occurred through an ongoing comparison of the data with the existing literature on the topic, pulling from critical race scholars of varying backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Ongoing critical self-reflection through systematic analysis and dialogue with myself, advisors, my committee, and friends also enabled me to stay reflexive and critical as much as possible. I also reviewed past
notes and feedback from my initial proposal. All of this feedback from a diverse group of individuals, who bring a wide range of perspectives to my work, helped ensure I maintained a critical and reflexive lens that continued to center marginalized voices, address my own biases and discomfort, and ultimately ensure my research was achieving my goals around deconstructing rather than upholding whiteness and white supremacy.

There were several fears, biases, and discomfort that I navigated throughout this process. While difficult at times, I think my awareness of these things made me a better researcher and helped me grow in my own journey and acceptance of myself. As human beings, we are all imperfect products of our histories. Like my participants, I too am continually constructing and trying to make sense of what it means to be racially aware as a white cisgender woman. Going through the data collection and analysis process were often like holding a mirror up to myself and my own concerns. I found that I worry about many of the same things my participants do, like unknowingly acting upon a bias or engaging in a microaggression by doing or saying something that is racist, exclusive, or hurtful; building new relationships with people of color and knowing (understandably so) that it could take time to build trust depending on what experiences they have had with white people; and worrying about maintaining my own level of authenticity (while also not being too hard on myself) throughout this journey. These concerns stem from my own stories around not being “good enough” or needing to be “perfect,” and this work helped me navigate and move through some of these feelings.

I also found that my own experiences led me to sometimes feel judgmental of, and also empathetic to, myself and my participants. Because I wanted to be objective and systematic, I worked to recognize when I was feeling that way and redirect myself or address it as needed. I did not want my own discomfort to be the focus or to prevent me from moving this work
forward. I wanted to be critical in my analysis, yes, but also gracious and empathetic, because many of us were navigating this in similar ways, which shows how complex and emotional this work is. When any other moments of discomfort happened, I would acknowledge how I was feeling and take time to step back, meditate, talk to someone I trust, journal, and self-reflect.

I also felt concerned with avoiding overly centering myself and whiteness more broadly in a conversation about systemic racism. And yet, I am a researcher, and critically examining whiteness (which includes my own experience too) is the focus of this research, which is necessary to help deconstruct systemic racism and white supremacy. As a trusted friend once told me, working to address inequities in partnership with people of color does not mean avoiding sharing my own story. Similarly, centering whiteness so that we may understand and critically examine it does not automatically equate to decentering marginalized voices. It is a balance, a “both/and” that needs to occur. I share this personal piece of myself because navigating my own uncertainties and feelings was an intimate part of this research process and a very real part of my journey (and participants’ too) in continually (re)constructing my own identity as racially aware. I have come to accept these internal fears, conversations, and discomfort as part of my own process, and that helps me face it head on. Trusted people – friends, family, a therapist – help me navigate what I’m feeling in a safe and honest manner that prevents me from being so consumed by my fear that it becomes counterproductive. I also accept that no matter what, I am imperfect and will continue to make mistakes. That is part of the learning I have committed to in doing this type of work, and all part of being self-aware and critically self-reflexive throughout this research.
CHAPTER FIVE: BECOMING RACIALLY AWARE

The social construction of race does not exist separate from the racialization of identity; in the United States, white supremacist ideologies and discourses have actively played a role in (re)producing racialized subjectivity, meaning, and white racialized identities (Ferber 1998; Howard 2000). As discussed in previous chapters, such factors reinforce a normative white identity centered around ideals of superiority and privilege. While white supremacist and nationalist organizations intentionally work to highlight and construct a white identity, other white Americans are less aware of how they participate in racialized identity construction (DiAngelo 2018; Feagin et al. 2001; Ferber 1998). Therefore, the ways in which white people recognize a process of racialized identity construction or not, and how they identify with it if they do, have not been widely explored. Further, contemporary events have led to the normative and universalized state of whiteness and white supremacy being more openly challenged, and with it the hegemonic processes of white identity construction and racialization (Doane 2003). White Americans like those in my study are challenging and deconstructing normative whiteness, white supremacy, and white identity through their ongoing journey of racial awareness and engagement in action, in favor of (re)constructing a more racially aware and just alternative white identity. My findings further illuminate this process of identity work.

I found that in trying to make sense of their process of becoming racially aware, I uncovered rich narratives about people who are accounting for why they differ from other white people. The social construction of identity – and particularly of a racially aware identity as a white person – emerged as not just a primary theme, but the thread that connects all the other themes together. In this and the following chapters, I outline these themes as key “components” of the process of constructing a white racially aware identity. In this chapter, I cover how the
process of becoming aware is a key component that formulates the basis for constructing this alternative white identity, and this component is broken down into several relevant stages:

(1) The process starts with a foundation of understanding who these participants “are,” as based in self-described identity traits and their described experiences of feeling like an outsider early in their lives;

(2) This process continues or occurs throughout their lives via exposure to different experiences or “turning points” that spark awareness; and

(3) Throughout, empathy helps explain why such turning point moments are meaningful in sparking and deepening awareness.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I build upon this basis by describing how the meaning of being racially aware and engaging in social action are also relevant components in the process of constructing a white racially aware identity.

(1) The Foundations of Becoming Racially Aware: Identity Traits and Outsiderness

I found that there is a foundational stage in the process of becoming racially aware as a component of (re)constructing a white racially aware identity. This foundational stage is comprised of a set of common identity traits and outsider experiences that form the basis for empathy to emerge throughout other stages in the process. In this section, I will first describe the common identity traits and then segue into outsider experiences. Participants often described themselves in terms of individual personality traits, yet several common identity traits emerged across participants, offering insight into how participants become aware as a component of the social process of racial identity construction. These common traits included being: (1) self-aware / introspective, which also incorporates sensitive; (2) curious; (3) outspoken, someone who speaks up and questions things; and (4) responsible in the face of unfairness and injustice (the
latter two of which are also related to why participants take action). These traits were building blocks that developed throughout participants’ lives and were part of the recipe in making them more likely to be empathetic, open, and understanding later. And, as will be demonstrated, participants often possessed several of these traits as well.

1. Self-aware and Sensitive

The first common trait that emerged as a key part of becoming racially aware is self-awareness, which I found also incorporated descriptions around being introspective and/or sensitive. For the purposes of research, self-aware refers to the conscious process of self-reflecting and/or being introspective in the face of racist ideas, thoughts, or actions. For example, Hilda describes how her journey through recovery from alcoholism was impactful in her process of becoming aware because it taught her how to deeply self-reflect. She explains,

> It’s a continual practice because recovery teaches us to do an inventory every day – a moral inventory – and look at the day and admit to where we maybe made mistakes or want to go back and heal a harm ... So we get very practiced in self-examination and self-reflection … so when I was confronted with racism … I mean, my God, it’s in the thoughts … my theory of change [was] that if I could become aware of these thoughts and process them in a productive way, that I would have a shift in my thinking and I wouldn’t have this negative bias about Black people … I wouldn’t go so far as to say it’s worked because I think racism operates a lot like alcoholism. It’s sort of a disease of our culture and it’s not going to just go away, but I will tell you it has been lifted from me. And for that, I’m so grateful because it’s opened up my world to interact with so many more people at a level of comfort and intimacy that I just wouldn’t trade for the world.
Hilda goes on to explain that she has always been a “reflective person.” She also describes this process as part of a “spiritual awakening” that she experienced through recovery and counseling as well. Martin’s own spirituality is also a key part of his identity; he similarly credits his spirituality with what makes him a self-aware person. He shared that he views himself as someone who regularly self-reflects and is self-aware because of his Buddhist practice,

In the last 20 years I’ve been studying Buddhism and those studies just have increased my awareness over the years and it affects all aspects of my life, including the awareness of race. The foundations of Buddhism is love and compassion and non-judgment, and trying to practice those in my day-to-day life and noticing when I have thoughts that are judgmental, how to work with those. And so I think I’ve seen personal growth over the last 20 years as I’ve studied … and then I’ve applied that to what goes on in the world… I believe in those Buddhist principles [and] wake up every day and try to be aware and try to live the best I can for the world.

Like Martin, participants also frequently described “sensitive” as part of their narratives on self-awareness. Here, sensitive refers to people who are both self-aware and empathetic; they are intuitive and in-tune with what is going on in the world around them and to others’ feelings. Martin places his sense of self as sensitive, aware, and self-reflective within a 20-year long journey of learning, studying, and practicing Buddhist principles he values. Eric also describes himself as self-aware and sensitive, because he is a “thinker,” and talks about this in relationship to making progress over time as well,

I’m kind of a thinker, like on the side of coding and stuff, wanting to solve those problems. I also like to read philosophy … I took a philosophy class in high school and that was really eye-opening. Just like thinking about what makes humans work and why
we do certain things … just trying to learn what is the motivations and trying to make myself a better person … I recognize that I’m imperfect. So I have to keep on working to make progress … like you could be at a point where you don’t realize you’re like bad at something and then you’re comfortable. You stay there, you don’t get any better … it’s brought me to a point where I realized that there’s room for growth. So that makes me more open to progress.

He explains further that he applies this to understanding racism and reflecting on the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing racial protests in the summer of 2020, which was the summer he transitioned to college. Eric later explains that his sense of self-awareness is also related to being sensitive. As a sensitive, self-aware person, he has selected the field of programming because he is passionate about wanting to help people, which he also explains speaks to his empathy for others. Jack also succinctly states in response to a probe about being a sensitive person, “I feel I’m pretty introspective a lot of the time,” and that he is “definitely more sensitive.” He further describes how,

I definitely think I am more conscious of the world around me and how I interact with it being white and being male. I think it is also has changed me from the perspective that, as being white and male, I have a, I won’t say an obligation, but a definite opportunity and ability to impact the world in a good way, helping to reverse hundreds of years of systematic oppression in my actions and what I’m doing and how I’m doing it and what I’m saying. So [from] that aspect of my identity … I don’t want to become apathetic. So [recognizing] that I have that power to … affect change.

Jack’s sensitivity and self-reflection lead not only to racial awareness but also to a desire to “affect change,” or act, and he describes this as an aspect of his identity. Earl helps to expand on
the complexity of self-awareness, including how it is also about recognizing one’s own positionality and being a better person. He shared a story about feeling connected with a community of people through hip-hop in high school, but also recognizing his positionality within that community,

I was hanging out deep man … I really was like a little white boy in hip hop hanging out and just at school, but I was going to people’s houses. I was going to community functions and late night functions and … so I was kind of deep into some of that, stepping outside my bubble, but also recognizing that I wasn’t Black … so recognizing that I was partaking in a culture that made me feel human and connected with the world, but that came through both the genius and God that’s in people, but also the oppression and hate that systems can manifest.

Later as an adult, Earl draws from these experiences and his understanding of his identity traits as what enabled his identity to shift and change, explaining,

Something that’s changed a lot is my ability to love myself and to work towards my own healing. I felt valued by the world since I joined [DE&I organization] … I [did] feel kind of a little bit rejected for a long time, even if that was my own ego. And so it’s kind of validating to feel like people find some meaning in your life’s journey … and also feel like sharing with you some of their life’s journey and figure out what it means to be anti-racist with white skin on this planet, it kind of gives you the desire to keep going ‘cause it’s like, oh, I do have the opportunity to practice being a better person. And I do have the opportunity to help a lot of other people consider that too. And if more of us are doing that, I do think it’s making the world better for our neighbors of color and others that live under these systems.
Earl makes sense of his experiences by explaining how recognizing his positionality and the systems of oppression around him have deepened his understanding, as a key part of his racial awareness journey, and have also inspired him to act by being a better person and helping others.

As demonstrated so far, many of the individuals who described themselves as self-aware and sensitive were men. Additional men who described themselves this way also included Allen, Ryan, James, and Nelson. However, women also described themselves as sensitive when discussing self-awareness, equating it more to emotion or being emotional, specifically in terms of caring for others and their feelings. For example, Chantel says,

I would describe myself as someone who is very caring, I care about others. I often put others’ needs above myself, sometimes to my own detriment. I’m very sensitive – I like to connect with people. I think that’s a really fundamental part of who I am.

Eloise also describes herself as very sensitive, explaining,

I’ve just always been very sensitive to people’s feelings and I am a person that stands up for people, cause nobody really stood up for me… I guess I’m just open to other people. I’m that type of person that will always be there for somebody … that type of person that listens. And if you ever need, you could be a stranger off the street and if you need anything from me, I’ll be there for you. I have this, I don’t want to say need, I just, I’m sensitive… Like I pick up when people are going through things and it’s like I’m sensitive to it.

Eloise is a more sensitive person when it comes to understanding and picking up on other people’s feelings. She also adds on later that because she feels what other people are feeling, she is a more vocal person – someone who speaks up when she sees injustices occurring. Similarly, although she does not use the word “sensitive” specifically, Ella also describes herself as
someone who is empathetic and emotionally in-tune,

    My psychiatrist has told me that I am a very empathetic person, sometimes to the point where it is destructive for myself. Um, and I totally get it. There are things where sometimes I obsess because I'm worried or I feel like it's wrong, or I get really excited about things and I'm like, we have to do this ... when I was around the age of 10, I lost my grandmother who I was so close to. And then we lost her dog who had been there since before I was born. Um, and then I lost my grandfather and my mom was like, you know what, you're just an emotional basket case and I can't help you. So here's the psychiatrist and you need help because it's just not fair to put you in this situation. And ... I'm a more emotionally healthy person because of it.

Ella’s sensitivity and empathy as a person grew out of loss and grief, which her psychiatrist has aided her in processing and becoming a more “emotionally healthy person” as a result, which can be understood as impactful on her journey of racial awareness. Ruth also does not specifically use the word “sensitive” to describe herself, but she explains her sensitivity as,

    It might be kind of religious, but I have always had such a tender heart. I would cry about everything when I was little ... I don’t know, I’ve always just been emotional and very tender hearted. I guess it hurts me to think people are just being ... blatantly rude and they’re treating people differently because of the color of their skin.

Ruth describes herself as “emotional and very tender hearted,” and equates it potentially to her own religious upbringing, but she also says she would often cry about everything from the time she was little, and she goes on to explain that she is still that way. When she then equates that to poor treatment of others, it also makes her feel emotional.
2. **Curious**

Several participants in my study also discussed being curious individuals, which they situate as helping them bridge the gap in understanding different people’s experiences as they have cultivated their racial awareness. When asked to describe himself, one of the first things Bruce mentions is curiosity.

I think probably the first thing that comes to mind is I think of myself as someone who is intensely curious and just on a continuous quest for knowledge … I just think of myself as a lifelong continuous learner, and I have trained myself to be very curious about life. Bruce also emphasizes himself as someone who values leadership and is introspective, which he intertwines with his sense of self as “curious,” defining this as focused on learning and obtaining knowledge so that he can understand better. Wesley also describes being curious in a similar way, explaining.

I spent 15 years of my career trying to set up businesses overseas, lived in Germany for a while. I spent a lot of time in China and Hong Kong because of my interest across cultures, there's just so much diversity in this world. And I'm always curious about it, what's it like to be somebody else? … So I mean, back to the thing about how has my awareness changed. I think I've just become more aware. I know more about what's going on. I've done the research. I continue to do the research. I still read, I still do that. I am by nature a learner. So I continue to, I'm curious.

Wesley describes being curious with respect to experiences earlier in his life traveling overseas, being curious about different cultures, and being a learner. Now Wesley is a DE&I facilitator and works with other white men on their racial awareness. He further defines long-lasting racial awareness as a lifelong commitment and a willingness to be curious. This is insightful in understanding how racially aware individuals make sense of both their own sense of constructing...
a racially aware identity, and also the ways in which they act upon it – in this case, in relation to how he teaches and relays that to others in his daily work. Nelson also describes how being curious played a role in becoming racially aware. In his early adulthood, he worked for a company where he took people on outdoor adventure activities, and he saw how these experiences brought people together, describing,

I saw that there were avenues to bring people together across differences and there was some racial diversity, but not a lot in some of those programs. And then I remember some guys from New York City had never been out of the city and they came and they had their chains on and big knives, this was before TSA banned knives on planes and stuff like that. They loved the woods and then they got back and get ready to go back home on their planes and they put their big knives back on and it’s like, oh (laughs), they’re going back to the real jungle. So I got curious about that.

Through different experiences, Nelson was exposed to different people. Rather than perceiving it negatively, however, he describes being curious. Interestingly, most of the participants who describe themselves as curious are men. However, when asked to describe who she is, Misty also includes “curious” in her personal identity traits,

I would say I have always been … very energetic, curious, intelligent, very outspoken, unafraid to lead the charge when I feel strongly about an issue. People always know where I stand.

Seeing oneself as a curious person enables participants to be more open, making it a key trait in setting the foundation for becoming aware as a component of developing a racially aware identity. Misty also describes herself as “outspoken,” which is the topic of the next section.
3. Outspoken

The third common identity trait was a strong orientation towards questioning things and speaking up, which I refer to as being **outspoken**. Given participants care not only about being racially aware but also about taking action towards racial equity, it was unsurprising that many of them described themselves as individuals who speak up and question things. As O’Brien (2001) discusses, white people are in a unique position of privileged resistance, where we may have opportunities to be more vocal about white supremacy and racism without the same repercussions as people of color. Though speaking up is also a type of action, which will be discussed further in Chapter Seven, I also found it to be a common identity trait that participants defined in making sense of their racially aware identity. I described earlier that Eloise and Misty – along with being sensitive and curious – are also people who are vocal and speak up. Chloe views herself as someone who speaks up,

> I'm not one to put up with any form of assholery, whether that's racism or --, and my husband, bless his heart. He has a hard time with it because the distance between my brain and my mouth is like, especially when, like something irks me and yeah. Saying things to people in public. And I know it's not always wise, but I can't always help it. And that has gotten me into trouble in my past.

While Chloe describes herself as always being this way, Jennifer describes becoming more “outspoken” as something that has shifted over time,

> More outspoken, like, maybe years ago I would be hesitant to share a Martin Luther King quote like that, because that might stir the pot and now I'm just like, nah, I don't care. Stop all of you that act like you're for social justice yet you're mad that, you know, an
NFL player – where’s his freedom of speech when he loses his job for kneeling? Um, and yeah, I just know, like I just am over it. So if anything, I'm more outspoken.

Like Jennifer, Autumn also describes how they’ve changed in terms of becoming more outspoken,

In ways of changes, I have accepted my own privilege. I’ve accepted my own inherent racism. And I think that has helped me, I've become more bold or stronger in, better at like having conversations with people, speaking up when I'm seeing it happening or hearing it happen. And because of those changes that have happened, I think that's helped me gain a little more, I don't know if confidence is the word, but conviction in doing something about it.

Autumn has come to accept their own privilege and internalized racism, which they attribute to helping them become bolder and stronger in speaking out and acting. Being outspoken does not always require being bold or confrontational. Will describes how he speaks up and pushes back as a leader in his work, even with like-minded people,

Being such an influential part of the pride group, being co-chair for an entire leadership forum, bringing hundreds of people together…I pushed them to make sure we're not just bringing in the same set of speakers and showing just that gay white experience. I need more than that. And I'm pushing them to do more than that. I'm comfortable asking, is this the set of candidates? Look at your program and you have four white people back-to-back, what message are you sending? Like, I know that people exist that have these experiences let's go out there and find them. I don't want to see the same program we've done for years and years and years, but that pushing that conversation is so important. We're pushing it in all of our Pride events, we're pushing it within our teams.
Will pushes back through conversation and asking questions of his co-workers in the Pride organization, an LGBTQ+ organization at work, and even on his own teams when looking at candidates for jobs.

4. Responsibility and fairness

The final common trait expressed was a strong sense of responsibility and fairness. This trait also overlaps with some of the other traits discussed so far and was one of the primary identity traits that drove participants’ desire to take action. For example, Nelson is sensitive and curious, but he also feels that morally he has a responsibility to act, something that has been cultivated as part of constructing a white racially aware identity,

And it's obviously white people's job. It's our problem. We're the ones that perpetuate and for the most part are blind to it and not seeing our whiteness. So the identity that grew was a calling to make this my life's work.

Chantel, who also identifies as highly sensitive, describes herself as someone who is responsible and values fairness based on her own experiences of unfairness, which drive her to want to “change the world.” This began when she was very young,

I grew up in a very dysfunctional household, dysfunctional family. And so I have a younger brother … and often I did what was necessary, took care of myself and took care of the house and he often caused trouble… I would get punished, but he did things wrong all the time and [my parents] were afraid [to hold him accountable] … that definitely contributes to, I felt like that was unfair. I felt like I had a higher burden and a higher standard set. So that's probably where it starts… So there are many things at play here. I think me being so driven to change the world. You know, I grew up where I really took care of my brother and I really took care of things around the house and I was, I don't
know if empowered is the right word, because a four year old shouldn't be having to act like an adult in her household, but in my upbringing, I was definitely raised to, thinking that I could change things and thinking I could do whatever I wanted. And with fairness being a really core part of who I am and my value system.

Natalie also describes feeling a responsibility to act because of unfairness she has witnessed,

I’m in a caregiving profession, when something hurts, you recognize that's not okay and you want to fix it. And so when you see this experience of people where there's this inequity and where there's this pain, it's like, that's not okay. And you want to make it different… I think for me to see something that is so unfair and to see the, it doesn’t feel good to be okay, to have freedom from all of these, you know, freedom from racism and freedom from discrimination when somebody else is experiencing that... So the question becomes, I have this awareness now, what am I going to do with it to make it right?

As a caregiver, Natalie feels responsible for taking action in the face of pain and inequity, and the question for her becomes a matter of what she is going to do about it. This has become foundational to who she is and how she views herself as a racially aware white person. In summary, the described identity traits of being self-aware and sensitive, curious, outspoken, and responsible / fair are foundational elements of identity that participants most commonly ascribe to themselves, which helps explain how participants make sense of their shifting, racially aware identity.

**Outsiderness**

While collectively participants defined themselves as self-aware, sensitive, curious, outspoken, and responsible, an additional commonality was shared across participants. In helping to understand why these traits specifically contributed to racial awareness, participants’
descriptions of feeling like an outsider early in life appear to be critical in this process. I refer to this as **outsiderness**: experiences participants had throughout their lives, often in earlier phases of their life, when they felt like an “outsider” or that they did not belong (related to a sense of marginalization or not being in the dominant group). Though these early experiences were not direct catalysts for racial awareness, they helped prime participants for awareness development later. This is similar to O’Brien’s (2001) idea of “approximating experiences.” From a sociological perspective, white people are unable to experience systemic race-based discrimination and inequity, so they must rely upon “approximate” experiences of their own to help build empathy for what race-based discrimination might feel like. In my study, participants relied upon diverse and often intersectional experiences of feeling like an outcast, outsider, or not belonging as foundational to their process of becoming racially aware.

More than 3/4 of participants described feeling like an “outsider” as being the “only” or not belonging at some point in their life. As participants have become more racially aware, these narratives illuminate how participants make sense of their own expanding white racially aware identity. In the process of identity construction, these moments where they experienced unfairness are drawn upon to connect with injustices that other people may be experiencing. This happened across participants regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, income, or socioeconomic background. No matter who they were or how they differed, outsider experiences formulate a core piece of how participants’ journey of racial awareness begins and continues.

Outsiderness occurred in participants’ lives across a diverse array of experiences. To start, I want to revisit Chantel, who experienced different moments where she felt like an outsider. I described earlier how she often felt responsible for caring for herself and her brother within a dysfunctional family, which contributed to her feeling like an outsider, as well as the
cultivation of identity traits around responsibility and fairness. Another experience that particularly shaped her occurred in high school,

I had set a goal in the eighth grade that I wanted to be valedictorian and so I was on track for that goal ... but one boy was very competitive. And he also had the same goal and often we'd have a test, and we'd get our scores back and he would stand up from his desk and march to my desk and slam his test results on my desk and compare and … He wanted to know if he got a better score than me. And I always felt singled out and I didn't really understand why … He didn't do that to any of the other kids in the class, we had other guys in the class that were neck and neck with us ... I felt like it was because I was a girl and I felt he tried to bully me… and it just felt unfair.

Chantel’s early experience of unfairness and feeling singled out based on her gender, combined with her strong sense of responsibility and fairness as described earlier, became pivotal early experiences in her construction of a racially aware identity. Ryan also emphasizes valuing fairness and justice; he, too, narrates feeling singled out growing up as someone who identified as a skater,

I grew up kind of being weary of the police, being a young skater and back in the day, skaters were considered hooligans or whatever by the police and by adults and by society in general… so being targeted as a criminal because I was a skateboarder, like that was a real sense … and that doesn’t compare or equal getting shot by the police by any stretch of the imagination, but … I can see the problem with the police and with the racism.

Alternatively, Elaine describes feeling like an outsider due to religion. She grew up near her mom’s sister (her aunt) and her cousin, and Elaine’s family was Protestant while her cousin’s family was Jewish. Elaine recalls,
During Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and Passover, I always felt very excluded. We would be at these events, but I was different, and I didn't fit in and I didn't like not fitting in…that was impactful for me, the fact that there were so many people who knew how to spin a dreidel and I didn’t understand it … I didn’t know the protocol or the customs, so it made me different. It made me an outcast and I didn’t like it. Interestingly, rather than a sense of empathy or compassion being based in one type of event, a range of events were identified as helping to foster this sense of empathy. Though Elaine is part of a religious majority in the United States (Christian), in her family she felt different because half her family was Jewish, and she was not familiar with those customs. Ella’s story of being a young woman with disabilities and the empathy and compassion she feels towards others as a result has enabled her to become more racially aware,

I think it's seeing the hurt that people have experienced, and a whole lot of it is going [on in] my life. I was dealt some pretty rough cards. I have struggled to get help. It took me eight years to get a diagnosis because I was told, oh, it's growing pains. Oh, you're a girl going through puberty. Oh, you are really emotional and sensitive. It's all in your head. And being like, no, you come be in my situation in the middle of the night [when] I'm in this immense amount of pain and like, even though other people who are experiencing, like, I mean pain is pain and it doesn't matter if it's emotional, if it's physical, if it's whatever … if your life is to the point where you have to do things differently because of your situation and how much pain it puts you in, or trying to minimize pain. Like, I feel like it is something about being able to connect with other people.

I described Ella earlier as a sensitive and empathetic person, and she further connects with others because of her own chronic pain and not being believed as a young woman. She explained that
her awareness grew because of these connections, as well as her curiosity and observation of an array of people and situations while waiting in doctor’s offices. Taylor pulls upon feeling like an outsider due to her gender identity and sexual orientation as a lesbian transgender woman experiencing mental health struggles. Early in her life, as she navigated and tried to understand her own gender identity and sexual orientation, her family was not very supportive or accepting. As an adult, she explains that it was difficult coming out as transgender, and even though her family is much more accepting now, her experience and the things she still worries about as a transgender woman make her more aware of the challenges other people might be going through,

I always have that anxiety of, does somebody know that I’m trans or what do I say, or how do I say it? Or, you know, what’s the pitch of my voice or anything because my voice is deeper, you know? And I think that maybe because I am trans, you know, I worry about those things more than probably most people, but I am also much more aware of the strife that others – immigrants, Hispanic, Blacks – have gone through.

Taylor’s experiences of marginalization help her connect to the experiences of others and understand better what different groups may experience. James does something similar, though he draws from his experience growing up in diverse, urban, low-income communities to build and make sense of his awareness. James describes that he was often made fun of by people of color in his community for being white and by other white people for being poor. While this was happening, he was also growing up in a somewhat abusive and unhealthy environment. Despite this, he does credit his parents for teaching him to be open and accepting. I asked him how that impacted his awareness, and he summarized,

I never felt like I belonged and the people in the community I grew up in often expressed that they felt like they didn't belong. It was just easier to be like, okay, well, yeah, I don't
belong. And you don't think you belong, then I have a felt sense of what your experience could be. And so, yeah, it was easier to empathize I think, through that. James was able to connect to people in his community, who were also very diverse, across a common felt sense of not belonging, even if that looked different for different people. Like James, Celeste also grew up in a dysfunctional and abusive environment that often left her feeling like an outsider, particularly within her own family, I was an outsider in my own family. I wasn’t really a part of my mom and my brother and my stepfather’s family. They all were. And then my dad remarried and had another son. So I always felt kind of like, not belonging. So a lot of my childhood I felt [that way]. Conversely, while Earl grew up in a loving family, he too often felt like an outsider, experiencing depression at a young age that left him turning to drugs and other destructive behaviors. When I asked him more about feeling like an outsider, he describes, I felt like an awkward duck. I felt isolated. I felt like as a man, you couldn't be affectionate and caring and the world didn't reward that. I felt like the other examples of men that I saw besides my dad were like Bush and all these people that celebrated war and plastic, crass consumerism. As a sensitive, caring, and self-aware man, Earl felt early in his life that he did not fit into the typical expectations of men in American society. That left him feeling like an outsider and that he did not belong. He eventually found community and belonging within the Black community through art and music, as discussed earlier. Allen is also a sensitive, caring, and self-aware man, and he, too, shares stories of feeling like he did not belong in high school as someone who was more gentle, sensitive, and studious,
I was very quickly indoctrinated into the, you don't belong. Here I was in [STATE] where being male meant being aggressive, playing football, being tough. And I was a kid that much more identified with academics, with gentleness. I was an older brother slash third parent to my siblings. There was a picture of me shown during high school graduation that all my peers laughed at. I mean, good naturally, but they all laughed at, that's me with my little sister and she's got her head on my shoulder and I've got my head on her head. And I just look at that picture even as an 18-year-old high school male. And I was like, it just melted my heart…so nurturing, kind, gentle, studious. These were not male characteristics in [STATE] you know, so I very much did not fit in.

Participants’ common identity traits and their personal experiences of outsiderness set the foundation as a key part of their process of becoming aware as part of their social identity construction as a racially aware person. What is particularly powerful about these stories is that such experiences did not have to be race-based to spark racial awareness; these experiences occurred with respect to disability and mental health, veganism and caring about animals, religion, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic disadvantage, and being introverted or “different.” Combined with identity traits such as sensitivity, self-awareness, curiosity, and fairness, the intersection of these traits and outsider experiences were foundational in making participants more open and empathetic in moments where they were exposed to injustices. Therefore, in the next section, I build upon this foundation by exploring how participants further construct a white racially aware identity through the process of becoming aware with respect to various moments of exposure, or turning points, throughout their lives.
(2) Turning Points and Relational Exposure

In the previous section, I described common identity traits and outsider experiences that help us understand the foundational stage of becoming racially aware, a key component in the process of constructing a white racially aware identity. However, this foundation alone is not enough to become racially aware; rather, this process requires additional necessary points of exposure that act as sparks from which awareness can grow and/or deepen. In this section, I discuss turning point moments of exposure as another key stage that further enables racial awareness to emerge.

I first set the stage for this section by revisiting the existing literature on “turning points” to help frame my findings and explain how I defined “turning points,” “exposure,” and “relational exposure,” all of which are key aspects of this stage of constructing a racially aware identity. I then utilize participant quotes to support these findings as key aspects of this stage.

Definitions and Framing

Sociological research on turning points and identity has been influenced by Robert Merton and Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh in relationship to the process of role exit, as discussed in Chapter Two. In my research, I found that the process of becoming racially aware was about exiting or transitioning from a white racially unaware person – who is often color-blind and oblivious to systemic origins and the ways in which they perpetuate white supremacy – toward the construction of a white racially aware identity in which participants’ empathy is awakened and their beliefs or understandings around the experiences of people of color shift. This makes sense because in applying a critical whiteness studies (CWS) framework, I take the position that white Americans do not grow up with a clear awareness of systemic racism, white supremacy, and internalized whiteness because we are socialized to be “color-blind” – to ignore or not see mechanisms of race, which perpetuates the current power structure and white people’s place of
“superiority” within it. This was true among participants as well – most did not grow up with a consciously-understood idea of systemic racism, their own race and the impacts of whiteness, or an understanding of being part of a racialized social order. While a few participants, like Stella and Adrienne, felt they have been racially aware most of their lives, most participants grew up in overtly racist and/or covertly color-blind environments. Participants made sense of their shift in identity to more racially aware by drawing upon narratives about meaningful moments, or “turning points,” that sparked deeper awareness and helped them integrate racial awareness as part of who they are. Examining turning points provides a deeper understanding into the process of how people (re)construct a white racially aware identity.

My findings on turning points expand on what O’Brien (2001:18) found in her research on white antiracists; she states that “a particular event in someone’s life could serve as a ‘turning point’ and they see their antiracist transformation as dating from that moment.” These events typically stemmed from early memories. As I will demonstrate, many of my participants also describe more definitive, earlier memories that influence or act as a catalyst for their racial awakening, but the process itself of becoming racially aware is deeper, more complex, and ongoing over time. Turning points appeared to be less about making a conscientious decision to exit a role at a definitive point in time or resulting from one specific definitive moment, so that no one point acted as individuals’ singular racial awakening “birth” (O’Brien 2001). Instead, my findings expand upon the scholarship to redefine turning points as a series of experiences, moments, or catalysts that may be gradual, yet stand out meaningfully to people as pivotal moments of racial awareness. These moments typically occurred in the form of exposure, which refers to moments when participants experienced a situation in which they learned about the realities of racism, white supremacy, whiteness, and/or racial inequity from other people –
particularly people of color, though not always. Exposure occurred through many different settings, such as in the workplace, educational institutions, close friendly interactions, at a conference, in a training, through media, and more. It also could take the form of exposure to different experiences, perspectives, and cultures that made them question their understandings of racism, white supremacy, and white identity.

Further, a common theme that made these moments meaningful catalysts for awareness related to experiencing exposure through various types of relationships. Even in the interviews, the relational interaction between the participants and me was a site for ongoing identity construction. I define this as relational exposure: the social, relational interactions that served as memorable turning points for participants, in which storytelling led to greater racial awareness of systemic racism, their own whiteness and white identity, and white supremacy, whether it was through direct conversation or indirectly through media or entertainment (e.g., movies, music, comedians, etc.). This more nuanced definition helps call attention to the importance of sharing stories, the willingness of the white participant to listen and internalize what they heard, and the broader means through which awareness can occur beyond just direct or close interactions. I will expand upon these concepts further throughout this section.

**Turning Points**

Understanding how people become aware through “turning points,” and what that process looks like, is complex. It is not a singular step, destination, nor something that one “achieves” or automatically has as a trait. Instead, it is a complicated, socially constructed journey that varies from person to person and helps explain how participants are making sense of themselves in the context of the world around them and their own shifting identity. In relation to this study, sometimes participants experienced these moments as very definitive, sometimes less so. Either
way, they often occurred multiple times and are ongoing throughout their lives. As Nelson summarizes well,

… when you say you know ‘racial awareness’, I kind of laugh because, you know, it's never over. It's like I'm not racially aware, now I am racially aware.

Though the process is ongoing, there are still meaningful points of change and departure from previously held identities toward the construction of a new identity.

Participants often used similar types of words to describe these moments. For example, some participants called it a “series” of moments, though as a probe, I often asked them follow-up questions about how they experienced these moments of awareness over time. Other descriptors were more in their own words, such as when Ella refers to these moments as “building blocks.” Jack describes these moments as a “crescendo” over time. Will called it a “snowball effect,” stating,

I think for me, it's always kind of like a series of moments and events. It's just that kind of snowball effect. Right? It's just growing and growing over time. And, um, cause I just, I've always had that experience of, oh, you know, you don't see color, be color-blind and treat everybody the way you want to be treated and all good and all, until you realize that just because you, one person are treating people with respect doesn't mean that they're getting what they need to be able to succeed, when an entire system has been built against them for hundreds of years… So snowball of events.

Will’s description is also an example of how this “snowball of events” has moved him away from a color-blind understanding of race towards a systemic one. Other participants also describe definitive moments related to injustices, reflecting on how these experiences differ from their own. Jennifer describes an experience while driving with a friend, who is Puerto Rican,
Even before Black Lives Matter, realizing that my interaction with law enforcement was always very respectful, and it wasn't until another teacher who's actually Puerto Rican. Um, we all went downtown one night. We all left from my house and my friend drove and as we were going through downtown [name of local suburb], on the way back to my house, we got pulled over and they were just giving him so much crap. Like, you don't live here, your license says [different suburb]. And you know, like this part of [city] is where, like you see the NBA players and just like, everyone has a fancy car and, you know, he had like a Camry or something. And so, I guess it stood out and they were giving him so much crap and he didn't even do anything wrong. And then it was like, well, what are you doing with this young woman, blah, blah, blah. And it wasn't until I gave them my license that showed that I had a [local suburb] address that like, oh, then they were like, okay, well just be safe. But it was like, what the hell?

Witnessing firsthand this injustice at the hands of the police, and recognizing her own privilege as a white, local woman and how that changed the police person’s attitude, was eye-opening for Jennifer and therefore became a more definitive moment in her process of becoming aware.

Martin also describes his process of becoming aware through more definitive moments, describing specific moments when he was younger in which he would have conversations with his father and other family members about the Holocaust. Martin grew up in a Jewish family and his father’s parents had left their home country at the time of the Holocaust. He summarizes these moments and why they were impactful to him,

I think it started with the discussions of the Holocaust. As a younger child that made me very aware of discrimination at that point, discrimination against Jews in an awful way. And so it wasn't difficult to apply that experience to other forms of discrimination. And
so it's not that I was personally discriminated against as a young Jew. It wasn't really dealt with in school and with my friends but that story of the Holocaust and my father's emotions around that really made me very aware of discrimination and made me want to not have anything to do with discrimination of other people.

These conversations with his father stand out as definitive moments for Martin. Earl also describes moments related to growing up in a Jewish family and having family who fled the Holocaust. In the 1960s, his mom marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and his dad joined the Peace Corps to avoid the Vietnam War. His definitive moments range from early memories of Black friends, his parents having diverse groups of people coming in and out of their home, and even reading children’s books that he later realized were quite racist. In high school, he moved across the country to a predominantly Black neighborhood and school and was suddenly surrounded by a community of impactful teachers, leaders, and friends from whom he learned. However, an encounter with the police that left him walking away while a friend who was Black did not, was the impetuous for significant change; this definitive moment politicized Earl towards action that has lasted throughout his life. This reminds me of what O’Brien (2001) described as *approximating experiences* – moments where individuals’ relationships with people of color, witnessing or experiencing personal instances of suffering or oppression, and/or their own beliefs around fairness and equity act as a means through which people feel empathy for those experiencing inequity. For the participants described so far, the turning points throughout their lives had to do with witnessing or recognizing systemic injustices that people of color experience and reflecting on how their personal experiences as a white person differ.

Some participants described their turning points as a more gradual, less definitive process. For example, Allen says, “It’s been iterative for me, so it’s hard to pinpoint a single
point.” I followed up by asking him if he felt like it was ongoing or a journey, and he replied, “Yeah. That word would fit.” Taylor also uses similar terminology to describe her process as more ongoing or gradual, referring to her process a “progression.” She recalled,

I don’t know when I became more racially aware, I think it’s a progression, I think like a mark was kind of struck, you know, if you were to look at like a chart or something, you could see just gradual increases over time. And then just this skyrocket up of a trend line that was probably associated more with me coming out of the closet.

Taylor goes on to describe that there are “pieces” of experiences for her over time that added up to being aware, her own experience of coming out and transitioning being a big piece in this “progression,” but she describes them as less specific “ah-ha” moments, lending to the process being more gradual and ongoing for her. Misty also describes different pieces of experiences over time, though she calls them “seeds,” stating that her awareness, “I think maybe … there was a little seed that started when I was in high school.” Though she pinpoints this more specific moment, her stories of specific experiences are less definitive. She describes high-level experiences of being around diverse immigrant families growing up, being a teacher, living in the Bahamas and having Bahamian friends whose children she viewed as her “adopted” family, and also experiences of diversity, equity and inclusion trainings at work. While there are many different pieces or “seeds,” the way she describes them more generally and with less detail indicate her process is more ongoing and gradual. Finally, when asked about his process, Clint describes it as,

More like an ongoing continuous process, occasionally punctuated with big moments … I remember learning moments that really solidified my understanding of some differences.
Though he recalls some specific learning moments, like Misty, he does not describe them in a lot of detail and refers to his process as more “ongoing” and “continuous.”

**Relational Exposure**

Turning points are meaningful because they create moments of exposure that spark awareness. The most significant type of exposure occurred through relationships, both directly and indirectly. I defined this as “relational exposure.” Relational exposure provides a setting in which the white racially aware identity can be (re)produced and even reinforced, as these interactions also serve to hold people accountable to and reinforce the ideals and traits of such an identity. They help participants become, build upon, and maintain their awareness over time.

Relational exposure occurs in different ways and through different types of relationships. While participants often described these experiences – and the overall process of becoming racially aware – from their vantage point as an individual, their rich stories demonstrate the impact of the social interactions they have with the people around them and, when held collectively across participants, demonstrate that relational exposure has the power to impact people both at the micro and macro levels of society. These social interactions and the discourse participants engage in through these moments shape how they are continually constructing their understanding of race, racism, whiteness, and white supremacy in broader society and also their own sense of self and place within those constructs. Specifically, these interactions can occur through close personal relationships they have developed with people of color or through more “minor” relationships with acquaintances. Relational exposure also sometimes occurs through close relationships and experiences with other white people they feel comfortable talking to. Participants encountered these relationships and moments sometimes intentionally, but more often than not, they were unplanned and arose organically.
Relational moments of exposure frequently occurred through close relationships with people of color. For example, Celeste summarizes this well when she describes her relationship with one of her closest friends, who is Black, and her friend’s family. Celeste and her friend met through work and have been friends for years; she describes her experience with them,

Being a part of that family and learning as a white woman how to be a part of and also keep myself in check and also build relationships with each of them. And not like you know put on, like, oh, I'm friends with their mother or their grandmother, so this grants me passageway … that has been like some of the most transformational learning on, you know, how do I not stay detached, or just like disappear so much that my personality and connection with them isn't fluid, but also how do I keep in check my whiteness, like, be aware as best I can, where am I coming from, make repair. Not get into saviorism ... I really believe this work is highly relational and that's been some training ground for me

Celeste’s example is one of constant and ongoing relational exposure through her close personal relationship with her friend and her friend’s family. As Celeste discusses, becoming aware and maintaining awareness are part of a highly relational process that has to do with ongoing moments of exposure through close personal friendships and interactions. These interactions also lead to authentic connection where she can share her personality and be herself also, as well as transformational learning. Such relationships enable her to stay in the work of undoing her own internalized whiteness and avoid the detachment, unawareness, or complacency that white people can easily fall back into because of our “privileged” positionality within a racialized hierarchy. Ruth was also impacted by close relationships, particularly in high school. She grew up in a neighborhood that was split evenly between white and Hispanic populations. Her best
friend was Hispanic, and she was courageous enough to call Ruth out when Ruth said or did things unknowingly that were racist. Ruth shares one incident,

I was with her and a bunch of her friends. I don’t think at this moment in time I was racially aware, but looking back…so embarrassing … I didn’t know what the word meant at all, I just thought it meant like cool or funny or something. And I called [another girl] ‘ghetto’ and my friend was like, Ruth, why did you say that? And I was like, is that a bad word? She was like it’s not a bad word, but where we come from, when people call you ghetto, it means you’re cheap or whatever. And I was like, oh okay, that is not what I thought that word meant at all.

Ruth’s close relationship with her friend has the level of trust where her friend can give her honest feedback and Ruth takes it to heart. Hilda has a similar relationship with her former partner and father of her children, who shares his experience with her as a Black man and gives her feedback when she as a white woman is doing or saying something that is racist or a microaggression. Hilda first describes that growing up, she did not have any close relationships with people of color until she met her partner and began dating him. She explained,

I don't think I tuned in until I woke up. I mean, I don't think I ever, I never really looked at this stuff until I met [partner’s name] and I met him in a dating situation. And all of a sudden I was confronted with my own racism. He was the first Black person I knew … I [had] maybe casual acquaintances at work … but nobody that I was in any kind of honest, meaningful, like nobody I was talking about race with or our own identity…

Even though they are no longer together, Hilda and her ex-partner choose to remain friends, and he continues to support her growth in awareness through ongoing, honest conversations about inequity, microaggressions, and whiteness. Hilda has also grown through her alcohol recovery
and therapy programs, becoming more deeply aware of systemic racism and white supremacy as a result. Rachel’s racial awareness development also occurs through her close relationship with her husband, who is a Black man. She describes becoming more racially aware,

   When I met my husband because … he shared with me even some of the things he had experienced like recently, of just being pulled over because he fits the profile, and people asking to search his car. Like I’ve been pulled over and have gotten multiple [tickets] without having to take traffic school … I’ve gotten probably four or five tickets in my life and never once have I been asked additional questions or even thought about having my car searched. But the fact that he can get pulled over for not really even doing things and being asked to search his car, for basically doing the same thing I would be doing, is like that's tough … so hearing like wow that actually happens and to people like you.

Revisiting Earl, he is another participant who has had many deep relationships with people of color throughout his life. Earl is unique from other participants in that his moments of relational exposure began early in his life and continued throughout adulthood. As a sensitive man who experienced a deep sense of outsidersness and depression in high school, his connection and feeling of belonging came from the close relationships he developed with Black people during and after high school. He shares one particular example,

   Some of the people that began to accept me as a human being outside of my immediate parents and my sister were the Black arts scene in [city], where I began to have a real community feeling and appreciate that I had a voice too, and a story. And I could use that as, instead of just using, drug abusing or rebellious behavior that's hurtful to myself because I didn't know how to manage my feelings.

Earlier, I described that Earl often felt like an outsider growing up because he was sensitive and
caring. He encountered this arts scene while attending a predominantly Black high school, and it was through these early relationships with Black people in the Black arts scene that he not only grew his awareness, but also found community outside of his family. These relationships were extremely influential on him and served as healthier outlets when he was struggling with drugs and depression. Another influential moment was due to a restorative intervention by a teacher,

That first year I remember being punched in the face and two Black kids saying this is for Rodney King and a teacher witnessing that. Actually to this day, one of my favorite people, miss [teacher’s name], amazing Black feminist lesbian organizer, teacher, human being, just beautiful person. She saw that and she actually made us all sit down and … we talked about what was going on that day. And I got to say, in hindsight, what she did was genius because had she not intervened like that, I could have definitely seen myself being like, man, I'm not fucking with these Black dudes, they're fucking aggressive bullies out here and they're taking shit out on me. And for her to break that up and number one is like, okay, these are two people, not Black dudes. Number two, we're having, she actually tried, attempted to do restorative justice, where we talked about feelings and where they made them apologize to me. It's not like we ever became best friends, but man, that was a powerful moment.

Earl’s experience also speaks to the importance of relationships with people of color in leadership or authority positions, especially during formative years of people’s lives, like high school. Similarly, Greeny greatly admired a high school teacher and stayed in touch with him over the years, explaining how,

He became my mentor, my coach, my friend. He was the first person in this community of color…I also remember [he] took us to Chicago, so he opened the world for me in
many different ways.

Greeny’s relationship with her teacher of respect and trust opened her eyes to the world in a way her modest upbringing did not, and she appreciated that about this teacher.

These quotes describe how participants become aware of other perspectives, worldviews, and experiences that help begin to lift the veil in ways they were not previously aware. This occurs through close, mutual relationships of trust, love, respect, and honesty. Because of the trust and love they have for these people, and the authenticity of their conversations, they see the reality of these experiences in impactful and lasting ways that also lead them to learn and self-reflect on their own experiences, allowing awareness to blossom. Conversely, some participants describe specific moments of relational exposure with people of color they are not as closely acquainted with, and these moments can still be very impactful. For example, Natalie recalls a specific moment of exposure at lunch with several colleagues that was an ah-ha moment for her,

And one of the moments that I remember again, sort of a few years into this was I was at a conference and I was at lunch. And there were probably three white women and three Black women and one of the Black woman was telling a story about interviewing people for a job and that someone had said something about her last name and she said, you know you don't ask a Black person about their last name. And I didn't know what she meant, but it was a very powerful thing for her to say. Then I discovered what she meant, you know talking about how often Black people have the names of their white slave owners. That was a real eye opener for me, and I think that started the process for me of okay, I need to learn what's happening around me here because it's clearly not okay... and so I think I started to become more racially aware...that was probably 10 years ago. So after that, I started to pay more attention.
Growing up in another country, Natalie did not have much exposure to Black people until she moved to the United States. As someone who is sensitive, aware, and caring, this definitive relational moment of exposure really stuck with her and prompted her to learn and understand more about Black people’s experience of injustice. Greeny also describes a meaningful encounter with an acquaintance. Growing up, her family did not have a lot of money and could not afford to travel, so instead they hosted families from different countries in their home. Their stays were temporary, and therefore Greeny did not know these families well; however, they left lasting impressions on her worldview. She recalls one person in particular,

   We had a man from [African country] and this opened my eyes incredibly because I got really sick during that time and had to spend a month in bed. And during that time, he sat next to me and told me stories of [country] and the animals, and the animals coming to his village, and his family. And so as I laid there, I saw there was a world so much bigger than mine. And that was when I was, I think, in a middle school. And that was a changing point for me. Like the world is much bigger than I know.

Though she did not know these individuals well, Greeny’s unique exposure to different families in her home growing up was influential in becoming more racially aware.

   College was also an important site for relational exposure through acquaintances or less well-known relationships to occur. For example, Eric describes expanding his worldview through acquaintances he had in college. He describes an incident on the soccer team with a Black player that impacted him deeply,

   Coming here and playing soccer, there [was] an incident of racially insensitive things being said in a group chat or something like that. So that’s made me think, it’s made me realize like… saying these things makes a big impact on a player because he ended up
leaving the team because he did not feel good about that. So that was a hard thing to hear, and it definitely made me think … I touched on earlier, that idea of going from passive to wanting to be more active…you can’t just let these things go by just because it doesn’t affect you. It’s like if you see it, you have to call it out because you don’t know how it affects other people… the instance with the African American player on my soccer team, that sparked us to like our team as a whole collected together to watch a podcast about becoming more racially aware and actually understanding the problems that we have there … And we want to get him back on the team, like we know that we can do better and we need to prove it too.

Eric was new to the team and did not know this player well, but this experiential moment of relational exposure impacted him. At the time of the interview, this incident had happened only a couple weeks earlier, so it was fresh in Eric’s mind and not yet resolved. College also played a role for other participants. For example, Esther’s process of becoming racially aware was highly influenced by ongoing moments of relational exposure she experienced in college during her study abroad program in a Latin American country, which also intertwined with her awareness of being the only white person in class while studying abroad. Esther describes how her own experience of ongoing cultural exposure was pivotal,

Racial awareness for me was re-learning history. So it was having to go back and realize like, that I had a very whitewashed view of the world and history and what it meant to be white, what it meant to be a Black person in America and globally. And that was really challenged for me when I was doing my Spanish degree at school, I studied abroad twice. And the first time I went to Spain and just having conversations like with my teacher and other Spanish students at the university … And the second time I went, it was in Costa
Rica and we were doing Latin American Studies and the way I learned about Christopher Columbus in Spanish from Latin American women is not the same way that I learned about it from a white fourth grade teacher. Totally different. And it was like a whole new world from there.

Esther’s experience of studying abroad made her more aware because she saw and experienced first-hand the “evidence” of historical inequalities herself – both in traveling to different historic sites and learning but also through the interactions she had with people throughout her study abroad experience.

Though many of these personal relationships occur with people of color – and particularly Black colleagues and friends – some of the participants experience important moments of exposure through their relationships with other aware white people. For example, Wesley and Nelson work together, and his relationship with Nelson has been very impactful and influential. Wesley worked previously in various leadership and safety training roles, and through his relationship with Nelson and a men’s group that he participated in for years, he transitioned into DE&I work which has been life changing. Wesley recalls,

As part of my journey in this world, I had joined in 2006 a men's group … and as a side for what it's worth, [it] changed my life. And I don't say lightly, it saved my life, because when I came out of the bankruptcy, I didn't want to be alive. And so it was profound in that. And what it got me is in touch with what's really more important in this world. And I think that's where the multicultural experiences I’ve had, the leadership part, knowing Nelson and watching him talk about how he was actually helping change the world was just incredibly attractive to me.
Through those meaningful relationships and discussions, particularly his relationship with Nelson, he eventually came to work for Nelson in DE&I and pursue what he has come to feel like is a calling in the work he is doing. Jack is Esther’s husband, and meeting and talking with her has been another catalyst in his racial awareness journey,

I'd say one big one is [Esther]. I met [Esther] my senior year [of college] and she thinks deeply on everything, anything. And I think I had someone like that who wasn't just a buddy anymore, but a kindred spirit and just thinking, just wanting to … broach the entire concept from left to right, of extremes of, that particular opinion, thought, idea. So being able to get to share that and to communicate, and I'm sure [Esther’s] mentioned it as well that she started developing her understanding of how she felt about racism and Black people around the time we got married as well … she was one of the defining things of why I was doing what I was doing. It wasn't just that person has more melanin in their skin … it started developing that social construct for me that, it just started reframing everything for me. So I'd say that was probably one of the big catalysts.

Similarly, Esther was also instrumental in her younger sister, Ruth’s, racial awareness development. As discussed earlier, Ruth’s close relationship with her best friend was very impactful, and she later goes on to describe that her relationship with her sister was as well,

My older sister … she would talk to me about race… she would just give it to me in little chunks, I guess kind of just a little thought in my head. So I could just kind of marinate on that for a while.

Esther was able to help Ruth apply her own feelings of feeling like an outcast to how Black and Brown people may feel day-to-day, which led Ruth to embrace racial awareness more openly. That exposure and conversation with her sister, whom she loves and trusts, brought forward
more empathy and understanding for what different people’s experiences might be like. James
also shares a similar experience of how exposure to people of color and their experiences
occurred through an older sibling, his brother. The first thing he mentioned when asked what led
to racial awareness was,

I think that some of it came from my older brother, with growing up in those
communities [referring to the diverse, lower socioeconomic neighborhoods they grew up
in], he gravitated towards things like rap music and some of the other cultural things that
brought a connection to people of color. And I gravitated towards those qualities.

James later states that there was a Black family in his neighborhood that his brother was very
close to, and by proximity, he got introduced to that family as well. While he was not as close to
them as his brother was, they had a connection and relationship growing up that positively
impacted his racial awareness, both through his brother and his experience with that family.

Finally in this section, I want to briefly discuss how relational exposure interactions can
also occur more indirectly or “from a distance,” such as through exposure to leaders or
influencers in social media and other media / entertainment channels such as music, books,
comedy, movies, and TV. Though these are not close personal relationships, they are
interactional moments and therefore relational in the sense that participants interact with these
sources and observe real human beings. They are impactful enough that they impart a level of
education or awareness that sticks, often because they can relate to them in some way through
empathy, their own experiences, and/or their values. For example, both Rachel’s and Allen’s
awareness were influenced by watching the show Roots growing up. More recently, Ruth shared
how the Netflix series Dear white People impacted her racial awareness. Contemporary authors
are also influential. For example, participants like Martin, Misty, Ruth, and Clint described
reading books by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds on antiracism. Other authors mentioned were Resmaa Menakem’s work on somatic racism and Robin DiAngelo’s work on white fragility, which was popular at the time of these interviews. Some participants like Earl, Ruth, and James have been impacted by music, such as rap and hip hop, while others like Allen and Ella have been influenced by comedians. Social media was also mentioned consistently throughout the interviews as a key platform for relational exposure to occur, whether it was through sharing their own ideas, conversing with people through social media messaging, or educating themselves by following influential people.

**Relational Exposure through Gateway Experiences**

As described thus far, participants’ moments of relational exposure that influence their racial awareness often center around (unsurprisingly) race or ethnicity. I also found that influential moments of exposure occurred through experiences with people who differed from participants, not just in terms of race, but other forms of diversity, such as class, gender, and/or sexual orientation. I defined these moments as **gateway experiences** to racial awareness – an indirect (to race) turning point experience that is relational and eye-opening to some form of social inequity (not race-based) that leads the participant to greater exposure to and empathy for other forms of social inequities. Therefore, exposure did not have to be specifically race-based to play a role in becoming racially aware and ultimately (re)constructing a racially aware identity. I discuss this idea in my interview with Clint. Clint is a DE&I practitioner and has led training around the globe. Clint discusses how class discussions can be gateways to racial awareness in these types of training, especially for white participants who may be struggling with the idea of privilege because they grew up socioeconomically disadvantaged,
How do we get to the white people that feel like they’ve been disadvantaged? We got to get to them through class. So how do we do that without making like it’s all about class and that’s why people feel the way they do?

What Clint is suggesting is that relational exposure to class-based discussions in his training sessions can and have led to more understanding of racial inequity, but it is also tricky because he does not want the class discussion to dominate to the detriment of understanding systemic racism. So he balances that throughout his workshops. For Steve, gender served as a gateway to deeper racial awareness due to the relationship he has with his daughter,

I realized, especially as I got into management, that men and women weren't paid the same. And when … my first child was a daughter, I really realized that she should be able to do anything I can do. And I realized just from the women that I’m working with, what they have to go through … And so my focus at that point was a lot more on say equality for women than it was racial because I didn't recognize the racial piece, where I absolutely could see the inequality for women. And had I not had a daughter, it would have taken me longer to realize that.

Steve later describes that the racial awareness came to him after attending an intensive DE&I training, the training that Nelson’s organization leads. However, his understanding of gender inequity and the care he has for his daughter and even his wife, too, supported his journey towards racial awareness.

Chantel is another participant who experienced a very powerful gateway relational exposure moment. She describes one turning point as an experience she had with a close gay friend in college,
I have a moment where I was able to empathize with somebody. This isn't a race thing but I think it's really critical to my evolution … when I was in college, one of my best friends was a lesbian … Probably my first friend who is openly out and she was explaining just her experience of coming out and how her family treats her and they don't really accept her. And it was the first time that I felt like someone understood how I felt coming out as an atheist, and my relationship with my family after coming out as an atheist and I think that was the first time I was able to really, because of my own experience, which was different, my own experience feeling like the minority, feeling isolated, feeling like I didn't belong And I was able to see that translate to someone else's experience coming out, which was a totally different situation. That opened my eyes to people being treated differently because of things they can't control.

Chantel’s close relationship with her best friend in college was impactful because, while not about race, it was a close relationship where they could openly share similar yet different experiences of feeling isolated, which prompted empathy and awareness. This is just one example that demonstrates how various social factors, not just race, at times influenced participants’ awareness of inequity in general, which then influenced their racially specific awareness as well. Another example of this is Ryan, whose experiences in becoming a vegan led him to greater awareness of other inequities, such as racial inequities. He describes a particular turning point on his journey to veganism in speaking with close friends. Ryan explains,

And then I had a coworker friend that him and his girlfriend had two dogs, and they were dog people. And so we just hung out with them, we'd go to the dog park together. And we just were, you know, friends and had dogs together. And they were vegetarian. And so they just were making the case for, well, if you love your dog so much, what is the
difference between your dog and a cow and a pig and whatever. And I was like, yeah, I think you're right. I mean, intellectually, I was like, of course, I mean, to me, there was no difference. And that just opened up the thought process of that, and having them as examples, living examples of a different way. This wasn't reading a pamphlet or anything. This was real people that I connected with already on a personal level outside of that issue, that then they brought that issue to the table and shared it with me. And I was open because I wasn't in an adversarial relationship with them.

Through his passion for veganism as a “gateway,” Ryan fell into a world of activism where people around him were also focusing on racial justice too.

As seen throughout this section, participants’ experience of relational exposure occurred in a lot of different ways. What all these experiences share is that they involve people sharing stories with participants, and participants hearing and internalizing these experiences as real.

White people do not personally experience the racialized inequities that Black and Brown people experience. Combined with a socialization that can lead white people to avoid acknowledging their own complicity in systemic racism and white supremacy, becoming racially aware in order to participate in its deconstruction can be difficult. Through relational exposure, participants gain education and learning, deep relationships and trust, and sometimes mentorship and coaching as they continue to grow their own understanding and awareness. Sharing personal stories and experiences, from both people of color and other white people, and truly hearing these stories and internalizing them, are what make this part of the process so impactful in becoming racially aware and making sense of one’s evolving racially aware identity.

While experiences of relational exposure to people of color and the stories shared within that process are key for white participants’ racial awareness journey, this may place an emotional
burden on people of color. In continuing to approach this research critically, it is important to acknowledge and recognize that many of the influential people who have shared their experiences with my participants did so because of the relationships they had with the participant. While a key finding is that this does play an important role in becoming racially aware for white people, this cannot occur to the detriment of people of colors’ own mental health and well-being. Participants in relational exposure choose to be part of these interactions, and that must remain a choice for its ongoing success. It may also be relevant to explore other ways that such experiences might be able to be created without that emotional burden – such as virtual reality scenarios or role-playing. White people can help share that burden by helping to teach other white people, and we can also ensure we are considering and paying people of color for their labor when they are willing to do this work.

In this section, I have established the importance of turning points – and particularly moments of relational exposure – as a critical stage in the social process of becoming racially aware, a necessary component of (re)constructing a white racially aware identity. This occurs in many different ways, whether through close relationships with people of color or other white people, acquaintances, or even relational interactions indirectly through gateway experiences or other mediums like social media, TV, music, and books. Regardless of how the process occurs, turning point moments of relational exposure is a key stage in this process. But what makes these experiences stick as meaningful turning points for participants? The next piece in this important equation relates to the development and utilization of empathy.

(3) Developing and Utilizing Empathy
Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how participants construct their racially aware identity through the process of “becoming aware” as a key component of this identity work. This
process starts with a foundation of early outsider experiences and self-described identity traits that make later turning points meaningful moments of exposure that spark and grow racial awareness throughout their lives; and, these moments of exposure could have all taken very different turns. Rather than becoming aware and working to deconstruct whiteness and white supremacy, participants could have enacted more common forms of white identity and reinforced white supremacy through reactions such as anger, denial, claims of reverse discrimination, and more. Yet when confronted with stories of racism and oppression by individuals who are marginalized, participants instead chose to be open and believe these experiences rather than diminish or minimize them. The question is why? What is it about these individuals that made them more open?

The answer to that question is the development and utilization of empathy. I found that empathy explains why participants become aware within these critical moments of exposure when it could have gone a very different direction. Participants’ early, foundational life experiences of outsiderness – along with their identity traits as people who are self-aware, sensitive, curious, responsible, and outspoken – were often called upon as pivotal in enabling them to develop and utilize empathy during turning point moments of exposure, making these moments meaningful enough to spark and deepen awareness within the process of constructing a white racially aware identity, especially when there was a relationship involved (relational exposure). In this section, I further explore empathy as the third relevant stage in becoming racially aware as part of the process of identity construction. I begin with a brief exploration of the existing scholarship on empathy and my own definition of empathy based on my findings. I then connect empathy back to participants’ self-described identity traits and experiences of outsiderness to demonstrate how empathy undergirds the process of becoming racially aware.
Both popular interest and scholarly research into empathy and its development have grown in the past two decades, rising across multiple disciplines such as education, ethics, psychology, sociology, and health care only in the past few years (Nelems 2017). While literature on empathy in sociology is limited, and there is not one agreed upon definition, the closest is by Larocco (2017:3), who debates whether empathy is truly a feeling but rather something that just helps orient one person to another based on similarities, which is not enough to initiate action. Nelems (2017) and Ruiz-Junco (2017), however, explain that moving from a “passive or individualistic orientation” offers a “transformative potential” where someone can “imagine and share the thoughts and feelings” of another. In this way, empathy can be interactional, and can still mean invoking empathic feelings or emotions.

In my research, participants defined deploying empathy as both the ability to connect across experiences of similarity (such as their own experiences of feeling like an outsider or experiencing inequity) and utilize those experiences to imagine what someone’s experiences might feel like. Therefore, I define empathy as an integrative and interactional social construct that continuously develops and evolves within and across social interactions, taking on the complexities of being both an orientation and a feeling, depending on the situational context. This definition follows an interactionist approach to empathy; through social interaction in the form of relational exposure turning points, participants were able to, together with the other person, cognitively put themselves in the role or position of another and imagine what their experience might feel like based on their experiences of a similar situation (Ruiz-Junco 2017).

Larocco (2017) also states that “how one responds to the feelings produced by the empathic orientation depends on other dispositions, behavioural habits and inclinations, as well as the cognitive frames and self-narratives in which one is embedded.” I found that such
“dispositions, behavioural habits … and self-narratives” described by participants included the common identity traits and early experiences of outsiderness described earlier. Their sense of self as aware, sensitive, curious, outspoken, and responsible – along with experiences of unfairness and inequity – influenced their development of empathy, which they then utilized to make moments of relational exposure meaningful. Empathy employed regardless of whether relational exposure occurred through close relationships or more distant exposures. Therefore, being in close relationship to the person with whom they were interacting was not necessary for empathy to emerge; even indirect forms of interaction such as social media and music were important factors in creating empathy (Clarke et. al 2015; Ruiz-Junco 2017).

Several participants exemplify how all these pieces (identity traits, outsider experiences, and turning points of relational exposure) came together to formulate the process of becoming aware. Chantel summarizes this well by saying,

I think if I hadn't had many experiences like that where I was also called out and isolated for seemingly no reason, I think that also put me in a space where I felt like I was being treated differently. And those experiences helped me empathize with other people, even though their backgrounds and their experiences were different, it helped me be able to observe and see and feel the same things that they're feeling.

These participants share some common identity traits, such as being sensitive. Like Chantel, Ryan was another sensitive participant that also describes how certain moments were the spark for awareness to emerge through empathy. His exposure comes out through his love for animals and his veganism, as well as his own experience of feeling like an outsider when he was younger. He summarizes,
My awareness was broadened, was cracked wide open. I am being empathetic on a justice level to animals, to my one dog, which then opened up to all animals, which then opened it up to all people, all the earth, nature, all the peoples of the world. I’m against violence and unfairness across the board… One more point I wanted to make … I think that people are how they are kind of personality wise, but a lot of the issues in the world, the selfish point of view is an easy sell. And unless somebody has some kind of event or something to crack them out of that, and to be empathetic to somebody else … that being selfish is so easy to sell.

While their experiences differ, other participants developed and utilized empathy in becoming racially aware, despite having traumatic outsider experiences. As a transgender woman, Taylor had multiple experiences where she felt on the outside, even experiencing violence. Though traumatic, these experiences helped her be empathetic to different people’s lived experiences,

One of the reasons I’ve been successful in my job, in some of my human rights work or diversity and inclusion work is because … when somebody tells me something or I hear something, I try to interpolate it to understand more what they may be going through or a project at work or something like that. I try to assimilate it to something. Having gone through some experiences myself, I try to correlate those and kind of understand a little bit better … it's not to say that you have to fit into some diverse category or some marginalized group in order to understand, reflect, and sympathize.

But I think for me it helped.

As someone who is vocal and sensitive, Eloise also attributes her own experiences of being bullied when she was younger to empathizing with inequities that other people experience. She
recalls how she applied that perspective after the racial protests and murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020,

[In high school] I had been bullied … it was hard … I know what it’s like to feel like people hate you for no reason or that you can’t figure out… so to see people go through what I went through or just to see people just hurting, it hurts me. I hurt for them.

Everything that happened last year really tore me up. I went through a situation where I just came home and I just cried.

Celeste also experienced violence growing up in her own home, and it made her more aware, vigilant, and empathetic to what others may be going through. Knowing that situation like that could have turned out very differently, I ask her what it was about her that made her empathetic versus another emotion. She explains,

My seminary teacher said that I was born without a veil, like I could see things clearly. I could see that in in my family, the dysfunction. Felt like I could see things and feel things, and then at some point in time I got very confused because what I sensed and felt wasn't being mirrored on the outside or talked about So, in some ways, this process that I've described has brought me all the way home, back to that. But it's been quite a journey. I think I was pretty vigilant, my household was violent. So I was also pretty tuned into feeling and sensing things and what was happening. So that might have also been part of why I could go, something doesn't feel quite right. I definitely think my family again…and how I didn't feel I belonged and how important that [was in becoming] more aware of like who wasn't belonging… I think of my own not feeling that, but also kind of keenly tuned into others that might not be feeling that [belonging].
Celeste describes having almost a sixth sense or intuition about when things felt “off” because of growing up in a violent and turbulent home. Because of her own experiences, she goes on to explain, she can apply that feeling to others and be empathetic. James also grew up in a turbulent household and often felt he did not belong; however, many in his community felt that they did not belong, and his shared sense of outsiderness with his community further built his empathy.

I would say living next [to] those folks was probably the most influential in a way of guiding openness and empathy. Because again, I lived there from a time of being, you know, I was probably seven or eight until fourteen. And so, yeah, I mean a lot of the kind of building blocks of my childhood surrounded that family and they had quite a big family. So a lot of folks in that community – it shaped how I think about race [now].

Andrew also had a difficult and traumatic upbringing. Coaching and therapy helped him develop empathy and compassion from these experiences and apply them to others. Andrew shares,

By taking the time out to really focus on yourself and go inward…linking up that compassion for yourself and that empathy for yourself and that realization that you're not broken and that you are strong and you can go forward is good on any level. But I think by having that work done on myself, I can open my mind up to other people's issues…working on yourself gives you a better perspective on life, a better stool to stand on, a view higher up on the mountain. And I think it makes room for you to be more compassionate and empathetic to the plight of other people. You can connect your experiences with other people.

Andrew’s own journey towards empathy was supported through therapy, similar to Hilda’s experience with therapy in her recovery from alcoholism.
Though arrived at through different situations, contexts, and scenarios, these participants described similar identity traits and experiences of outsiderness that, when in situations where they were exposed to different perspectives, adopted and applied empathy to spark and/or deepen their awareness. Together, the foundational, turning point, and empathy stages forge a process for becoming racially aware, which became evident as participants made sense of the white racially aware identity they were actively constructing within the interview process through their narratives. Understanding the process of becoming racially aware as a key component of constructing such an identity sets the stage for exploration of the other components of this identity work in Chapters Six and Seven.

Discussion
Becoming racially aware is a complex social process and component of making sense of oneself as a white racially aware person in a society that frequently reinforces color-blind and supremacist ideologies and narratives in the normalization of whiteness, white supremacy, and systemic racism in all facets of life (social, economic, and political). Our experiences throughout our lives shape this process, continually (re)constructing what that process looks like and our understanding of racism, whiteness, and white supremacy over time. No two people are at the same place in this journey at any given point, and yet there are many commonalities across participants, some of which have been identified in existing literature and some of which have not. This study builds upon existing scholarship by finding that the process of becoming racially aware is a process of social identity construction, specifically the construction of a white racially aware identity, despite people differing across demographics such as occupation, background, educational experience, gender, and income.
As evidenced by the conservative backlash we have been experiencing as a society, white Americans have many opportunities for exposure to systemic racism and white supremacy, especially since such conversations have become more available through things like social media, but not all react to those moments with openness, empathy, and curiosity. Many times, it is the opposite, as seen with the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the continued white conservative backlash we have seen even after his presidency ended. Therefore, understanding what makes some white Americans willing and open to becoming racially aware and what that process looks like is what I had set out to find from the onset of this study. I found that the process of becoming aware is a component of a broader social process of ongoing identity work. Through all the interviews, I heard detailed narratives illustrating how individuals make sense of that process, finding that through several key themes or “components” of this process, participants are actively and continually deconstructing a normalized and internalized sense of whiteness and white identity in favor of a different white, racially aware identity. One of the primary ways in which they made sense of this identity work was through their descriptions on how they became racially aware, which was the focus of this chapter.

Becoming racially aware as a component of social identity (re)construction occurred through three stages. Through their stories, I first uncovered the foundational elements of this process, which included identifying common identity traits that comprise the “type” of person someone who is racially aware emulates (self-aware and sensitive, curious, outspoken, and responsible/fair) and conveying their own personal experiences of feeling like an outsider or not belonging, which I referred to as “outsiderness.” The next stage then focused on turning point moments of exposure, which were impactful moments of meaningful interaction that acted as a spark or catalyst for the ongoing development of participants’ racial awareness. These moments
were frequently relational in nature, making “relational exposure” one of the most critical types of turning points that participants described. Finally, I found that the final stage or aspect of this process was the development and utilization of empathy, which was cultivated in relationship to their own self-described identity traits (particularly for those who described themselves as sensitive) and experiences of outsiderness and applied during meaningful turning point moments of exposure throughout their lives. Empathy therefore undergirded this process as a key factor that enabled participants’ racial awareness development and desire to ultimately take action. In summary, having certain identity traits, experiences of outsiderness, relational moments of exposure that act as impactful turning points, and employing empathy came together to formulate the social process of how and why some white Americans become racially aware as an active component of their own white racially aware identity work.

These findings both reinforce and expand upon existing literature on this topic. The most relevant and similar study to my own research was Eileen O’Brien’s work on white antiracists. O’Brien (2001:18) also considers a similar question to my own: “What has motivated [white people] to take a step which is unheard of for most whites?” She identified three explanations: (1) involvement in activist groups or networks; (2) the development of empathy through “approximating experiences;” and (3) experiencing a specific turning point from which one’s antiracist journey begins. My own findings yielded similar and different results, building upon her work in several ways.

First, O’Brien’s work generally focuses on the actions, motivations, and connection (or lack of) to activist organizations of white antiracists in understanding their role in the advancement of social change and justice. While she discusses identity and ideologies that play into these factors, her findings are less about understanding becoming aware or becoming
antiracist as a *social process* and more about understanding the factors involved in their motivation and the types of antiracism that these individuals engage in and why. For example, while she explains that participants identified with “antiracist” as part of their identity, she focuses more on why and how people engage in antiracist *action*, and the challenges that accompany that, versus examining such action as a part of a process of identity work and *becoming* antiracist or racially aware. She does outline how participants “become” antiracist, but she approaches it more as a linear, step-by-step model of evolution towards the “achievement” of antiracism. Conversely, my work builds upon this by positioning “becoming racially aware” as a non-linear social process, finding specifically that it is a component of an overarching and ongoing process of (re)constructing a white racially aware identity. While I found some similar factors – such as the importance of empathy, turning points, and approximating experiences (what I called “outsiderness”) – my work departs from O’Brien’s by defining these factors in slightly different ways based on my own findings, and by understanding them more as important stages in a broader social process of identity work.

Second, O’Brien’s concept of “approximating experiences” is closely related to my own findings on relational identity traits, outsiderness, relational exposure turning points, and empathy. O’Brien classifies approximating experiences into subcategories: (1) borrowed approximations, which refer to understanding racism through close relationships with and personal stories from people of color; (2) overlapping approximations, or whites’ own experiences of inequity that they call upon to empathize with people of color; and (3) global approximations, which refers to individuals’ sense of unfairness and injustice against humanity and exist in the absence of relationships with people of color. These are viewed more as motivation toward taking action and engaging in antiracism than as a process of becoming
racially aware and constructing a racially aware identity. For example, while O’Brien identified the importance of individuals’ sense of unfairness as important for global approximations, I found that certain identity traits were not approximations but, rather, comprise the “type” of person participants were trying to be or become in reconstructing their identity as racially aware. This was not separate from or in place of relationships with people of color as an avenue to empathy; it instead helped explain why people developed empathy when interacting with people of color. Therefore, my work expands our understanding of white antiracism by finding that these traits, together with outsiderness (not unlike O’Brien’s concept of overlapping approximations), formulate a foundational stage in the process of racially aware identity work and becoming racially aware as a key component of that work.

Third, I also found that turning point moments of exposure, and particularly relational exposure, are another important stage in this process. Relational exposure is similar to O’Brien’s concept of borrowed approximations. It reminded me of McKinney’s (2006) work as well on the interracial contact debate or “contact hypothesis.” According to McKinney (2006:167), the contact hypothesis “suggests that interactions between members of different racial and ethnic groups can diminish stereotyping and increase understanding and empathy … Presumably, interracial contact may convince a prejudiced person that other racial groups are not inherently inferior or superior to their own…” One critique is that this approach is too individual or micro-level focused, meaning that individual-level prejudice and attitudes may shift, but it is unclear whether such contact really shifts the behaviors and structures involved in upholding systems of oppression. While McKinney’s work was more micro-focused, she did find in her study of white students that contact with people of color impacted their consciousness by not only improving their attitudes towards people of color but also enabling them to reconsider their own white
racialized status and what it means to be white, which could have broader societal implications. This contact happened in a variety of ways – through friendships, romance, travel, being in the minority, and through “vicarious victimization,” in which a white person witnesses firsthand the negative treatment of a person of color. McKinney (2006:169) defined such turning points as “different or new understandings of race or whiteness.”

My work expands upon this research, however, by viewing relational exposure as a type of turning point that alone does not result in change but rather is the spark through which empathy can occur, when taking into consideration the foundation of identity traits and outsiderness that participants also possessed. In this way, I expand upon both O’Brien’s and McKinney’s work by creating a more nuanced yet process-oriented understanding of relational exposure and its role in the process of becoming aware and constructing a racially aware identity. I also view these relationships as diverse – not only close relationships can bring forth empathy but also distant or even indirect relational interactions with media and TV personalities or authors, for example, can yield racial awakening. By understanding these themes as relevant stages in a process that can grow and shift over time, these findings provide greater insight into understanding how and why white Americans become racially aware when the alternative is the norm, and what interventions could be then developed and applied in aiding other white Americans in becoming racially aware.

Finally, empathy was the stage that developed from and made the other stages I identified relevant. O’Brien, too, found that the development of empathy was an important part of antiracism. I found, though, that empathy developed through the foundations of key identity traits and experiences of outsiderness, to be called upon in turning point moments of exposure, particularly relational moments, to spark or even deepen awareness in those moments. It is an
active part of participants’ identity construction as racially aware because it explained *why* people became aware in those moments. Being able to develop and utilize empathy was a key part of how people made sense of themselves as white racially aware people. O’Brien (2001) also found that overlapping approximations and empathy were expressed mostly by women in her study, whereas I found that participants of all genders experienced outsiderness and drew upon these experiences to employ empathy as part of their foundational development of racial awareness. For example, Earl and Allen expressed being deeply sensitive and empathetic people, to the point where, as men in a white patriarchal society, they often did not feel they belonged. That outsiderness even as white men fueled their process for becoming and identifying as someone who is racially aware. This demonstrates that both women and men can employ empathy, even when it means defying normative expectations of masculinity *and* whiteness in order to do so. Additionally, gender identity more broadly, sexual orientation, and class also played roles in some people’s understanding of race and their utilization of empathy. Chantel and Taylor both describe awareness stemming from interactions across gender identity and sexual orientation, and James described his connection with Black people in his community across a shared sense of not belonging due to living in a lower socioeconomic environment.

It is also important to acknowledge that while white people engaging in empathy is important to their process of socially constructing a racially aware white identity and *becoming* aware as part of that process, it does not mean that we as white people can personally know, comprehend, and fully understand the experiences and consciousness of people of color. As Rankine (2015) described, white people may feel bad about Black suffering, but no amount of empathy from white people can truly know the strain of Black living and being. In critically examining ourselves in this work, it is important to recognize and be mindful of this fact. We
cannot know the Black experience entirely because we as white people do not live it day in and
day out. We can employ empathy to understand better, but understanding and acting does not
equate to knowing and being. Because we can never truly know this reality, a vigilance in
staying aware through the maintenance of ongoing exposure (from which participants
demonstrated there are many avenues, not just through direct conversations with people of color)
is also part of our continued social construction of a white racially aware identity.

Throughout this discussion, I have focused on how my findings expand upon and depart
from existing literature, further adding to our understanding of white racially awareness and
racially aware identity construction. I also wanted to explore a few additional items I had not yet
touched upon. More generally, I found that the processes I identified within my research
occurred across a diverse group of white Americans. This was also an important departure from
the literature. For example, Bonilla-Silva (2014) found in a survey he conducted on “race
traitors” that people who typically defy normative expectations of white behavior are
predominantly progressive, working-class, white women. However, my study indicates that
people across a wide range of diversity can construct racial awareness and a racially aware
identity. My participants were almost 50-50 men and women, were predominantly upper-middle-
class and more highly educated (though this too varied), and varied in political affiliation, though
many did lean more liberal.

My findings also demonstrated that organizations played a role in exposing participants
to systemic racism and inequity by acting as sites for moments of relational exposure to occur.
O’Brien (2001) focused on organizations as important sites for confronting racism in her study,
but she focused predominantly on activist organizations. Therefore, my study expands upon that
by finding that the two most common types of organizational sites for such learning and
transformation were higher education (i.e., college, graduate school) and workplaces, demonstrating that other types of organizations can also be relevant sites for this relational work to take place. This is not surprising, given that most of my participants have completed higher education and are working professionals. College was a place for exposure to new and different people and experiences, whether through relationships, classwork, and/or study abroad exposure. Work also frequently served as an important site for relational exposure to occur, whether it was through DE&I trainings, employee resource groups, or conversations with colleagues.

Though organizations did frequently serve as important sites for relational exposure and ultimately racial awareness to develop, not all participants in my study experienced this. I think this is important to note for a couple of reasons. First, much of who formulates the base for conservative, backlash politicians are less educated white people (Metzl 2019). Therefore, one could speculate that white Americans who become racially aware are more highly educated. And yet, 6 people in my study had not completed higher education and were racially aware and taking action. While workplaces and school can serve as important locations for racial awareness transformation to occur, my study also demonstrates that individuals who do not have these experiences – have not completed higher education or have not been exposed through work – can still develop racial awareness. For these individuals, they experienced relational exposure and the development of empathy through other means such as friends or social media. The trick in intervening for these types of populations is figuring out how to create more instances of relational exposure for these populations when other people may be organically gaining those opportunities through their school-based education or work.

Another thing I observed is that participants frequently talked about their process of becoming racially aware in the Black-white binary, and as a result, I framed much of my findings
and discussion in this way too. This could also be because I spoke to participants not long after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, where race and particularly the atrocities experienced by the Black community at the hands of white people in power had become a conversation at the forefront of many news outlets, media, and dialogues in and out of the workplace. The United States also has a racialized history steeped particularly in Black-white relations; combined with the recent racial protests of 2020 and the evolution of Black Lives Matter, it is not surprising that participants spoke about their racialized awareness in these terms. At the same time, to break down white supremacy, it is important as white people that our awareness also includes an understanding of how racialized inequity is experienced across a variety of groups, including but not limited to Indigenous, Asian American, and Latinx populations. Some participants talked about racial awareness across various groups, but the conversation still centered around Black-white relationships.

Finally, my findings also posit that becoming racially aware or antiracist is a deeply intertwined, non-linear, and ongoing process of social identity (re)construction that never ends or is “achieved,” but rather, is a lifelong journey of continual awareness and development. This is an important distinction, because betraying power structures to deconstruct whiteness is a difficult process, one that can be easily maintained by even small actions (McWhorter 2005). Overcoming this therefore requires continued resilience in (re)constructing a white racially aware identity. This work helps scholars deepen understandings of this process and the interconnected themes within it for the sake of potentially replicating aspects of these stages to help other white people learn and grow. While such processes are not step-by-step but rather very personal and unique, the commonalities that were identified throughout this work do give us some concrete elements from which to build potential interventions, a core goal of this research.
in operating as praxis. Understanding these elements illuminates the social process of becoming racially aware as foundational to the process of white identity (re)construction and can therefore better enable those working towards deconstructing systemic racism and white supremacy by demonstrating how we can begin to collectively reconstruct white racialized identity in favor of a more just, racially aware white identity.
CHAPTER SIX: THE MEANING OF BEING RACIALLY AWARE

Throughout this paper I have established that normative white identity, rooted in white supremacy and the lack of acknowledgment of its consequences for most white Americans, is a construct within which white Americans have been socialized and have as a result internalized. This study indicates that some white Americans actively push against this normative construct by reconstructing a different, alternative white identity rooted in racial awareness and equity. Becoming racially aware is the first component of this identity work. The second component involves making sense of what being racially aware then means in the context of how to act and behave as someone who is racially aware in the culture around you. Attaching meaning to cultural symbols through our discourse or narratives can be a core part of identity work and helps to indicate to ourselves and others who and/or what type of people we are (Ferber 1998; Schwalbe 1996). Whereas existing scholarship has explored meaning within the construction of white supremacist identities and ideologies, this work demonstrates how similar processes can occur in (re)constructing a positive, racially aware identity (Ferber 1998). In this chapter, I explore findings that indicate this process of identity work can be more deeply understood by analyzing the meaning that participants attach to being racially aware. I further examine commonly shared ideas of what it means to be racially aware among participants, which include:

1. recognizing differential treatment, experiences, and perspectives occur across races, including understanding privilege as a white person and the impacts of white supremacy on people of color and even themselves (albeit differently);
2. incorporating taking action into their definition, which included varying types of communication-based action and further education; and
3. how that meaning changes over time.
Participants rarely only mentioned one of these common concepts, meaning these themes often overlapped with one another. These themes also occurred consistently across my participant group, despite participants being varied in age, gender, geographical location, jobs, and other demographics. In the following sections, I first discuss the meaning that participants ascribed to being racially aware, how that meaning changed, and what implications this discussion has for our broader understanding of white racially aware identity work.

(1) Recognizing Differences Across Race and the Impact of White Privilege

One of the primary dimensions of what it means to be racially aware is recognizing that people’s experiences, perspectives, and how they are treated differ across different aspects of social identity. Therefore, most participants define being racially aware, at least in part, as understanding that (1) people of different races experience both differential treatment and opportunities; (2) they have undergone racialization as a white person; and (3) there are very real impacts of that racialization and white supremacy that exist, which may influence them to take action. These dimensions also commonly overlapped within participants’ definitions. For example, Chantel’s definition of being racially aware summarizes this overlap well,

Being racially aware has two parts. The first being aware of what other races’ experiences are and recognizing that those experiences are different from your own. And being able to see those differences and experiences. And then the second part, I would say is recognizing the experiences of my own race. And not just the differences because it's really easy to see where some groups of people are disadvantaged, it's easy to see that. I think it's harder to see how your group is advantaged. So as a white person I think it's harder for me to see where my advantages come in because I was raised in a white culture and it's like a fish in water, you don't see it until you get out of it, until the fish is
out of water. So I think being racially aware has those two parts, understanding the experiences of others. And then in really starting to understand your own experience, your own racial identity, how your race influences your unique walk through life. Natalie also explains her definition similarly, summarizing the key points of the most common dimensions of the definitions when she describes,

For me being racially aware means that I understand that there is not equity between races in America with respect to the way people are treated and with respect to opportunity. Um, and it means being aware, not only of the opportunities that some people don't have because of their race, but also being aware of the opportunities that I do have because of my race and in particular, raising a son, being aware of the opportunities that he has as a white male.

Natalie’s definition also illustrates that being racially aware can mean having an intersectional understanding of systems of oppression across, for example, race and gender. Jack’s definition also incorporates several of these dimensions, which demonstrates how this definition has evolved over time. He explains that part of his definition of being racially aware meant recognizing that differences across race were more than simply recognizing skin color or thinking of racial differences as biological. He shares that his definition changed over time from a more general awareness of race – which was more focused on skin color (that he is white-skinned and someone else may be dark-skinned) – to understanding the disparate treatment and opportunities and how he fits into that as a white person. He further describes,

Knowing that because of who I am, because of what my race is, I have certain opportunities, experiences, availabilities of resources that I otherwise may not have if I
was another race. I think being aware of that…it's definitely put on more meaning and weight as we've been going along.

In recognizing these differences and the impacts of that, Jack further explains that he did not truly understand previously “the weight of what that difference is.” Instead, as his awareness has grown, the meaning of being racially aware has too, becoming more about recognizing the privilege of his own whiteness in being afforded certain opportunities, experiences, and access to resources and the socially constructed nature of race and racism. Allen’s definition of being racially aware had some similarities and differences to Natalie’s and Jack’s. He states that,

**Being racially aware, I guess it means a lot of things, you know. For me it means recognizing the differences in experience and opportunity, and probability of success that might accompany one's race. So for me, I have this racial identity as white. And I mean, you can just look at me I guess, and you can guess that that's going to be a likely identity I would carry. And that doesn't for me convey any sense of being superior or better. I've struggled at some times in my life with that maybe conveying a sense of being inferior or worse in the sense that do I have to sort of carry this collective guilt of the way that people who look like me have treated and continue to treat people who don't. And so does that make us, you know, inherently inferior? Are we the bad guys of the story? And I guess I don't believe that necessarily is true either in the sense that there's something fundamentally wrong with us as a race. But I do believe that if you're going to go through life with your eyes open, it helps to look at the history of what one's race, one's society perhaps has done, and what the consequences of that are at the time and ongoing….**

Allen also defines being racially aware across the three dimensions I identified earlier, as understanding how people of colors’ experiences/treatment and opportunity have differed from
white people’s, recognizing his race’s complicity in that treatment, and the impacts of that more broadly – both the harm to people of color most marginalized by these systems and also the harm to himself as someone socialized within this system.

In recognizing these different dimensions, and ultimately the impacts of systemic racism and white supremacy, participants like Allen also discuss how this makes them feel, and how they move through those feelings to ultimately take action. For example, Allen spoke to recognizing the historical context and the “collective guilt” that can accompany such [currently unavoidable] differential treatment based on systemic inequities. He goes on to conclude his definition by explaining,

so I guess I relate to race in a sense of perhaps kind of a pragmatic and intellectual way...

This is the history of what my race and my culture has done, and this is the aftermath of that. And just because I wasn't the architect of the harm does not alleviate me from a responsibility to do something about it...and privilege is just simply the advantages that are bestowed upon us by an unjust society. Some of those things are probably created consciously and some of those things are probably created unconsciously, but they're still there. And so I don't get to choose whether I have privilege or not. I just simply am able to walk down the street with a lot less concern about what's going to happen when a cop car pulls up behind me than somebody who looks different. And that's just, that is the way it is. And so I don't get to say I don't have that privilege and not have it. Society has decided that I have it. So if I want that to change then I need to do something about that.

Allen summarizes his recognition of white privilege, its impact, and his own accountability to take action to address it. Though Allen at times experiences white guilt, recognizing his own white racialization and privilege does not mean necessarily blaming himself or others for the
socio-historical circumstances that led us to a systemically racist society in the United States, but it *does* mean understanding the “responsibility to do something about it.” Nelson also shares how he had to move through guilt and shame to make sense of what it means to be aware and ultimately take action. His description of being racially aware further illustrated the focus on understanding differences across races while recognizing one’s own racialization as white and the impact of that,

Racially aware means that I, for me, I have an understanding that I do have a race. What that race is for me being white, and then a sense of the impact of that. It's not about is race real as a construct or anything like that. It's like the impact of race is real, whether that's genetic, socially constructed or what ...so I think it means that I walk around continuing to be striving to be conscious of the impact of what my race is and how that impacts how I see and experience the world and how others may experience the world differently because of their race, if it's different than mine. And that I think is a lens that I can look at from a social justice perspective in terms of my privilege, my power.

Like Allen, Nelson too concluded with how his understanding of being racially aware can ultimately impact actions he can take “from a social justice perspective.” Celeste, who works with Nelson in the same organization, also shared her own experience navigating and moving through guilt or shame to be active,

I think about it both in a systemic way but also in a really relational way … I just got back from being a month in [Latin American country]. And being there, what I noticed was just kind of a …grounded awareness of my race, of my whiteness, of kind of the historical context and baggage that that carries… just aware of difference but also being able to … just holding that consciousness, there’s a certain honor that gets transmitted
through presence and communication when the work is real and embodied and carried in an honorable way, not a place of perfection. I think people can feel it. I can feel it … I think there’s never a moment that I’m not aware of my race and what’s around me, and also other identities. And I think it’s taken me … (tearing up) a while to get to a place where that, I wasn’t trying to learn these things or performing these things or in grief or shame or struggling and trying to be active, but now it feels like there’s something and I’m just now being aware of it in this interaction that there’s something that now is in my bones and in my body and in my heart that just is an “isness,” around honor of whiteness, of Blackness, of Brownness, of difference.

Being aware and defining what that means are emotional processes, and Celeste shares the almost spiritual connection she feels in becoming aware and making sense of her own racially aware identity through defining what it means to be aware. She has struggled and experienced challenges, and yet a deep, relational awareness and interconnectedness with other human beings that enables her to be aware and also honor people’s “isness” across race also emerged.

Though many participants’ definitions overlapped across all or a combination of these dimensions of differential treatment and opportunities across race, their own racialization, and the impacts of white supremacy, not everyone included all these parts in their definitions. 9 participants define being racially aware in terms of primarily understanding differences, and they do not specifically mention whiteness or white privilege. Instead, they discuss their meaning of being racially aware more broadly. For example, Stella discusses her definition as more about recognizing what sets people apart, what triggers different people, and being sensitive to people having different experiences from herself. A few others in this group describe their definition similarly. Martin describes being racially aware as being open to understanding the day-to-day
differences across race. As a Buddhist, Martin practices self-awareness and mindfulness, which includes extending love, acceptance and non-judgement to himself and others. Being racially aware is about applying that mindset to an understanding of people’s different experiences and helping people of different races or ethnicities feel welcome and comfortable. Ryan also discusses that being racially aware is about understanding that people have different experiences and perspectives than you do, stating specifically that being racially aware is,

Being able to see the [and] understand different perspectives and that there's other people that could have a different, you know, experience than you.

Eric and Adrienne also describe being racially aware in terms of actively recognizing differences across race and being cognizant that these differences may be unique from what they experience. For example, Adrienne says,

Being racially aware is … always being cognizant of others regardless of their race or their differences … and then looking around to make sure that I’m not doing anything, that I don’t treat people different based on their race… also respecting their race and not just overlooking, like when a lot of people will say I don’t see race, I don’t see color. I don’t think that’s necessarily the goal of being racially aware. It’s more recognizing everyone’s different and being able to still interact and respect those differences and appreciate them, even though they don’t look like me.

Though some participants like Adrienne do not talk specifically about whiteness in their definitions, many of these participants who talk about being racially aware as recognizing racialized differences think about it in comparison to their own selves or experiences. Given that these participants live in a very individual-focused society in the United States, it is not surprising that they try to understand what it means to be racially aware within the context of
their own self and experiences. At the same time, as constructing a racially aware identity is an ongoing process, these participants’ definitions still focus more on others’ racialized experiences, and they do not mention their own racialization as a white person nor the impact of that whiteness. A few of the definitions, while mentioning differences across race, focused more on connecting across similarities. Some of these definitions were still somewhat color-blind. For example, Adam describes his definition of being racially aware as,

I suppose being racially aware, all of it has to do with recognizing what background a person comes from and recognizing that they might not sort of deal with the same things on a day-to-day basis that you do. As far as how it's changed over time … I used to be in the mindset that you just don't, as a white person in America, I just don't see color. I don't see race. Now it's come to my understanding that that sort of attitude has been shown to be, I guess, detrimental towards race relations. Now I guess you could say that you don't see color, but you see that said person is a human being, a US citizen … has equal human rights and is entitled to everything that you would be entitled to, but they just come from a different background … I don't know, it's [not] changed that much. I still would prefer to say that I just, you don't see someone as just the outside of them. Like you don't judge a book by its cover, you don't see someone of a different race … I still think that it just comes down to that's another human being, another citizen of our country and they happen to be coming from different backgrounds.

While Adam recognizes it is less socially acceptable for a white person to say, “I don’t see color,” he still prefers to see people as just human beings from different backgrounds. This indicates further how constructing one’s sense of self as “racially aware” varies across
participants and is not linear but ongoing. People are at different places depending on their experiences, and people like Adam may be earlier in that journey.

(2) Taking Action

As described in the previous section, individuals often defined being racially aware in terms of recognizing differences across race, their whiteness and privilege, and the very real impacts of whiteness, white supremacy, and racism on people. For 12 participants, this also meant not just recognizing these differences and consequences, but also taking action to address them in the face of inequity. We began to see this in Allen’s and Nelson’s definitions earlier, and I will introduce more participants’ definitions in this section. I also found find that “social action” is not just something participants simply do as part of their definitions, but action is also a primary component in how they make sense of and position themselves as racially aware white people, which is the subject of Chapter Seven. Therefore, taking action as part of one’s definition of what being racially aware means overlaps as a core component of the overall process of (re)constructing an alternative white racially aware identity. This indicates how attaching meaning to cultural symbols through our discourse or narratives, such as attaching meaning to “action” in the face of inequity, can be a core part of our identity work (Ferber 1998).

Many individuals who included taking action in their definition mentioned it in addition to other dimensions, such as recognizing differences across race and the impact of their own whiteness or white privilege. Hilda’s definition summarizes this overlap well,

It means having an understanding of my racial identity and an understanding of the context and the impact. So the historical context of what does it mean to be white and the current context of what does it mean to be white in the 21st century at this moment in this country. And how can I leverage whiteness to be a part of the change.
Hilda’s definition is multifaceted. Her definition of being racially aware includes an awareness and understanding of her white racial identity, the historical context that has shaped whiteness and the impact of that, and a desire to be “part of the change” by taking action in some way.

Rachel’s definition is another example of the overlap between dimensions,

It's more about being aware that there are differences in how the different races are treated or some of the stigmas that may be held against them, or some of the racism that still may be going on against them and to be aware of that. And how we might be able to assist in a situation that arises.

Eric also talks about how his definition means not just passively recognizing differences across race but doing something to interfere when witnessing racism occurring. He states,

I would say being racially aware is being … not just recognizing passively that there is a difference but realizing that we need to start doing something about this. There's been times in my life where, if you just stand by and other people are being racist, then you're just letting the problem persist. So that's kind of been my mentality as I've grown up.

Eric talks about the importance of recognizing racialized differences but also speaking up against racist actions. Here we begin to see not only overlaps between action and other dimensions of definitions, but also some connections to the identity traits, such as being “outspoken,” that were discussed in Chapter Five. Eloise also discusses her definition of being racially aware as overlapping across recognizing differential treatment, white privilege, and taking action in the form of being outspoken or “vocal,” explaining,

Being racially aware to me means that I'm still trying to educate myself on what is going on, why my friends are being treated the way that they are, or the discriminations that are happening. I'm just trying to do my part in being vocal and bringing awareness to the
situation and being very aware of white privilege, which, I mean, we've all known it's been there, but I didn't become truly aware of it until probably recently in the past year. Eloise’s definition also begins to demonstrate that educating oneself can be part of making sense of what it means to be racially aware.

Therefore, in addition to definitions continuing to have overlapping dimensions that included taking action, being racially aware often also meant engaging in various types of communications-based action (such as speaking up or listening), as well as achieving knowledge through further education. I defined this as self-education, which involved educating oneself through different means and/or receiving educational opportunities through others. For example, Autumn describes that their definition of being racially aware means,

Constantly learning, constantly seeking information, you know, rhetoric, personal stories, listening. And like I said, like shutting up, you know what I mean? Like obviously have your discussions with your family and when you see it, speaking up, but like in terms of being racially aware, I think it's more about listening and hearing people than doing like much speaking about it.

Like Eloise, Autumn also talks about the importance of both learning (“seeking information”) and engaging in different types of communications-based actions (such as “listening” and “speaking up”) as part of their understanding of what it means to be racially aware. Autumn later builds upon this definition, including how they as a white person have benefited from systemic racism, explaining how constant learning and listening enables them to continuously work towards deconstructing and unlearning that internalized system. Thus, Autumn’s definition too still includes overlaps of various dimensions to make sense of the meaning of being aware. Ella’s
definition also crosses different dimensions, which include recognizing her own privilege as a white person and also taking action in the form of self-education,

I think being racially aware is … I realized that because of the position I'm in, I am [at] home. I don't have a job per se. I do things for different groups, but I'm not employed through anything. I have time where I can use to learn more about racial inequality in the United States and then reflect on that for myself. And I realized that so much of being, not just racially aware, but politically aware, it's a privilege because you have to have the time and make [sure] the time that you do have you are actively using to do something.

[So] really just realizing that I have so many privileges based off just the luck of the draw that I was born as a white person and that I live in the United States. It's different wherever you're born and in the United States, being white comes with these giant privileges and making sure that we do things that bring other people to the same level.

Part of Ella’s definition includes ensuring she uses the time she does have right now to actively do something about racial inequity, in addition to educating herself.

Some participants also expand upon self-education as part of their definition to also include understanding the history. For Esther, her definition highlights the importance of gathering knowledge, taking action, and understanding history. She describes,

I would say it was three big pillars for me ... racial awareness today is knowledge plus action, intentional action, and then before that it was achievement of knowledge, but no conviction to act just yet. And then before that the season was knowledge gathering, you know, fact checking history verifying, so that's … how it's changed for me.

Esther’s definition includes the importance of “fact checking history.” She goes on to explain that she had a very whitewashed view of the world and of history, and that to understand better
what it meant to be Black in America and globally, she needed to “re-learn history” and understand the historical context of that experience. She did that through knowledge-gathering and “intentional action.” Finally, Will also describes the meaning of being racially aware as recognizing the historical context of systemic inequity and bias that has evolved through a system of colonialism. He explains that being aware of that and understanding how to take action to change that system are part of his definition. Will also states that his definition changed for him over time due to his own self-education. In this case, self-education is more of the means for Will’s definition changing than it is actually part of his definition.

As demonstrated throughout this chapter so far, I found that most participants defined being racially aware as a combination of: (1) understanding their own whiteness and its impact; (2) recognizing differences in experience and treatment across races, often placing white people in a place of superiority; and (3) feeling some responsibility in terms of taking action. Action could occur through many means, such as self-education, listening, speaking up, or just “being part of the change.” More specific types of action will be further explored in Chapter Seven.

(3) Shifting Meaning Over Time

As participants continue to make sense of their identity as racially aware, their understanding of what it means to be that racially aware person also grows and shifts. More than 3/4 of participants indicated that the meaning of being racially aware changed over time. This indicates that most participants were not just born racially aware or with a clear definition of what that means, but that it evolved, and continues to evolve, through their experiences. Such changes in meaning often shifted throughout their lives from a color-blind understanding of race to a more systemically aware understanding of the impacts of whiteness and racism. One participant who summarizes this shift well is Allen, who explains that,
I went through a period in my life where, I don’t know that I would say I fully identified this way, but I was much more into that sort of Pollyanna place of, hey, we all just need to be color-blind. And I think that has a real appeal and it feels really good, but I don’t think that’s realistic… it is easy for me to be color-blind because I’m in this position of privilege, but for somebody who’s not, and when you really start sitting down and listening to people who operate from a different position, they’re like, we can’t be color-blind. We talk about race all the time, because it’s an everyday thing that affects our lives. And I’m talking about people of color that feel this way. And so my color-blindness, although perhaps emblematic of some type of cultural ideal in some ways, was glossing over the reality that exists in society and was enabling me to take a more passive position than what was really called for if I was going to be somebody that was a true champion for justice.

Allen highlights not only that his meaning has shifted from a more color-blind understanding, but he also explains clearly how he cannot remain color-blind if he wants to be a “true champion for justice.” Natalie describes a similar shift, though her explanation and experience as an immigrant differs slightly,

I think initially for me being racially aware meant being color-blind, and I think maybe some of that comes from growing up in an immigrant society where there were these people from all over the world and you were just friends with everyone. So I think I moved to the U.S. and this was just an extension of that, but that really wasn’t racially aware, that was, an awareness yes that there are different races, but not anything about what different races experience.
Although this study is limited to an understanding of whiteness, white supremacy, and systemic racism in the United States, I find this quote interesting because even someone who is white from another Western country describes being more “color-blind” earlier in her life. It was not until she moved to the United States and had more direct experiences with Black people that she became aware of the systemic ways in which whiteness and racism play out.

Some participants also indicated that the meaning shifted from a color-blind understanding when they were younger to a deeper understanding in adulthood. Ryan describes,

When you’re a kid, we were taught and raised that everybody’s equal and not to be prejudice and all that, but that’s just very broad for a kid. As an adult, now that would include understanding the job opportunities that different people have in this country, the economic factors that different people have to deal with. And I’ve learned, as an adult, about redlining and real estate issues with Black America, the history of our country, you know, property ownership and mortgages and wealth building and all those kinds of factors that I wouldn’t know about [as a kid] necessarily.

Ryan describes being taught that “everybody’s equal” or to treat everyone equally, which can also be color-blind because it implies ignoring race-based factors within social issues and treating everyone the same. Then, though he and other participants do not use the term “systemic,” Ryan speaks to how this meaning shifted toward an understanding of the systemic and structural impacts of racism as he became an adult. Rachel’s also explains how her meaning shifted from a color-blind understanding of race when she was younger,

Yes, it has changed for sure over time … I fell into that category of people that felt like oh, but isn’t it good not to see color and not to consider that, like oh this person’s Black or this person’s Asian … aren’t we just supposed to, oh this is just another student in my
class or another co-worker … I come from cops being my parents, so that was more of a descriptive thing, we’re looking for an Asian male at six four … not how you would like describe your friends … and then now with everything going on, I realized that that’s kind of not what the goal was, it’s more about being aware that there are differences in how different races are treated or some of the stigmas that may be held against them or some of the racism that still may be going on against them and to be aware of that. And how we might be able to assist in a situation that arises.

Rachel’s meaning shifted and evolved over time to one that is less color-blind and more aware of different races’ experiences, though she differs from other participants in that she does not talk about a deeper understanding of the systemic or structural nature of racism. She was one participant who was just beginning to become more racially aware, and therefore still appeared less aware of the systemic or structural aspect of whiteness, white supremacy, and racism.

While post participants indicated a shift in meaning over time, some participants described always having been racially aware in some way, though the specifics of that sometimes still changed. These participants in particular grappled with whether they were just “born with” this understanding, yet their narratives highlight specifically how it has been a process for them. For example, Stella describes this scenario well,

I would say I was racially aware or felt like I was always racially aware because I grew up in very diverse, low-income housing…it was probably 50/50 white and other. My friends growing up were mixed and the neighborhood I grew up in was mixed. And I'm married to an Asian guy. My roommates in college ironically were Asian too. And so in some ways I felt like I was a part of other clubs, right. I was a part of other social networks where I got to learn different cultures. And then I did international [work] for a
long time. So I feel like being racially aware was just a part of my DNA, but then also things I had to do as a part of my work and my life and my husband and relationships. What I've learned, I think in the last year is that, you're not ever fully racially aware, right? There's no way you yourself can understand everything that every other race or culture is going through. And just as you think you might get it, then something happens and you don't know. You don't know how people are really processing things or what they're going through. And I think I learned that even more so this year.

For Stella, because of the diversity of her experiences and even relationships growing up and into adulthood, she had this perception that “being racially aware was just a part of my DNA.” As a result, she initially described her meaning of being racially aware as not really shifting. However, she mentions that in the past year in particular (through 2020), she came to realize that “you’re not ever fully racially aware,” indicating that becoming aware and making sense of her identity as aware is an ongoing process. Adrienne was somewhat similar, but also unique. When asked if the meaning of being racially aware has changed for her, she replied,

No, I was raised in a super small town of 4,000 people. Everyone was mostly white… the town was separated by railroad tracks. White people lived on one side, Black people on the other side… when I started school … all of my chosen friendships have been very diverse. And so I would say, from my school age, I could always recognize differences and respect those, which is significantly different than those same white kids that I originally was raised with. So I would say for me, this isn’t a newfound awareness. It’s just something that I always had. It’s kind of confusing because I feel like everyone has had the opportunity, if I have the opportunity to have that experience growing up in a small, rural white town, why isn’t everybody here yet? You know, so for me, it’s not a
change... It’s just … kind of just been a lifestyle or it’s just been who I have been since
I’ve been able to make my own choices.

Adrienne was a more unique participant in this study. She described always being racially aware
in the way that she defines it and since being able to make her own choices. As an adult, she
further explains that her friends, husband, children, and extended family are mostly Black or
mixed race. Despite growing up with negative messages around race, Adrienne always “chose”
friends who were predominantly people of color. When probed about how her awareness and
identity have changed, she had a hard time answering, explaining “I feel like I was born that
way.” This is still a process of meaning-making and identity work, however, as she indicates that
being racially aware and what that means are difficult to separate from her core sense of self and
how she maintains that identity around others.

In this chapter, I describe the dimensions of meaning that comprise a core component of
participants’ identity work. Through the narrative process afforded by our interviews,
participants highlighted similar ways in which they framed and thought about the meaning of
being racially aware, which most commonly meant: (1) recognizing both the differential
treatment and opportunities (privilege) that exist across races; (2) acknowledging and navigating
one’s own internalization of hegemonic white ideals, such as white privilege, white guilt, and
color-blindness; (3) understanding that systemic racism and white supremacy have real material
impacts on both marginalized people and even the dominant groups that benefit from these
systems; and (4) for some, utilizing these understandings to inspire social action as a part of what
it means to be racially aware. Analyzing the meaning of “being racially aware” provides valuable
insights into socially constructed, commonly held ideals, narratives, and behaviors that people
attribute within the process of (re)producing a white racially aware identity. In the face of
deconstructing an often expected and opposing, normative “color-blind” white identity, making sense of what it culturally means to be racially aware is a key component of constructing this alternative white racially aware identity.

Discussion

Meaning is an important component of identity work, and the common dimensions identified in this chapter represent cultural frames that together formulate a core component of the process of constructing a collective, white racially aware identity. In their work on white supremacist organizations and how they further their movement through the internet, Adams and Roscigno (2005:760) analyze online language used by these organizations to understand how common symbolic and cultural frames are constructed and utilized in crafting a collective white nationalist identity, arguing that “collective identity is not an individual phenomenon, but rather a manifestation of group attributes and member commonalities occurring at a social level.” This was true for the participants in my study as well, though rather than collectively constructing a white supremacist identity, they were actively pushing against these ideals in (re)constructing a white racially aware identity. Though spoken from their individual perspective, the common themes found in understanding the meaning of being racially aware are important cultural frames that are drawn upon in the narrative process to construct and maintain this new, collective identity through ongoing processes of identity work and meaning making.

Therefore, in uncovering what being racially aware means to participants, I found that demonstrating a “successful” white racially aware identity and signaling that they are “racially aware” to others collectively consisted of indicating at least one or a combination of the following: (1) you are not color-blind but are aware of the inequitable disparities and differences across race; (2) you recognize the privileged positionality of whiteness as “superior” or
benefiting from systemic inequity and your own positionality as white within this; (3) you are (in most cases) beginning to understand the systemic nature of these impacts; and (4) you are actively doing something to address these disparities. Whether they realized it or used these exact words, participants often described and defined their understanding of being racially aware within the context of structural and systemic aspects of white supremacy and racism through interpretive processes of sharing their personal, individualized narratives. This further supports how personal experiences at the individual level can indicate broader, socio-cultural processes at the collective level.

It is unsurprising that participants make sense of broader structures through individual narratives, given the predominant individualistic socio-cultural ethos of the United States and a capitalistic society. This aligns with Baumann’s (2000) understanding of “liquid modernity” to describe the contemporary state of the United States and other Western societies, in which the public is made private only to then be generalized again, and with the increasingly common cultural framework of a therapeutic ethos, in which personal relations have been overtaken by scientific approaches (Illouz 2008). According to symbolic interactionist perspectives, structures are made up of interpersonal interactions, so these combined interpretations continue to both question and uphold racialized systems. Participants’ interactions with me through the interview process allowed their understanding of common, structural elements of society and their own sense of self within this space to come to light.

Another concept I thought about throughout this research was “othering.” Given participants’ focus on describing their meaning and awareness in relationship to understanding differential treatment of “other” races in comparison to their own, I at first thought that participants were describing practices of othering, a hegemonic tool utilized to marginalize
Black and Brown people and reinforce a racialized social order (Crenshaw 1988; Collins 2000). However, I found that part of being racially aware was also framing oneself as aware of this racialized social order through narratives around their own whiteness and privilege. Though they made sense of normative white constructs through an understanding of how that impacts themselves and “others” (people of color), this was different from othering in that being racially aware meant developing such understandings in order to deconstruct, rather than reinforce, systemic racial inequities. In other words, people (re)construct their white racially aware identity and the meaning of that in contrast to what they are not (they are not people of color or “typical” white people). This also signals that they are racially aware as a white person and understand these disparities, acting as an important cultural frame in being racially aware. Therefore, describing oneself in relationship to understanding how “other” experiences differ from their own was a common way for participants to make sense of themselves and their identity.

Making sense of the meaning of being racially aware through structural and systemic understandings of race and racial disparities meant also contrasting that against earlier understandings and demonstrating how these meanings have shifted. This finding further indicates how the construction of identity and meaning making are ongoing social processes, and part of that process of becoming a white racially aware person is also demonstrating to others how your awareness and meaning of that awareness have shifted. Many participants’ meanings shifted from color-blindness, “treat everyone equally,” or “I don’t see color” ideologies and expectations to awareness of the systemic and socially constructed nature of race-based disparities. Some even further described how it has shifted from simple biological explanations of race. For example, Jack mentions how his definition shifted from thinking more about skin color to understanding the weight of what that actually meant for people in terms of differential
treatment and opportunity. Rachel also discussed that race was simply used as a way to describe people in her household growing up; social issues were not understood as rooted in racialized structures or systems. Interestingly, a few participants – like Rachel and Adam, for example – were earlier in their racial awareness journeys and were grappling with their understandings of what it means to be racially aware, at times still leaning towards a somewhat color-blind perspective. In returning to the idea of certain themes and narratives being socio-cultural frames, participants who were still grappling with their understanding of being and becoming racially aware appeared color-blind at times; and yet in order to fit within the confines of this white, racially aware identity, they must appear aware of color-blindness, differences across race, and their own white privilege, even if that causes conflict within themselves. Understanding what being racially aware means and how that impacts one’s sense of self are complex processes.

Nelson also shared further that he has never given much credence to the debate over biological differences in race as a justification for the treatment of people of color. Instead, he goes “beyond the individual lens that we’re all just human” to understand that race is a socially constructed concept with the very real social and economic consequences, as well as physiological. These understandings were further influenced by contemporary discussions of racial inequity. One such example is discussions around the impacts of intergenerational trauma and how that is stored in the body. Nelson and Celeste both mentioned being influenced by Resmaa Menakem’s (2017) work on somatic racism and how trauma gets trapped in the body for both white people and people of color (with differential experiences and consequences). Nelson believes that white Americans throughout history have learned to suppress their moral compass or humanity in order to justify the enslavement and ongoing negative treatment of Black people. The Black Lives Matter movement has been a reactivating of the moral compass for some white
people, and with that also comes navigating the reality that one’s humanity may have been turned off and this brings with it trauma too – albeit, a different kind of trauma and experience from Black and Brown people. These deeper systemic understandings of race-based issues are indicative of a cultural shift in some white people’s understanding of social inequity and the common ways in which we speak to indicate ourselves as racially aware. As discussed, this is influenced by a variety of other contemporary sources as well – social media, TV, other books and authors, podcasts, close personal relationships with people of color, and other white people who are “racially aware.” These cultural resources can be drawn upon in making sense of what it means to be racially aware, and in further crafting this new white racial identity that challenges the hegemonic, “status quo” white identity.

In this regard, it is also important to continue to situate these findings of racially aware meaning and identity construction within a broader socio-historical lens of the time in which these participants were interviewed. While some participants, like Nelson, argued that the events of 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement were a reactivating of the moral compass for some white people, this alone was not the catalyst or even primary descriptor that participants shared when making sense of themselves as racially aware. While participants’ meanings and identity construction certainly were influenced by the ongoing effects of a global pandemic, Trump-era identity politics, and racial unrest (and the heightened access to knowledge and information via books, podcasts, social media, and other sources), participants frequently discussed how their understanding of being racially aware began to emerge before these events. Therefore, while a contemporary historical context is important for situating the meaning of being racially aware, people were beginning to construct their sense of self and critically examine their own awareness and what that means earlier than the racial protests of 2020 or the
election of Donald Trump in 2016. While more than half of participants mentioned these events at least once as something they are aware of and/or as relevant to their journey, most did not mention them as catalysts for their identity construction nor contributing to what it means to be racially aware.

This is interesting because given the time in which I interviewed participants, I anticipated more people would cite these events as impactful in constructing their racially aware identity and what that means. Therefore, this socio-historical context did not directly impact people’s meaning making or identity work processes as much. This may be based on age. Participants in my study ranged from ages 19 to 74, with the majority being over the age of 30 and more than half being over the age of 40. Participants often described how their current understanding of what being racially aware means did not begin until early to middle adulthood when their racial awareness journey first was sparked. That timeframe for most was well before 2020 and even 2016. While this does not mean that the current socio-historical context is unimportant, it just means it was not as directly influential for participants as I thought it might be. While participants were well on their journey when the events of 2020 occurred, these events did further spur and re-solidify their evolving sense of what it means to be racially aware and then take action as part of that identity, which is the focus of the next chapter.

Throughout this chapter I analyzed how participants, in understanding the process of becoming racially aware as a process of ongoing identity (re)construction, also used narratives to account for and make sense of what it means to be racially aware as a key component of that identity work. In making sense of a racially aware identity, participants had to actively formulate an understanding of what it means to be racially aware, and in so doing, identified some common cultural frames that white people must adopt in order to signal they are racially aware and
understand what that means more collectively. This expands upon existing research by providing insights into the particular cultural narratives that some white Americans draw from and internalize to (re)construct their identity and make sense of what that means to them, both individually and collectively as a group. This is important because in further understanding what these frames are, scholars may continue to critically examine them and their usefulness in addressing systemic racism and white supremacy through the development of a white racially aware identity.
CHAPTER SEVEN: SOCIAL ACTION

Engaging in social action is the third and final component of constructing a white racially aware identity, which accompanies the other components of becoming aware (Chapter Five) and making sense of what it means to be aware (Chapter Six) to explain this identity work. This last component illustrates how participants take action as a key piece of (re)constructing themselves as white, racially aware people, but also how it is an important frame in indicating to others that they are racially aware. It is also closely connected to and overlaps with the other components. In Chapter Five, I first described the importance of taking action in relationship to participant’s identity traits, particularly those who valued responsibility and fairness as part of their identity. In Chapter Six, I discussed how action was one of the dimensions used to describe the meaning of being racially aware. In this chapter, I will further explain how participants characterized this component of their identity work through (1) their motivation, or reason, for action, which was related to “making a difference,” and (2) the types of action they engaged in. The following sections summarize these findings and connect them back to other themes in the research.

1) Making a Difference

While race-based scholarship has often included discussions around activism and antiracism, especially in critical whiteness studies, my goal was to understand better the connections between the social processes of becoming racially aware and the motivation to act. I found that engaging in some type of social action towards racial equity and social change was more than just a behavior or a simple action; it is a core piece of constructing oneself as, and indicating to others that one is, racially aware. Participants engaged in action for various reasons, but the most common reason had to do with “making a difference,” which became a key characteristic in
further understanding what social action means within their identity work and why people participate in action. In this section, I examine this reason for action and demonstrate its close relationship to another component of identity work, the process of becoming racially aware.

About half of participants described **making a difference** as the reason for taking action, which is defined as engaging in social action because of altruistic reasons and connected to one’s purpose or calling in life as part of who they are, making it seem “meant to be.” Participants who fell into this category were well-distributed across gender, age, education, and income, with no particular discerning factors to indicate any demographic-related explanations for this reason for taking action. Instead, their desire to make a difference through social action was closely related to participants’ process of becoming racially aware, as described in Chapter Five. Particularly, the primary factors that drove people to make a difference were like some of the factors important in the process of becoming racially aware and included: (1) being attributed to “who they are,” which at times comprised some of the common identity traits of self-aware, sensitive, responsible, and fair, and (2) close personal relationships and turning point moments of relational exposure. Further, participants’ desire to make a difference translated into action via their (3) occupation, which was more than just “work” or a “job,” but was described as a “calling” or their “purpose in life.” In this way, making a difference as a reason for taking action is also closely connected to work as a type of action. Types of action are discussed further in the next section.

These three factors often overlapped and were difficult to separate. For example, Wesley’s story summarizes this overlap well, as he explains how taking action equates to making a difference through his personal sense of self, his desire to make work his calling, and the conversations he has with people. He first describes changing careers from owning his own granite company and conducting safety trainings to becoming a diversity, equity, and inclusion
(DE&I) consultant working with other white men to advance their knowledge and understanding of structural inequity. He states one of the reasons for making that change as “It wasn't my thing. I wanted to go do something that was going to make a difference in this world.” Wesley states he “makes a difference in this world” and stays “true to who I am” through conversations:

…how do I be true to who I am if I don't have those conversations, right? And more and more my sense of how am I going to help change this world – I'm gonna do one conversation at a time.

These conversations occur through social interactions with people he is both close to and/or knows through work. Nelson spoke the most of any of the participants about his calling / purpose and wanting to make a difference. Nelson describes part of his engagement in social action as related to a deep calling and purpose in his life. This calling and desire to make a difference is also closely connected to his own self-identity, the work he has done both domestically and globally with corporate leaders, and the close personal relationships he has built with other white men and people of color. Nelson describes,

The deepest calling for me is to open the world for love to flow. So, I feel like I love to … see beauty in the world, connect to people and I thrive on that authentic relating, connecting and yeah, create change in the world … and it's tied to my own liberation, as I help the world be more equitable and free.

Both Wesley and Nelson describe making a difference in relationship to their own identity, work, and relationships. Chantel also talked about making a difference as related to her own individual values and beliefs (identity traits), her experiences at work, and her close personal relationships. Specifically, in regard to relationships, Chantel again referenced the turning point moment of relational exposure with her college friend, initially shared in Chapter Five, further explaining,
The moment with my lesbian friend that I described where I started to see the world differently, that moment wouldn't have been possible without me first forming a friendship with her and getting to a space where she could be vulnerable with me and I could be vulnerable with her in sharing our experiences because without that moment I might not be the racially aware person that I am today. And I think because of my upbringing and in me seeing well, that's not right, that's unfair, I think a lot of people see that's unfair, but I wasn't ok just leaving it being unfair. I wanted to influence change in the world.

Chantel’s identity traits of being self-aware, responsible, and fair, along with moments of relational exposure, influenced her not only in becoming racially aware as a key component of her identity construction, but also in making a difference as another key component of her identity work through action. Chantel later shared that she strives to make a difference through work-related action as part of her company’s employee resource groups (ERGs) as well.

Being responsible / fair was a common identity trait that participants described in their motivation to make a difference. Much of the responsibility participants felt to make a difference occurred through work, particularly DE&I-related work. This may be because I recruited people through my DE&I network; however, these findings are still relevant for understanding people’s process of (re)constructing a racially aware identity through action because it speaks to the role DE&I plays as part of their cultural framing. Such discussions around DE&I occurred for both people who work directly in DE&I and those who do not. For example, Wesley and Nelson work directly in DE&I and made work their “life’s calling.” Elaine also worked in DE&I before retiring, describing,

I retired at the end of the summer. I had been there for 18 years … that was my job that I
loved … I worked in diversity every day and it was my job as well as my passion.

For Elaine, DE&I was the primary way in which she engaged in action to make a difference. Conversely, Steve does not work in DE&I yet discussed feeling responsible for making a difference as an executive engineering leader who cares about and supports his co-workers,

Once I became more aware, [I felt] it’s my job to go tell others about it, to try to right the wrongs that are likely to continue to happen to people that shouldn’t happen to. So I will spend a lot of time pushing women, people of color forward, making sure they’ve got advocates, mentors, sponsors. Whereas before I didn’t do that. [Now] I spend quite a bit more time on diversity and inclusion, talking about it with my staff, talking about it with other folks because it is that much more important to me than it ever was to make sure we’re being fair … So that’s how I think I’ve changed. My identity changed more from a focus for me … and we talk about passionate. I don’t know whether passion is always the right adjective to use, but it’s absolutely something I am focused on probably every day to make sure I spend enough time on this and we’re not leaving people behind.

The responsibility Steve feels to make a difference as a leader has changed over time as his identity and awareness have changed. Taylor is another participant who does not work in DE&I but talks about its influence in her life and how she makes a difference at work,

I can speak to trans issues all day long. I want to be able to speak to their issues too, because if I do this in a silo and bring myself up, I’m not bringing anybody else along with me. It takes all of us locked in arms together to make the world better. And that’s what I’m trying to prove here, that our ERG should be working together to bring up all ERGs at the same time. And then that’s also a call to action for anybody that’s not involved in an ERG, for somebody that does have privilege … to get involved, to help lift
those same voices. You’re lifting your community, you’re lifting your peers up, and bringing us all to the same platform. So I think that’s what’s so important about that.

Taylor worked to make a difference through the ERGs at her work because, like other participants, she felt a responsibility to act by advocating for and supporting others. Will also discusses making a difference through work in DE&I,

I do a lot of work in DE&I as my side job on top of what I do [as] a finance manager because I love people and I love getting along with people and building a better place for people.

Though he works in finance, Will’s desire to make a difference relates to a broader love for humanity and the additional work he does in DE&I. Misty works as a librarian and has received DE&I-related training on inequities through work. What she has learned has moved her to make a difference,

With so many people, the injustice that you see, the inequity, especially with law enforcement, housing, job opportunities, education … every time I hear about whatever kind of inequity it is, it breaks my heart … the brutality of the last couple of years in particular with police has just been, it’s overwhelming. I’m getting emotional now. I just, I can’t stand the thought of people being treated so badly, so unfairly, I don’t know how we let that happen. And that has really moved me a great deal in the last while back.

Misty’s feelings around fairness and equity, combined with her learning through work, inspired her to make a difference.

Finally, while work, identity, and relationships were still intertwined with these definitions, some participants described their desire to make a difference through a spiritual lens. This often related to people’s broader love for humanity, themselves, and others. For example,
Earl’s description also overlapped with these three factors of making a difference, which were derived from his spirituality and love for humanity and those around him,

So I guess wanting to make the world … a better place, but for me, there is actually a Jewish belief I've always resonated with that says that where community is present, God is present and I've always really enjoyed that idea. And to me, social justice – I really do agree with Cornell West – is what love looks like in public and the ideas that just that once I learn about something, I have to follow through with the action. Maybe that's why I liked to do drugs for a long time, ’cause if you escape, you don't have to follow through with commitment. I can escape, but if I'm sober and present and my humanity is turned on, I know there's a way we can be better and do better. That's just how I'm hardwired.

Based off the ways I was raised and the way the universe has blessed me with life, like I'm going to stand up… But I know that [going along] … makes it harder for my Black daughter to be yourself in the world, makes it harder for my Black wife to be herself, makes it harder for my lesbian sister, makes it hard for white women and makes it harder for Earl to be himself in the world. So, um, I don't have a choice. It's just choosing how to do in a way that is impactfulful and hopefully builds bridges rather than burns them. That's the choice I have.

Earl’s spirituality and love for humanity compels him to make a difference because of how he is “wired” and feeling responsible to the people in his life that he loves that are impacted by systemic inequity. Martin’s sense of interconnectedness with other human beings is also part of what compels him to make a difference,

If you asked me what’s my heritage, I’m an earthling. I believe in that. There’s that connection with humans all over the world and I feel that. [I identify that over American].
Martin’s sense of interconnectedness was also driven by his spirituality and Buddhist practice. Though not Buddhist, Natalie was also influenced by Buddhist practices of loving kindness through mediation, explaining,

I guess through meditation practice and through loving kindness practice, the wish [is] for that [equity] is for all beings and it’s not happening for everyone right now. So the question becomes, all right, I have this awareness now, what am I going to do with it to make it right? Because it’s the right thing to do. Maybe there’s not an intellectual answer to that. Maybe that’s just a heart answer … to see people suffering and also to recognize that I’m benefiting as a result of that. Neither of those feels good. So how do we get to the same freedom from suffering for everybody? We’re all interdependent. It can’t be, it’s just not okay … I guess that’s what prompts you to take action.

Natalie also talked about the interconnectedness of people and the strong desire and responsibility that, with her evolving racially aware identity, to take action to right inequities as a component of that work.

In summary, making a difference is one of the primary reasons and motivators for why participants take action. This occurred because of participants’ own sense of self as people who are morally responsible to take action in the face of unfairness and inequity, the deep love and connection they feel for other people (whether broader humanity, co-workers, peers, or close loved ones), and a deep connection to work as part of this calling, purpose, or passion to make a difference. In the next section, I further discuss the relevance of action through the most common types of actions participants engage in.
(2) Types of Action

Participants’ discussions of social action also consisted of the types of action they typically engaged in, which provided insights into how participants approach or define “social action” and what that means in relationship to constructing a racially aware identity. Though the types of social action and the degree to which participants were involved in action varied, I found several commonalities across participants, enabling me to further characterize and make sense of social action as an important component of constructing a collective, white, racially aware identity. These common types of action not only aided people in continuing to make sense of themselves as racially aware but also were drawn upon as relevant cultural frames or symbols to indicate their identity as aware to others. The most common types of action included: (1) work-related action; (2) activism in different forms, such as conversing with others, speaking up against social inequities (directly or via social media), and working with local community organizations; (3) self-education; and (4) financially based action. Participants frequently engaged in multiple types of actions (versus just one), and they selected actions based on what they personally identified with and the availability or accessibility of the action.

1. Work-related Action

In the previous section, I discussed how work as a “calling,” “purpose,” or “passion” was part of understanding participants’ reason for taking action through a desire to make a difference. Work was also a type of action, as both a conduit for action to occur and as an action itself. Since most people in my study have jobs, work-related action was easily accessible in terms of a place they could influence. Many also felt it was their responsibility to act, and again, work provided an easy avenue through which to conduct that action. This was evident by participants who both worked as DE&I practitioners and those who did not but engaged in DE&I actions in different
ways. For example, Chantel further explains that once she got into a position of influence in a corporate work setting through her organization’s women’s ERG, she used that position as an avenue to help address the unfairness she saw for women – particularly women of color – by “looking at how we can change those experiences and create fairness in this corporate world where there’s not a lot of fairness.” This type of action makes sense for Chantel as a place she could easily influence given her positionality within the workplace, and it also meshed with her sense of self as responsible and fair. Other participants also had occupations as teachers and felt that work was one of the primary types of action they engage in. For example, Hilda explains,

I think the biggest thing that I do is educate … educating people around race, racial identity development, implicit bias, waking up to this … and to our shared humanity. Hilda’s work is her action, as a way to advocate for others, teach about inequity, and create greater equity. Jennifer is also a teacher and talks about her work as both an important type of social action and an avenue through which other types of action can occur,

Any kind of professional development, like I’m in a U.S. history teaching grant and a lot of that is dealing with race … really just trying to share, I reached out a lot to former professors, former colleagues… [being] open to any resources.

In addition to her own professional development and conversing with other colleagues, Jennifer further explains that she brings discussions about disparities into her classroom as a history teacher as well.

Work-related action can also refer to making decisions about the type of work you choose and do not choose. Celeste shares a story where she had an opportunity as a DE&I consultant to make a significant amount of money in working with a celebrity guest at a company. When she found out the celebrity guest was a white woman, she was disappointed, describing,
My heart just sank. I was like, oh fuck. I can’t be a white woman working with another white woman, like my idea was there’s such diversity at [this company] … let’s find out how this amazing group of people are practicing presence or whatever they might call it. So the intervention was pretty powerful, of giving them a different way that I wanted to approach the project and that [this celebrity] would not be the focus and neither would I… it just kind of disrupted everything, and the [company] lined up with that but [the celebrity] wouldn’t. So the project just completely died and it was going to be like a $200,000 piece of work for me … Not taking contracts or speaking up about things like that, some of those actions have been fueled by a deep integrity and my relationships.

Celeste’s own commitment to advancing DE&I, her awareness, and her own “integrity and relationships” fueled work-related actions she took, sometimes in the form of declining work that misaligned with her identity in being a racially aware person, even if it meant losing money.

2. Activism

Action also occurred in the form of social justice activism, which could occur through political action, conversations/speaking up and social media (which often intertwined), marches, and local community organizations, some of which overlap and intersect with each other. For example, Ella identifies as someone who is “politically active” and takes action through campaigning and participating in her local Democratic party. She describes,

I’m part of my county’s executive democratic committee … I’m part of the communications team and one of the fundraising chairs. The summer in response to George Floyd’s murder, I helped our local chapter of [an organization led by women of color] write a petition to … the police departments.
Ella demonstrates how her activism intersects across political and local community action.

Esther’s social action also crosses these bounds within her activism,

I’m trying to be more involved in local politics. So one of the things I do now is I go to the [local city] Facebook page and we have a police oversight commission review board … And they are there to be a third party funded by the city to review the police actions and consequences … I’m there, I’m asking questions, I’m talking with literal police officers in group chats with other concerned citizens.

Esther’s activism across political and local levels also overlaps with online, social media engagement. She further explains that outside of this particular local action, she is also “active and intentional with my social media accounts” in hopes of influencing and conversing with people in her sphere of influence. Local community activism can also take the form of volunteering in various avenues. Both Natalie and Allen, who are married, describe similar forms of activism through the volunteering that they do. Natalie first describes,

I have evolved with using philanthropy as a tool for [becoming racially aware]. And the [local] community foundation we’re involved with has also been offering webinars and seminars about racial inequity and what we can do. And so I’ve been attending these webinars… I am [also] a member of the board of trustees at [her son’s] school. I sit on the DE&I and justice committee. So in the ways that that committee works to take action, both within our school and through connections within the greater community.

Natalie demonstrates how different actions can overlap and come together to formulate how she holistically takes action; though she predominantly describes philanthropic and social justice activism through local community organizations, she also mentions educating herself through some of the resources available to her through these organizations. Allen also describes several
overlapping actions of activism across voting, speaking up, and volunteering with a local organization that supports refugees,

I guess there’s more subtle and overt social actions. I’ve always been somebody who votes. I don’t claim a political party, but I’m going to generally vote for the party that’s going to be progressive on race issues … I’m going to vote for the candidate that I see is going to champion social, racial, economic justice issues … I’ve [also] always been one who is very comfortable speaking out loud about my positions … I started volunteering to work with refugees so that, well, we as a country are putting out an awful lot of negative energy, saying we don’t care what you’re going through, you don’t belong here. And I want to say, we care what you’re going through and you belong here. So I wanted to deliver that message.

Adrienne also engages in various types of activist actions, particularly through marches and speaking up through conversations online,

So for me, social action initially was just understanding the whole story. Listened to a lot of podcasts, read the book, trying to be able to speak to those people that come to me and say whatever ignorant theory they have, studying Black history … and then really social activism, not really large scale, just participating in marches … making every opportunity that I can on social media … not to have a charged response on social media because I don’t want to get turned off… but just to like paint a very logical, factual picture of all these incidences.

Adrienne’s actions have taken various forms, including educating herself (which is another type of action), speaking up through social media, and participating in marches. Andrew also describes taking action in the form of marching,
One of the things that, when we went to the rally, it’s like as a white person, are you willing to put your life on the line to help Black people express their feelings and I’m like yeah, what’s up, what do I have to do? And then like cops are coming up to the right and … I’m a little scared. I’m a father, I provide for my family. I’m literally putting my life at risk being here. At first, I’m like, that’s stupid. Why are we here? And second off, it’s very empowering because I’m willing to risk my life to do this, because straight up, honest to God, they’re the worst, fuck ‘em.

Andrew expresses feeling both scared and empowered in taking action through rallies and marches as a form of social action. Similarly, Eloise participates in different types of action, including speaking up through conversations and social media, and also attending marches,

I re-posted videos of things that happen because I believe that that helps bring awareness. I think some people say that it does the opposite, but my purpose is to bring awareness. It’s not to stir up anything. I make sure to discuss with people around me what’s going on. I have marched in several protests. I’ve gone to vigils. I am a part of several social media groups. I’m a part of BLM. I just try to call things out when I see them. I try to be as active as possible… just be involved. When I’m out there marching, it makes me feel empowered. It makes me feel like I’m making a difference.

Eloise is someone who identified as sensitive and outspoken, and she selects actions that enable her to speak up, feel empowered, and make a difference. Other participants have engaged in different forms of activism yet express not always feeling comfortable to do so, even though they feel like they “should.” For example, Autumn shares,

I’m not as, like, on the streets maybe as I wish that I could … I went to protests, I show up in ways. But in terms of like front line, putting my body physically in between--,
something that I’ve done as much as maybe I should or I would like to… but I have incredible high anxiety disorders, [and] I’m not like a fit person.

Autumn goes on to describe that they participate in other types of activism through local community outlets, such as doing mutual aid, picking up and dropping off donations, posting and spreading resources online through social media, and donating money. Autumn feels some anxiety around protesting yet feels like they “should” be protesting. In this particular historical context right after 2020, that was not surprising, given one of the most visible forms of activism around the globe during that timeframe was marching or protesting. Some of the fear and anxiety around protesting was a commonly shared feeling among other participants, too, such as Steve and Eric. For Eric, he was more introverted and did not feel he had the right connections to get involved in marches,

I haven’t found the right connections to it, like I haven’t gotten connected to protests or marches or anything besides educating myself really.

Instead, Eric’s action has predominantly focused on self-education, which segues into the next type of action.

3. Self-Education

Educating oneself, or “self-education,” was another type of action. As a reminder, self-education was an indirect type of relational exposure that participants engaged in within the process of becoming racially aware (discussed in Chapter Five) and was also relevant to understanding how participants made sense of what it means to be racially aware (discussed in Chapter Six). Self-education is also a type of social action. Therefore, self-education was an important cultural frame in making sense of one’s identity as racially aware across all components of the identity construction process – becoming racially aware, the meaning of being racially aware, and social
action. Particularly for those who may be less comfortable with more overt types of action (and/or who may not have a lot of experience with other types of action or activism), education was a means that helped people feel like they were doing something, and it took many forms. For some, like Rachel, it occurred in the form of reading online or via books,

I have followed a few accounts that are about the movement and different things … sometimes it can be a lot to take in and read all the things, but I do try to read some of it and get an understanding of what’s going on… I put a couple books on my reading lists, [and] I have read in the past like Michelle Obama’s book … that was kind of eye-opening to some of the stuff that they dealt with.

Ruth, who is in college, also described reading as part of her action,

I have a few books on my bookshelf that I’ve kind of been reading through … I like reading too and just, I don’t know. I know I can’t be in the learning about racism phase forever. At some point you just got to get out there and start doing stuff I guess. But yeah, just reading.

For someone less certain about how to get involved, self-education was helpful for Ruth. She also described further that reading could take the form of reading articles on Instagram and Facebook also. James also felt he had less experience with different types of social action, and leaned towards educating himself as action,

I don’t have a lot of experience with social action. When I was younger, I was much more involved in, I would say in terms of community events. Now I would say education is much more where I’m kind of focused, whether it be through books or podcasts, or books on tape I listened to a lot. Ted Talks or those sorts of things have been really helpful in a very kind of hardline educational approach.
Like others, James also worked full-time and had a young child at home, so this was a more viable option for him. Therefore, self-education was available to various people who were less knowledgeable about, and/or who had constraints to participating in, other types of action.

4. Financial Action

The final type of action was financially based action, which could take the form of spending money at Black or minority-owned businesses and donating money to causes or organizations focused on social and racial equity. For Stella, who grew up poor and is now an executive, she took action through a scholarship foundation her husband and she set up,

[In college] I had a full scholarship for four years. So now, 21 years later, my husband and I established a foundation, and we’re up to $110,000 and we give out scholarships every year that get propagated from this foundation. And we meet with all of our scholarship recipients … it’s the best thing I can say I’ve ever done with my life and my money is being able to do that.

Clint also took action by donating money to organizations committed to racial equity,

The way I try to support is financially by contributing to causes that are doing important work both locally and nationally. So we supported Black Lives Matter and NAACP and the ACLU and to locally funding causes that our community is working on and supporting them mostly through the church.

Jack, who is married to Esther, also talked about the importance of donating financially, which is part of his identity as a Christian and something he and Esther do together,

Being Christian, we [donate] 10% of our income. So what we’re doing now is that instead of giving to a particular church who would probably be majority white people, we’ve started giving our [tithes] to [an organization] that helps Black scholars, Black
upcoming young people, have the opportunity and time to not only study the word, but to become effective leaders in the Black church, in the Black community… And it’s actually run by Black religious leaders as well. So we’re trying to give more of our money back to the Black community … I want that money to go to something that is devoid of me, of my benefit.

Jack and Esther are very intentional about their donations, ensuring the organizations are aligned with racial equity. Autumn and Andrew also both mention that, in addition to some of their other actions, they make intentional efforts to purchase products from Black and Brown-owned businesses. For example, Autumn explains,

I try and donate money weekly too, whether it’s an organization, whether it’s a specific person in need. I’ve been trying to refocus in Black-owned businesses and making sure my sources are correct, things like that … also like following … Black creators … PayPaling them, I’m following their Patreon. I’m trying to make sure now that I’m financially being grateful too.

Andrew in particular was influenced by a rap artist named Killer Mike, explaining,

I follow this guy … his name’s Killer Mike, and he’s a rap artist. He’s an amazing person … and he has taught me about buying from Black-owned businesses. Like if you want to help … empower us to have our own businesses.

Therefore, a celebrity influenced Andrew in taking financial action through supporting and buying from Black-owned businesses.

Social action took many different forms, whether it was work-related, activism, self-education, or financial. These different types of action demonstrate some commonalities in the ways participants socially construct their white, racially aware identity around the component of
social action, and what they feel may be “acceptable” ways of addressing racial disparities as a racially aware person. These actions are also very personal to the participant and how they see themselves, especially in terms of selecting something that they can connect with and easily contribute to. Understanding both the reasons and types of action provided further insight into what being racially aware meant to people, and it also indicated common types of symbols and cultural frames that participants drew upon to indicate themselves as racially aware to others through their action as another component of this identity work.

Discussion

Collective social action is an important component of advancing greater equity, social justice, and change. This is evident through the work of scholars and activists alike, and antiracism and activism are key themes in sociological work and critical whiteness studies (Collins 2019; Corces-Zimmerman and Guida 2019; Kendi 2019; O’Brien 2001). When I set out to conduct this research, it was important to me that I understood not only the social actions of participants – in hopes of utilizing this information to identify actions anyone can take to further address structural barriers and build greater racial equity – but that my work itself was a form of social action. I therefore framed my research in a way that it, too, could be praxis. This meant that I sought to understand not only the social process of how white Americans became racially aware, but also what prompts people to take some sort of action related to that awareness, in pursuit of social justice and change. I purposely sought out participants who felt they were both aware and involved in some level of social action for social justice, however they defined that, and I wanted to understand what that looked like for them and whether it was interrelated with their racial awareness process. In this discussion, I further analyze the key characteristics within
this component of “social action” as identity work and discuss some potential implications these findings have for supporting the racial awareness journey of other white Americans.

In my research, I found that demonstrating engagement in some sort of social action to address racial disparities, whatever that may look like, was a core component of how constructing a racially aware identity; and, it was also a key way to signal to others that one is racially aware. Common reasons and types of action were symbolic and cultural frames or characteristics that people drew upon in making sense of what “social action” means to them, and in deciding why and what types of action to engage in. The first characteristic of understanding action related to the reason or motivation to act. Most participants were motivated by a desire to “make a difference” in the world, to address the disparities they were becoming aware of as part of this new racially aware identity. “Making a difference” was closely intertwined with the process of becoming racially aware, as both processes included (1) making sense of oneself and one’s action as racially aware in relationship to the identity traits of being self-aware, responsible, and fair, and (2) being impacted by close relationships / relational exposure. Making a difference was also about (3) translating this into work-related action, described as a “calling” or “purpose.” Therefore, it was not enough to simply become aware as a part of their identity work; one must also act. As Earl said, he had no choice but to act as part of these processes. I will break down each of these factors a bit more in the following paragraphs.

First, making a difference was closely tied to participants’ sense of self as self-aware and responsible/fair. Revisiting Chapter Five, these were some of the identity traits that comprised the foundation for developing and utilizing empathy in key moments of relational exposure as part of the process of becoming racially aware. These identity traits therefore not only influenced the development and deployment of empathy in becoming aware, but also compelled them to do
something about what they are becoming aware of. If they did not, act this would misalign with their identity traits and the racially aware identity they were (re)constructing. Being antiracist means not standing idly by but acting (Collins 2019; Kendi 2019; O’Brien 2001).

Second, participants felt compelled to act because of both their care and empathy for people in their lives impacted by social inequity and their broader concern for humanity. Therefore, turning point moments of relational exposure were both an important stage in sparking racial awareness and also sparking a desire to act (“make a difference”). This relational piece of “making a difference” also had a spiritual component for some participants. For example, Earl, Natalie, Martin, and Nelson all described feeling a deeper connection and love for humanity, describing it as a human interconnectedness that also motivated their desire to positively impact people around the globe. In critically examining this factor, one thing I thought frequently about throughout this portion of the study was white saviorism. In his work about white saviorism in films, Hughey (2010) describes white saviors as prominent white characters that help typically low-income, lower-class people of color better, achieve, transform, and/or redeem themselves in some way. This perpetuates the idea that whites are superior and must “save” non-white subjects. Participants did not imply people of color were helpless and could only be advanced by them saving the day. The desire to act or “make a difference” was compelled by their individual identity traits of feeling responsible as moral people to not just sit idly by. At the same time, some of their verbiage sometimes lent itself to a saviorism mentality, such as “using their privilege” for good or wanting to help others advance. While it sometimes walked a fine line, in general participants seemed aware of and conscientious that their work was not perceived as white saviorism. Therefore, in constructing and indicating oneself as “racially aware,” another cultural frame was positioning one’s action as not white saviorism. Part of
signaling that one is aware is recognizing this distinction and being conscientious in one’s work that you are not (re)centering whiteness or reinforcing white superiority in efforts to decenter and deconstruct it. It is not about being perfect – mistakes happen – but it is about recognizing it and ensuring it does not continue within an ongoing process of self-awareness.

Third, making a difference most frequently translated into work-related action as the type of action that participants utilized to “make a difference.” Work could be a place or avenue for exposure to learning within the process of becoming racially aware, and it was also both a type of action and medium through which exposure and action occurred. Particularly for those motivated by making a difference in the world, their work as action was discussed as a “calling,” “purpose,” and/or a “passion.” The feeling of individual responsibility to act, and to do so in the form of a “calling,” are socio-cultural aspects of an individualized ethos, privatization of life, and the separation of the public and private spheres (only to be made public again) that are often internalized by those living in contemporary Western societies (Giddens 1991: Illouz 2008).

According to Bellah et. al (1985), in earlier eras one’s work could be conceptualized in terms of the “calling,” which was morally attached to and inseparable from one’s role in the community and sense of self. As traditional, community-based culture gave way to a culture of individualism, the private and public life became more segmented, and the pursuit of a “calling” became restricted to the private “job” or “career.” One’s labor became a “self-interested activity,” reframing work or career more so in the sense of personal achievement, advancement, and monetary wealth than about the betterment of the community. However, Bellah et. al (1985:66) argue that,

Something of the notion of calling lingers on…In the strongest sense of a ‘calling,’ work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person’s work morally
inseparable from his or her life… The calling is a crucial link between the individual and the public world… However we define work, it is very close to our sense of self. What we ‘do’ often translated to what we ‘are.’

With the intense separation of public and private in contemporary society, the remnants of a calling can leave individuals seeking a greater sense of moral community and meaning in connection with their sense of self and identity. One’s work as a calling can link the private and public in a way that strives to connect one’s private identity back to a sense of broader, external community, something that can feel lost in an increasingly individualized and separated world. This applied to my participants as well. People’s work as a calling was deeply meaningful, intertwined with their personalized sense of identity and who they are, as well as to a broader moral community they were trying to connect with. In (re)constructing a new collective, racially aware white identity, this broader moral community was that of white racially aware people, and participants were continually making sense of this – whether they realized it or not – through their individualized narratives of personalized identity traits and characteristics of action. Their work as a calling was yet another way of making sense of this.

Further, as such, making a difference through a calling could appear “meant to be,” or as Earl described, that he had no choice but to choose to act, making it seem “meant to be” when there are no further explanations or options. In a contemporary world where individuals feel both responsible to act and are plagued by limitless options for how to do so, this feeling makes sense, as it can seem like individuals have no choice but to choose. As such, individuals must rely on themselves to determine how to act, and “morally good,” “right” choices can only be determined according to what feels right to the individual in relationship to their sense of self as morally good, responsible subjects (Bauman 2000; Bellah et al. 1985; Giddens 1991; Illouz 2008).
Within this context, making a difference in general (and particularly in the sense of work as a calling) emerged as a cultural frame from which participants drew upon to understand themselves as white racially aware people, their connection to a broader collective community and identity, and in making choices for how to act in the face of inequities.

Interestingly, several of the participants who described “making a difference” and/or work as their calling come from or have taken classes from a common DE&I organization. While I cannot know for sure (and this may be an area for further research in the future), making a difference through a calling could have also been influenced by a common organizational ethos taught by this company and/or utilized to attract or recruit similar “types” of people with similar identity traits and values. At the same time, other participants unaffiliated with this organization also described the desire to make a difference, but not necessarily through work as a calling. While they may not have talked about a calling, they described similar senses of wanting to make a difference that were also tied to relationships, identity, and work, despite never having interacted with this particular organization. Therefore, while it is interesting that people who work at and/or have been trained by this particular organization had similar descriptions about making a difference, the fact that other participants who have never been exposed to this particular organization also described similar experiences – albeit not in as much depth – indicates that there is a broader connection between racial awareness and making a difference that goes beyond organizational affiliation.

The second section of this chapter discussed another characteristic of taking action, which was understanding the types of actions people selected. People participated in different types of action based on what was most personally meaningful to them (in alignment with their sense of self) and what was easily accessible to engage in. The types of actions frequently
overlapped, meaning participants engaged in multiple types, and could be categorized into four common themes: (1) work-related action; (2) activism in different forms; (3) self-education; and (4) financially based action. These types of actions were also socially constructed and culturally influenced, as participants often talked about action in similar ways and in similar forms, which sheds light on what it means to be racially aware in terms of the type of action that may be more socially accepted or even expected.

Findings on the types of action help advance and build upon existing scholarship, as sociological research on white social action in response to systemic racism and white supremacy has been lacking. Even as critical whiteness studies advances as an area of study, few empirical research projects have been conducted on social action in particular. For example, O’Brien (2001) discusses actions of white antiracists that include interrupting racism, the importance of activist organizations and networks as sites for activism, and challenging structures in institutional settings. My work builds upon this by also identifying workplaces and social media locales as sites for action, the latter of which did not exist at the time of O’Brien’s study. The advancement of social media shows up not only as a significant site for social action to occur, but it has also changed the visibility and accessibility of information, making it easier to see the types of actions other white Americans may be engaging in. Therefore, social media becomes another cultural resource and locale for advancing oneself as racially aware, in the form of a place in which to take action, demonstrate your action / awareness to others, and obtain visibility into the action / awareness of others.

Further, self-education in particular appeared to be the go-to action for people less sure of “what to do,” and reminded me of a more contemporary version of the education field’s dive into autobiographical narratives of self-education. Instead, people begin by educating themselves,
within which also emerges further self-understanding, introspection, and awareness. While important to the construction of one’s identity as racially aware, self-education could also fall under the same critiques as autobiographical self-examinations, which is that the change is occurring at a more micro-level of individual change versus macro-level change. At the same time, as perhaps a necessary and foundational steppingstone to deeper types of action, these common micro processes have the power to impact others through interaction, especially given the global connectedness available through the internet and social media. The question then becomes is knowledge enough to impact societal-level social change? For my participants, as a foundational element to their action and a stepping stone to other types of actions, it was at least a start in the right direction.

Finally, one of the last types of actions I will further examine is that of activism. Activism took many forms – speaking up and having conversations (particularly via social media), engaging in and volunteering at different activist organizations, marches, and even political activism. Given the socio-historical context in which these interviews occurred in the wake of 2020, it is unsurprising that speaking up via social media was a key form of activism, nor was it surprising that participants frequently mentioned whether they took part in marches/protests. In continually constructing a white racially aware identity, people seemed compelled to mention marches/protests, even if they did not participate. Then, if they did not participate, they seemed compelled to justify why not and explain other actions they took instead. This indicated the importance of marches in framing seemingly “acceptable” forms of social action within this historical space in time. Marches/protests therefore acted as a cultural frame that shaped participants’ narratives around action, and their overall process of constructing a white, racially aware identity.
Findings around more specific types of action that white people engage in furthers our understanding of why and how some white Americans engage in social action in support of equity and social change. As O’Brien (2001) describes, white people who want to do something in the face of racial disparities are often at a loss of what to do because of a lack of visibility into the actions of other role models. Studies like this can help change that by providing greater visibility into some options for action that other white Americans may partake in. At the same time, whether these types of action are truly effective in achieving the change individuals are seeking is a deeper question, one for a future research study and analysis. In the meantime, by identifying key types of action that some white Americans participate in, this study provides relevant insights for others seeking to advance this field of research and take action as well.

Further, this research was my own personal form of social action, both as a researcher and in continually (re)constructing myself as a white racially aware person. Critical whiteness and critical race scholars argue for our research as praxis, a key tenet of the theoretical framework and goal of this research project (Collins 2019; Guess 2006). Therefore, identifying the reasons for and types of action were not only helpful in understanding how people develop their identity as white racially aware Americans, but also in illuminating characteristics that could potentially aid other white Americans in becoming racially aware and taking action.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

The United States was built on a foundation of racialized economic stratification that has resulted in a long history of institutionalized and systemic racism, white supremacy, and oppression (Doane 2003; Taylor 2016). Ideas and mechanisms of white superiority prove adaptable and resilient, shifting and changing to the moment to continuously restructure and reinforce the material realities that people experience within the resulting racialized social order (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Bobo 2017). One way these mechanisms are perpetuated and reinforced is through the normalization and universalization of whiteness, which can occur to the point that connections with its inner workings such as white racism and white privilege appear “invisible” to white Americans who are complicit in and benefit from it (Feagin et al. 2001; Memmi 2000). This is problematic for many reasons, one of which being the challenge it presents in deconstructing systemic racism and white supremacy when those from the dominant group are unaware, or refuse to be aware, of the mechanisms shaping racialized life. Therefore, I sought to understand better how some white Americans do become more aware of systemic racism, its impacts, and their own complicity (collectively and individually) in upholding racialized relations of power and privilege, and how taking action to address these inequities factors into this process. My intention was to, in critically examining and uncovering this process, make sense of this process and identify specific aspects that could be taught and/or incorporated into interventions to support other white Americans advancing social change in collaboration with people of color.

By applying a multifaceted theoretical and methodological framework rooted in critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, grounded theory, and narrative approaches, I found that the process of becoming racially aware and taking action is a complex process of ongoing identity (re)construction. As discussed in Chapter Two, whiteness and its relationship to the
racialized social order often underlies a normalized white identity interconnected with white supremacy, racism, and American identity (Metzl 2019; Morrison 1992; Thompson and Neville 1999). This normalized sense of white identity, and the differential structures of power relations people perpetuate, becomes internalized as normal/universal and not attributable to race, and is recreated regularly at the interactional and institutional levels (Dyer 1997; Kolber 2017; Leonardo 2004). In my research, I discovered that participants continuously draw from symbolic and cultural frames and resources around them to actively push against this normalized white identity (whether they realize it or not) to (re)construct a white, racially aware identity that is oppositional or different from the norm.

This ongoing process of identity work was characterized by three primary components. In Chapter Five, I discussed the first component of this process, which was becoming aware. While I initially thought my focus was on understanding the process of becoming aware itself, I found that this process was actually a component of a larger process of identity work. Becoming aware occurred in three stages. In the first stage, people build a foundation early on for understanding and empathy to occur later in life. They do this by drawing upon common sets of identity traits – including being self-aware, sensitive, curious, outspoken, and responsible/fair – and their own experiences of outsiderness and unfairness. The second stage then involves experiencing specific turning point moments of exposure throughout their lives, or moments that were sparks or catalysts for racial awakening and awareness to occur. These turning points were consistently relational, meaning they involved interactions with people they were close to (across all races) and/or from a distance (such as through books, media, leaders they admired, celebrities, or acquaintances). These turning points provided the necessary exposure to create an “ah-ha” moment that brought racial disparities into focus for participants, allowing space for the third
stage to occur, which is the development and utilization of empathy. Because of their own past experiences of feeling like an outsider – combined with personally identifying as good, moral people who are self-aware/sensitive, curious, outspoken, and responsible/fair – people are able to be empathetic in these moments. The utilization of empathy in key moments creates meaningful shifts, not only in people’s awareness of the racial disparities and privileged position of power that white people occupy, but also in their own identity and sense of self as racially aware.

Second, in Chapter Six, I examined how the meaning of being racially aware is also a core component of both constructing and establishing oneself as racially aware. In first becoming racially aware, participants also had to make sense of what it means to be racially aware as an aspect of their identity. Attaching meaning to cultural symbols through our discourse or narratives is a part of identity work and helps to indicate to ourselves and others who we are (Ferber 1998; Schwalbe 1996). I found that participants described the meaning of racial awareness in similar ways, which also indicates some of the cultural narratives and framing participants are drawing from in constructing and making sense of themselves as white, racially aware subjects. These common themes included: (1) recognizing that differential treatment, experiences, and perspectives occur across races, including understanding their own privilege and the impacts of white supremacy; (2) taking action, which is also the third component of their identity work; and (3) discussing how that meaning changed over time.

Finally, engaging in some type of social action was the third component of this new white, racially aware identity work, which I described in Chapter Seven. Taking action was not only an aspect of what being aware means to them, but it was also closely tied to their self identities as responsible, morally good people. Taking action could be characterized by two factors. First, was the motivation to act, which focused on a felt responsibility to make a
difference in the world and was based on their identity/sense of self, close relationships, and work. The second factor was the types of actions participants engaged in, which included: (1) work-related action; (2) activism; (3) self-education; and (4) financially based action. These types of action indicate cultural norms, frames, and expectations that people drew upon to construct themselves as white, racially aware subjects. Together, the three components of becoming racially aware, making sense of what it means to be aware, and engaging in action summarize a rich, socially constructed process of identity construction that is continuous and ongoing as people actively push against (rather than uphold) systems of normative whiteness, white supremacy, and systemic racism.

My work therefore advances empirical and theoretical work within the field of critical whiteness studies in several ways. First, while existing scholarship on race, racism, and white supremacy has been advanced to understand the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of whiteness that people of color have (which is important to continue), it is also important to critically examine the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of white people in advancing these systems of racialized oppression. A deeper understanding of all aspects of racism can create richer grounds from which to identify mechanisms for social change, which was a primary purpose of this research (Andersen 2003; Ferber 1998; Frankenberg 1997; Morrison 1992; Niemonen 2010). Second, it builds upon similar studies (like Eileen O’Brien’s work on white antiracist activists in 2001) by understanding racial awareness and taking action as aspects of a deeper process of identity construction. As part of this process, my work provides greater insights into the importance of empathy, outsider experiences, turning points, meaning, and the types of action people take and why. It also couches these understandings within a contemporary timeframe and socio-historical context of global racial protests, a global pandemic, and social
media, advancing our understandings of these processes and how they are both similar yet
different from 20 years ago. Finally, this study adds to the critical whiteness studies cannon by
providing a deeper empirical and methodological example of how a CWS framework may be
applied to a research project and conducted methodologically. While some studies like this exist,
there are still few empirical and methodological examples of research conducted under CWS;
many are still predominantly theoretical in nature.

There are several opportunities for future analysis and additional research that I could
engage in to grow and deepen this research. First, I only interviewed white people; I did not
interview people of color. Given people of color’s unique and “privileged” epistemic position
through collective struggle and marginalization, people of color can further offer relevant
insights into understanding these processes. In absence of these interviews, I remained critically
reflexive and supplemented my research with the works of scholars of color to ensure a well-
rounded approach. At the same time, taking it a step further and interviewing people of color to
obtain their perspective on white racial awareness would be an opportunity for further study.

Related to this would also be interviewing white people who are not on a journey of
racial awareness, whether they remain color-blind, unaware, and/or overtly racist. These are
people who emulate and identify with the more normalized sense of white American identity.
While my study focused on people who are actively constructing a racially aware white identity,
it might also be worthwhile to conduct a deeper, contemporary study of the “opposing” process
of white identity construction, to understand better the construction of a racially aware one. This
is something I thought frequently about throughout this study, asking myself why some people
become aware when others do not. While I have some insights into why that might be from the
perspective of those who are aware, I do not have that perspective from people who are not
aware in the way this study defines it. It would be an interesting comparison. I also think such a comparison could further illuminate the connections between normative white identity, American identity, and American identity politics, which I initially discuss in Chapter Two. Though the contemporary political context certainly was mentioned by participants throughout the interviews, it was not as frequently discussed as I had originally anticipated it might be. A deeper comparison across different angles of white identity may further illuminate connections and challenges that white Americans (re)constructing a racially aware identity may face.

I also collected more data on the emotions that participants experienced in becoming racially aware, the challenges they faced, and the benefits they felt they received in becoming racially aware. In the future, I could expand upon the findings I have outlined in this paper by diving deeper into these emotions, challenges, and benefits. I also collected some information on whether participants were oldest, middle, youngest, or only children. At one point in my research, I was finding that another common characteristic among most participants was that they were either oldest children and/or only children. Very few were middle children. I wondered how the impact of one’s birth order could shape their sense of responsibility and fairness, which was a key identity trait and part of why people felt compelled to take action. While out of the scope of this study, exploring differences in socialization based on one’s birth order and the resulting characteristics could be an area for future exploration. Finally, another opportunity for future analysis and exploration is to expand upon some of the intersectional analyses started in this paper. While I did focus predominantly on race, I began to illustrate some of the intersections of systems of oppression that are at play here across gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation. I would like to further build upon this in the future.
This research project has illuminated some of the core components of how white people in the United States actively work to develop and reconstruct their sense of self in favor of a white, racially aware identity. The journey does not stop here. As Doane (2017) describes, where systemic racism is understood as problematic, the challenge for us as a society then becomes how to address it. These findings have implications for social justice and social change and can be utilized to inform greater equity approaches to help address the disparities we continue to see. Therefore, in keeping with the CWS framework that research can be praxis, this project for me, too, was an action in support of racial equity. This research demonstrates the work that white people are doing together and with people of color to try to make real change happen. These results could be utilized more broadly by academics in various fields (not just sociologists), policymakers, organizational leaders, and others to help focus efforts towards enabling greater racial awareness for more white people and, by extension, greater action and partnership in collectively advancing racial equity. Specifically, interventions in the form of a framework or training program could be applied in schools, workplaces, activist organizations, and even within new policies, practices, and procedures that better enable equity. As I said, the journey does not stop here. I plan to draw upon my conclusions to inform my own work as a diversity, equity, and inclusion leader, continue to grow myself, and find ways to support other white people in their journeys towards an alternative, racially aware white identity.
APPENDIX A: IRB HUMAN SUBJECTS PERMISSION LETTER
EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

November 23, 2020

Dear Ashley Sobke:

On 11/23/2020, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Becoming Racially Aware: the Social Process of Awakening to Whiteness and White Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Ashley Sobke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00002457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant ID:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Documents Reviewed: | • Form-251-Faculty-Advisor-Review_Sobke, Category: Faculty Research Approval;  
• Form-254-Explanation-of-Research_Sobke, Category: Consent Form;  
• Form-255_Request-for-Exemption_Sobke, Category: IRB Protocol;  
• Interview-Questions, Category: Interview / Focus Questions;  
• Recruitment-Email-and-Phone-Transcript, Category: Recruitment Materials; |

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

Due to current COVID-19 restrictions, in-person research is not permitted to begin unless you are able to follow the COVID-19 Human Subject Research (HSR) Standard Safety Plan with permission from your Dean of Research or submitted your Study-Specific Safety Plan and received IRB
and EH&S approval. Be sure to monitor correspondence from the Office of Research, as they will communicate when restrictions are lifted, and all in-person research can resume.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kamille Birkbeck
Designated Reviewer
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS
Participant Recruitment Email

Good morning/afternoon/evening,

You are receiving this email request as part of a research study I am conducting for my dissertation. I am currently a PhD candidate at the University of Central Florida within the Sociology department. This study examines the social process that some white Americans undergo in becoming more racially aware of their own white identity, how that identity is situated within broader society and current events, and how they come to understand whiteness more generally. I plan to hold virtual, recorded interviews via Zoom that will run approximately an hour long. The interviews are semi-structured, meaning there is a set of questions that I would ask you, though the interview is intended to flow like a conversation.

To participate in this study, all participants must self-identify as:

- white, Caucasian, non-Hispanic
- 18 years of age or older
- English-speaking
- A current resident of the United States for at least 10 years and “American,” even if you also identify with other nationalities
- Racially aware and actively involved in social justice initiatives

I am reaching out to you as [someone within my network who / someone who was recommended that] might be interested in sharing your experience about your own racial awareness and involvement in social justice. If this is interesting to you and you meet all the above criteria, please respond to this email so we can set up a time to talk.

Thank you so much in advance for your consideration!

Investigator contact: sobke021@knights.ucf.edu
Lead investigator: Ashley Sobke, PhD Candidate
Department of Sociology
4297 Andromeda Loop N.
Howard Phillips Hall
Orlando, FL 32816-1360
612-812-4350

Participant Recruitment Phone Call Transcript

Good morning/afternoon/evening, may I please speak with [name]?

Hello, my name is Ashley Sobke and I am currently a PhD candidate at the University of Central Florida within the Sociology department. I am reaching out to you as [someone within my network who / someone who was recommended that] might be interested in participating in my dissertation research study. This study examines the social process that some white Americans undergo in becoming more racially aware of their own white identity, how that identity is situated within broader society and current events, and how they come to understand whiteness
more generally. I plan to hold virtual, recorded interviews via Zoom that will run approximately an hour long. The interviews are semi-structured, meaning there is a structured yet flexible set of questions that I would ask you, though the interview flow like a conversation as well.

Does this sound like something you would be interested in and available to do? *Wait for yes/no response. If “yes,” proceed…*

Great. To confirm, I do have to ensure you meet all the criteria for this study. To participate in this study, all participants must self-identify as:

- white, Caucasian, non-Hispanic
- 18 years of age or older
- English-speaking
- A current resident of the United States for at least 10 years and “American,” even if you also identify with other nationalities
- Racially aware and actively involved in social justice initiatives

Do you self-identify as meeting all of these criteria? *Wait for yes/no response. If “yes,” proceed…*

Wonderful! I look forward to working with you then. Is now a good time for us to talk more, or would you prefer to set up a future time to talk?

Thank you again! Please reach out if you have any further questions. Have a nice day.

Investigator contact: sobke021@knights.ucf.edu
Lead investigator: Ashley Sobke, PhD Candidate
Department of Sociology
4297 Andromeda Loop N.
Howard Phillips Hall
Orlando, FL 32816-1360
612-812-4350
APPENDIX C: EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH
EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: Becoming Racially Aware: the Social Process of Awakening to whiteness and white Identity

Principal Investigator: Ashley Sobke

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Amanda Koontz

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you. The purpose of this research is to add to the general body of knowledge on whiteness, white identity, and white racial awareness. This research aims to further understand the experiences of white Americans who are racially aware and participate in social justice initiatives.

You will be asked to take part in an interview that will take place through Zoom, which will go over some of your experiences. I expect the interview to take approximately one hour, or as long as you would like for the interview to last. Therefore, I expect that your total participation time in this project will last for one hour. You are not required to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

You will be asked to be audio recorded only during this study. If you do not want to be recorded in any way, you will not be able to participate in the study.

Some identifiable information will be collected, including your name, contact information, and a series of demographic information such as age, gender, race, religious affiliation, political affiliation, sexual orientation, etc. Names and contact information will be collected only in case the primary researcher needs to contact you following the interview for clarification purposes. No identifiable information will be included in the interview transcripts nor the final research product. Demographic information will be utilized for analysis as part of the interview questions. All participant identifiable information will be stored in two separate password-protected Excel files that only the primary researcher has access to. One file will include participants’ contact information and an associated participant code. The other file will include the demographic information attached to the participant code only. All excel files, Zoom recordings, and transcribed interview responses will be stored in a password-protected OneDrive that only the primary researcher has access to. All data will be deleted a minimum of 5 years after study closure, per the University of Central Florida’s policy.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice or penalty. Your decision to participate or not participate in this study will in no way affect your relationship with UCF, myself as the researcher, or your relationship with the individuals who may have an interest in this study.

In order to achieve the research aims, there are a few guidelines for who can participate. To participate in this study, you need to:

- identify as white, Caucasian, non-Hispanic
- be at least 18 years of age or older
- speak English
- have been a current resident of the United States for at least 10 years and self-identify as “American,” even if you identify with other nationalities
- self-identify as racially aware
- be actively involved in social justice actions or initiatives

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact Ashley Sobke, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, at (612) 812-4350
or by email at sobke021@knights.ucf.edu, or Dr. Amanda Koontz, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Sociology at (407) 823-3744 or by email at Amanda.koontz@ucf.edu.

**IRB contact about your rights in this study or to report a complaint:** If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or have concerns about the conduct of this study, please contact Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of Central Florida, Office of Research, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901, or email irb@ucf.edu.
Demographic Questions: Before beginning the more in-depth portion of our interview, I have a few demographic questions for you. Please answer according to how you self-identify. Once again, you do not have to answer any of the following if you prefer not to:

- What is your gender identity?
- What is your age?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What is your combined household income level? You may answer within the following ranges:
  a) Under $25,000
  b) $25,000 – $50,000
  c) $50,001 - $75,000
  d) $75,001 - $100,000
  e) $100,001 - $150,000
  f) Above $150,000
- From the following, what is your highest level of educational attainment?
  a) Less than a High school diploma
  b) High school diploma or GED
  c) Some college
  d) Undergraduate
  e) Some graduate
  f) Graduate
  g) Doctoral
  h) Other (please explain)
- What is your current or most recent occupation?
- What is your religious affiliation, if you claim an affiliation?
- What is your political affiliation, if you claim an affiliation?
- What city and state did you grow up in? How would it typically be labeled - rural or urban?
- What city and state do you currently reside in? Again, would it typically be labeled as rural or urban?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions: The following questions were asked of each participant and could be asked in the order that most logically follows the participants’ responses. Probes/follow-up questions were asked to make sure the interviewer fully understood the participants’ responses.

1. How would you describe who you are? As in, if someone generally asked you to describe yourself, how would you do so?
   a. I note you did (not) include your racial identity. Why did you include (or not include) that in your description of who you are?
   b. What is your racial identity?
2. What does being “racially aware” mean to you? Has the meaning changed for you over time?
3. What are some of your earliest memories around race in general?
   a. What are some of your earliest memories around racism in general? Is there a moment you recall being more aware of race or racism specifically?
4. When did you first become more racially aware and what caused you to do so?
5. How has your identity shifted over time, if at all, in relationship to your understanding of your own racial awareness?

6. What conversations around racial awareness do you have with other people?
   a. Possible follow-up: Do you have different conversations with white people than with people of color? Tell me more about that.
   b. What are the results of those actions (how do they go)?

7. Tell me about your social activism. What is it that you do and how did you get started with it?
   a. Why did you opt into this form of social activism and what keeps you going with it?

8. Are there certain actions that you take as a result of your racial awareness?
   a. Follow-up: How does, if at all, this differ from actions taken in the past?

9. What emotions have you experienced in becoming more racially aware?
   a. Follow-up: How do you navigate/overcome these challenges and feelings?

10. What benefits do you feel that you experience in becoming more racially aware as a white person?

11. What challenges do you feel that you experience in becoming more racially aware as a white person?

12. Is there anything that we haven’t talked about yet that you think is important to add?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code &amp; Category</th>
<th>Initial Descriptions (thematic definitions were refined during writing process)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IDENTITY</strong></td>
<td><strong>Possible THEME</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDENTIFIES THEIR RACE</td>
<td>Readily / initially describes racial identity as part of their descriptors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOES NOT IDENTIFY RACE</td>
<td>Doesn't readily describe racial (or other &quot;demographic&quot; or &quot;gov't&quot; identities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXTERNAL VS. INTERNAL ALIGNMENT</td>
<td>Sometimes aligned, sometimes not. Also, how one describes oneself externally and what they share can depend on the CONTEXT or situation in which they're in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL</td>
<td>Thinks of self more as individual than belonging to group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLECTIVE / GROUP</td>
<td>Sees self as part of broader humanity / collective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY</td>
<td>Ties of self-identity to American identity / national identity / what it means to be American?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDENTITY HAS CHANGED / SHIFTED</td>
<td>For some people, their awareness &amp; identity HAS changed much over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDENTITY HAS NOT CHANGED / SHIFTED</td>
<td>For some people, their awareness &amp; identity has not changed much over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHITENESS / WHITE IDENTITY</td>
<td>How does this factor in, if at all? Not sure this is a code yet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| <strong>BECOMING RACIALLY AWARE PROCESS</strong>   | <strong>Possible THEME</strong>                                                               |
| BEING RACIALLY AWARE MEANING          | What being racially aware means to participants, how they define it, and whether that definition or meaning has changed or shifted for them over time as they've become more racially aware |
| Meaning Has Shifted Over Time         | How they define being racially aware HAS shifted or changed for them over time as they've become more aware. |
| Meaning Has NOT Shifted Over Time     | How they define being racially aware has not shifted or changed for them over time. It's remained the same / similar as they've become more aware. |
| OTHERING                              | Understanding race or developing racial awareness through an awareness of racially different “others” (but not necessarily seeing themselves in that equation or seeing their own race) |
| EARLY RACIALIZED MEMORIES / EXPERIENCES | How they describe their early memories or experiences around race, racism, understanding race and racism, what they learned, etc. |
| FAMILY / UPBRINGING / GROWING UP       | What they learned from their families about race, whether it was overt, covert, color-blind, direct/indirect, through observation, actual conversation, etc. Types of families, family heritages/histories. |
| COLOR-BLIND                           | Treating everyone “equally,” same, with respect, not seeing color, etc.            |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>OVERT RACISM / COVERT RACISM</strong></th>
<th>Direct and indirect messages, observations, etc. of racism around them (could be in early memories and also in present or more recent memories).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>VALUES / MORALS / BELIEFS</strong></td>
<td>Sense of Responsibility, Sense of Fairness, Sense of “right vs wrong” - Many describe innate feelings - responsibility, accountability, wanting fairness. Possibly “identity traits” also <em>(related to identity too)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RELIGION</strong></td>
<td>For some has good and bad influences. Religion is different from “spirituality.” Spirituality is those who have a spiritual sense but not tied to a specific religion. Religion is those who have a spiritual sense tied to a specific religion and potentially the accompanying values/morals of that religion. This can also be a reason for why people engage in action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPIRITUALITY</strong></td>
<td>Different from RELIGION, almost like the “self-help” spirituality (in a good way) - love for others, self-love, empathy, belief in interconnectedness of human beings, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS</strong></td>
<td>Certain characteristics commonly discussed that play a role in becoming racially aware; possibly “identity traits”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SENSITIVE</strong></td>
<td>People who describe themselves as more sensitive, caring, in-tune - related to EMPATHY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SELF-AWARENESS / INTROSPECTION</strong></td>
<td>Cultivating Self-Awareness through personal reflection / introspection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESPONSIBLE / RESPONSIBILITY</strong></td>
<td>People describe feeling responsible, or they have experiences from a young age where they show responsibility or leadership. Relates to sense of fairness - people who value fairness also seem to be “responsible.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPEAKING UP / QUESTIONING / CHALLENGING AUTHORITY</strong></td>
<td>Being the type of person who always speaks up, challenges authority, uses one's voice, confronts others, stands up against injustice. Form of action also.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CURIOUS</strong></td>
<td>Describing oneself as curious, observant, interested in learning more about other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AWARENESS HAS NOT CHANGED / SHIFTED</strong></td>
<td>For some people, their awareness has not changed much over time (could be related to IDENTITY &amp; MEANING also, whether those things shift or not as well)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AWARENESS HAS CHANGED / SHIFTED</strong></td>
<td>For some people, their awareness HAVE changed or shifted over time (could be related to IDENTITY &amp; MEANING also, whether those things shift or not as well)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TURNING POINTS</strong></td>
<td>Potential theme &amp; sub-themes - The moments in people's lives where they become aware. Sometimes describe them as specific moments or catalysts, sometimes it's an ongoing series of turning points or continuum where it's no one or two specific events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPROXIMATING EXPERIENCES</strong></td>
<td><em>(From O'Brien 2001)</em> - Connected also to “outsider” and “not feeling one belongs” or “being the only.” Experiences of being on the outside or not belonging that often (though maybe not always) gives people more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPATHY</td>
<td>Towards others' experiences of feeling like an outsider and it connects to their ability to become more aware (potentially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTSIDER - BELONGING, THE “ONLY”</td>
<td>Experiences of Outsideness / Not Belonging / Experience being the “only” or in the minority, not feeling accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPATHY / COMPASSION</td>
<td>Comparing One's Experiences of injustice/unfairness to Others &amp; Feeling Empathy / Understanding for another's situation; related to turning points, feeling like an outsider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELF-EDUCATION / LEARNING ORIENTATION</td>
<td>A willingness to educate oneself, which contributed to their awareness. They have an orientation towards wanting to learn, to understand. Learning also seems to be ongoing. Also a form of social action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HISTORY</td>
<td>Many have an interest in history or learning about history - not sure if this is a main code yet or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRAUMA / TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES</td>
<td>For some, trauma or traumatic, life-changing experiences have been GATEWAYS to self-awareness and therefore racial awareness. I think this can include ADDICTION for now too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPOSURE</td>
<td>Potential theme - people become racially aware through EXPOSURE to many different things or through various different avenues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEGE</td>
<td>College education, classes, professors, studying abroad, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOSE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS (RELATIONAL EXPOSURE)</td>
<td>Close personal relationships / Connections with others - close relationships other white people, w/ POC growing up and/or throughout life. Could also be meaningful relationships with a POC in an authority position (i.e. leadership, professor, etc.). Not always necessarily a close relationship to be a meaningful one. It speaks to the RELATIONAL nature of this becoming racially aware process. Influential in sparking and maintaining awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUST</td>
<td>Related to close personal relationships / connection and exposure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPPORT</td>
<td>Conversations with other people can be very supportive in navigating emotions and challenges that come up in the racial awareness journey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP / AUTHORITY</td>
<td>Being influenced by people in positions of power, leadership or authority - legitimates their understanding (whether white, Black, Brown, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIFFERENT CULTURES / COUNTRIES</td>
<td>Exposure to other cultures through different means - i.e., Studying abroad, traveling, working abroad, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIA / SOCIAL MEDIA / POP CULTURE / MUSIC / NEWS / BOOKS</td>
<td>Influences from popular TV, books, articles, social media, news, artists, music, etc. External influences, whether through SELF-EDUCATION or exposure through other EXPERIENCES / TURNING POINTS, these things made a difference in people's awareness or they mentioned a relationship to them as part of their journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORK</td>
<td>A place where people's awareness sometimes seems to grow, a place where different types of exposure can occur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUMP, POLITICS</td>
<td>This, too, has awoken people - impacts of Trump, Trump administration and people who follow Trump, conservatism, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEORGE FLOYD / BLM</td>
<td>Moments of exposure pertaining to murder and violence against Black people; interaction with BLM movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIRTH ORDER - OLDEST, MIDDLE, YOUNGEST</td>
<td>Majority of participants are oldest children. Is becoming aware related to the values / morals one develops based on their birth order?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERSECTIONALITY</td>
<td>Impacts of Gender, Sexuality, Class/socioeconomics, religion, etc. on becoming racially aware process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GATEWAY</td>
<td>Race or other experiences as a “gateway” to other understandings (and sometimes vice versa – understanding of social identities is a gateway to racial understanding) (related to INTERSECTIONALITY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THERAPY / HEALING</td>
<td>A number of participants see therapists, coaches and/or find other ways to “heal” through their racial awareness journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIBERATION / FREEDOM</td>
<td>The process of becoming racially aware is one of freedom and liberation, liberation from both individual and/or collective constructs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOSS / FRUSTRATION</td>
<td>In becoming racially aware, some people lose or give up things - loss of position/authority/power, loss of income, loss of friendships, etc. Can be painful/sad/frustrating for some, also liberating. This could refer to potential loss, or loss in terms of relationships changing even if they're not completely lost.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTION AND WHY TAKE ACTION</td>
<td>Possible THEME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCAL ACTION OR COMMUNITY</td>
<td>Some social action takes the form of occurring at the local level, or has to do with one's local community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPES OF ACTION</td>
<td>Various ways that participants engaged in social action (activism, volunteering, giving money, speaking up, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL JUSTICE / ACTIVISM</td>
<td>Could be related to volunteering, though could be separate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLUNTEERING</td>
<td>Could be related to social justice / activism, though could be separate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONEY</td>
<td>Using your money/wealth as a form of action. Could take different forms - donating money to a cause, philanthropy, etc. Also includes buying from Black / minority-owned businesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL MEDIA</td>
<td>Could be related to MEDIA in the process of becoming aware, but it's also a part of people's social action processes, as well as their becoming aware processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLANTING SEEDS</td>
<td>For some, action isn't about mass transformation, it's about planting seeds to help possibly awaken others. This could be done through some of the other actions - social media, conversations, etc. O'Brien (2001) talks about “planting seeds” also</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONVERSATIONS ON RACE / CONVERSATIONS</td>
<td>Talking to other people is a form of action, or creating spaces where conversation around race or racism can occur. This could be at work, on social media, with friends, volunteering, etc.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>REASONS FOR ENGAGING IN ACTION</td>
<td>Why they engage in social action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTERING OTHERS</td>
<td>De-centering oneself in favor of centering others who may be marginalized. Not “white saviorism,” but “passing the mic” or “getting off the stage”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECONSTRUCTING INTERNAL / EXTERNAL WHITE SUPREMACY</td>
<td>Actively trying to deconstruct, decenter internalized or external whiteness, white supremacy, colonization, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAKING A DIFFERENCE / CALLING / PURPOSE</td>
<td>Action, but related to identity too. Action is meaningful b/c making a difference, and/or feeling as though social action is connected to one’s purpose or calling in life; feels meant to be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSITION OF POWER</td>
<td>Use position of power/ influence/ privilege to enact change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOVE FOR OTHER PEOPLE</td>
<td>Is this related to human interconnectedness or self-love? Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT DOING ENOUGH / OVERWHELMING PROBLEM</td>
<td>Feeling overwhelmed, too big of a problem to solve, feel like they're not doing enough to do a difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNSURE WHICH ACTION TO TAKE / WHAT TO DO</td>
<td>Not sure how to help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Routledge.


