

WHITE SCRIPTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
WHITE ADMINISTRATORS NAVIGATING RACIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION  
EFFORTS

A Dissertation  
By  
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## **Abstract**

### **WHITE SCRIPTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHITE ADMINISTRATORS NAVIGATING RACIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION EFFORTS**

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Guided by critical theoretical perspectives on race and whiteness, this qualitative study examines the manifestations of racial identity for White higher education administrators and explores their approaches to navigating racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. To illustrate the findings of this study, five composite characters are introduced to illuminate the hidden and unquestioned assumptions and structures that maintain white power and privilege in higher education. These characters, or *White Scripts*, embody the approaches, moods, and styles of the ten research participants of this study to reveal how White higher education administrators navigate, challenge, and/or reinforce whiteness in higher education. These *White Scripts* represent the ideological racial scripts that create, control, and recreate whiteness in society and higher education. Consequently, the findings of this study offer insights into the development of anti-racist policies and practices in higher education with the goal of empowering and inspiring White administrators to take action toward racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions.

## **Acknowledgments**

As a first-generation college student who grew up in a small town in South Carolina, I am reminded of my mom's steadfast advice... "never forget where you came from." I am deeply humbled and filled with so much gratitude for the support, encouragement, and love that has been given to me throughout my doctoral journey by family, friends, colleagues, and students.

To my husband, Tyler, for being on this journey alongside me day in and day out. For helping me celebrate life's joys and successes, no matter how big or small, and for being my rock in the toughest moments. You keep me anchored and inspire me to be the best version of myself. I love you.

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To my friends and family, thank you for loving me unconditionally and for patiently listening to me explain my research (even when I did not know what I was talking about) and for keeping me motivated and encouraged throughout the journey. I love you all.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated in memory of my Dad.

For the integrity, laughter, and love that he shared with so many.

I am so proud to be your son

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	v
Dedication.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction and Significance .....	1
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose and Research Questions.....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework .....	9
Racism in Society .....	9
Institutional Racism in Higher Education .....	11
Whiteness in Society.....	13
Institutional Whiteness in Higher Education .....	14
A Critical Conceptual Framework.....	16
Critical Whiteness Studies.....	19
Critical whiteness and white privilege.....	22
Critique of critical whiteness studies.....	23
Interweaving Critical Theory with Critical Whiteness .....	24
Ideology .....	24
Hegemony .....	27
Power .....	29
Chapter 3: Research Design.....	32

Methodological Approach .....	33
Epistemological Perspective: Critical Qualitative Inquiry .....	34
Phenomenology.....	35
Research Methods .....	37
Overview of participants.....	37
Sampling and recruitment strategy .....	39
Participant demographics.....	40
Data Collection .....	42
Interview protocol.....	43
Data Analysis and Representation.....	44
Compiling .....	47
Disassembling.....	48
Reassembling .....	50
Interpreting.....	51
Representing .....	53
Composite narratives .....	54
Blending critical transformative dialogues with creative nonfiction .....	55
Concluding.....	57
Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations .....	58
Memo writing.....	59
Triangulation.....	61
Empathic neutrality.....	61
Ethical considerations .....	62

Subjectivity and Positionality: Unmasking my Whiteness.....	64
Whiteness in my work .....	67
Whiteness in my research .....	70
Summary .....	73
Chapter 4: White Scripts in Higher Education .....	75
Rhonda: The Risk-Taker .....	78
Patty: The Self-Proclaimed Progressive.....	80
Mike: The Maintainer .....	82
Sam: The Structuralist.....	85
Dana: The Developer .....	88
Summary .....	90
Chapter 5: A Dialogue on Whiteness.....	92
Background.....	93
Focal Point 1: Navigating Spaces as an Insider/Outsider.....	96
Focal point 1 summary.....	119
Focal Point 2: Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment .....	120
Focal point 2 summary.....	136
Focal Point 3: Developing White Racial Authenticity.....	136
Focal point 3 summary.....	150
Focal Point 4: “Giving Something Up” .....	151
Focal point 4 summary.....	164
Chapter 6: Interrogating Whiteness through Analysis and Discussion .....	167
Whiteness as Smog.....	168

Exploring Individual White Identity.....	170
Denial.....	173
Deflection.....	174
Rationalization.....	175
Intellectualization.....	176
Principium.....	177
False envy.....	178
Benevolence.....	179
Minimization.....	181
Disrupting White Normative Behaviors in Higher Education.....	183
Race traitors.....	183
White insulation.....	185
Whiteness as politeness.....	186
“We don’t have a race problem.”.....	188
Combating race-neutrality.....	189
“Everything is about race, but not everything is about race.”.....	191
Developing white racial authenticity.....	192
Interrogating Power Dynamics.....	195
Whiteness as professionalism.....	196
“Giving something up”.....	198
Allyship and interest convergence.....	199
Backing down or pushing back.....	201
A Counter-Script on Whiteness.....	205

Cam: The Critically Conscious White Administrator.....	207
Societal realm of whiteness .....	209
Institutional realm of whiteness .....	210
Individual realm of whiteness.....	217
Summary .....	223
Chapter 7: Implications and Conclusion.....	226
Implications for Practice and Interpersonal Relations.....	226
Personal development .....	228
Engaging other white administrators .....	230
Implications for Education and Programming.....	237
Programs and trainings .....	239
White racial caucusing.....	241
Implications for Future Research .....	244
Concluding Thoughts.....	247
References.....	250
Appendices.....	267
Appendix A: Invitation to Participate .....	268
Appendix B: Social Media Recruitment Message.....	269
Appendix C: Participant Confirmation & Scheduling Email .....	270
Appendix D: Participant Consent Form.....	271
Appendix E: Participant Background and Demographic Information Form .....	273
Appendix F: Interview Protocol.....	274
Vita.....	277

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Significance

*The country is in deep trouble. We've forgotten that a rich life consists fundamentally of serving others, trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. We need the courage to question the powers that be, the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people, the courage to fight for social justice. In many instances we will be stepping out on nothing, and just hoping to land on something. But that's the struggle. To live is to wrestle with despair, yet never allow despair to have the last word.*

- Cornel West

I open this dissertation with the quote above from Cornel West, critical race scholar and activist, because I believe it captures the essence of what this study is about. Simply put, we currently live in a society fraught with racial injustice. Racism is so prevalent in our country that all racial identity is shaped by it. Race affects every level of our social institutions and interpersonal interactions, whether consciously or subconsciously. So, where do we start? How do we develop the courage to fight for social justice, while stepping out on nothing? More importantly, how do we wrestle with despair while maintaining hope? I believe the journey begins with situating ourselves in the racial privileges, realities, and complexities of whiteness. As the reader, I invite you to be part of this journey, as I examine the manifestations of racial identity for White higher education administrators, explore their approaches to navigating racial equity efforts on their campuses, and offer insights into the development of anti-racist policies and practices in higher education.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the words “our” and “we” to indicate that I am also part of the white racial majority, thus positioning myself directly in this work. In doing so, my intention is not to exclude but rather to put the focus on White administrators<sup>1</sup> who should be doing the heavy lifting in the pursuit of racial equity in higher education. In the following sections, I introduce the social construct of whiteness in order to establish the

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<sup>1</sup> I define administrators as individuals who are positioned within their higher education institution that have decision-making power or influence related to curricular and/or co-curricular functions at their institution.

purpose and rationale for this study and outline the three research questions that guided my inquiry.

A significant, yet hidden, societal issue that creates and defines our social institutions and plagues our individual consciousness is the social construct of whiteness (Omi & Winant, 1994). Whiteness positions White people as superior to other races and is framed as “normal.” This hidden norm is frequently recreated as socially acceptable within the context of higher education and is central in continuing racial domination (Cabrera, 2012; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gusa, 2010). The invisibility of whiteness, particularly to White people, makes it incredibly difficult to identify, challenge, and transform (Cabrera, 2009). Consequently, higher education institutions serve to replicate, intentionally or not, the existing racial paradigm of White supremacy<sup>2</sup> (Gusa, 2010). Many higher education institutions claim to value racial equity and inclusion and have even identified them as hallmarks in their mission statements or strategic plans. However, as scholars warn us, there is a difference between *claiming* racial equity and *being* racially equitable (Ahmed, 2005). Many institutions fall short in their efforts because they do not critically examine how whiteness manifests in daily practice. In order to make transformational change, institutions must address underlying systems and structures that work to maintain white dominance. This shift in approach and mindset is a key difference between diversity and equity (Anderson, 2008). Adams and Bell (2016) are seminal scholars in outlining the distinction between

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<sup>2</sup> I use Ansley’s (1997) definition to frame white supremacy. Ansley clearly names that white supremacy lives within individual consciousness and systems of society by stating: “By White supremacy I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of White supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which White [people] overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (p. 592). This distinction between individual and institutional White supremacy is of theoretical and ontological importance to my study.

diversity and equity/social justice. They assert:

Diversity refers to differences among social groups such as ethnic heritage, class, age, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and nationality. Social justice is both a goal and a process. The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change (p. 3).

If the goal of social justice is equity for all and the process must be inclusive and participatory, one must first acknowledge and understand that differences exist. Jones (2006) asserts that diversity has to be “a tool for social justice” (p. 151). To be socially just, individuals and institutions must recognize and have a deep appreciation for differences. This misalignment and lack of appreciation for diversity not only negatively impacts the institution as a whole, but more importantly, it can prove detrimental to already minoritized students on campus. The shift from a community of sameness to a community of difference underscores the need to confront socially difficult topics with respect, dialogue, and a continuous expansion of awareness, knowledge, and action (Brown, 2004). Higher education institutions tend to approach diversity work in the domains of numerical representation, environment, activities, equality in human resource management, admissions, and curriculum (Anderson, 2008). However, without a clear understanding of equity, these initiatives fall flat and do not elicit full and equitable participation by the people being impacted. For example, institutions that focus solely on admitting underrepresented students to increase diversity

numbers without looking holistically at support services for when these students arrive to campus are not leading with an equity lens. These institutions are looking for a quick fix to diversity initiatives and neglect to focus on the success and needs of minoritized students to help them thrive. Diversity becomes a checkbox upon which the institution receives a gold star for lackluster support. In relation to societal systems and institutions, equity involves confronting the dominant ideologies and institutional practices that uphold unequal social relations and maintain norms (Adams & Bell, 2016). Racial equity involves taking action against injustices that are created to unequally benefit White people over People of Color.

Historically, People of Color have shouldered the responsibility for transforming institutions to be more inclusive. Under their leadership, significant progress has been made to advance issues of racial equity and inclusion in higher education, particularly at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Valverde, 2003). On the contrary, White administrators have the choice to engage or disengage in racial equity issues due to the safety and comfort of being white, thus reinforcing our privileged position. In light of this, whiteness is maintained through the lack of engagement and critical consciousness of White administrators. Critical consciousness involves critical reflection and action on the part of the individual (Freire, 1970). Critically conscious leaders are “committed to lifelong learning and growth, to recognizing and eliminating prejudice and oppression, to increasing awareness, to facilitating change, and to building inclusive communities” (Brown, 2004, p. 92). If White higher education administrators are to foster inclusive excellence throughout their institutions, they should concern themselves with racial equity, critical consciousness, and social change (Adams & Bell, 2016). However, this is much easier said than done.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem with whiteness lies within the dominant ideologies and hegemonic structures that exist to perpetuate White supremacy and racism. This is most evident in White higher education administrators who lead using a colorblind lens – the belief that race has no role in everyday life. Using a colorblind perspective perpetuates a belief that the problems of race are myths that should not be made real (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003). When White people embrace dominant racial ideologies, we benefit from a system that operates under dominant norms and structures because whiteness is not part of the race discourse (Wildman & Davis, 1997). Despite this, many White administrators still operate, make decisions, and lead using a colorblind lens. Ignoring race maintains the status quo of White supremacy (Smith, Altbach & Lomotey, 2002) and perpetuates white norms in higher education. As evidenced in the next chapter, the field of higher education is lacking in a critical, race-based analysis of whiteness (Cabrera, Franklin & Watson, 2017). In particular, there is limited research that examines White higher education administrators’ perspectives on race and racial identities. Without examining White administrators’ perspectives and understanding of race, it is difficult to expose and dismantle dominant racial ideologies of whiteness. Rather than White administrators perpetuating white norms in higher education, the ultimate goal is for White administrators to develop critical consciousness.

Critical consciousness takes self-reflection to another level by including “a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including White privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism” (Capper, Theoharis & Sebastian, 2006, p. 213). The goal of critical consciousness is to develop an awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing

reality. Adams and Bell (2016) connect critical consciousness to solidarity in the fight against oppression by stating:

Critical consciousness means working in solidarity with others to question, analyze, and challenge oppressive conditions in their lives rather than blame each other or fate. The goal of critical consciousness is to develop awareness or mindfulness of the social and political factors that create oppression, to analyze the patterns that sustain oppression and the interests it serves, and to take action to work democratically with others to reimagine and remake the world in the interest of all (p. 16).

As White administrators become more aware of our whiteness, we can begin to see the hegemonic structures and norms that exist to benefit us and maintain white dominance in higher education. In other words, we begin to make the invisible visible.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Mindful of these realities, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions and the role their racial identity plays in the process. Perhaps the most un-interrogated space within higher education, and the space with the most White people, is at the top of the ivory tower. Therefore, this study intentionally focuses on White higher education administrators who hold leadership positions as a Director, Dean, Associate Dean, or above at their institution. The intellectual goal of this study was to unmask the dominant ideology that sustains whiteness in higher education by shedding light on how whiteness manifests at the individual, institutional, and societal realms. Consequently, the practical goal of this study was to empower White higher education administrators to take action toward racial equity and inclusion at their institutions and to inspire them to develop critical

consciousness. This study on whiteness is both timely and critical to higher education, as we continue to witness daily acts of racism and White supremacy in our society and at our institutions.

In order to accomplish the goals of this study, the following research questions guided my inquiry:

1. What role does white racial identity play in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts?
2. How do White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution?
3. In what ways do White higher education administrators' approaches to racial equity and inclusion efforts offer insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices?

The implications for this research are particularly important to White administrators working in higher education at all levels of the institution – administrators, faculty, staff, trustees, etc. – because White administrators hold power, both racial and positional, to make decisions about the institution's future including curriculum, finances, human resources, facilities, and co-curricular activities. Consequently, this study offers insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices and provides tools for White higher education administrators to begin thinking about their work differently in relation to their whiteness.

As Cornel West reminds us, "...We need the courage to question the powers that be, the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people, the courage to fight for social justice...". I argue that now, more than ever, higher education needs bold, courageous, and

critically conscious White administrators who are willing to fully engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts to transform their institutions. More importantly, we need leaders who are ready to get their hands dirty to address rooted issues of oppression and injustice within higher education and society. This begins with critical reflection and analysis and moves from understanding into action (Shields, 2010). This study sought to explore how White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions and the role their White identity plays in the process. Consequently, this study offers implications into the development of anti-racist policies and practices in higher education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

Many Americans are not equipped to discuss race in its social, political, and institutional contexts (Jensen, 2005). The normalcy of racism is deeply embedded in our legal systems, cultural values, and daily interactions that it becomes almost impossible for White people to see and address (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Jones, as cited by Helms (1993), distinguished between three types of racism: individual, institutional, and societal/cultural:

- (a) individual, that is personal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors designed to convince oneself of the superiority of Whites and the inferiority of non-White racial groups;
- (b) institutional, meaning social policies, laws, and regulations whose purpose is to maintain the economic and social advantages of Whites over non-Whites; and (c)
- cultural, that is, societal beliefs and customs that promote the assumption that the products of White culture (e.g., language, traditions, appearance) are superior to those of non-White cultures (p. 49).

### **Racism in Society**

In reading the previous definitions, it becomes clear that racism is a multi-faceted social construct embedded throughout our daily lives. Throughout U.S. history, material resources (i.e. economic, social, and political) and ideological elements of race have been inextricably linked. In particular, the 1960s were a time of salient challenges to the existing racial paradigm, whereby minoritized communities (and some majority allies) rose up, refusing to be a permanent underclass (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). In response, the 1970s and 1980s were marked by a reframing of whiteness from a symbol of superiority to one of normality, yet whiteness remained socially dominant (Omi & Winant, 1994). This hegemonic

structuring of whiteness rendered racial power relations invisible which served to naturalize racial stratification where White people remain at the top of the hierarchy (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003). As critics have pointed out, work that focuses on culture, ideology, or identity without careful attention to power and the structural components of race threatens to miss the key point that racial identity directly involves social norms as determined by White people (Andersen, 2003). The racialization of White people is inherently about domination because the very existence is dependent on the continuation of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Mills, 1997).

The consistent theme throughout history is that White supremacy is a pertinent social issue. At the beginning of America's history, the distinction between who could *have* property and who would *be* property was paramount. Whiteness represented a position of power where the power holder defined the categories and exerted power over People of Color. Eventually, whiteness became a form of property, a valuable asset that all White people possess. Whiteness defined the legal status of a person as slave or free. Whiteness conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits and was guarded as a valued possession, allowed only to those who met a strict standard of proof. As history shows us, whiteness unites all White people across class lines and defines the structure of who should be inferior (People of Color) and who should be superior (White people) (Pinder, 2012). A seminal piece in this area is critical legal scholar Cheryl Harris' (1993) essay, *Whiteness as Property*, in which she reviewed the legal foundations of whiteness as a condition for ownership of material goods. Harris (1993) discussed the emergence of whiteness as intellectual property, "affirmed, legitimated and protected by the law" (p. 1713). Harris stated that not only does whiteness afford a certain group of people a level of benefits but creates

and defines their identity in society. She argued that the importance and value of whiteness has increased, and the law defends this increase of importance. She also stated that all racial subordination is based on White supremacy. Harris' main point was that the idea of whiteness as property was being defended and instilled in society by law, showing that by being White there is greater economic and social security as well as stability, a kind that is not accessible to People of Color. In particular, Harris used law and legal studies to examine power relations in our racialized society. Specifically, she articulated how the law reinforces whiteness, and how White people use our power to influence laws, decision-making, and governance. This power is maintained through social relations, systems, and institutions of education, politics, religion, and media. As the dominant race, we have absorbed racism the same way a sponge absorbs water; it appears to happen naturally, without intention or deliberate action. This very seamlessness is what makes it so difficult for us to not only perceive it within ourselves, but also to recognize it in other members of the white majority (Tatum, 1997).

### **Institutional Racism in Higher Education**

Racial equity requires accounting for race and racism in higher education. Shaun Harper, a critical race scholar in the field of higher education, defines racism as “individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity; and institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons” (Harper, 2012, p. 10). Put simply, racism is a system whereby white cultural norms and White people are believed to be societally and institutionally positioned as superior. Racism is a social condition whereby it is “...the usual

way society does business...” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). From overt racism such as writing the n-word on the side of buildings or hanging nooses from trees to covert racism such as racial microaggressions<sup>3</sup>, it is evident that racism is alive and well at colleges and universities. In particular, the 2016 presidential election created a flurry of racist acts on college campuses in the form of hate speech and racist language posted around campus, on the sides of buildings, and sidewalks. Whenever someone does something explicitly racist, it is often framed as an isolated incident to minimize the issue. However, ideas about race and racism need to be understood in relation to structures, institutional and cultural practices, and discourses, not simply as “something which emanates from certain individual beings” (Hall, 1990).

There have been many initiatives attempting to address racism on college campuses. Engberg’s (2004) review of intervention studies outlines four broad categories: multicultural course intervention, diversity workshop and training interventions, peer-facilitated interventions, and service interventions. These represent a mixture of both content (i.e. courses on race) and contact (i.e. interactions across race). The trouble with these interventions is that they are frequently limited to improving cross-racial group dynamics in higher education. The success of the programs is defined by educating people about diversity, and this is subtly, but importantly, different from understanding and addressing the roots of racism. For example, there are several initiatives within higher education aimed at increasing awareness of racial difference such as diversity celebrations and cultural heritage programming. While these initiatives help create space to enter the conversation on racial

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<sup>3</sup> Microaggressions are viewed as contemporary forms of racism that are subtle, indirect, and often disguised. They are brief, everyday exchanges that send hostile or negative messages to People of Color because they belong to a racially minoritized group (Sue, 2003).

differences, they do not always address systems or structures. Awareness does not imply a critical analysis of racial oppression. Institutions find pride in promoting these diversity efforts; however, this misconception fails to address the core of racism - the system of White supremacy. To move beyond awareness, it is necessary to understand racism as systemic and make the invisible visible by highlighting the ways in which society structures and recreates the unmeritocratic privileges White people enjoy (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). Further, hegemonic discourses<sup>4</sup> shape race relations in the United States and promote White supremacy as the norm. Racial ideologies are always produced and rearticulated in relation to whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). The degree to which racialized experiences are transparent to White people is vital in understanding the nuances of how race and privilege play out in higher education.

### **Whiteness in Society**

As evidenced in the literature on race and whiteness, whiteness is theorized as “a location of structural advantage,” whether realized or unrealized by White people (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). It is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on all levels (individual, institutional, and societal). These processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences only consistently afforded to White people (Frankenberg, 1993). Whiteness is so embedded in our daily lives, it is the norm in which United States society and educational systems are structured. Whiteness is a hidden barrier that is as much, if not more, subconscious than conscious for White people. White people are ideologically constructed as a better form of human - genetically, culturally, and

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<sup>4</sup> Hegemonic discourses are values and beliefs defined and prescribed by privileged groups which are then accepted by the masses as the natural political and social order (Orlowski, 2001).

intellectually. Fostered through institutions of cultural transmission (academia, faith communities, political discourse and media) and reinforced by parents and peers, whiteness is deep and pervasive. This dominant frame shapes our thinking and action in everyday life situations. Where and when White people find it appropriate, we use this frame in accenting our privileges and virtues of whiteness and in evaluating and relating to People of Color (Feagin, 2013). As we become more aware of the pervasiveness of racism and the rewards of white privilege, we often become mired in denial. This denial can take many forms - the denial that privilege exists; repression of shameful feelings that paralyze any effort to act; or perception of self as a “good” White person who can dissociate from the harm caused by “bad” White people. None of these responses lead to effective social or institutional change.

### **Institutional Whiteness in Higher Education**

Whiteness is woven into the fabric of U.S. society and embedded in the campus cultures and climates of higher education institutions (Allen, 1992; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005). Whiteness is frequently recreated as socially acceptable within the context of higher education because it is framed as normal (Cabrera, 2012; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Gusa, 2010). In higher education, the overwhelming presence of White people centers whiteness as the dominant culture and climate of institutions, particularly at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Together the climate and culture of higher education institutions contextualize the development of individuals on college campuses (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar & Arellano, 2012). One method of whiteness normalization is the disproportionately high representation of White people in higher education, especially at four-year institutions (Brown, 2004). According to a study conducted in 2016 by the College and University Professional

Association for Human Resources, only 7% of higher education administrative positions (e.g. top executive administrators like controllers, division heads, department heads, deans and associate deans) were held by Black administrators. Just 3% of those jobs were held by Latinx people, 2% were Asian and 1% identified as another race or ethnicity. The remaining 86% of administrators were White (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). In addition, the concentrated awarding of college degrees to White people serve to reinforce the existing racial paradigm because graduates are provided with increased earning potential and greater access to social networks (Chesler, Lewis & Crowfoot, 2005). However, proportional representation is only part of the higher education perpetuation of whiteness. Other methods include an institutional stance on racism that is reactive instead of proactive, the exclusion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the mission statement, concentration of institutional power in White (often male) administrators, minimal representation of Faculty of Color, and a reliance upon traditional pedagogies that disregard teaching across racial difference (Chesler et al. 2005; Gusa, 2010).

There is much work to be done to begin dismantling racism and whiteness in higher education. While reviewing the literature on whiteness, Cabrera (2012) found only eight of the 215 peer-reviewed chapters in the study included issues of whiteness in the context of higher education. With few examinations of whiteness in higher education, “there is both a limited empirical foundation for the current research but also possibility, as there are a number of un-interrogated spaces where White supremacy is continually recreated in colleges and universities” (Cabrera, 2012, p. 6). The creation of inclusive campus environments by White administrators is made more difficult because “Whiteness... is visible most clearly to those it definitely excludes... those who are securely housed within its

borders usually do not examine it” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 228-229). Therefore, it may be difficult for White administrators to acknowledge and understand their racial privilege and the barriers it poses when creating inclusive environments. White administrators have the choice to engage or disengage in racial equity issues, thus reinforcing our privileged position and hegemonic norms. DiAngelo’s (2018) research on white fragility, which I fully explain in Chapter 3, provides insight into these actions for how whiteness manifests in higher education:

- White administrators get argumentative or defensive when we are challenged by students or Faculty of Color on issues related to unwelcoming or hostile campus environments
- White administrators being silent or non-reactive when racist actions take place on campus such as hate speech or racial profiling
- White administrators shutting down or disengaging in conversations because they feel guilty or angry, thus putting the burden back on People of Color.

In the sections to follow, I provide an overview of critical theory, which serves as the framework upon which I tackle the concepts and realities of whiteness. Consequently, I highlight Critical Whiteness Studies as the foundation upon which I analyze, disrupt, and deconstruct whiteness in higher education.

### **A Critical Conceptual Framework**

For this study, I used critical perspectives and concepts to frame my research and to analyze whiteness in higher education. A critical framework sheds light on the systems and structures of power that maintain dominance and social injustices in society. Informed by social theories, critical theory specifically supports individuals in their understanding of

issues regarding equity, power, and oppression (Giroux, 1997; Apple, 2004). In general, critical theorists reject positivism, which says that society is governed by ultimate “truths” based on research and facts. Critical theory has a distinctive goal: to unmask the dominant ideology that is falsely justifying forms of social or economic oppression - to reveal it as ideology - and, in so doing, to contribute to ending that oppression. Critical theory aims to dismantle and challenge hegemonic norms about social and economic life so that people come to recognize oppressive structures (Kincheloe, 2005). The ultimate goal is emancipation whereby people become critically conscious of their place - whether the oppressed or the oppressor - in the oppressive system and actively work to dismantle structures of inequity (Kincheloe, 2005).

Critical theory can be traced back to the Frankfurt School, which was founded in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany, and started as a Marxist study group whose members sought to deal with practical problems facing the labor movement in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. During the establishment of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse researched German traditions of philosophical and social thought, especially that of Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber. From the vantage point of these critical theorists whose viewpoints were influenced by the devastation of World War I, the social world was in urgent need of reinterpretation. These theorists highlighted the critical method of thought and placed emphasis upon the role of ideology, and the commitment to resist the deformation of the individual (Bronner, 2011). Their emphasis on the critical component of theory was derived significantly from their attempt to overcome the limits of positivism, materialism, and determinism (Bronner, 2011).

A key theorist who helped lay the groundwork for critical theory was Karl Marx. A

critical theory of education draws on Marxism, stressing the importance of critique of ideology and analyzing education within the dominant social relations and system of political economy (Kellner, 1989). Marx conceptualized critical theory as a capitalist society in relation to domination and subordination, progressive social change, and transformative practices that would create a better life and society for all. Marxism systematically criticizes the assumptions of an established hegemonic discipline and creates an alternative theory and practice to overcome oppression. According to Marxism, we are all social actors in a capitalist society, and we fall into thinking of capitalist economic relations as justified - as how things should be. Marx argued that this ideology obscures our ways of knowing and being in the world, and any prospects for change, reform, or revolution requires first that people come to see capitalism for what it is. According to Marx, we must first see the ways in which we are alienated, powerless, and exploited before we can try to free ourselves from it.

Though critical theory offers a lens to examine systems and structures of dominance, it also carries the weight of some valid critiques. Critical theory is critiqued as being too academic, inaccessible, and elitist in that it actually undermines its application to practice and change. Perhaps the most significant critique of critical theory is that the traditional Marxist perspective leaves out issues of race within the discourse. Marxism focuses primarily on class inequities and capitalism. Barely, if at all, does Marxism examine race through a critical lens. According to Leonardo (2009), "Orthodox Marxism economizes the concept of race, and the specific issues found within themes of racial identity, development, and representation become subsumed under modes of production, or worse, as an instance of false consciousness" (p. 45). Race is seen as a product of economic processes. Bonilla-Silva

(2001) supports this claim that racism is excluded from the foundation or structure of the social system when using a class-based approach. Put simply, Marxism views race as objective within the boundaries of a capitalist society. It disregards the systems, structures, and experiences of people through a subjective, racialized lens. This shortcoming of race analysis within Marxism presents issues in understanding an individual's lived experience, specifically in regards to intersectionality. Leonardo (2009) provides a solid example of this by stating, "Students of Color, like many Scholars of Color, find it unconvincing that they are experiencing only class relations when the concepts used to demean and dehumanize them are of a racial nature" (p. 49).

The central message is that critical theory, while drawing from Marxism, should avoid reification and closure into a single worldview at the risk of losing its critical capacity. Reflecting on the purpose of critical theory, it is imperative to situate discussions in the context of current oppressive systems and structures within today's society and to use a critical framework to illuminate, disrupt, and dismantle oppressive actions. Using a critical framework and perspectives provides opportunity to remove the cloak of normality that whiteness provides us. In the following section, I introduce Critical Whiteness Studies which seeks to further problematize the social construct of whiteness.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies**

Extending critical theory to an understanding of whiteness, Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) explores issues of being white and racially privileged in our society. The purpose of CWS is to reveal the frequently invisible social structures and systems that continually recreate White supremacy and privilege. Stemming from Critical Race Theory, CWS theorizes whiteness as a system existing within a social, political, historical, and economic

context. The focus is on sociocultural structures along with individuals and their identities. Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003) share that “what is new and unique about whiteness studies is that it reverses the traditional focus of research on race relations by concentrating the attention upon the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact of whiteness upon intergroup relations” (p. 3). CWS challenges dominant ideology and critically examines how the unmeritocratic and unwarranted privileges of whiteness are both enacted, normalized, and maintained within society. Before examining Critical Whiteness Studies further, it is important to acknowledge its roots within Critical Race Theory.

Critical Whiteness Studies emerged from Critical Race Theory and puts a lens on whiteness suggesting that a critical interrogation of white racial identity will help dismantle the grip of institutional racism and oppression. Critical Race Theory (CRT), a movement originating from critical legal studies, posits that racism is a normal, inherent feature of American society. CRT is grounded in the Civil Rights Movement and from its beginning has focused on social justice, liberation, and economic empowerment (Tate, 1997). It is predicated upon radical tradition and represents such thinkers as Frederick Douglass, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and W.E.B. Du Bois (McKesson, 2016). In fact, Du Bois coined the concept of “double consciousness,” a principle tenant of CRT, whereby People of Color are essentially forced to have two identities and pressured to view themselves as they are perceived by their White peers. Du Bois’s work represents a major contribution to the discourse on race and racism that certainly paved the way for future theories and perspectives. As key scholars in the field of CRT note, race is a key organizing category for inequality because of the permanence of racial ideology and White supremacy in American society (Omi & Winant, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Du Bois, 2015).

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), CRT “foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research” (p. 24). It is clear that racism is deeply ingrained in American life and must be analyzed, in conjunction with other forms of oppression, to understand inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT provides the opportunity to discuss the impact that the intersections of identity, such as race and class, have on an individual’s experience. CRT also creates an opportunity to challenge the dominant narrative about race in an attempt to promote racial justice and to critically explore the construction of whiteness (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical Whiteness Studies scholars such as Frankenberg (1993) have explored the history of whiteness, the systems and practices that maintain it, and how it might be possible to resist the power of whiteness. Frankenberg asserts that White people and People of Color live racially structured lives. Critical Whiteness Studies stresses that whiteness is conceptualized as a constellation of processes and practices rather than as a discrete entity (i.e. skin color alone). According to Andersen (2003), there are three themes in CWS literature: 1) a perspective that white is normal, 2) a system of white privilege and 3) an understanding that race is socially constructed. She adds that, while “People of Color have been ‘racialized,’ so have White people although with radically different consequences” (p. 24). Today, many of us (White people) continue to live highly segregated lives having little meaningful interaction with People of Color. We often are not consciously aware of the racial nature of our experiences. Though the nature of whiteness often enables White people to go through life without thinking about the racialized nature of our own experiences, it does not mean we are somehow outside of the system we have created and have projected onto others.

Marilyn Frye (1983) argues that whiteness is a deeply ingrained way of being in the world. Whiteness shapes actions, social practices and dispositions, and thus constitutes a part of the “know how” or practical knowledge that competent social actors possess. Research on whiteness that is attentive to the underlying systems and structures of dominance and power relations has the potential to not only push the boundaries of our understandings about the role of White people as social actors but also to extend our understandings of how race works within higher education (Lewis, 2004). Thus, it is imperative to distinguish between critical whiteness and white privilege discourse. Here, I provide a definition of white privilege and discuss the differences between the two perspectives.

**Critical whiteness and white privilege.** Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) moves beyond traditional discussions that solely focus on white privilege without examining the larger structures of whiteness and systemic White supremacy. White privilege is “unearned power conferred systematically” (McIntosh, 1995, pp. 82-83) that is assigned due to a perceived membership in the dominant race. As Levine-Rasky (2000) notes, “...a general criticism [only focusing on] White privilege is that it focuses on the “who” of whiteness, rather than on “how” whiteness is created in the social order” (p. 274). Leonardo (2004) also challenges discussions of privilege that frame it as if White people are passively handed advantages in an invisible knapsack (McIntosh, 1988) rather than illuminating the hegemonic nature of whiteness. While white privilege is a component of CWS discourse, one must view CWS through a systematic lens of hegemony and white dominant ideology.

Typically, research focused on whiteness represents race as a biological fact or as a human creation (Allen, 1992; Omi & Winant, 1994; Andersen, 2003). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue that white privilege plays a significant role in creating narratives about race and

a biological justification for racial discrimination. The literature that suggests whiteness is a social construction created by humans also recognizes the real consequences of racism, including the inequitable distribution of power and resources that are maintained through systems of racial privilege (Allen, 1992; Andersen, 2003; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006; McIntosh, 1988; McIntyre, 1997). What distinguishes the white privilege approach from critical whiteness inquiry is that white privilege tends to center the discussion more on race-based privilege and individuals - the bodies of White people become the arenas for change and study in this approach. Rather than focusing solely on the white individual, critical whiteness “takes the emphasis off white bodies as they negotiate the day-to-day double binds of whiteness... It shifts to the discourse, the culture, the structures, the mechanisms, the processes, the social relations of whiteness that produce racialized subjects including White [people]” (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 285). Shifting the primary analysis to systems (such as housing and labor discrimination) helps us to understand that whiteness is not simply a matter of individuals undertaking individual actions. Embracing a critical theory of whiteness helps us to examine and question systems of power and dominance - a consideration not of “who,” but of “how” (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 274).

**Critique of critical whiteness studies.** In regards to Critical Whiteness Studies, one of the primary criticisms is that White people have once again centered ourselves in study, replacing the object of concern - white racial domination. Therefore, CWS scholars aim to focus on the disruption of the structures and mechanisms that function to maintain racial oppression; the purpose is to work towards liberation for all. A critical theory of whiteness that is grounded in the broader context of racial justice should not place White people on a

pedestal for admiration and glory; rather it should turn a critical eye towards the consciousness and practices of those of us in the racially dominant positions within a White supremacist society. Leonardo (2004) acknowledges the importance of studying white privilege but insists that we must do so in ways that do not mask the system of oppression that creates and maintains privilege. White privilege must be studied not from a personal perspective, but from the perspective of White supremacy, because it is “the condition of White supremacy that makes white privilege possible” (Leonardo, 2004, p.137). Studying whiteness requires particular care in order to not make whiteness fashionable or takeover space within the academy for Scholars of Color. Studying whiteness or white people without understanding hegemonic social contexts obscures the precise reason to study whiteness... to remove the cloak of normality that continues to secure racial dominance for White people (Lewis, 2004).

### **Interweaving Critical Theory with Critical Whiteness**

Because whiteness is an invisible structure that recreates dominance and injustice in society and institutions, critical theory offers three key concepts to examine how whiteness operates within these structures: ideology, hegemony, and power.

**Ideology.** Ideology is the system of beliefs, often tacit and taken-for-granted, which serve to legitimate unequal forms of social relations (Crossley, 2005). Ideologies provide frameworks for understanding our social existence and are most effective when they are invisible, common sense understandings that naturalize the social world and thus justify the status quo (Hall, 1990). Ideology shapes what and who we believe we are through the normalization of social behaviors. Because ideologies affect ways of understanding the world, they also deeply shape our experiences in that world. Althusser (1971), a key theorist

regarding ideology, argues that people are constituted in ideology by way of what he calls interpellation. Interpellation is used to describe a process whereby individuals come to think about and conceptualize themselves in accordance with the manner in which others conceptualize them (Althusser, 1971). In other words, people form a conception of themselves in accordance with the way in which they are treated. Others give meaning to who and what we are; interpellation is the process whereby this is communicated to us, and we come to accept it, whether consciously or subconsciously. Leonardo (2009), in discussing racial ideology in education, supports Althusser's definition of interpellation by stating, "The ideology of race and its concomitant discourses interpellate every human individual into the racial formation. We are signified and brought into the racial universe, which gives us a racial label, White or otherwise" (p. 37). Leonardo goes on to support Althusser's definitions of ideology, specifically that ideology is largely unconscious. Leonardo (2009), in discussing Bonilla-Silva's (2006) work, states:

Race is an intimate part of how people represent/understand themselves and others. Racial ideology may distort their scientific understanding of social life, but it also functions for people in a daily way, and not always in a positive sense... the unconscious nature of racial ideology is especially pertinent when discussing racism. The racist is always the other, never the self; another society, never one's own. A racist, even the most rabid, rarely admits or recognizes that he is racist. It produces an ironic condition of "racism without any racist" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) (p. 38).

Colorblind ideology is a perfect example of Bonilla-Silva's (2006) conceptualization that racial ideology is "racism without any racist." Colorblindness is a prevalent ideology that finds virtue in not "seeing" race. Colorblind ideology has gained dominance as a framework

to understand issues of race and racial justice. In practice, this means framing racial inequality in terms of anything but racism (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Not only do many White people lack self-conscious understandings of ourselves as racial actors, but many of us today claim that race is no longer important. Many White people believe that we should all be colorblind and that even talking about race or racial groups is racist because it perpetuates racial classification (Gilroy, 2000). Part of this new colorblind ideology is the presumption or assertion of a race-neutral social context (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). People who embrace a race-neutral position are aware that racial differences exist; however, they believe that race should not be a factor in decision-making. It also involves the assertion that color is noticed but is not seen or given meaning (Crenshaw, 1997).

Race-neutrality plays out in several social contexts today including our legal system and higher education institutions. For example, several colleges and universities use race-neutral policies in their admission selection criteria by maintaining that race is not a determining factor in their review. This process stigmatizes attempts to raise questions about redressing racial inequality through accusations such as “playing the race card” or identity politics, which suggest that one is bringing race into a situation or conversation where it previously did not exist and in which it does not belong (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Crenshaw, 1997). With our claims of colorblindness, White people are self-exonerated from any blame for current racial inequalities, and thus People of Color are blamed implicitly or explicitly for their own condition. Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that colorblindness is more than a racial attitude; rather, it is a racial ideology. Today’s contemporary view of race for most White people is that of a post-racial society. The common phrase, “I don’t see race” has become

common language for White people. Those of us who say we “don’t see race” in fact usually do see it, and we frequently act negatively on what we see. Those who align with a colorblind ideology refuse to acknowledge racial differences. If whiteness is left unchecked, it could lead White people back into complicity with structural and institutional dimensions of inequality (Frankenberg, 1993).

**Hegemony.** The second foundational concept related to critical theory is hegemony. Hegemony refers to, “the ideal representation of the interests of the privileged groups as universal interests, which are then accepted by the masses as the natural political and social order” (Orlowski, 2001, p. 2). Antonio Gramsci (1971) developed the Marxist conception of hegemony as the principal manner in which social order is maintained within capitalist societies. The effects of hegemony are so difficult to combat because hegemony itself “constitutes the limit of common sense for most people” (Williams, cited in Apple, 2004, p. 4). Giroux (1997) describes hegemony as, “the successful attempt of a dominant class to utilize its control over the resources of the state and civil society... to establish its views of the world as all-inclusive and universal” (p. 23). In other words, hegemony shapes how people view life itself through organizing values, rituals, and meaning. Structuration is an example of how hegemony is practiced and maintained. Structure refers to the ordering of elements of a social system so that “the ordering serves as a binding force across space and time. The ordering defines the perceived horizon of thought and action, and it provides the resources for social reproduction” (Owen, 2007, p. 207). One example of structuration is racial stratification. Basically, this is a term that is used to describe the way that people, power, and resources are unequally distributed in our society. As a social construction, race

structures society and determines who gets access to resources; it also shapes the cognitive frameworks of all people due to the socialization and conditioning of hegemonic norms.

Whiteness does not simply situate elements of the social system relative to one another; it places those elements into a hierarchical relationship of superiority and subordination. For example, in a nationwide housing discrimination study conducted by the Urban Institute in 2000, it was found that Black homebuyers encountered discrimination in 22% of their searches for rental units and 17% in their efforts to purchase homes. For Latinx home buyers, the figures were 26 and 20% (Turner, Ross, Galster & Yinger, 2002). The structuring property of whiteness locates White people in a structural position of superiority and advantage and People of Color in a structural position of inferiority, subordination, and disadvantage. This hierarchical ordering is an essential aspect of the structuring function of whiteness. If whiteness is a structuring property of modern social systems, then it can be understood as deeply embedded in the everyday, normal functioning of those systems. Because of its hegemony within the system, whiteness is reproduced largely behind the backs of social agents (Owen, 2007). Whiteness persists as a structuring property when nothing or little is done to disrupt it. It structures the social institutions that normatively regulate behavior, and it serves as a set of assumptions that underlie the functioning of the economic, political, and legal systems, among others. Furthermore, whiteness acts as a structuring property that shapes the formation of individual personality and identity (Owen, 2007). If the social world is systematically shaped by the needs, interests, and values of White people, then individuals are always being socialized and acculturated into whiteness (Owen, 2007).

This acculturation into whiteness is clearly evident on college campuses today through the use of symbols, rituals, and values. For example, higher education institutions

across the United States, in particular those located in Southern states, have historical statues and buildings named after people (almost always White men) who were proponents of racial discrimination and slavery. Furthermore, disputes about racist university mascots continue to take place. These disputes often involve Students of Color who find these mascots to be racist and stereotypical, whereas White alumni and students express that the mascots are deeply tied to their identity and the identity of the institution. These cultural symbols function as physical manifestations of the institution's values, which directly affects the campus climate (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). Therefore, the institution becomes structured by whiteness.

**Power.** There have been countless endeavors to define power precisely and conclusively, but all of the results remain as unsatisfactory as ever (Morriss, 1987). Initially this sounds surprising, since we think of power as distinctly experienceable and identifiable in everyday life. However, scholarly discussions of power demonstrate that this impression is misleading. It becomes increasingly difficult to incorporate the different analyses into a comprehensive concept or a common definition of power. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to give a systematic overview of the current ideas of power. For the purposes of this study, it proved to be most helpful to distinguish “power over” and “power with” as the two fundamental dimensions of power (Gohler, 2009). Higher education administrators, faculty, staff, and students may find themselves in situations where each can be exposed to either or both of these dimensions of power. The goal, therefore, is to understand how power manifests and how to use it for the common good.

“Power over” means having power over other people, enforcement of one's own intentions over those of others, and is only conceivable in a social relation (Giddens, 1981).

“Power over” is a traditional relationship in which one person has power over another person or one group over another group. It is a traditional relationship in the sense that dominance and coercion are used repeatedly before other alternatives are sought. One side vies for power over another, at best trying to influence the other to concede its position, at worst using brute force to have its way (Giddens, 1981). It is subjective when imposing one’s will, interests or preferences, or objective when carrying out inherent necessities or given norms (Gohler, 2009). This type of power can be experienced in hierarchical contexts across an institution ranging from faculty-to-student dynamics to top-down decision-making by a Board of Trustees or College President. In these cases, people with authority use their positional power to make decisions and influence others. Regardless of actions or intentions, the dichotomy between teacher and student, administrator and student, president and teacher exist and have real implications on how power is viewed and maintained. In addition, having power to name experiences is equivalent to having the power to construct reality. Those who name the world have the privilege of highlighting their own experiences, and thereby identify what they consider important. Thus, minoritized groups are denied the opportunity to define and express their own experiences (Spender, 1984). The analysis of power relations described as “power over” assumes that at least one of the parties is able to execute more power than the other person. Here, power is a precondition; it first has to exist before it can be exercised (Gohler, 2009).

On the other hand, “power with” is relational and collective. “Power with” is used when people share their power with others in order to elevate the entire community. This is seen in higher education when faculty, students, and administrators have shared ownership in the creation and decision-making regarding the institution’s vision, curriculum, and

operations. The binary between student/teacher and student/administrator is reimagined and power is shared among the group. The key question then becomes: Is it *really* power if it is not exercised over others? Obviously, power is not only the realization of options to act, it is having these options themselves. The fact that power determines the level of autonomy and dependence is of significance for the concept of hegemony (Giddens, 1981). Research that aspires to be critical seeks to confront injustices in society and aims to understand the power dynamics and relationship between societal structures and ideology. Thus, the goal of critical theory is to disrupt dominant ideology and hegemony and move towards a model of “power with” others.

In summary, critical theory sheds light on the systems and structures that work to maintain dominance and oppression within society and institutions. It is clear that whiteness is a hidden barrier deeply rooted in our sub-consciousness and ideologies. Extending critical theory to an understanding of whiteness, Critical Whiteness Studies reveals those invisible social structures that continually recreate White supremacy and privilege. Whiteness is maintained and enacted in higher education institutions through colorblind ideology and practices, structuration of symbols and values, and hierarchical power relations. Using a critical framework and drawing from the literature on Critical Whiteness Studies, this study explored how White higher education administrators navigate, challenge, and/or reinforce racial inequities in higher education. In the following chapter, I outline the process of my research design, including my methodology and methods of data collection.

### **Chapter 3: Research Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore how White higher education administrators navigate and position themselves in relation to racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution. Using a phenomenological methodology, this study reveals how ten White higher education administrators navigate, challenge, and/or reinforce racial inequities in higher education. Guided by critical theoretical perspectives on race and Critical Whiteness Studies, I analyzed how these actions informed the participants' positionality, decision-making, and interactions with self and others. Consequently, the ultimate goal of this study is to contribute to the knowledge base of higher education and share findings that will help White administrators develop critical consciousness and move them forward in becoming transformative leaders for social justice. In order to accomplish the goals of this study, the following research questions guided my inquiry:

1. What role does white racial identity play in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts?
2. How do White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution?
3. In what ways do White higher education administrators' approaches to racial equity and inclusion efforts offer insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices?

In the following sections, I outline the elements of my research design. I begin by stating my epistemological perspective related to this study identified as critical qualitative inquiry (Cannella and Lincoln, 2012). From there, I provide an overview of phenomenology (van Manen, 1997), which was used as the methodological approach in this study. I then shift

my attention to outlining and describing the research methods and data analysis process I undertook to conduct this study followed by a discussion on trustworthiness and ethical considerations. With an understanding that my own white identity and lived experiences inform this research, this chapter concludes with a reflection on my subjectivities and positionalities aptly titled “unmasking my whiteness.”

### **Methodological Approach**

Methodology, according to Schwandt (2007), is “a theory of how inquiry should proceed. It involves analysis of the assumptions, principles, and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry” (p. 193). An important part of research is understanding how certain perspectives and paradigms - “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17) - inform our philosophy and approach. Creswell (2013) argues that these paradigms are formed by our ontological (the nature of reality), epistemological (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), and methodological (the process of research) worldviews, thus directly impacting our research process and interpretations. This study was framed through a critical perspective using Critical Whiteness Studies as an anchor to guide the inquiry. Specifically, a critical qualitative phenomenology undergirded this effort to illuminate the frequently invisible phenomenon of whiteness that continually recreates White supremacy and privilege in higher education. The heart of qualitative inquiry is about understanding the meaning of human action (Schwandt, 2007). Qualitative inquiry is a process-oriented measurement and “stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 10). Qualitative research was particularly suited for this study due to exploring and understanding the phenomenon of

whiteness as a social construction. In particular, critical qualitative inquiry was well suited to explore how White higher education administrators position themselves in relation to racial equity and inclusion efforts and the role their racial identities play in the process.

### **Epistemological Perspective: Critical Qualitative Inquiry**

Cannella and Lincoln (2012) define critical qualitative inquiry as “any research that recognizes power - that seeks in its analyses to plumb the archaeology of taken-for-granted perspectives to understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be reified as historical ‘givens’” (p. 105). As is evident in the research, whiteness is normalized and perpetuated at the individual, institutional, and societal levels; it is taken-for-granted and hidden at all levels of human interaction. According to Pasque and Perez (2015), “a central tenet of critical qualitative inquiry is to complicate and problematize the variety of ways that power exists” (p. 148). Given that critical qualitative inquiry allows for analysis of power and hegemony, I analyzed how White higher education administrators navigate, challenge, and/or reinforce racial inequity in higher education and explored how these actions informed the participants’ positionality and interactions with self and others. For example, I asked questions related to how and when conversations of race come up in the participants’ professional roles and how they navigate these discussions. Further, participants were asked to reflect on their personal and professional failures, struggles, and successes related to racial equity and inclusion. Pasque and Perez (2015) assert that, “at the center of critical qualitative inquiry is concern for social justice and equity. The very notion of its existence is to bring about social change” (p. 159). Indeed, the practical purpose of this study is to contribute to the knowledge base of higher education and share findings that will help White

administrators develop critical consciousness and move them forward in becoming transformative leaders for social justice.

### **Phenomenology**

At the heart of this work, the phenomenon that needed to be brought to consciousness and transformed was whiteness. Therefore, I combined a phenomenological approach with critical qualitative inquiry to guide this study and explore the phenomenon of whiteness. Phenomenology explores the lived experiences of people and sheds light on existential meanings (van Manen, 1997). Creswell (2007) differentiates phenomenology from narrative inquiry by explaining that phenomenology seeks to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon as it exists in the social world compared to narrative inquiry which looks at the lives of individuals.

The concept of intentionality is important in phenomenology. Phenomenologists use this word to highlight the connectedness between people, objects, and ideas in the world (Vagle, 2016). Simply put, phenomenology is about studying a phenomenon and the intentional relations that manifest and appear. Intentionality is also described as an invisible thread that connects humans to their surroundings meaningfully whether they are conscious of that connection or not (Merleau-Ponty (1964 [1947])). Similarly, Sartre (1970) described intentionality as the ways in which we meaningfully find ourselves bursting forth toward the world. Sartre's language captures the action-oriented nature of intentionality in that meaning is ever-changing and in constant motion. Crafting a phenomenological research study means "embracing phenomena as social and not as belonging to the individual" (Vagle, 2016, p. 41). Phenomenology recognizes that consciousness or meaning-making influences reality. As such, a respect for multiple truths is foundational to phenomenological philosophy (Patton,

2002). Creswell (2007) further argues that a phenomenological stance assumes experience is conscious and “through dialogue and reflection, the quintessential meaning of the experience is revealed” (p. 58).

Critical self-reflection is a way for White higher education administrators to make meaning of their experiences in an effort to transform their realities (Kegan, 1994). McIntyre (1997) states that without critical race reflection, White people are able to distance themselves from exploring how whiteness perpetuates individual and systemic racism. Investigating the experiences of White higher education administrators using a phenomenological perspective is critical in addressing the challenges of creating inclusive environments at higher education institutions. Making the construction of whiteness visible exposes racial domination that maintains systems of White supremacy. In the words of Gallagher (2000):

In order for whiteness to be demystified and stripped to its political essence, our interviews must generate counternarratives of whiteness which give the respondents the opportunity to rethink the white scripts, those unquestioned assumptions about race that are constantly being written, rewritten, and internalized. (p. 68)

Moreover, phenomenology becomes a methodological tool to expose these counternarratives of whiteness and explore deeper meaning of the participants’ views and experiences. As higher education administrators, the participants are centered in institutional settings that reify and perpetuate whiteness. Consequently, they may not be critically aware of how they are subsumed within structures of White supremacy. They are protected by their whiteness; thus, their power and privilege are barriers to developing critical consciousness. At times during the study, it was difficult for the participants to see how they were

contributing to oppressive actions and behaviors that perpetuate White supremacy in higher education. For example, participants proudly spoke about policies and practices they created or helped support at their institutions, yet they failed to name and own how these actions were imbued with institutional and structural whiteness. Therefore, phenomenology layered with critical qualitative inquiry is an excellent fit for exploring and gaining a deeper awareness of the participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and the phenomenon of whiteness in the context of institutional life.

### **Research Methods**

A variety of methods were employed to interrogate the phenomenon of whiteness in relation to White higher education administrators. In the following sections, I discuss how this study was conducted by first providing an overview of the participants, including sampling strategy, recruitment and outreach efforts, and demographic information. From there, I move into discussions of data collection and analysis and conclude with matters of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

**Overview of participants.** This study involved ten White higher education administrators representing a wide range of institutional types and geographic regions across the United States. For the purpose of this study, participants were selected using criterion sampling which involved selecting participants based on set criteria (Creswell, 2007). It was imperative that the participants have personal experience with the phenomenon under study (whiteness), and that they serve in an administrative role at their institution. Therefore, it was necessary for the participants to meet the following criteria in order to answer the research questions of this study:

- 1) Participants must self-identify as White.

2) Participants must serve in a leadership position as a Director, Dean, Associate Dean (or equivalent), or above at their institution.

3) Participants must be engaged in some form of equity work at their institution.

Although it is important that all higher education administrators understand and engage in racial equity efforts, I intentionally selected White administrators as the focus of this study because they continue to be the numerical majority of administrators and maintain social capital among their peers (Danowitz Sagaria, 2002). White college administrators have the privileged choice, on a daily basis, to ignore their racial identity and subsequent privilege. Administrators of Color, however, do not have this same choice because of their lived experiences and microaggressions they encounter on a regular basis (Valverde, 2003). Due to the hierarchical organizational structure of most higher education institutions, the higher the title, the more authority and legitimate power the individual has over decision-making and influence at the institution. As such, I sought to recruit administrators who held positions towards the top of their organizational structure. The criteria set forth in this study places emphasis on White college administrators who have decision-making power and influence related to curricular and/or co-curricular functions at their institution. Because the phenomenon of whiteness is not limited to one particular functional area of a university, I did not limit the criteria to any specific division or unit. However, based upon participant interest, the majority of participants in this study work in a Student Affairs or Student Services capacity. Lastly, it was important for participants to be engaged in some form of equity work at their institution. This provided a backdrop to engage participants throughout the interview process because they were able to provide examples of how they put this work into action. Consequently, this provided an opportunity to better understand each

participant's intentions and motives for engaging in equity work while analyzing it through a critical whiteness lens.

**Sampling and recruitment strategy.** To assist with identifying participants, I employed a criterion sampling strategy for this study. Criterion sampling is used in many qualitative studies to allow the researcher to identify small, specific groups to work with based on a set criterion. This sampling strategy leads to information-rich research whereby one learns about a central issue or phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). Using a criterion sampling strategy, I recruited ten participants to take part in this study. In order to recruit a wide range of participants, I utilized social media to put out a call for participants who were interested in participating and met the required criteria. Specifically, I posted in two Facebook groups to recruit participants: 1) Higher Education Professionals; and 2) Student Affairs Professionals Dismantling White Privilege. I asked folks who were interested to fill out an online Dissertation Participation Interest Form (Appendix C) and told them that I would be in touch with more information. Much to my surprise, I received 19 interest form submissions within two weeks. After receiving the Dissertation Participation Interest Forms, I sent each participant an email officially inviting them to participate in the study, restated the required criteria, and offered to answer any questions that they had. From the 19 original interest form submissions, 11 individuals met the participant criteria and confirmed that they were interested in participating. Upon receiving email confirmation of their willingness to participate, I sent each participant a copy of the Participant Consent Form (Appendix D) and a link to the Participant Background and Information Form (Appendix E). The Participant Background and Information Form collected demographic data such as participants' pronouns, social identities, position/title, highest level of degree attained, number of years

worked in higher education, etc. This participant demographic information, as further explained in the next section, was used to create a snapshot of each participant to better understand their positionalities. Both of these forms were collected before the first interview and copies were stored on my personal password-protected computer and a secured online server. I used an online scheduling platform, Calendly, to help manage all of the interview times, and I asked participants to sign up based on their availability. During the data collection phase, one participant completed the first interview but withdrew a few weeks later due to a busy schedule. Consequently, I ended with a total of ten participants for this study as highlighted in the following section.

**Participant demographics.** As stated in the participant criteria, all ten participants self-identified as White and served in a leadership position as a Director, Dean, or Associate Dean (or equivalent) at their institution. While the participants' racial identities were the same, the group represented a diverse range of other social identities including gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and religion/spirituality (see Table 3.1). Furthermore, the participants' institutional demographics represented both a breadth and depth of experience in higher education (see Table 3.2). Individually, the participants worked in higher education between 8-18 years with an average of 12 years collectively. Seven of them had Master's degrees and three of them had Doctorates. They worked at a variety of institutional-types ranging from large, public research institutions to small, liberal arts institutions to private Ivy Leagues to community colleges. They were geographically located in regions throughout the United States from the Deep South to New England to the Midwest and to the Pacific Northwest.

**Table 3.1 - Participants' Social Identities<sup>5</sup>**

	<b>Racial Identity</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>	<b>Religion/Spirituality</b>
1	White	Woman	Heterosexual	Middle	Questioning
2	White	Man	Heterosexual	Middle	Catholic
3	White	Woman	Questioning	Upper Middle	Agnostic
4	White	Man	Heterosexual	Upper Middle	None
5	White	Woman	Bisexual	Middle	None
6	White	Man	Gay	Middle	Christian
7	White	Woman	Queer	Upper Middle	Secular Humanism
8	White	Woman	Pansexual	Middle	Catholic
9	White	Woman	Heterosexual	Middle	Christian
10	White	Woman	Heterosexual	Upper	Atheist

**Table 3.2 - Participants' Institutional Demographics<sup>6</sup>**

	<b>Title/Position</b>	<b>Highest Level of Degree Completion</b>	<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>Geographic Region</b>	<b>Years Worked in Higher Education</b>	<b>Years Worked at Current Institution</b>
1	Executive Director	Master's	Public Research	Southeast	17	11
2	Director	Doctorate	Public Research	New England	14	6

<sup>5</sup> Social identities were self-identified by participants.

<sup>6</sup> Institutions based on Carnegie Classifications (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.)

3	Assistant Dean	Master's	Private Liberal Arts	Pacific Northwest	10	7
4	Associate Dean	Master's	Private Liberal Arts	Mid Atlantic	18	9
5	Director	Master's	Private Research	Southeast	8	1
6	Director	Master's	Public Research	Midwest	11	7
7	Dean	Master's	Community College	South	8	1
8	Director	Master's	Private Liberal Arts	Mid Atlantic	9	3
9	Dean	Doctorate	Private Liberal Arts	Midwest	13	1
10	Director	Doctorate	Private Ivy League	Mid Atlantic	8	2

### Data Collection

Using a critical phenomenological approach, I explored the multiple perspectives shared through the participants' lived experiences using individual in-depth interviews. Individual interviews capture thick description - or nuances of meaning - interwoven into personal experience (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, thick description makes patterns of cultural and social relationships more explicit and puts them in context of lived experiences (Holloway, 1997).

I conducted three rounds of 50-60 minute interviews with eight participants and two rounds of interviews with two participants (these two participants could only commit to two

interviews). The private interviews took place via Zoom - a remote video conferencing service - and were audio recorded for transcription. I used a semi-structured interview protocol with the purpose of capturing participants' descriptions and stories in order to interpret the meaning of the phenomenon under study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Moreover, semi-structured interviews give the researcher more flexibility during the interview process, rather than remaining static and hidden behind a preset interview template (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 21). As I explored the phenomenon of whiteness with the participants, it was important for me to guide the conversation in a direction to get at the heart of the phenomenon while also remaining flexible and responsive to what I heard. As such, I adhered to what Rossman and Rallis (2003) call the interview guide approach whereby the researcher "respects how the participant frames and structures responses" (p. 181) yet remains focused on the problem under study. Consequently, questions were framed in the context of motives, values, concerns, perceptions, attitudes and needs related to the participants' experiences (Glesne, 2011), and I remained focused on listening to the participants' experiences to lead me through the interview. Through the interview questions, I indirectly introduced concepts of colorblind ideology, hegemony and power to the participant in order to better unearth and illuminate the participants' perceptions, actions, and attitudes. In doing so, the nature of phenomenological method was reinforced and the participants' stories were more authentic.

**Interview protocol.** During the first interview round, I took abbreviated notes on paper so that I could remain fully engaged throughout the conversation. The interview centered on rapport building and broad questioning focused on the participants' understanding of racial equity and inclusion and how they position themselves in these

efforts at their institutions (Appendix F). The second interview round, which lasted around 60 minutes, took place after first interviews had been transcribed and reviewed. Second round interviews typically occurred within two weeks from the first interview. During the second interview, I dove deeper into the themes that emerged during the first interview round. To do this, I engaged in reflective memo writing between interview sessions to capture and develop my thoughts as they occurred. This technique assisted with early data analysis and helped me think about my work, and new questions and connections between the participants' stories (Glesne, 2011). In addition, the second interview informed how the participants understand whiteness, and their motives, successes, struggles, and failures of engaging in racial equity work. Lastly, the third interview primarily focused on institutional misalignment around racial equity and implications for policy and practice. The third interview was also used to follow up on any themes or patterns that needed additional clarification from the previous interviews.

At the conclusion of each interview round, I sent the audio recordings to a professional online transcription service, Temi, within 48 hours of the interview. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality throughout the process. After interviews were transcribed, I read each transcription in detail concurrently with interview notes, checking for errors and developing preliminary analyses of data. In the following section, I outline my process for conducting data analysis.

### **Data Analysis and Representation**

As I began to unpack, analyze, and make meaning of the data, I realized the importance of self-reflexivity in the process. Davis and Craven (2016) stress the importance of interrogating one's own positionality in relation to the participants as part of the research

process. By engaging in reflection, such as memo writing, I asked myself similar questions that I asked the participants. For example, I thought deeply about how I feel about being white and how those feelings influence my behaviors and actions as a White administrator. I also reflected on the times that my whiteness has benefited me, and how I have perpetuated systems of whiteness in my work and personal life. It was important for me to grapple with these questions, and more, throughout the interview process to remain reflexive and grounded in my own experiences while learning and engaging with the participants. This reflexive process, which I highlight in more detail at the end of this chapter, helped me become immersed in the participant's stories and experiences while also becoming more authentic in my own writing.

After conducting nearly 30 interviews with the ten participants, I was left with nearly 350 pages of transcripts and almost 1,500 minutes (25 hours) of audio. Guided by a critical phenomenological approach, I embraced the underpinnings and assumptions of crafting phenomenological research. To do this, I utilized Vagle's (2016) whole-parts-whole process as a lens in which to view the data as well as Yin's (2016) data analysis framework to guide me through the data and interpretation process. Vagle (2016) describes the whole-parts-whole process of data analysis by highlighting the importance of focusing on focal meanings or moments in relation to the broader context from which we are situated. Once we begin to shift parts from one context and place them in dialogue with other parts, we come to understand new meanings about the phenomenon under study. While embracing Vagle's approach to phenomenological analysis, I used critical theory and Critical Whiteness Studies as a backdrop to interrogate and interpret the phenomenon of whiteness. Although some scholars assert that there is no place for theory in phenomenology, I argue that theory is all

around us; it is already part of the life-world in which we aim to study. Vagle (2016) shares a similar stance in that theory is already running through data gathering and analysis. Theory is part of the research process, whether we want it to be or not, and should be opened up rather than avoided. Phenomenology and theory should not be an either/or dichotomy, rather they should work in tandem with one another to support, enhance, and illuminate what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call “lines of flight” (p. 3) - those elusive moments when change happens and something new is created. Whiteness is both theory *and* reality. When researchers talk about whiteness from a theoretical perspective, we must also unpack and understand the very real impact that whiteness has in everyday life. The phenomenon of whiteness must be viewed from multiple perspectives to unearth deeper meaning and shed light on how it shapes people’s lives, both White people and People of Color. This is precisely where this study come in – to interrogate the phenomenon of whiteness from a theoretical and individual lens in hopes of showing how pervasive and entangled whiteness is in our understandings of society, self, and others.

In staying true to the phenomenological analysis process and critical qualitative inquiry, I used a comprehensive cycle to analyze and interpret the data. Yin (2016) outlined five phases of data analysis: 1) Compiling; 2) Disassembling; 3) Reassembling (and arraying); 4) Interpreting; and 5) Concluding. I found this approach to be comprehensive and useful to aid in analysis, however, I modified it for this study. In addition to these five phases, I added a phase between Interpreting and Concluding and labeled it Representing. I believe the representation of data and the ways in which we share the findings is just as important as the findings themselves. As such, I used this six-phase process to analyze the data. Each phase is explained below as I describe the specific data analysis procedures for this study.

**Compiling.** I first started by compiling and sorting all of my notes and transcriptions from the 28 participant interviews. Compiling involves “formally arranging all the notes in some useful order... The objective is to organize your qualitative data in a systematic fashion before formal analysis starts... More orderly data will lead to stronger analyses and ultimately to more rigorous qualitative research” (Yin, 2016, p. 190). With over 300 pages of transcripts and observation notes, I made the decision to use an online computer software program to help compile and organize the data. I used the cloud-based version of ATLAS.ti as a tool to organize and streamline the data analysis process. ATLAS.ti is an online tool that helps researchers arrange, manage, and reflect on their findings in a creative, yet systematic way. Before uploading any files into ATLAS.ti, I reviewed all the transcripts for accuracy and made edits as necessary based on the audio recordings. From there, I continued in the process.

The first step I took was to reread and re-familiarize myself with my field notes and transcripts. This helped jog my memory and refocused my attention to key points shared during the participant interviews. As with most qualitative research, it is difficult to separate data gathering from analysis, as the two are so delicately intertwined throughout all phases of a study (Vagle, 2016). Therefore, I had already begun informal analysis during the interview process and my memo writing. After I re-familiarized myself with the data, I began organizing the information in a thoughtful and analytic way. I looked for the distinctive features of the data and how it related to my research questions (Yin, 2016). This phase of the analysis process is similar to what Vagle (2016) described as starting with the “whole.” Organizing and reviewing the data at a macro-level before jumping into the minute details helped frame the data in a meaningful way. Within ATLAS.ti, I created digital folders to help

separate the data into a consistent format. I approached this in two ways: 1) I created a digital folder for each participant with all of their interview transcripts and notes in one space. This ensured that the participants' narratives and stories remained intact; and 2) I compiled all of the participants' transcripts from each interview round and created digital folders for each interview session. By organizing the data by interview rounds I could more clearly see how individual participants responded to each interview question, thus making it easier to identify the distinctive features of the data.

**Disassembling.** After I compiled and organized the data in meaningful ways, I began disassembling it into smaller pieces in order to better understand the phenomenon of whiteness. This is the “parts” process of phenomenological analysis that Vagle (2016) discussed. This phase contained iterative steps by going back and forth between my initial ideas of how to disassemble the data and the actual data I had in front of me (Yin, 2016). It was vital, therefore, to constantly write memos to keep my thoughts organized and not lose ideas that were floating around in my head. I found this phase of data analysis to be the most reflective, and at times the most overwhelming, because there were so many unique and creative ways to disassemble the data.

I chose to break the data down and categorize it by using codes. Coding involves “assigning new labels or codes to selected words, phrases, or other segments of text in a database” (Yin, 2016, p. 195). Coding helped me to identify the essential aspects of the data and “begin moving methodically to a slightly higher conceptual level” (Yin, p. 195). I approached data coding in two ways: open codes (Level 1) and category codes (Level 2). During the open coding process, I reviewed my organized notes and data and reread the transcripts to identify words and phrases that appeared interesting, provocative, aligned, or

misaligned with the literature. For example, participants used a variety of words or phrases to answer the interview questions. Some of their language aligned very closely with the literature, such as white fragility and allyship, which made it easier to find parallels in the literature. However, other parts of the coding process took more time because each participant had their own way of describing their experience, which did not always align with the literature. I also looked for consistencies or inconsistencies in what the participants were saying and coded those as well. In some cases, I coded a few words and in others I coded large chunks of text. ATLAS.ti provided an efficient manner to code all of the transcripts by allowing me to highlight specific segments and easily assign them codes. Forty-one unique codes were identified during the open coding process representing around 200 quotations or segments of data. From there, I moved into Level 2 coding which involved using the 41 open codes to identify broader categories, representing an even higher conceptual level (Yin, 2016). This took lots of time, critical thinking, reflection, and memoing to develop the categorical codes. In the end, nine overarching categories were identified by combining two or more initial codes into different groups.

At this juncture, it was important to remind myself of Sipe and Ghiso's (2004) advice that "all coding is a judgment call" since we bring "our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, [and] our quirks" to the process (pp. 482-483). As such, it was critical for me to suspend, or bridle, my assumptions, preconceived ideas, and biases during the reassembling phase. In addition, Gibson and Brown (2009) caution researchers to not simply pull codes of data without understanding the context in which they were told. In doing this, "we create textual fragments whereby the researcher ignores the contexts in which narrations were shared. The contexts may be fundamental to the meaning that participants might have

been signaling when they produced the narrations” (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 189). Indeed, the participants shared rich stories and experiences throughout the interviews, and the contexts in which they told their stories mattered. Therefore, I was thoughtful and intentional with my coding methods in order to represent both the textual data as well as the context in which the participants’ narratives were told. I describe in detail my process for doing this in the trustworthiness section of this chapter.

**Reassembling.** After the data was disassembled and coding was complete, I moved into the Reassembling phase. The primary purpose of the Reassembling phase was to search for patterns. This process involved taking my Level 1 and Level 2 codes onto an even higher conceptual plane, “whereby themes and theoretical concepts start to emerge (Yin, 2016, p. 202). This phase closed the loop on Vagle’s (2016) whole-parts-whole process for phenomenological analysis by bringing the parts back together to once again see the data as a whole. Although this time when I looked at the data as a whole, it looked different. It had new groupings and codes and hidden meanings waiting to be explored. In searching for patterns, I sifted and sorted through the coded data by looking for relationships, connections, or discrepancies that would move me towards a new understanding of the participants’ relationship with the phenomenon of whiteness in the context of higher education. This involved what Yin (2016) calls “playing with the data.” I was constantly rearranging the data and moving things around in order to draw the clearest conclusions possible. To assist with the arraying process, I created a schematic diagram in the form of a concept map using a dry erase board, so I could easily reassemble information. This exercise proved helpful in identifying new patterns or patterns that did not have solid grounding based on the data provided.

The reassembling process undoubtedly involved several discretionary choices such as what data was important, what should be included, and what should not be included, etc. Each decision I made along the process shaped the outcome of this study. To help relieve - not fully remove - bias, I constantly compared the data to one another and watched for similarities and dissimilarities among the patterns. From there, I questioned why I found the data items to be similar or different (Yin, 2016). This constant comparison was a reflective process, and I sought to poke holes in my own assumptions about the patterns I had identified. Yin (2016) also suggests using negative instances to avoid problems during the Reassembling phase. This involved “uncovering items that on the surface might have seemed similar but on closer examination appear to be misfits” (Yin, p. 211). By using this procedure of negative instances, I refined by interpretation and assumptions about the existing patterns. In fact, I originally concluded the reassembling process with five central themes that I thought were individually strong and unique. However, after looking at the negative instances and patterns, I realized that one theme, “when whiteness gets in the way,” was a misfit and was not strong enough to stand on its own. Although I initially felt that it was an important pattern, I was trying to make it fit with the data like a round peg in a square hole. Consequently, I removed the misfit theme and concluded the Reassembling phase with four grounded and distinct central themes. I then used these four themes as the basis for interpreting the findings, as outlined in the following section.

**Interpreting.** After identifying the central themes and patterns in the study, I shifted my attention to interpretation. Interpreting is considered “the craft of giving your own meaning to your findings - that is, your reassembled data and data arrays” (Yin, 2016, p. 220). This phase is the pinnacle of data analysis and brings all the phases together and serves

as the basis for understanding the entire study (Yin, 2016). During this phase, I drew upon Vagle's (2016) description of phenomenological interpretation and intentionality. He states:

[Intentionalities] are permeable and malleable: they are not rigid, nor are they finite... they shift and change in and over time, through ever changing contexts... they signify some salient, partial, fleeting, temporary, unstable intentional meanings... Intended meanings are always in the process of becoming (pp. 40-41).

Vagle (2016) argues that phenomenological research should be crafted using a "through-ness" mindset, which signifies movement and the process of becoming. He goes on to say that:

This allows us to see intentionalities as multiple, partial, fleeting meanings that circulate, generate, undo, and remake themselves. In a "through-ness" conception there is not a linear link between subjects and objects. Rather, there are intentionalities of different shape, sizes, and contours running all over the place (p. 41).

This concept of "becoming" resonated with me and influenced how I interpreted the findings. In crafting the interpretations, I looked for those "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3) or when the data was "bursting forth toward" (Sartre, 1970) new meaning. These types of interpretations aim "to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence - in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (van Manen, 2001, p. 36). Doing so required a critical approach as to draw attention to power dynamics and social contexts that may or may not be named by participants. Therefore, I utilized my theoretical framework as an analytical tool to interpret the findings. I drew upon Critical Whiteness

Studies scholars described in Chapter 2 in order to contextualize the words of participants. In using theory to interpret and make meaning of the participants' stories, I connected the data with critical concepts from the literature such as colorblind ideology, hegemony, and power. In doing so, I came closer to answering the study's research questions of understanding how White administrators position themselves in relation to racial equity and inclusion efforts and the role their white racial identity plays in the process.

**Representing.** After interpreting the data, it was important to think about how I wanted to represent the stories and lived experiences of the participants based on the findings. After conducting nearly 30 interviews with the ten participants, each participant had shared times of failure, frustration, hope, and when their white identity got in the way of doing racial equity work. The data quickly became more rich, entangled, and personal than I had expected. As the researcher, I was impressed and somewhat surprised by the participants' reflectiveness and candidness about their professional and personal struggles with whiteness, and I was left with a dataset of complex and personal interviews. The tricky question then became: How do I represent the richness of the data while maintaining the confidentiality of each participant which, as I was reminded throughout the interview process, was crucial in them feeling comfortable speaking out? This methodological question became crucial in determining how to represent the data and share the findings.

I was drawn to storytelling by the data I had in front of me. My aim was not to distinguish *between* participants through comparison, but rather to highlight how White administrators, as a group of people, navigate and position themselves in institutional racial equity efforts and the role their white identity plays in the process. Kendall (2006) supports the idea that White people only see themselves as individuals by stating, "Many of us who

are white have little sense of what it means for our lives, and we are not particularly concerned with finding out. It doesn't seem relevant. We see ourselves as individuals rather than as members of a group..." (p. 41). Therefore, it did not seem appropriate to represent the findings in a "standard" format by simply regurgitating information. Rather, I felt compelled to represent the findings in a creative yet ethical way in the form of composite narratives.

**Composite narratives.** Willis (2018) describes composite narratives as a way "to present an authentic yet anonymous story" using the data from multiple participants to recreate the story or experience as if it were coming from a single individual. This approach was a good response to the difficult question about confidentiality described above. From a practical perspective, this allowed me to explicitly name when participants were reinforcing or recreating whiteness without having to worry about exposing their identity. These composites are stories, not fictions (Smart, 2010), in that each description is based solely on interview data, and all quotations came directly from interviews. The only modification was to present data from several interviews as if it were from a single individual. As the researcher, I used my own judgements to create stories that captured the essence of the participants' lives, experiences and perspectives. These composite narratives were a way to engage the imagination by connecting the mind with the heart (Banks & Banks, 1998). Orbach (2000) calls this "emotional truth" defined as "an authentic representation of feeling rather than a strict adherence to narrative truth" (p. 197). These five composite narratives were meant to highlight the positionality and messiness of whiteness for each participant. In doing so, this helped provide richness and context for how the participants navigate racial equity work at their institution. The narratives represent a mix of participant identities,

though in order for the reader to better understand the story and the phenomenon of whiteness, a new identity was assigned to each composite character.

It is important to note that the composite narratives were not intended to essentialize one's racial identity, rather "they offer ways to self-reflect on and understand our behaviors while interrogating our actions in relationship to power accumulated through White Supremist systems" (Earick, 2018, p. 801). No participant is reflected in a single composite character. In fact, each composite character is made up of multiple participants based on their stories and experiences throughout the interview process. Therefore, these composite characters should not be viewed as a single identity enacted by an individual or group, but as multiple identities one takes on depending on their social and professional circumstances (Earick, 2018). Although some critics suggest that this approach removes factual information, Banks and Banks (1998) argue that this type of storytelling brings together fact and truth by connecting the mind with the heart. Using composite narratives is a way to draw attention to the imagination and to the "rigor of inquiry" (Banks & Banks, 1998, p. 8) and to create a connection between the texts that describe the social world to the reality of lived experiences in the social world (Banks & Banks, 1998). The interview data could, of course, have been combined in different ways, to create different composites. Indeed, different combinations were considered and explored. The final composite narratives were developed as a way to convey the range of views and positions revealed by the data.

**Blending critical transformative dialogues with creative nonfiction.** In staying true to the critical qualitative nature of this study, I blended critical transformative dialogue with a creative nonfiction approach (Caulley, 2008). In constructing my approach, I was informed by Freire's (1970) argument that "in this theory of action one cannot speak of an

actor, nor simply of actors, but rather of actors in intercommunication” (p. 129). Trede, Higgs and Rothwell (2009) use critical transformative dialogue as a way to create shared understanding and knowledge through dialogue. Trede et al. (2009) advocate for critical transformative dialogues as a useful tool when choosing to work within transformative paradigms and change processes where the underpinning values consist of inclusiveness, critique of status quo, transformation and emancipation. In describing the significance of critical transformative dialogues, Trede et al. (2009) use work from Habermas (1984) by stating:

Dialogues that are conducted with dialogue partners who do not explore beyond their horizons are stifling and are merely transactions of information because such dialogues remain within existing value frameworks, traditions and horizons. The importance of critical dialogues is that they focus on freeing speech partners from their limited horizons by exposing their unreflected prejudices and the preconceived ideas that they bring to the dialogue. Dialogues lead to emancipatory knowledge when they are free of domination, coercion and unnecessary constraints (p. 2).

Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, tells a story using facts while integrating techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy. Creative nonfiction delivers facts in ways that move the reader toward a deeper understanding of a topic (Cheney, 2001). Weaving together the method of critical transformative dialogue and the emotional vibrancy of creative nonfiction allowed for raising critical consciousness, accessing complex dimensions of social life, and building bridges across differences (Leavy, 2012). Representing the findings of this study using a dialogue format also provided an accessible and meaningful way for readers outside academia to understand and make

meaning of this research. In doing so, the voices of the participants in this study were elevated and uninhibited by the researcher jargon that often plagues traditional qualitative research findings (Caulley, 2008). In an effort to create holistic and authentic representations of the composite narratives, I set aside an entire chapter to present each narrative. These five composite narratives are described in detail in Chapter 4 followed by Chapters 5 in which I place the characters in dialogue with one another to further analyze the emerging themes and findings of this study.

**Concluding.** The final phase of the data analysis process was concluding. Yin (2016) includes Concluding as a phase in this process because drawing conclusions should “be connected both to the preceding Interpreting phase and to a study’s main data or empirical findings. In this sense, drawing conclusions still may be considered as part of a study’s analysis” (Yin, 2016, p. 235). Conclusions raise the interpretation of the study to an even higher conceptual level while capturing the significance of the study (Yin, 2016). For the purpose of this study, the Concluding phase is highlighted in the final chapter and includes sections on Implications for Practice, Future Directions for Research and Scholarship, and Concluding Thoughts. In these sections, I make inferences from the research as a whole to answer the third and final research question: In what ways do White higher education administrators’ approaches to racial equity efforts offer insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices?

Throughout the data analysis process power was at play. As the researcher, I had the power to decide what to include in my research, what to leave out, and how I wanted to interpret and represent the data. All of this, of course, was predicated on my ontological and epistemological worldviews. Consequently, it was vital to maintain trustworthiness

throughout my study and integrate reflexive practices. In the following section, I discuss issues related to trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is established by ensuring the research process is executed fairly and the data accurately represents the experiences of the participants (Ely, 1991). In phenomenology specifically, researchers use techniques called bracketing and bridling. While these two techniques have similar roots, they are distinctly different. Bracketing, according to Giorgi (1997), involves the researcher putting aside “past knowledge about the phenomenon encountered, in order to be fully present to it as it is in the concrete situation in which one is encountering it” (p. 240). Giorgi is particularly concerned that past interpretations will determine the study of present phenomena. In comparison, bridling is:

A reflective stance that helps us “slacken” the firm intentional threads that tie us to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1995). We do not want to cut them off and we cannot even cut them off as long as we live, but we must, as Merleau-Ponty encourages us to, loosen them up in order to give us that elbow room that we need to see what is happening when we understand phenomena and their meanings (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 16).

Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom (2008) add that bridling is forward-looking and that bracketing looks backwards, focusing on pre-understandings and trying to limit their influence on the present. To bridle one’s own biases, we must, as Dahlberg claims, give ourselves elbow room to see the phenomenon in a different way. To do so, researchers must take a reflexive, open stance (Vagle, 2016). Glesne (2011) shares that “you must conduct two

research projects at the same time: one into your topic and the other into your ‘self’ and the ground on which you stand” (p. 151). I agree wholeheartedly with Glesne especially because, as the researcher, I was centrally located within the discourse and phenomenon being studied. I had to be consciously aware of the socio-political context in which I asked my questions and critically reflect on my whiteness to try and avoid reification of whiteness into a single worldview.

My primary concern to the trustworthiness of this study was that my own subjectivities of being a White higher education administrator would directly influence this process. Indeed, I brought my own assumptions and perspectives to the research process, so I had to constantly check my own bias and reflect on how I, too, was reinforcing white ideologies. To assist with this, I bridled my assumptions and tried to remain as reflexive throughout the research process using memo writing.

**Memo writing.** Memo writing is an analytic tool that I used to reflect and process my thoughts and ideas throughout this study, particularly during the interview and data analysis phases. These memos became invaluable insight into my thoughts and ideas along the research journey. I used them to jot down key phrases that participants said or segments of an article or book that I read. Lather (1993) writes, “It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing-spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge” (p. 675). I wrote lots of “why” and “how” questions trying to unearth my own assumptions of normality. I wrote short reflective narratives about how the text spoke to me and how I was embedded within it. This reflexive process helped me to center my whiteness so that I could then try to bridle my assumptions and preconceived ideas about myself and others. In a way, I was centering and de-centering

my whiteness at the same time. There is lots of irony in this process because while the intent of my research is to disrupt and decenter whiteness as the norm, I, as the researcher, had to actually center my own whiteness in order to move beyond the boundaries and constraints of racial social constructs. Vagle (2016) summarizes this process nicely by stating, “We cannot escape being parts of history and can never re-position ourselves outside of tradition and history. So, crafting [memos] presses us to question our understandings, the traditions we are operating within, and the history we are launching from - while carefully examining the participants’ experiences” (p. 132).

In reflecting on my positionality in relation to the participants, I had to be constantly aware of the temptation to get lost in white talk - “talk that serves to insulate White people from examining their/our individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism” (McIntyre, 1997, p. 45). I am a White person interviewing White leaders about whiteness; this created a complex relationship from the outset, and I could have gotten lost in white talk if I was not careful. Indeed, in some of this white talk, there were assumptions and comments steeped in whiteness that I may not have recognized because of shared understandings and obliviousness. While the goal of this phenomenological research was to let the process unfold on its own and to glean meaning from what the participants were saying, I had to remain consciously aware of the white power, ideological, and hegemonic dynamics at play during the interview. If the conversation went down a path towards white talk and started straying away from the topic of race, I had to gently guide us back to the key research questions of this study. When this occurred, I made note during the interview and came back to it later during my memo writing. I also made note of what the participants were *not* sharing or how they avoided questions regarding race, and I reflected on those as well. This was an

important finding as it related to white silence and comfort and is reflected in the composite narratives.

**Triangulation.** Another technique that I used to enhance trustworthiness and strengthen credibility in this study was triangulation. This technique has long been recognized in doing qualitative research (Denzin, 1978; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) with the goal to “determine whether data from two or more sources (or evidence from multiple occasions by the same source) converge or lead to the same finding” (Yin, 2016, p. 160). To do this, I looked for converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2016) throughout the study to support the evidence or claim being made. This involved looking for converging points across multiple participant interviews as well as triangulating points within an individual participant’s story or experience. Glesne (2011) recommends prolonged engagement with participants to develop trust, learn the culture, and validate ideas. During the 2-3 hours spent with each participant, I was able to return and reopen certain questions or statements to dig deeper into the participants’ feelings and thoughts. This assisted with triangulating the evidence because the participant had to retell or rephrase their idea or experience. In return, new angles and perspectives emerged from the same encounter, thus deepening my interpretation of the participant’s lived experience and strengthening validation. The last triangulation tool that I used was theory. In doing so, I utilized theoretical perspectives to identify corroborating or conflicting ideas based on the data and literature.

**Empathic neutrality.** The final approach that I took to strengthen trustworthiness was to use Patton’s (2015) interview approach of empathic neutrality with participants to build trust and connection. Patton describes empathic neutrality as “understanding a person’s situation and perspective without judging the person - and communicating that understanding

with authenticity to build rapport, trust, and openness” (p. 50). Moustakas (1995) similarly described the role of empathy in the qualitative interview by noting:

I enter with the intention of understanding and accepting perceptions and not presenting my own view or reaction... I only want to encourage and support the other person’s expression, what and how it is, how it can be, and where it is going. (pp. 82-83)

Having conducted three rounds of interviews with nearly all the participants, I found this approach to be meaningful and authentic. The participants shared openly and vulnerably about their failures, struggles, and successes with racial equity efforts on their campus. They shared very real and raw emotions describing times of anger, frustration, joy, and content. Let me be clear, however, that I had to balance this empathic neutrality with not engaging in white talk. I did not soothe the participants and affirm that they were being “good White people” and allies. As Hayes and Juárez (2009) state, “when you show your whiteness, you are not entitled to a good White people’s medal” (p. 740). By approaching the participant interviews with empathic neutrality, I did not judge the participants’ emotions or stories nor did I reward them. I simply listened, encouraged, and supported them while they shared their stories and at times challenged them to think and feel more deeply about their whiteness.

**Ethical considerations.** This study brought with it several ethical considerations, specifically related to confidentiality. As was indicated on the Participant Consent Form (Appendix D), it was not expected that the participants would experience any discomfort as a result of participating in this study, and under no circumstances would the participants’ interview data be shared with anyone without their explicit permission. As I shared previously, the participants constantly asked for affirmation throughout the study that their

identities and institution names would remain confidential. While this confidentiality factor helped participants be more open and honest in their responses, it presented a unique challenge for how to represent the data in an authentic yet ethical way. As such, I chose to represent the participants and their stories using composite narratives as outlined in the Representing phase of my data analysis section. I found this approach to be responsive to the ethical and authentic nature of this study. Further, this allowed for the data and findings to be shared broadly at academic conferences, professional meetings, or in publications, thus contributing new knowledge to the field of higher education.

In addition to employing composite narratives, I used direct quotes from participants to get at the essence of what they were saying. This allowed for the participants' voices to remain at the forefront while ensuring that my own subjectivities did not negatively influence my participants' stories. Narratives are always constructed through collaboration between the researcher and participant (Riessman, 2008), so I had to give special attention to make sure I was not centering my voice or thoughts during the data analysis and interview processes.

Lastly, an ethical issue revolved around the use of member checks. Member checking helps strengthen trustworthiness between researcher and participants and allows participants to respond to the researcher (Glesne, 2011). I originally thought that member checks would be part of my data analysis and that I would share the interview transcripts with participants and allow them to confirm or deny what they said. However, after much thought, I opted not to use member checks in this process. Due to the nature of this study and the stories that were shared, I was concerned that participants might want to reframe the data in order to be perceived as a "good White person." I wanted their real feelings and emotions to bubble up in the data, and I was concerned that they would re-read their transcripts and change the

meaning or context in which things were shared. Ironically, in the context of this study, membership checking felt like the reification of whiteness. Therefore, in order to maintain the integrity and ethical prowess of this research, membership checks were not conducted. Rather than member checks, I chose to engage in peer debriefing to ensure that the ethical prowess of the study was maintained. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define peer debriefing as, “the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind (p. 308). Peer debriefing enhances the validity of a study because the process ensures the results make sense to someone other than the researcher (Creswell, 2014). Consequently, I utilized my dissertation committee and doctoral classmates as a peer debriefing group to assist me with reviewing my interpretations of the findings to inform and strengthen my implications.

Related to the trustworthiness and ethics of qualitative research, it was critical to reflect on my subjectivities and positionalities as the researcher. In the final section of this chapter, I focus my attention to unmasking my own whiteness - both personal and professional - in relation to this study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research design and methods used to conduct this study.

### **Subjectivity and Positionality: Unmasking my Whiteness**

I recognize research can never be truly objective, as researchers cannot completely disengage from their unique worldviews as they gather and interpret data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The goal of a qualitative researcher in representing others’ perspectives is to do so authentically with results that stay true to the participants’ views. In attempting to do so, one

must acknowledge their own subjectivities. Glesne (2011) discusses the importance of critical subjectivity while conducting qualitative research. She states:

Reflexivity generally involves critical reflection on how researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other. This includes examining one's personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways... and for developing particular interpretations (p. 151).

Reflexivity is an active acknowledgement that my identities and experiences shape the cultures and communities of which I belong. Before I engaged in this qualitative study, it was important to investigate my own white identity and subsequent privilege in an effort to keep these issues visible throughout the research process. The person I am today has evolved from a culture based on personal experiences, people, and social identities. Nearly all of my cultures and identities come from a dominant and privileged place. As a White, gay, Christian, able-bodied man, I recognize that I do not and cannot represent or speak for all people. I must seek to understand the various cultures and subjectivities of each person and try to make meaning of these cultural contexts to inform my research

Growing up in a small, conservative town in South Carolina, I always had a desire to be perceived as a "good White person," and I never considered myself to be racist or part of the "problem." My desire to be a good White person provided me the courage to speak up, but it also led me to a false confidence of having "done the work" to be a good ally. I most certainly perceived myself to be a white progressive, a term that DiAngelo (2018) describes as any White person who thinks he or she is not racist, or is less racist... or already "gets it." This was certainly me throughout my teenage and undergraduate college years.

After completing my undergraduate degree from a small, liberal arts college in South Carolina, I attended graduate school in Vermont - yet another predominantly white state - where I was exposed to critical issues and theories related to social justice. During those transformational years, I became critically aware of the privilege and power I possess as a White man and the histories and structures at play that reinforce White supremacy today. It was through critical reflection and action that I began to view myself as a social justice educator. For me, a social justice educator is one who views education as an emancipatory act. This orientation is reflected in my educational background and professional experience. I am committed to working toward social justice and equity and trying to take action toward positive change. I believe that critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) is the first step in unpacking one's privilege so that the individual can begin to make meaning of their whiteness. Reading and engaging in critical dialogue are ways in which I continue to become critically conscious of my whiteness and the impacts of my racial identity on others. My whiteness is something that I can never give up, but I can use it to chip away at racism and White supremacy.

Although I view myself as a social justice educator, I cannot ever claim that I have "arrived." The moment I think or act in this way is the moment I do more harm than good. Indeed, DiAngelo (2018) shares that this way of thinking causes the most daily damage to People of Color. Rather than putting my energy into deepening self-awareness or continuing my education around anti-racist practices, this way of thinking places emphasis on trying to convince other people that I have arrived and that I am a "good White person" and should be trusted. This way of thinking and being is dangerous and only serves to reify whiteness.

In addition to my subjectivities, I am positioned within a social and ideological location that shapes how I view myself in relation to others, which is known as my positionality (Durdella, 2019). In relation to my study, one strength of my positionality is that I shared a common privileged racial identity with participants, so at times, it was easier for participants to open up about their experience. Rather than participants feeling guilty or in a state of denial while talking about their whiteness, our shared racial identity opened up the door to deeper conversation and understanding about our shared experience. The weakness of my positionality was the same as my strength. As a White person, I interviewed White people about whiteness. Although my goal in this study was to contribute to the knowledge base of leadership in higher education, I did this through a privileged lens. Therefore, I constantly used reflexive practices to try to make my white identity and subsequent privilege visible, thus more effectively assisting the research participants in critical explore of their own construction of whiteness. This type of critical inquiry was meant to unmask the concept of whiteness in hopes to re-center whiteness as a responsibility to take action against institutional and interpersonal racism.

**Whiteness in my work.** As part of my positionality, it is important to name how whiteness shows up in my daily work. I have worked in Student Affairs for over eight years and have held an administrative leadership position in my department. I have supervised numerous staff members, including full-time staff, graduate, and undergraduate students, on the creation and delivery of campus-wide programs and student engagement initiatives. I hold positional power to make and influence decisions while overseeing a hefty budget and access to numerous campus resources.

As a White administrator, I have the power to determine what is valuable and acceptable. On a daily basis, I am posed with a variety of questions and information that impacts the lives and experiences of college students. I have the power to say “yes” or “no” to others’ ideas or programs based on how I interpret their value and impact on campus. I have the power to support others’ successes and ideas, or I can add barriers and roadblocks to their success. As a scholar-practitioner, I try to link theory to practice in my work and apply learning from my research. Consequently, my whiteness plays out in myriad ways in my daily work with students and colleagues. From a Critical Whiteness lens, the ways in which ideas are presented and articulated typically determine the level of success. For example, if a project is polished and clearly connected with the mission and purpose of the department, it will have a better chance of being approved. I must remember, however, that my expectation is framed through a white racial lens. As a White person, I have already made assumptions about value and worth based on how I expect people to talk, present information, what they should wear, and how they should act. Ultimately, all of this is framed as whiteness as professionalism which is discussed later in this study. It has a direct impact on the career advancement of professionals and students. How I perceive the value and worth of others is linked to my white racial lens.

In addition to determining value and worth, I have the power to ignore and discredit the realities of People of Color. Working at a Predominately White Institution, I hear stories from students and Colleagues of Color on a regular basis of how they experience racism on campus and in the local community. These stories range from overt racist language from their peers or while shopping in a local grocery store to microaggressions in the classroom or while hanging out with friends. When these stories are shared with me, I have the power to

ignore or discredit what they are telling me. I can easily say, “Oh, you’re just overreacting” or “I’m sure that’s not what they meant.” As a White person, I do not have these same experiences, and I have the freedom to dismiss Peoples of Color experiences and truths. Consequently, there is no pressure for me to take responsibility or challenge my White peers.

Lastly, as a White administrator, I have the power to sustain racial stratification and incompetency - both for myself and others. I can easily hide behind the cloak of whiteness and be passive regarding race and equity. I can choose to engage in diversity and inclusion work or not, and no one would care or think differently if I chose not to. On the other hand, my Colleagues of Color are held to a higher standard and expected to articulate their stance on diversity on a whim. When People of Color do not meet White people’s expectations of their views or stance on diversity, they are quickly dismissed. I have seen this play out numerous times during search committee processes whereby we (an almost completely White staff) interview top candidates for a position and immediately dismiss the Candidates of Color because they do not “correctly” answer questions based on our definition of diversity and inclusion. Yet, the White candidates are quickly approved because they know so much, and they are “woke.” We rationalize our selection of the White candidate by saying that the Candidate of Color “just wouldn’t be a good fit here.” This example clearly maintains White supremacy through our staffing and hiring processes.

Furthermore, I can sustain racial incompetency for others by not integrating topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion into staff training and development. We talk a lot about best practices in Student Affairs, yet we do not interrogate and question who created those best practices and where they came from. Once you trace the best practice to the author or source, it is almost inevitably a White person. This has dangerous potential to reify the notion that

only White people can create knowledge, thus reinforcing White supremacy in higher education. In the following section, I expand upon this and share my experiences of how whiteness emerged throughout this research process and how deeply embedded it is in the academic realm of higher education.

**Whiteness in my research.** Initially, this study was developed as a case study analysis of White administrators at one institution. It became evident very quickly that a study on whiteness was a tough sell, and administrators shied away from the topic. I constantly found myself having to negotiate the language used in my recruitment efforts for this study (i.e. title, research questions, recruitment summary) in order to make this research topic more palatable for White folks. Here I was - a White, male, doctoral student - trying to study whiteness in higher education, and I was afraid to use the word “whiteness” and “racism”? What the hell was I doing? It felt disingenuous because I knew that by not naming these things, I was further replicating whiteness in my actions. I had several phone calls and email exchanges with key informants at one particular institution that I originally thought would be my research site, yet the key informants had trepidation about what might be exposed in the process. There was concern about confidentiality and a fear that the results of this study would somehow bring negative attention or harm to the institution or individual administrators. There was clear acknowledgement from the key informants that this research topic is important, yet they talked about the need to protect the University. The hidden undertone of our conversations made me think that not only were they protecting the University, but they were also protecting the White administrators at the institution. This is an example of institutionalized whiteness. Rather than interrogating and challenging White supremacy and whiteness at their institution, they chose to play it safe and not engage. This

safety perpetuates an epistemology of ignorance in which people choose to remain racially blissful (Mills, 1997). This ignorance carries over into institutions by allowing systemic racism and White supremacy to remain uninterrogated and therefore untouched. When institutions turn a blind eye or claim that they do not have time to examine racism on their campus, it sends a clear message and has a real impact on People of Color at the institution. It fuels White supremacy and reinforces White people's abilities to emotionally disengage when discussing topics of race. This phenomenon is known as white fragility. As coined by DiAngelo (2011), white fragility is a state in which White people become emotionally charged when presented with a minimal amount of racial tension. These emotions are outwardly displayed as anger, fear, guilt, silence, or complete disengagement with racial dynamics. Whiteness is deeply embedded into the history and culture of higher education. Rather than attempting to illuminate and dismantle racial inequity, higher education institutions create an insulated environment of racial protection. These insulated environments protect white norms and hegemonic structures leading to the reification of white fragility in the academy. An aspect of white fragility that plagues higher education is white solidarity, the unspoken agreement among White people to protect white advantage and dominance (DiAngelo, 2011). The goal of white solidarity is "to ensure that other White people do not feel targeted or any type of racial discomfort. White solidarity is maintained by remaining silent about anything that exposes the advantage of whiteness and tacit agreement to remain racially united in the protection of White supremacy. To break white solidarity is to break rank" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 58). Breaking rank implies going against power dynamics and challenging structures. Higher education is maintained by white power and political structures. To go against these structures is to potentially jeopardize your career and personal

and institutional reputation. This perceived jeopardy or peril seemingly made it too risky for the institution to break the white solidarity that unconsciously exists at the institution. Their decision to not engage in this research demonstrated how deeply rooted whiteness is in higher education. Even top-level administrators who are tasked with creating more inclusive and welcoming environments practice white fragility. Sadly, I should not have been surprised by the institution's response. In fact, I should have expected it. One of this study's participants summed it up well when she shared:

The system is working exactly how it was designed to work. None of this is by chance or just happen-stance. We didn't just accidentally stumble into White supremacy. We got here very intentionally, and our systems that are inequitable are working as designed. So, we have to acknowledge the intentionality behind it, then dismantle and disrupt it.

Indeed, the system of White supremacy creates a context where people are afraid and anxious to talk about whiteness, and institutions are too concerned with their rankings and endowments in order to make systemic and structural changes towards racial equity. As evidenced in the literature, White people want to be perceived as good White people and do not always see the racial privileges they carry with them on a daily basis. These unmeritocratic privileges are pervasive in institutional life and reinforce fear of the "other."

In the previous sections, I provided insight into how the phenomenon of whiteness is interwoven throughout my life as a White individual, administrator, and researcher. All of the examples above reinforce the stance that whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels (Frankenburg, 1993). This study sought to shed light on these dynamics by critically examining how White administrators navigate and position themselves

in relation to racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. Rather than perpetuating acts of white dominance, it is important for White people to constantly practice reflexivity and become critically conscious of how we perpetuate whiteness in our personal lives, work, and research.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to offer a methodological guide for the study of how White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution. First, I situated the study within the broader landscape of critical qualitative inquiry and named phenomenology as the guiding methodology. I highlighted several attributes of phenomenological research, including intentionality, which differentiate it from other qualitative methodologies and articulated why phenomenology was well suited for this study. I went on to describe in detail my research methods and how I went about recruiting my ten participants and collecting data from interviews. I then discussed the comprehensive data analysis process that I undertook by outlining the six phases of analysis and discussed my reasoning for employing composite narratives to represent the data. Lastly, I highlighted matters of trustworthiness and ethical considerations related to this study followed by an extensive reflection on my subjectivities and positionalities as a White individual, researcher, and administrator.

In the following two chapters, I share the findings of this study. Chapter 4 is titled “White Scripts” and introduces the composite characters and narratives as described in the previous sections of this chapter. In Chapter 5, I situate the five composite characters in dialogue with one another around four focal points. The chapter is aptly titled “A Dialogue on Whiteness” and is a compilation of representations of the findings interwoven with bits of

analysis. Following the findings chapters, I provide a full discussion and analysis of the findings in Chapter 6 and end this dissertation with implications and conclusion in Chapter 7.

## Chapter 4: White Scripts in Higher Education

The purpose of this chapter is to present part of the findings of this study in a way that is concise yet representative of the complexity of white racial identity, institutional norms, and the phenomenon of whiteness. In doing so, I introduce five composite characters that embody the approaches, moods, and styles of the ten participants as was illustrated during our interviews. This study was guided by three overarching research questions. The first asks, what role does white racial identity play in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts? The second question serves to delve deeper into the phenomenon of whiteness by asking, how do White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution? The final research question connects theory to practice by asking, in what ways do White higher education administrators' approaches to racial equity and inclusion efforts offer insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices? During data collection and analysis, a major concept that continued to permeate my reflections was the notion of white scripts. Gallagher (2000) named white scripts as unquestioned assumptions that maintain white power and are constantly being rewritten and internalized. DiAngelo (2018) uses the term white scripts as a way to unpack whiteness and shed light on the cultural norms that maintain it, primarily through our socialization. DiAngelo (2018) shares:

When I talk to White people about racism, their responses are so predictable I sometimes feel as though we are all reciting lines from a shared script. And on some level, we are, because we are actors in a shared culture. A significant aspect of the white script derives from our seeing ourselves as both objective and unique (p. 9).

Throughout the data analysis process, I kept thinking about how we, as White people, are all actors or characters in the same story. Although we are each unique, we are all reciting lines from a shared script (DiAngelo, 2018). This racial script is the master narrative or ideological stance that creates, controls, and recreates whiteness in society and higher education. In presenting the findings of this study, I seek to unmask the dominant white scripts, reveal them as ideology, and address them head on. To do this, I represent the data in a way that is true to the participants’ experiences while recognizing the script that White people share. Using composite narratives described in Chapter 3, I aim to create stories which capture the essence of the participants’ experiences and perspectives as they relate to the phenomenon of whiteness.

As several patterns and themes emerged from the data, one thing became glaringly clear from the analysis: there was no one way or linear approach to how the participants engaged in racial equity efforts at their institutions. Some participants approached racial equity work head-on with no regrets, some carried with them self-doubt about their skills and abilities, and others were comfortable and complacent in their whiteness. The patterns that emerged from analysis guided the creation of five unique composite characters, which I refer to as White Scripts in Higher Education (see Table 4.1). These scripts represent contrasting experiences with whiteness from a personal and institutional perspective.

**Table 4.1 – White Scripts in Higher Education**

Name	Descriptor	Character Traits
Rhonda ( <i>she/her</i> )	Risk-Taker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Challenges and takes risks</li> <li>● Actively questions policies and practices</li> <li>● Recognizes power dynamics in group settings</li> <li>● Pushes back against her White peers and Colleagues of Color</li> </ul>

Patty ( <i>she/her</i> )	Self-Proclaimed Progressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sees herself as an ally to People of Color</li> <li>● Carries “white progressive” label as badge of honor</li> <li>● Tries to separate herself from “bad” White people</li> <li>● Well educated and views herself as having “arrived”</li> </ul>
Mike ( <i>he/him</i> )	Maintainer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Comfortable and complacent; does not like to “rock the boat”</li> <li>● Is not motivated to critically reflect on his whiteness</li> <li>● “What you see is what you get” kind of guy</li> <li>● Typically remains neutral or silent in situations of racial tension</li> </ul>
Sam ( <i>he/him</i> )	Structuralist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strong understanding of systemic and institutional racism and the bureaucratic nature of higher education</li> <li>● Focuses on systemic issues rather than individual people</li> <li>● Feels a sense of responsibility to dismantle White supremacy but does not have the tools to engage on the individual level</li> </ul>
Dana ( <i>they/them</i> )	Developer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lacks self-confidence and courage to engage in racial equity work, but engages regardless</li> <li>● Often doubts their abilities and skills to engage with other White people</li> <li>● Deep commitment and responsibility to ending racism</li> <li>● Tries to be a role model for other White people</li> </ul>

In the following sections, I provide the script of each character. At the beginning of each composite narrative is a brief overview of each character followed by real stories or excerpts shared by the participants. Direct quotes from participants are *italicized* to place emphasis on how each composite narrative came to be while also remaining authentic and true to the participants’ stories. In Chapter 5, I place these characters in dialogue with one another to further illuminate the complexity of whiteness in higher education, both on the individual and institutional levels, and to answer the second research question: How do White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution?

## **Rhonda: The Risk-Taker**

Rhonda is a composite of multiple participants who challenge and take risks to combat racism in higher education through their actions. In several situations, Rhonda is viewed as an outsider by her White peers because she is constantly questioning decisions and policies related to racial equity and access at her institution. She has developed a reputation among her White colleagues as *being someone who asks a lot of questions that people don't necessarily like to answer. They kind of expect that from me... I'm certainly not the only one, but whether or not they appreciate it, it's expected of me.* When Rhonda is in settings with other White directors and she speaks up, they typically respond with, *"Oh, here we go, it's Rhonda again. Why is nothing we do ever good enough? Isn't it enough that we've started these conversations?"* Rhonda challenges the status quo, and although she may be viewed as an outsider by her White colleagues, she does not care how others view her. Rhonda shared:

*I don't care what White people think about me and my role. I mean other than hopefully that makes them feel the same level of responsibility that I feel. I feel a higher sense of responsibility, and it's more meaningful to me when People of Color see that I'm an advocate or an ally.*

Rhonda gets frustrated when her White peers ask her why she cares about this work and why she is the way she is. *I hate that question, but I get it all the time. Hell, I don't know. "Why aren't you?" That's what I want to say to them.* Rhonda recognizes that advocating for racial equity also means that White people have to be willing to give something up. *There are administrators who just want to check the box, and they create a goal of diversity and inclusion without truly examining what that means. I think the responsibility of White administrators is to dig into that and be open to that. You have to give something up in that*

*process. Rhonda thinks that a lot of White folks get stuck in their own self-pride which reinforces whiteness in higher education. It means that when you've been given the space to be a voice that you share that space, if not give it up for someone else. This work requires us to sometimes step aside and see that there might actually be somebody else, including People of Color, better positioned to engage in this work. It's less about structure based on position and title and more about what's going to be most supportive for our students.*

Furthermore, Rhonda does not shy away from explicitly naming racial dynamics in conversations with colleagues. In situations where race is not being talked about or is being hidden by whiteness, Rhonda finds ways to bring race into the conversation. She might ask questions like, *"Can we look at this data in a more nuanced way based on [racial] demographics?"* Or, if there is some really generalized feedback about a program and it is assumed that it represents all students' experience, Rhonda may push back and ask, *"Can we do some focus groups with Students of Color or with other communities that may not really be represented within this generalized data that we're talking about?"*

Perhaps most importantly, Rhonda uses her whiteness and positional power to gain access and proximity to administrators and decision-makers to create opportunities for others, yet she is critically conscious of the role her whiteness plays in advocating for People of Color:

*I don't want to be somebody else's voice, but I want to make room for their voice to be heard. I don't want to assume that I understand their experience and can then advocate for them, but I want to create the opportunity for them to share what their experience is and then for me to affirm that and continue pushing for resources or changes or policies that support the experience that they've shared.*

Rhonda is a risk-taker, challenger, and outsider in relation to her White peers. Consequently, colleagues and Students of Color view Rhonda as an accomplice fighting alongside them towards racial equity. She believes that White people must move past being an ally *to* People of Color and be an accomplice *with* People of Color. Rhonda recognizes power dynamics of spaces and is critically conscious of her whiteness. For Rhonda, it feels like not engaging in this work is not an option. Whether she is in a role that is specifically tasked with doing diversity and inclusion work or not, she feels like, *as a White person, when you come to a point where you begin to understand and see these systems of oppression, I don't think we have any other choice except to actively try to disrupt those systems.*

**Patty: The Self-Proclaimed Progressive**

Patty is a composite of two participants who view themselves as self-proclaimed progressives in the fight for racial equity. DiAngelo (2018) uses the term white progressive to mean any White person who thinks they have already “arrived” and is not racist or less racist than their White peers. According to DiAngelo (2018), white progressives can be the most difficult for People of Color because they place so much emphasis on trying to convince others that they are not racist. In doing so, they do not engage in continual learning or critical reflection about their whiteness. White progressives do in fact uphold and perpetuate racism, but their defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain how they do so.

Patty's intent is to challenge whiteness, yet she reinforces whiteness in her actions and impact as a white progressive. I add “self-proclaimed” in front of DiAngelo's (2018) term because Patty eagerly embraces being a progressive, almost as if it were a badge of honor. Ironically, this action alone reinforces DiAngelo's (2018) argument that white

progressives uphold and perpetuate racism because of their certitude. In interactions with other White people, Patty tries to separate herself from the “bad” White people by saying, *People are crazy. That’s part of my issue now at my institution, and we are in a very conservative bubble. It is still not the most supportive place for People of Color. I wouldn’t say I don’t belong, but there are moments where I don’t think I fit in. It always comes back to, well, how can I separate myself? You know, there’s not a sign I can put on my forehead that says, “Oh yeah, I’m not like that other White person that made you mad.”* Patty often tries to distance herself from her White peers by creating a dichotomy between “good” and “bad” White people. This imaginary binary places Patty safely on the “not racist” side. DiAngelo (2018) unpacks this by stating, “The simplistic idea that racism is limited to individual intentional acts committed by unkind people is at the root of virtually all white defensiveness on this topic...What further action is required of me? No action is required because I am not racist. Therefore, racism is not my problem; it doesn’t concern me and there is nothing further I need to do” (p. 73).

Furthermore, Patty feels that the disadvantage of being white is that *it feels like you don’t have a culture. It’s the idea that you’re vanilla. There isn’t culture. There isn’t a richness to it, and I think that part of that comes from whiteness as a norm. If things are normal, it’s hard for us to identify normal. I also think it’s that dynamic of how do you identify with your culture and not be a white nationalist? I think that’s the challenge.* This further illuminates Patty’s desire to distance herself from her whiteness. She acknowledges that white culture is normalized within society, yet she immediately names and distances herself from being a white nationalist as part of her culture. In doing so, she creates a wider gap between “good” white culture and “bad” white culture. Consequently, Patty finds solace

in knowing that she is in community with People of Color in her personal and professional life. She finds herself *more and more actually being the minority, numerically speaking, in the room*. Her partner is Black, and most of her closest friends and classmates are People of Color. She finds herself in spaces where *Black folks use the language of 'it's for the culture*. Patty takes this as a sense of pride. *I'm showing pride in their culture*. As a self-proclaimed progressive, Patty sees herself as an insider with People of Color and takes great pride in being embraced by a culture other than white.

Lastly, Patty has a strong sense of confidence in herself due to her level of cultural competency through educational classes and trainings. *I still am very privileged. I mean, you look at me and you can assume that I'm very privileged, so I think everyone's kind of used to that. I have a doctorate, so I'm at a much different place than a newer professional. For me, it's a lot easier to be challenged. I'm a lot more open to it than others would be, and I think some people just aren't open to discussing whiteness*. Self-proclaimed progressives try to insulate themselves from their whiteness by stating claims of academic knowledge or rhetoric such as “I already know this” or “I’ve taken a class on race.” DiAngelo (2018) shares that all of these responses are examples of white fragility. It is clear that Patty sees herself as “having arrived” and tries to position herself as a “good” White person by separating herself from white culture. Although this is not her intent, her actions and words often do more harm than good in the fight for racial equity.

### **Mike: The Maintainer**

Mike is a composite of two participants who consciously or subconsciously maintain whiteness in higher education. Mike is a White, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, cisgender man. He refers to himself as a “*what you see is what you get kind of guy*.” For

*better or worse, it is what it is.* Mike is content in his role as a White administrator and does not actively work to question or dismantle whiteness. He buys into the idea that racial diversity and inclusion are important in higher education but is not motivated to reflect on his own whiteness. Simply put, Mike is comfortable sitting in his whiteness and does not rock the boat because he is afraid it will negatively impact his reputation and credibility. Because whiteness is assumed as the default norm, Mike does not have to think about his racial identity. He has the ability to go through much of his life without self-reflecting and without being challenged to have any racial discomfort. He says, *I can pretty easily avoid situations where I have to deal with my white fragility or any level of racial discomfort.* This means that others never question his decision-making in relation to his racial identity, and he has *the ability to enter and be comfortable in spaces, whether allowed or not. I have the right to be in there, to speak, or to make my presence known.* He has been conditioned that way since birth.

In regards to continual learning about racial equity and inclusion, Mike appears to do just enough to get by. When Mike is posed with the question: “What does it mean to be a good White person?” he is dumbfounded. He responds by saying, *this is not a phrase that I’ve given a lot of thought. I feel like I’ve heard it before, and it also seems loaded in some ways. I can’t really unpack that without knowing what’s behind it. I was taught to treat everyone the same. It feels like a defensive phrase that I’ve heard before.*

When Mike is prompted to reflect on an experience in which he remained silent or did not speak out against a racist comment or interaction with a peer, he cannot. Once again, he is perplexed by commenting, *It’s a stumper. I’m sure there has. Hmm. That’s a really good question. I don’t know. I mean this is a hard question. I’m sure it probably has*

*happened. I'm very aware that there's probably a high chance that it did happen. When Mike finally does think of an example, he provides a very sweeping and generic response as if to hide his complacent approach. He explains that during an incident that took place with a group of colleagues, a fairly well-known administrator in a high leadership role at the time made a comment that was wholly inappropriate and to the extent that a number of people got up and walked out. However, Mike did not. In hindsight, he feels like he should have been a part of that. He should have been able to participate in that protest. It was sort of like a gasp moment for many of us. Mike tends to remain neutral or silent in addressing racist acts or comments in the workplace.*

Mike subconsciously maintains whiteness in higher education because he finds comfort and safety *in a group where he already identified that they have similar thoughts about their responsibilities to promote social justice, dismantle White supremacy, and those kinds of situations.* Similarly, Mike's white complacency and passiveness carries over into his personal life in interactions with friends outside of work. Using an example from 2018 of Colin Kaepernick's kneeling for the American flag at football games, he describes balancing his personal and professional lives in the following way:

*My work life and my personal life are very different. In Higher Education, we do live kind of this very much liberal life. Let's talk about Colin Kaepernick for a minute and the kneeling for the flag at football games. I could ask 120 people in our division and almost all of them would probably say they think it's great and all these kinds of things. For my friends in my life outside of work, you would ask them, and I would say probably 70 percent of them would tell you it's not a good thing. It's not because they're bad people. It's because they just have different belief systems. We're all from*

*very different places, so we just get to a place where we all agree to disagree on something. When there's one of you and three of your friends who all share very similar beliefs, that's how you end up there.*

Mike's approach to *agree to disagree* does not challenge White supremacy or racism. His desire to remain neutral or silent on topics of race only serve to replicate white norms and perpetuate white fragility in his personal life and professional role.

### **Sam: The Structuralist**

Sam represents the participants who view racial equity in terms of systems and structures but lack clarity or understanding on how to navigate racial equity on a personal level. Sam uses broad ideas or theories to represent whiteness and struggles with articulating personal examples of whiteness at play. He is committed to dismantling White supremacy in higher education, yet he does not have the tools to enact change on the ground level. Unlike his peer, Mike, Sam does not lack motivation or knowledge to dismantle White supremacy. Rather, he focuses his attention to systems of supremacy and oppression. He feels that *White folks created this system, so it's our responsibility to dismantle it. It's the right thing to do.*

Sam grew up in a college town, and he spent a lot of free time being on a college campus. *The physical structures are comfortable to him, and campuses in general are comfortable. The structure of a college campus has a particular role in his life history. Sam comes from a family of all college graduates, so there's some aspect and expectation for him to understand how higher education works.* This sense of belonging and connection with a college campus helps Sam to recognize how White supremacy is integrated and deeply rooted into the systems and structures of higher education. He adeptly names White supremacy in higher education by articulating the history of higher education. *The higher*

*education model in the United States is based predominantly on a colonized version of other institutions that have brought their ideas over into the United States. There's a series of privileges that you must possess or have access to in order to gain entrance to an institution of higher education and those privileges almost entirely sit with what was considered the ruling privileged class in the 1600s and forward. As I look at higher education today, I don't think that it's difficult to recognize that... a lot of conversations are very cyclical.*

Although Sam has a deep understanding of White supremacy within institutions of higher education, he associates his actions with issues not individuals. *I feel a sense of responsibility to advocate for issues. I don't think of myself as advocating for individuals. I don't know if that's the right answer, but it's how I do the work.* Sam goes on to share that *it's really not about the color of a student's skin. It's really about the topic that you're advocating on behalf of. It's also who you can go to for something. Some people can just make things happen, and then some people need to ask more people. The less people involved, the better.* Sam approaches his work with racial equity through a structural lens and feels more responsibility to advocate for all people rather than individuals. In some ways, Sam perpetuates colorblind ideology by dismissing the color of a student's skin by rolling race into a structural viewpoint. Furthermore, from his years of growing up near a college campus to now working in higher education, Sam clearly understands how to navigate the bureaucratic systems of a university as indicated by his comments. Sam also focuses his attention to the financial impact and benefit institutions have in upholding White supremacy. *Public institutions invest local, state, and national resources into education. There's a financial reason to make these arguments. I think it's important to engage in racial equity work from the lens that the system is working exactly how it was designed to work. None of*

*this is by chance or just happen-stance. We didn't just accidentally stumble into White supremacy. We got here very intentionally, and our systems that are inequitable are working as designed. We have to acknowledge the intentionality behind it, then dismantle and disrupt it.*

True to his structuralist viewpoints, Sam has a deep understanding of how relationships and cultures are interconnected with systems and structures. Sam names the fact that White supremacy is working in higher education exactly how it was designed centuries ago to exclude and disenfranchise People of Color. However, his structural analysis of whiteness in higher education stays in the clouds and creates a gap between his understanding of systems and structures and his ability to be in community with people. Sam struggles with knowing how to engage in racial equity work on the ground level with individuals. He shares his confusion of engaging with People of Color from an individual and group level by stating, *“How do you know what that group has gone through? How can you actually advocate for what might be in their best interests without having a narrow view on things?”* He goes on to share frustrations about engaging with others in today's political climate. *You know today, and in the last year or so, it's very much a political thing where it's like, “oh, you're just a liberal,” and that's become a dirty word to some people. And, “oh, you're just a conservative.” I feel like it [race] has very much become a politicized thing. I don't understand why helping someone else, or giving someone else rights, or things that everyone should have is a political thing, but it is.”*

In summary, Sam views his role and positionality as someone who is *part of a larger movement within his institution as opposed to being an individual inserting himself in a particular situation*. He is committed to ending racial inequities in higher education, but he

struggles with the “how” to operationalize racial equity work in a society that has become so politicized. Consequently, he focuses his attention on systemic issues rather than individuals and uses concepts to explain whiteness in higher education rather than personal examples.

### **Dana: The Developer**

Dana is a composite of three participants who want to be an advocate for racial equity but are struggling to find their place and voice to do so. Dana lacks confidence and courage in themselves and does not feel qualified to engage in racial equity work, although they are constantly engaging in learning opportunities such as trainings, readings, intergroup dialogue programs, etc. They feel a deep sense of responsibility to advocate for racial equity but tends to talk themselves out of situations due to imposter syndrome and self-doubt. They share, *I do have quite a bit of imposter syndrome, but I think it's beyond that. I just don't know that I... I cannot be qualified for all of these things to the level that my students deserve and the institution deserves.* Dana is constantly immersing themselves in learning about social justice and whiteness to improve their knowledge and skills. They read, watch documentaries, and even teach a cultural competency-related course at their institution, yet *it's still an uncomfortable conversation for them to have, and it's only because they haven't had a chance to practice it as much. They receive a lot of information, but they haven't had a chance to practice engaging with the topic.*

In some cases, Dana becomes almost paralyzed with self-doubt and lacks the confidence to speak up. In reflecting on their experience with race conversations, *they think about all the times when they were just too afraid or didn't know how to address something that they should have. When you get that gut feeling and you're like, “what just happened?”*, *but you don't have the words or language or frankly the courage to say something.* They

spent a lot more time in their career being afraid and not doing something rather than speaking up. The pressure and nervousness elevates when they are in shared company with only White folks. *They are not good at talking to other White people about race, and they are trying to get better.* Dana reflects on a time when they were selected to present on whiteness and white racial identity at a regional professional conference:

*I have never been more nervous in my life. I was more nervous in that room than I was when I presented to the Board of Trustees. I thought I was gonna throw up. I thought about not doing it, but that goes back to being safe. It's safe for me not to talk with other White people. And so again, I'm trying harder to tell my story a little bit so maybe it will help somebody else who is overwhelmed.*

In addition to feeling overwhelmed, Dana is worried that their intent will not align with their impact and that they will do more harm than good. They are *terribly scared that they will mess things up* [conversations about race]. They do not think that they should be given leeway to make mistakes because they could do more harm than good. Therefore, it prevents them from really engaging. They are nervous to engage in very public arenas with this work because they believe it is about impact, not intention. Their intention could be one thing, but if *they have a negative impact, they should be held accountable for that.*

Dana constantly feels that they are not doing enough at their institution to combat White supremacy or that they are constantly having to prove themselves to others. *Even if they might have some knowledge on the topic, they are not always looked at as the expert in the area. It hurts their own confidence in the areas.* In particular, they describe how they have had to navigate their institution as a White leader engaged in racial equity work. They feel that *they have to continually prove themselves to administrators above them.* They shared that it

is like *starting from a place of assumptions of limited skills or abilities. It took a lot of years to feel like they were understood within the community or that there was some recognition of them as a leader.*

At first glance Dana might seem complacent and not able or willing to challenge white racial norms, yet their greatest strength is their commitment and sense of responsibility to personal development, reflection, and action. Although they may still be developing their self-confidence and skills, they put themselves out there and do not let their fear or discomfort incapacitate them. They share that *we should feel uncomfortable as White people. That's fine... it's constructive discomfort.* In their practice, Dana wants all students to have an equitable experience on campus. They do not want there to be roadblocks in place for students. *Society has made it everyone else's job to understand what it's like to be a White person.* They believe that everyone has a responsibility to do the work. *We have to set a reasonable bar for what being qualified to do that work is so that we invite more people to engage in the work as opposed to turning them away.* Indeed, Dana views themselves as an advocate for racial equity and strives to use their voice for change and to serve as a role model for other White people regardless of their internal conflict and self-doubt.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to bring the data to life and to answer one of the primary research questions guiding this study: What role does white racial identity play in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts? By creating composite narratives and characters based on the interview data, the findings of this study represent a mix of views, emotions, and thoughts for how these administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution. Some of the characters, such as

Rhonda, demonstrated critical self-awareness of how their white racial identity impacts their work around racial equity. Others, such as Mike, are complacent with not exploring their white racial identity, thus maintaining whiteness in higher education. Patty represents a character that, unfortunately, we see too often in higher education, the self-proclaimed progressive. Although her intent is to support People of Color, she perpetuates White supremacy by actively trying to convince others that she is not like those “bad” White people rather than continuing to educate herself about these topics. Sam, the structuralist, understands the complexities and interconnections of race and White supremacy at the systemic and institutional levels, yet he struggles to find entry points with individuals across racial difference. Finally, Dana represents those administrators who feel a deep sense of responsibility to engage in racial equity work but lack self-confidence. Although Dana lacks self-confidence, they are persistent and committed to developing skills and knowledge around racial equity.

Each of these people are unique and approach their work in different ways, yet they are all implicated in the larger narrative of whiteness. They represent the white scripts of how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion work. In the following chapter, I place these five composite characters in dialogue with one another to further illuminate the complexity and intricacies of whiteness in higher education.

## Chapter 5: A Dialogue on Whiteness

Grounded in the principles of critical qualitative inquiry, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions and the role their racial identity plays in the process. To accomplish the goals of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What role does white racial identity play in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts?
2. How do White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution?
3. In what ways do White higher education administrators' approaches to racial equity and inclusion efforts offer insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices?

Building upon the findings and momentum from Chapter 4, the purpose of Chapter 5 is to answer the second research question. In doing so, I place the five composite characters described in Chapter 4 in dialogue with one another to explicate *how* White administrators navigate the phenomenon of whiteness in their daily practice. This dialogue is a compilation of the representations of findings taken directly from the ten participants in this study. To help frame the dialogue, I use four focal points taken from the research and interview protocol questions. The four focal points that shape the dialogue are: 1) *Navigating Spaces as an Insider/Outsider*; 2) *Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment*; 3) *Developing White Racial Authenticity*, and 4) *"Giving Something Up"* (see Table 5.1). These focal points

are highlighted and substantiated in the dialogue on whiteness between the five composite characters. The dialogue is separated into four sections with a summary at the end of each.

**Table 5.1 – Dialogue Focal Points**

<b>Focal Point 1</b>	<b>Focal Point 2</b>	<b>Focal Point 3</b>	<b>Focal Point 4</b>
Navigating Spaces as an Insider/ Outsider	Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment	Developing White Racial Authenticity	“Giving Something Up”

By presenting the findings as critical transformative dialogues, I intentionally focus on the fluidity of the participants’ experiences and the competing tensions and approaches between administrators. These dialogues are grounded in the four focal points that emerged from participant interviews and are substantiated by the findings that emerged from this study. The participants’ stories are woven together to paint a bigger picture of how whiteness manifests in higher education. As such, it is important to read the dialogue script with a group-as-a-whole theory in mind (Wells, 1985). This theory posits that group behavior is organic, with individual members taking up roles on behalf of the whole group. Throughout the group dialogue certain characters are more vocal and present than others. This is intentional to represent common interactions between White people, specifically how and when White men choose to speak up or remain silent in all-white company.

**Background**

The dialogue takes place between all five characters - Rhonda (the risk taker), Patty (the self-proclaimed progressive), Mike (the maintainer), Sam (the structuralist), and Dana (the developer) - and focuses on how each person views themselves in relation to other White people and their work in higher education. The setting takes place at a national conference focused on the study of higher education. The conference theme is titled “Envisioning a

Racially Just Future in Higher Education” and offers session blocks for racial caucusing. Racial caucuses are designed to allow people with similar racial identities to come together and dialogue about their lived experiences, expose and interrogate difficult topics, and to strategize about ways to engage and fight for racial equity. I, Dustin, serve as the moderator for the group dialogue in this representation. Thus, it is not my role to interject my thoughts or voice in the space but rather to stoke the fire of dialogue between participants. As both the moderator and researcher, I am positioned in a unique way. As the moderator, I take a more passive role by asking reflective, guiding questions to prompt dialogue. On the other hand, as the researcher, I am deeply embedded within the research and am actively engaged in self-reflexivity throughout the process. As Glesne (2011) says, “As a researcher, you are inseparable from your findings” (p. 243). Therefore, this created some tension between passive moderator and active researcher. To reconcile this dilemma, I introduce reflection points throughout the dialogue to serve as points of analysis to guide the reader in my thinking without interrupting the dialogue between characters. These reflection points are indicated by text boxes peppered throughout the dialogue and offer an opportunity to reflect on my personal experiences, internal thoughts, and questions ruminating in my head. These reflection points also offer a nice entryway into analysis and implications in the final chapters.

I enter the group dialogue with the premise that the characters have already met and are familiar with one another. They all work at various institutions across the country ranging from large public research institutions to private Ivy Leagues to small Liberal Arts institutions to community colleges. They come from all different regions across the United States - Deep South, Midwest, New England, Pacific Northwest, and Mid Atlantic - and have

individually worked in higher education between 8-18 years. In the left column is the name of the person speaking followed by their dialogue in the right column. The dialogue presented comes directly from the participants in this study. In order to enhance the readability for the reader, minor grammatical and sentence structure edits were made and filler words such as “um” and “like” were removed. In addition, transition sentences were added between character dialogues to serve as a bridge between ideas and emergent themes. Although minimal edits were made to enhance the flow of these findings, no content was changed or skewed during this process. These words represent the participants’ authentic voices and stories in the context in which they were told.

Central to this dialogue are the focal points of 1) *Navigating Spaces as an Insider/Outsider*, and 2) *Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment*. The dichotomous relationship between insider and outsider highlights how some characters feel strongly about centering themselves in racial equity work and actively try to dismantle the system as a white “insider” while being perceived by their White colleagues and peers as an “outsider.” Other characters are more passive and want to maintain their status as a “good” White person, thus remaining an “insider.” Furthermore, the characters openly discuss their experiences of when their personal values of racial equity did not align with their institution’s values. In particular, they talk about topics related to institutional power, politics, and professionalism. Throughout the dialogue, the characters challenge one another to think more deeply about their perceptions and actions, or inactions, as White higher education administrators. The dialogue opens with a brief welcome; then we dive in...

### **Focal Point 1: Navigating Spaces as an Insider/Outsider**

Dustin: Welcome, everyone! Thanks again for being part of this group dialogue. I'm looking forward to our conversation today. Before we begin, I want to remind everyone that what is shared in this space is confidential, so identities and stories should not leave this space. However, I do hope we will take the learning with us, so we can all go back to our campuses and engage with these topics in real and meaningful ways. Okay, so let's jump right in. I'm curious to know how you're feeling being in this space right now talking about whiteness.

Patty: Oh, I'm just so excited to be here and to talk about this topic. I work at a very diverse campus and live in a very diverse community, so it's something that I think about ALL the time. I just really try to be the best ally as possible for People of Color.

Sam: Yeah, to echo Patty I'm excited for the conversation too. I think there are lots of issues with White supremacy and racism within our institutions, but I sometimes struggle with how to show support for People of Color.

Mike: I'll be honest, I'm quite anxious about being here. I mean, I know there are problems on our campuses, and I totally get the fact that we need to be more inclusive and promote diversity. But, I'm also not trying to rock the boat too much. You know? I mean, I've got a family and bills to pay. But don't get me wrong, I'm willing to do what I can.

Rhonda: Well, that's exactly *why* we need to have this conversation... we should be rocking the boat and asking questions. For me, I struggle between feeling

hopeful and full of despair. If we could just get comfortable talking about race, we could make a difference, but then sometimes I feel like it's not that simple.

Dana: Rhonda, I totally agree. I feel a deep sense of responsibility to ending racism. Although I don't feel like I'm necessarily qualified to be here, I'm eager to learn and grow with all of you.

Dustin: Great. Thank you all for sharing. So, Rhonda, I want to come back to what you just shared. You said you struggle with feeling hopeful and full of despair. Tell us more about that.

Rhonda: Everything is about race, or if not race, it's some other component of difference and diversity. I'm thoughtful of those power differentials all the time, and the path to getting comfortable is talking about race. It's certainly not that simple or comfortable talking about race. The thing that's so hard about this work is that we have to unlearn so much. We have to unpack so much, and it takes so much time. We backtrack. We get worse at this before we get better. We make mistakes. I find myself constantly in this place of hope and despair because I see progress and opportunities, yet I know how much work it's really going to take.

Dana: Well, I also think it has a lot to do with fear. I mean, sometimes I'm afraid that I'm going to be judged, but I still show up.

Dustin: Tell us more about the fear piece. Why is it so hard to have conversations about race?

Dana: I think there's a concern of feeling that you're not going to say the right thing, and if you don't say the right thing there's going to be judgment. I definitely exemplified some of those feelings personally when I was younger. Now, I'd rather show up to a space with my hand shaking and actually participate than just sit there with my hands clenched in a fist and not participating or dialoguing with others. I did that for a while and that didn't help. That didn't grow my own understanding or self-awareness.

Rhonda: Yeah, Dana, I agree. The self-awareness piece is ongoing, and I think we have to manage our discomfort and be willing to be challenged and questioned. We have to be willing to be in situations where we are out of our comfort zone, and we are the minority in a situation. We need to show up and be uncomfortable. It's okay to be in that discomfort.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda is filled with emotions of hope and despair as she navigates racial equity efforts at her institution and within her personal life. She says, "we get worse at this before we get better." That is certainly the case for me. I've made several mistakes along my journey of anti-racist work where my intent did not align with the impact. As I make these mistakes, how and why do I continue to show up? Dana's analogy of showing up and engaging with shaking hands rather than sitting quietly with clenched fists reminds me that I cannot let the fear of talking about race impair me from engaging. It is an easy way out. I have to continue to show up and be uncomfortable, as Rhonda says.

Sam: From a bigger perspective, I think it's because a lot of White people acknowledge that racism exists, but their definition of racism is based on White folks in costumes carrying pitchforks and torches. They see the extreme view, like perhaps a lynching, as the only definition of racism. There's not a willingness or acceptance to recognize that there are smaller and cumulative things that are compounding the same series of situations. The same daily actions or behaviors over time can be just as impactful and negative as

something much more extreme. When racism happens right here on campus, it becomes too close to talk about. If we're going to question things, it's going to require a whole lot of work. Perhaps the idea is that we're not ready to do the work or maybe we're not motivated to do the work.

**Reflection Point:** Sam shares that racism becomes “too close to talk about” when it happens on campus. This really gets at the notion of white fragility that DiAngelo (2011) highlights. When topics of race or racism become too personal, White people shut down or disengage. It is easier to pretend that nothing is wrong rather than leaning into discomfort and addressing racism head on.

Patty: I feel motivated to do the work, but there are times I've felt uncomfortable in making decisions, especially in conduct hearings when I've had that feeling or interaction with a student. I felt like it was going to be an, “Oh, they're making this decision because she's White, and I'm not.” So, I've had those moments where I've said, “Hey, maybe if I bring a Person of Color alongside me in this conversation, maybe it'll go better.” Or sometimes saying, “Hey, would you be willing to have this conversation with the student because thus far my interactions have not been positive, and I want this to end well for the student.” I want them to thrive and be successful, and maybe a Person of Color that they connect with or see as a leader on this campus would do a better job than I'm doing.

**Reflection Point:** Although Patty means well by asking a Colleague of Color to join her in a conduct hearing, it seems that she's putting the burden back on Folks of Color, so she can feel more at ease. Ultimately, it is about Patty's comfort and not that of the student. She wants to support racial equity, but she also expects something in return.

Mike: I think it's easier to talk about race when it involves a student situation. There are several times involving my supervisor when I haven't said anything or

remained silent. For example, my previous supervisor had a tendency to misname Black staff members by using the wrong name for them on more than one occasion. It wasn't a regular thing, but I think the connotation was sort of, well, they all look alike. That's not what he said by any means, but that's how it came across. When those instances occurred, I personally had never been present or witnessed it. Except one time, I was present at a larger training, and he joked and laughed it off and said something like, "Oh wow, I'm so sorry. I'm getting old," kind of thing. I didn't say anything because I couldn't. I didn't know how to approach it in the moment without taking a situation that he was trying to move past. I didn't know how to bring that up in front of a group of about 40 folks who were all under him, including myself. After the session, I struggled with how to bring it up after the fact. I didn't know how to do that. I think a lot of that had to do with the dynamics that he was my boss's boss.

Sam: Those are certainly tricky situations when power dynamics are at play.

Dustin: So even though you may experience discomfort, why do you continue to engage in racial equity work?

Sam: Well, education is such a good opportunity for us to use facts to inform decisions and to use peers to help others grow. It's hard to combat the garbage that's out there on social media and on mainstream news channels. If that's what people are hearing, it's a chance to bring in actual data points and talk about it. There's a mentality that we don't have a problem with racism and that it's over. People know that we had slavery, racism, and segregation but

thinking that's over now. Thinking that it's all in the past. It's hard to re-train what the true facts of the situation are, and those facts can often be hidden. To have a college campus where you have the opportunity to share this information with students and get them to realize that this is still happening. It's just a really powerful opportunity.

**Reflection Point:** Mike shares how difficult it is to hold other White people accountable for racist actions, especially when power dynamics are at play. He chooses not to address the behavior with his supervisor even after the incident due to uncertainty or fear of how it will be received. Although perhaps unintentional, this action only strengthens white solidarity (DiAngelo, 2018). Mike does not want to make his supervisor feel bad about making the racist statement, but in doing so, he is protecting whiteness because he does not want another White person to feel racial discomfort. In this case, power dynamics lead to fear and white solidarity. In Sam's response, it seems that he is talking about socialization and how we are all part of the vicious cycle that perpetuates racism. This makes me think of my childhood and how race was never explicitly talked about, yet it was a massive part of how I engaged with others. I was taught messages to not "see" skin color. When I did see skin color, it was only through a Black/White binary. Other races were quickly rolled into an "other" category and tucked away only to be mentioned when someone needed a group to target with racial slurs. The cycle of socialization is powerful and is anchored in fear, hate, doubt, and privilege.

Patty: When I engage in racial equity work, I actually get kudos from other people for being the White person who is engaged in this work. It feels weird, but I've also had a Colleague of Color say that they appreciated me. They wanted more White people to help take this on.

Mike: That's awesome! Good for you!

Dana: Patty, I'm sorry if I come off the wrong way... I think it's great that a Colleague of Color affirmed your involvement with these efforts, but it still feels unsettling to me. Almost like you're centering your whiteness in that situation?

Patty: Hmm... I never thought of it that way. I guess I have to be conscious of being a White person entering that space and not making it about what I want and

my voice. Any conversation or context that's about diversity and inclusion should not be primarily White people. Of course diversity and inclusion are more than just race and ethnicity, but I'm a White cisgender woman of upper-middle class. I guess there are lots people like me on campus.

Dana: Yes, I think we always have to be mindful of that.

**Reflection Point:** Patty shares that she gets kudos for engaging in racial equity work, and Mike (the maintainer) quickly jumps in to affirm her. Dana, on the other hand, challenges Patty to think about how she is possibly centering her whiteness. I, too, receive kudos and affirmation for doing this work on my campus, and it does feel weird. As a White man, I receive a level of credibility for my work around racial equity and inclusion. It's assumed that my Colleagues of Color should already be engaged in this work. How do I ensure that I'm also not centering my whiteness in this work? How am I creating - not taking away - space for People of Color on my campus? How am I elevating minoritized voices and not pushing them to the side? Am I too concerned about myself and wanting to get a gold star for being a "woke" White person? All of these are examples of white dominance and interest convergence.

Dustin: In what ways does your white identity inform your engagement with racial equity and inclusion work?

Rhonda: I think it informs the way I think about systems, structures, and power dynamics as opposed to earlier on in my own identity development where I thought about marginalized communities in a sort of othering way. I viewed them as communities that were experiencing challenges, yet I wasn't able to make that mental connection to the system of whiteness that I am part of. I came to that learning through my white identity. I don't think I had fully interrogated my experiences and identity around sexual orientation, gender, and socioeconomics until I deeply understood my white identity. My whiteness has been very informative in how I approach my work now. It's this balance of being deeply rooted in relationship-building and seeing that as core

to equity work AND having a very systems-level strategic approach to the work.

Mike: I think it's part of the success and the struggle. The reality is that I'm very much the privileged guy wherever I go. I grew up upper-class and now I am highly educated, middle class, and straight. You can't get more privileged than I am. That's definitely something that hurts me. Who wants to listen to the privileged White guy on some of these topics? I'll admit, I don't know the most about all of these things. I think it's fascinating, and I want to be a real advocate and ally, but I think who I am hurts that too. What benefits me is when I am an ally in the right situations. For example, I have a lot of friends that served in the military, and I have a lot of friends who are current law enforcement. The American flag has a very sacred meaning to me, but I 100% agree with the right for people to protest. When people start talking to me about it, and I become an ally for their ability to protest, I think my privilege, my whiteness, actually gives it a little more credibility. I hate to even say that and it sucks, but it's true. The reality is that my ability to be an ally in that situation gives it more credence, which is just a sad statement in and of itself I guess, but it's the truth.

**Reflection Point:** Mike's comment about "being an ally in the right situation" is an interesting one. He clearly names his multiple privileged identities and talks about how it can be a hindrance to engaging in racial equity work. However, he turns it back around to say that his whiteness (in combination with his other privileged identities) gives him more credibility and makes him an ally. This is an interesting take on the insider and outsider dichotomy. Mike clearly sees himself as an "insider" based on his multiple privileged identities, and he takes advantage of those privileges to position himself as an ally. I don't get the sense, however, that Mike sees himself as an outsider. He navigates white spaces using his privilege and attempts to be an ally for People of Color on politicized topics, but in some ways he remains complacent with being an "insider" and not rocking the boat too hard. Rhonda, on the other hand, has a

more critical perspective by looking at her racial identity through a personal and systemic lens. Earlier in her racial identity development, she viewed People of Color as the Other. As is common for most White people, we come to understand ourselves by what we are not (DiAngelo, 2018). Yet, as she examined her own racial identity, she came to better understand her whiteness in relation to her other identities and People of Color. She now approaches her racial equity work around building relationships and addressing structural and systemic racism.

Dana: I'm still struggling with my whiteness. I've been to a few intergroup dialogue and restorative justice circle trainings, and I really struggle to talk about whiteness. I absolutely have access and privilege. I feel like I'm still at the surface-level stuff. I talk about how I have access to spaces I'm in and that whiteness gives me privilege, but I'm not at the depths that I am with talking about gender. I can talk about privileges or marginalization based on my gender, but I don't feel it in the same way that I feel my whiteness. It makes me feel embarrassed and shameful to talk about my whiteness because I know that I don't think about it or feel it as deeply as I do other characteristics. However, I intentionally leverage my whiteness in certain settings to gain access.

Dustin: Tell us more about that. How do you leverage your whiteness? What does this look like in action?

Dana: It plays out in day-to-day interactions. I think about times when I'm sitting around a table with faculty and other staff, particularly now that I'm at a Predominantly White Institution, and somebody says a microaggression. They'll talk about soul food or fried chicken or something like that in the context of Black culture, and I'm like, "What do you mean by that?" I can ask those things in the room, but People of Color don't feel like they can say those things. I also know that I have access to spaces that People of Color don't. At

my previous institution, the Diversity Director would say, “I’m not going to be invited to this meeting, but you are. So you go and you get me into this meeting.” We would sort of tap into each other’s strengths to make sure that voices were being heard.

Rhonda: There are ways that my whiteness allows me to say things that wouldn’t be received in the same way from a Person of Color, and it allows me to push boundaries. At the same time, there are some gaps in my understanding of what the student experience is here and how staff and Faculty of Color are experiencing campus. As a White person in an administrative role, I have to seek out that information in other ways because I’m not going to always get it from my lived experience. That’s the gap I have to recognize and be willing to address.

**Reflection Point:** Dana shares an example of being an “insider” while challenging the system as an “outsider.” They are aware that they have access to certain spaces and are invited to meetings that their Colleagues of Color are not. Rather than sitting complacently in those spaces, they challenge others’ comments and microaggressions. As an insider, they work within the system to advocate and create space for Colleagues of Color to ensure their voices are heard. Similarly, Rhonda owns that her White identity provides her with space to challenge others, yet she is aware that her whiteness leaves gaps in her understanding of racial difference. As I listen to this dialogue, I wonder how am *I* making space for Colleagues of Color? When I look around a room and see only White people in the space, how do I respond? What action do *I* take?

Patty: I’ve had others come up to me and make comments about things that my Colleagues of Color have said or done in ways that I know would never be done to me. This person is one of my superiors, and it is a person with a lot of privilege. Things are frequently said, and I always have to judge how I want to react in those situations. There are certain reactions that cause more harm, so I have to determine if it’s worth speaking up. There are things that I’ve

challenged when this person has said things to me about his female peers. He will share things with me about how they interact with one another in ways that are catty or aggressive or things like that. Specifically, he said something about how he thought two Women of Color were just competing with one another because they were the only two Women of Color on the leadership team, and they were just trying to be the head person.

Dustin: Why do you feel like he was coming to you with that information?

Patty: I have the benefit of being a confidant for a lot of people, so that's a position that, of course, I benefit from in many ways in terms of having access to information. It's one of those things where I have to weigh how I respond because I think sometimes having that access can allow me to use my privilege to work for good. Like I said, when it's about someone else I do push back, and it's not in an aggressive way. I kind of dismiss what is being presented to me.

**Reflection Point:** Patty views herself as a confidant with access to information that people share with her. She has to navigate how and if she should challenge her White male supervisor. She doesn't push back too hard because it seems that she doesn't want to rattle the cage too much. She can "use her privilege for good," but it seems that she still insulates herself from her whiteness. There's also a clear power dynamic going on here between her and her supervisor. Interactions with her supervisor seem like a difficult knot between whiteness, sexism, and misogyny - the pillars that maintain a white supremacist culture.

Sam: I usually get my voice heard in most spaces and am seen as an authority figure. I think a lot of people view my words as correct in terms of my explanation of a situation. I'm not necessarily marked by difference. I'm marked by sameness. If you think about interviewing for jobs at colleges or for anything that has some sort of prestige or privilege associated with it,

being a White person talking to other White people generally means that there's an assumed sameness that's going to serve White people well.

Dustin: You said White people are not marked by difference but more as sameness. What do you mean?

Sam: If you look at our general systems of who's in power - politics, police, school administrations - they tend to be majority white. Anyone who is not white is seen as different or special. Whereas White people, it's the same. We can just do what we've always done because what we've always done directly benefits us.

Patty: I have a good example of what Sam is saying. In thinking about my career trajectory, my resumes have never been pushed aside because the name was unfamiliar to someone, and my hiring committees have almost always been exclusively white. This has gotten me jobs that perhaps would disadvantage a Person of Color who hasn't had the opportunity to interview with people who look like them.

**Reflection Point:** Both Sam and Patty leverage their white racial identity to gain authority, credibility, and access to opportunities that People of Color do not have. In particular, Patty shares that almost all the hiring committees that she has interviewed with have been exclusively white. This marker of sameness, as Sam describes, continues to benefit White administrators in higher education and reinforces the social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) of whiteness. These networks of shared norms and values further insulate and validate our whiteness through hiring practices, networking, and representation in leadership positions.

Dustin: Have you ever been in a situation involving race where someone called you out or accused you of being racist? If so, please tell us about the experience.

Mike: It occurred one time in a social media group probably six or seven years ago. When it first occurred, I couldn't believe it. My instant response was how dare

you think that? The more I self-reflected, I understood that if someone chooses to call me racist, that's their opinion. That's their thought. I know in my own heart and mind that I'm not racist.

Rhonda: Mike, I'm going to push you back on that. It sounds like your actions on social media were construed as racist by others. Although I agree that it is their opinion, it sounds like you are just deflecting the issue or trying to play the "good White person" card.

Mike: Yes, they can certainly call me a racist, but what I feel now is more or less that their judgment was based off of three sentences or a paragraph that was written in a post on a Facebook group in response to someone else's post. Knowing my actions and behaviors is to know who I am. That is where I sit with that now.

Rhonda: For me, I actively try to challenge other White people and not be afraid of the conflict of pushing back. I try to do this in a caring way by challenging what a family member says, or a stranger in the community, or a dynamic that comes up at a PTA meeting at school, for example. Whatever the setting, I have to be willing to be uncomfortable and ask uncomfortable questions and not just let it sit. That to me is an important part of trying to disrupt whiteness as a White person.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda feels that she has a responsibility to take action and disrupt whiteness even when it feels uncomfortable. As a White person, she is an insider with other White people but moves beyond the boundary of comfort to challenge herself and her White peers to critically reflect on how they are maintaining whiteness. This is evidenced in the dialogue between Rhonda and Mike above. Mike shares that he was surprised that someone in a Facebook group perceived him to be racist. Rather than processing and owning his actions, he deflects his whiteness and makes the claim that he was misunderstood. When Rhonda challenges him on this behavior, Mike dismisses the claim and disengages from the

conversation. This is yet another action of whiteness at play and a defense move based on his white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018).

Dustin: Thank you both for sharing. I appreciate your reflections and willingness to engage and to stay engaged. On the opposite end of that, when is it safest to talk about race on campus?

Sam: It's easier for me to talk about race when I'm in mostly white settings. It is easier not to confront something or push the topic of race when I'm surrounded by other White people because we have a common experience. We share a similar entry point into the conversation.

Dana: Oh, wow. I'm the opposite... I struggle. I am not good at talking to other White people about race, but I'm trying to get better. The people who really need to know about racism are people who look like me and you. I struggle with that still. I make mistakes all the time, and I have to ask myself... next time... what can I do better next time?

Rhonda: There's a really vivid memory in my mind when I went to a faculty member's office to have a specific conversation, and he started unloading his emotions on me. I thought to myself, what are you doing right now? What is this? Who do you think I am for you in this space? What signals am I giving to this person where they can't cry in public places, but they automatically feel they can confide in me? I certainly walked away from that conversation with more questions than answers.

Dustin: Why do you think they felt they could unload that on you?

Rhonda: I think they made a lot of assumptions about me because I'm white. It's also performativity. The role that I play when I go to a faculty member's office and

try to be confident with authority and have a collegial conversation they're like, "Oh, my walls can come down a little bit because you're one of me."

**Reflection Point:** This dialogue highlights the ways in which the participants enter conversations about race at their institutions. Sam feels safer talking about race with other White people. He talks about shared entry points into the conversation. There is an underlying feeling that Sam does not directly name: safety = comfort. How does remaining in all-White company when discussing race reinforce racial norms and white comfort? These shared entry points that Sam discusses only serves to perpetuate white dominance by not creating space for voice from People of Color. Dana, ironically, seems intimidated by their White peers when talking about race, yet they engage in the conversation in small ways. Dana's own racial development and self-confidence places them in a unique position constantly straddling the boundary between insider and outsider. Rhonda, on the other hand, continues to be an outsider to her White peers by being critically conscious of her whiteness and others around her. In her story of meeting with a White faculty member, Rhonda seems frustrated that a White colleague would immediately assume that she is on their side simply because they are both White. This story represents white solidarity in that White people assume that they are all on the same "team" and can let their guard down, as if creating a deeper level of trust with other White people.

Dustin: Thank you all for sharing. Shifting gears a bit, what does it mean to be a "good" White person?

Rhonda: I think whiteness is politeness. To be a good White person, according to other White people, means you don't rock the boat, but I think being a good White person by the definition of People of Color is to be an accomplice. It means that you are not their white savior. You have to work alongside them, to find opportunities to uplift their voices, to provide access for them.

Mike: For me, it means being perfectly on the team, to not talk about anything controversial, to stay in your lane and not be disruptive.

Dustin: Tell us more, Mike. What do you mean by perfectly on the team?

Mike: I think it means to be quiet and not ask too many questions... don't be deviant, don't be delinquent. Stay in the box. Don't make too much money,

don't make too little money, do K-12, go to college, get a job, have a family, and don't be too political.

Dustin: What happens if someone steps outside that box or out of their lane?

Mike: You get pushed to the margins. You're still white so you get a whole bunch of privileges, but you're labeled as deviant in some way.

Rhonda: I don't think there's anything wrong with being on the margins when fighting for racial equity. It means that we're making progress and rattling the cage with our White peers.

**Reflection Point:** Indeed, Mike's perspective on being a good White person seeks to replicate complacency and white norms. If White people step outside of these norms, they are seen as deviant and disruptive by their White peers, thus pushed to the margins. The dichotomy between good and bad is further magnified when White people challenge other White people in the fight for racial equity. Those who challenge their White peers are pushed to the margins. Rhonda demonstrates this by using the phrase "whiteness is politeness." White people associate politeness with being a good person. Rhonda uses the term accomplice to reframe how People of Color view White people. Interestingly, Mike's definition of being on the margins is what Rhonda aims to do, which she labels as being an accomplice with People of Color. One cannot be an accomplice without being on the margins of whiteness. This example further highlights the complexity of the insider/outsider finding of this study.

Dana: I remember a specific experience earlier in my career when I learned an abrupt lesson on wanting to be perceived as a "good" White person. I was at a summer institute focused, ironically, on social justice education. There was a Latina woman there probably around 30 years old. I kept wanting to tell her how pretty she was and make sure she didn't need anything. When we were put in the same group, I was excited because I could finally tell her how pretty she was, but something was holding me back. What made it worse is I could tell she didn't like me because she wasn't talking to me and that just hurt. I thought all People of Color loved me, and she would get to know me that

week and would love me too. At the end of the week, we still had no relationship, and I finally said something to her about how I'd been wanting to tell her all week how pretty she was. Her response was, "I know. I could sense that. I don't know why you wanted to tell me that and why you thought I needed to hear that from you." I was left in disbelief. Why was I trying to make her comfortable when it wasn't even my event? That's how much I was in trying to be the best White person because if I made her comfortable and became her friend that must have meant that I was a good White person. That's just an example of the things I would do to make sure people knew that I was different from other White people.

Dustin: Thanks for sharing, Dana. What did you learn from that experience?

Dana: I was so upset that I had upset this woman that I started learning as much as I could. What else was I saying or doing that I wasn't aware of? That experience really pushed me in a direction of thinking that I haven't been taught everything I should know. My experiences aren't the same as everyone. It taught me a lot. I've made mistakes, and I'm just trying to be okay with it and learn from them.

Dustin: Would anyone else like to share an example or story of when you've stepped outside the norm of being a "good" White person, or maybe challenged other White people?

Rhonda: I had an experience in the grocery store yesterday with my daughter. She's adopted and is multi-racial and African American. With her current hairstyle, she has these long beautiful braids in. She's eight years old now and has

grown up being affirmed that you don't let people touch your hair because it is part of your body. She's very comfortable with that, but she's also a little girl. She's still at a social age where you are respectful of adults and sort of defer to adults around. So... we're in line at the grocery store and this older White woman - I'd say maybe mid-sixties - walks all the way over from another line, completely out of her way, to my child and touches her on her back and says, "I like your hair" and then starts stroking her hair. My daughter freezes because she can't believe what's happening, and she looks at me waiting for me to do something. I'm a couple feet away and immediately step in and push the woman's hand away and very firmly tell her, "You may not touch my daughter, and you need to not touch her hair." I don't know how much of it is white entitlement or just the weirdness of age differentials and how much that is stepping out of the norm to disrespect an elder, but she was so angry and visibly seemed incredulous that I was challenging her. She just went on into this defensive rant. Meanwhile, she's STILL touching my daughter's hair. It was just astounding to me and even after I verbally pushed her back towards her aisle, she's muttering under her breath the rest of the time that we're both in the grocery store aisle. It was awful. It was a horrible situation. I was so angry.

Patty: That's interesting, Rhonda, because I had the opposite reaction when I challenged one of my close friends at my previous institution when she touched a Woman's of Color hair. She had good intentions. We had a Woman of Color come into our office and my colleague, who is also a friend, went to

touch her hair and interestingly enough, the student did not have any issue with it. I audibly gasped then quickly reined it in because I realized that my student was not reacting, so I didn't want to make a bigger deal of it. My friend could tell I was upset about something. After the student left, I'm said, "You cannot do that." She responded, "Why? I love it," and she was being appreciative of it. I'm not saying she wasn't, but we had the whole conversation of what we're entitled to do and how we don't have ownership over people and all of those discussions. She said, "I still feel like if it were a White student and they came in and I liked their hair, I probably would touch their hair too." I told her that's different because a White student has always had the ability to tell you, as a White staff member, that they don't appreciate that, and she got it. I think she had enough respect for me that she took what I said to heart, but I still think she would touch another woman's hair at some point. *(Patty chuckles to herself about her last comment, and it is clear that Rhonda has an emotional reaction to this...)*

Rhonda: Patty, it seems like the difference in your situation was that you already had a relationship with the person you were challenging. I wonder if your friend actually took what you told her to heart?

Patty: Well, I clearly challenged my friend and did my part as an ally to support the Woman of Color. I can't control my friend's actions and behaviors every time she's around a Person of Color.

Rhonda: I agree with you, but I do think we have a responsibility to challenge other White women in spaces about our whiteness. I can only speak from my

experience as a White woman, but I see the way whiteness pushes many White women to be really complicit in systems of White supremacy and even with patriarchy. I think we are not always willing to actually take the risks of disrupting those systems, and I think sexism is like a cushion that we fall back on. We think it would be too risky to engage or that we're not being listened to because we are women. Often in those kinds of situations, it's that we're being complicit and not wanting to challenge the status quo because there's still some things that we are benefiting from.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda and Patty are both White women engaged in racial equity work, yet they approach the work in different ways while in different contexts. Rhonda's story of the White woman touching her daughter's hair in the grocery story is, unfortunately, commonplace for many Women of Color. After Rhonda directly addressed the woman's behavior, the woman immediately got defensive and angry, as if Rhonda was out of line for holding her accountable for touching her daughter's hair. This situation is an example of White people feeling entitled to do what they want without consequence because they are being "nice." It further reinforces the notion that People of Color are seen as property of White people (Harris, 1993) and can be used however White people see fit. Patty's story offers insight into when and how White women challenge each other in the context of racial norms. Patty feels proud that she was able to help her White colleague "get it" by explaining the problem with touching a Woman's of Color hair but then ends the conversation by stating that her colleague will probably do it again. When Rhonda challenges Patty on this, Patty responds with a sentiment of having done her part and not being able to do anything else. This one-and-done approach aligns with Patty's identifier as a self-proclaimed progressive by feeling like she has done her part in ending racism. It is almost as if she feels that she is the ultimate ally because she held her colleague accountable in one situation. Rhonda, on the other hand, argues that it must be on-going and challenges Patty to not be complacent in her identities as a White woman.

Dustin: Let's dig a little deeper into interactions with other White folks. Have you personally experienced or witnessed a time when a White colleague got emotional (frustrated, defensive, angry, etc.) when discussing race?

Rhonda: Which time? The most recent? *[Rhonda rolls her eyes to indicate that she is irritated by something]*. Oh my gosh... I've got a great example for you! This conversation actually occurred at a regional meeting after a White woman,

who is a leader within our system office, all of a sudden found her “personal passion” for racial justice after she saw a movie with some friends. It just opened her eyes to this whole world of race relations and policing in the United States. Yeah... I wish I was making this up... *[Rhonda pauses and looks around the room to place emphasis on what she just said. She continues...]* So, this White woman sees this movie and says, “Oh my gosh. Our institution was at the epicenter of this horrible tragedy and no one is talking about these issues. We need to start the conversation.” Of course that’s horribly inaccurate. Racial justice issues are deeply rooted in our community and there are several non-profits and Civil Rights community organizations already doing the work, so it’s not true. People are absolutely having this conversation. She starts sharing all these ideas about wanting to bring People of Color and police officers together to help bridge the divide. It becomes clear that all of her ideas are proposing that police and Communities of Color just need to get to know each other better, which I don’t think is the answer. I think that we have intentionally designed a system that is working the way we want it to work. We have to dismantle those systems and getting to know each other by having cops and donuts and pickup basketball is NOT the answer. There were two Women of Color directors that were also at this meeting, and they both had already voiced their concerns about her ideas. So, we pushed back on this idea and plan, and she was really not taking the feedback... and so to her credit *[Rhonda gives a small chuckle to herself]*, she lasted probably a solid 25 minutes before crying in front of all of us. This instantly meant that

all the Women of Color in the room, who had just advocated for themselves and their students, had to instantly comfort her and say, “Oh, it’s okay. You’re well-intentioned. Don’t worry. This is hard. Thank you for listening to us.”

Dustin: What did you do when this started to happen?

Rhonda: I actually interrupted her because I was not going to let her do that. You don’t know that you’re causing harm with your white tears, but you are. Maybe it’s rude for me to cut you off mid-sentence, but I’m not gonna put my Colleagues of Color in a situation where they have to comfort you.

Dustin: How did she respond?

Rhonda: She started to back track and cover up what she had said. She said, “Well, I’ve realized that I’m just screwing up all along the way, and I’m just trying my best.” I could hear it in her voice working up to tears again. I just said, “Mary [a pseudonym], it’s okay. Talking about race is hard for all of us, and I think that that’s been the power of this conversation in the room today. We’re hearing from our Colleagues of Color that they don’t feel safe talking about race. You know, a lot of us who are white in the room have been quiet during this conversation because we’re scared that we’re going to say the wrong thing. We don’t know what to say. It’s not our experience. It’s hard.”

Dustin: Thanks for sharing, Rhonda. Would anyone else like to share?

Dana: I will. So, there was a White woman who worked in my building for a little under a year but had been at the institution for several years. She was new to our office environment where students talk very openly about race, racism, and things that happen in the classroom. We try to create this environment

where students can come after class and vent and say what they need to and have real conversations, and this was a very different environment than what the staff member was used to. She was so uncomfortable with things that she was overhearing and taking it all as personally directed at her. Her frustrations just kept building, and one day it suddenly exploded while I was in my office meeting with two staff members. She knocked on the door and was visibly emotional, and she asked to come in and talk with us. She sat down, red in the face, and told us that she couldn't work in the building anymore. Basically, she didn't want to be around Students of Color and felt like it was a hostile work environment for her. She was so upset and crying, and we were all a little shell shocked.

Dustin: Wow. So how did you respond to her in that situation?

Dana: I did my best to try to end the conversation because I didn't think it was appropriate to have in front of two staff Members of Color. I told her that she was off-base and kept it really brief. She was really mad because she didn't get the validation and support that she thought she was going to get coming to talk with us, and she stormed off. I was able to talk to her by phone the next day, and she was saying a lot of, "I'm not racist," and so it just unraveled from there. She moved out of the building and was planning to leave the position already at the end of that academic year.

Dustin: Was there any follow-up after that interaction?

Dana: Oh, yes. It took meetings with Human Resources, my supervisor, and her supervisor to make sure there was some accountability. Honestly, I think she

got away with a lot because she was already leaving. The behavior was not really addressed and the harm was already done. That was some of the most extreme white fragility that I've seen and experienced firsthand, but I think it was really upsetting to see how white fragility is allowed and the lack of accountability by upper administrators.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda and Dana provide similar examples of how white fragility manifests in higher education. In Rhonda's story, an upper-level administrator ignores the voices of Women of Color when discussing programming about racial justice. When she realizes that things are not going the way she planned, her white fragility kicks in and she uses her whiteness to maintain control over the meeting space in the form of white tears. Similarly, Dana's story highlights how a White woman becomes emotional when she feels uncomfortable in her work environment because she is white. In an attempt to build white solidarity, she seeks Dana's support and solace to help mitigate her white fragility. However, Dana does not provide her what she is seeking, and she becomes even more angry. Both of these stories represent the phenomenon of White women's tears (Accapadi, 2007). This phenomenon allows White women to move between two of their social identities depending on the context of the situation, meaning they can choose to be a woman and/or choose to be White, in order to control situations. White women can be both helpless without the helplessness being a reflection of all White people and powerful by occupying a position of power as any White person (Accapadi). In Rhonda's example, the Women of Color in the room felt that they had to comfort the White administrator, thus putting the burden back on the Women of Color to console her. Luckily, Rhonda interrupts this behavior by addressing the White leader directly and helping her move beyond her White tears. The White women in Dana's story becomes irate when she does not get what she wants, yet she still gets off the hook and her actions and behaviors are not addressed by the institution. These inactions only serve to replicate systems of whiteness in higher education and have very real impacts on the Students and Staff of Color that experience these behaviors on a daily basis.

**Focal point 1 summary.** The dialogue between the five composite characters above illuminate how White administrators navigate spaces as an insider/outsider. This focal point of the dialogue answers the research question of how White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. Some participants perpetuate whiteness by engaging with People of Color but subconsciously expect something in return (i.e. what is in it for me). Some make a conscious effort to be an accomplice with People of Color in the fight for racial equity, while others straddle the boundary between insider and

outsider with the fear of being pushed to the margins by their White peers. Lastly, this focal point contextualizes the phenomenon of White women's tears in relation to this study by providing two examples of how White women use physical tears and emotions to maintain white control and dominance over People of Color. In both situations, the women center their whiteness by wanting to secure their status as "good" White people, thus remaining insiders. In the following section, the dialogue pivots toward the second focal point – *Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment* – switching from the individual to the institutional perspective and sheds new light into how whiteness flows throughout higher education institutions.

### **Focal Point 2: Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment**

Dustin: Let's shift gears and focus our attention to our institutions as a whole. Can you think of a time when your personal values of racial equity did not align with your institution's values or decisions?

Sam: Sure, I'll share. One thing that comes to mind was early in my career. After graduate school, I went to work for an institution that had a fairly diverse student body, but still predominantly white, and the students of the program that I oversaw were predominantly Students of Color. I remember our Office of Communications and Admissions created pamphlets and flyers for prospective students, and I was looking through the pamphlets and realized that they were trying to paint a picture of a diverse campus that really didn't exist. They were using our students to create that by having our students peppered throughout all of these pamphlets, brochures, and website. That really did not create an accurate picture of what the campus was like, and I

think my current institution is guilty of that as well to some extent. I thought that was inappropriate and felt that the institution was using students in a way to create a picture of an environment that just didn't exist.

Dustin: Why did you feel that it was wrong to do that?

Sam: Well, because I felt like it was luring other Students of Color into an environment that they were not necessarily welcomed in and where they wouldn't necessarily have a positive experience. This was back in the mid to late nineties, so the topic of diversity in higher education was just beginning to be the focus. At least in my experience, those were the first times that I heard that we had to diversify our student body, faculty, and staff. It was a tool to draw people in. I get diversity as an institutional goal, and that's not inappropriate all. In fact, I support that 100%, but I think it's inappropriate to do that by creating a false sense of security and inclusion.

**Reflection Point:** Sam's example above is a common practice in higher education today. In an effort to increase their enrollment of Students of Color, institutions disproportionately represent Students of Color in their marketing materials. Sam's statement about institutions luring Students of Color onto campus magnifies the notion that the color of Black students' bodies is being commoditized as a stand-in for "diversity" in these materials (Pippert, Essenburg & Matchett, 2013). Doing as they have been taught and instructed, marketing departments have endeavored to create images of diversity to help encourage enrollments from Students of Color by communicating a false sense of "you'll fit in here" and belongingness. Sam's perspective further highlights his ability to see and name the structural components of whiteness in higher education and how institutions seek to replicate it, yet he remains distant from naming action steps to address this injustice. There is a clear misalignment between the institution's actions and Sam's personal values, but he falls short in challenging institutional norms. Therefore, the oppressive actions persist and Students of Color continue to be lured into white culture.

Patty: I have a recent example from last semester. My institution made a series of statements about a very famous, high profile alumnus who publicly made some racist remarks. A number of other institutions that received financial

support from him distanced themselves, but my institution affirmed our relationship with him. It was difficult because our students were just infuriated, and it was an institutional blunder that had, in my opinion, lasting impacts on my ability to have relationships with new students. Some of our students treated that topic as a litmus test to see how we, as staff members, would react. There was some level of guilty by association. Students would say, “Oh, well you work here, so this is also how you feel.” We had to work through those pieces and help our students find and amplify their voices and be able to communicate opposition to the institutional decision to back this alumnus. It was challenging and really hard to navigate.

**Reflection Point:** Patty is willing to speak out against the alumnus, yet she does not want to be “guilty by association.” In a way, she does not want to be perceived as a bad White person by her students. I find it interesting that she never directly names the institution’s actions as oppressive, but rather focuses the group’s attention on how hard it was to build relationships with students because they perceived her as “guilty.” Patty tries to distance herself from the institution by creating a divide between her and the institution, thus reinforcing the good/bad binary.

Mike: I think about my university as a whole. The university says we want to hire diverse leaders, but when the Chancellor had an opportunity to hire a new diverse Provost, she didn’t. There were some amazing female candidates to be Provost, and we’re known to be a science and technology school. So, women in the sciences is something we want to make a big push for. To hire a woman to be our Provost would have filled a major gap for us, but instead, we hired a White man. Overall, I don’t think that’s a good message. Out of our six cabinet-level positions, they’re all white except for one Woman of Color. I bring that example up because we are told to think about diversity when we’re

hiring, but when you look at the leadership of the school and you don't see a diverse population, it does not help us. The same goes for my Division level.

Dana: Mike, that's really disappointing and frustrating to hear. Why can't people just practice what they preach? As I have ascended the levels of responsibility at my institution, I've seen how these spaces have gotten whiter. The frontline staff are super diverse, but there's less representation at the top. I think those are some reasons why I feel a sense of responsibility because I see a lack of representation as I've moved up in my institution.

Dustin: Do you think other people around campus (students, faculty and staff) see this lack of representation too? Do they realize what's happening?

Mike: Yeah, I think the staff definitely notice. We struggled a couple of years ago when several of our young Staff Members of Color left because they felt like they were tokens. Now, the reality is they weren't, but they were asked to do lots of things like be on committees and all that kind of stuff. They would start questioning why they were even here, and we would lose them. I think Students of Color notice it because they arrive on campus and don't see staff that look like them. I think the maintenance staff look like them, and that's the problem too.

**Reflection Point:** The dialogue between Mike and Dana align with the literature on diversity and inclusion in higher education leadership. As Dana shares, institutions are “whiter at the top” and there continues to be a lack of diverse representation in top leadership positions. With 86% of higher education administrators being White (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017), staff, faculty, and Students of Color rarely see people who look like them in leadership positions. As Mike indicates, even when institutions are provided with opportunities to hire diverse candidates for cabinet-level positions, whiteness sets in and White men are given the position. These bonds are unspoken and legitimized by continuing to give White people higher titles, power, and access to resources which only serves to reinforce white solidarity. In most cases, frontline staff (i.e. hourly employees such as housekeepers, groundskeepers, physical plant

workers) or entry-level employees come from more diverse backgrounds than upper-level administrators. When these frontline or entry-level employees are asked to serve on committees or take on extra responsibilities because of their racial identity, this can lead to tokenism, as exemplified in the story above. In a roundabout way, Mike dismisses the experiences of the Staff Members of Color by stating, “they felt like they were tokens. Now, the reality is they weren’t...” Whose reality is Mike referring to? Clearly, his reality is shaped by whiteness. When he makes this comment, although unintentional, he is reifying whiteness as the ultimate truth and reality, thus delegitimizing the experience of People of Color.

Rhonda: I also see institutional misalignment in departments or divisions across campus, for example, our Athletics Department. Our Athletic Director is a White woman, and the way that they talk about athletics, to their credit, is that they have a higher proportion of Students of Color as student athletes than the student body. They see themselves as participating in diversity through numbers. However, when we have discussions about understanding difference, it’s in direct contrast to what athletics tries to promote. For them, they want everyone to be the same; they want the students to be a team. Political discussions shouldn’t happen in the locker room because that’s going to be divisive, so they promote diversity by basically being color blind. It has been a challenge thinking about diversity and inclusion and how it might apply to Athletics when their view on what unity means and creating community is diametrically opposed to understanding and seeing folks’ differences.

Dana: I never thought about Athletics and discussions of diversity in that way. Wow. This is why we have to create an institutional culture where it’s embedded everywhere, and it involves everyone across the university. My assessment of my campus is that because we’re so diverse, we think we don’t have a

problem. We wouldn't be an HSI<sup>7</sup> if our Latino students felt like they were being discriminated against. 30% of our employees wouldn't be Black if they were being discriminated against. We assume that representation equals equity or justice. I think there is a perception that we don't have a race or inclusion problem because there are diverse people here.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda and Dana provide two stories from their institutions that contextualize colorblind ideology at the institutional level. Rhonda shares that the Athletics Department at her institution promotes diversity through the number of Athletes of Color. Rather than engaging in topics of racial equity, the department promotes unity and teamwork in the spirit of sameness. Dana's example of working at an HSI is similar in that the institution feels that it does not need to engage in racial equity work because it is already diverse. The institution assumes that diversity automatically equals inclusion and equity. Both of these approaches reinforce a colorblind or colormute ideology. In practice, colorblind means not willing to "see" race while colormute means acknowledging racial difference yet choosing to actively remain silent (Pollock, 2004).

Dustin: You've already alluded to this in some ways, but I'm curious how power dynamics or politics come up in your role? How do you navigate that?

Rhonda: I think everyone does diversity and inclusion work from a different angle based on different strengths, and I think that's really important and valuable. For me, I've come to a place where I really enjoy strategic thinking and appreciate the way that my white identity has helped me to better understand those power structures.

Dustin: Can you unpack that a little more? How are power structures central to understanding your whiteness?

Rhonda: Some of our White folks in senior leadership positions continue to say things like, "My door is open" or "I want Students of Color to feel comfortable with

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<sup>7</sup> HSI stands for Hispanic Serving Institution.

me.” There’s a sense of detachment and lack of awareness of the power dynamics at play. You can’t erase those hierarchical differences and identity-based power dynamics. There’s also a lack of interrogating how their whiteness reinforces those power dynamics. Things like rushing to make decisions and creating a sense of urgency or need to control a situation. I see that happen within our leadership structures, but it’s not talked about in a way that is tied to whiteness. However, that is an aspect of maintaining white control and dominance in decision-making. Those are the kinds of things that I try to point out and name as tied to whiteness and power dynamics. Otherwise, they just go unaddressed or unspoken. There are a lot of well-intentioned people that are trying to do thoughtful work, but there are no policies for accountability and no structural changes happening at the upper-levels.

**Reflection Point:** As a risk-taker, Rhonda clearly names and challenges structural whiteness even when it involves upper-level administrators. She feels a sense of responsibility to point this out even when others may back down. Most importantly, Rhonda not only names whiteness in leadership, she articulates *how* whiteness manifests in these leaders’ actions and behaviors. When these power dynamics are left unnamed or unchallenged, they perpetuate white dominance throughout the institution.

Patty: I see politics or hot topic issues come up in one-on-one settings with students. I think a lot of this work involves asking reflective questions and helping students critically think about the political things without me personally saying “no” because of a political reason. My general stance as a professional is to come from a place of “yes,” and when I can’t, I want to help our students better understand some of the realities that we’re dealing with. Not to say that

the politics we're dealing with is the reason why we have to say no, but it becomes a conversation of managing reality and expectations.

Mike: I have a lot of colleagues who really care about this work. I have a lot of Friends of Color that come and go from the university. I'll meet them, get excited they're here, start doing good work together, and they can't take it because of the department they work in. I think to myself, how am I still here? What about my experience is easier than what they had? I think it is because my position is so unique and nobody really knows what I do, or they just don't want to do it. I think this has protected me over the years.

**Reflection Point:** Mike thinks that he's "unique," but he does not own the fact that his whiteness is what protects him from leaving. This perspective is anchored in white racial innocence – the action that White people take in order to remain blissfully "unaware" of their whiteness so that they do not have to interrogate their racial privileges (DiAngelo, 2018).

Dustin: In thinking about power dynamics and politics at your institution, when is it most difficult to speak up about racial equity on your campus? *[Everyone looks around the room at each other. There is a pause, as if folks are anxious to share their thoughts. After about 15 seconds, Patty speaks up...]*

Patty: When I first started at my institution, I was coming from a very small, white community to this larger more diverse school. It was right after the White supremacy marches and violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, and I was in a meeting with colleagues. I had been at the institution maybe a month, and I asked, "What are we doing to support our Students of Color during this time? Are we creating non-white spaces so that they can process? How are we dealing with this?" The one Woman of Color in the space said to me, "Well, you know, our students really aren't interested in activism or anything like

that. They're more focused on their studies, so I don't think that's necessary." I didn't know how to react in that situation. In my previous roles, I had not had any opportunities to be in situations like this interacting with a Women of Color, and she was also Director-level at the time. I thought to myself, I don't want to challenge a Woman of Color on what Students of Color need. I don't know the institutional culture, but I also have a passion for this. In my previous job, I was frequently taking the charge on these kinds of things, but I certainly didn't want to try and overstep any type of structures that may already exist. So, I was silent... completely silent. I still think about it, and I'm not sure if that was the right thing to do. I can tell you, however, that even being new to the institution had a White colleague said that to me, I would have 100% challenged them. Interestingly enough, one of the ways I would have challenged it would be to try and draw in opinions from either colleagues or Students of Color about what they need. I don't think it's appropriate for a White person to say what a Person of Color may need or not need. When I had a Woman of Color telling me that they didn't need any type of affinity space, I backed down. I still think that although she, of course, had awareness about what she may have needed, I still think there were perhaps Students of Color who needed that space to process what was happening.

Dana: Patty, thanks for speaking up first because I feel the same way, but I wasn't sure if I was the only one. I feel the most unsafe talking about race when I know that there are People of Color in the room who have a particular viewpoint that is counter to racial equity work. There are Black folks on my

campus who say “Blue Lives Matter.” In particular, I’m thinking about a meeting that I was invited to attend to talk about race, policing, and how we can incorporate educational programming. I was presenting to our Leadership and Deans Council, and I was sharing how my staff and I have concerns about some of the current programming related to this topic. Our Faculty Council President is a Black man, and he sits in on leadership team meetings. He interjected right away and said, “You know, I come from a generation where you respect the police, and what we need to do is teach people to respect the police. The media doesn’t show the videos of the part where people are being disrespectful to the police. What do you expect them to do if you’re mouthing off and not following directions? The media just goes around and cherry picks these incidents to play on repeat. It really doesn’t happen that often. We have to support our police.” Those are the moments that aren’t the riskiest, but the moments that I feel the most uncomfortable. It’s those instances when my own understanding of racial dynamics and White supremacy conflict with the folks who theoretically are the most impacted by it, but I also have to understand that People of Color are not a monolith.

Rhonda: I have very similar feelings and experiences as Patty and Dana. I’m part of our Bias Incident Response team, and it’s led by our Chief Diversity Officer who’s a Black woman and long time faculty member. Often when a report comes in, the two of us, along with some other folks within the team, are making decisions about response, next steps, what support is needed, and how to address the incident. It’s not uncommon for me and our Chief Diversity

Officer to have pretty different thoughts about how to address the situation. I often feel that her response is too limited, and I think there's a number of reasons for that, specifically around her personality and lived experience and the generation that she's part of. As the White person in those conversations, it's very uncomfortable to push back on a Woman of Color. There are times when I know I have to, and it feels really uncomfortable.

**Reflection Point:** Patty, Dana, and Rhonda share three different stories of how they navigate racial equity work in relation to Colleagues of Color. They share their discomfort associated with challenging Colleagues of Color while discussing topics of racial inequity. Interestingly, this is the first time throughout the dialogue that whiteness is discussed in context with challenging People of Color. Up until this point, the participants have only talked about challenging their White peers. These stories create dissonance about whether it is appropriate for White people to challenge or disagree with People of Color on racial equity topics, even when the White person is working to dismantle the systems of injustice. When the Leaders of Color in these stories take a personal stance that reifies whiteness, the participants are uncertain or unsettled with how to respond. Patty, for example, remains silent and chooses to not challenge her Colleague of Color. Dana is also caught off guard when the Faculty Council President, a Black man, appears to reinforce systemic racism when discussing racial profiling and police brutality. Rhonda further supports the difficulty in having these conversations when she pushes back on the Chief Diversity Officer, a Woman of Color, at her institution on having too limited of a view in how to support and address issues related to racial equity on her campus. As Dana shares, these are the moments that are not necessarily the riskiest for White administrators but are the most difficult to navigate. These racial tensions center around those moments when White people have a deep understanding of racial dynamics and White supremacy and those views are in direct conflict with Peoples' of Color views and understanding. This dynamic creates discomfort and causes White administrators to become hesitant or question their role in advocating for racial equity at their institutions.

Dustin: Thank you all for sharing. How else do racial dynamics come up in your work?

Sam: I think there's an overbearing sense of whiteness that isn't challenged by how we define professionalism in higher education. There's a piece of "pseudo-professionalism" of race not being something that we talk about at work. I try as much as I can in everyday conversation or in a presentation or whatever to

name my identities so that it's a normalized thing. You can look at me and guess my identity, so why wouldn't I just say that out loud? I get the sense that it makes some folks uncomfortable, as if I'm oversharing. I don't know quite what it is, but it feels like it's tied to this sense of "professionalism" in the workplace.

Dustin: Sam, you bring up a good point of professionalism and how whiteness is implicated in that. Would anyone else like to share how they see whiteness and professionalism linked?

Patty: A few years ago, I served on a Divisional Diversity Workgroup to address a series of human resource topics related to retention, recruitment, satisfaction, recognition, and overall work climate in our division. During those meetings we had a lot of discussion about hair, as it related to some institutional norms tied to hats and things along those lines. A lot of the discussion in the room was about the university's policies and the need to have to follow the rules. Essentially, folks couldn't wear any kind of a hat or headdress that didn't have some kind of religious connection. They didn't want anyone wearing headscarves. During the conversation there wasn't any acknowledgement that upkeep and maintenance of hair is difficult at times in the town that we live in, particularly for our Staff Members of Color. They don't have access to salons, so there might be a day where Women of Color might have to wear a headscarf or something else, and they would not meet the "professional look" that the policy was originally created for. I tried to challenge the policy from a standpoint of there are days when my hair isn't going to look good, but I can

figure out how to make it work because I have boring hair. So, why are we going to exclude a headscarf when that can be done in a professional manner? I think “professionalism” in and of itself sits with a lot of privilege.

Sam: I agree, Patty, I think the term professionalism is really loaded. I think about it from an interpersonal perspective of the idea that a “professional” is not someone who gets emotional. As a White person, I can have a thought or opinion and share that passionately, but that isn’t me being emotional per se. However, some may consider my Colleague of Color’s passionate response to be unprofessional. They’re told to calm down, or they’re not permitted or asked to share their thoughts because they’re viewed as too emotional and unprofessional.

Dana: There are all these signs and signals of white supremacist culture that you wouldn’t necessarily identify but permeate workplaces. I notice things like the ways we introduce new staff at meetings by starting with their honorifics and where they went to school and things like that. It’s based on this prestigious white culture, and the messages are subtle unless you’re looking for them. You’re not necessarily going to notice because it’s business as usual.

Rhonda: Yeah, I agree with what Dana just shared. On a surface level, a lot of our norms around dress code, hair, and communication are very much centered on whiteness and white cultural norms. I think the way we have defined professional demeanor is very rooted in white culture. On a more nuanced level though, I think that even some of our basic expectations around promptness and thoroughness in communication or follow-through on

different things are often inconsistently held on the basis of race. Whenever there is a norm around doing certain things in a timely manner, I often see the way that expectation is not held consistently between White people and People of Color. A Person of Color might get a really snarky email from the business office about something being turned in late, and as a White person, I could be late doing the same thing and I get a really polite response or a gentle reminder. It's the same professional expectation, but we're not held to it in the same way.

**Reflection Point:** According to Sam, the term professionalism is a loaded word because it is steeped in whiteness. From a critical lens, leaders should be asking questions about the *why* and *who* behind professionalism. Who determines what is professional and what is not? Throughout history, people in power (i.e. White people) have made decisions and choices impacting all people, yet they have limited views about the lived experiences of People of Color. The standards of professionalism are heavily defined by whiteness such as dress code, speech, work style, and timeliness (Okun, 2010). We operationalize and prioritize whiteness under the guise of professionalism and perpetuate these standards throughout higher education. Sam also mentions how People of Color are held to different standards when it comes to showing their emotions in the workplace. When People of Color show emotions other than politeness (as defined by their White peers) they are seen as disruptive or abrasive and told to calm down. When White people say the same thing in the same way, they are often affirmed. When White people's behaviors or emotions are not affirmed, racial angst kicks in and they often demand respect in an effort to re-center their whiteness. This is part of white emotionality (Matias, 2016) and reifies racism and whiteness in higher education. The idea of "business as usual" is reflected in how whiteness operates in higher education. In order to do your job and do it well, everyone is expected to follow professional white norms. This often represents a misalignment between personal and institutional values and impacts the ways in which White administrators navigate their roles in higher education.

Rhonda: I also think that we're not really explicit about how to develop resiliency, as we think about mentoring and training staff and students. The reality is, and this is true around gender dynamics as well as racial dynamics, part of helping people to be resilient is helping them learn coping strategies around how to navigate these systems that are often very racist and sexist and harmful. As

part of teaching resilience, we should be real clear about naming the fact that this particular system is really messed up. That's often the way I talk about professionalism with students. Before we can even talk about how to set yourself up for success in life, we have to talk explicitly about how the expectations themselves are racialized and heteronormative and harmful overall. We talk about that first and then, depending on our personal values and personal life needs around finances, safety, security, each of us gets to personally decide how much we are going to push and how much we are going to work within that system, even though we know it's harmful. No one can tell someone else how to do that. We all have to decide that for ourselves every day. I think that we should be more upfront about acknowledging the fact that the system itself is harmful.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda's views of helping others develop resiliency starts with naming the unjust system and structure. Only then can one decide how to navigate the unjust system based on their own personal needs and values. Why is it that White administrators so often do not explicitly name these unjust systems and power structures in higher education? Are we too afraid? Too complicit? Or, simply too selfish?

Sam: Yes, Rhonda, I also think the system overall is harmful. I think higher education is really hierarchical, and there are certain spaces in which it's okay to challenge folks who have authority and others in which it isn't. I mean, we don't get tenure. I'm not saying necessarily that someone would get fired just for challenging something racist. Though Colleagues of Color get fired for it, I'm not sure that White folks get fired for it. I've been on a couple of search committees where we look at folk's resumes, and sometimes there'll be typos on them. Sometimes it's from folks who were from lower-ranked universities,

or sometimes you can guess from the name that they are someone who's international or a Person of Color. The "professional" expectation from the search committee is that folks write perfectly, never have typos, know perfect English, etc. The committee will say, "I don't see what we're looking for in these materials." Therefore, they do not consider them for the position.

Mike: I think there are times, though, when we have to scrutinize candidates' credentials. At my last institution, there was an African-American female candidate that applied for a position. She had absolutely no experience in the department, had never actually lived in a residence hall, and was applying to be the Hall Director for a building of all freshmen females. I understood that we wanted to have a Staff Member of Color. I completely respect and value that, but I felt that we weren't setting her up for success because she had no experience within the field. We needed somebody who could take that on, and she was a timid person. I didn't feel confident that she could handle the job, but I really felt she was chosen because she was a Person of Color. That shouldn't be the only reason why we hire a Person of Color. It is a bonus plus all their skills and abilities.

**Reflection Point:** Sam provides concrete examples of how whiteness infiltrates hiring committee processes and decision-making. These are examples of implicit bias against People of Color. White people internally rationalize a decision not to hire a Person of Color based on previous experiences or assumptions. In this case, Candidates of Color were dismissed from further review because of their name or where they went to school. This biased mentality replicates racist assumptions and actions and seeks to further enhance white solidarity. If People of Color are not given an opportunity during the application review phase, how will higher education ever become more diverse?

Mike's example is complex in that he is challenging the institution's decision to hire a Woman of Color, with no direct experience, simply based on her race. He is pushing back against racial tokenism because it seems that the institution is more concerned about increasing its diversity numbers over the success and wellbeing of the Woman of Color. What makes it

complex is how Mike describes the woman's racial identity as a "bonus." Although Mike pushes back against racial tokenism, he centers whiteness in the discourse because he sees the woman's racial identity as something that can be added. If People of Color are viewed as a "bonus" or something that can be added to "normal" society (i.e. White society), it means that they can also be removed or taken away. This perspective of People of Color being "bonuses" serves to replicate white ideology in higher education and society.

**Focal point 2 summary.** The second focal point of the dialogue, *Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment*, comes to life between the five composite characters above in order to shed light on how whiteness is challenged and/or maintained throughout higher education institutions. In particular, the characters discuss incidents of when their institutions' actions did not align with their personal values of racial equity and how, if at all, the characters chose to respond. The characters also share their discomfort associated with challenging Colleagues of Color while discussing topics of racial inequity. Lastly, this focal point highlights how whiteness is so deeply embedded in institutional culture (i.e. professional standards, hiring practices, trainings) and how it informs group decision-making and relationship-building. In the following section, the characters are asked a variety of questions focused on how they develop authentic relationships with others across racial difference.

### **Focal Point 3: Developing White Racial Authenticity**

The third focal point of the dialogue is *Developing White Racial Authenticity*. The ten participants in this study, as represented in the composite characters, shared that in order to successfully navigate their roles as White administrators, they had to develop strong relationships with People of Color. Accordingly, they shared that the crux of developing relationships across racial differences was trust and authenticity. The dialogue continues with

the third focal point with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of White administrators' approaches to developing white racial authenticity.

Dustin: Let's now focus our attention on the personal level of racial equity and inclusion work. How do relationships impact your work around racial equity?

Sam: I feel like the fragility that is so much a part of whiteness impacts relationships. Whiteness is so intertwined with other forms of oppression, particularly patriarchy. I think it affects human relationships and my ability to effectively express my emotions, manage conflict, and just explore meaningful, healthy, sustained friendships and relationships with People of Color.

Patty: I think the relationships that I have with students make a difference, and that's the small day-to-day thing that we don't often think about in equity work. We know that, within Higher Education and K-12, having one positive relationship with a staff or faculty member makes a huge difference in student success. It's really important to me, especially in a more administrative leadership role, that I'm not detached from students who I'm trying to advocate for every day. I have to actually be in real relationships with them, and that is super important to me.

Rhonda: I think it's this balance of being comfortable with your whiteness and having authentic relationships. I think authenticity has to mean that you're not afraid of shying away from the racial dynamic but that not everything is about race. It's the balance of everything is about race, but not everything is about race. I think relationships are how you start.

**Reflection Point:** Sam opens the dialogue with a strong statement about acknowledging and owning his white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) and how it impacts his ability to develop meaningful relationships with People of Color. Discussing race often brings a mix of emotions such as shame, guilt, discomfort, and confusion, as witnessed by all the participants in this study. These white emotionalities (Matias, 2016) often work in tandem with white fragility. Instead of suppressing these feelings, it is important to name, understand, and interrogate them if one ever hopes to fully commit to racial equity. Rhonda supports this by saying “everything is about race, but not everything is about race.” We cannot tiptoe around racial topics as if they do not exist. Rather, White people must remain open and honest with themselves about how they contribute to white dominance and continually interrogate the real racial dynamics in daily interactions with others.

Dana: I think racial diversity is tough, and I rely on allies. I don't know if I'm good at this or doing more harm than good. I can be myself and be honest, and that's where the relationship with my colleague who's the Diversity Director at my previous institution started. I would go to her and say, "I might be really screwing up, and if I am, I would really like somebody to tell me because I am not trying to hurt people right now." She would say, "I am going to tell you if you are hurting people. I'm definitely going to do that. I need a White person who I can trust that's going to be with me in different spaces, and that's you." That was a pretty huge compliment, so I showed up. She knows me so well. She has been a bridge and a connector, and I've been that for her too.

Sam: Going back to what I shared earlier, I wish I could build stronger relationships and connections with folks across difference. I think one of the biggest downfalls of my whiteness is practicing empathy knowing that racial inequities exist. I'm thinking about the ways I learned to understand empathy versus sympathy and that kind of thing. It's like being able to truly say you understand what someone else is going through. While I try to ensure that I'm

informed and supporting People of Color, I don't know what it's like. I don't know that I can be empathetic to some of those struggles.

**Reflection Point:** Relationships help build bridges and connections across racial differences. These authentic relationships are at the core of racial equity work and help sustain movements across generations. It is not as easy as it sounds, nor should it be. We, White people, are part of hundreds of generations who have fueled racism and White supremacy through violence, death, power, greed, and control. We have caused harm and trauma to People of Color throughout our history. Dismantling racist structures cannot be as easy as making a new Black friend and having cozy conversations with them over a cup of coffee at Starbucks. Rather, we have to be in real, authentic relationships with them, listen, and take action. Sam highlights the difficulty in practicing empathy across racial difference because we will never know how it feels to be a Person of Color. White people will never know the struggles of People of Color. How do we move from racial difference to practicing racial empathy? This is the crux of developing white racial authenticity.

Mike: Being someone from multiple privileged identities, it's really just about curiosity. I have to show people and be willing to learn about them on an individual basis. For example, when I'm engaging with a student I want them to understand that I want to learn about their own situation. I could meet with two Black students, and they could have very different worlds, you know? One can be from Georgia and the other can be from a very poor neighborhood two towns over, but they have very different backgrounds. When they walk into my office they can look like twins. I want them to understand that I'm invested in them as a person. I let them know that you might be in my office because you are a victim of something or maybe you did something bad or you're struggling with classes or whatever, but we care first. It's really just about making sure they understand and know that we want to meet them where they are, and we care. It's really about my curiosities that I always want to continue to learn and to better myself. I'm not afraid to say what I don't know, and what I want to learn about. I'm very self-reflective, and I have a

genuine curiosity of understanding that, especially on topics of privileged identities.

**Reflection Point:** Mike's intent here is to show that he supports People of Color by seeing them as individual people, not a collective sum. Yet, the way in which he describes the process places him at the center of the situation. Mike's desire to explore his curiosities and learn about racial differences places the burden back on Students of Color to understand where he is coming from rather than truly trying to listen and understand their background. This is an example of interest convergence (Bell, 1980).

Dustin: How do you develop authenticity across racial difference?

Dana: I have been called out a few times by both People of Color and White people. Of course I feel a little bit of a sting, but I've always been so appreciative because I've learned so much from those instances. When I have been called out, I've really respected the trust that we've established between us because they've been individuals who know that this is something I care about. They understand that this is important, so they're willing to push the conversation forward. They trust me when I say that I want to be called out, and so they are giving me their trust too.

Rhonda: Over the years in my career, there have been a lot of things mirrored back to me as general areas of growth for myself as a leader and as a professional, but those are the easier things for me to change. It's been really powerful and painful to have certain areas pointed out to me as racist. You know, it's not just that I might need to improve on how I share feedback, for example. It's the way I might be doing a certain thing that is racist and thinking to myself, would I have that same conversation in quite that same way with a White colleague? It's really hard to dig deep in yourself and unpack that. It's not intended to be racist, but that's the thing about racism... it's so deeply

embedded in the way we operate that until it's called out explicitly, it's really easy to excuse our own behavior and just call it something else and not recognize it as racism.

**Reflection Point:** Racism is deeply embedded in the ways in which we understand ourselves and others. Rhonda shares that until racism is explicitly called out, we will continue to do more harm than good. Practicing racial authenticity and humility allows White people to move beyond their own self-interest and make change within themselves. It is not the responsibility of People of Color to change; it's on White people to own their behaviors and actions. Dana adds that mutual trust must be established between White people and People of Color in order to give and receive feedback about race. Without mutual trust, racial authenticity cannot flourish. White people must be consciously aware not to perpetuate false generosity (Freire, 1970) when establishing relationships. Otherwise, they only seek to maintain the good/bad White person binary and continue to oppress People of Color.

Patty: When I have a burning question about race, I think about how I can insulate it a little bit. For example, when I'm with colleagues or students I'll say, "Okay, so I have a White lady question," or something like that just to give the cue that I acknowledge that the question I'm about to ask is because of my experiences as a White person. They take a little breath in and say, "okay." I don't know if I've successfully been in a situation where I've had to be super vulnerable, but I have definitely been in spaces where I just don't know because of my experiences. I tell people it's not their job to teach me, and they get to use the ejector seat out of the situation if they want. I give them the exit button or permission to leave without giving any sort of excuse.

**Reflection Point:** This seems problematic. Patty tries building authentic relationships with People of Color by stating she has a "White lady question." She allows them to remove themselves from the conversation, if they do not want to engage. However, she is still putting the burden back on People of Color by giving them "permission" to leave when she did not give them the option to opt-in to the conversation to begin with. Patty displays acts of interest convergence (Bell, 1980) by centering who own needs at the expense of People of Color.

Dustin: How else do you develop racial authenticity?

Rhonda: I'm someone who welcomes dialogue and discussions with Students and Staff of Color by asking them to share a resource. I try to really not have anyone explain it to me because at the end of the day that's my job and not theirs. It's not their burden or labor. It also goes back to the informal discussions about things that are happening in the news or events of the week. I ask our Students of Color how they are doing and if there are things that we can do to ensure that they're getting as close to whole as possible.

Dana: I agree, Rhonda. I think we also have to keep in mind that it takes time to develop authentic relationships with Students of Color, partially because I'm white and because I'm in a position of authority. I didn't understand that for a long time. I would get really close with the Students of Color, and I would be so hurt when they would do something and I had to reprimand them. I would take it so personally, and finally, I realized that it was not about me. They haven't been able to trust people in authority their whole lives, and so they're just waiting for me to do the same thing.

Patty: Oh yes, Dana, I agree that it just takes time to develop those relationships. I've been a member of a sorority for several years, and there are Women of Color in my chapter that are just now starting to work with me. There's nothing I can do about that, and I know it's because I'm White. There are some women who think this is their space, and I'm in their space. I think about that a lot as well, but I do take space away from Women of Color. There are very few spaces where they can be by themselves and just talk and not have to put on that shield. Do I take that away from them? Sometimes the

answer is “yes,” and I definitely can get in the way. I have tried to tell myself that it takes time, and if someone doesn’t want to work with me or trust me, it’s not about me. I’m not going to stress about it. It’s about other White people who have ruined People’s of Color perceptions of White people and rightly so. Who am I to come in and tell them they shouldn’t think so?

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda shares that she tries not to put the burden back on People of Color to educate her about race. She engages People of Color in informal discussions to simply ask how she can support them and ensure they are getting “as close to whole as possible”. To develop white racial authenticity, White people have to explicitly see and name race, not just hide from it. Rhonda believes that we have to decenter ourselves and refocus on developing wholeness in People of Color. In the same vein, Dana comes to realize that they were centering themselves in the discourse of whiteness without acknowledging their own positionality and power. Patty, on the other hand, admits that she takes up space from Women of Color but still centers herself and her whiteness in the story she shares. She tries to separate herself from “other White people who have ruined People’s of Color perception of White people.” Although perhaps unintentional, in doing so, she deepens her stance as a self-proclaimed progressive by trying to distance herself from her whiteness.

Dustin: I’m curious about your thoughts and feelings on the term ally. How does being an ally impact racial authenticity?

Rhonda: I have seen this all too often. From a personal perspective, as a White woman, I can’t just walk into a racialized space and say, “Hi, I’m an ally, and I know the answer.” That’s not allyship. That’s not being an accomplice. That is actually asserting your whiteness. It’s the idea that you’re there to save someone or that you have all the answers. I think it starts with relationships. It’s important to know that the work of allyship and building strategies for equity is about building capacity, empowerment, and removing barriers and creating access for Folks of Color. *[Patty and Dana snap their fingers in support of what Rhonda just says.]*

Dana: I used to just concentrate so much of my time on being a strong ally for underrepresented students and trying to be a voice and advocate when I could. What I have now tried to do is actually work with White people, and believe me, it's a slow process. I distrusted White people for a long time, so I'm trying to be better and more open in talking with White people about race.

Sam: For me, being an ally means trying to truly be in solidarity with movements led by marginalized communities. It's really easy for us as White people to simply post a Facebook article or talk in our little circle of other White people that are somewhat open to talking about race. We don't actually develop meaningful, deeper, long-term relationships with People of Color. We don't put in the time and energy to go to community-based meetings or give our money and contribute volunteer time to be on a Board. Those are things that I don't do enough of, and it is a constant place of trying to push myself to do more, not because I'm trying to prove anything to someone. Those are the things that are behind the scenes that I'm not trying to advertise to anyone that I'm a "good" White person. I should be deeply involved in my community and building those ongoing relationships and trying to make a difference and contribute to the work that other people are doing. I think giving of our time or other resources with zero credit and not receiving a thank you or looking for recognition is strong allyship.

**Reflection Point:** The participants above share a similar sentiment that allyship is not about "saving" People of Color. White people have to engage in racial equity and inclusion work without receiving credit or not expecting a "thank you" or recognition. As Sam states, allyship is more than just posting or sharing something on Facebook. This is an example of slacktivism, or the notion that people can be allies or activists by simply hiding behind their computer screens or mobile devices. When White people do this, we remove the very human nature of

connecting with others in building relationships. Slacktivism is a passive approach to racial equity work. According to Rhonda, we must move past the notion of allyship and aim to become accomplices *with* People of Color. Being an accomplice means building capacity and empowering others and not centering ourselves in the work.

Dustin: How do you build deeper relationships with students, faculty, and staff around racial equity work?

Mike: I have a good example of this. I was brand new in my role, and I was meeting with the President of the Black Student Association. We were meeting to prep her to meet with our University President and a representative from the Board of Trustees. There was a mutual acknowledgement between us, as if she were to say, “Okay, Mike knows what he’s doing, and he knows how to prep me for these questions.” For me, it was helping that student understand that she was going into a room with a bunch of White people. She could call *me* racist, and I wasn’t going to respond in a negative context because I know I’m not a racist. [*... Mike briefly pauses and looks around the room...*] I mean, I’m not out carrying pitchforks or tiki torches and those kinds of things. I think it helped her understand some of the norms in the setting with the University President and how to shape her conversation, so it wouldn’t abruptly stop.

**Reflection Point:** While helping a student leader prepare for a meeting with the University President, Mike helps her “understand some of the norms in the setting.” By norms, one can assume Mike is referring to white norms. Essentially, Mike is advising the President of the Black Student Association to maintain whiteness (i.e. do not be too loud, abrasive, or disrespectful) so that the conversation will not come to an immediate halt with the University President. Mike seeks to reify whiteness to protect other White people, thus reinforcing white solidarity (DiAngelo, 2018). In addition, Mike fumbles on his own words to try and cover up his own view of racism that implicates him in whiteness. He quickly clarifies that he is not out carrying pitchforks and tiki torches to help separate himself from “those” White people.

Rhonda: One of my former employees was a White woman who wanted to implement a culturally-based wellness program on campus. She had gone through lots of training to become a practitioner, and I told her that it was going to be really important before she implemented the program to talk a little bit about where she came from and what it meant for her as a White person to be bringing this practice to campus. I didn't want to imply that it was impossible to do, but there were just better ways to implement it. She got very upset because she felt like I was calling out her authenticity or her ability to be a true practitioner.

Dustin: Why do you think she went to that place?

Rhonda: I think she felt that she was offering something to the campus that didn't exist and was going to be helpful to people. There's the constant talk about student stress, and here was a method that works to promote stress and sleep. Why wouldn't I just want it everywhere? So to her, it was a moral good that she was offering the program, and I was saying it's more complex than that. It's not just about delivering a service in a cultural vacuum. Your desire to help people could potentially be harmful if you're not doing it in the right way.

Dana: I also have an example of a supervision experience. I once supervised a Woman of Color that I had to do progressive discipline with. On the front end, I thought a lot about the racial dynamics as part of the process, and I really tried to think critically about the things that I felt she wasn't meeting expectations on. I was very conscious of that throughout the entire process. Not only was I supervising a Woman of Color, but my supervisor was also a

Woman of Color. I had to have accountability conversations with my staff member to say, “Hey, here’s a couple of things that haven’t happened,” and we talked about it. After the meeting with the staff member, I was debriefing it with my supervisor, who’s a Woman of Color, and I shared that she had gotten pretty upset and basically shut down and left the meeting. My supervisor felt that her behavior was unacceptable and that she should have been more professional and told me to give her that feedback. *[Dana takes a deep breath.]* And I didn’t. I did not feel comfortable telling a Black woman that she needed to be more professional and watch her emotions in the workplace, so I didn’t do that.

Dustin: Why did you not feel good about that?

Dana: Because I was really concerned that it would come across as tone policing her and putting her into that box of being an angry Black woman, and it just felt dehumanizing. It felt like I would be giving her feedback to dehumanize her. I felt as a supervisor, regardless of what someone’s identity or cultural background is, that was contradictory to everything I believed in. I didn’t feel comfortable doing that and then combine that with the racial dynamic.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda and Dana share examples of the difficulty of having racial conversations with staff members whom they supervise. Rhonda’s example of supervising a White woman and giving her feedback on how she could potentially be reifying whiteness provides insight into how White people respond when receiving criticism about racial dynamics. The White employee immediately gets defensive when Rhonda encourages her to engage in reflexivity about her white identity. The employee does not acknowledge the racial dynamic of being a White woman implementing a culturally-based program and gets angry with Rhonda because she feels misunderstood. The employee expects Rhonda to acknowledge her good intentions and agree that the good intentions outweigh the potentially oppressive program. However, Rhonda is clear with the employee that her desire to do good could actually do harm.

This is similar to Dana’s story whereby they are consciously aware of the impact that

race has on supervision relationships. Dana is critically aware that the Woman of Color who reports to them has different life experiences than Dana, and Dana reframes their supervision style to be more equitable about these differences. Dana states that they “didn’t want to further marginalize this Staff of Color by putting her in a box. It felt dehumanizing.” Ironically, Dana’s supervisor, a Woman of Color, gives Dana advice that Dana should have been stricter and held the employee accountable for being emotional. This could be an example of internalized racism. That is, the oppressed begin to believe in their own inferiority, both individually and collectively (Baker, 1983). In turn, members of the oppressed group (i.e. People of Color) begin to consciously or subconsciously endorse and act upon the ideologies of the dominant group (i.e. White people). On the other hand, Dana’s decision not to provide the Staff Member of Color with feedback could be an example of white fragility in that Dana was avoiding racial conversation and discomfort (DiAngelo, 2018).

Dustin: How do you practice racial authenticity?

Patty: When I’m on committees with folks, I have to remember that although I want things to move quickly, I have to listen to my Colleagues of Color. I’m currently involved in a committee where we’ve been working together for about two years to create a diversity and inclusion framework for campus life. It’s a racially and ethnically diverse group, so I’m not the only White person in the room. In some ways I think my whiteness has given me the opportunity to push a little harder than some of my Colleagues of Color. We’ve discussed taking out the term racism from the framework, but I’ve been someone who has been adamant that the word really needs to be in there. I’ve been able to say that as a White person, whereas some of my Colleagues of Color understandably are a little bit more hesitant. They take a more pragmatic approach. I’ve been able to be more idealistic because I’m a White woman in that space who has never experienced all of the microaggressions that my Colleagues of Color have experienced when they use the word racism. The fact that I want certain words in there is not as important as them saying, “Look, we need this to work and to make this work, this is what we have to

do.” That’s where I really defer to my Colleagues of Color when they say, “We’ve been having these conversations in multiple spaces and this is what has worked and this is what has not.” It’s my responsibility to say, “I’m in this fight with you, and I hear what you’re saying and value your experiences.” Those are the times when I’ve got to put my own white ego aside, which feels like taking half measures, but it’s not about me.

**Reflection Point:** Patty acknowledges that she can take a more idealistic approach to racial equity and inclusion work, as compared to her Colleagues of Color. As a White woman, she feels safe in challenging her White peers and is able to push harder on racial topics. She owns the fact that, at times, she has to put her white ego aside and listen to what her Colleagues of Color are saying about their lived experiences.

Rhonda: I think it’s everyone’s responsibility to talk about race because if you’re talking about race and ethnicity, you’re also talking about whiteness. White people have a very significant role to play. It’s us that put these terrible systems of oppression together. We should be the ones working hardest to tear them down. In a utopia it would be a significant part of all of our job descriptions. In reality, I think given the culture of busyness and the fear of making mistakes, our colleagues who work in Identity Centers get asked to do all the equity work. I think there’s a balance there, right? The people who are in those positions have worked and done the research and know the theory. They are experts, not just because of their identities, but because they’ve studied these issues. They’re professionals in these fields. You don’t just get hired in an Identity Center because you are of that identity. You’ve got the knowledge base too. It’s trying to strike the balance of relying on them and consulting with them for their expertise and also knowing the space in which

you've got to do some of your own learning and bring that to the table for them to build on. For example, if I went to the Director of our Multicultural Center and said, "Come in and fix racism in my department," that would be a really shitty thing to do. What education have I already done before I expect a Person of Color to educate me and do it for me? In some ways I think it's right that the folks in those Identity Centers be at the center of conversations around diversity and inclusion, but they've got to have support. We've got to listen to their expertise but also not expect them to implement everything themselves.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda develops white racial authenticity with colleagues by owning what she does not know and not waiting for People of Color to teach her. Programmatically, Rhonda engages in racial authenticity by striking a balance between relying on and consulting with staff in Identity Centers for their expertise and knowledge while not expecting them to come and "fix" issues and educate White people. When White people rely on People of Color to "fix" diversity issues in their departments, they take responsibility and ownership off of themselves and place the burden back on People of Color. Having white racial authenticity means taking ownership of what we do not know and having the audacity to remain engaged and continue to fight for racial equity without reward or benefit.

**Focal point 3 summary.** In this section of the dialogue, the characters talk about how they strive to move beyond allyship and become accomplices *with* People of Color in the fight for racial equity. They discuss the importance of owning their whiteness and not relying on People of Color, specifically those who work in Identity-Based Centers, to come and "fix" diversity issues in their departments. Lastly, the characters demonstrate the various power dynamics at play in staff supervision. In particular, Rhonda and Dana share stories of their experiences supervising a White woman versus a Woman of Color and the racial nuances that exist in both of these cases. The concepts of white fragility and internalized racism are

explicated in these examples and further examined in Chapter 7. The dialogue continues by exploring the fourth and final focal point titled “*Giving Something Up.*”

#### **Focal Point 4: “Giving Something Up”**

The phrase “*Giving Something Up,*” as taken directly from a participant in this study, gets at the heart of why White administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion work or not. It interrogates how far White administrators are willing to go to support racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. Consequently, this theme gives voice to why some White administrators resist engagement in this work and what is at stake in the process. This final focal point comes from both personal and institutional domains and further highlight how White administrators navigate and position themselves in this work.

Dustin: Do you believe we should openly discuss topics of race and whiteness in Higher Education? Why or why not?

Sam: Absolutely. We have to. We always have, but we just haven’t understood them as conversations about race and whiteness. We have always talked about whiteness. It’s in the way that we approach conversations in the classroom, or the way that we talk about inner cities or the ghettos. There’s always been this racially coded language, and we haven’t reversed the lens to see that we’re actually assuming whiteness as the ideal version of humanity or group within a society. We haven’t reversed it within Higher Education. I think we’re at a place where we’re able to have more explicit conversations about race and equity, but because we don’t have fundamental shared language around how to do that, it becomes very challenging and an unhealthy dogmatic approach to the work. A lot of harm can be done if we’re trying to talk about something

in ways that further isolates and marginalizes people. We tend to do work in a way that is a “kumbaya” colorblind approach where everybody just gets along without actually talking about structures and power. If we keep it on the surface-level diversity lens and we don’t examine power structures, it can be super damaging and doesn’t do any good. So yeah, I feel like we have to be talking about it, but we have to be talking about it in very intentional and thoughtful ways.

**Reflection Point:** Sam shares that there is racially coded language in higher education, and institutions need to reverse the lens. White administrators have to explicitly name racism and whiteness in very intentional and thoughtful ways, otherwise, it can do more harm than good. When institutions take a “kumbaya colorblind approach,” they reinforce whiteness by not intentionally naming difference or examining power structures. This does not promote racial equity and inclusion because it seeks to make everyone the same. In the context of higher education, making everyone the same usually means assimilating them to institutional norms and traditions. This history and evolution of higher education over the centuries has proven to be steeped in whiteness. Therefore, when institutions claim to promote “sameness,” what they really mean is whiteness.

Rhonda: Oh, I’ve got a good example of this kumbaya bullshit. When I was a faculty member in the School of Education, there was a Diversity and Inclusion Committee that I was part of, and it was one of those committees that got together and didn’t do jack shit. We got together and talked about how things were an issue but never tied down any concrete things that we would do. That was very frustrating for me. We just talked ourselves in circles. It was one of those committees where there weren’t clear expectations about what the committee was supposed to be doing and what we had the power to do. We would meet faithfully, you know, a bunch of well-meaning White folks, but nothing ever came of it. None of us had to give anything up to change things. We were giving up an hour of our time, but there were no action steps where

we would have to say, “Okay, I need to change the pedagogy of this course that I’m teaching” or “I need to actively recruit more internship sites” or “I need to go back to my department and actually fight with them about this policy that we have in place that is really unfriendly to low income students.” None of us had to actually fight any fight. We could talk our well-meaning White people talk as much as we wanted and say, “Oh, isn’t it a tragedy?” and then go to lunch and go back to the world as it was.

Sam: Yes, Rhonda. That’s exactly what I mean by a kumbaya colorblind approach to our work. It’s not intentional or thoughtful. We don’t have to give anything up.

Dana: It also reminds me of our conversation a few minutes ago about being an ally. White allies are folks who just want to put up a sign on their door that says “I’m an ally” without actually doing the work. The idea that I’ve gone through a training, and therefore, I know everything there is to know is not enough. White people have to give things up. To just say, “I’m here for you, I’m here for you” without any action is an easy and intellectualized way to do equity work in higher education.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda and Dana share two very important points about how whiteness is maintained in higher education and why White leaders do not engage in racial equity efforts. First, whiteness is insulated within higher education because people do not have to “give something up.” In sharing about her experience serving on a diversity and inclusion committee with faculty members, Rhonda articulates that she and her colleagues, a group of well-intended White people, met regularly to try and advocate for racial equity in their college, yet they were unsuccessful because none of them had to give anything up in the process. They were enthralled with the idea of engaging with diversity and equity efforts but were not invested in developing tangible action steps to move things forward. As Rhonda shares, none of them had to give up anything or make any changes to their teaching or practice. They spent time talking in circles with no results. After spending hours talking about equity and inclusion, these White faculty members could get up and leave the space without any personal investment or

ownership. Unfortunately, committee meetings such as this are commonplace in higher education. We bring together a group of well-intended people from across campus or departments and set lofty, aspirational goals around equity and inclusion efforts. People typically leave the meeting feeling good about themselves, but there is no personal acknowledgement or ownership of having to give something up. In order for racial equity to truly happen, White people have to be willing to give up their power and control. Combine this white dominance with the bureaucratic structure and racist history of higher education and one can see the ingredients for structural racism and oppression.

Dana supports Rhonda's experience by sharing that White administrators find easy ways out of racial equity work by intellectualizing their stances or claiming to be experts on the topic. In a way, Dana is interrogating Patty's identifier as a self-proclaimed progressive without actually knowing it. Racial equity work has to be deeply personal, and White administrators must be willing to give something up in the process.

Mike: I think we should definitely talk about race more openly, but I think for my institution it's not open. There are some people within my institution that believe if we're to speak about some of these topics, it's going to require us to share personal opinions. When we do this, it could alienate or create a difficult work environment, particularly for some staff who may not agree with what we're saying or come from a different lived experience. On my campus we generally separate and segregate our professional and support staff in conversations about race. There's a perspective of, well, they're going to disagree, and they're not going to want to participate. I don't necessarily find that to be the case in talking with folks.

**Reflection Point:** Mike brings up an interesting point here about siloing support staff and "professional" staff members. I, too, have seen this take place when departments or a full division will intentionally not invite hourly staff including housekeepers, maintenance staff, office support staff, etc. The institution does not take a holistic approach to educating all faculty and staff members regardless of their position, salary bracket, or education level. This maintains oppressive structures because it further separates the "haves" versus the "have nots." The questions I am left with is: how might institutions develop curriculum and trainings for ALL levels of the organization to openly discuss topics of race while ensuring the delivery is equitable and accessible to the different target audiences?

Dustin: Thinking about your whiteness from a personal perspective, how does your white identity get in the way of doing racial equity work?

Rhonda: My whiteness gets in the way when I am not willing or able to push myself out of my comfort zone. I get hung up in my own whiteness. I defer too much on not wanting to get in other people's space and wanting to give them their privacy and space to organize. I have a tentativeness or apprehension of inserting myself into communities, and I'm not deeply investing in relationships with students or Colleagues of Color in the way that I want to be. It's a very internalized thing that happens, and at times my whiteness gets in the way of noticing things. I see more and more the way that my whiteness makes me interpret an interaction so differently than somebody else. It's the unspoken dynamics that I miss. Someone might make a very racially-coded comment, and I just completely miss it in the moment with no ill intent. My whiteness provides me blinders, and I have to push harder to educate and challenge myself even if I didn't notice anything. For example, unpacking a meeting or challenging conversation for myself by asking, "What was happening there, and was there something I didn't recognize in the moment?" I have to push myself to do that because there's a lot that I miss.

Dana: I think of my whiteness a little differently. The ways that we were raised and what we have been taught as White people gets in the way all the time. I have racist thoughts every day, and I can't stop my thoughts. We think we can easily stop them, but when we've been taught our whole lives that we're better than People of Color, it seems almost impossible. What I try to concentrate on

is the second thought. I internally say to myself, “Okay, I just had a racist thought... Why did I think that, where did it come from, and is it true?”

We’re going to make mistakes. You don’t always have time to think before you say something, and sometimes you say something and nobody else might recognize it as being racist, but you did. Then you think about it for the next three days and you say to yourself, “Why did you say that?!” I think my background and what I’ve been taught gets in the way of doing racial equity work.

Dustin: Thanks, Dana. Would anyone else like to share?

Mike: Well, we’ve been talking for like an hour, so I think clearly you’ve seen that I enjoy having these discussions. I care about these issues, but I struggle with my own self-confidence because I don’t want to be wrong. There’s nothing wrong with being wrong, that’s how you learn, but, I don’t want to be wrong for the wrong reasons. There’s a perception that if you’re the White guy, you should be right. That’s the thing that’s embedded in you. If you’re going to put yourself out there about this topic, you can’t be wrong because you’re stretching yourself thin on this, and that does concern me a little. I have to be careful because if I’m wrong, I could really lose some credibility. People respect me because I’ve put myself out there and the relationships that I’ve built with people and the work that I’ve done. It’s just, you know, always in your head.

**Reflection Point:** Rhonda shares that whiteness gets in her way of interpreting meaning of racially-coded language. She talks about the blinders that White people are automatically given so that we do not have to examine or discuss our whiteness. These blinders are a metaphor for colorblind ideology whereby White people do not “see” or recognize race, thus reinforcing the

notion of racism without racists (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). However, Rhonda practices self-reflexivity and pushes herself to look beyond the simple words by taking into consideration the racial dynamics of the situation and how it informs her interpretations of the world around her. Dana echoes this sentiment by sharing the importance of self-reflexivity and focusing on our thoughts and intentions.

Dana shares that they have been taught their whole life that White people are better than People of Color. Rather than trying to stop these thoughts, Dana focuses on unpacking their thought process to unearth the “why” of their thoughts, so they can transform their thoughts and actions in the future. Society is comprised of systems and structures that work to maintain white dominance and oppression. For both Rhonda and Dana, their whiteness gets in the way of doing racial equity work because of the socialization they have both experienced. To work through this, they both practice critical self-reflexivity to examine their whiteness in hopes of disrupting their preconceived ideas and assumptions.

Mike, the maintainer, is afraid to lose his credibility and reputation. As a White man, he is worried how other people will perceive him if he is wrong. He says that people respect him because he has “put himself out there.” Unfortunately, Mike fails to realize that he is centering his whiteness in his actions. He is afraid to challenge white norms because he might lose credibility in the process. This sense of entitlement and lack of self-awareness is an example of toxic whiteness and deepens Mike’s complacent attitude towards fighting for racial equity and inclusion.

Dustin: How is whiteness maintained in Higher Education?

Sam: At my institution, folks have the mentality that if you’re not Black, you can’t do this work very well. We end up hiring someone to come in and do this because people think we can’t do it ourselves. Earlier in my career it was sort of stifling because the institution was not going to invest in our White staff in this manner because it felt that we couldn’t present or train on these topics like People of Color can. Although I think there’s some absolute truth to that, to say that we shouldn’t be able to present, train, or educate on this topic means that we’re reinforcing the larger system and issue that’s causing all of this. Similar to what Rhonda shared earlier about working with Identity-Based Centers, if it’s always another office’s job, that’s problematic. I’ve gotten this feeling at all the institutions I’ve worked at. It’s the norm of, “Oh, that’s a

diversity issue therefore it's the Multicultural Center's concern. They can take care of that."

Dana: We have a lot of older, White, male faculty members who have been tenured for a long time and have a lot of political clout, and everyone is sort of waiting for them to go. It's frustrating that we allow a small number of folks to have so much power, but they do. I mean, they have a lot of weight and influence and power on campus, and so I think that hinders a lot of our efforts in being able to move things forward.

Rhonda: I think there's also this notion that we should treat everyone the same, and I think it's bullshit when people say that. I don't think that's good pedagogy. It means you were taught not to acknowledge difference. It's the idea of colorblindness. It's deeply problematic to say, "I don't see color," when you do, but you choose to ignore it. The idea of treating everyone the same means that you're not actually paying attention to the people in front of you. You're paying more attention to your ideas of who you think YOU are. Well, who's that about? That's about you, honey.

Patty: Well, and I don't think it's always as noticeable as that. It's little things that happen like when people want Students of Color to speak at events, they call me because of the program I oversee. I want to say, "Don't you know Students of Color? If you don't know Students of Color, why don't you? Why am I the only person you ever call?" I think to myself, is it because I'm white that they're okay with all these things?

<p><b>Reflection Point:</b> The participants share a variety of reasons how whiteness is maintained in higher education. Sam feels that his institution does not invest in racial equity training and</p>
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education for White people because institutional leaders perceive that White people cannot do the work as well as People of Color. He references Rhonda's previous comment about not always relying on staff members in Identity Centers to have to come "fix" diversity problems. This situation creates tension between the individual and institutional perspectives of who can and should be engaged in racial equity and inclusion work. What happens when White people are ready to engage in the work, but the institution does not allow space for this? How do institutions find a balance between not centering White people in racial equity work while at the same time not placing all the workload and burden on People of Color?

In Dana's response, they name what we see too often in higher education – old, White men maintaining their power and prestige under the guise of tenure. What expectations do tenured faculty have regarding racial equity and inclusion in their teaching, research, and practice? How do institutions reframe tenure to promote equity and inclusion work rather than use it as a tool to maintain power and political clout with an elite group? Rhonda infuses thoughts on pedagogy and teaching by sharing faculty promote colorblindness in the classroom because they want to treat everyone the same. In doing so, White faculty members center their own whiteness because they are more comfortable not engaging in racial equity conversations and reevaluating their curriculum to make it more culturally responsive.

Lastly, Patty shares frustration about White colleagues calling her to help them find Students of Color to attend or speak at events. This transaction between Patty and her White peers is grounded in the presumption that People of Color are property to be traded like commodities for the enjoyment of White people (Harris, 1993).

Dustin: Believe it or not, we've arrived to the last question of our dialogue today. I'm curious to know, when you speak out against whiteness or racial inequity, what's on the line?

Patty: I mean, my livelihood to some extent, right? In my current position, I don't have any job responsibilities or anything that is explicitly tied to diversity or inclusion. If I push too hard and it's not directly tied to my job responsibilities, it could result in me losing my position.

Mike: If I stand up against someone who might have differing values or morals, I might be perceived as a rebel without a cause. I might be trying to rock the boat. I think in those instances where credibility once existed, perhaps it's now questioned. Then I start questioning myself like, Mike, why are you thinking this?

Dana: I think it's normal to question yourself when doing this work. I often feel like a rebel without a cause. Something that's on the line for me, and is sometimes difficult, is navigating relationships. You have to be okay with losing or changing relationships, and it's not always easy to be okay with that, especially when it involves your family. You have to figure that out. It's going to happen, so you have to be willing to sacrifice some relationships in doing this work.

Rhonda: I have a very personal example to share. I almost forgot about it because it was so traumatic, and I try to forget it. *[Rhonda takes a deep breath.]* I was at a Predominantly White Institution a few years ago when another unarmed Black man was shot and killed by a local police officer. We had a small, Black student population on campus, but because we were an under-resourced public institution, there was no multicultural student resource center or an obvious dedicated space on campus. I knew that our students were going to be hurting, and I also knew that it would not be obvious where the safe spaces would be on campus. Our counselor on campus was a Black woman, and so the next morning after this murder happened, I was in her office to check on her and also to ask, "What should we be doing for students?" We quickly brainstormed and decided that we were going to send an all-campus email letting folks know that there would be some group counseling sessions in a neutral location on campus, and we were very clear in the wording that this was not a space for White students right now. I gave my Vice President a heads up about the email, and he approved it but never actually read the email

to know what it was going to say. So, we sent the email to all students on campus, and it went public and was posted all over social media. This was a small town, and I got phone calls from people who didn't even know me. They called me a bigot and said that I was making things more divisive when I should be bringing people together. They said, "What about the White students who are hurting right now? What about people who have police officers or law enforcement in their family? You're alienating them." I think what made it worse was the campus conversation that unfolded. The administration sent a follow-up email dismissing my email, which Students of Color knew what that meant. It meant that this wasn't supposed to happen. We weren't supposed to have this resource. White students got mad and the response was that quick. I think that's the thing that was the worst. My intentions in providing Students of Color with a resource became another opportunity for them to be reminded that the institution wasn't for them.

Dustin: Why do you think the administration sent that follow-up email?

Rhonda: They sent it because of white pressure. They sent it because of white fragility - their own white fragility and our students' white fragility. It was the need to protect the institution's reputation, protect donors, and ultimately protect White people.

Mike: It seems like you're at a better institution now where you can make a difference.

Rhonda: Yeah, but I have so much guilt about my time there. I know that I didn't do anything wrong, but I went in there and stirred shit up for two years and then

got to leave. I still had privilege to leave. I hadn't scorched the earth so much that I could still get a job somewhere else, and I had financial means to do so. I've never felt guiltier about leaving an institution because I knew what the institution learned from me was how to screen out candidates like me in the future.

**Reflection Point:** This portion of the dialogue highlights the difficulties that the participants have in challenging racial inequities at their institutions. For some of the participants this means that they could lose their jobs or their reputation could be tarnished. For others, it means leaving their institution due to a lack of commitment towards change. Ultimately, each participant has to determine how hard they are willing to push, and what is on the line when doing so. For Patty, the self-proclaimed progressive, she is willing to challenge things at her institution but to the extent that she does not lose her job over it. Mike is more focused on his reputation and credibility. He does not want to be viewed as a "rebel without a cause." Therefore, he takes a more passive approach.

Rhonda, the risk taker, shares a vivid story of how she navigated a difficult situation at her former institution, which ultimately led to her departure. She directly names how white fragility and pressure influenced the institution's decision to retract Rhonda's campus-wide email in solidarity with People of Color. By sending a follow-up email, the institution prioritized the safety, desires, and feelings of White people at the institution over People of Color, thus reinforcing white solidarity (DiAngelo, 2018). Rhonda finishes her story with stating that the institution now knows how to "screen out candidates like me in the future." When institutions take this approach to hiring practices they seek to replicate white norms and complacency. Essentially, the underlying message becomes, "We do not have a diversity problem so stay in your lane." This underlying message perpetuates white dominance in higher education and seeks to recreate whiteness as socially acceptable (Cabrera, 2012).

Dustin: Thanks, Rhonda. This work is difficult and messy, and I appreciate you being vulnerable with us to share that. I'm curious if anyone else has experienced barriers from doing this work. Would anyone else like to share?

Patty: I'm someone who is very comfortable talking about race in informal conversations with individuals or in structured discussions like one-on-ones or in the classroom. I'm comfortable in most types of environments. From a campus perspective, we tend to do better when we participate in dialogues around national events, particularly when those national events aren't

occurring on our campus. We can talk about race as long as it doesn't involve any of us.

Dustin: Can you share an example of this?

Patty: I think about a number of national events involving police shootings or the nationalist comments that President Trump has made on Twitter. I think those were easier conversations to lean into with some of our students who are feeling very challenged by that. However, the same topics related to race, power, and privilege were much more difficult when we were having discussions on our campus related to free speech issues.

Sam: My campus has had a lot of protests around racial equity, and it has felt like an "us versus them" mentality. It has created an environment that feels really othering of our students as being the problem as opposed to really looking at the root of the issues that they were bringing up. This year, we have not had any campus protests, and I hear a lot of talk from administrators about things being so much better and how good it is. However, I am actually seeing and managing more bias incidents and concerning behavior this year than any year that I've been here. It's concerning that the marker of how we're doing as a campus and whether or not there are racial issues that we need to deal with is based on students having to sacrifice their emotional well-being and putting themselves at risk by protesting rather than administrators actually seeing the dynamics of what's going on.

Dana: Sam, I feel the same way about my campus. There's an "us versus them" feeling, and the work falls on the shoulders of our Students of Color. It

shouldn't have to be them that makes change. It's just one more thing on their plates when they're here to be students. Something I really remember during a sit-in a few years ago on campus is a student saying, "Students of Color are teaching administrators how to do their jobs." By giving us a list of demands of what students think should happen here, they're basically giving us a blueprint for how to fix the inequities that are happening on campus. Why should students have to do that?

Dustin: Thanks for sharing, Dana. Indeed, we shouldn't place the burden back on our students or Colleagues of Color to "fix" these issues. We have a responsibility to take action on our campuses. With that said, thank you all for your engagement in this dialogue on whiteness. I appreciate your openness and honesty throughout our conversation and hope that it was a reflective and meaningful space for each of you. Thank you.

**Reflection Point:** The participants discuss barriers that exist from engaging in racial equity and inclusion work. In particular, Patty states that proximity can be a barrier at her institution. When racial equity issues arise, it is easier for White people to engage in conversation and interrogate the issue when it does not take place on their campus or in close proximity to them. When racial issues happen on campus, such as free speech topics, White people feel targeted and become defensive in the conversation. White fragility kicks in when racial topics become too personal or hit too close to home (DiAngelo, 2018). This becomes a coping mechanism for White people – keep race conversations objective and at arm's length, so I do not have to critically think or become emotionally tied to the situation. It becomes too messy, and White people disengage from the issue.

Sam and Dana share a similar stance in how their institutions position Students of Color to have to carry the brunt of racial equity work on campus. It becomes an administration (us) vs. students (them) environment. Students of Color are further minoritized and viewed as the "problem" rather agents of change. As Sam shares, the marker of success for how institutions measure racial equity efforts should not be at the expense of students' emotional well-being. Rather, institutions must take responsibility and actively work towards transformative change.

**Focal point 4 summary.** The final focal point of this dialogue, "*Giving Something Up*," provides further insight into the complexity of how White higher education

administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. The characters shared stories about how, when, and why they chose to speak up for racial equity and inclusion at their institutions and barriers associated with this work. Theoretical perspectives of colorblind ideology and whiteness as property emerged as topics in this section of the dialogue. Furthermore, the concept of white fragility continued to flow throughout the dialogue, as the participants reflected and examined their own positionality in relation to whiteness. Ultimately, the characters had to determine for themselves how hard they were willing to push and fight for racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. Some characters were willing to “give something up,” while others chose to remain silent or complacent in their whiteness.

In this chapter, I brought together the five composite characters described in Chapter 4 and created a dialogue on whiteness using a blended model between critical transformative dialogue and creative nonfiction. The dialogue was developed directly from participant interviews and was framed around four focal points: 1) *Navigating Spaces as an Insider/Outsider*; 2) *Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment*; 3) *Developing White Racial Authenticity*, and 4) *“Giving Something Up.”* As evidenced in the literature, transformative leadership involves recognizing current barriers to inequity so that they may be resolved, thereby creating an opportunity for equitable relations and systems (Shields, 2010). The focal points used to frame the dialogue in this chapter provide insight into the approaches that White higher education administrators take to navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. By utilizing a transformative dialogue approach, the phenomenon of whiteness was examined to expose its normativity, fluidity, and complexity in higher education. In the following chapter of this dissertation, I weave together existing

literature on critical race perspectives and the white scripts outlined in chapter 4 to analyze and discuss the findings of this study.

## **Chapter 6: Interrogating Whiteness through Analysis and Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how White higher education administrators navigate and position themselves in relation to racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. In order to accomplish the goals of this study, the following research questions guided my inquiry:

1. What role does white racial identity play in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts?
2. How do White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution?
3. In what ways do White higher education administrators' approaches to racial equity and inclusion efforts offer insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices?

In this chapter, I extend the analysis from the reflection/analytical points in the previous chapter and offer a more detailed discussion using the three realms of racism (Helms, 1993) outlined in the literature found in Chapter 2 of this study. I bring together existing literature on racial equity and critical whiteness to further interrogate the phenomenon of whiteness, as it relates to the higher education environment. Guided by critical theoretical perspectives on race and Critical Whiteness Studies, I found that the ten White higher education administrators interviewed for this study used several different modes or discourses to navigate racial equity efforts at their institutions. In order to explicate the White administrators' positionalities and viewpoints, I developed five composite characters, as described in Chapter 4, that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and perspectives related to the phenomenon of whiteness. From there, I placed

the five characters in dialogue with one another using four focal points as the framework: 1) *Navigating Spaces as an Insider/Outsider*; 2) *Challenging Institutional Barriers and Misalignment*; 3) *Developing White Racial Authenticity*; and 4) “*Giving Something Up.*” To do this, I blended critical transformative dialogue with creative nonfiction to illuminate the complexities of whiteness and how White administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts based on their white privileged identities. The heart of critical qualitative inquiry is about recognizing power dynamics in order to shed light on the taken-for-granted perspectives that perpetuate unjust and oppressive social conditions (Canella & Lincoln, 2012). These taken-for-granted perspectives are hidden and deeply embedded within individual ways of thinking and societal norms and structures. Leonardo (2004) supports this claim by sharing that although whiteness was created centuries ago, White people recreate it on a daily basis at both the individual and institutional levels. Whiteness and racism do not operate in a vacuum. They are all around us at every level of human interaction and decision-making and are embedded into the cultural norms of higher education. Beverly Tatum (1997) refers to this as racial smog. In the following section, I illuminate the smog that exists at all levels of human interaction and discuss how White administrators can begin to disrupt the smogginess of higher education.

### **Whiteness as Smog**

The literature that framed this study (Helms, 1993) outlined three different types of racism: individual, institutional, and societal/cultural. The individual realm distinguishes personal beliefs, values, and behaviors that exist to convince individuals that White people are better than People of Color. The institutional realm incorporates policies, expectations, and norms that serve to maintain power structures and systems of inequity between racial

groups. Lastly, the societal/cultural realm promotes an ideology of whiteness in which White culture is reproduced through individuals and institutions. This includes language, the commercialization of whiteness as beauty, and educational systems (Helms, 1993). Owen (2007) provides further direction from the literature by stating:

Whiteness, understood as a structuring property of the social world can, however, be exposed, challenged, resisted and disrupted. And this is precisely why a greater degree of clarity is necessary concerning what whiteness is and how it functions in the reproduction of the system of racial oppression. (p. 205)

Tatum (1997) states that whiteness, or the assumed superiority of White people, is reaffirmed through cultural images and messages and is like smog in the air. At times, “the smog is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as ‘smog-breathers,’ but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?” (p. 6). Indeed, there is no way to avoid breathing in the smog. We all live, work, and operate in a society that is structured by whiteness, and higher education like most institutions, is deeply embedded within the smog, and the smog is deeply embedded in higher education. We are all socialized into a smoggy society, and people are suffocating and running out of air. Most White people do not strive to be racists, so why would we not work to eliminate the smog (i.e. racism)? Rather than dismissing or avoiding the smog, we must name it and work to get rid of it. As Sam shared during the dialogue in Chapter 5, “There’s a mentality that we don’t have a problem with racism and that it’s over.”

This study sought to explicate the dynamics that exist within higher education using a lens of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). It bears repeating that the dismantling of structural

whiteness is different from white privilege. Focusing solely on white privilege provides a narrow approach because it examines the “who” of whiteness and not the “how” of whiteness (Levine-Rasky, 2000). Taking a critical whiteness approach means examining and dismantling the structural and systemic components that sustain whiteness as the dominant ideology. In order to begin removing the racial smog described by Tatum (1997), we must attack the societal and institutional hegemonic structures and norms that exist to maintain white dominance *and* individual, daily acts of racism. To do this, I begin with a discussion on the individual realm of whiteness using Watt’s (2007) Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model and then move to the institutional and societal realms of whiteness. Finally, I interweave all three realms of whiteness by introducing a white counter-script known as Cam, the critically conscious White administrator. This counter-script assists with the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices for other White administrators working in higher education.

### **Exploring Individual White Identity**

The first research question that guided this study asked the following question: What role does white racial identity play in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts? As evidenced in the grounding literature in Chapter 2, whiteness is nearly invisible to those who hold a privileged white identity because we are not forced to examine our whiteness in daily interactions (Frankenberg, 1993). Furthermore, White people have an option to engage or disengage in racial discourse, whereas People of Color do not have this option (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Consequently, if White people can opt-out of engaging or reflecting on their race, it may be difficult for White higher education administrators to think about their white racial identity and how it impacts their

daily work. Here I use the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model developed by Watt (2007) as a theoretical framework to analyze and answer the first research question of this study and to bring whiteness to the forefront of reflection. I chose this model because it aligns with current literature on critical whiteness, specifically DiAngelo's (2018) work on white fragility, and it seeks to explore *how* privileged identity groups react and engage in equity and inclusion topics. This is precisely what the first research question of this study seeks to answer, and the model provides a nice launching pad for detailed discussion into the findings. Furthermore, to the discredit of many researchers, I believe that lots of research about race and whiteness are inaccessible to most people outside of academia because we use academic jargon and difficult words to describe complex concepts and theories. The PIE model provides an accessible way for readers to enter the conversation about race and explore how they fit into the systems and structures of whiteness. Using this model as an analytical tool, I situate the five composite characters inside this framework to further explain how their white racial identities impact their engagement in racial equity and inclusion efforts.

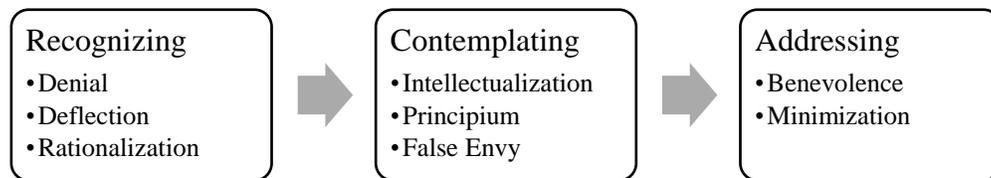
The PIE model, grounded in psychodynamic theory, was designed to understand how individuals from privileged identities react when learning about and engaging with diversity and equity topics (Watt, 2007). In the context of this study, I position engagement as how White people react, respond to, or resist topics of race based on their white racial identity. Fear and entitlement are central components of the PIE model and are used to explain the challenge for individuals to engage in critical dialogue as well as a critical exploration of their privilege (Watt, 2007). As discussed in the literature on Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), the nature of whiteness is such that those who benefit from it do not notice its

existence unless they are explicitly taught to do so (McIntosh, 1988). One's white racial identity confers both explicit and implicit privileges at the individual and systemic levels. Explicit whiteness emerges in the form of white privilege and provides White people with automatic, unasked for advantages simply for being white, something McIntosh (1988) calls an "invisible knapsack." Implicit whiteness is more difficult to identify and interrogate. Implicit whiteness is grounded in hegemonic structures and norms and defines reality. It is invisible, yet it has real impacts on our cultural norms, institutions, and daily life (Leonardo, 2004). Thus, teaching White individuals to recognize and engage with their whiteness requires them to make the invisible visible.

In using the PIE model as a framework for analysis, I attempt to make the invisible visible by discussing how the composite characters' white racial identities inform how they engage (i.e. react, respond, or resist) racial equity and inclusion topics. For example, this could include how White administrators respond to their White peers during a staff meeting when difficult topics of race are discussed. This could look like resistance in the form of refusing to change a hiring policy or process because the White administrator wants to ensure they hire someone that is a "good fit." Lastly, engagement could manifest in how White administrators react when they are challenged by Students of Color about a racist incident that took place on their campus. Regardless of the situation, the goal is for White administrators to become critically aware of how their white privileged racial identity shapes their engagement with racial topics, and how they can actively work against racism. To assist with this analysis, Watt (2007) identified three categories of behaviors one exhibits when exploring their privileged identity: 1) Recognizing, 2) Contemplating, and 3) Addressing. Under each behavior there are 2-3 modes often displayed in difficult dialogues when one is

being encouraged to reflect on their social and political position in society (see Figure 6.1). These behaviors and modes work in tandem with one another to capture how people from privileged identity groups engage or do not engage with difficult topics. Based on an individual's level of self-awareness, one might use several of these modes or none at all. In the following sections, I situate the five composite characters in the context of this framework to illustrate the role that white racial identity plays in how White higher education administrators engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts. I begin with the recognizing behavior of denial and move along the spectrum outlined in Figure 6.1.

**Figure 6.1 – Categories and Defense Modes from the Privileged Identity Exploration Model (Watt, 2007)**



**Denial.** Denial occurs when a person thinks that racism or whiteness does not exist. Denial can occur in both direct and indirect ways such as making contradictory statements about the realities of race (Watt, 2007). In many cases, denial comes in the form of White people defending privilege instead of recognizing the consequences of their privilege. The character who exhibits the most consistent modes of denial is Mike, the maintainer. Although Mike never comes right out and says “racism does not exist,” he contradicts himself often throughout the dialogue. Mike names what it means to be a “good” White person by stating, “For me, it means being perfectly on the team, to not talk about anything controversial, to stay in your lane and not be disruptive... I think it means to be quiet and not ask too many questions... don’t be deviant, don’t be delinquent. Stay in the box.” Ironically, Mike genuinely thinks that he is disrupting normative behaviors, yet his words and actions paint a

different picture. He fears losing his credibility and reputation with colleagues and students. This is evidenced when he shared, “I struggle with my own self-confidence because I don’t want to be wrong. There’s nothing wrong with being wrong, that’s how you learn, but, I don’t want to be wrong for the wrong reasons.” Mike’s fear of being wrong places him in denial of the racial realities happening in higher education. Consequently, he centers his whiteness to feel safe, secure, and confident. Another mode often paired with denial is deflection. I describe the deflection mode below and provide an example of it in action.

**Deflection.** A deflection mode means taking the realities of race off of the individual and placing it on something or someone less threatening (Watt, 2007). White people tend to deflect topics of race when it becomes too personal or hits too close to home. They perceive racism as something that is so overt that there is no way they play a part in it. Therefore, when White people are faced with racial tension, they deflect their emotions onto something else. This is exemplified in a point made by Sam:

A lot of White people acknowledge that racism exists, but their definition of racism is based on White folks in costumes carrying pitchforks and torches. They see the extreme view, like perhaps a lynching, as the only definition of racism. There’s not a willingness or acceptance to recognize that there are smaller and cumulative things that are compounding the same series of situations... When racism happens right here on campus, it becomes too close to talk about. If we’re going to question things, it’s going to require a whole lot of work. Perhaps the idea is that we’re not ready to do the work or maybe we’re not motivated to do the work.

When racism “becomes too close to talk about” on campus, White people deflect the issue and pivot the conversation towards something else. For example, so often when a racist

act happens on a college campus, it is immediately denied and deflected as an isolated incident and the message becomes focused on unity and the “celebration of difference” rather than naming the racist act and working to dismantle it. When White administrators take this approach, they not only reify whiteness but also dismiss the experiences of Students of Color. The last mode under the Recognizing category is rationalization. While the denial and deflection modes tend to be more obvious, the rationalization mode is sometimes harder to notice, especially when the individual’s intent is meant to be good. I describe this approach in the following section.

**Rationalization.** The rationalization mode takes place when a person attempts to compare and contrast experiences in order to resolve their own cognitive dissonance (Watt, 2007). In many cases, White people who use the rationalization mode shift the conversation to focus on minoritized parts of their identity so that they do not have to critically explore their privileged white identity (Watt, 2007). Rationalization is highlighted in the story shared by Rhonda about the White, female administrator ignoring the voices of Women of Color on her team about a program on racial justice. When the administrator realizes that her team is not in favor of her idea, she begins to cry and waits for the Women of Color in the room to console her. She weaponizes her white tears (Accapadi, 2007) to maintain control and rationalize the dissonance she is feeling. DiAngelo (2018) refers to this as the discourse of self-defense whereby White people rationalize their discomfort and white fragility by playing the victim role or feeling “attacked” based on their white racial identity. Consequently, the rationalization mode allows White people to scapegoat out of the conversation and disengage without owning their whiteness. The next mode, intellectualization, is often used to support rationalization when discussing racial topics. Intellectualization draws our attention to the

Contemplating category of the PIE model when the individual begins thinking more deeply about race and how it relates to social injustices (Watt, 2007). As such, I explain this mode in the following section and provide an example from the findings of this study.

**Intellectualization.** The intellectualization mode is identified when a White person avoids emotional attachment with race and crafts intellectual arguments to explain why racial injustice is happening (Watt, 2007). The avoidance of emotional connection to injustice enables privileged individuals to remain unaware of the “depth or breadth of social oppression” (Goodman, 2001, p. 29). This intellectualization mode is modeled in how individuals perceive their role in advocating for racial justice. This mode is witnessed in how Sam, the Structuralist, approaches his work with racial equity through a structural and more intellectual lens. He feels more responsibility to advocate issues rather than people, which could create the avoidance of emotional connection. Specifically, Sam articulated how he views racial equity work using an intellectualization lens by saying, “White people love to have checklists, and we love to know how to solve a problem. Give me the racist issue, and I will solve it. If I can’t, I will find somebody who can.” This idea that racism can be easily “solved” is an intellectualized way of thinking and creates a detachment from real world issues impacting People of Color. By responding with an intellectualization mode, White administrators understand the breadth at which racial oppression exists but are unaware of the personal realities of people directly impacted. As indicated in his *White Script* in Chapter 4, Sam has a deep knowledge of systems and structures that uphold whiteness, and he understands how these systems are interconnected to perpetuate racism in society. However, he uses the intellectualization mode to engage in racial equity efforts because he struggles

with how to be in community with People of Color. Consequently, he focuses his attention on intellectualizing racism, so he maintains his credibility and seat at the table.

The next mode shifts from the intellectual to the moral in which White people defend their whiteness based on something larger than themselves. The principium mode is often difficult to combat because the White individual deeply believes that their way of thinking is morally right. I describe this mode in the next section.

**Principium.** The principium mode is most commonly used by White people to avoid topics of race based on a core value, such as religious or personal beliefs (Watt, 2007). Mike uses a principium defense while sharing his experience about an incident on social media when someone called him racist. He shares that he immediately got defensive, but after more self-reflection, he settled on the idea that, “if someone chooses to call me racist, that’s their opinion. That’s their thought. I know in my own heart and mind that I’m not racist.” Rhonda, the risk-taker, follows-up on Mike’s comment to say that he is trying to play the “good White person” card. As White people, we take racial criticism as an attack on our moral character. The principium mode reinforces the good/bad White person binary. White people do not want to be perceived as a “bad” White person, and if they are, they play the victim in their response (DiAngelo, 2018). White administrators in higher education have to listen and receive feedback openly and honestly from People of Color and their White peers about how their actions and behaviors are being oppressive. Just because someone’s intent was harmless does not take away the real emotions or impact of racial realities. Dana provides a strong example of how they led with their values and pushed back against White norms by not tone policing a Woman of Color on her staff. Although Dana had to give the employee difficult feedback on her performance, Dana was critically aware of the racial dynamics at play and

felt it would be dehumanizing to place the employee into a box of being an angry Black woman. Therefore, Dana navigated the conversation with an equity mindset while addressing the performance issue. White administrators can learn a lesson from Dana's example about the importance of leading with an equity mindset. They should be conscious to not engage in superficial discussions of race described in the next section as false envy.

**False envy.** The false envy mode takes place when White people display public admiration for People of Color, yet they avoid deeper exploration of the complexities of race (Watt, 2007). Racial interactions remain surface-level, and White people remain content with their own racial reality. The false envy mode is most prevalent in Patty's identity and actions as a self-proclaimed progressive. In an attempt to show support and solidarity with People of Color, her actions only perpetuate whiteness. She tries to separate herself from the "bad" White people without looking inwardly at her own privileged white identity. She gets easily frustrated with her White peers because she thinks they should be doing more. Patty's false envy approach is evidenced in her dialogue about being a White woman in her sorority, and she states that it takes time to build relationships with the Women of Color in her sorority. She is fully aware that she takes space away from the Women of Color, yet she attempts to distance herself from other White people. Patty shares:

I do take space away from Women of Color. There are very few spaces where they can be by themselves and just talk and not have to put on that shield... I have tried to tell myself that it takes time, and if someone doesn't want to work with me or trust me, it's not about me. I'm not going to stress about it. It's about other White people who have ruined People's of Color perceptions of White people and rightly so. Who am I to come in and tell them they shouldn't think so?

Patty practices the false envy mode by not situating herself in the issue. She points the finger at “those” White people who have ruined her ability to develop trusting relationships with People of Color. She shares these feelings while at the same time acknowledging that she is taking up space for Women of Color. This mentality is what keeps Patty “self-proclaimed” because she fails to effectively connect her intent with her impact. White higher education administrators should constantly take stock on the impact they are having with racial equity and inclusion efforts. Questions such as, “Why am I making this decision, whom does it benefit, how are racial dynamics implicated in this, whose voices or insights have I considered before making this decision?” are important to constantly ask ourselves. When critical questions such as these are not explored, White administrators could invoke a false envy mode, thereby replicating whiteness, and also enforce the mode of benevolence.

**Benevolence.** The benevolence mode manifests as “acts of goodwill” from White people to People of Color. In an effort to show support, White people become overly sensitive towards racial topics and provide charity to minoritized people rather than exploring power dynamics and their own whiteness (Watt, 2007). The benevolence mode can also be associated with Freire’s (1970) concept of false generosity – the notion that generosity hides behind egotism and paternalism and, as Freire writes, it can fail to question systems of oppression or the reasons why some are able to give “generously” while others are the “unfortunates” in need of help. In the benevolence mode, White people support People of Color not because they want to critically engage with their whiteness, but rather because White people want to feel good about themselves. This benevolent approach can be dangerous when engaging in racial equity work because it could further legitimize and reinforce racist attitudes, policies, and practices in the name of supporting, empowering, or

defending People of Color (Esposito & Romano, 2014). We see this benevolent approach represented in Mike's dialogue about the time he helped prepare the President of the Black Student Association for a meeting with the University President and a member of the Board of Trustees. Mike takes a benevolent approach to advising the student leader by helping her "understand that she was going into a room with a bunch of White people," and "to understand some of the norms of how to shape her conversation, so it wouldn't abruptly stop." Depending on the full context of the conversation between Mike and the President of the Black Student Association, Mike could actually be taking the power away from the student by sending her subconscious messages to "act white." While his intention is to empower the Black student leader on how to navigate the political and bureaucratic structures of higher education, he should be conscious not to reify whiteness in his actions. There is a difference between preparing Students of Color with the social and cultural capital needed to succeed in higher education versus advising them to follow the established white norms. Indeed, providing students with the social and cultural capital is important in order for them to navigate the hegemonic structures of whiteness in higher education. However, administrators should be critically aware of when this crosses the line from empowerment to complacency. When we advise students to "fit" into white norms, it means we are too afraid to challenge whiteness under the guise of benevolence. White administrators should constantly find ways to cultivate the voices of Students of Color and ensure they have a solid understanding of the racial barriers and challenges that exist while at the same time empowering their voices and ideas. This "act of goodwill" that the benevolent approach aims to give should be constantly scrutinized to ensure that whiteness is not reinforced in higher education. The final mode of the PIE model is minimization and seeks to replicate whiteness

by trying to distill racism into simple solutions. I explain this mode in the next section followed by a summary of the PIE model.

**Minimization.** The minimization mode attempts to reduce the impact or importance of racial equity and inclusion efforts into overly simple explanations (Watt, 2007). Much like benevolence, White administrators engage in minimization in order to control the dominant narrative and minimize the racial realities of People of Color. White administrators who take the minimization approach do so to play it safe. This safety perpetuates an epistemology of ignorance in which people choose to remain racially blissful (Mills, 1997). By oversimplifying racial equity efforts, White administrators do not have to dive deep into understanding the root causes or issues of injustice. The minimization approach can be seen in Patty's dialogue when she chooses to be racially blissful by stating she has a "White lady question" and expects People of Color to educate her. Although she allows them to use an "ejector seat out of the situation," her entry point into the conversation does not safely allow for this. Patty also takes a minimization approach in the dialogue when her White colleague touched a Student's of Color hair, and Patty educates her about why it was not appropriate. The minimization does not take place during the actual incident itself, but rather, in the exchange between Patty and Rhonda in the dialogue circle. After Patty chuckles to herself about her story, Rhonda challenges her by asking if her colleague actually took what Patty said to heart. Patty minimizes the importance of holding other White people accountable by saying that she did her part as an ally. This one-and-done mentality aligns with the minimization approach of the PIE model, as if racism is easily eradicated with one challenging conversation with one White person.

Utilizing Watt's (2007) PIE model, I discussed each of the eight modes that inform how people from privileged identity groups engage in challenging dialogue around race and used examples from the findings of this study to discuss how White higher education administrators are situated within the discourse. Self-awareness was a key component of how individuals navigated these eight modes, which was framed around the three overarching categories and behaviors of Recognizing, Contemplating, and Addressing. Consequently, it is critical for White administrators to practice self-reflexivity in order to understand how their white racial identity impacts their leadership in higher education. The process of becoming self-aware of one's own whiteness, making meaning of their white racial identity, and developing realistic and positive actions for engagement is the first step in disrupting White supremacy in higher education (Lawrence & Tatum, 1999). Too often, White administrators perpetuate white dominance because they do not take time to read, engage in dialogue with others, or simply stop and reflect on their actions. The goal should never be to deny one's own white racial identity, but rather to develop critical consciousness so that White administrators are deeply aware and in-tune with *how* they show up in spaces and *why* they choose to engage (react, respond, or resist) in racial topics.

The PIE model serves as a reminder that developing critical consciousness is a continuous process aimed at disrupting inequitable systems and structures of power and privilege (Watt, 2007). In the following section, I shift my analysis and discussion from understanding participants' white racial identities to focusing on how White administrators navigate structures and systems of racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions.

## **Disrupting White Normative Behaviors in Higher Education**

Up to this point, I have outlined my discussion in a way that gets at personal and individual dynamics of whiteness. Here, I move from individual to institutional analysis to get at the ways in which higher education functions around whiteness. To move beyond individual actions, one must understand whiteness as systemic and make the invisible visible by examining the institutional structures that recreate racism (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). These structures and cultural practices inform how racism and whiteness operates within institutions and must be understood as something greater than individuals (Hall, 1990). By shifting focus to the institutional and societal realms of whiteness, I begin to answer the second research question of this study: How do White higher education administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution? To answer this research question, I used the literature and critical theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapter 2 as a backdrop for further analysis and discussion. These theoretical perspectives served to unpack and question epistemological (ways of knowing) and ontological (ways of being) assumptions, values, beliefs, and ideas of whiteness in higher education. In other words, I brought theory to life by discussing how whiteness manifests in higher education, as experienced by the participants in this study. Consequently, by examining the findings of this study against a critical theoretical framework, new knowledge and meanings were created and explored. In the following sections, I utilize the composite characters to discuss and analyze the approaches, perspectives, and strategies that the participants in this study took in navigating racial equity efforts at their institutions.

**Race traitors.** Several of the participants in this study shared personal stories and experiences of when they leveraged their White identity in order to challenge their White

peers and push the status quo. This finding was highlighted primarily through Rhonda and Dana's composite narratives. Rhonda and Dana are constantly navigating spaces as a white insider and outsider. Being a white outsider means being intrusive and drawing attention to racial inequities that may not be as visible in conversations or decision-making. Some White administrators, like Rhonda who challenge the status quo too hard, are perceived as a race traitor by their White peers. Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) coined the term race traitor which promoted the idea that "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity." As such, a race traitor is a person who is perceived as supporting attitudes or positions that go against the dominant views and interests of their own race. Being a white outsider means disrupting hegemonic norms of whiteness and constantly challenging your White peers to think more critically about their implicit and explicit whiteness. Consequently, the concern is that White administrators who are perceived by their White peers as race traitors are labeled as "too risky" to invite into certain spaces. This is in direct response to structural whiteness in which White people do everything they can to maintain dominance and prestige. We do not want People of Color holding us accountable for our actions, and we certainly do not want another White person – a race traitor – to tell us that we are racist. Rhonda acknowledges that she, as a White administrator, has access to certain spaces and is viewed as credible, therefore, making it easier for her to challenge other White people. Her Colleagues of Color, on the other hand, are positioned differently and may feel tokenized due to their race. Thus, they cannot be as intrusive as Rhonda. Rhonda's approach to being intrusive is unabashedly direct. She is not afraid to explicitly name racism and White supremacy when it becomes hidden or sugar-coated, and she leans into discomfort. However, Rhonda reminds us that there is a delicate line of not being a White savior or thinking "I'm here, and I get it." White

administrators have to actively challenge other White people and not be afraid of racial conflict. We have to be willing to be uncomfortable to ask uncomfortable questions. As we see in Rhonda's character, this approach might be viewed as risky by her White peers. This provocative behavior is one strategy that can lead to the disruption of whiteness.

Dana, who is also viewed as somewhat of an outsider by their White peers, navigates discussions of racial equity in a different way. Rather than a direct, in-your-face approach, Dana enters the conversation in a more collaborative manner. They are still developing self-confidence in naming racism and whiteness, but they leverage their relationships with others to create space for People of Color. An example of this is when Dana uses their whiteness by working in collaboration with their Colleague of Color to help her gain access to meetings that she would not have otherwise been invited to attend. Dana uses their white advantage to be an accomplice with her Colleague of Color. Similar to Rhonda, Dana recognizes racial dynamics and actively works to fill the gaps caused by racial inequities. In several cases, both Rhonda and Dana are viewed as outsiders by their White peers. When they challenge their White peers, they are viewed as a traitor to other White people. It is important to note, however, that being an outsider could be viewed as problematic, as Rhonda and Dana will never truly be outsiders because of their white identity. Not only do race traitors challenge individual White people, they push back against hegemonic ideology that perpetuates whiteness. Two examples of this are white insulation and the "whiteness as politeness" frame. I discuss both of these in the following sections and provide direct examples from the findings of this study.

**White insulation.** The findings of this study support what Critical Whiteness Studies scholar Michelle Fine (1997) describes as white insulation – the concept that whiteness

accrues privilege and status and gets insulated with resources, unearned benefits, and credibility. This insulation is evident in Mike's composite narrative. Mike maintains his whiteness through complacency and conformity. Although outwardly he supports equity and inclusion efforts at his institution, his actions or inactions keep him safely in the realm of insider. He expects credibility from his peers and students, and when racial issues emerge, he retreats from the spotlight in order to maintain his white dominance. In addition, Mike subconsciously maintains his whiteness because he finds comfort and safety in groups with people who have similar thoughts about topics related to equity and inclusion. This approach reinforces white solidarity and racial bonding by not having to expose the advantages of whiteness. "To break white solidarity is to break rank," (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 58) which we saw from Mike when he chose not to approach his White supervisor about making a racist remark. Mike emerges from the shadows of silence only when he feels safe that he will not be directly challenged on racial topics or when the conversation becomes objective or non-personal. In summary, Mike represents key elements of DiAngelo's (2011) theory of white fragility. His defensiveness, complacency, and objectivity keep him safely positioned in his leadership role in higher education. In addition to white insulation, some White administrators take a "whiteness as politeness" stance, which seeks to reinforce white complacency. In the following section, I discuss this racial frame using existing literature and expand on it using the findings of this study.

**Whiteness as politeness.** In navigating racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions, some White administrators embrace a "whiteness as politeness" complacency viewpoint, as evidenced in existing literature and the findings of this study. McIntyre (1997) states that White people imbue a "culture of niceness," which she asserts is a mode of white

talk that avoids any talk of whiteness and racism. McIntyre (1997) presents “white talk” to explain and label the coded language used by white people to avoid critically self-reflecting on their own racialized worldviews. White talk manifests itself as the uncritical acceptance of biased comments through speech tactics. McIntyre explains that the tactics of white talk of: derailing the conversation, evading questions, dismissing counter arguments, withdrawing from the discussion, remaining silent, interrupting speakers and topics, and colluding with each other (McIntyre, 1997).

Indeed, a normalized phrase we hear often in society is, “If you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” Cultural norms such as this are intended to maintain power dynamics, and when situated in racial discourses, these norms manifest as white silence and power. This norm was further demonstrated in Mike’s experience with his supervisor, who tended to misname Black staff members on a regular basis. Rather than addressing this action with his supervisor, Mike took a “whiteness is politeness” approach and chose to remain silent. Mike did not want to make his supervisor feel bad about misnaming Black staff members, but in doing so, he was protecting whiteness by remaining silent. As DiAngelo (2012) notes, “white silence functions to shelter White people by keeping their racial perspectives hidden and protected” (p. 5). Consequently, the silence implies agreement and thereby allows for behaviors to continue. Because Mike chose to remain silent and not address his supervisor’s behavior, it is very likely that his supervisor will continue to misname and mislabel People of Color. Mike’s positionality as a White male leader within his Division provided him the power and social capital to disrupt this racist behavior. Instead, Mike’s white fragility got in the way, and he invoked the “whiteness is politeness” racial frame. In learning from Mike’s experience, White administrators can break

the silence and speak up when we see racial microaggressions or behaviors take place. To do this, White administrators have to move past our own white egotism. In the following section, I provide further discussion on how whiteness is maintained in higher education by describing institutional misalignments shared by the participants in this study.

**“We don’t have a race problem.”** In discussing institutional misalignment, some participants expressed feelings that their campuses were diverse but not inclusive. In particular, Dana talked about their experience working at a Hispanic Serving Institution with a very diverse student and employee population, but the institution did not focus efforts to increase awareness and knowledge around racial equity. There was an institutional belief that because the campus community was racially diverse, there was no need to have conversations about racial equity. Dana shared how several White administrators at their campus perceived racial equity by saying, “If the institution had a ‘race problem,’ Students of Color would not apply to the institution.” Higher education institutions tend to approach diversity in the domains of numerical representation, environment, activities, equality in human resource management, admissions, and curriculum (Anderson, 2008). This institutional viewpoint can be detrimental in promoting and cultivating racial equity on a college campus. This approach does not support an equity framework. In fact, it reinforces metrics and numbers and becomes a checkbox for diversity. Dana recognized the importance of viewing their work through an equity lens but was frustrated that their institution took a more passive approach to equity and inclusion efforts. Institutions should be mindful that when they take a passive approach to racial equity and inclusion efforts, it could lead to further marginalization of People of Color through racial tokenization.

Racial tokenization, or the practice of using People of Color to prevent criticism or give the appearance that diversity is important (Kelly, 2007), was illustrated in Sam's story of the Communications and Admissions Office using Students of Color disproportionately in their marketing materials to lure prospective Students of Color to their campus. In this case, diversity became a checklist of numbers rather than a transformative approach towards inclusion. Another example of racial tokenization was when Mike shared that his institution struggled to retain Staff Members of Color because they felt that they were racial tokens. Mike went on to say that they were not tokenized, but they were asked to serve on additional committees "and all that kind of stuff." From a critical whiteness perspective, Mike appears to dismiss the feelings of the Staff Members of Color by reframing reality to fit his own white racial lens. As a White man, Mike's reality is clearly shaped by whiteness. When he makes this comment, although perhaps unintentional, he is reifying whiteness as the ultimate truth and reality. This is also an example of whitesplaining, or the way in which White people patronizingly explain how a Person of Color does not know enough to accurately articulate their own experience (dictionary.com). Unfortunately, this happens too often in higher education and is usually in response to a White person being called out for committing a microaggression or making a racist comment. Although it may not be the person's intent, whitesplaining and microaggressions further marginalize and tokenize People of Color. In order to disrupt whiteness in higher education, White administrators should be aware if/when they are tokenizing People of Color. Another form of hegemonic whiteness that might be more difficult to acknowledge is race-neutrality, which I discuss in the following section.

**Combating race-neutrality.** White administrators seek to maintain white dominance when they take a race-neutral approach to racial equity and inclusion work. Race-neutrality is

part of colorblind ideology except that color is noticed but not given meaning (Crenshaw, 1997). All of the participants indicated that they had to navigate discussions of race on a regular basis. Most of the time, the topic of race was hidden under the veil of another topic or was only discussed in private settings. In some cases, race was not to be discussed because it could have become divisive and separate others. This was evidenced in Rhonda's example of how the Athletic Department at her institution viewed discussions of race. In an effort to build unity and teamwork among the student athletes, the department took a color-neutral approach to racial equity and inclusion work. Although the student athletes represented a higher proportion of Students of Color than the student body, the Athletic Department wanted all athletes to be the same. As is represented in the literature on critical whiteness, this new colorblind ideology is the presumption or assertion of a race-neutral social context (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). In this situation, the Athletics Department was aware that racial differences existed; however, they embraced a race-neutral position because they were afraid that discussions of race would separate players and become divisive. This meant that color was noticed but was not seen or given meaning (Crenshaw, 1997). Mica Pollock (2004) termed this avoidance as colormute. In her research, Pollock found that educators in a high school and California school district avoided talking about racism, despite the existence of numerous racial disparities among students. She coined the term colormute to emphasize the ideological scaffolding that White people use to justify their decisions when opting not to address or name race. In practice, colorblind means not willing to "see" race while colormute means acknowledging racial difference yet choosing to actively remain silent. Pollock (2004) states:

All Americans, every day, are reinforcing racial distinctions and racialized thinking by using race labels; but we are also reinforcing racial inequality by refusing to use them. By using race words carelessly and particularly by deleting race words, I am convinced, both policymakers and laypeople in America help reproduce the very racial inequalities that plague us (p. 4).

Colleges and universities think it is safer to take a color-mute stance because they do not want to upset anyone - especially those in positions of power. A color-mute approach is part of higher education's cultural norms because White people feel like discussions of race are too risky and will become divisive. Rather than approaching our work with a "we don't have a race problem," White administrators should approach our work using an equity-mindset. In order to do this, we cannot hide behind a race-neutral or color-mute shield. We have to explicitly name race and make transformational change to our underlying systems and structures that work to maintain dominance. This shift in ideology and mindset is a key difference between diversity and equity. At the core of this transformational change is authentic relationships. I explore this in the next section using the focal point of *Developing White Racial Authenticity* from Chapter 5.

**"Everything is about race, but not everything is about race."** The phrase "everything is about race, but not everything is about race" comes directly from a participant in this study to mean that White administrators should aim to strike a balance between being comfortable in their whiteness and engaging in authentic relationships with People of Color. White administrators should strive to lead using an equity-minded lens to name, understand, and interrogate structural racism while at the same time being in community with People of Color. This finding was evidenced in the focal point of *Developing White Racial Authenticity*

in the Dialogue on Whiteness and is further highlighted at the intersection with white fragility. White administrators must understand how their white privileged identity impacts their relationships with People of Color, and how these relationships influence their engagement with racial equity efforts. White administrators can no longer tiptoe around racial dynamics, as if they do not exist. Rather, they should openly explore race and whiteness in their work. Rhonda shared that early on in her identity development she, “thought about marginalized communities in a sort of othering way. I viewed them as communities that were experiencing challenges, yet I wasn’t able to make that mental connection to the system of whiteness that I am part of.” Rhonda takes a critical perspective of her white identity by looking at it through a personal and systemic lens. As she examined her own racial identity, she came to better understand her whiteness in relation to her other identities and People of Color. This helped her find a balance of “being deeply rooted in relationship-building and seeing that as core to equity work *and* having a very systems-level strategic approach to the work.” Rhonda made whiteness visible through critical examination of her own white identity. In doing so, she now approaches her work through an equity-minded lens.

**Developing white racial authenticity.** Viewing People of Color as the “other” is a barrier to relationship-building. In order for White administrators to develop racial authenticity, a deep level of trust and humility should be exchanged between the White administrator and the Person of Color. Racial authenticity and trust cannot emanate from one side only. Otherwise, it risks becoming transactional and one-directional. To develop racial authenticity means that the relationship between the White administrator and Person of Color is transformative and power is equitably shared between both parties. It is grounded in

mutual trust, humility, and empathy, yet there is a common understanding of the racial dynamics at play. White racial authenticity dismisses ideologies of colorblindness or race-neutrality and removes white egotism. This approach to developing racial authenticity is grounded in bell hooks' (2006) "ethic of love" philosophy. In describing an ethic of love hooks states:

Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle (p. 244).

Developing white racial authenticity acknowledges that, "everything is about race, but not everything is about race" in the name of love and justice.

Too often, white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) gets in the way of engaging in racial equity and inclusion work. The participants presented several instances when their white fragility was a barrier to engagement. In many cases, the participants' white fragility was implicit, and they were unconsciously sustaining white dominance in their roles. Rhonda refers to this as "blindness" in which her whiteness gets in the way of noticing things or makes her interpret an interaction differently. For example, she shares that, "Someone might make a very racially-coded comment, and I just completely miss it in the moment with no ill intent." These blindnesses that Rhonda refers to are a metaphor for colorblind ideology and help keep White people safe in the comfort of their own whiteness.

White comfort results when White people choose to bask in the glory of their complacency rather than challenging their preconceived ideas of race. White comfort ultimately means safety of White people, so they do not feel any kind of cognitive dissonance

(DiAngelo, 2018). White comfort and fragility are further supported in Watt's (2007) research on the PIE model, as described previously in this chapter. Sam describes his white comfort when he shares that it is easier for him to talk about race when he is in mostly white settings. "It is easier not to confront something or push the topic of race when I'm surrounded by other White people because we have a common experience. We share a similar entry point into the conversation." Furthermore, white comfort is instilled in institutional culture when it is easier for White people to discuss racial topics that are not in close proximity to them, both emotionally and physically. Patty highlights white comfort at the institutional level when she says that from a campus perspective, the institution does better when, "we participate in dialogues around national events, particularly when those national events aren't occurring on our campus. We can talk about race as long as it doesn't involve any of us." When institutions choose not to engage in racial topics on a personal level, it feeds into white comfort because it allows race to remain an abstract, objective idea that White people do not see themselves embedded within. To overcome institutional white comfort, White administrators should ask themselves when and how do topics of race come up on campus? Who are the primary communicators and organizers of these racial issues? If White campus affiliates (i.e. students, administrators, faculty, and staff) are not somehow engaged in these processes, then the institution is at risk of reifying whiteness by placing the burden back on the shoulders of People of Color. To shift this culture, institutions should work to interrogate the power dynamics that uphold these injustices. I provide an analysis and discussion of these power dynamics at the institutional level as well as individual power dynamics in the form of professionalism.

## **Interrogating Power Dynamics**

Power dynamics were another barrier that the participants discussed navigating. As discussed in the literature on critical theory, power is a concept that manifests in myriad ways. Due to the hierarchical nature of higher education, power is typically exhibited in a one-way social relation whereby one side has “power over” over another (Giddens, 1981). This dynamic is visually represented in organizational charts and department settings. Power dynamics exist across the institution (i.e. faculty-to-student, top-down decision-making by a Board of Trustees or College President, etc.) and serve to reinforce whiteness. Rhonda provides examples of how whiteness is maintained in higher education through power dynamics. She shares that although White senior leaders at her institution say things like, “My door is open” or “I want Students of Color to feel comfortable with me,” there remains a lack of interrogation of the power dynamics that exist in these relationships. Higher education institutions are intrinsically hierarchical, and systems of shared governance can be complex. If White administrators want to truly transform their institutions and make them more equitable and inclusive, they should aim to move past transactional, one-way interactions with Communities of Color. An example of this is when White administrators send out a mass survey to collect feedback or host a focus group to gain insight into inclusion efforts on campus. So often, White administrators maintain the status quo by simply throwing together a survey and using the results in their end-of-year reports without actually examining the results to inform their practice. Several of the participants in this study highlighted that in order for change to happen, there has to be commitment from the top around issues of equity. The University President does not have to have all the solutions, but there has to be a commitment early on because racial equity and inclusion work is messy and

complex. As Sam stated, “If there’s any second guessing from the top, that’s when we end up backtracking and maintaining status quo. That’s when we make surface-level nods toward diversity but don’t actually do the more painful work of a deeper cultural shift and structural changes.” Indeed, surface-level decisions will not shift a culture or challenge deep rooted white norms. These “nods toward diversity” are perpetuated when White administrators create an imaginary sense of urgency in decision-making. In doing so, they reinforce the existing power dynamics and seek to maintain control and dominance over a situation. This sense of urgency makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive and to encourage democratic or thoughtful decision-making. This sense of urgency makes decision-making clear to those with power and unclear to those without it (Okun, 2010). Another way to dismantle power dynamics in higher education is to examine norms and expectations around professionalism.

**Whiteness as professionalism.** White power and dominance also manifest through formal structures of rules and expectations in higher education. Expectations serve to drive consistency and provide control to those in charge. An example of structural rules and expectations that several participants discussed was the topic of professionalism.

Professionalism is a social construct anchored in whiteness that permeates all levels of an organization and throughout social spaces. Often, professionalism is dictated by social stereotypes and predetermined roles based on people’s race, sex, gender identity, or class. Professionalism is deeply embedded in white culture by the ways in which higher education policies and procedures are written to benefit White people. Sam describes the concept of professionalism in higher education as something that is expected and linked with whiteness. Professionalism means not showing your emotions in the workplace, and if you do show your emotions, they better be supported with data or good reasoning. Sam shared that when

he shows emotions, it makes some people feel uncomfortable, as if he is oversharing. Yet, people still value his opinions and thoughts and do not outcast him from the group because he is white. On the other hand, when People of Color show emotions or passionately respond to an issue, they are perceived as unprofessional. As Sam articulates, “They’re told to calm down, or they’re not permitted or asked to share their thoughts because they’re viewed as too emotional or unprofessional.” Respecting authority at work and the expectation that People of Color should embrace white culture, even when it is at odds with who they are, perpetuates white dominance. When People of Color do not assimilate to white professional norms (i.e. work style, attire, etc.), their work ethic and credibility are called into question. Rhonda provides an example of this by sharing:

Whenever there is a norm around doing certain things in a timely manner, I often see the way that expectation is not held consistently between White people and People of Color. A Person of Color might get a really snarky email from the business office about something being turned in late, and as a White person, I could be late doing the same thing and I get a really polite response or a gentle reminder. It’s the same professional expectation, but we’re not held to it in the same way.

White professional standards and norms reinforce respectability politics, which demand that People of Color go out of their way to assimilate into the dominant white culture in order to be successful in the eyes of White people (Obasogie & Newman, 2016). The problem with respectability politics is that it implies that by striving for the respect of White people, People of Color can work hard and overcome structural barriers of racism (Obasogie & Newman, 2016). This can be extremely problematic because it removes the very real power dynamics that come with structural racism and provides a false sense of security to

People of Color. Respectability politics asks the people being harmed by racism to change in order to stop being harmed by the racism. In order to disrupt white professional norms and respectability politics, all people should “interrupt the cultural gaze” (Fine, 1997, p. 64) of the discourse about racial equity and inclusion. “Interrupting the cultural gaze” means shifting the focus from People of Color to the structural realities of whiteness in order to disrupt white dominance. To do this, White administrators have to be willing to “give something up.” I discuss this finding in the next section and provide an analysis using literature on allyship and interest convergence.

**“Giving something up”.** The phrase “Giving Something Up” served as a focal point in the dialogue on whiteness and centers around the notion that White administrators have to be willing to practice critical self-reflexivity and actively give something up in the process towards racial equity. This theme was explicated in Rhonda’s dialogue about her experience serving on a diversity and inclusion committee in the College of Education. Rhonda shares that the committee, comprised of “well-meaning White folks,” met regularly to discuss ways to make their teaching and practice more equitable. However, nothing tangible ever came from it. She says, “None of us had to give anything up to change things... or actually fight any fight. We could talk our well-meaning White people talk as much as we wanted and say, ‘Oh, isn’t it a tragedy?’ and then go to lunch and back to the world as it was.” In the fight for racial equity and inclusion, White administrators have to be willing to give up their power and control. Yet, the majority of White administrators are fearful of giving something up. Bell (1980) refers to this as interest convergence theory.

Bell (1980) conceptualized interest convergence to mean that racial equality and equity for People of Color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the

interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of White people. Using this theory, I believe that interest convergence is alive and well in higher education today and implicitly embedded in the psyche of White administrators. As one participant acknowledged, “There are times where it benefits my whiteness to advocate for equity. For example, offering help to Students of Color because I want them to become reliant on me.” White people’s desire for People of Color to have to rely on them manifests in very real ways. White administrators may carry with them an internal mindset of, “What’s in it for me?” while trying to be the best White person they can be. This was illustrated in Patty’s dialogue when she asked a Person of Color to join her in a conduct board hearing with a Student of Color because she “wanted it to end well.” By asking a Colleague of Color to join her in the hearing, she places the burden back on Folks of Color, so she can feel more at ease during the interaction with the student. Ultimately, her decision is not centered around supporting the student, but rather Patty’s own white comfort and interest. I now extend the discussion of interest convergence to incorporate allyship. Consequently, I challenge the concept of allyship and encourage White administrators to become accomplices with People of Color.

**Allyship and interest convergence.** A contested topic in relation to interest convergence theory is allyship. White administrators might be motivated to get involved with racial equity efforts because they seek opportunities to receive positive feedback from People of Color and their White peers. When White administrators, particularly White men, get involved with racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions, they tend to receive visible praise or accolades for joining the fight. This was evidenced in Patty’s dialogue when she shared:

I actually get kudos from other people for being the White person who is engaged in this work. It feels weird, but I've also had a Colleague of Color say that they appreciated me. They wanted more White people to help take this on.

It is common for White administrators to receive praise about being an ally for racial justice efforts based upon their ability to “walk the talk” and for being someone who “gets it” even when their engagement and follow-through is subpar. This type of engagement is reflective of interest convergence. White administrators are more likely to engage in racial equity efforts when their personal needs are being met in the form of rewards, accolades, or immediate results, and when they do not have to do much work or take responsibility (Patton & Bondi, 2015). In these cases, People of Color are left to carry the burden of their own oppression. Most notably, when racial equity work gets difficult or heated, White administrators have the power and privilege to simply walk away when their own interests are threatened or no longer being served (Patton & Bondi, 2015). Allyship grounded in interest convergence facilitates whiteness and maintains White supremacy. Being a true ally for racial equity means “staying in the anguish of being a problem” (Applebaum, 2015, p. 2). As Rhonda shared, allyship does not mean that White people show up because they want to save someone or because they have all the answers. White administrators should move past the notion of allyship and aim to become accomplices *with* People of Color. Being an accomplice means building capacity and empowering others and not centering ourselves in the work. For White people, “giving something up” and being an accomplice means clearly naming racial dynamics, denouncing how whiteness works, shedding light on the structures and norms that maintain it, and giving up our power in the fight for racial equity (Harden & Harden-Moore, 2019). In some situations, being an accomplice means thoughtfully

challenging our Colleagues of Color when their words or actions are counter to racial equity work. This process was perhaps the most difficult for the participants to name and disrupt. Some White administrators chose to back down while others chose to push back. I discuss this dichotomous process in the section below.

**Backing down or pushing back.** The participants in this study shared that they experienced the most difficulty in speaking up about racial equity and inclusion when their perspectives and approaches differed from their Colleagues of Color. Specifically, three of the characters – Patty, Dana, and Rhonda – shared stories of when they were in meetings with Colleagues of Color, and they experienced discomfort when their colleagues had a viewpoint that was counter to racial equity work. As Dana shares:

Those are the moments that aren't the riskiest, but the moments that I feel the most uncomfortable. It's those instances when my own understanding of racial dynamics and White supremacy conflict with the folks who theoretically are the most impacted by it, but I also have to understand that People of Color are not a monolith.

When issues such as this arise, it creates dissonance for White administrators. Some administrators choose to remain silent and back down from the situation, such as Patty. Others, like Rhonda, lean into the discomfort and continue to push for racial equity, regardless of people's racial identity. Even though Rhonda articulates that it is uncomfortable to push back, she says that, "There are times when I know I have to." This dichotomy between backing down or pushing back is anchored in ideological perspectives. Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) argues that racism is a system that impacts everyone, not just individuals. We are all part of the hegemonic structures of whiteness, White people *and* People of Color, that exists within a social, political, historical, and economic context (Doane

& Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Therefore, we are all subsumed in white ideological ways of knowing and being in the world (Frye, 1983). These ideological beliefs are perpetuated through socialization at the individual (parenting, friendships) and institutional levels (schools, religious affiliations, media) and enacted in our daily lives through our language, behaviors, and decisions.

Remember, whiteness does not just refer to skin color, but rather it is grounded in ideological beliefs, values, and attitudes, which result in the unequal distribution of power and privilege based on skin color (Frye, 1983). If one does not fully understand the dimensions and structures of whiteness, it might be assumed that People of Color are outside the hegemonic systems of whiteness. The result, therefore, is dissonance, confusion, or discomfort, as was witnessed in the participants of this study. The difficulty lies in *how* and *when* White administrators navigate challenges such as this and choose to push back on their Colleagues of Color, if at all. The key question becomes: How does one push back on systems of whiteness while at the same time honoring individual Peoples of Color lived experiences and perspectives? I believe the answer lies in relationships. Embodying racial equity and inclusion means taking the time to make room for personal stories, voices, and experiences. At the same time, White administrators need to have a strong understanding of how whiteness and racism are structured at their institution and within society. This allows us to better understand and connect with the person's experience.

White administrators have to always keep in mind that "People of Color are not a monolith," as Dana shared. One individual person is not the spokesperson for their whole race, gender, religion, social class, LGBTQ+ community, etc. In the stories shared by the participants, Patty and Dana's white fragility kicked in when they became uncomfortable

with pushing back against their Colleagues of Color. In doing so, they embraced the monolithic viewpoint as told by their Colleague of Color. This approach could serve to reify the ideological beliefs of whiteness. Let me be clear, however; I am not suggesting that White administrators push back on our Colleagues of Color every time they disagree with us about whiteness and racism. In fact, that would be dismissive to their perspectives and experiences and would only re-center our whiteness in the conversation. What I am suggesting is that White administrators not be afraid or uncomfortable leaning into difficult conversations with their Colleagues of Color even when they may disagree on the outcome or results. When a Colleague of Color says something that is counter to racial equity and inclusion, we should deeply listen to what they are saying because that is their truth and reality. Courage and growth lie in the process of mirroring the gaps back to our Colleagues of Color, not with the intention of dismissing their truth or reality, but with the hope of situating the issue in the context of the racialized norms of whiteness. This process takes humility, authenticity, and a deep awareness from the White administrator of how they are positioned within the space.

Using Dana's story as an example of when they were presenting at a Deans Council meeting about racial justice programming, and the Faculty Council President, a Black man, interjected and shared the following viewpoint that was counter to racial equity and inclusion:

You know, I come from a generation where you respect the police, and what we need to do is teach people to respect the police. The media doesn't show the videos of the part where people are being disrespectful to the police. What do you expect them to do if you're mouthing off and not following directions? The media just goes around

and cherry picks these incidents to play on repeat. It really doesn't happen that often. We have to support our police.

In reflecting on this experience, Dana could have responded with:

I appreciate what you shared about the media, and I agree. The media does inform so much of how we view racial justice, whether positively or negatively. In talking with our Students of Color on campus, it is clear that they are deeply impacted on a personal level by what is happening locally and nationally. I wonder how we might support them individually and collectively, rather than relying on the media to shape our decision?

Rather than remaining silent, this response allows Dana to further engage the Faculty Council President in deeper dialogue about ways to address racial justice issues on campus. It also acknowledges that Dana heard what the person was saying but also names how the media perpetuates norms and stereotypes. Most importantly, the response focuses on the actions needed to support Students of Color on campus, rather than focusing the conversation on the Council President's views of the media.

The last portion of this chapter builds on the momentum from the first two sections of discussion and analysis and turns them into opportunities for action. In the following section, I introduce a counter-script on whiteness to answer the third research question of this study: In what ways do White higher education administrators' approaches to racial equity and inclusion efforts offer insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices? I begin by re-anchoring this work in the literature and frame the counter-script around the three realms of racism discussed by Helms (1993). From there, I discuss ways in which White administrators can integrate praxis into all levels of this model.

## **A Counter-Script on Whiteness**

As stated previously in Chapter 2, the invisibility of whiteness, particularly to White people, makes it incredibly difficult to identify, challenge, and transform (Cabrera, 2009). Consequently, there is limited empirical research about how White supremacy shows up in higher education and how it manifests in un-interrogated spaces (Cabrera, 2012). This study expands upon existing knowledge and literature on whiteness in higher education by providing new research on how White administrators operate within the structural systems of whiteness and how they can begin to work towards dismantling these hegemonic and racist systems at their institutions. In this final section, I answer the third research question that guided this study by offering insight into how White administrators' approaches can inform the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices. To assist with this process, I revisit the *White Scripts* outlined in Chapter 4 and offer a counter-script to those narratives. The purpose of this counter-script is to challenge unquestioned assumptions that maintain white dominant ideology and to provide White administrators a guide for how to integrate critical consciousness into their work.

The character, Cam, represented in this counter-script is a role-model for other White people and illustrates ways in which White higher education administrators can develop and engage in issues related to racial equity and inclusion at their institutions. Although gender was not formally the phenomenon under study, it is important to name that whiteness and gender are deeply entangled with one another (Ferber, 1998) and inform how White administrators engage and navigate whiteness in higher education. This came to life in the findings of this study during the creation of the composite characters in Chapter 4. Both Mike (the maintainer) and Sam (the structuralist) were composites of two of the male-identified

participants in this study. Cam, the forthcoming counter-script, is represented from interviews with the female-identified participants in this study. In fact, when I first began writing this counter-script, I named the character Claire and used she/her pronouns because I saw a greater sense of critical consciousness in the female participants. However, I made the intentional decision to change the character's name to Cam and use gender inclusive pronouns (*they/them*) so that all White administrators, in particular White men, might see themselves reflected in Cam, regardless of gender. Using an intersectional approach is important in the process of educating fellow White administrators because they will hear things differently coming from a White man versus a White woman or gender non-conforming colleague. This extra layer of privilege provides White men with even greater access to power and decision-making at their institutions. Consequently, it is important for White male administrators to remain critically conscious of how we experience this work and the level of access granted to us based on our privileged racial and gender identities.

This counter-script is based in the most critically conscious moments expressed by some of the participants in this study and incorporates the literature on critical whiteness. This is not to say that Cam is *the* perfect White administrator. Rather, it is about embracing the imperfections and messiness of this work while knowing that mistakes will be made. Consequently, the goal of this counter-script is to empower White higher education administrators to take action toward racial equity and inclusion at their institutions and to inspire them to continue to develop critical consciousness. As the discussion on the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model supports, those of us with a privileged racial identity should constantly reflect on our whiteness with the hope that it will take us to deeper levels of understanding. This counter-script provides an opportunity to practice self-

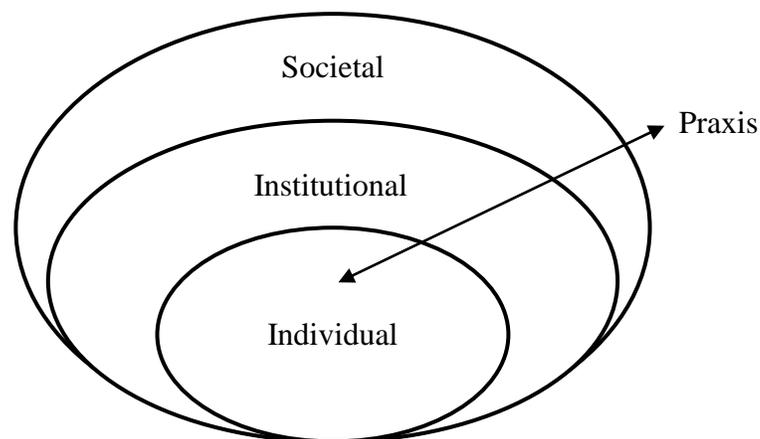
reflexivity and offers ways in which White administrators can become racially-just leaders. Lastly, this counter-script serves as a reminder of the challenges that White administrators face while trying to make intentional decisions in the fight for racial equity at their institutions. In the following sections, I introduce Cam and discuss how their approaches as a White administrator can inform the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices for other White administrators working in higher education. The sections are framed around the three realms of racism found in the literature – societal, institutional, and individual (Helms, 1993). I introduce each realm with a brief overview of the literature that framed this study and served as the backdrop to this counter-script. The counter-script is outlined in the text boxes below to illustrate how Cam navigates racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institution. I begin the counter-script with an introduction of Cam’s background and their commitment to engaging in praxis in their daily work.

### **Cam: The Critically Conscious White Administrator**

Cam, the character for this counter-script, represents the ideal critically conscious White administrator working in higher education. Cam (*they/them*) works at a public, research institution of around 20,000 students located in a rural setting in the Midwestern region of the United States. They have worked in higher education for nearly fifteen years and has progressed in their career to now serve as Dean of Student Success at their institution. They supervise a racially diverse staff of around 20 people and advises numerous academic student groups. In addition to their professional role, they are actively working towards their Doctorate in Educational Leadership. Cam is viewed by both their Colleagues of Color and White colleagues as a leader who is deeply engaged and invested in racial equity and inclusion efforts on campus and within the community. As one Colleague of

Color said, “Cam is not afraid to get their hands dirty and engage in tough conversations. They welcome voices from all perspectives and is critically conscious of their identity as a White person.” The term critical consciousness, or conscientization, was coined by Freire (1970) to explain an individual’s ability to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 17). Freire (1970) argued that only through the interdependence of critical reflection and action can one be engaged in authentic, sustainable transformation, which he referred to as praxis. Cam is a White administrator who is critically aware of their whiteness and is able to effectively integrate praxis into their daily practice at all three realms (see Figure 6.2) to make positive change on their campus and in society. However, critical consciousness is no easy task. It takes commitment and a willingness to unpack and sometimes unlearn what one has always believed to be true. In the following sections, I delve into the three realms that inform Cam’s praxis in higher education. Utilizing my theoretical framework from Chapter 2, I use the literature to layout the distinctions between the individual, institutional, and societal levels of racism that manifest and structure whiteness. I start with an introduction of the distinctions between each realm and then embed the counter-script to illustrate how Cam navigates the

**Figure 6.2 – Integrating Praxis into Daily Practice**



various realms of whiteness that play out in higher education. Consequently, this provides implications into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices for other White administrators working in higher education. I begin with a discussion on the societal realm of whiteness and how Cam navigates this process.

**Societal realm of whiteness.** As evidenced in the literature found in Chapter 2 of this study, whiteness is a hidden norm that structures society and shapes our ways of knowing and being in the world (Frye, 1983). We are socialized into a system from the moment we are born that perpetuates systems of racism by providing White people with the power and privilege to define truth and reality for all people. Consequently, White people are inculcated into whiteness long before they become administrators in higher education. Exposing White administrators to topics of critical whiteness and White supremacy has the potential to shift whiteness from the universal, raceless norm to the raced particular (Foste, 2017). As such, administrators are encouraged to situate discussions of whiteness within larger frameworks of institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Leonardo (2009) recommended that administrators move beyond discussions of white privilege (i.e. skin color) to consider not only the status of being dominant but the process of dominance that secures privilege. Let's now get a glimpse into how Cam navigates their whiteness at the societal realm...

**Cam:** As a critically conscious White administrator, I often reflect on the racial realities that have influenced my life history and how those experiences translate into my work in higher education. Like so many of my White peers, my first experience related to understanding racial difference was reading and learning about People of Color. It was not until my Graduate Studies that I started learning about my own whiteness and how racism is deeply embedded in society. I think to myself often, "Why did it take so long for me to learn about *my* own white racial identity?" Because I have so much left to learn, I often engage in learning opportunities such as professional development conferences, readings, and interpersonal dialogue with friends and Colleagues of Color to better understand how their upbringing and experiences are different from my own. I do not expect People of Color to teach me about race. Instead, I actively seek

information to educate myself about my own whiteness and how I have benefited systemically and personally as a White person. In doing my own homework, I understand how engrained and intrinsically linked racism and White supremacy are in society. Because of this, I can easily shift conversations about individual acts of racism to larger systems that all White people are responsible for challenging (Foste, 2017). I recognize how harmful systems of whiteness and racism are for ALL people. After I started learning more about whiteness, I moved past the stage in my development of thinking about race from a place of saviorism or thinking I always have something to contribute. I realize that I have many gaps and so much left to learn about my whiteness. However, being white does not mean I'm here to "save" People of Color.

As DiAngelo (2018) explains, "We come to understand who we are by who we are not" (p. 11). Cam tries to flip this paradigm by reframing the way they learn about People of Color. Furthermore, Cam views racial equity and inclusion as an integrated part of their life. Racial equity work should not stop the moment you drive away from campus. In fact, that is when it should be the strongest. Society has told White people our entire lives that we are better than People of Color. It is clear that whiteness is working exactly how it was designed – to sustain and reinforce dominant white racial ideology. This ideology carries over into our personal and work lives and subconsciously informs our decision-making and interactions in higher education. In the following section, I explore Cam's praxis of racial equity at the institutional level and continue to provide insight into how these approaches can inform the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices.

**Institutional realm of whiteness.** The institutional realm of whiteness addresses topics related to institutional policies, programs, and practice. As discussed in the previous section, whiteness frames societal structures and institutions with the goal of replicating White supremacy. Unfortunately, educational institutions serve as a springboard for whiteness to exist and flourish in society. Beginning in K-12, children are taught how to maneuver and succeed in society based on white norms. Most notably are the ways in which

history lessons are whitewashed to intentionally leave out topics of race such as slavery, the massacre of indigenous people, and immigration. By whitewashing our history, people become race-less, thus promoting an ideology of whiteness. Furthermore, Students of Color are taught “proper” ways of speaking in order to assimilate into white culture. This teaches Students of Color early on that in order to make it in life, they have to straddle between two realities - their own reality and the reality of White people. This straddling process is enforced in K-12 and carries into higher education. Since the founding of higher education in the United States at Harvard University in 1636, whiteness has been embedded in the fabric of institutional decision-making and campus cultures (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005). These white cultural norms greatly impact students’ educational experiences and serve to replicate, intentionally or not, the existing racial paradigm of White supremacy (Hurtado et al., 2012; Gusa, 2010).

As evidenced in the findings of this study, race remains a difficult topic to discuss on college campuses, especially among White people. Many White administrators, such as Mike and Patty, want to remain polite and be perceived as a “good” White person, so they do not often discuss race in the context of their whiteness. Cam, on the other hand, is a leader who does not tiptoe around conversations of race. In fact, they encourage and promote discussion and dialogue about race with their staff and students, as highlighted in the counter-script below...

**Cam:** I believe it is important to explicitly name race and racial dynamics in spaces, whether in staff meetings, hiring committee meetings, etc. I’m a big fan of being explicit about race rather than implicit. I think when things are implicit, there’s lots of ways to use euphemisms and “niceness” to not really get anything done. I think that there are plenty of committees and task forces out there that are meant to get consensus before moving decisions forward, but to everyone who has been here for a while, they seem like stalling tactics.

One way that I try to make race dynamics explicit is by integrating experiential learning

activities focused around racial equity and inclusion into staff meetings. For example, I invite my team members to compile a list of resources (articles, videos, books, podcasts, photos, etc.) centered around the topics of race, oppression, whiteness, and privilege, etc. From there, I bring these resources and topics into staff meetings to prompt dialogue and reflection. While participating in these dialogues, I constantly think about how my positionalities, as both a White person and as the leader of the department, inform my interactions in the space. I think about how power dynamics are playing out and flowing amongst the team. Throughout the dialogue, I do very little talking, and when I do speak, I try to always use “I” statements to take ownership of my words and actions. I understand that, as a White person, I have a choice about whether or not to engage in uncomfortable conversations about race. People of Color do not have this option. Regardless, I always choose to actively engage in conversations about race and do not complain about how “hard” it is. By complaining, I would only be centering myself and dismissing the needs of People of Color. I try to be very mindful not to center myself in racial issues.

When White administrators lack commitment or racial consciousness, conversations of race are superficial and half-hearted at best. This is evident when White administrators view racial equity work as being siloed within a Multicultural Office or Identity-Based Center on campus. This reinforces the notion that People of Color have to “fix” their own oppression while White administrators dictate instructions from the top of the ivory tower. For example, when a racist act takes place on campus, administrators scramble around trying to ensure that the issue is viewed publicly as an isolated incident and that the institution is a safe space for everyone. This is typically followed by a public email to all students, faculty, and staff with something along the lines of “we do not tolerate hate on our campus.” White administrators then rush to spaces where Students of Color hang out (i.e. Identity-Based Centers, multicultural student organizations) to comfort students and Faculty of Color in hopes that they will be perceived as “good” White administrators. Although this act is intended to show an ethic of care for People of Color, why is it that White administrators wait until a racist act takes place on campus to communicate the importance of racial equity

and inclusion or to engage with Students of Color in their spaces? It is not enough to advocate for racial equity only when a racist incident takes place on campus. This is a reactive response that many perceive as insincere and as a tactic to protect the institution's public image.

**Cam:** Unlike my White colleagues, when a racialized incident takes place on campus, I do not try to deflect the impact on People of Color by trying to claim that it was an “isolated incident.” Rather, I make it a point to get out of my office and build connections with Students of Color and ask them how they would like to be supported versus assuming I, as a White person, know how Students of Color need to be supported. Consequently, there are times when People of Color need to be in community with one another, and I acknowledge that those spaces aren't for me. People of Color need spaces where they can be their authentic selves without White people's judgment, and I don't take this personally.

While in committee meetings with faculty and staff colleagues, Cam recognizes when they are taking space and voice away from People of Color. Not only do they recognize when they are doing this, they actually do something about it in the moment.

**Cam:** When topics of racial equity and inclusion emerge in group discussion, I intentionally take a step back to allow my Colleagues of Color to share their personal experiences or ideas. In doing so, I listen with humility about how my Colleagues of Color are experiencing the campus climate and culture. While listening intently, I track my thoughts and feelings within myself to understand how I am experiencing campus as a White person. When I do speak, I try to amplify and draw attention to the voices of the unheard by naming racial distinctions between how People of Color are experiencing campus and how I, and my White peers, experience campus.

Cam extends this approach to their supervision of staff members as well. Research shows that higher education administrators' workloads offer very little opportunity to reflect on their practice (Diaz, 2011). Consequently, administrators continue to operate in the same ways they always have. Critical reflection should occur periodically and be reinforced through institutionalized practices, especially in supervision. Cam's goal as a White

administrator and supervisor is to empower staff members to engage in social justice and inclusion work on a daily basis.

**Cam:** As a supervisor, I try to help my staff members critically reflect on their experiences by speaking with them, not at them, and by asking open-ended questions to help them make deeper meaning of their experiences. I am critically conscious of the racial differences of supervising Staff Members of Color and White staff members. As such, I take an intersectional approach to supervision. This means that I have to modify my approach with each supervisee to take into account their lived experiences and cultural differences. While engaging with staff members, I am mindful of how my words and actions can be heard or felt differently due to my staff member's identities and cultural backgrounds.

In framing this supervision approach, Cam has to give up the need to feel like and be seen as a good White person. This does not mean that Cam holds any staff members less accountable than others. In fact, this intersectional approach to supervision increases motivation because people feel valued, seen, and heard in the context of their own lives. It promotes a culture of belonging and creates space for deeper connection and authenticity among staff members.

As the Dean of Student Success, Cam is often asked to serve on several hiring committees for faculty and staff positions across the university. Despite institutional priorities and commitment to diversifying faculty and staff roles over the last five years, Cam's institution has yet to embrace an equity-minded approach to the hiring process. White administrators often rationalize this issue by saying that People of Color will not come to our institution because "we're too rural" or "the weather just gets too cold." Cam challenges this notion of thinking by claiming that the institution's hiring practices are steeped in whiteness and do not place Candidates of Color on an equal playing field as their white counterparts. Too often, hiring committees make decisions based on implicit bias against People of Color.

White people internally rationalize a decision not to hire a Person of Color based on previous experiences or assumptions.

**Cam:** A few years ago, I was serving as the Chair of a hiring committee for a faculty position in the College of Education. The hiring manager for the position sent me an email with his recommended list of committee members. As I looked at the list, I quickly realized that, other than myself, the five people on the list were all White, tenured, male faculty members who had been teaching in the College of Education for over twenty years. It became clear that the hiring manager, also a White male professor, had picked his friends to serve on the hiring committee. So, I immediately picked up the phone and called the hiring manager to discuss my concern with the lack of diverse representation on the committee. I used my own whiteness and positional power with another White administrator to advocate for more diverse identities, voices, and experiences on the hiring committee. As I shared with the hiring manager over the phone, how are we supposed to recruit and support diverse scholars on our campus if their first interaction does not represent diverse identities and perspectives? The hiring manager agreed with me and apologized for not thinking critically about the hiring committee list. He responded with, “We’ve had the vacancy for over a semester now, and I just wanted to get the position filled. I knew the people on the list I sent you could get the job done quickly.”

When White administrators create a false sense of urgency, they avoid engaging in critical reflection about ways to enhance racial equity. What the hiring manager was implicitly saying is that he wanted another faculty member like himself – someone to join the “good old boys” club. Luckily, Cam leads through a lens of equity-mindedness and challenged the hiring manager on his whiteness.

As a critically conscious administrator, Cam is fully aware of the power they hold as both a White insider and outsider. They challenge the system of whiteness while working within the system. Unlike Rhonda the risk-taker, Cam is strategic in how and when they push their White peers on racial equity efforts. They understand that it is about rocking the boat without getting kicked out of the boat and being perceived as a race traitor by their White peers. Cam works alongside their Colleagues of Color and other critically conscious White administrators to build coalitions to transform the institution. One way to transform campus

culture is by shifting programmatic efforts and eliminating the one-and-done approach to racial equity education. Cam is an advocate for quality trainings at their institution...

**Cam:** I strongly believe that racial equity and inclusion trainings have to be mandatory for all faculty and staff because of the self-selection bias associated with these topics. My institution currently takes an opt-in or one-time training approach, and it is the same people who always attend the trainings. Consequently, the participants are usually the ones who are more aware of racial equity efforts on campus. I think that White administrators must be in these training spaces to help spread knowledge and shift the overall institutional culture, and in order to do so, these efforts must be mandatory. My institution implements a one-hour online diversity training, but faculty and staff sit at their desks and complete the module by themselves. This is not quality racial equity training. You don't suddenly become culturally competent in an hour, and you certainly don't become culturally competent by staring at your computer screen. If that was the case, we'd all be experts with how much we're on our electronic devices today. It's disappointing that my institution does not currently have a shared sense of what it expects all faculty and staff members to be able to do. So, professional development trainings are scattered and surface level because the institution does not know what it is working towards. Although the institution does not have set goals or processes for quality trainings, I have worked with my department and colleagues around campus to create our own trainings. I also encourage my team to seek opportunities outside the institution to deepen their knowledge of racial equity and inclusion work.

As the findings of this study support, the hegemonic structures of whiteness in higher education cannot be undone over the matter of a course, workshop, or even a semester. Cam suggests making racial equity and inclusion trainings mandatory for all faculty and staff members. Yet, when institutions make things mandatory, there is typically push back from faculty and staff with several members making comments such as, "This isn't my job" or "I'm too busy conducting research, and I don't have time for this." When this arises, White administrators fall weak to criticism and make half-hearted attempts to reconcile the issue. Consequently, this action maintains white complacency and does not challenge white norms in higher education. In addition, when racial equity trainings are mandatory, quality is often compromised under the guise of convenience.

**Individual realm of whiteness.** The final realm that informs administrators’ realities of whiteness centers around the individual. As stated previously, the aim of critical transformation is praxis (Freire, 1970), or simply put, critical consciousness + action. White administrators can continue to deepen their critical consciousness by “examining the backdrop of everyday life” (Delpit, 1995, p. 92) and invite dialogue into their organizations and environments in which they lead. Transformative leaders, such as Cam, develop praxis with the intent of empowering community members (i.e. students, staff, and faculty) and challenging dominant white norms. It is through this critical reflection and action that greater equity and social justice can be achieved. One way that Cam does this is by constantly reflecting on their whiteness and how it informs their decision-making...

**Cam:** As I navigate my institution on a daily basis, I write reflection notes to myself as a way to track my thoughts and feelings. I try to reflect on why I feel certain ways and track when I revert back to my whiteness. For example, when I received an email from a Colleague of Color stating that a recent decision I made was culturally insensitive, I looked for meaning in what my colleague was saying. I’ll be honest, it was tough. I had to catch myself from feeling defensive or trying to intellectualize why I thought I was right and my Colleague of Color was wrong. I took time to look at the decision from multiple perspectives and reflected on how my whiteness influenced that particular decision. I responded to my colleague with an invitation to meet in-person, so I could learn more about where my colleague was coming from. In doing so, I did not expect my Colleague of Color to teach me about race and cultural insensitivity, but rather my hope was to break down barriers and see truth in what my Colleague of Color was saying. I am committed to holding the mirror up to myself and reflecting on how I reinforce whiteness in higher education. This helps me move past my own white fragility and become a more critically conscious administrator.

Oftentimes, White administrators do or say racially insensitive things that perpetuate whiteness. This includes words, actions, or behaviors that have a very real impact and consequences on the lives and experiences of People of Color (Latino, 2010). Perhaps the most pervasive act of whiteness in higher education is *inaction* at the individual level. We

saw this demonstrated in Rhonda’s experience in Chapter 5 while serving on the Diversity and Inclusion Committee within the School of Education at her institution. The committee met on a regular basis but never actually made anything concrete. The members remained safely in their whiteness and none of them “had to give anything up to change things.”

Ironically, the inaction from the committee members led to the reinforcement of whiteness in higher education, which was the very thing they were trying to work against. As the risk-taker and someone who wants fast moving change, Rhonda became frustrated in the process and disengaged because she felt that it was a lost cause. If Cam had been on the committee, they might have approached things differently. Rather than seeing the committee as a lost cause, they would re-center the group by asking the following questions...

**Cam:** I’m feeling like our committee efforts are getting lost in the process. I often leave our meetings together feeling personally energized, but after I reflect on our impact, I realize that we are not galvanizing change with our discussions. I don’t believe that our intent is aligning with our impact, and we are not critically examining our own racial privileges in our work. How can we reimagine our time together, so we are seeing concrete actions? How can we move past our own whiteness and work with colleagues and students to create more equitable curriculum, teaching strategies, recruitment, and support for Folks of Color in the School of Education? What’s stopping us from doing this? What are we, and our colleagues, willing to give up in our pursuit of equity and inclusion?

In this example, Cam examines the intent vs. impact dichotomy and names that the committee members are getting lost in their own whiteness. They use “I” statements to challenge themselves and their White colleagues to step up and develop concrete actions for change. White administrators often rely on intent vs. impact statements by saying, “Well, that was not my intent. What I meant was...” In doing so, we shield ourselves from having to own the impact of our words, actions, or inactions, similar to Rhonda’s committee experience.

Central to critical consciousness is skepticism in a belief that one has “arrived” at some kind of non-racist endpoint (Yancy, 2008). Unlike Patty, the self-proclaimed progressive, Cam constantly seeks new knowledge to deepen self-awareness. Rather than aiming for some imaginary finish line, White administrators should remain open to what Yancy (2008) described as the experience of being ambushed by one’s own whiteness. He explained:

Whites who are open to life-affirming and transformative transactions with People of Color are not simply waiting defensively in fear of new information that may threaten to destabilize their sense of self. Rather, there is an openness to having one’s world transformed and cracked. Being ambushed within such transactional contexts can lead to profound experiences of liminality, throwing the white self into spaces of rich uncertainty and the actual phenomenological experience of the white self as permeable (p. 240).

The hidden, structural barriers of whiteness are what fuel White supremacy in higher education and society. This concept of white ambush is grounded in the idea that White administrators have to encounter themselves as a problem in order to destabilize their sense of self. Ironically, in doing so, they become more self-aware because the hidden phenomenon of whiteness becomes dislodged from the shadows and White administrators come to understand themselves in relation to their whiteness. The findings of this study underscore the importance for White administrators to not only recognize one’s own whiteness, but to constantly develop and practice critical consciousness. That is, White administrators should possess the humility and vulnerability to center themselves as racial subjects of critique. Assuming that one has “arrived” at a final destination of racial equity is the first sign that the

White administrator has not developed critical consciousness. This notion of having “arrived” is often witnessed in one-on-one conversations with other White administrators. This was illustrated in Rhonda’s story in Chapter 5 of when she challenged one of her former employees, a White woman, about implementing a culturally-based wellness program on campus. Rhonda explained that:

She [the employee] had gone through lots of training to become a practitioner, and I told her that it was going to be really important before she implemented the program to talk a little bit about where she came from and what it meant for her as a White person to be bringing this practice to campus. I didn’t want to imply that it was impossible to do, but there were just better ways to implement it. She got very upset because she felt like I was calling out her authenticity or her ability to be a true practitioner.

The employee’s response to Rhonda’s concern represents the White administrator’s white fragility. When the objectivity of race is challenged, White people become defensive (DiAngelo, 2018). Simply put, when race becomes too personal to White people, white fragility kicks in. Cam might address this behavior by responding with something like...

**Cam:** I can see you’re upset from this conversation. Why is that...? How do you see your whiteness impacting your delivery of this program? How do you think our Communities of Color will perceive this program on campus? What can we do to make sure that our whiteness and own desires to do good do not derail the purpose and impact of this program? How are we engaging Folks of Color in this conversation?

In taking this approach, Cam provides the White administrator with a call to action to make sure she is not centering her own whiteness or desire to be a good White person. In fact, Cam challenges their employee to name her whiteness and to think about its impact on the program. Although the employee may not like it, Cam is helping her to develop critical

consciousness by asking reflective questions. While Cam actively tries to empower and hold their White peers accountable to racial equity efforts, they have their own accountability partners to keep them in check of their own whiteness, which I describe in the next section.

To keep their whiteness at the forefront of their consciousness, Cam uses accountability partners to help with this process...

**Cam:** For me, an accountability partner is someone who can show me empathy but also give me a shot of realism. It is someone who is also striving for critical consciousness and understands the complexities of whiteness and racial equity work. I believe that it is important to have both White people and People of Color hold me accountable. However, I'm very mindful not to place the racial burden on People of Color in this process. The emotional processing of my whiteness is reserved for my white accountability partners. These are White people who hold me accountable in moments when I need a reality check on if what I am feeling is white fragility, or if my feelings of anxiety and discomfort are valid. Again, I do not think it is appropriate for White people to put the emotional racial baggage back on People of Color. Rather, I ask my trusted Colleagues of Color about my behaviors as a White person to ensure that I continue showing up in spaces as an accomplice rather than a hindrance. Some of my White colleagues, especially the self-proclaimed progressives, think they have the right to speak or act for People of Color. For me, accountability means not making assumptions about People of Color and allowing them to speak for themselves.

Cam reflects often on why they feel a sense of responsibility to engage in racial equity work. It has taken several years for them to work through their own racial baggage, and they are still working on it. At the beginning of their journey, Cam was so focused on trying to be a “good” White person and to prove to People of Color that they were on their side. Cam came to realize through their own self-reflection, reading, researching, and engaging in dialogue with people that, although they had good intent, they were centering their whiteness in the work. Thompson (1998) emphasized that, “There is no such thing as white innocence; there is only racial responsibility or irresponsibility” (p. 524). By trying to “help” People of Color, Cam was freeing themselves of any responsibility or ownership of

having to explore their own whiteness. This process served to reify whiteness through interest convergence. As Cam became more critically conscious of their whiteness, they learned how to be comfortable being uncomfortable. Cam moved past feelings of guilt or anger and no longer used white innocence as an excuse to avoid exploring constructions of whiteness and their own personal white racial identity. Through the development of their racial consciousness, Cam came to understand that, although they cannot change history, they have a responsibility to transform their institution. Freire's (1970) praxis demands that White higher education leaders function as facilitators and organizers rather than the voice of People of Color (Diaz, 2011). This approach is a key factor in the empowerment of all people, which the actualization of social justice ultimately rests upon.

Cam owns the fact that racial equity and inclusion work is going to be messy. The more that White administrators acknowledge racial inequity and the ways whiteness shows up within their institutions, the more entangled it becomes. Jenson (2005) asserts the burden of White people is "to understand that we are the problem, come to terms with what that really means, and act based on understanding. Our burden is to do something that does not come naturally to people in positions of power and privilege: Look in the mirror honestly and concede that we live in an unjust society and have no right to some of what we have" (p. 93). Indeed, as a critically conscious White administrator, Cam owns this burden and carries it with them every day, in every meeting, and every interaction they have with people at their institution. Ultimately, Cam realizes that this process begins with themselves, and no one else. Cam strives every day to make the invisible visible and to remove the veil of whiteness that covers their institution and fuels White supremacy in society (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000).

Cam, the critically conscious White administrator, provides significant insight into the development of higher education anti-racist policies and practices. As indicated in the previous sections, Cam is a critical and strategic thinker who approaches racial equity work in very intentional ways. They integrate praxis into their work in higher education at multiple levels including societal, institutional, and individual. Yet, they embrace the messiness and complexity of racial equity work while recognizing and owning that mistakes will be made. It is through this ongoing development of critical consciousness and their ability and commitment to put things into action that they find success in anti-racist work as a White administrator in higher education.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented a continuation of the analysis/reflection points provided in Chapter 5 while also threading together the literature and conceptual framework from Chapter 2 that supported this study. The discussion and analysis offered in this chapter answered the three research questions of this study using multiple outlets to do so.

To answer the first research question, I utilized the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model (Watt, 2007) as a framework to analyze how the participants engaged (reacted, responded, and resisted) racial equity and inclusion efforts based on their white racial identities. Ultimately, the participants' stories indicated that White administrators should work to develop critical consciousness through ongoing reflection of their white racial identity and understand how their actions, both individually and collectively, perpetuate dominance. The PIE model provided an entry point into exposing the ways in which White administrators engage in racial equity work and offered opportunities for further reflection.

In answering the second research question, I provided a discussion and analysis on how White administrators navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. The White administrators in this study offered a variety of approaches, perspectives, and strategies that they employ while navigating racial equity work. Some of the participants took a very active approach towards disrupting racial injustices by positioning themselves as an “outsider” to their White peers. In doing so, the administrators were perceived by their White peers as race traitors and thereby were too risky to invite into certain spaces. Furthermore, the participants shared their approaches to combating race neutrality under the guise of “unity” as well as overcoming the “we don’t have a race problem” myth. These approaches challenged hegemonic perspectives of diversity in higher education and offer insight into ways to further interrogate power dynamics. The discussion continued with an analysis of the theory of interest convergence (Bell, 1980) and how it is intertwined with allyship. Although most White administrators strive to be allies for People of Color on their campuses, we have to ask ourselves who is benefiting from our actions. Allyship through interest convergence is not true allyship; it only reifies whiteness in higher education. Lastly, I provided a discussion on how White administrators navigate difficult conversations with Colleagues of Color, specifically when their colleagues’ perspectives are counter to racial equity. As part of the discussion, I offered thoughts into how White administrators can respond to these issues in the future and move past their discomfort and dissonance.

The final portion of this chapter answered the third research question of this study by offering insight into the development of institutional anti-racist policies and practices used by White higher education administrators. To accomplish this, I created a White counter-script as a means to connect theory with practice and to analyze the three realms of racism found in

the literature (Helms, 1993). Using Cam, the Critically Conscious White administrator, as a guide, the goal of this counter-script was to empower White higher education administrators to examine their role in sustaining whiteness and to begin cultivating critical consciousness within themselves in order to disrupt white norms and behaviors at their institutions. Based upon this analysis and discussion, I now turn to the implications, opportunities for future research, and conclusions surrounding this work.

## Chapter 7: Implications and Conclusion

*I hold and understand my whiteness and see it as part of me.*

*-Study Participant*

This study offers a number of implications for White higher education administrators engaging in racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. In order to remove the cloak of normality that whiteness provides us and engage in praxis, White higher education administrators must integrate theory with practice. The White Scripts illustrated in Chapter 4 embody the approaches, moods, and styles White administrators embrace while navigating racial topics. Some White administrators refuse to educate themselves and change their behavior because they are comfortable maintaining the status quo. Others are developing self-confidence and finding their voice in racial equity efforts, while some challenge themselves, their White peers, and Colleagues of Color towards racial equity. Consequently, these administrators take a risk at being positioned as a race traitor (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996) by their White peers. Ultimately, the goal of this study, and in particular this chapter, is to empower White higher education administrators to take action toward racial equity and inclusion at their institutions. My hope with this chapter is to provide White administrators, like myself, with tools to begin thinking about our work differently and to inspire them to continue to develop critical consciousness in their daily practice. Here, I provide implications for practice focused around interpersonal relations, education and programming, and future research. I end this dissertation with some concluding thoughts and reflection.

### **Implications for Practice and Interpersonal Relations**

After conducting this research, it is clear that the ways in which White administrators view themselves in racial equity efforts need to focus more consistently on equity-mindedness. We must each ask ourselves, how do I see *myself* reflected in these White

Scripts? Or, as one participant put it, how do I “understand my whiteness and see it as part of me?” When do I show up as Mike the Maintainer and take a passive approach to racial equity work? When do I embrace Patty the Self-Proclaimed Progressive and inadvertently claim that I have “arrived?” How am I being courageous and taking risks like Rhonda? Furthermore, how do we see these White Scripts come to life in our interactions with other White administrators? Perhaps you have a supervisor like Sam the Structuralist. How do you help them stop focusing on intellectualization and be in community with the work and with People of Color who are directly affected? How do we help Dana develop confidence in their abilities and to self-actualize their value in racial equity work? The ultimate goal is to be more aligned with Cam, the Critically Conscious Administrator, and to own the burden of our whiteness while strategically and emphatically advocating for racial equity and inclusion on our campuses. Let me be clear, there is a difference between being a self-proclaimed progressive, like Patty, who tries to be a “good” White person and “expert” in racial equity efforts versus a critically conscious administrator, like Cam, who owns their whiteness and is aware of how it manifests within all realms of interaction. Patty reifies whiteness, while Cam disrupts it. Both may be perceived as “good” White people, but this nuanced approach is important. Otherwise, one may inadvertently think they are disrupting, while in fact, they are reifying whiteness in higher education. White administrators have to be prepared to sit with the real messiness and complication of this work in the fight for racial justice. As Cam previously shared, “If we can’t do our work with an equity lens when things are okay, how are we going to do this work well when things are really messy and we’re not at our best?” In this chapter, I provide implications for practice and interpersonal relations – specifically, insights on how White higher education administrators can integrate this research into their

practice and promote equity-mindedness at their institutions. I begin with personal development and then move to examples of how to engage with other White administrators in higher education. Additionally, I offer implications for education and programming – in particular, how equity-mindedness can be infused at the institutional level through programs and trainings. Finally, I discuss implications for future research.

**Personal development.** As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, White administrators are more confident and effective when we are grounded in our own personal development and self-awareness of whiteness and race. Personal development means becoming more aware of our own biases and blind spots, which affect the relationships we build with other people and how we perceive and create policies and procedures. Whiteness must be constantly examined and challenged on a daily basis in our professional and personal lives. White administrators have to be critically aware of how our white racial identities reify explicit and implicit norms of whiteness, whether intentional or not. Engaging in racial equity and inclusion work means being willing to go down a path of self-exploration and open oneself to vulnerability about our biases while facing the tough reality of what that might bring. Dana shared the following story about their own personal development:

A Friend of Color once said to me, “I wish White people spent as much time learning about Black culture and Black people as I have had to spend learning about White people.” That was a tipping point for me and made me think about what learning I’ve done on my own and what I’ve relied on other people to teach me.

Personal development can come in many forms such as reading, attending conferences or workshops, taking a class, listening to podcasts, watching videos or documentaries. The critical piece is that personal development must be ongoing and

consistent. White administrators should never assume that we have “arrived” at some final destination point. We saw that witnessed in Patty’s White Script, as she strived to be viewed as a White progressive. As we engage in the personal development process, we must be willing and open to examine and suspend the power dynamics that exist in higher education. White administrators must be vulnerable to learn from anyone at any level of the institution regardless of title, tenure, or position. Using the critical theoretical framework from this study (Kincheloe, 2005; Giroux, 1997), we must ask ourselves “Who defines truth?” and “Where and whom does knowledge come from?” If we think that knowledge can only emanate from faculty members or someone with a fancy title, we have embraced a White dominant way of thinking. When we shift the paradigm and embrace that knowledge and truth can come from anyone and anywhere at the institution (including students), we begin to deconstruct power dynamics and open ourselves to new ways of knowing and being in the world. This will help White higher education administrators expand our white racial frame (Feagin, 2013) and begin to shift the White Scripts that were found in this study.

As White administrators continue to develop their racial consciousness, we must also be aware of the pitfall of expecting People of Color to do the hard work of understanding for us, and consequently, telling us how we are supposed to act. Research indicates that this “tell us the answer” perspective makes racial equity work seem simple and solvable for White people (Hyttén & Warren, 2003). As discussed in this dissertation, racial equity work is complex and messy. There is no “magic answer” to solve racism in higher education or society. White administrators must be cognizant not to overly simplify racial issues because it could further tokenize the voices of People of Color and remove our responsibility for both problems and solutions (Hyttén & Warren, 2003). We must continue to unpack our own

whiteness and work towards critical consciousness while examining the power dynamics in the process. This nuanced approach helps shed light on the racial inequities that exist at the institution and opens the door for further examination. White administrators should strategically name racial dynamics at their institutions and use their own whiteness to actively draw other White administrators into the conversation. The goal should be to help create awareness and critical consciousness, not to prove a point that we are “good” White administrators. Consequently, White administrators must make it a priority to speak *with* White people, rather than *at* White people.

Lastly, racial equity has to be in all places at all times, especially in our personal lives. There are White administrators who think that equity work is a nine to five thing. We know there are racist people out there, but we go home to our White families and friends and do not talk about race. Racial equity becomes a job. White administrators might be good at their job, but we have to make a conscious decision: Are we going to do racial equity work for our work, or are we going to sacrifice things? If we do it only in our work, our families and friends will not change, but if White administrators truly want to do anti-racist work, they have to make the effort to do it in their personal lives and not just on campus.

In the following section, I shift to focus on how White administrators engage with one another in higher education and provide examples for how this might show up in committee or group meetings. The goal is to draw attention to how whiteness manifests in various spaces at our institutions, and how White administrators can begin noticing and tracking these dynamics.

**Engaging other white administrators.** As evidenced in Cam and Rhonda’s narratives, White administrators must consistently and explicitly name when and how racial

dynamics play out in different spaces - whether in staff meetings, committee meetings, supervision conversations, etc. In other words, White people have to be comfortable talking about race and whiteness. We can no longer tiptoe around race. When we do this, we invoke the “whiteness as politeness” racial frame and seek to maintain our own racial comfort. Conversations about race are difficult and complex, but they are critical in order to move racial equity efforts forward. Perhaps most importantly is for White people to notice and examine how whiteness manifests in ourselves and other White people. Most of us talk with other White administrators every day at work, but we never take time to critically examine the undertones and power dynamics at play in our interactions. For example, the next time we are in a committee or group meeting and topics of diversity, equity, or inclusion emerge, let’s observe how whiteness flows throughout the space. How do White administrators exhibit characteristics from the White Scripts presented in this study? To assist with this reflection process, I provide a list of examples below of how these White Scripts might come alive in a group or committee meeting when White administrators are present:

Mike: The Maintainer

- Spends more time greeting people as they come into the space than actually contributing to the dialogue. This is an attempt to maintain credibility and reputation.
- When someone brings up a racist incident that took place recently on campus, he is surprised and does not know how to respond. This is due to a lack of racial awareness of himself and the experiences of People of Color on campus.
- When he finds himself in dialogue with another White administrator during the meeting and gets push back from that person (usually someone like Cam or Rhonda), he immediately backs down and says, “let’s just agree to disagree on this one.” This

is in response to his white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) and discomfort of talking about race.

- When people are asked to volunteer for assignments for the next meeting, he hardly ever signs up, or when he does, he takes a light workload. He is comfortable maintaining a breadth of knowledge on the topic but is not interested in engaging deeply in racial equity issues. Essentially, he does just enough to get by.

#### Rhonda: The Risk-Taker

- Comes prepared to the meeting ready to engage in the conversation about race. This is because she has already done her homework and is aware of the racial dynamics happening on her campus and in the community.
- Intentionally diverts the conversation off of White people and creates space for diverse voices in the room. She does this by encouraging people who have already spoken to be in listener mode. She takes the lead from her Colleagues of Color and reinforces what they are saying or feeling.
- Confidently, and sometimes too forcibly, pushes back on other White administrators when they seem to be complacent about issues of race. She might appear frustrated when other White administrators do not engage in the conversation at the level she thinks they should, and others might get defensive or shutdown in the process due to their white fragility.
- When any type of data or research is shared, she asks to see the disaggregated data based on demographics to better understand how people are experiencing the institution. Consequently, she challenges the status quo by constantly asking the questions, “Why is it done this way?” and “How can we do better?”

### Dana: The Developer

- Engages in the conversation but does not speak very often. This is due to a lack of self-confidence, although Dana might be one of the most knowledgeable people in the room about racial equity issues.
- Listens deeply to what other White administrators are saying in the space, whether Dana agrees or not, and responds with questions to better understand where they are coming from. This helps Dana draw other White administrators into the conversation rather than pushing them away.
- When asked if anyone would be willing to attend a workshop or conference on equity and inclusion, Dana is the first to sign up. After the workshop, they ask if they can get some time on the next agenda to share all the things they learned at the event. This is because Dana feels a responsibility to continually educate themselves and others.
- When discussing racial topics, Dana always grounds the conversation in relationships and the people impacted.

### Sam: The Structuralist

- Actively engages in the discussion by providing key data points and facts from his scholarly practices or readings.
- Tends to use complex words to describe racial dynamics without articulating their meanings in a simple or accessible way for other group members to understand. The result is that racial topics stay abstract and impersonal.
- Has several “connections” to help with racial equity efforts, but when explored further, it turns out the majority of his connections are all White people with similar identities to his own.

- Often approaches the conversation with a “let’s make it happen” mentality without really understanding how to effectively and intentionally put things into practice. This is because he understands the societal and institutional realms of racism and whiteness, but he lacks engagement with the individual realm.

Patty: The Self-Proclaimed Progressive

- Without being prompted, Patty shows her allyship by taking time during the meeting to tell personal stories of how she has supported Students of Color over the last week. This is to ensure that everyone knows that she is an ally for People of Color.
- After a colleague speaks in the meeting about race, she follows up with an irrelevant example from her personal experience almost as if to “one up” the other White administrator.
- In responding to her peers in the room, she often comes from a place of already knowing the information, and she “gets it.”
- When discussing a racist act that took place on campus, she is appalled and angry that “those White people” did such a thing.

The prompts above are common examples of how the White Scripts from this study might play out in higher education. A key piece of developing critical consciousness is noticing and tracking how we each show up in spaces. As one participant shared, “I’m in a leadership role, so it’s about holding myself accountable and being a role model for inclusion.” To do this, one has to explicitly see and name race, not just hide it. White administrators can use the prompts above as a starting point to guide their thinking about which characteristics they exhibit in conversations with other White administrators. From there, we must ask ourselves *why* we show up in these ways and *how* we can work to become

more aligned with Cam, the Critically Conscious White Administrator. I now provide a few prompts for how Cam might engage in the same meeting as the five characters above:

Cam: The Critically Conscious White Administrator

- Observes and clearly names underlying racial dynamics during the meeting using “I” statements. They pose statements like, “I know that my experiences as a White person inform how I view this issue. I wonder how our students or Colleagues of Color might view this same issue?” Consequently, they challenge their White peers to think about their own racial identity while entering the conversation from a personal perspective.
- Before making a hasty decision or snap judgement, Cam is intentional to invite more voices into the process. They might say, “I feel we need more diverse perspectives and voices in this space before making a decision. How can we work to do this without tokenizing any of our students or Colleagues of Color?”
- Publicly owns their mistakes and failures around racial equity and shares the successes with others, especially their colleagues and Students of Color directly involved in the work.
- Points directly to specific policies or processes that maintain whiteness and provides the administrators in the room with a call to action to examine and change these policies. Not only does Cam name the inequitable policy, they offer to Chair the review committee, rather than pushing the work to someone else.
- During the open floor portion at the end of every meeting, Cam makes it a point to share any upcoming events taking place on campus or within the community on issues related to racial equity and invites others to join them as well.

- If one of their White colleagues commits a microaggression or says something racially problematic, Cam is sure to follow-up with the colleague after the meeting to share what they noticed in that space. They have a sense of responsibility to educate their White peers as an opportunity for learning and growth, not as a “gotcha” moment. Most of the time, the feedback is taken well because a trusting relationship is already built between Cam and the other White administrator. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, there are times when the conversation is not so easy. At times, they find it more difficult to engage with their White male colleagues due to the multiple layers of privilege. However, this does not stop Cam from having these difficult conversations.

Cam approaches their work as a White administrator with informed candidness. That is, they try to be critically aware of their whiteness but do not pretend to have unrealistic stocks of knowledge around racial equity. White administrators have to experience failure so that we can learn from our mistakes and see that we are not always at our best as leaders. As Cam would say, “As White folks leading and supporting Staff of Color, if we can’t do our work with an equity lens when things are okay, how are we going to do this work well when things are really messy and we’re not at our best?” White administrators should not be afraid of making mistakes with racial equity efforts, but when we do reify our whiteness, we must immediately take ownership and not deflect or deny responsibility. Cam’s informed candidness approach can be used as a way to provide space for People of Color and White people to engage authentically with one another.

The examples above demonstrate opportunities for White administrators to engage with other White administrators about racial equity and inclusion topics. Cam recognizes that

these small interventions between White people can lead to a shift in critical consciousness. Therefore, it is important for White administrators to hold each other accountable when our words, actions, or behaviors do not align with racial equity and inclusion efforts. This approach could also inform White administrators' personal development and help them identify what gaps of awareness or knowledge are missing from their consciousness. Yes, racial equity and inclusion work is messy and imperfect, and White administrators are going to make mistakes in the process. However, if we find ourselves making excuses for every racist thing we do (or do not do), we are not cultivating critical consciousness. If we were, we would not be perpetuating racism or oppression in the first place. White administrators must constantly examine how and when we choose to engage in this work and to not dismiss our inactions by using intent vs. impact all the time. As one continues to strive toward becoming a more critically conscious White administrator, we must not lose sight of the barriers and norms that maintain whiteness at their institution. In order to combat color-neutral approaches, White administrators must embrace an equity-minded framework to inform our decisions on education and programming efforts.

### **Implications for Education and Programming**

To be equity-minded means that White administrators are critically conscious of the racial dynamics at play and draw attention to the patterns of inequity that exist within their institutions (Peña, Bensimon, & Colyar, 2006). This racial frame cannot be limited to one facet of the institution; it must be embedded in every discussion, decision, and personal interaction throughout our daily practice. This includes decisions around facility planning, budgeting, personnel, student services, curriculum development, training, and faculty tenure and promotion. To help guide this process, White administrators can use the concepts

discussed in Chapter 6 to interrogate whiteness in higher education. In particular, the idea of professionalism in the workplace should be challenged using a critical whiteness lens in order to extract how and when whiteness manifests in various spaces. Administrators need to rewrite and overhaul policies and practices that were designed to protect whiteness as professionalism. Topics around professional attire, hairstyle, language, etc. should be part of the discourse, so we can begin to untangle what it means to be “professional” in higher education. But, it cannot stop there. Racial frames of white insulation and whiteness as politeness have to be challenged. We have to move beyond thinking of ourselves and others in a good/bad binary way. We must hold ourselves and other White administrators responsible for our actions and create opportunities for dialogue and personal development. It is no longer enough for institutions to claim diversity and inclusion as a strategic priority; Equity-mindedness must be the new way institutions go about doing business, and how they define excellence. If not, whiteness will continue to thrive in higher education. As Dana shared, “the messages are subtle unless you’re looking for them. You’re not necessarily going to notice because it’s business as usual.” What is most difficult is that institutions are working the way they were designed to work. As Sam stated:

Higher education systems were designed to be racist, and they are incredibly effective at doing so. How do you tell an entire field that the way we’re doing education doesn’t work, or the way faculty members are teaching is not culturally responsive, or the way we are delivering student services is not culturally relevant? Our systems are working the way they were meant to work... to perpetuate whiteness.

Therefore, White administrators have a responsibility to understand the existing structures and work to dismantle them. To do this, administrators must be willing to critically examine

how they fit into current structures of whiteness. Equity-mindedness has to be in all places at all times. In other words, “everything is about race, but not everything is about race,” as discussed in the previous chapter.

We can take Cam’s lead by informing ourselves of the societal realm of whiteness and shifting our cultural gaze (Fine, 1997) from People of Color to White people. Rather than turning our gaze to learning about the “other,” we should look inward first and understand our own racial identity and interrogate constructs of whiteness. Consequently, we must be willing and ready to exchange our understanding whiteness for a new perspective. For many White administrators, this means that we may need to re-learn what we have always known and challenge our epistemological and ontological beliefs. This means doing our homework – reading, writing, listening, engaging in dialogue, etc. – to challenge what we have always been taught. If we feel shame or guilt, we must unpack it. White administrators have to start getting serious about learning about our whiteness and how we are inculcated in it. This process must be integrated throughout our lives with our White colleagues, family, friends, and strangers. As Cam says, “It’s just something I have to do. There’s no other option... It’s for the survival of us all.” Indeed, White administrators should aim to integrate this momentum and commitment to praxis throughout our personal and professional lives. In the following sections, I provide implications for how institutions can develop equity-mindedness through programs and trainings.

**Programs and trainings.** In order to lead with an equity mindset and make transformative change, White higher education leaders have to be talking about the same things in the same way. We often talk past each other because we are not operating from the same introductory baseline knowledge around what we mean when we talk about racial

equity, privilege, or systems of power and oppression. When people enter a conversation with various levels of knowledge and understanding, it becomes difficult to make any amount of progress. We see this exemplified in the White Scripts of this study by how Mike and Cam engage in racial equity work. Because Mike does not have a strong personal commitment to deepening his understanding of racial equity, he enters this work with baseline awareness of language and structural issues of racism. Cam, on the other hand, has a deep commitment to learning and engaging on issues of racial equity and inclusion through individual, institutional, and societal perspectives. Consequently, they enter the conversation at a much deeper level than Mike. It becomes critical, therefore, for institutions to offer consistent and quality programs and trainings examining race and whiteness at the individual, institutional, and societal realms.

To begin tackling issues of racial equity, White administrators must assess current programs, trainings, and practices to determine how and if these programs are developing deeper levels of racial consciousness for participants. Many institutions use a multicultural competency framework (Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Gayles & Kelly, 2007) as a starting point to develop racial equity trainings at their institutions. This continuum, grounded in counselor education, has three dimensions (Figure 7.1) that guide White administrators in developing multicultural competence and critical consciousness.

**Figure 7.1 – Multicultural Competency Framework**

Awareness ↔ Knowledge ↔ Skills ↔ Action

The dimensions of multicultural competence include *awareness*, meaning an “openness to learning about differences associated with various cultures and being conscious of biases and assumptions we hold and the impact they have” on others; *knowledge* of

diverse cultures and groups using an intersectional approach; and *skills* which “involves the capacity to work effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds by translating awareness and knowledge... into good practice” (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 194). In addition to the three dimensions, Reason and Davis (2005) argue for “action that upsets the status quo” (p. 7). Therefore, institutions should add a fourth dimension of “action” to this framework to assist White administrators in actively thinking of how they will put their knowledge and skills to use in their daily work. To assist White administrators with moving along the continuum towards action, institutions should create expectations and capacity for administrators to engage in this process. This means moving away from one-time workshops or trainings that are held once a semester and developing a robust series of learning and development opportunities that address each of the dimensions on the continuum. These dimensions should build upon each other and flow organically back and forth to keep whiteness at the forefront of White administrators’ racial consciousness. One way to practice the “action” part of the continuum is through white racial caucusing. Nearly all of the White administrators in this study shared that racial caucusing has been one of the most transformational learning experience in their personal and professional growth about race and whiteness. I describe white racial caucusing in the section below and how it can be used as a tool for engaging with racial equity.

**White racial caucusing.** White racial caucuses provide space for White people to unpack whiteness and better understand White supremacy, their role in it, and their role in dismantling it. Racial caucuses provide people with a mutual learning environment while using dialogue to transform understanding and relationships (Vlasic, 2019). To enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants; each person must trust the others and be

willing to question what they know to be true (Freire, 1970). Through dialogue, existing ideas change and new knowledge is created. In forming a white caucus, White people can relate to the realities of racism and the harm that it causes, rather than assuming or hoping that we can jump directly into racial healing. White administrators often distance themselves from each other because they want to maintain their perception as a good White person; we are afraid that we will be called out for not knowing enough about racial issues or worse, be called a racist. Therefore, for some White people, racial caucusing can be challenging and uncomfortable. Some believe that racial conversations must happen in diverse groups. I argue that white racial caucuses provide administrators an outlet to have authentic dialogue amongst other White people. In addition to increasing racial consciousness, white caucus groups can help White administrators develop greater capacities for communication regarding issues of race and racism. Patty shared the value of white racial caucusing by saying:

I don't get to talk about my whiteness often. My staff doesn't sit down and say, "How does your whiteness affect your work?" We don't have time. We are just trying to put out fires. Having a space to talk about my whiteness gives me the opportunity to reflect on what I may need to be working on and what I may have more experience in than what I thought I did.

Part of the difficult work of racial justice is that White people are constantly having to unpack their whiteness, yet they do not create space for themselves to unpack whiteness in a community setting. According to Cam, "We need to be having meatier conversations." By creating opportunities for white racial caucusing, White administrators have more time and capacity to critically reflect on their work in higher education and how their whiteness

informs their practice. Lastly, White administrators should be cognizant and intentional for how they are showing up in training spaces. Rhonda noted how upper-level White administrators at her institution show up in trainings and programs by saying that she often sees White folks organize a training or bring someone in to do some work with the division, but they might be sitting in the back on their phone. “They’re important, I get it, but that’s communicating something to the team. Whatever investment a leader is putting into training and professional development, they have to visibly be part of that development and training themselves.” Developing equity-mindedness within our institutions means developing clear standards and expectations for all faculty and staff around racial equity and inclusion work and personally showing up to engage in learning as well. Higher education institutions can support these efforts by creating programs and training opportunities grounded in a multicultural framework and by providing space and time for faculty, staff, and administrators to actively engage in racial caucuses.

Indeed, higher education needs bold, critically conscious White administrators who have the vision, commitment, and skills to transform their institutions into equity-minded places of learning. White administrators must refute the notion that race should be silent. Instead, we must engage with other White people on topics of race, even those who we may not politically or ideologically agree with. If White people, as the privileged racial group, are too afraid, stubborn, or downright selfish to engage with other White people about racial topics, we place the burden back on People of Color to end their own oppression. Utilizing the White Scripts from this study, White administrators should critically reflect on how they see themselves reflected in these findings. In doing so, White administrators can begin to notice and unpack how they navigate racial equity and inclusion efforts at their own

institution, and how their whiteness informs their practice. In the final sections of this dissertation, I provide limitations of this study as well as offer opportunities for future research and scholarship. I conclude with some final thoughts and reflection.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As with any rigorous research, this study is not without limitations. First, given the study's qualitative design, the findings cannot be generalized to all White administrators working in higher education. My goal was to provide a launching pad for White administrators to critically reflect on their whiteness and to spark action towards racial equity, not to represent the voices of all White leaders in higher education. Along those lines, the data was only as rich as the White administrators who chose to participate. Trying to recruit upper-level White administrators for a study on racial equity proved to be challenging due to time constraints and access to the administrators. As evidenced in Chapter 3, whiteness became embedded in the methods of my research. Because the nature of this study was inherently political, some participants may not have been as forthcoming in sharing their authentic thoughts, feelings, and experiences due to fear that they would somehow be exposed. Indeed, this reaction supports DiAngelo's (2018) concept of white solidarity and offers a glimpse into future research on whiteness in higher education.

Another limitation was the centrality of whiteness between researcher, participants, and the phenomenon under study. As a fellow White administrator, my white identity limited not only my positionality with participants, but their positionalities with me. Throughout the interview process, participants displayed enthusiasm and eagerness and appeared to be comfortable with me as a White person. Being white tends to afford a certain amount of access to white research participants that Scholars of Color are not afforded (Gallagher,

2000). Consequently, it was important to be mindful throughout the study to not get lost in dialogue that perpetuated white dominance or white liberalism. The goal was to disrupt and dismantle whiteness, not to re-center it. Being in all-white company could have potentially made the participants speak with a certain assuredness of mutual understanding (Sleeter, 1994) that would not have been present if I were a Person of Color.

Lastly, while a Critical Whiteness framework necessitates the foregrounding of whiteness and white identity (Owen, 2007), this study on whiteness and white racial identity had potential limitations by approaching identity through a singular, non-intersectional lens. The intersection of identities plays a critical role in how White people understand and make meaning of their whiteness. While I aimed to unpack whiteness using a critical lens, there is no doubt that the participants' other identities (i.e. gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc.) intersected their whiteness and informed how they made meaning and interpreted realities of whiteness. Although these nuanced meanings were beyond the scope of this study, future studies should attempt to analyze whiteness using a more intersectional approach to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the lived experience of the individual. As stated in Chapter 6, the male-identified participants in this study were primarily represented in the composite characters of Mike (the maintainer) and Sam (the structuralist). Future research should expand on this finding and study how White men, as racial and gendered beings, can move past maintaining the status quo.

Despite limitations, this study is also ripe for future scholarship and practice. I posit that these limitations open the door for future research related to whiteness in higher education. First, the White Scripts and other findings of this study offer entry points for further examination on how whiteness is practiced in different contexts within higher

education. For example, how might these White Scripts play out in hiring committee meetings, supervision meetings, or at Board of Trustees meetings? Researchers should use the White Scripts as an analytical tool to understand how whiteness manifests in different settings and how it flows among White administrators in higher education.

Another opportunity for future research is to select one or two White Scripts, identify White administrators who exhibit these characteristics and behaviors, and conduct in-depth research on those specific archetypes. For example, one could select Dana's White Script as the Developer and conduct a full study exploring how White administrators develop self-efficacy and confidence in topics related to racial equity in higher education. As the study indicated, there was a difference in self-confidence between how Dana and Rhonda, the Risk-Taker, felt about themselves as White administrators. It would be interesting to explore this more in the future. Furthermore, researchers could select two of the White Scripts and conduct a comparative analysis between both archetypes. In particular, it could be worthwhile to conduct a comparative study between Mike the Maintainer and Rhonda the Risk-Taker. It is evident in the findings of this study that both archetypes exist in higher education, perhaps even in the same department. Therefore, a study examining the differences and similarities between both archetypes would be helpful in identifying how these White administrators could work more closely together on racial equity efforts at their institution.

As stated previously, further research on whiteness in higher education should consider whiteness as it intersects with other identities. In particular, how do White administrators from majority privileged identities (i.e. White, heterosexual, middle/upper class, cis-gender men) experience and navigate their whiteness in higher education compared

to White administrators with intersecting minoritized identities (i.e. women, LGBTQ+, low/working class, etc.)? Do White administrators with other specific intersecting identities have greater success in addressing racial equity issues in policy and practice? Do White folks with minoritized identities feel a greater sense of responsibility to fight for racial equity than others? Although they are white, how might their minoritized identity offer them greater or less access to racial equity efforts in higher education? As demonstrated in this study, whiteness is a complex phenomenon, however, intersectionality is much more complex. Researchers should take heed to honor each individual's intersecting identities and entry points as they study the complexity of whiteness.

Lastly, an in-depth study on white racial caucus groups could be beneficial to inform practice within higher education. Indeed, some researchers have started to explore white racial caucus groups (Blitz & Kohl, 2012), however these studies take place outside the context of higher education. Future research on white racial caucus groups within higher education can help understand how these groups support the development of critical consciousness among White higher education administrators and the impact they have on racial equity efforts at institutions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this study was to explore how White higher education administrators navigate and position themselves in relation to racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions. The findings of this study were represented in the creation of five White Scripts, one white counter-script, and a critical transformative dialogue and answered the three research questions that guided this inquiry. In many ways, these results suggest that whiteness is alive and well in higher education and manifests in the various behaviors,

interactions, and decisions of White administrators. As Omi and Winant (1994) remind us, whiteness is a hidden and often invisible norm by which all other racial groups are judged. It is both structural and personal and is central to continuing racial domination. Indeed, whiteness operates at all levels of society and is frequently recreated as socially acceptable within the context of higher education because it is framed as normal (Cabrera, 2012; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Gusa, 2010). The findings of this dissertation underscore the importance of challenging unquestioned assumptions that maintain white dominant ideology in higher education. As I have tried to make clear throughout, the goal is to empower White higher education administrators to take action toward racial equity and inclusion at their institutions and to inspire them to continue to develop critical consciousness. Therefore, White administrators must pay close attention to how whiteness manifests around them and begin noticing and tracking these dynamics within themselves, others, and systems (i.e., policies, processes, and programs) within their institutions. In order to strengthen racial equity and inclusion efforts in higher education, White administrators must work in solidarity with People of Color to examine, challenge, and disrupt the oppressive structures that sustain whiteness and racism. The findings of this study provide a strong foundation to begin this critical examination. Consequently, we must ask ourselves *why* we show up in these ways and *how* we can work to become more critically conscious.

In closing, this study on whiteness is both timely and critical to higher education. Institutions need bold leaders who are critically conscious of their racial identity and have a vision and commitment to infusing racial equity and inclusion efforts into all aspects of their institutions. The responsibility is on us, White administrators, to examine our own whiteness and challenge our White peers to step up. We can no longer place the responsibility and

burden on People of Color to address the problems that were created centuries ago. The time is now. Let's get to work.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Appendix B: Social Media Recruitment Message

Appendix C: Participant Confirmation & Scheduling Email

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Appendix E: Participant Background and Demographic Information Form

Appendix F: Interview Protocol

## **Appendix A: Invitation to Participate**

Dear Participant:

Dustin Evatt, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at Appalachian State University, is conducting a research study to explore the experiences of White higher education administrators engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at their institution. I am writing to invite you to participate in this study.

### **Introduction and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how White higher education administrators understand, advocate, and position themselves in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at their institutions. In particular, the study will explore how these administrators navigate decision-making related to diversity and inclusion on campus and the role their racial identity plays in the process. Consequently, participants will offer insight into the development of institutional practices and policies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### **Description of Study Procedures**

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in 3 individual, private interviews lasting 60-90 minutes each. These interviews will be audio recorded. All interviews and other materials will remain confidential and will be stored on a secured computer in a locked office.

### **Risks of Participation**

It is not expected that you will experience any discomfort as a result of your participation in this study. Under no circumstances will your interview data be shared with anyone without your explicit permission. The results of this research project may be presented at academic conferences, professional meetings, or in publications; however, your identity will not be disclosed. Presentations and manuscripts typically contain participants' quotes, but participants will not be identified. Your involvement in the research project is entirely voluntary. You have the right to discontinue participation at any time.

### **Benefits of Participation**

The findings of this study have the potential to offer recommendations to White higher education administrators, so they can work towards more equitable and inclusive policies, practices, and programs at their institutions. Moreover, sharing your experiences individually could prove to be beneficial for you and your institution.

### **Contact Persons**

If you have any questions concerning this research project, please contact Dustin Evatt (Principal Investigator) at (864) 884-1402 or [evattwd@appstate.edu](mailto:evattwd@appstate.edu) or Dr. Brandy Bryson (Faculty Advisor) at (828) 262-6093 or [brysonbs@appstate.edu](mailto:brysonbs@appstate.edu). Thank you for your time and consideration!

## Appendix B: Social Media Recruitment Message

Dear Colleagues,

I'm writing to ask for your support and help with recruiting participants for my dissertation research study entitled "Exploring the Experiences of White Higher Education Administrators Engaging in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts." The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a deeper understanding of how White higher education administrators understand, advocate, and position themselves in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at their institutions. In particular, the study will explore how these administrators navigate decision-making related to diversity and inclusion on campus and the role their racial identity plays in the process.

The time commitment is 2-3 rounds of 60-75 minute interviews that would take place over Zoom or Skype in the coming weeks. Participant information would remain confidential throughout the process. To participate in this study, participants must:

- 1) identify as White
- 2) hold a Director or Dean/Associate Dean title or above at a college or university

If you or someone you know might be interested in participating in this study, please take a moment to fill out this study participation interest form or share it with others: <https://goo.gl/forms/YYQ9OKPNt8foBW703>. From there, I'll send more information soon.

Thanks for your consideration and support!

Dustin Evatt  
Doctoral Student  
Appalachian State University



## Appendix C: Participant Confirmation & Scheduling Email

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thanks for your interest in participating in my dissertation study focusing on the experiences of White higher education administrators engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion work. I'm very excited to begin this study and hope that you are still interested in taking part! As a participant, you will be asked to participate in 2-3 individual, private interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes each. These interviews will take place via Zoom conference calls and will be audio recorded for transcription. All interviews and other materials will remain confidential throughout the process. I've attached a copy of my **participant recruitment letter** for more information.

A few key highlights:

- To participate, you must identify as White and serve in a leadership position as a Director, Dean, or Associate Dean (or equivalent) at your institution.
- Interviews will be conducted between October 8th - November 9th.
- Interview times are based on *YOUR* schedule and can vary as needed.
- It is not expected that you will experience any discomfort as a result of your participation in this study.

If you are still interested and available to participate in this study, please take a few minutes to complete the following items:

1. Find us a time to meet based on *your* schedule. Please select 2-3 meeting slots over the next month, and I will follow up with Zoom meeting details before our scheduled time.
2. Fill out the Participant Background and Information Form.
3. Please review, sign, and return the attached **Participant Consent Form** before our first interview.

I cannot thank you enough for your consideration and support of my dissertation study. The topics of whiteness, equity, and inclusion in higher education leadership have never been more important as they are today, especially in our current historical context and political climate. My hope is that this research will support more equitable and inclusive policies, practices, and programs within higher education. Sharing your experience will certainly prove beneficial to creating more socially just campus communities.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this study more, please don't hesitate to reach out via email or phone.

Sincerely,

Dustin Evatt  
Doctoral Candidate  
Appalachian State University

## **Appendix D: Participant Consent Form**

### **Exploring the Experiences of White Higher Education Administrators Engaging in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts**

Principal Investigator: Dustin Evatt  
Department: Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership  
Contact Information: evattwd@appstate.edu  
Faculty Advisor: Brandy Bryson, Ph.D.  
Faculty Contact: brysonbs@appstate.edu  
IRB Number: 18-0350

#### **Consent to Participate in Research** *Information to Consider About this Research*

I agree to participate in a study that will explore how White higher education administrators understand and position themselves in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at their institutions. You will be one of five participants. This study will ask you to participate in three individual, private interview sessions (60-90 minutes). Each interview will be scheduled at a date and time convenient for you. I understand that the individual interview sessions will include questions about diversity, inclusion, race and racial identity, and educational leadership in the context of personal and institutional perspectives.

I understand that there are no foreseeable risks associated with my participation in this study. I also know that this study may help higher education administrators' work towards more equitable and inclusive policies, practices, and programs.

I understand that my interview will be audio recorded.

I give Dustin Evatt ownership of the audio from the interview(s) he conducts with me and understand that tapes and transcripts will be kept in Dustin's possession that will be securely protected by a lockable desk and a password-protected computer. I understand that anonymous information or quotations from tapes might be used for future publications beyond this research project and all identifying information will be removed and each participant will be given a pseudonym. I understand I will not receive compensation for the interview.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can end it at any time without consequence. I also understand that I do not have to answer any questions and can end the interview at any time with no consequences. Furthermore, I understand that my responses and data will not be shared with my employer.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Dustin Evatt (Principal Investigator) at (864) 884-1402 or email evattwd@appstate.edu. If you wish to speak with the faculty advisor associated with this research you may contact Brandy Bryson, Ph.D. at (828) 262-6093 or email her at brysonbs@appstate.edu. You may also contact the

Appalachian Institutional Review Board Administrator at (828) 262-2692, through email at irb@appstate.edu, or via mail at Appalachian State University, Office of Research Protections, IRB Administrator, Boone, NC 28608.

This research project has been approved on **July 18, 2018** by the Institutional Review Board at Appalachian State University. This approval will expire on **July 17, 2019** unless the IRB renews the approval of this research.

By continuing to the research procedures, you acknowledge you are at least 18 years old, have read the above information regarding confidentiality, and agree to participate. If you agree to participate, please sign below to proceed with your participation.

*I agree to participate in the study.*

---

Participant's Name (PRINT)

---

Signature

---

Date

## Appendix E: Participant Background and Demographic Information Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study titled “Exploring the Experiences of White Higher Education Administrators Engaging in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts.” As stated in the consent form, your participation is voluntary and confidential. To assist with this research project, please answer the background and demographic questions below.

1. First & Last Name \*

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2. Pronoun \*

---

3. Email \*

---

4. Institution Name \*

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5. Position/Title \*

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6. How many years have you worked in higher education? \*

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7. How many years have you worked at your current institution? \*

---

8. Highest level of education degree completed: \*

---

9. What is your racial identity? \*

---

10. What is your gender identity? \*

---

11. What is your sexual orientation? \*

---

12. Are you a first generation college student? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

13. What is your socioeconomic status (SES)? \*

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14. What is your religious and/or spiritual identity? \*

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15. Do you have any comments or questions?

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## **Appendix F: Interview Protocol**

### **Introductory Phase:**

1. Introductions
2. Provide brief overview of the study
3. Hand out informed consent forms to sign

### **Individual Interview #1:**

Please share a brief overview of your primary responsibilities in your current position.

- a. What types of institutional resources do you oversee (human, financial, etc.)?

### **Conceptual Understandings**

2. What does racial equity and inclusion mean to you?
3. What role do you believe racial equity plays in higher education?
4. How has your concept of equity and inclusion influenced your leadership position?

### **Experiences with Racial Equity and Inclusion**

5. Tell me about a time when you felt you were making a difference regarding racial equity and inclusion at your institution.
  - a. What was the outcome?
  - b. What do you credit for your success in these efforts?
6. Tell me a story about a time when you experienced failure or struggle as part of your racial equity and inclusion efforts. What was your intention behind the effort?
7. Do you believe your white identity plays a factor in the success or struggles of these efforts? Why or why not?

### **Advocating for Racial Equity and Inclusion**

8. When posed with a dilemma related to racial equity and inclusion at your institution, how do you navigate it? Walk me through your process.
9. Are there any barriers (political, social, etc.) that get in the way of doing this work? Please explain.
10. What factors (people, resources, time, and capacity) do you consider when making decisions related to racial equity and inclusion? Who and what does this process involve?
11. Can you think of a time when you questioned a policy or practice at your institution related to diversity, equity, and inclusion? What was the outcome?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your work related to racial equity and inclusion?

### **Individual Interview #2:**

#### **Leading with a White Racial Identity**

1. As an administrator, what is your role in navigating racial equity and inclusion efforts at your institution? Can you please share an example?
2. In what ways do topics of racial equity and inclusion come up? This could include meetings, interpersonal interactions, etc.

3. When topics or discussions of racial equity and inclusion come up, how do you typically respond?
4. Do you feel your race has influenced your work as an administrator? If so, how?
5. As an administrator, how do others know that you support racial equity and inclusion efforts? Can you please share a story or example that demonstrates this?

#### Exploring Participants' White Racial Identity

6. What does it mean to be White?
7. How do you feel about being White?
  - a. What are the advantages?
  - b. What are the disadvantages?
8. Are there other aspects of your identity that inform your work around diversity, equity, and inclusion (such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, social economic status, etc.)?

#### Navigating Racial Equity and Inclusion Efforts.

9. In what ways does your white identity inform your engagement with racial equity work?
10. In what ways does your white identity get in the way of doing racial equity work?
11. Can you recall a time when your race impacted your ability or inability to engage in these efforts?
  - a. What factors were at play?
  - b. How did you navigate the situation?
12. Has there ever been a time when you were accused of being racist? If so, please tell me about the experience.

#### Positioning in Racial Groups

13. Tell me about a time when you worked with students, faculty, staff, or administrators of color on a diversity or inclusion project (committee, workgroup, etc.)
  - a. What role did you play in the group?
  - b. What was the outcome?
14. Tell me about a time when you worked with majority White students, faculty, staff, or administrators on a diversity or inclusion project (committee, workgroup, etc.)
  - a. What role did you play in the group?
  - b. What was the outcome?
15. Do you feel a sense of responsibility or obligation to advocate for People of Color at your institution? If so why and how do you do this?
16. Any final thoughts or comments on anything we discussed today?

#### **Individual Interview #3:**

##### Addressing Issues Related to Racial Equity and Inclusion

1. Tell me about how you educate others about race as part of your work.
2. How do you feel when you see or hear stories of acts of injustice taking place on campus? Why do you feel this way?

3. What is the role of administrators in confronting or addressing issues of injustice on campus?
  - a. Can you recall a time when you engaged in similar efforts?
4. What changes are necessary (institutionally, societal, individually, leadership) to move forward issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion?
5. As an administrator, what is your role and position in this process?

Implications for Practice and Policy

6. What advice would you give to other White administrators about navigating racial equity and inclusion efforts at their institutions?
7. How can racial equity and inclusion efforts (i.e. professional development and training) be elevated for higher education administrators?
  - a. What is working well?
  - b. What is not working well?
8. Anything else you would like to share?

## **Vita**

W. Dustin Evatt was born in Easley, South Carolina. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Integrated Marketing Communication from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, a Masters of Education degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs from the University of Vermont in Burlington, Vermont, and a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Higher Education from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Dustin currently resides in Cleveland, Ohio with his husband, Tyler.

Dustin has nearly ten years of experience working in higher education on student engagement and involvement initiatives, leadership development, campus activities, conduct and policy development, and organizational advising. He currently works for an educational non-profit organization located in Cleveland, Ohio with a mission of supporting inner-city K-12 students and schools. Whether in higher education or the non-profit world, Dustin is committed to working towards praxis and equity. He strives to create spaces where everyone feels part of an inclusive community, and individuals can bring their full, authentic selves while challenging one another to deepen understandings and perspectives across difference. In his future endeavors, Dustin plans to continue to explore, both personally and academically, topics of race, whiteness, and social change. His goal is to one day publish his scholarship and make it as open and accessible to as many people as possible.