

DISSERTATION

COMING TO TERMS WITH MYSELF: EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF
EMERGING WHITE RACIAL JUSTICE ACCOMPLICES IN COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

COMING TO TERMS WITH MYSELF: EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMERGING WHITE RACIAL JUSTICE ACCOMPLICES IN COLLEGE

Many of the conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education rightly focus on the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students and how to support them on their educational journey. Fewer of the conversations involve naming and interrogating the oppressive systems that cause these students to need additional support in the first place. Additionally, education scholars highlight the difficulty of engaging White students in conversations about race. When challenged, White students often get stuck in emotional turmoil—experiencing emotions such as guilt, fear, and defensiveness—and they spend the bulk of their energy trying to prove they are not racist instead of learning, growing, or fighting racism. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of White students and how they develop as White people committed to racial justice while in college, with a particular emphasis on navigating emotionality. This study employed a critical qualitative approach using constructivist grounded theory methodology. Informed by sensitizing concepts from critical whiteness studies and the literature on White emotionality, I generated a model for the development of emerging White accomplices. The model identifies five critical characteristics that make up the emerging accomplice mindset: curiosity, agency, empathy, acceptance of discomfort, and persistence in the journey. These characteristics empower and sustain White students as they develop in their commitment to racial justice and enable them to constructively navigate challenges they encounter. Insights gleaned from this study can inform educators as

they seek to strategically empower White students to move through their guilt and insecurities to take actions as racial justice accomplices.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In August 2017, White¹ nationalists marched through the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville with flaming torches and signs with racist slogans, waving Nazi and Confederate flags. Shock waves rippled through the nation as videos of the march flooded the news. Many younger Americans had only seen such things in Civil Rights documentaries. Students rallied in counter-protest. Violence ensued. One woman died and dozens more were injured after a White nationalist ran his car into a crowd of counter-protestors (BBC News, 2017). To the dismay of many Americans, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, defended the unauthorized white supremacist rally by laying blame on everyone equally, saying there were “very fine people on both sides” (Politico Staff, 2017, para. 55). The racism in the U.S. that had been mostly simmering beneath the surface, hidden from mainstream media, boiled over in spectacular fashion.

Meanwhile on the quiet campus in Claremont, California, where I work, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students protested more subtle, yet equally damaging experiences of racism. An internal faculty report was leaked that contained quotes from professors about students, including opinions that with a more diverse student body had come lower admission standards and lower academic ability. Students stood outside of administration buildings with signs that read: “Respect My Existence or Expect Resistance,” “Take My Face Off the Pamphlet,” “Fire Racist Faculty,” and “I am not a Diversity Statistic” (Sheridan, 2018).

¹ I respect that some critical scholars choose to use lower-case ‘w’ when talking about White people and white ideologies as a means of counteracting white privilege and ongoing white domination. With the goal of honoring the full humanity of all people in my work, I chose to continue to capitalize White when referring to individual racial identity, just as I do Black, Latinx, etc. At the same time, it is my goal to critically name and disrupt systems of oppression, so I chose not to capitalize whiteness, white supremacy, white privilege and other oppressive concepts. When quoting authors, I use their language.

That same year, an outspoken critic of the Black Lives Matter movement was invited by administrators to speak on campus despite objections from students. Students staged a protest in front of the event entrance, wearing Black Lives Matter shirts and locking arms to block the entrance (Breslow, 2017). The event was forced to live stream to an alternative location. Subsequently, in 2019, a campus climate survey reported 61% of Students of Color were dissatisfied with the climate on campus, experienced 50% more stress compared to fellow White students, and three times as much depression (Office of Institutional Research, 2019). Rallying for increased mental health support, students again marched in protest, holding signs that read: “Enough is Enough,” “Nothing About Us Without Us,” and “They Don’t Listen” (Heeter, 2019).

While some pundits in the U.S. victoriously claimed we were entering a post-racial era with the election of the nation’s first Black president in 2008, all evidence since then proves the opposite. White supremacy is not dead. It is alive and well, and often the site of contestation is the college campus. Educators are navigating a time when students are polarized along political and racial lines (J. Anderson, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2020; Walker, 2021). Teaching actual facts about our racial history in public schools is under attack (Calvan, 2021; Cineas, 2021; Greene, 2021; Mazzei & Hartocollis, 2023; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). State legislatures are working overtime to enshrine color-evasive curriculum into K-12 education, even to the point of banning Advanced Placement African American Studies, saying the curriculum is “historically inaccurate” and “lacks educational value” (Mazzei & Hartocollis, 2023). These same state governments are censoring higher education curriculum, attempting to ban critical race theory, threatening academic freedom, and auditing spending on DEI initiatives (Diep & Pettit, 2023; Mangan, 2023; Thomason, 2023). Proponents of racist discourse are on the rise and white supremacy still infuses our educational institutions, sometimes overtly, but frequently in

insidious, normative ways (Gusa, 2010). Higher education leaders desperately need to understand how to effectively engage White students and challenge their ideologies rooted in whiteness. Educators must help these students see new ways of being; new ways of understanding themselves and the world around them. The issue of racism has again reared its ugly head and it cannot be ignored. In spite of resistance, White college students, raised in the current era, are primed for engagement on issues of race, especially after witnessing the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings. Educators can and must take advantage of this moment.

Problem Statement

White people created higher education in the United States for White people (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Wilder, 2013) and whiteness continues to infuse every aspect of our institutions (Cabrera, 2019; Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). Since the Civil Rights Movement, there has been a steady increase in the diversity of identities represented on college campuses, especially racial diversity. In the face of this growing diversity, institutions have made Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) an increasingly valued priority. Yet studies show that BIPOC students continue to experience hostile climates filled with micro- and macro-aggressions (Cabrera, 2014, 2019; Foste, 2019; Hikido & Murray, 2016; Iverson, 2007). Many of the conversations around DEI in higher education rightly focus on the experiences of BIPOC students and how to support them in their educational journey. Fewer of the conversations involve naming and interrogating the oppressive systems that cause these students to need additional support in the first place (Cabrera, 2012; Foste, 2019; Leonardo, 2009; Watt, 2007). Additionally, even DEI efforts are now coming under scrutiny as politicians are shamelessly attacking DEI initiatives through intimidation and funding threats (Diep & Pettit, 2023; Lu, 2023b; Mangan, 2023).

In addition to higher education's problematic history and environments, scholars highlight the difficulty of engaging White students in conversations about race (Cabrera, 2012, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Hikido & Murray, 2016; Reason & Evans, 2007). When challenged, White students often get stuck in emotional turmoil—emotions such as guilt, fear, and shame—and they spend the bulk of their energy trying to prove they are not racist instead of learning (Cabrera et al., 2017; DiAngelo, 2018; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2013). Additionally, grounded in a color-evasive worldview, these White students are causing harm and perpetuating alienating, hostile environments for BIPOC students.

Student affairs practitioners and researchers do not know enough about how White students can move past their color-evasive worldviews and their emotional fragility, or how they might embrace a commitment to racial justice that moves beyond individual attitudes. Until we know more about how to effectively challenge White students, they will continue to cause harm and they will graduate into the world to perpetuate systems of oppression. However, educators have an opportunity to leverage these crucial developmental years to cultivate accomplices in the struggle for racial justice and then send them out into the world to be part of the change we need (i.e., to be *syborgs*² in the system). White students who are able to lean into the uncomfortable challenges to their worldview and grow through it are less likely to say or do something harmful to a BIPOC student, colleague, or friend and can develop a commitment to interrupt systems of whiteness wherever they are, not just on campus, but in their future communities. They are also liberated to grow into their full humanity and connect with others in a truer, deeper way.

² “*Scyborg*—composed of *s* + *cyborg*—is a queer turn of word that I offer to you to name the structural agency of persons who have picked up colonial technologies and reassembled them to decolonizing purposes.” (la paperson, 2017, p. xiv).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of White students and how they develop as White people committed to racial justice in college, with a particular emphasis on navigating emotionality. Guided by critical whiteness studies (CWS) and White emotionality research, I sought to both understand students' experiences from their perspectives, as well as analyze that understanding through a critical lens. I explored how these students are working to unpack their socialization into whiteness and how their varied experiences in college contribute to their growth. I was interested in exploring beyond how White students are perpetuating harm and toward how they are learning to create justice—creating cracks in the concrete of white supremacy (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Research Questions

The following research question and sub-questions guided this study:

1. How do White students grow in their commitment to racial justice in college?
 - a. What types of experiences in college contribute to developing a commitment to racial justice?
 - b. How do White students come to understand racism as a systemic reality and not merely individual actions or beliefs?
 - c. How do White students navigate their emotionality while developing a commitment to racial justice?

Situating Myself in the Study

Several formative experiences shaped my interest in this topic. The first was experiences in my faith tradition throughout high school and college. The second was through my experiences of coming out in that faith tradition and experiencing discrimination for the first

time. And finally, the understanding of racism, injustice, and their roots in white supremacy that I gained through this program has profoundly shifted the way I think about my role in higher education and how I approach my work. I share below about how each of these experiences led to my commitment to this project.

My initial value for social justice was fostered through my faith tradition. I currently consider myself a recovering evangelical Christian. And while I no longer identify with that faith tradition, many of the biblical values of love and justice were deeply formative for me throughout high school and college and still resonate with me today. In my teens, I connected with the biblical commandment to love my neighbor as myself, to give sacrificially, and to live a life of love for God, others, and myself. In college, through my involvement with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, I learned about social justice and God's love for the oppressed. This learning was an invitation to humbly love those who were pushed to the margins of society, to embrace those who were hurting and had nowhere else to turn. These values still drive me today.

It was my belief in a loving and just God that gave me the courage to come out to myself and embrace my queer identity. When I came out to those in my faith community, I experienced rejection and discrimination for the first time. I felt the pain and injustice of being rejected based on an identity that I did not choose. This experience changed me. The people who I considered my chosen family could no longer accept me as a full member in the community. They thought they were doing the right and moral thing. Yet they had no idea the harm they were causing. They had no idea how wrong they were. They simply could not understand from their limited, dominant, Christian, straight identities what it actually felt like to be queer; that I was really not that different from them.

I desperately wanted the homophobic Christians in my life to put themselves in my shoes and embrace all aspects of my identity. But they could not see past their own normative understandings of humanity and sexuality. It was the pain of this experience that pushed me to explore my dominant identities and acknowledge ways that perhaps I had similarly inflicted harm on others. Perhaps there were truths and injustices that I could not see, that were rendered invisible by my privileged experiences as a White, cisgender, educated, upper-middle class person. This experience started my journey and framed by desire to explore my own whiteness and talk to *my* people about *our* whiteness. I want to expose whiteness in ways that other White folks might be able to see.

The other experience that has influenced my rationale for this project is the past five years in the higher education leadership program. This program has challenged me to explore both my dominant and marginalized identities in new ways. I have deepened what I know will be a lifelong journey of reflection on how my identities and experiences have shaped my worldview. I have learned about the painful roots of higher education in this country and how white supremacy is deeply infused within our institutions and our scholarship (Patel, 2016; Smith, 2012; Wilder, 2013). In choosing a research interest, Jones et al. (2014) advised researchers to choose a topic of “compelling interest” (p. 24). Quoting Gadamer, they explained, “a question presses itself upon us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion” (p. 24). This question about how to dismantle and disrupt white supremacy has pressed itself upon me in the past five years. I am committed to continually striving to unpack the ways that whiteness and white hegemony have shaped my understanding of the world and my approach to scholarship. This is a primary motivating factor for me in this research study. I believe that it is incumbent on White people to step into these issues and conversations. Racism

is not a BIPOC problem. It is a White problem. We caused it. We embedded it in our society. And we have an obligation to be part of dismantling it.

Significance of the Study

White hegemony is an insidious force in higher education. While often invisible, there is no part of an institution that it does not touch. Research shows how whiteness infuses the culture and practices of higher education (Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). Researchers also highlight how difficult it is to engage White students and professionals alike in acknowledging the ways their whiteness affects how they take up space in the world (Cabrera et al., 2017; Matias, 2016; Watt, 2007). More research is needed on whiteness and White development, not to center White people, but to deconstruct and challenge white hegemony, to name it and expose it as the oppressive force it is. Educators need to identify ways to help White students navigate the minefield of White emotionality (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Cabrera et al. (2017) highlighted that understanding the emotional reactions of White people is a central concern and, thus, needs more research. We need more White people to commit the time, as well as intellectual and emotional energy, to this work—just as I want straight people to work on understanding their straight privilege and the ways that the world has been made for them and then act as accomplices in dismantling heteronormativity.

If White educators take on more of the “burden of race,” (2016, p. 94), as Matias described it, we can learn how to help White students navigate their fragility. White students who become committed to racial justice and do their own continuing inner-work can become accomplices in the work of challenging and dismantling the systems that perpetuate inequitable treatment and outcomes for BIPOC students.

It can be a difficult journey to wrestle with your socialization into a dominant identity. It can feel unmooring. I get it. I have been stuck in my own white fragility, scared to move either way for fear of causing harm or being called a racist. I believe there are White students who can be moved and encouraged to grow if given a balance between challenge and support, between discomfort and comfortable *enough* to stay engaged (Zembylas, 2018). I am not talking about prioritizing the comfort of White students for the sake of protecting them from pain. Aiming to minimize discomfort is not the goal and would only reinforced the valid critiques of “safe space” language made by critical scholars (Cabrera et al., 2016; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Drawing from Leonardo and Porter (2010), I am imagining an environment of risk, where growth, not comfort, is prioritized.

Leonardo and Porter (2010) explained that “critical race pedagogy is inherently risky, uncomfortable, and fundamentally unsafe” (p. 139). They go on to explain the nuance involved in balancing comfort and risk, “if it is a safe condition, then it is the safety of being able to take risks, of putting oneself at risk, a condition many people of color already navigate” (p. 141). Calling for a hermeneutic of empathy, they conclude that framing the journey for White students as one of risk and courage, not safety or comfort, will lead to more transformative learning, “for it is guided by an ethic of concern for and not a desire to expose whites as simply racist” (p. 153). Spaces of risk may be uncomfortable and challenging, but they are spaces where engagement and growth happen; they are spaces where White students can ask hard questions and not be afraid to get messy or be wrong. This environment can intentionally provide a space to do the difficult internal work of coming to terms with a dominant identity. In a similar way, Matias and Zembylas (2014) called for “strategic empathy” (p. 332) when engaging White students. Zembylas (2018) later named this strategic approach a pedagogy of discomfort, where

educators provide "a *relatively safe* [emphasis added] space to challenge individuals' comfort zones and transform the emotionality of Whites" (p. 87). BIPOC educators should not be pressed to concern themselves with White students' feelings of comfort or safety, even if it is strategic. But White educators can and must do this work. We need to challenge our own people. This is part of our share of the burden of race.

As a scholar, I enter this conversation from a critical constructivist perspective. Understanding that knowledge is constructed based on experiences, I sought to understand the experiences of the White participants in this study. I did this not to center whiteness, but to learn from their journeys how we might further challenge whiteness. Coming from a place of critical and humanizing love (hooks, 2001; Matias & Allen, 2013), I critique out of love and a pursuit of justice and equity. It is my hope that my research might invite other White people along on this journey into a deeper understanding of humanity and connection with others, and a truer wrestling with their complicity in systems of whiteness. As a White person, I am uniquely situated to bring compassion, love, and understanding, as well as challenge and critique, to White students who are on this journey.

Theoretical Perspective

To answer my research questions, I used theories and perspectives from critical whiteness studies (CWS) as well as scholarship on White emotionality. While I go into greater depth in Chapter 2, I outline the central concepts of each area briefly here.

Critical Whiteness Studies

CWS shifts the attention from looking primarily at BIPOC people when talking about race, racism, and oppression to interrogating whiteness, white supremacy, and the construction of the White race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CWS "focuses on problematizing the normality of

hegemonic whiteness...[It acknowledges that] whiteness is the underlying mechanism that maintains a racist system, and not acknowledging whiteness contributes to the permanence of race and racism” (Matias et al., 2014, p. 291). The goal of applying a critical whiteness lens is not to center whiteness, but to expose how whiteness infuses the environment, creates oppression for BIPOC people, and immunity from oppression for White people (Cabrera, 2011, 2018, 2019; Leonardo, 2009). CWS ideas apply to both the critical exploration of white supremacy (systemic), as well as white immunity/privilege (individual), highlighting the ways that they work together to reinforce the minoritization of BIPOC people (Leonardo, 2009).

From a CWS perspective, whiteness is an ideology, a way of knowing and understanding the world. It is a worldview that functions to uphold the centrality and dominance of White people. Whiteness as a racial category was created historically by White people to justify the social and economic domination of BIPOC people (Cabrera, 2011, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Leonardo, 2009; Wilder, 2013). On the other hand, whiteness as an ideology is a collective racial epistemology, a way of acting and knowing that upholds the racial status quo (Foste, 2019; Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). Whiteness as a construct is distinct from White as a racial identity, yet they are often intimately related (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Leonardo, 2009). Whiteness is a social force that typically goes unnamed and unrecognized, making it difficult to disrupt. Most White people are oblivious to its existence and their racial comfort is sustained by this oblivion. Whiteness is not invisible, however, to those it oppresses. I center my understanding of whiteness on the idea of white hegemony. Cabrera (2018) uses the concept of white hegemony as a concept to describe how racism operates, by insidiously and invisibly upholding White domination. White hegemony is the system of social domination created by white normativity and white supremacy that serves to uphold inequity (Cabrera, 2018). Naming it as hegemonic

calls attention to the invisible, oppressive nature of whiteness as a social reality that directly impacts campus cultures.

In addition to conceptualizing whiteness in this way, there are several specific CWS concepts that I used to frame my research. While there is not a single, unified set of CWS principles, scholars have identified a number of constructs that have become mainstays in the CWS literature (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009). The constructs that I explored for this study include white normativity and hegemony, epistemologies of ignorance, white innocence, white complicity, and color-evasive ideologies. I agree with Cabrera et al. (2017) that these constructs do not exist in isolation and that they are “mutually reinforcing” (p. 27). I discuss these each in greater detail in Chapter 2.

White Emotionality

Central to my research interest is how White students navigate their emotionality around issues of race and racism. Race scholars consistently identify White emotions such as guilt, shame, defensiveness, anger, denial, discomfort, and sadness, as consistent players in racial discourse and racial justice education efforts (Cabrera, 2012; Cabrera et al., 2017; DiAngelo, 2011; Linder, 2015; Matias, 2016; Watt, 2007). The concept of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018), a term used to describe the de-railing nature of White emotions in race conversations, has become more commonly used in the U.S. since DiAngelo’s work gained prominence in the wake of the 2020 George Floyd murder and subsequent protests. Understanding how these emotions operate to reinforce white hegemony and uphold the status quo is critical to challenging their power.

If a central goal of CWS is to expose the hegemony of whiteness, then understanding and critiquing the role of emotions is critical to this project. White emotions shape the degree to

which White students' engage in learning about race, racism, and whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2017; DiAngelo, 2018; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Uncomfortable emotions such as guilt, shame, and defensiveness, frequently serve as obstructions and diversions for White students wrestling with critical concepts such as white privilege, immunity, complicity, and their own internalized racism. And when these emotions turn into White tears, they have the effect of re-centering whiteness, reinforcing white supremacy, and further harming and marginalizing BIPOC students (Matias, 2016). I unpack the scholarship on the role of White emotions more in Chapter 2.

Positionality

In keeping with a critical whiteness approach and my commitment to critical inquiry, it is important to highlight my positionality in this work. While identities and life stories are complex, I attempt to break them down here, while not aiming to oversimplify them either. Building from the section above on situating myself in the study, the identities that are most relevant to this study are my experiences as a White, queer, cisgender woman. Another identity that impacts how I engage in this work is related to ability. While I consider myself able-bodied in the sense that I do not require physical aids to navigate the world, I live with mental health concerns that affect me emotionally, mentally, and physically. This reality shapes how I engage in research. Experiencing depression and anxiety has deepened my ability to be empathetic to others' emotional suffering. Because of this, I am able to bring love and compassion to my scholarship in an authentic way. I am naturally empathetic of others, including my White participants. Other salient identities that shape who I am are educated and upper-middle class. Knowing that who I am and how I enter into research has profound effects on research itself, I strive to remain

conscious of my both dominant and marginalized identities and how they shape my worldview, understandings, and experiences.

I am aware that as a White person studying whiteness there is the potential for me to miss the ways that my socialization into ideologies of whiteness have shaped my worldview. Just as I felt the pain of my faith community's refusal look past their own ideologies, I am aware that my socialization into ideologies of whiteness makes me equally vulnerable to inflicting harm and, thereby, perpetuating white hegemony. I need to acknowledge how my upbringing and socialization might cause me to think I understand something that I know nothing about. This perspective has helped me be more open to hearing and believing the stories and experiences of others, especially BIPOC friends, students, and mentors. I am committed to continually learning, reflecting, and challenging myself as I see whiteness influencing me.

By deconstructing whiteness and its impacts, I hope to understand my own privileged identities more deeply, as well as help others see and explore their own whiteness. Additionally, I feel my White identity helped me understand and unpack the experiences of the White students that participated in my study. I was able to relate to their stories and feelings. I also acknowledge that my White identity can sometimes be a hinderance in being able to name the ways whiteness is at work due to my lifetime of socialization into the norms of whiteness. This is where learning from my marginalized experiences can help me understand more deeply. In this way, I brought my full self to this study, my dominant identities and my marginalized identities. They each helped me navigate the terrain of research that I undertook.

Use of Terms

In this section, I briefly outline two key concepts and my rationale for using them in this study.

Accomplice

What are White people who are actively committed to racial justice to be called? Ally, accomplice, coconspirator, anti-racist? On one hand, I do not really care. I am more interested in actions and outcomes than labels, especially when they are self-declared. On the other hand, language is powerful. Language conveys meaning. And language is contextually shaped and reflects cultural understandings and reality. Thus, at the end of the day, the language we use matters. With that in mind, I choose to use the term accomplice when describing White people who are actively committed to racial justice.

Much of social justice literature uses ally terminology to describe a dominant group identity that supports justice and equity for those in minoritized groups (e.g., Edwards, 2006; Reason et al., 2005). Some critical scholars use anti-racist or co-conspirator (e.g., Linder, 2015; Matias & Mackey, 2016), while others focus on concepts of solidarity (e.g., Kluttz et al., 2020). They do this because the term ally has become a watered-down, performative declaration for some. Being an ally can be a label one takes on without any accompanying action to challenge systems of power and oppression. This fact is problematic. For me, anti-racist, in a similar way, has become a bit of a buzz word that means different things to different people. If used as Kendi (2019) intended in his popular book, it refers to someone who is more than an ally, someone who takes proactive steps to interrupt racism and racist policies wherever they occurs. Similar concepts of co-conspirator or solidarity also imply greater action and commitment to the cause of racial justice. In this way, these are better language choices if one seeks to actively confront racism.

While I considered both co-conspirator and accomplice, I ultimately chose to use the word accomplice. The two terms have similar meanings, however, the history and definitions of

the two differ in meaningful ways. An accomplice is “a person who knowingly helps another in a crime or wrongdoing, often as a subordinate” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). The two key aspects in this definition are taking concrete action and assuming a secondary position. Thus, White accomplices actively support the work of racial justice and do so without co-opting the cause or putting themselves at the center. White accomplices for racial justice work in partnership with BIPOC leaders and activists, yet they do not take over. Interestingly, according to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), the etymology of the word accomplice comes from the Anglo-French alteration of *complice*, from which we also get the word complicit. This lines up with CWS invitations for White accomplices to acknowledge their complicity, not only in fighting injustice, but also in upholding systems of whiteness. Additionally, both the English and French words “ultimately derive from the Latin verb meaning ‘to fold together’” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), which is a meaningful way to think about the communal work involved in the pursuit of racial justice. Thus, White racial justice accomplices work together in community with, and take the lead from, BIPOC people to move the cause of justice forward while also wrestling with our own participation in systems of whiteness that continue to privilege us over our BIPOC partners. With this understanding in mind, I refer to the participants in this study as emerging accomplices. They are still in development, but are on the road of accompliceship in critical ways.

White Hegemony

Another term that I chose with intentionality is white hegemony. While I expand on this concept more in Chapter 2, I summarize here why I focus on this language. Drawing from Cabrera (2018), I use the term white hegemony to name how white supremacy shows up most frequently today. Hegemonic whiteness is the environment and culture that mediates white supremacy. Naming whiteness as hegemonic allows us to expose the normative way that

whiteness dominates. This naming of white hegemony takes racism and white supremacy out of the individual context and places them in a systemic, historical context. I choose to use the term “white hegemony” often in lieu of “white supremacy” when talking about racism in this study for two reasons. One, it more accurately names what is happening so we can confront and dismantle it. Two, it avoids the emotionally charged associations that many White people have with the term white supremacy. White supremacy is a reality that needs to be named, exposed, and confronted. However, many White people only think about torch-bearing men in white hoods when they hear the term white supremacy, which allows them to exempt themselves from the problem and embrace their color-evasive identity. I advocate for strategically using terms like white hegemony, not to deny the brutal reality of white supremacy or to cater to White sentiments, but to stealthily create inroads that may serve to upend the supremacy of whiteness and end racial oppression on a systemic level.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the study’s purpose and goals by framing them in the context of the hegemony of whiteness in higher education and the need to help White students interrogate their own identities. In this study, I explored White students’ experiences in college and how they are navigating issues of race, racism, and their own whiteness. The goal was to understand how White students grow in their understanding of systemic (in)justice and in their own commitment to racial justice, with an emphasis on navigating emotionality. I explored these students’ experiences through the sensitizing concepts of critical whiteness and White emotionality scholarship. In so doing, I sought to understand how the participants navigate, resist, confront, or enact ideologies of whiteness and White emotionality. I also framed this study in light of my own journey, identities, and White positionality.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth look at the literature that informed my research approach and theoretical framework in this study. I explore the research on White identity development and White emotionality, as well as key theoretical constructs found in CWS. Additionally, I discuss how this study can contribute to the research by exploring how White students can productively navigate their emotions while deepening a commitment to racial justice.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses the literature on the roots of whiteness in higher education, White ally development and emotionality, as well as core concepts in critical whiteness studies (CWS). After situating the literature in historical context, the subsequent sections explore the research on White student development as allies and accomplices for racial justice, as well as the literature on a critical aspect of developing as an accomplice: emotionality. I end this literature review with an exploration of the emerging field of CWS and the core tenets and assumptions that informed my theoretical approach to this study. Throughout each section, consistent themes are evident around the tendency to over-individualize racism at the expense of systemic critiques and solutions; and the propensity to be more afraid of appearing racist than taking actions to not be racist. More research is needed that will bridge the gap for White students to move past the personal toward the systemic, while navigating emotionality, in order to drive impactful change.

Higher Education as a Tool of White Supremacy

Before exploring the literature on White development and whiteness in present day higher education, it is important to position the conversation within the history of higher education in the United States. Thus, this first section explores the history of higher education as a tool of white supremacy and settler colonialism and how that legacy impacts campuses today. Any study of the history of the U.S. must include a look into racism, imperialism, capitalism, slavery, and colonization. The study of the history of education, both K-12 and higher education, is no different (Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013).

In the U.S., higher education is and has always been a tool for white supremacy. Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022) argued that “most colleges in the United States are HWCUs

(Historically White Colleges and Universities) with a history, demography, curriculum, climate, and a set of symbols and traditions that embody and reproduce whiteness and white supremacy” (p. 2). Additionally, Patton (2016) asserted that “the academy functions as a bastion of racism/White supremacy” (p. 317). The earliest colonial colleges were directly linked with slavery and indigenous genocide (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Higher education has served as a means of enforcing White knowledge production, cultural assimilation, and the legitimization of scientific racism, segregation, and expansionist colonialism (Kendi, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pak, 2021; Span, 2015; Wilder, 2013). The impacts of this history are still seen today, from the demographics of institutional leadership and faculty, to the stubborn reliance on standardized testing despite evidence of its racist outcomes, to the persistent resistance to affirmative action and more (Guinier, 2015; Kendi, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Patton, 2016).

From the Colonies to Jim Crow

Historical research on the founding of the nation’s early colleges reveals how deeply intertwined higher education was with the institution of slavery, the wealth earned through the ownership of humans, the appropriation of native land, and the cultural genocide of indigenous people. Wilder’s (2013) insightful work, *Ebony & Ivy*, meticulously exposed how the first colonial colleges supported and profited from slavery, educated elite plantation owners, used enslaved people to build their buildings and serve their campuses, and imprisoned and abused indigenous children. As Wilder noted, “The high point of the African slave trade also marked, not coincidentally, the period in which higher education in the colonies expanded most rapidly” (p. 9). Higher education thrived in the slave economy. The earliest presidents, trustees, and donors all profited from the brutal oppression of Blacks and Native Americans. Harvard, the first

colonial college, which remains the wealthiest university in the country, grew its endowment through enslavement (Patton, 2016). Profits from slave labor were used to found the second colonial college, the College of William and Mary (Kendi, 2016). Princeton's first eight presidents all owned slaves (Patton, 2016). All of the colonial colleges, which educated and propelled the elite and the local economies, were "instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the African slave trade and slavery" (Wilder, 2013, p. 17).

This legacy continued through the Civil War, into Reconstruction, and beyond. Punishable by 20 lashes, antiliteracy laws in most southern states made it illegal for enslaved (or in many cases even free) Blacks to gather in groups, attend school, or be taught to read or write (Span, 2015). White colonizers believed in the power of education "because literacy inspired thoughts of freedom" (Span, 2015, p. 56), so they worked through law and policy to deny it to Black people. Even after they gained access to education under Jim Crow, the average school year for Black students in the south was about four months long, allowing them more time for farm labor (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Higher education scholarship was used to rewrite much of this history, casting southern Whites as the victims of the reconstruction era. Kendi's (2016) research exposed how Columbia University's distinguished Dunning School of Reconstruction completely re-framed the history of slavery from a barbarous, profitable institution to an "unprofitable commerce dominated by benevolent, paternalistic planters civilizing and caring for" (p. 287) content uncivilized people. Kendi also pointed out that Dunning trained a "generation of influential southern historians who became department chairs and dominated the discipline of history for decades in the twentieth century" (p. 287), impacting school curricula at

all levels. Thus, higher education not only profited from oppression, but also served to rationalize and reify the subjugation of other humans.

“Civilizing” Black and Indigenous Humans

Rooted in Christianity, the subjugation of human beings was often lauded as noble. Early colleges told donors they would convert and civilize Native people and train Black people to act White (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Patton, 2016). Institutions started Indian colleges and mission schools and forced Native “students” to dress in European clothes (Wilder, 2013). With the goal of “kill[ing] the Indian in order to save the man” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5), Congress made it illegal for indigenous students to be taught in their native languages.

White Knowledge Production and Scientific Racism

From the beginning, higher education was also employed to normalize and center White knowledge, urging the assimilation into whiteness for all non-White students. The early colonial colleges based their curriculum off of Cambridge and Euro-centric knowledge paradigms and this pattern continued as higher education expanded across the country (Kendi, 2016). Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022) contended that HWCUs are White spaces with a White curriculum that “reflects the norms, values, history, and position of Whites in the world. Historically, what passed as social science, history, or as philosophy in HWCUs was partial to Whites and the West” (p. 4). Patton (2016) agreed, critiquing the curriculum and cannon of knowledge produced in the academy as “one form of property that belongs to White people” (p. 321) and is “designed to colonize the mind” (p. 321). This White knowledge production also seeped into assimilationist HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), which recognized Black equality, but often focused on cultural inferiority which could be educated out of them (Kendi, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Scientific racism was used to justify the normality and centrality of White knowledge.

Science in higher education promoted the supposedly proven biological superiority of Whites, used corpses of Black and Indigenous people, and experimented on and exploited Black bodies (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013).

Settler Colonialism and the Problem of Land-Grant Colleges

It was not just the elite, east coast colleges and universities that perpetuated white supremacy. Land-grant colleges were critical components of the United States' expansion and empire building. The Morrill Act of 1862 dedicated stolen indigenous land for use by states to create and fund higher education institutions. Some land-grants were founded on stolen land, others were funded with proceeds from the sale of formerly indigenous land (Nash, 2019; Pak, 2021). Land-grant colleges are often hailed as creating access to higher education for those who would not otherwise have it. Their creation has been framed as a move away from elitist liberal arts toward practical, applied studies, like agriculture. What is often left out of this narrative is this expansion was “part and parcel of the federal governments’ quest to settle the continent with (mostly) white people” (Nash, 2019, p. 439). Settler colonialism requires settling on the land; it requires agriculture, which these land-grant universities advanced. And, as Nash (2019) noted, “Settler colonialism needs more than agriculture. It also requires labor, transportation, a banking system, and political stability. Land-grant colleges had the potential to help with all of these things” (p. 445). The expansion of higher education around the country was “predicated on territorial expansion and systematic exploitation of Indigenous land and labor” (Pak, 2021, p. 133). These institutions also systematically left out BIPOC students, thus HBUCs and Tribal Colleges were created, further cementing practices of segregation in the U.S. (Patton, 2016).

Segregation, *Brown*, and the Legacy of Whiteness

Under Jim Crow, higher education institutions created segregated programs and facilities that were dramatically unequal to their White counterparts (C. Anderson, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Span, 2015). For example, University of Texas at Austin created a law school for Black students in a rundown, off-site basement (C. Anderson, 2017). Even in the northern states, segregated, second class schools were the norm at all levels. This institutionalized, intentional effort to deny schooling to Black students continued after the Civil War until the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 that outlawed segregation in schools (Span, 2015). However, even after *Brown*, institutions of higher education, along with K-12 education, fought integration at every step (C. Anderson, 2017; Kendi, 2016; Span, 2015). Additionally, it is important to note that integrating schools was more an act of international image maintenance for the U.S. than it was an act of amends (Kendi, 2016).

Billings in the U.S. education debt, Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that this history of segregated schooling created unequal funding models, as well as other impacts, that continue to this day. For example, most beneficiaries of affirmative action were, and continue to be, White women (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As Anderson (2017) noted, fifty years after *Brown*, “not a single African American earned a Ph.D. in astronomy or astrophysics...In fact, of the 2,100 Ph.Ds. awarded in forty-three different fields in the natural sciences, not one of these doctoral degrees went to an African American” (p. 94-95). In fact, after several court cases that eroded the impact of *Brown*, U.S. schools are now as racially segregated as they were just a few years after the ruling (Span, 2015).

Pak (2021) appropriately argued that we should not be surprised at the fact that schools, including higher education, continue to be spaces that perpetuate whiteness. “Schools are doing

exactly what they were designed to do,” (p. 134) she argued. Institutions of higher education continue to rely on racist standardized tests for admission; faculty, as well as presidents and trustees, are still overwhelmingly White; and schools of education are filled with almost 90% White women who will go into K-12 public schools to teach an ever diversifying student body (Kendi, 2016; Patton, 2016). From the names on buildings, to the traditions of whiteness in the curriculum, higher education is still saturated in whiteness. In recognition of this fact, scholars and educators have long been working for change. One focus of this effort is the development of White identities that are committed to racial justice. The next section explores how scholars have studied White identity development in an effort to bring allies and accomplices into the struggle for racial justice.

Developing White Racial Justice Allies³

In an effort to confront white hegemony in the academy and beyond, many researchers have taken an approach that focuses on getting White people to acknowledge their white privilege on an individual level as a first step toward reducing racism (Ambrosio, 2014; DiAngelo, 2018; Edwards, 2006; Kendall, 2012; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005). Leonardo (2009) critiqued this individual approach as a “passive description of racial domination without agents” (p. 9) and instead argued for a focus on white supremacy as a systemic problem. Leonardo argued that White people need to dis-identify with whiteness as an ideology, not just acknowledge, or even resist, their own personal privileges. Without this dis-identification, White people cannot be full participants in equity initiatives (Leonardo, 2009). The tension here is that systems are made up of individuals. Enabling individuals to work through their own racial

³ The majority of literature uses ally language and not accomplice language. While remaining committed to the concept of accomplices in my research, I will use ally language most frequently in this chapter to accurately reflect the conversations in the literature.

development is a key part of them being able to embrace a more systemic approach that might serve to dismantle white hegemony. Here is where the individual development models can be helpful, as long as they include a critical, systemic critique of whiteness in their approach. Both foci are needed.

White Identity Development Models

Numerous models exist for developing White people toward anti-racist (or even just less-racist) identities. Some are framed as White identity development models (Helms, 1993), some are focused on broader social justice ally development (Edwards, 2006; Waters, 2010; Watt, 2007), and some are specifically focused on developing racial justice allies (Linder, 2015; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005). In general, these models present a staged approach similar to many social identity development models used in student affairs work (e.g., Patton et al., 2016). In these models, individuals progress from a less developed position toward a more complex and nuanced understanding of themselves and how they fit into the world. These models can be helpful in recognizing how White students can develop in their understanding of themselves and their position of privilege in a white supremacist world. And while the staged models of ally development make sense from a classic identity development lens, they also can be problematic in how they re-center whiteness and White racial identity within the structures of racism and white hegemony. I briefly summarize several popular models and then discuss them together.

Helms' (1993) model of White racial identity development is one of the most frequently engaged with models in the literature and is, therefore, foundational for many of the subsequent ally development models. Developed in the 1990s, the model laid out a staged process of development that begins with ignorance of racism and moves towards a "nonracist White identity" (Helms, 1993, p. 49). There are six stages grouped into two phases and identity

progresses in a largely linear fashion. In the first phase (abandonment of racism), Whites become aware of racism through contact with Black people, causing dissonance and pushing them to wrestle with their own cultural racism and beliefs about Black inferiority. The second phase is about defining a nonracist White identity where Whites question their beliefs, seek new understanding, and confront their prejudice. The end result is an abandonment of personal racism and the construction of a positive, nonracist White identity.

Reason and colleagues (Reason, 2007; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005; Reason, Scales, et al., 2005; Reason & Evans, 2007) have written substantially on ally development. Reason et al.'s (2005) model of racial justice ally development identified multiple factors that contribute to developing racial justice allies in college. Factors such as having diverse friendships, coursework, and having White role models, all helped contribute to greater racial justice actions (a term not defined). While this model is less linear and more complex than the Helms (1993) model, it still relies on the notion of eventual, paced progress toward a less racist individual identity. Ally development progresses continually from low knowledge to a more complex understanding of their power and privilege and, finally, to a commitment to taking actions based on that knowledge. Interestingly, Reason's later work (2007; Reason & Evans, 2007) included a critique of linear models. They acknowledged that identity development is more complex, yet they still assumed a sense of progress toward an inevitable less-racist identity.

Edwards (2006) developed a model based on assessing an ally's motivation for action. While Edwards used statuses instead of stages to indicate that there can be fluid movement between them, the model presumes that aspiring allies will want to move toward the more mature status of "Ally for Social Justice." The model is similar to the other models in recognizing increasing complexity of identities and outlooks as students develop over time. While this model

is not framed solely on issues of racism, Edwards drew on the Helms (1993) model and Kendall's (2012, 2nd ed.) work on white privilege to unpack his model. Aspiring allies move through three statuses based on self-interest, altruism, and, finally, social justice.

Linder's (2015) more recent model updated the staged approach by adding a cyclical component. The first part of the model is linear: (1) students are introduced to issues of racism, (2) experience resistance, anger, and defensiveness, (3) then finally accept the reality of racism. Once students go through those stages, they enter a cycle of guilt, shame, fear of appearing racist, and attempt to distance themselves from *bad, racist* Whites by being *good, non-racist* Whites. This cycle often keeps them from engaging in action as racial justice allies, but at times they can break free from the cycle and take action. At other times, they are back in the cycle and are wrestling with "hyperawareness" and "over analysis" (p. 544) that sometimes blocks action, all while remaining aware of their responsibility to act.

In addition to the above models, much of the literature around ally development incorporates similar, mostly linear, understandings of White students as they become allies (e.g., Bridges & Mather, 2015; Waters, 2010; Watt, 2007). Cabrera (2012) identified a similar, yet more nuanced path for White male students who are "working through whiteness" (p. 382) that begins with developing racial awareness, moves to understanding privilege, struggling to take racial justice actions, and finally acknowledging there is "work still to be done" (p. 392). With this final aspect of working through whiteness, Cabrera acknowledged that the road to allyship is a journey of continual work to address systemic oppression. Without this acknowledgement, he argued, the developmental approaches to White identity are merely a "type of racial therapy that is not necessarily related to larger social structures of oppression" (p. 378). To move past the

White racial therapy approach, it is important to name issues of individualism inherent in such models.

Individual Focus

Many of the models of White identity development can lead White people to believe they can overcome their socialization, become good, non-racist individuals, leading the world to become a more just place. The problem is that in almost all of the models, whiteness is framed as an individual racial identity. This makes sense given that we are talking about personal identity development, an area of study that looks at individuals, their beliefs, and their actions. However, to limit the conversation to the individual level when discussing dominant identities is to reify the status quo of white hegemony. As critical scholars note, to leave it unnamed is to leave it intact (Cabrera et al., 2016; Leonardo, 2009). The majority of the ally research does not name whiteness as an ideology or white hegemony as a structural reality that needs to be dismantled (e.g., Helms, 1993; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005; Watt, 2007). Positioning whiteness in only individual identity terms is problematic and will never lead to systemic change. The reality is more complex, and these models need to be complicated.

Many scholars rightly point out that framing allyship in terms of individual identity development that leads toward an enlightened, non-racist identity reinforces the notion that racism is a problem that lies within individuals (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera, 2019; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009). The majority of the models reinforce the good/bad binary notion that “encourages a sense of white exceptionalism for those who are supposedly more developed than less aware white people” (Foste & Irwin, 2020, p. 445). Helms’ (1993) foundational model is a key example of this. Several of the other models cite this model and build on its basic, staged structure, such as Reason, Roosa Miller, et al.’s (2005) model. They acknowledged that identity

development is complex, yet they still assumed a sense of progress toward an inevitable less-racist identity.

A glaring example of the overwhelmingly individual focused ally development models is when Brown and Ostrove (2013) claimed that one of the biggest challenges for allies is “maintaining non-prejudiced attitudes and behavior over time” (p. 2221). If the biggest challenge is having a better attitude, we will never get to challenging white hegemony, white privilege, or white supremacy. This focus on individual morality reinforces the myth that racism is an individual problem and frames allyship simply as being a good, non-racist White person. Additionally, while many authors use the more systemic language of racism, racial oppression, or social justice (Bridges & Mather, 2015; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005; Watt, 2007), the discussion is consistently framed in terms of personal actions, not systems of oppression. Reason and Evans (2007) wrote about whiteness as a set of cultural norms that create “invisible control” (p. 1993) on campuses that must be addressed, but this critical lens is not present in their ally development model (Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005).

If racism is only upheld by individual actors committing racist acts, then an individual focus would not be an issue. However, understanding that racism is deeply systemic, it is clear that being a “good” white person will not eliminate inequity (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009; Patton & Bondi, 2015). Cabrera et al. (2017) rightly observed that this approach to developing allies can easily turn into a form of “White racial narcissism...[that explains] why cross-racial interactions fail or produce counterproductive results...[because] White people...spend their psychic energy trying to not appear racist” (p. 34). Ally development models do not often name the fact that eliminating personal racism from one’s life, while laudable, does nothing to eliminate structural oppression. I agree with Patton and Bondi (2015)

when they concluded that allyship that only focuses on individual actions and does not engage in broader systems is not real allyship, it is merely people being nice. As they argued, real allyship requires addressing systems of inequity and includes “contentious relationships with those in power” (p. 509). Focusing on being a good White person prevents broader justice work, upholds the status quo of white hegemony and leaves us stuck in a world of racism without racists (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). This is why moving away from individual allyship toward active accomplice narratives might be a good first step.

Lack of Awareness?

The ally development models typically start with lack of awareness in White people. Rarely do they interrogate this perception. A classic example is in Helms’ (1993) model. Once White people have been exposed to Black people, Helms concludes, “sooner or later [they] will have to acknowledge that there are differences in how Blacks and whites in the United States are treated regardless of economic status” (p. 57). This is an extremely hopeful, yet naïve statement. As I explore in greater detail later in this chapter, critical whiteness scholars note, the problem is not that White people simply do not know anything about race or racism issues, it is that they willingly choose ignorance and deny knowledge (Cabrera et al., 2017; Leonardo, 2009). Many of the models assume that White students will eventually become less ignorant (and, therefore, less racist) as they are exposed to more information in college. For example, Reason, Roosa Miller, et al.’s (2005) model of racial justice ally development identified multiple factors that contribute to developing allies, many of which centered around exposure to non-White others/information. Factors such as having diverse friendships, diverse living arrangements, and coursework related to race, all helped contribute to greater knowledge and understanding, which eventually led to racial justice actions.

It is important to acknowledge that having racially diverse relationships is seen in the literature as a consistent characteristic of racial justice allies (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Edwards, 2006; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kluttz et al., 2020; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005). It is equally important to trouble the notion that White people will be less racist if only they had more knowledge acquired from BIPOC people. We know that White people frequently choose ignorance and claim obliviousness (Cabrera et al., 2017; Leonardo, 2009). It is not simply a lack of awareness that leaves White students hindered in their growth, it is also their embrace of ideologies of whiteness and their active resistance to challenges to that ideology (Leonardo, 2009; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). It is not so easy to disentangle hegemonic whiteness merely by exposure to new information or making new friends. The reality of whiteness is much more insidious.

A Racism-Free Destination?

A further complication to the White development models is that they almost universally assume that a White person can progress to reach a point where they are no longer racist. According to these models, true allies have rid themselves of any personal, racist intentions and biases. If we apply a pedagogy of complicity, as I explain more in the subsequent section on CWS, we can see that this is not a realistic goal. As Foste and Irwin (2020) explained, “White complicity challenges the belief that individual willpower and increasing developmental complexity will lead to the self-actualization necessary for white students to overcome racist attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives” (p. 445). We must name the fact that White people cannot simply abandon racism and take on an autonomous nonracist White identity. Leonardo (2013) took this idea a step further (quoting Howard): “Those who claim to have discovered such a pathway *out* of Whiteness merely demonstrate their limited awareness of the depth and

complexity of [the] journey” (p. 88). I wholeheartedly agree. White accomplices must always be on guard for the ways that we inhabit and reinforce whiteness.

It is important to acknowledge that White people can grow in their identity as an ally, or accomplice, and in their understanding of race and racism, while also understanding that this is ongoing work that will never be complete. In recent years, scholars have wrestled with more nuanced approaches to understanding White ally development. As mentioned above, Cabrera (2012) discussed becoming a racial justice ally as a process, not an end, stressing that there is always more work to be done. Linder’s (2015) model provided a much needed update to the staged approach by adding a cyclical component that, similar to Cabrera (2012), challenged the notion of an end destination. Once White students go through some initial stages, they enter a cycle of wrestling with their guilt, complicity, inaction, and desires to enact allyship. Of all the models, Linder’s is the most promising in recognizing the never-ending nature of White allies’ quest to disentangle themselves from whiteness and engage in consistent ally action, or what I would call accomplice behaviors.

Other scholars similarly observe the cycle and complexity of White identities (e.g., Cabrera, 2012; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Kluttz et al., 2020). White people cannot stop being White or stop having immunity from racial oppression, even if they wanted to. The key, then, is to consistently engage in the messiness of striving to disentangle oneself from whiteness, as much as possible, while also accepting inherent complicity. This conceptualization fits the idea of being an accomplice well. Foste and Irwin (2020), citing Yancy, talked about White students who are striving to be allies as “anti-racist racists” (p. 445). Starting from a place of complicity with White students can alleviate the pressures and fears associated with constantly striving to appear not racist. Cabrera (2012) insightfully noted “there is a tendency of those in privileged

social positions to engage oppression only to the extent that they can move beyond it” (p. 397). Given this fact, it is crucial for White students to learn about their complicity and encouraged to take responsibility for their positionality, own their internalized racism, and be continually self-reflective (Cabrera, 2012; Ford & Orlandella, 2015). Similarly, Leonardo (2009) posited that White people could “rearticulate” a sense of White identity by owning their positionality while asserting “their humanity as beings-in-struggle and beings-for-others, rather than using others-for-their-being” (p. 97). This is a powerful way to look at White identity that accepts the process and the continual struggle. Acknowledging complicity can be the first step to breaking the good/bad binary framework. It allows White students to see the systemic nature of racism and begin to take action to dismantle it without needing to project a perfect (and unattainable) “good” White identity.

It is also critical to address the fact that White students typically struggle to accept their complicity, engaging in defensiveness, denial, anger, and other emotional responses as a way to avoid the pain of complicity (Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2017; DiAngelo, 2018; Matias, 2016; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005; Zembylas, 2018). I discuss these and other emotional reactions more below, but for now it is important to note that avoiding complicity only maintains existing inequitable structures. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Zembylas (2018) advocated for pedagogies of discomfort to create an entry point into challenging White students to wrestle with their dominant beliefs, complicity in racism and upholding of hegemonic whiteness. Challenging the notion of “safe spaces,” a pedagogy of discomfort pushes Whites to examine their complicity yet does not coddle or comfort in ways that reify white hegemony. It allows educators to provide “a relatively safe space to challenge individuals’ comfort zones” and can build humanizing solidarity (Zembylas, 2018, p. 87). As I discussed in Chapter 1, the idea of *relatively* safe space,

where safety means safe to take risks, is a strategic choice and important if we want White students to be able to grow.

Allyship and Identity

Another theme in the literature on ally development is the tension between allyship as an individual identity and allyship as specific actions to disrupt white supremacy. As discussed above, seeing allyship as an end identity to be achieved is common in many of the models (Bridges & Mather, 2015; Helms, 1993; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005; Reason, Scales, et al., 2005; Waters, 2010; Watt, 2007). Some studies acknowledge that striving for this goal is an ongoing process, and perhaps ultimately more aspirational than realistic (Cabrera, 2012; Cabrera et al., 2017; Edwards, 2006; Ford & Orlandella, 2015). Some scholars go further to critique notions of allyship as identity (Kluttz et al., 2020; Patton & Bondi, 2015). They rightfully note that allyship must be more than an internal identity. They argue, and I agree, that we must reframe the conversation to include both deep, personal identity development, as well as call students to take bold actions to disrupt systemic inequities. It is engaging in these actions that sets one apart as an accomplice for racial justice.

Allyship as an Identity

Many of the identity development models, not surprisingly, frame allyship as an individual, internal identity. An ally is one who is no longer racist (Helms, 1993). An ally is one who recognizes their individual privilege (Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005). An ally seeks to be a good person by fighting racist actions to display their moral goodness (Edwards, 2006). For example, Reason and colleagues' (2005) theorizing on allyship called for Whites to develop a new "antiracist, privilege-cognizant white consciousness" (Reason, Scales, et al., p. 60) that balances negative and positive aspects of White identity (Reason, 2007). While they ultimately

encouraged action, the action is a result of the internal identity and not a core component of it. In the developmental progression identified by Bridges and Mather (2015), “constructing an ally identity” and “claiming a shared [ally] identity” (p. 159) were two stages of internal development toward allyship. Additionally, labelling themselves as allies helped White students facilitate relationships with other allies to build supportive community (Bridges & Mather, 2015). This understanding of allyship falls short of creating real change because it does not require consistent action in order to proclaim oneself an ally.

Framing allyship solely in individual identity terms does nothing to disrupt systems of whiteness and the reality of white hegemony. As previously discussed, whiteness is more than an individual identity, it is a structural reality that shapes the lives of all people. The scholarship that frames allyship as simply an identity ignores this reality. With a critical understanding of whiteness as ideology and a tool of hegemony, good allyship scholarship must be grounded in social constructs of power and oppression, not just individual, psychological, developmental understandings. Some scholars understand this fact. Foste and Irwin (2020) rightly remind us of “Scholars of Color, like Baldwin (1984/1998) and Du Bois (1903/1998) who named whiteness, not merely as an identity but as a force of terror and violence in the lives of People of Color” (p. 441). By reducing discussions of whiteness to identity alone, scholars ignore its role in larger patterns of institutional and systemic oppression. Ally development models must acknowledge that White people are individuals who go through developmental processes while at the same time asserting that those processes exist within a structure that gives them unearned power and privilege at the expense of others’ humanity.

Furthermore, claiming an ally identity can be a problematic way to avoid culpability in systems of inequity (Ford & Orlandella, 2015). Kluttz et al. (2020) argued that “the ally identity

lulls us into a false notion of having ‘achieved’ a status that does not invite continued questioning and constant un-settling” (p. 53). Foste and Irwin (2020) named this “a false sense of arrival” (p. 440). Not troubling ally identity with notions of ongoing complicity lets White students off the hook and does a disservice to them in their own development. It allows them to claim an identity and absolve themselves of guilt without truly wrestling with how they are inevitably implicated in the systemic oppression of others. This watered-down understanding of allyship then becomes simply “ego maintenance” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 31) that allows them to save face.

Additionally, owning a status of ‘ally’ can be problematic in other ways, too. Claiming an ally identity can be a way to manage ongoing fears of appearing racist and avoid critique from others. Bonilla-Silva’s (2018) unpacking of color-evasive ideology locates this conversation in notions abstract liberalism, which (among other things) frames everything in individual terms and seeks to avoid responsibility for systems. Thus, White people can soothe their own discomfort by claiming “I am not a racist. I am a good person and an ally.” Any impactful scholarship on allyship must not be limited to ideas of individual identity, but must include how systemic whiteness operates. Focusing allyship (or as I prefer, accomplice-ship) discourse on actions to disrupt the system and not solely identity, prohibits Whites from centering these individual morality claims.

Allyship as Action

There is literature that appropriately wrestles with the notion that allyship must include accompanying action. Several studies critique the notion of allyship as individual identity and challenge educators to frame allyship in terms of actions taken. For example, Brown and Ostrove (2013) preferred to frame allyship in terms of action over internal identity: “Allies are people

willing to take action, either interpersonally or in larger social settings, and move beyond self-regulation of prejudice” (p. 2212). Leonardo and Zembylas (2013), in discussing White people’s desire to project an ally or non-racist identity, argued that “‘Non-racist’ becomes an identity, even a badge of honor, whereas anti-racism is arguably a political pledge, a form of race labor, to combat racism before it ossifies into an identity. To the non-racist, it is something one is; to the anti-racist, it is something one does” (p. 156). Other scholars agree that allies are those who take action (Cabrera et al., 2017; Waters, 2010). Individual identity status alone is not enough to make one an ally or disrupt whiteness.

The scholarship that complicates individual ally identification by acknowledging complicity and including calls to action to dismantle systems of oppression are a step in the right direction. As Cabrera (2012) wisely stated:

The development of a White racial identity based on the pursuit of racial justice becomes a means by which racially privileged people can move beyond racial guilt paralysis and become allies in the movement toward racial equity...*Identity becomes an embodiment of praxis* [emphasis added] whereby ideas about race, racism, and racial identity are challenged, contested, and transformed through the intersection of theory and action. Admittedly, this identity currently exists as a lofty ideal, as only a small proportion of White people struggle toward it. (p. 380-381)

This statement sums up the identity vs. action tension perfectly. Allyship, like humanity in general, is complex and contains multiple realities. Identity must be linked with praxis. However, the courage to disrupt white hegemony through action only comes after an individual experiences personal growth. Action is critical, but deep, personal identity work is also needed to overcome the obstacles to action. Without the individual work, the actions are merely performative.

Accordingly, if identity must be linked with praxis, so too must praxis be linked with personal identity. A good example is Ford and Orlandella’s (2015) definition of an ally as a person who

consciously commits, *attitudinally and behaviorally* [emphasis added], to an ongoing, purposeful engagement with and active challenging of white privilege, overt and subtle

racism, and systemic racial inequalities for the purpose of becoming an agent of change in collaboration with, not for, people of color. (p. 288)

Their definition of allyship better approaches the concept of accomplice that I discussed in Chapter 1. The focus, then, must be on both attitudes and action, identity and challenging inequity.

Future scholarship must complicate allyship by acknowledging both the individual identity aspects as well as including a requirement of accompanying action. Linder's (2015) model does this well. She framed her work in identity development concepts, but concludes that the end point is not static, but a cycle of continually striving to do ally work. Additionally, Kluttz et al.'s (2020) work on un-settling allyship provides an incisive critique of individual notions of allyship as identity. They argued that being an ally is not a "permanent designation" (p. 52) and that the "concept of 'ally' evokes binary and static understandings: one is either an ally or not an ally" (p. 53). Instead, they advocated for a process of action they call decolonizing solidarity:

Unlike being an 'ally', decolonising [*sic*] solidarity is not an identity taken on or stepped into, but a process where relationships within action shape one's identity and self-understanding. It is work that unsettles the possibility of fully reconciling settler guilt and disallows the continuing denial and ignorance of complicity in colonisation [*sic*]. (Kluttz et al., 2020, p. 55)

This approach to allyship does not allow one to claim an ally identity separate from action. The actions shape identity and vice versa. The two are and must remain intimately connected.

Synopsis: White Development and Allyship

This section has outlined various approaches to White identity/ally development found in education literature. Numerous models exist that outline individual growth from less aware (and more racist), to greater awareness with an accompanying commitment to allyship. All of the models include periods of struggle, discomfort, and resistance. Many of these approaches lack the complexity needed to combine both individual developmental approaches with actions that

will challenge or interrupt oppressive systems. Without systemic action, allies are simply “good people” without prejudice. Critical approaches include concepts of complicity which relinquishes racism-free goals in favor of taking actions to challenge our racist reality. This requires both deep, personal work, as well as courage to take action.

In wrestling with the nuances of identity, actions, and ally development, it is crucial to also explore the barriers and strategies of resistance that are consistently documented in the research. The next section discusses the difficulties of addressing race with White students due to the discomfort, emotionality, and problematic behaviors that inevitably arise.

Emotionality and Difficulties of Engaging White Students

A consistent theme in the literature on whiteness and White student development is on the difficulties of engaging students in conversations about race. White students display a full range of emotionalities that reveal their discomfort when engaging in issues of racism. In this section I explore the literature on emotionality, white fragility, and emotional reactions such as guilt, defensiveness, anger, shame, and withdrawal. White emotions, while an unavoidable human experience, most often serve to recenter whiteness and White people, as well as uphold the status quo of white hegemony (Cabrera et al., 2017; Matias, 2016). These emotions are largely rooted in color-evasive ideologies that equate racism with moral failure and, when acted upon, become maneuvers to avoid cognitive dissonance and uphold a positive self-image (Cabrera et al., 2016; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Thus, the emotionality of White students is a primary barrier to their development, often derailing conversations about race and inflicting harm on any BIPOC individuals who might be present (Matias, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014).

The following sections explore the literature on White emotional discomfort. I begin by looking at what causes it and what it looks like in action. I follow that by unpacking the consequences and remedies for White discomfort proposed in the literature. This section serves not only to expose the reader to literature that has influenced my research topic, but also to illuminate the theoretical understandings of White emotionality that form a key aspect of my theoretical framework.

Understanding White Discomfort

Scholars consistently point to White students' resistance and discomfort in conversations about race and racism (e.g., Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2016; DiAngelo, 2018; Matias, 2016; Zembylas, 2012, 2018). From claiming they have no race, to enforcing White norms, to crying, to blaming the messenger, these behaviors consistently serve to derail anti-racism efforts. Research also establishes that these problematic behaviors stem from strong emotional discomfort (Matias, 2016; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). It is critical to understand where these emotions come from if practitioners are going to develop effective interventions to push these White students through this often painful, unsettling process. The following section explores the causes and behaviors associated with this White emotionality.

What Causes It

Scholars highlight several reasons for White discomfort and the emotional reactions that follow. Researchers emphasize the roots in color-evasive ideologies, which are themselves rooted in notions of individualism and meritocracy (Annamma et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2017). White children in the U.S. are raised to believe that the world is a fair place for all who work hard and that race does not matter (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Zembylas, 2018). They are also raised to believe that racism is an individual moral offense (Bonilla-Silva,

2018; DiAngelo, 2018). As I unpack below in the theoretical framework section, color-evasive racism rests on the notion that racism equates to individual bad actions. Thus, when confronted with any sort of complicity in racism or acceptance of their whiteness, White students consider this an individual moral accusation. And, naturally, their defense mechanisms kick in.

Matias and DiAngelo (2013) framed this phenomenon as “a kind of pre-existing emotional neurosis...[that] stem[s] from the need for Whites to deny race, a traumatizing process that begins in childhood” (p. 4). They explain how White children are raised to deny race despite being able to clearly see race, lest they be shunned by their White community. This results in “emotional and psychological damage on the White psyche” (p. 12). They go on to boldly assert that “raising White children to be White is a form of child abuse” (p. 12) because the child is forced to deny reality and “rationalize irrationality” (p. 12). Zembylas (2018) agrees with this point by arguing that this phenomenon is racial trauma inflicted on White children, although to a different degree than racism is to BIPOC people. While emphasizing the traumatic, neurotic and yet understandable nature of the White psyche, these scholars do not allow this to excuse White behavior, for the consequences of the neurosis are levied on BIPOC individuals in a much more devastating way.

Other scholars discuss White discomfort in terms of intense cognitive dissonance. This notion of racial dissonance driving emotional reactions aligns well with Matias and DiAngelo’s (2013) notion of White neurosis. Cabrera et al. (2016) explained that, for White students, there is a tension between their positive sense of self and the realities of their role in a racist system which creates cognitive dissonance, leaving White students in a state of “racial arrested development” (p. 130). Watt (2007) framed her entire privileged identity exploration model on the notion of cognitive dissonance. She argued that the dissonance creates discomfort which

stimulates a natural, primal response of defensiveness. While these are normal psychological reactions, Whites can use them as an opportunity to work through their privilege to develop critical consciousness. Robbins and Jones (2016) explained this racial dissonance as “the moment when an individual’s schema for making meaning of racial interactions no longer makes sense or violates a moral principle” (p. 633). When one’s way of making sense of the world is challenged, it touches on identity and ideology in a deep way and discomfort is a natural response.

In a similar vein, Zembylas (2012) labeled this new awareness “troubled knowledge” (p. 114), the knowledge that comes from learning about the past and present in ways that implicate Whites in ongoing oppression. Zembylas (2018) also argued that there will always be emotional discomfort when engaging White students on issues of race “because Whites’ cherished beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged” (p. 92). When one’s worldview is challenged in this way, it is natural to feel disoriented, which then engages other biological systems in attempts to bring about a re-orientation (Ambrosio, 2014).

Robin DiAngelo has written extensively (individually and with others) on the phenomenon of white fragility and this scholarship provides more in depth explanations of where White discomfort comes from. White people in the United States are insulated from race-based stress, which creates the expectation for consistent racial comfort, which then lowers the tolerance for racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). The result is white fragility,

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57)

In line with the other scholars above, DiAngelo understands white fragility as resulting from an intolerable amount of disequilibrium. She outlines seven factors that lead to this disequilibrium (DiAngelo, 2011). The first is segregation—Whites lead segregated lives and have “little to no authentic information about racism” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 58). Second, White norms are universalized and, thus, Whites see themselves as individuals, as opposed to members of a racial group. Third, Whites feel an entitlement to racial comfort, responding as if something is wrong because they have not had to build tolerance for racial discomfort. Fourth, Whites are racially arrogant and not willing to listen to others who share their racial knowledge. Fifth, Whites are conditioned to feel as if they belong everywhere and thus respond poorly when challenged. Sixth, Whites have a psychic freedom because they do not bear the “social burden of race” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 60). And finally, Whites experience racial representation everywhere, centering their feelings of racial value and dominance. These seven factors, many rooted in color-evasive ideologies, drive white fragility and make it difficult to disrupt.

The common thread in the scholarship on White emotionality is that these emotions are not neutral. They are contextualized in social processes and influenced by white hegemony. So, while these emotions may be driven by understandable, and sometimes even unconscious, human psychological factors, it is critical to situate them in the context of hegemonic whiteness. Understanding these emotions and behaviors does not, in any way, excuse them. They must be challenged because of the harm they cause. As DiAngelo (2018) concludes, “though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not a weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage” (p. 2). We can bring understanding, and even empathy, to White students emotional responses, yet we must never back down from challenging them and finding

creative ways to disrupt their entitlement to bring about greater racial equity (Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Zembylas, 2012).

What It Looks Like

Discomfort and fragility reveals itself in myriad ways in White students. The most common ways are defensiveness, fear, guilt, and shame. Other ways include denial, anger, rationalization, interrupting, withdrawing, silence, incoherent speech, indirect or coded language, tears, helplessness, self-victimization, grief, blatant disrespect, and more.

Universally agreed upon in the research is that White students experience feelings of defensiveness when confronted with racial conversations. Matias (2016) explained that this defensiveness emerges from a fear of being labeled a racist. Deeply rooted in the belief that to be racist is a profound moral deficit, most White students will do anything to avoid being called a racist. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) call this the white alibi, when a White person creates a narrative to explain how they are not a racist. This alibi serves to create a sense of stability for the White person while setting themselves apart from “those other racist Whites.” Watt (2007) identifies eight defense modes that Whites enact on their journey to address their privileged identity: denial, deflection, rationalization, intellectualization, principium, false envy, benevolence, and minimization. All of these defenses are means that White students engage to deal with their discomfort. According to Linder (2015), this is even true for aspiring allies when she identified the fear of appearing racist as a critical thing that aspiring allies needed to navigate in order to take anti-racist action.

In addition to defensiveness and fear, guilt and shame are two common emotions that are noted in the literature. These emotions are also intimately connected with the fear of appearing racist. When confronted with knowledge that potentially implicates them in privilege and/or

oppression, White students either react defensively with denials or they respond with expressions of guilt and shame (Linder, 2015; Matias, 2016). Again this is connected with the good/bad binary that tells Whites that if they are implicated in racism, then they are bad, immoral people. This guilt and shame can lead to behaviors such as seeking affirmation that they are not racist, crying, helplessness, withdrawal, or centering themselves as the emotional victims in the moment (Matias, 2016). Guilt and shame can also lead to feelings of pity and false professions of caring for BIPOC individuals in belittling ways that only uphold White power (Matias & Zembylas, 2014).

Another common behavior includes what Bonilla-Silva (2018) described as “rhetorical incoherence” (p. 91). This incoherence shows up in long pauses, grammatical mistakes, repetition, digressions, self-corrections, use of filler words (e.g., um, like, well, etc.). An example from an interview with a White student: “I would not, I mean, I would not ever...You know, I mean, you know what I mean?...I mean, I think that, you know, I think, you know, I think, you know, all women are, I mean all women have...” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 92). This type of language signals that the student, like most White people, is ill-equipped to talk about race and gets stuck in cycles of racial contradictions (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013).

A final example that is consistently represented in the literature is how White students engage in blame. This might come in the form of claims of innocence and reverse discrimination or as attempts to critique the tone or word choice of the messenger as a way to deflect blame from themselves (Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). This denial and deflection halt any progress and only serve to protect White students’ egos.

Consequences and Remedies for White Discomfort

Understanding the literature around the roots and resultant behaviors of White emotionality are key first steps to grasping what is happening when White students experience discomfort. The next critical aspect in the literature explores the consequences of these reactions, as well as educational interventions that are offered as possibilities. The rest of this section outlines the scholarship on what White discomfort does and what we can do about it.

What It Does

There are several consistent conclusions in the literature on the consequences of White discomfort and emotionality, both for BIPOC individuals, as well as White individuals. Not surprisingly, the negative impacts fall primarily on BIPOC individuals and those engaged in anti-racism efforts. It should also be mentioned that there are negative consequences for the White students, as well. This section explores the literature on the impacts of White discomfort and emotionality.

By far, the most apparent consequence of White emotionality is how it acts as a barrier to progress and transformation. Matias (2016) noted that White emotionality “stonewall[s] the hope for racial justice” (p. xix). Scholars consistently note that these emotional reactions block transformation, uphold the status quo, and hold racism in place (Cabrera et al., 2016; DiAngelo, 2018; Linder, 2015; Matias, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Robbins & Jones, 2016; Todd et al., 2010; Zembylas, 2012, 2018). For example, Linder’s (2015) study noted how guilt, shame, and fear caused potential allies to freeze in inaction, prioritizing the approval of others over actions to drive change. Todd et al. (2010) emphasized how White emotional reactions served as the driver for defensive responses. Similarly, Zembylas (2012) noted how “these discomforting

feelings are persistently able to block, defuse, and distract the transformation of students” (p. 113) in higher education.

Another theme in the scholarship on White emotionality is how these emotions serve to re-center whiteness and White ideologies. Matias (2016) argued that White emotional reactions take the “power away from someone who critiques whiteness and put it back into the hands of whiteness itself” (p. 71). She went on to argue that this shows how narcissistic whiteness is—it continually puts itself at the center. This re-centering of whiteness reinforces white supremacy in the form of emotional dominance, subordinating the emotions of BIPOC individuals (Matias, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) agreed, arguing that White affect works as a sort of technology, reinforcing social power dynamics. This plays out frequently on college campuses in conversations around safe space for race dialogues, where focusing on White comfort in such conversations reinforces the supremacy of whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2016). By re-centering whiteness, White emotionality elevates White pain over the pain of BIPOC students (Matias, 2016).

The impact of White emotionality on BIPOC students is also consistently documented in the literature. By enacting affective technologies (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013), White students attempt to shift the burden of race back onto BIPOC students (Matias, 2016). They react by blaming BIPOC students, framing themselves as victims of reverse discrimination, and committing other microaggressions against their BIPOC peers, as well as faculty and staff members (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). These actions serve as a kind of gaslighting and bullying of BIPOC people. Matias and DiAngelo (2013) explained that as White students deny reality by maintaining the white lie that race does not matter, this becomes a kind of bullying which “undermines the sanity of People of Color” (p.

14), creating even more racial stress for them to navigate. DiAngelo (2018) explained how this works:

White fragility functions as a form of bullying; I am going to make is so miserable for you to confront me—no matter how diplomatically you try to do so—that you will simply back off, give up, and never raise the issue again. White fragility keeps people of color in line and “in their place.” In this way, it is a powerful form of white racial control. (p. 112)

White emotionality harms BIPOC students, faculty, and staff in higher education, while upholding the hegemonic status quo of whiteness. Scholars are clear that this is a problem that needs to be addressed if racial justice goals are going to be achieved.

In addition to the harm done to BIPOC individuals as well as to racial justice efforts, White students are also negatively impacted by their own emotionality, although in significantly different ways. As noted above, White students have been socialized into worldviews that distort reality and damage their psyches (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Some scholars even go so far as to label this a form of child abuse (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Todd et al. (2010) noted that there are psychosocial costs of racism to Whites that include: “White guilt, White empathy (i.e., feelings of sadness and anger about the existence of societal racism), and irrational White fear of racial minorities” (p. 99). While not leveling the same kind of damage to BIPOC individuals, these impacts leave White people stuck in a state of arrested development (Cabrera et al., 2016) and, shackled by whiteness, limited in their ability to engage with others in full humanity (Matias & Allen, 2013; Zembylas, 2012, 2018). In this sense, they are not free.

Finally, there is also limited research indicating that there might be benefits of these discomfoting emotions to White individuals in terms of their racial awareness and commitment to racial justice. Emotions can be a motivator for some students, driving positive engagement with racial issues (Cabrera et al., 2017; Estrada & Matthews, 2016; Todd et al., 2010). For example, while guilt can trigger defensive responses, it can sometimes be a productive emotion,

moving students toward growth (Cabrera et al., 2017). Estrada and Matthew's (2016) quantitative study showed that guilt, coupled with shame, led to lower racist attitudes in White students. There needs to be more research on how educators can leverage these inevitable emotional experiences toward anti-racist ends. Along those lines, many scholars have ideas on how to confront and deal with these emotions, as I discuss next.

What To Do About It

There is agreement that, in the midst of racial justice efforts, White emotions will be present and must be dealt with. Yet there is limited research on what the most productive ways are to do this or what interventions might be successful to move White students past their resistance. Some scholars point out the need to acknowledge the emotionality and push students to learn about their emotions (Cabrera et al., 2017; Linder, 2015; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Suthakaran, 2012; Todd et al., 2010; Watt, 2007). Other scholars focus on the importance of pushing White students to engage in these emotions as a means of redistributing the burden of race onto those who benefit from whiteness (Matias, 2016; Matias & Allen, 2013). Matias (2016) interestingly argued that allowing White students to be uncomfortable is a racial microaggression that is needed to shift this burden. Cabrera et al. (2017) acknowledged that people are not fully rational beings; emotions drive action, and, therefore, at a minimum, educators must find ways to engage in the emotionalities of whiteness.

Some scholars have more concrete suggestions as to *how* to deal with the emotionality of whiteness. A common theme is that White people need to develop the stamina to engage with the discomfort that comes with working through whiteness (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018; Matias, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Watt, 2007). "For how can one wholeheartedly engage in a cure if they cannot emotionally bear talking about the problem" (Matias & Zembylas, 2014, p. 303)?

White people must learn to stay engaged when these feelings arise. DiAngelo (2018) described this as developing the ability to “bear witness to the pain of racism that we cause” (p. 128).

DiAngelo (2011) also concluded that if educators frame the task as one of stamina building, then effective interventions can be strategically designed that focus on building endurance.

Other scholars have come to similar conclusions as DiAngelo and argue for creating educational spaces where dissonance and discomfort can be felt and engaged with strategically. In their critique of safe space approaches, Cabrera et al. (2016) advocated for an “assertive pedagogy of racial agitation” (pp. 131-132). Their argument held that racial disequilibrium is a key part of growth for White students and that educators should not prioritize comfort over growth. Other scholars agree that such racial dissonance is important to push White students out of their comfort zone and into their growth zone (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Zembylas, 2012). Zembylas (2018) advocated for using a decolonial framework for pedagogies of discomfort. As discussed in Chapter 1, a pedagogy of discomfort is a “pedagogical means by which learners—especially those who are privileged—are encouraged ‘to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others’” (Zembylas, 2018, p. 93). Zembylas argued that this uncomfortable approach is a way to challenge dominant emotionalities and can create transformative learning. This kind of pedagogy pushes White students to examine their emotions and positionalities while not coddling or prioritizing comfort. Zembylas’ approach was framed in decolonial strategies which push White students to see their complicity in coloniality while inviting humanizing solidarity. Similarly, Leonardo and Porter (2010) argued that the only safety created should be the amount of safety needed to take risks.

Along with pedagogies of discomfort, Zembylas (2012) and Matias and Zembylas (2014) have argued for pedagogies of strategic empathy, rooted in critical compassion, as a key element for effective pedagogies of discomfort. Arguing that pure critique is not adequate to effectively address the emotions of resistance, Zembylas (2012) describes strategic empathy as

essentially the use of empathetic emotions in both critical and strategic ways (Lindquist 2004); that is, it refers to the willingness of the teacher to make himself/herself strategically skeptic (working sometimes against his/her own emotions) in order to empathize with the troubled knowledge students carry with them, even when this troubled knowledge is disturbing to other students or to the teacher. (p. 114)

Zembylas goes on to explain that strategic empathy creates a “fragile pedagogical space” (p. 119) where truth can be taught “but not in such a way that it forecloses our capacity to become new people in relation to this history” (p. 119). This is also a similar concept to Leonardo and Porter’s (2010) hermeneutic of empathy. These approaches involve radical empathy and radical humanizing love. It is hopeful and yet decisively strategic. This empathy is not empathy for the sake of White students’ comfort. It is empathy for the sake of breaking down colonial barriers and creating a liberating new vision for humanity (Matias & Allen, 2013; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Zembylas, 2012). As Matias and Allen (2013) explain,

when recognizing resistance, I see students entrapped in a dehumanizing ideology and psychosocial state. In order to liberate their minds, I must first work with them to liberate their hearts. As painful as the process is not to give up on resistant students, I see humanizing love as a process of paying forward to those who have yet to be liberated. (p. 296)

This approach is one rooted in humanizing love, a radical love for others that draws people together (Matias & Allen, 2013). This is a hopeful and beautiful way to imagine the world that is possible when whiteness is not at the center.

These critical scholars have offered a deeply hopeful and humanizing vision for confronting White students’ resistance. Matias (2016) is right when she concluded that this is a

“therapeutic process of de-racializing the whiteness embodied in that white self” (p. 99). It will need sensitive, patient, well-trained educators to guide the process. Leonardo (2009) agreed when he concluded that teaching anti-racism must be done “aggressively and yet tenderly” (p. 122), recognizing that race “touches tender histories” (p. 122) in the lives of White students. Thus, educators must seek balance between challenging and allowing discomfort, and yet empathizing with these White emotions to strategically reach the goals of racial justice. While these scholars have provided a good foundation for navigating White emotionalities, there is still limited research on exactly *how* to find this balance between challenge and empathy. Which interventions are more successful than others is not yet clear.

One suggestion on how to help White students navigate their emotions is to help them see past individual notions of racism toward more systemic understandings. DiAngelo (2018) argued that if White people can understand racism as a system into which they were socialized, that might free them to be less defensive and promote growth. She argued that “the ubiquitous socializing power of white supremacy cannot be avoided...Entering the conversation with this understanding is freeing because it allows us to focus on *how*—rather than *if*—our racism is manifest” (p. 129). If White students can come to understand the systemic nature of racism, that can help break the good/bad binary and then they can focus on combating racism rather than image management. Other scholars (Linder, 2015; Reason, 2007) agree that moving students toward more systemic understandings of racism can help avoid the paralysis that comes with White emotionalities. This notion also aligns well with critical whiteness concepts of white complicity, which I unpack below.

While there is no silver bullet identified in the literature on how to deal productively with White resistance, there are promising ideas. Future research needs to work to understand more

about how White students navigate through the emotions, resistance, and defenses and not just why they have them. If getting White students to understand the systemic nature of racism helps them move past some of their personal defensive reactions, then more research needs to explore how educators can move White students in that direction effectively and strategically. These openings in the literature create space for my study to offer contributions to the field.

Synopsis: White Emotionality

Problematic White emotionality occurs when White students experience cognitive dissonance and racial disequilibrium when confronted with the realities of the racist world that they inhabit. White people today are almost universally taught from childhood that to be racist is to be a bad person. Thus, unsurprisingly, defensiveness and resistance ensue when their identity is questioned in a world where whiteness reigns supreme and is frequently synonymous with oppression. These intense emotions serve to re-center whiteness, block racial justice efforts, and bully BIPOC people. Scholars have called on educators to create pedagogical spaces of discomfort and strategic empathy to both challenge and enable White students to wrestle with their discomfort in ways that might create growth and result in accomplice behavior.

The scholarship on White emotionality is one of the two key components of my theoretical framework. The next section outlines the literature on critical whiteness studies (CWS) that serves as the second theoretical construct for my study.

Critical Whiteness Studies

As discussed in Chapter 1, I used concepts and assumptions from CWS as a core part of my theoretical framework for this study. In the following section, I explain the focus and goals of CWS, including the core critique of ideologies of whiteness. I then proceed to explore several

tenets of CWS that informed my study: white normativity/hegemony, white ignorance, white innocence/complicity, and color-evasive ideologies.

Focus and Goals of Critical Whiteness Studies

CWS focuses analysis of race and racism directly on whiteness as an ideology and discourse that creates hegemonic oppression. The goal of CWS is to locate and name whiteness in order to expose and disrupt its normative power (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2013). CWS centers whiteness in order to put it on trial. Contrary to other race theorizing that puts BIPOC people at the center of analysis, CWS takes the risk of centering whiteness in order to dismantle it. Critical whiteness scholarship is “driven by the commitment that *racism is ultimately a White problem*” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 86). Cabrera et al. (2017) considered interrogating whiteness the “missing link” (p. 7) in racial analysis. Matias et al. (2014) agreed with Cabrera et al. when they named the need to interrogate whiteness because “whiteness is the underlying mechanism that maintains a racist system, and not acknowledging whiteness contributes to the permanence of race and racism” (p. 291). If racism is the disease, then whiteness is the virus that causes the disease. And CWS is one stream of scholarship that attempts to research and expose whiteness in order to find a cure.

Whiteness studies has emerged in the last three decades as its own distinct area of study (Leonardo, 2013). Some think of it as a branch or subsection of critical race theory (CRT), which is not entirely the case. Cabrera et al. (2017) pointed out that, while there is occasional overlap between CRT and whiteness studies, CWS has its own intellectual lineage distinct from CRT. If CRT was meant as a space for BIPOC scholars to analyze issues of racism and uplift counter narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), CWS is becoming the space for (mostly) White scholars to explore the impacts of whiteness on systems, institutions, and people (Leonardo, 2013).

Additionally, it is important to note the critiques and limitations of CWS. Leonardo (2013) noted that CWS is saying what BIPOC scholars have been saying for decades, that whiteness is the problem. This fact creates the danger of White appropriation of the work of BIPOC scholars. Additionally, the fact that many White people are more open to hearing the critique of whiteness from White people is itself symptomatic of the very problem they are trying to challenge (Leonardo, 2013). Leonardo also pointed out the fear that CWS will reproduce “racial privilege at the level of intellectual production, despite its best intentions” (p. 98). Thus, “brutal self-reflection” (p. 98) is needed for White scholars doing CWS work. This is what Leonardo means when he talks about CWS as taking the risk of recentering whiteness in order to dismantle it. Scholars could end up reifying the very thing they are attempting to dismantle. With these critiques in mind, I humbly take the risk of centering whiteness in order to expose and challenge it. As the foundational thread of CWS is about understanding and interrogating ideologies of whiteness, I explore this first and then move on to discuss other tenets of CWS.

Whiteness as Ideology

Whiteness, from a CWS perspective, is an ideology; a way of knowing and understanding the world. Leonardo (2009) explained that, as an ideology and worldview, whiteness is “nothing but oppressive” (p. 71). It functions to uphold the centrality and dominance of White people. Whiteness as a *racial category* was created historically by White people to justify the social and economic domination of BIPOC people (Cabrera, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Leonardo, 2009; Wilder, 2013). Whiteness as an *ideology*, on the other hand, is a collective racial epistemology, a way of acting and knowing that upholds the racial status quo (Foste, 2019; Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). From a CWS perspective, whiteness as a construct is distinct from White as a racial identity, (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2017; Leonardo, 2009). Whiteness can be

upheld and enacted by White people, as well as BIPOC people. Whiteness is a social force that typically goes unnamed and unrecognized, thus making it difficult to disrupt.

The problem with this white ideology is its perceived normality and the way it is often used to “other” and oppress BIPOC people (Cabrera, 2019; Iverson, 2007; Leonardo, 2009). It is used to pressure BIPOC students in higher education to assimilate into campus cultures that are infused with whiteness in order to succeed (Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Iverson, 2007). As Gusa (2010) articulated, whiteness is a “sociological and political construct of power that allows Whites to assert superiority over those who are not White” (p. 468). Reason and Evans (2007) described an ideology of whiteness as “the invisible control exerted by the culture of Whiteness on campuses” (p. 67). It is this invisible quality, backed by institutional and historical power, which renders it so difficult to dismantle. Most White people are oblivious to its existence.

DiAngelo (2018) discussed the ideology of whiteness as a “white racial frame,” (p. 34) a term borrowed from sociologist Joe Feagin. She described it this way: “The frame includes both negative understandings of people of color and positive understandings of whites and white institutions. It is so internalized, so submerged, that it is never consciously considered or challenged by most whites” (p. 34). It is a mindset that White people have been unconsciously socialized into. It functions to maintain White power, while feigning innocence. Naming the insidious nature of whiteness is not to let White people “off the hook,” so to speak. This would only reinforce white ignorance, which is the opposite goal of CWS. CWS scholars, in fact, seek to highlight the complicity and responsibility of White people in their work (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Zembylas, 2018). Accordingly, they highlight the invisible, hegemonic nature of whiteness

to explain why it is so difficult to dismantle, as well as to encourage the pursuit of creative resistance (Cabrera, 2019).

Core Constructs of Critical Whiteness Studies

In addition to conceptualizing whiteness in the above way, there are several specific concepts found in the literature on whiteness that I used to frame my approach to this research. While there is not a single, unified set of CWS principles, scholars have identified a number of constructs that have become mainstays in the CWS literature (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009). These constructs further illuminate how whiteness works to uphold its own dominance. The constructs that I employed for this study are: white normativity and hegemony, epistemologies of ignorance, white complicity/innocence, and color-evasive ideologies. It is important to recognize that, while discussed as separate constructs, each interconnects and reinforces the other. They are all contours of the same problem: white supremacy.

White Normativity and Hegemony

White normativity names what is happening. White hegemony names its impact. I unpack each of these related concepts here.

The Power of “Normal.” One of the biggest obstacles in dismantling whiteness is its normativity. White people largely understand themselves as outside of race (Cabrera, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018). In our minds, racial identity and racial awareness is reserved for BIPOC people. This notion of being raceless leaves whiteness as an unexplored and largely invisible force. It serves to uphold White dominance, not through asserting White superiority, but by asserting white normality, white neutrality (Cabrera, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Foste, 2019). Leonardo (2013) described this normativity as “common sense” (p. 49), an unquestioned way of

being that influences our choices, perceptions, and institutions. White normativity places everyone who is not White as outside the norm, as “other”—forcing the “other” to assimilate into whiteness or resist and stay on the margins forever. In education, Leonardo (2013) observed how damaging this environment is:

From curriculum to comportment, schools require that students adopt an obsessive-compulsive White mindset, even in its instrumentalist forms...Even when students of color do not wholeheartedly adopt White normativity, they assimilate it in order to succeed in schools...They may resist Whiteness at every turn, but do not emerge from many years of formal schooling unscathed or unchanged. (p. 95-96)

In naming white normativity, critical scholars seek to expose the fact that common sense is only common for some. There is no such thing as “normal”—it is always culturally and contextually bound. Positioning whiteness as universal is white supremacy at work. And it becomes the center of hegemonic power, which I address below. But before moving on, it is important to explore how scholars have engaged with and challenged the notion of white normativity.

Exposing the lie of white normativity can be the first step in dismantling it (Cabrera, 2019). Many scholars take up this critique in their work. Cabrera (2019) argued that white normality perpetuates racism. After the Civil Rights Movement made it no longer socially acceptable to advocate for white superiority, whiteness was “rearticulated from superior to normal” (Cabrera, 2019, p. 9). This rendered the power and dominance of whiteness more invisible and harder to challenge. As Leonardo (2009) described it, whiteness has come to be synonymous with “what it means to be human” (p. 36). And if whiteness is the standard, then non-White people are seen as a deviation from the norm (DiAngelo, 2018).

The result of this invisible normality for BIPOC students on HWCU campuses is that they are framed as outsiders (Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Iverson, 2007). Iverson’s (2007) study highlighted that White (mostly male, middle class) students are seen as the norm on

campuses and the standard by which all other students are measured. This positions BIPOC students, among others, as outsiders in the academy, framing them through a deficit lens and attempting to “help” them assimilate into whiteness in order to be considered successful. Reason and Evans’ (2007) study exposed how HWCUs expect BIPOC students to adjust (i.e., assimilate) to a White culture that, in their view, requires no adjustment. This is the power of white normativity. White culture on campuses is not seen, acknowledged, or interrogated. And if it is seen, it is only seen as benign and neutral.

Gusa (2010) labeled this normative white campus culture as white institutional presence (WIP). In her article, she articulated the embedded ideologies of whiteness on college campuses that are so often taken for granted. She argued that WIP, as a component of a normative and “neutral” education, creates a racialized environment that, if left unexamined, will continue to create hostile climates for BIPOC students. Elements of WIP include (1) white ascendancy, (2) monoculturalism, (3) white blindness, and (4) white estrangement. The cumulative effect of this kind of white normativity, when left uninterrogated, “is that PWIs become alienating spaces of hegemonic power” (Gusa, 2010, p. 465). White normativity only serves to protect the status quo and keep Whites in their racial comfort zone, while continuing to disregard everyone else as not normal. It may go largely unseen, but it has profound impacts.

White Hegemony. White hegemony is the other side of the normative coin. If white normativity names the “common sense” and “neutral” ways that whiteness pervades our institutions, white hegemony exposes the oppressive and unjust nature of this reality. While white hegemony can be considered a dimension of white normality, it is distinct in the way it functions as a theory of racism and names the power dynamics inherent in the norming of whiteness. Many scholars use the language of hegemony to highlight the power dynamics

inherent in whiteness (Bondi, 2012; Cabrera, 2018, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2017; Gusa, 2010; Hikido & Murray, 2016; Iverson, 2007). Bondi (2012) advocated for the need to “fracture the hegemony of whiteness” (p. 397) in education by acknowledging the historical context of white supremacy and de-centering white norms in the curriculum and culture. Hikido and Murray’s (2016) application of critical multiculturalism to whiteness called attention to the hegemonic nature of whiteness as a social reality that directly impacts campus cultures. Using hegemonic language when discussing whiteness is a powerful way to highlight the institutional and historical domination of whiteness and how it shows up in reality today. It applies a critical power analysis to the concept of white normativity.

I resonate with education scholar Nolan Cabrera (2018, 2019) in his discussions of white hegemony. Cabrera (2018) outlined white hegemony as a theory of how racism works today and suggests adding it as a permanent tenet of critical race theory (CRT) in education. In Cabrera’s model of hegemonic whiteness, white supremacy is the superstructure over all of social life. For Cabrera (2018), elements of hegemonic whiteness are the “cultural and discursive practices [that] serve to naturalize unequal social relations along the color line” (p. 223). The norms of hegemonic whiteness reinforce and reproduce white privilege and racial inequality. Hegemonic whiteness is the environment, the culture, that mediates white supremacy. This naming of white hegemony takes racism and white supremacy out of the individual context and places them in the systemic, historical context. Cabrera’s (2019) study on White college men illuminated how white hegemony remains unseen and unnamed. He called on institutions to disrupt the hegemony of whiteness present in their cultures and he named their reluctance to do so as part of the problem:

...higher education leaders tend to treat racism and Whiteness the same way that wizards in Harry Potter treat Lord Voldemort: never uttering his name (Rowling, 1999). Within colleges and universities, we Voldemort racism and White supremacy—as if not mentioning them will make these social problems magically disappear. (p. 149)

Cabrera's argument is correct (and amusing for Harry Potter fans). The normative and hegemonic nature of whiteness serves to protect the status quo, which is racial inequality, oppression, and injustice. A critical first step to dismantling systemic white supremacy is to name its agent: hegemonic whiteness.

White Ignorance

The construct of white ignorance describes the frequent claims of obliviousness that White people employ when issues of race or racism arise. White people claim to not know anything about race, to not have a race, to not recognize their own racial identity. The normative nature of whiteness reinforces this ignorance, allowing White people to see themselves as "regular humans" while other identities and people are racialized. This ignorance is a willful choice, a commitment to not knowing, and a "collective forgetting" (Foste & Irwin, 2020, p. 446) of racial knowledge. It allows Whites to remain blissfully unaware, and therefore off the hook for any responsibility to act, all while allowing white hegemony to remain undisturbed (Cabrera et al., 2017).

Leonardo (2009) described white ignorance as an "utter sense of oblivion" (p. 76) that Whites claim about race and their privilege in the racial system. He challenged this idea that Whites are truly ignorant, calling it the "myth of white ignorance" (p. 107), and argued that they choose ignorance in order to uphold the systems that benefit them. In this way, Whites are complicit in their own ignorance in order to uphold whiteness. Leonardo (2009) also astutely noted that white ignorance upholds and masks white supremacy, preserving the racial order by pretending not to see the racial hierarchy.

DiAngelo (2018) made a similar observation on the power of white ignorance, but seemed to hold Whites less intentionally, individually responsible (perhaps sincerely oblivious)

for this process of upholding white ignorance. She argued that white racial ignorance results from our socialization into a world where Whites think of ourselves as outside of race, thus putting all responsibility for racial knowledge and systems onto BIPOC people. In her view, many Whites are truly oblivious. However, she also noted that this ignorance on the part of Whites serves to uphold white normativity and dominance and, therefore, must be challenged. In this way, she agreed with Leonardo (2009): The ignorance, however innocently acquired, must be disrupted.

Understanding how white ignorance shows up allows us to name how this supposed lack of knowledge is socialized into White people through normative white hegemony (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009). In naming the oblivion as willful (even if subconscious), Leonardo (2009) rejected the idea that the problem is simply one of knowledge acquisition:

As beneficiaries of racism, whites have had the luxury to neglect their own development in *racial understanding*, which should not be confused with *racial knowledge*. Whites forego a critical understanding of race because their structural position is both informed by and depends on a *fundamentally superficial grasp* of history and evolution. (p. 110)

The choice to neglect one's racial understanding is truly a luxury. In this way, Leonardo agreed with Foste and Irwin (2020), who said:

If white students' behaviors towards, attitudes about, and knowledge of race and racism were merely the result of limited exposure, then content knowledge about institutional racism, white privilege, and histories of racial exclusion would logically lead to a more enlightened and racially progressive racial consciousness...But white racial ignorance represents far more than a state of not knowing. "If this were the problem, just giving people more and better information would correct their knowledge problem. But we don't just have a knowledge problem—we have a habit-of-being problem..." (Shotwell, 2015, p. 58). (p. 447)

I agree with Foste and Irwin (2020). If education and knowledge were the issue, then education would have solved racism years ago. The problem is not lack of knowledge, the problem is hegemonic whiteness that insists on not knowing even when the knowledge is right before us.

This is white ignorance in action. And it is socialized into White people as part of our way of being in the world.

Cabrera's (2016) scholarship framed the epistemologies of ignorance frequently enacted by White students as a form of "racial arrested development" (p. 119). In a subsequent publication, Cabrera et al. (2017) defined white ignorance as "a willful aversion to the human suffering caused by systemic White supremacy...if ignorance is bliss, then racial ignorance allows White people to remain racially blissful (or at least not complicit in racial oppression)" (p. 21). As a response to this state of bliss, Cabrera et al. (2016) called for "an assertive pedagogy of racial agitation" (p. 132) to wrestle the ignorance out of their grasp by creating intentional discomfort. As addressed in the section above, educators must stop prioritizing the comfort of White students over their growth. This only serves to reinforce white hegemony by leaving systems of power and privilege in place at the expense of BIPOC students.

Critical scholars conclude that it is crucial that this white ignorance be disrupted if ideologies of whiteness are going to be challenged on campuses (Cabrera et al., 2016; Foste, 2019; Hikido & Murray, 2016; Leonardo, 2009, 2013). Foste's (2019) study highlighted the result of campuses that promote diversity discourses without the power analysis needed to disrupt white ignorance. In his study on how White students maintain ideologies of whiteness, Foste found that White students had a false sense of racial harmony on campus that prohibited them from engaging in systemic analysis of campus culture. Hikido and Murray (2016) referred to this phenomenon as "happy talk" (p. 396) and praising the "mosaic" (p. 397) of diversity while ignoring racial tensions and systemic realities. This ignorant belief that all is well in the racial climate only serves to uphold the status quo. As Foste (2019) described, it is a "collective forgetting that discredits and diminishes the lived experiences of People of Color with White

supremacy” (p. 243). Leonardo (2013) reinforced this notion when he named this ignorance “race amnesia” (p. 97). Similarly, Cabrera et al. (2017) concluded that white ignorance leads to sincere fictions, “beliefs espoused by White people regarding the nature of contemporary racism that they both believe (sincere) and are divorced from empirical reality (fictions)” (p. 33). Sincere fictions lead to “racing for innocence” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 33), a concept to which I now turn.

White Innocence and Complicity

When their ignorance is punctured, White people often employ strategies to uphold their innocence and avoid complicity. White complicity and white innocence are two sides of the same coin, so I discuss the literature on these concepts together here. White innocence names the attempt to avoid complicity in ongoing systems of oppression by maintaining a sense of moral innocence (Gotanda, 2004; Gutierrez, 2006; Poon, 2018). White complicity calls on scholars and researchers to address the inherent culpability of having a White experience in a white supremacist world (Foste, 2019; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009).

White Innocence. The concept of white innocence, rooted in critical legal studies, is a rhetorical strategy to avoid culpability. These claims of innocence are aimed at denying personal responsibility in systemic white supremacy and the resulting structural inequity (Lee et al., 2022). Frequently cited by education scholars (Gutierrez, 2006; Lee et al., 2022; Orozco, 2019; Poon, 2018), Gotanda’s (2004) legal scholarship exposed how white innocence was employed in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In overturning legal precedent in support of segregation, the Court cited “new” science that demonstrated how segregation was harmful. This “new” information created what Gotanda called “the Aha! Moment” (p. 670). This “Aha! Moment” allowed the Court to avoid responsibility for their previous decisions that upheld

inequity by claiming they did not know and were thus innocent of causing previous harm, even as they were acting in the moment to supposedly redress this harm (Gotanda, 2004). In this way, the justices re-framed themselves as the heroes of the story and not the villains.

Education scholars have taken up Gotanda's (2004) idea of white innocence and shown how the rhetoric shows up in K-12 and higher education environments. Gutierrez (2006) described white innocence as an underlying ideology and discourse that, when employed, functions to uphold the broader status quo: "a white innocence analysis involves naming the framework that has been naturalized and that allows the dominant subject position to remain 'innocent'—to claim, 'Who knew?' while sustaining the dominant framework and blocking opportunities for non-dominant groups" (p. 227). Similarly, Orozco (2019) named how white innocence reinforces normative whiteness as "whites are able to retain an invisible or, if present, innocent and 'neutral' role" (p. 427). Orozco built on Ross and Gotanda's legal analysis and focused on how notions of white innocence are developed through a complex and self-reinforcing cycle of experience, culture, and stereotypes that build shared frames, or scripts, for making sense of the world. These frames build a discourse that informs how we educate and reinforce racism in education.

Poon (2018) came to similar conclusions in her call to end white innocence in student affairs and higher education. Building on Gutierrez's (2006) work, she argued that white innocence works to prevent "the explicit naming and interrogation of dominant and oppressive frames in education" (pp. 14-15). Poon rightly pointed out that Whites then cling to their claims of innocence in order to avoid critical power analysis of their campus climates. This only serves to maintain the status quo. As long as Whites are innocent, even oblivious, about the dominant, hegemonic systems in place, they never have to confront their complicity in their maintenance.

Poon argued for inserting a power analysis into these systems to unmask and disrupt white innocence.

In discussing white innocence in higher education, Lee et al. (2022) described white innocence as “a social phenomenon that maintains a cycle of (performative) shock and response to momentary spectacles of racist incidents, which then prevent collective interrogation of systems that reproduce white supremacy” (p. 92). In this sense, white innocence is a performance designed to eliminate accusations or culpability. They observed that “the revelation of the existence of racism is not what surprises as much as the fear of being implicated in its reproduction and maintenance” (Lee et al., 2022, p. 97). Gotanda (2004) noted that part of the function of claims of innocence is that one can declare “a ‘new’ beginning, [and] cut off the moral, social, economic and political ties to the past” (p. 673) without any accountability. This new beginning leads to individualistic notions of racism, which stalls any attempts at broader, systemic challenges (Cabrera et al., 2017). This is what Cabrera et al. (2017) described as “racing for innocence” (p. 33) mentioned above. Foste (2019) advocated for a pedagogy of white complicity to unmask such evasive maneuvers. The calls from all of these scholars, in one way or another, are for the disruption of white innocence so that systems of oppression can be named and addressed. This is where notions of complicity come in.

White Complicity. White complicity, as articulated by Foste and Irwin (2020), “illuminates the ways white people, regardless of intentions, attitudes, or beliefs, are implicated in the maintenance and production of white supremacy” (p. 444). Notions of complicity move beyond individual intentions or even will power to name the inherent complexity of inhabiting a White body in a white supremacist world (Foste & Irwin, 2020). Due to our socialization into whiteness, White people cannot simply abandon racism and take on an autonomous nonracist

White identity; the existence of white hegemony makes that impossible (DiAngelo, 2018; Foste, 2019; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Kluttz et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2018). Simply by living as a White person in the U.S., with all the privileges that entails, makes one complicit in systems of dominance (Cabrera, 2019; Leonardo, 2009). As Foste and Irwin (2020) explained, even White people who are striving to be racial justice accomplices “are always implicated in a relational system of racial domination” (p. 445) and benefit from their white immunity.

While CWS makes a distinction between whiteness and White people, complicity requires us to also acknowledge the interconnected nature of the two. Bonilla-Silva (2018) incisively noted: “whiteness is ‘*embodied racial power*’ because ‘all actors socially regarded as “white”...receive systemic privileges just by virtue of wearing the white outfit”” (p. 156). This aligns well with the other scholars who call on Whites to realize and grapple with the ways they are implicated in the racial system and how they benefit from this racialization.

In response to this reality, education scholars advocate for a pedagogy of white complicity. Foste’s (2019) research concluded that educators should start from a place of complicity in working with White students. Cabrera (2012) advocated for continual self-reflection on complicity for White students seeking to be racial justice allies. Ford’s and Orlandella’s (2015) research agreed with Cabrera and advocates for White students to wrestle with their complicity, take responsibility for their positionality and own their internalized racism. Reason and Evans (2007) held that White students must come to a “racially cognizant sense of Whiteness” (p. 71), where they understand their complicity while also seeking to engage in racial justice actions. Starting from a place of complicity with White students can alleviate the pressures and fears associated with constantly striving to appear not racist (Cabrera et al., 2017; DiAngelo, 2018).

White complicity and innocence, as two sides of the same coin, prop up inequitable systems by misidentifying the nature of racism. As Lee et al. (2022) said “Through white innocence, people inaccurately define racism as individual acts of bad faith, allowing them to overlook their complicity in racist structures in order to maintain the image of the ‘good’ white person” (p. 92). This leads directly to embracing and enacting a color-evasive ideology.

Color-Evasive Ideology

Color-evasive ideology is a multifaceted concept that, essentially, claims that race does not matter, avoids discussions of race, and believes that even recognizing race is tantamount to racism. Notably, this ideology frames racism in individual terms, reinforcing the good/bad binary that allows Whites to declare a good, non-racist identity (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2017; Matias et al., 2014). It allows Whites to say “I am not a racist because I don’t see color.” It denies the importance of race, while at the same time reinforces the idea that being called a racist is an accusation of profound immorality (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera, 2018; DiAngelo, 2018). This ideology forms the foundation for what Bonilla-Silva (2018) calls the new racism, where racism is seen as individual acts committed by bad people, which must be avoided at all costs by good people, all the while leaving white hegemony ignored. In line with Annamma et al. (2017), I use the term “color-evasive” in lieu of “color-blind,” the more commonly used term in the literature, in order to avoid promoting ableist notions inherent in equating “blindness with ignorance” (p. 154), as well as to more accurately name what is happening in this ideology. When I quote others, I use their language.

Contours of Color-Evasive Ideology. Drawing from roots in critical legal studies, Annamma et al. (2017) explored how color-evasive ideologies have seeped into education. They traced the developments of color-evasive approaches and name how the ideology moved from a

tool used to support minoritized people to a tool used to oppress. Citing Justice Harland's lone dissent in *Plessy v Ferguson* that the constitution is "colorblind," people have used this language to argue that to recognize race is tantamount to racism. Using CRT, DisCrit, and Intersectionality, Annamma et al. critiqued the use of "blindness" language in describing this problematic ideology: "These terms are inherently problematic, as they do not accurately depict the problem of refusing to acknowledge race while simultaneously maintaining a deficit notion of people with disabilities" (p. 153). In expanding and re-framing this ideology as "color-evasiveness," they more accurately expose what is happening without using language that 'others' those with disabilities. "In other words, to use the term 'evade' highlights an attempt to obliterate...Using the racial ideology of color-evasiveness directly calls into question the presupposed goodness of ignoring race" (Annamma et al., 2017, p. 156). Not only is this terminology more respectful of those with disabilities, it incisively exposes the heart of the matter. Ideologies that claim not to see race are deliberate in their ignoring of reality.

Bonilla-Silva (2018), in the fifth edition of his popular book, *Racism Without Racists*, provided a thorough unpacking of the historical context, concepts, frames and discursive strategies used to uphold a color-evasive worldview. As he explained, color-evasive ideology manifests in a collection of claims, expressions, and stories that are used to justify, or explain away, racial inequalities. Bonilla-Silva (2018) and others (Leonardo, 2009; Reason & Evans, 2007) understand this ideology to function as the new racism in the post-Civil Rights era. No longer is it acceptable to be openly racist; racial inequity is now upheld through discursive moves that reproduce more "subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial" inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 3). The ideology relies on notions of liberalism such as merit, individualism, work ethic, equal opportunity, racial stereotypes, and common storylines to avoid accusations of

racism and reinforce the status quo at the same time. Scholars highlight how this approach frames racial inequality in terms of anything but racism (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 20; Leonardo, 2009; Reason & Evans, 2007). Cabrera (2019), somewhat humorously, labeled attempts to explain racial segregation on college campuses in terms of anything but racism as whitesplaining, which he defines as “White people explaining the nature of racism to People of Color—frequently in a condescending way” (p. 23). Whitesplaining is pure color-evasiveness, making up reasons to avoid naming something as racist.

Bonilla-Silva (2018) named four central frames of color-evasive racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. All of these frames are used by Whites as supposedly nonracial ideas, which in reality serve to maintain inequitable outcomes for BIPOC people. While attempting to appear reasonable and even moral, color-evasive ideologies, in effect, place blame on the marginalized for their continued material conditions of inequality. What is most frustrating is that those who enact color-evasive racism claim the moral high ground while doing so (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Leonardo, 2009). Annamma et al. (2017) astutely noted how these evasive tactics feign morality while reinforcing inequity: “those espousing a color-blind racial ideology are individually positioned as racially enlightened while simultaneously reproducing power and inequity in a system of white supremacy” (p. 154). By keeping the conversation at the level of individual morality, color-evasive racism prevents systemic interrogation of inequities (Annamma et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera, 2019).

The Good/Bad Binary. A central feature of color-evasive ideology is how it frames racism as an individual moral failure (Leonardo, 2009). This idea is built on the understanding that racism equals individual actions committed by bad people. Many scholars (Cabrera, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Reason & Evans, 2007) explore the mutually exclusive understanding that

most White people bring to conversations about racism: Racists are not good people and good people are not racists. This good/bad binary places enormous pressure on White people to uphold and maintain an image of racial innocence (DiAngelo, 2018; Leonardo, 2009; Poon, 2018). This striving to uphold an image of a “good” (i.e., non-racist) person is what drives problematic dynamics like white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), happy talk (Hikido & Murray, 2016), white innocence (Orozco, 2019), racial apathy (Reason & Evans, 2007), and more. Cabrera (2019) astutely highlights the fact that this binary is based on a fundamental “misunderstanding of the nature of racism” (p. 8). Contemporary racism is more than individual actions, it is a system of interconnected parts within the larger social structure. Simply choosing not to be overtly racist will not eliminate racism. Eliminating prejudice from one’s heart will not eliminate oppression from anyone’s life.

Other authors also highlight the need for White people to move past the individual good/bad binary and realize that they are complicit in a system that benefits them and oppresses others. Leonardo (2009) critiqued the binary as an individualistic approach to evade responsibility in a systemic issue. Drawing on the work of Bonilla-Silva, he says:

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 racists” (see Bonilla-Silva, 2003) since racism is like a flatulent that someone else always releases in the room. (p. 38)

In this worldview, racism is reduced to another individual’s character flaw. Recognizing this problem, Leonardo challenged his readers to see a broader, more systemic view of racism. An approach that focuses on white supremacy as a system that we all play a part in upholding. To name this system is the first step in dismantling it.

Other research called attention to breaking the good/bad binary as an important part of “rearticulating whiteness” (Reason, 2007) and developing a “racially cognizant” (Reason &

Evans, 2007) sense of whiteness. In studying White college students, Reason (2007) and Reason and Evans (2007), call attention to the ways that White students have been taught that racism is individualistic and therefore avoid race issues for fear of being called racist. Both studies discussed students who struggled with the desire to be perceived as a “good” White person. In these studies, some White students were able to move past this individualized notion and see race and racism as systemically and structurally bound. Such a realization enabled them to begin to move past their fears and engage in a rearticulating of their own understanding of whiteness. This rearticulation enabled them to begin to move past some of the typical defenses identified by DiAngelo (2018) and Watt (2007) and toward a more systemic understanding of whiteness.

How Color-Evasive Ideologies Permeate Higher Education. From institutional policies, to individual attitudes, to well-meaning “diversity” statements, to the current attacks on teaching CRT, ideologies of color-evasiveness pervade higher education. Recent attempts to ban critical race theory in education are a prime example of blatant color-evasive tactics in action (Cineas, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Just to discuss the nature of racism in the classroom has politicians and pundits crying foul (Greene, 2021). Allegations of “reverse racism” come up when institutions take action to correct historical injustices through affirmative action or supporting identity-based resources (Cabrera, 2019; Park, 2018). Even the “standardized” tests institutions use to evaluate a student’s ability to succeed in college are color-evasive schemes that only serve to uphold white normativity (Annamma et al., 2017; Park, 2018).

Cabrera’s body of extensive research on White men on college campuses exposes how White male students enter college “rooted in racial ideology of colorblindness” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 21). His research showed how White students are more likely than Students of Color to see campuses as equitable environments (Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2016). He exposed how

White men practiced color-evasive maneuvers, such as downplaying the presence and impact of racism, framing issues as anything but racism, and believing strongly in meritocracy and reverse racism (Cabrera, 2019). Recognizing that color-evasiveness was engrained into White students as they grew up in racially segregated communities, he advocated for intentionally challenging students' comfort zones through racial agitation (Cabrera, 2011, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2016).

Other scholars have taken up the impact of color-evasive ideologies in their education research, as well. In her critique of watered down diversity statements and activities, Poon (2018) concluded: "As a result of a hegemonic framework of color-evasive racism, diversity and equity is understood as additive and perhaps superficially enriching to one's personal life, but not as concepts with systemic or organizational implications requiring sustained attention or analysis" (p. 14). It is important to name color-evasiveness as an oppressive tactic that has as its goal the avoidance of systemic change. Similarly, Reason and Evans' (2007) research agrees that a color-evasive worldview only serves to ignore systemic racism as any efforts to address it are seen as unnecessary. Additionally, Hikido and Murray's (2016) study found that White students adhering to a color-evasive ideology claimed that discussions about race actually create division and the campus should focus instead on more unifying topics to bring students together. In these ways and many more, color-evasive ideology impacts higher education institutions and those who inhabit them.

An interesting final contour of color-evasive ideology in the education literature is the cognitive dissonance involved in espousing this view. Leonardo (2013) noted the internal, deception needed to hold this view when he described "the pretenses of color-blindness...[You] must recognize race in order then to ignore it" (p. 121). As Matias and Zembylas (2014) powerfully observed:

Whites have experienced racial trauma or abuse since childhood. This abuse forces White children to adopt a colorblind ideology (Trainor, 2008; Winans, 2010) despite bearing witness to racial reality, lest they be ostracized from their white community... Since people of Color “wear” their racial identities literally on their skins, they serve as a constant reminder to those so inoculated in whiteness that they are living a lie of colorblindness. (p. 332)

It is a fascinating exercise to think about the mental gymnastics that White individuals go through to justify and uphold this nonsensical ideology. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) advocated for in his book, this ideology must be called out for the fallacy that it is in order for us to get to the heart of the matter—oppressive systems and inequitable outcomes. A racist system will not be dismantled simply by getting rid of people with blatantly racist attitudes. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) said “hunting for racists tends to get us off what we need to correctly understand the workings of racism in society” (p. xv). Scholars need to continue to investigate ways to get White individuals past the entrapments of color-evasive ideology in order to address the racist system we live, work, and learn in.

CWS Synopsis: The Individual Problem

The through line within all of these CWS concepts is the push to keep racism at the individual level. Whiteness as an ideology works to keep systemic racism hidden through hegemonic structures that normalize inequity and continue to center whiteness. Each of the constructs reinforces the notion that racism is an individual problem. Through white ignorance, White people erase their own racial identity and role in the racialized system, pushing the issue solely onto BIPOC people. Utilizing claims of innocence, White people avoid any engagement with or responsibility to confront how racism is embedded in our structures. Instead, we opt to celebrate diversity through institutional statements and history months, all to avoid our own complicity in ongoing oppression. Color-evasive ideologies support these strategies, framing any issue that arises in “anything-but-racism” language. At the heart of the matter is the refusal to see

racism as anything but an individual moral failure. Until we can move past this entrenched ideology, challenges to the system will continue to be met with resistance. We need more research that can illuminate how White students get past the fear of individual moral indictment, to see their role in the larger system (both as complicit in it and as an agent of change).

Conclusions in Support of This Study

Higher education in the U.S. is rooted in white supremacy and settler colonialism. While acknowledging this reality, many critical scholars (myself included) also hold onto hope that higher education can be a powerful force for transformation and justice (Patton, 2016). Some of those critical scholars have taken to studying White students in hopes of helping them become racial justice allies and accomplices. However, many White ally development models are too individualistic and do not ultimately confront hegemonic whiteness. Whiteness is frequently framed as an individual racial identity, linked with racist attitudes and societal privilege. These approaches assume that, with proper challenge and support, White students will raise their awareness and move beyond a racist identity. While commendable, this goal does nothing to upend white ideologies that keep systems of domination in place. If we stay focused on individual identities, the status quo of white hegemony remains. Yet, recognizing that systems (and our campuses) are made up of individuals, we cannot simply throw out individual development efforts. Consequently, we need better approaches in education that include equipping White students to challenge and dismantle systemic whiteness. As Leonardo (2009) says, White students have a choice regarding whiteness and may opt to commit “race treason” (p. 140). It is up to us as educators to present them with this choice in the most effective way.

Educators need to help White students navigate their experience when they realize that “the privilege of ignoring race (color blindness) has been replaced by the pain of acknowledging

that race and racism are part of their identities" (Reason & Evans, 2007, p. 73). This invitation into the struggle for justice must be done with thoughtfulness by educators, recognizing that this is often unsettling and difficult for White students, especially young adults with arguably less maturity and life perspective to guide them (Cabrera et al., 2017; Kluttz et al., 2020; Watt, 2007; Zembylas, 2012). As the scholarship confirms, it is crucial that educators understand the emotionalities and resistance of White students more fully in order to create effective interventions. These defensive reactions only serve to harm BIPOC individuals, re-center whiteness, and reinforce white hegemony. This research project was designed to address this need by studying how some White students were able to navigate their own emotionality and defensiveness while growing a commitment to racial justice that included accepting their role in a system infused with whiteness.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the literature that informed this study and the theoretical framework that shaped the study design and analysis. The first section discussed the racist history of higher education in the United States. From the beginning, higher education was built by White people, for White people, on the backs of Black and Indigenous people. Its history as a tool of colonization, empire building, assimilation, and exclusion continues to shape institutions and students today. The second section explored the scholarship on White ally development. Many of the models lack the complexity needed to combine both individual developmental approaches with actions that will challenge oppressive systems. Without systemic action, allies are simply "good people" without prejudice. The final two sections explored the literature that formed the theoretical framework for this study. Scholarship on White emotionality exposes the harmful impact that White emotional reactions have on anti-racist efforts. Rooted in color-

evasive ideologies, emotional reactions based in guilt, fear, and defensiveness uphold white hegemony and prioritize White comfort at the expense of BIPOC people. Additionally, critical whiteness scholars have identified several constructs that expose how whiteness works to keep itself hidden through hegemonic structures that normalize whiteness. The tenets I used for my framework are white normativity/hegemony, white ignorance, white innocence/complicity, and color-evasive ideologies. Together, these concepts work to reinforce the idea that racism is merely a problem of individual prejudice, hindering efforts to address injustice on a systemic level.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, research methods, and data analysis procedures I employed in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of White students and how they develop as White people committed to racial justice in college, with a focus on navigating emotionality. In this chapter, I describe the critical qualitative approach and constructivist grounded theory methodology I employed and how they align with my research questions. I explain how I used the theoretical concepts in critical whiteness studies (CWS) and White emotionality throughout the study, as well as how I navigated my White identity as the researcher. Finally, I share how I recruited participants, how I approached data collection and analysis, as well as the trustworthiness and limitations/delimitations in the study.

As a reminder, my research question and sub-questions are:

1. How do White students grow in their commitment to racial justice in college?
 - a. What types of experiences in college contribute to developing a commitment to racial justice?
 - b. How do White students come to understand racism as a systemic reality and not merely individual actions or beliefs?
 - c. How do White students navigate their emotionality while developing a commitment to racial justice?

Methodological Approach

This section discusses the critical qualitative approach that guided this study. I begin by situating my approach to research within my own epistemological stance of critical constructivism. Following that, I describe the purposes of critical qualitative research and why it was well-suited to answer my research questions. I also explain my specific methodological

approach of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) and why it was ideal given my research goals, critical perspective, and epistemological stance.

Epistemological Paradigm

I approach knowledge exploration and acquisition from a critical constructivist perspective, recognizing that knowledge and truth are socially constructed, as well as shaped by broader systems of oppression and privilege (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I believe we can, through observation, listening, reflection, and evaluation, understand more about the world and people's experiences in it. At the same time, I believe that there is not one, single objective truth to be known, but many truths that are constructed based on lived experiences within systems of domination and oppression. We must always remember, as Charmaz (2017b) reminded us, that "our way of knowing is always interpretive of a reality, not a reproduction of it" (p. 41). Our own identities, positionalities, and experiences shape how we perceive the world. As researchers, we must account for this and seek to appreciate how this impacts our understandings. I reject the positivist notion that researchers can or should be neutral or "objective." We cannot stand apart from the world we study. Therefore, it is important to be humble and intentionally open-minded when approaching research. As a researcher, I strive to allow new truths to challenge my understandings, even if they appear to conflict with previously held knowledge. The world is complicated, interconnected and created through vast and varied experiences. Researchers must resist the temptation to tame it through over-simplification.

Critical Qualitative Research

This study employed critical qualitative methodologies in order to explore participant experiences. Qualitative research is about understanding how people make meaning of their experiences and of the world around them. Where quantitative research seeks to measure,

explain, and predict in generalizable ways, qualitative research seeks to go deeper into individual stories and experiences to understand the nuance of those experiences and how people in various contexts navigate those nuances (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

A qualitative approach fit well within my epistemological framework as it allowed for exploring individual perspectives in their own context, as well as within relationships of power and privilege. Qualitative approaches allow for investigating the “how” and the “why” of particular experiences in greater detail than quantitative approaches, which seek to reduce experiences to majority commonalities and predictable trends (Bhattacharya, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This approach aligns well with my constructivist lens that asserts individual knowledge construction based on experiences matters. A qualitative approach is also well aligned with my research questions which were aimed at unpacking the nuances found in the “how” and the “why” of emerging racial justice accomplices.

Critical Inquiry

My approach in this study also employed goals and perspectives of critical inquiry. Critical inquiry, at its heart, addresses issues of power, inequality, and injustice to challenge current social realities (Charmaz, 2017b). Understanding that all “thought is mediated by power relations that are historically and socially constructed” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 10), research that is specifically critical moves beyond understanding and describing to challenging, critiquing, and, ultimately, changing existing power structures. Quality research design must align well in all aspects with the researcher’s epistemological philosophy. A critical qualitative approach, as I describe more below, aligned well with my epistemology and study goals.

Given the critical aspect of my epistemology, that knowledge is shaped not only by experiences, but also by systems of power and domination, employing goals of critical inquiry

are well aligned as critical inquiry requires analyzing with an eye toward power, privilege, domination, and oppression (Charmaz, 2017b). Thus, I employed a critical interpretivist lens in this study. A critical interpretivist approach is one that seeks to understand the nuances of experiences, as understood by participants, while also complicating their knowledge through critical analysis (Patton & Bondi, 2015). An example of this approach in higher education research is Patton and Bondi's (2015) study on White male social justice allies. This approach allows for complicating identities and experiences within systems of oppression while studying dominant identities. One of the hallmarks of qualitative research is the focus on amplifying and centering the voices of participants, but when studying those with dominant identities, a critical researcher also has a responsibility to critique the ways that participants might have limited understandings based on their privileged positions. In this study, I sought to understand the nuances of White participants' experiences from their perspective, as well as examine their knowledge through critical analysis that accounts for systems of white hegemony and white supremacy.

Furthermore, critical inquiry seeks to intentionally expose injustice to foster change (Charmaz, 2017b; Jones et al., 2014). As I explained in Chapter 2, some critical scholars critique whiteness studies for its potential to unintentionally reinforce the very thing that it is attempting to challenge, the dominance of whiteness. According to Leonardo (2013), a critical whiteness approach "takes the risk of recentering Whiteness in order to marginalize its power and unveil its mysteries" (p. 91). In line with this understanding, I took the risk of centering White students in this study with the goal of developing knowledge and theories that might contribute to the deconstruction of whiteness and white hegemony in higher education. In this way, my approach was also situated in a transformative paradigm consistent with critical inquiry (Charmaz, 2017b;

Linder, 2015). My hope is that this research has practical implications that lead to transformation of systems of oppression.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology

Given my research questions, epistemology, and critical qualitative approach, I conducted this study using Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology. Grounded theory is a method of using inductive data analysis to construct conceptual categories that build into theories about a studied process, action, or phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Situated more in a positivist tradition, the goal of a *classic* grounded theory approach is to construct formal theories to explain phenomena by identifying patterns and generating categories that explain, or even predict, the topic of study (Charmaz, 2014, 2017a). While many of the methods are similar, *constructivist* grounded theory differs from classic grounded theory in that it builds from a specifically constructivist epistemological paradigm, situating the research and researcher in time and place. CGT scholar Kathy Charmaz (2017a), differentiating the constructivist version of grounded theory from earlier positivist approaches, noted that CGT is looking for “explication not explanation...Explication leads to insight and understanding” (p. 6) rather than predictions and conclusions, which are the goal of explanatory approaches in the positivist tradition. Thus, CGT allows for construction of substantive theories about particular phenomena by identifying patterns and generating categories that *explicate* the topic of study (Charmaz, 2014, 2017a). Substantive theory differs from formal theory in that it addresses specific, everyday problems in a particular, defined area of study (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It does not intend to predict or explain in generalizable ways. Thus, in this study, I developed a substantive theory for how White students develop as emerging accomplices for racial justice while in college.

Additionally, CGT is focused on exploring and understanding process, which made it ideal for answering my research questions about how White students grow and what influences that growth. Studies in higher education have used grounded theory for this very purpose before. For example, Reason et al.'s (2005) study used grounded theory methods to develop their model of racial justice ally development. Cabrera's 2012 study used grounded theory methods to analyze the "*process* [emphasis added] by which the racially privileged work through Whiteness" (p. 383). Charmaz (2014) noted that CGT provides a method of understanding processes, even if the researcher does not intend to develop a formal theory. A process, she explains, "consists of unfolding temporal sequences that may have identifiable markers with clear beginnings and endings and benchmarks in between. The temporal sequences are linked in a process and lead to change" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17). Constructivist grounded theory methods provide a way to analyze these sequences and markers, within a social context, to further understand what is happening with White students as they develop in their commitment to racial justice. This approach aligns with my constructivist epistemology, which emphasizes the contextual nature of knowledge and identity. The fundamental question in grounded theory is: What is happening here? (Charmaz, 2017a). The goal of a CGT study is to answer this question and provide an "abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4). This goal fit well with my intention in this study to provide a broader understanding of what is happening as White students develop so that educators might gain insight that contributes to further educating and challenging White students at their institutions.

Additionally, in alignment with critical inquiry, my goals were practical—to inform practice and create change—which makes CGT particularly well-fitting for my study given grounded theory's pragmatist heritage. Grounded theory has roots in pragmatist philosophy with

a focus on problem solving, as well as social justice (Charmaz, 2017b). It is ideal for researchers who seek to influence social conditions, especially critical researchers who seek to challenge systems of power (Charmaz, 2017b). Constructivist grounded theory, as a method, provides the analytical tools to study how events, processes, and actions are constructed and how they might reinforce or challenge power and injustice (Charmaz, 2017b). This pragmatic, justice-oriented approach aligns well with my theoretical framework, which seeks to challenge and disrupt white ideologies and hegemonic whiteness in pursuit of transformation. Constructivist grounded theory methods allowed me to take the conceptual frameworks of CWS and White emotionality and apply them to understanding the processes of growth in the participants. The next section outlines how I employed these theories within my research project.

Philosophical Assumptions

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, my assumptions entering this study were guided by scholarship from critical whiteness studies (CWS) and White emotionality. The following section outlines how these philosophical and theoretical assumptions impacted this study in design and implementation. In this section, I discuss assumptions of CWS followed by White emotionality research and provide examples of how these concepts shaped this study.

Critical Whiteness Studies

I began with the assumption, informed by critical race theory, that racism and white supremacy are endemic in the world, in the U.S., and in higher education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Leonardo, 2013). It is the goal of CWS scholarship to expose how whiteness operates in hegemonic ways, creating oppression and marginalization for BIPOC individuals (Cabrera et al., 2017; Leonardo, 2013). The tools found in CWS scholarship equipped me to investigate the ways that White students were either upholding or challenging ideologies of whiteness. CWS

highlights the power of language and discourse to reveal what is actually happening as White people talk about race and racism (Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Orozco, 2019). It calls attention to problematic claims of ignorance and innocence. It highlights how most White people live in a world surrounded by color-evasive ideologies that serve to uphold inequity.

I used these concepts to critically engage with my participants. CWS concepts shaped the questions I asked in the interviews, as well as the way I analyzed data. For example, as color-evasive ideologies highlight, a primary barrier to embracing an accomplice trajectory lies in understanding racism as solely an issue of individual bias. With this in mind, I asked the following questions of participants:

1. On the intake survey, when asked if racism was an issue of individual attitudes or systemic issues, you put *[XXX]*.
 - a. Tell me about why you chose that?
 - b. *[If relevant]* Tell me more about how you came to understand racism as a systemic reality and not just personal bias?
2. How does your understanding of systemic racism impact your feelings about your White identity?
 - a. *[Alternatively]* How does it feel to know that you are complicit/implicated in racism/racist structures?
 - b. How does it impact your commitment and actions regarding racial justice?

With these questions, I explored how the participants made sense of their place as White in a world embedded with systemic racism. As I discuss in Chapter 4, participants shared how they wrestled with the color-evasive notion of the good/bad binary and guilt as they learned more about their own complicity. When they shared about feeling they were a “bad person,” I used the CWS ideas of innocence and complicity as sensitizing concepts to ask follow up questions so as to further explore their understanding. I discuss using theories as sensitizing concepts in CGT methodology in the section on data analysis below.

White Emotionality

In addition to CWS, scholarship on White emotionality played a guiding role in the questions I asked and the data I collected. As described in Chapter 2, the scholarship on White emotions shows how uncomfortable emotions can hinder White students' engagement in racial justice initiatives (DiAngelo, 2018; Matias, 2016; Zembylas, 2018). Thus, understanding them was critical to the goals of this study. I explored emotions such as guilt, shame, defensiveness, anger, and discomfort with my participants to learn if they experienced these well-documented emotions and, if so, how they grew their commitment to racial justice in the midst of them.

Theories on White emotionality discuss how White people frequently respond to racial discomfort by seeking to restore equilibrium and avoid accusations of racism. To explore these ideas, I asked questions such as:

1. Have you experienced emotional reactions (such as guilt, defensiveness, fear, shame, anger, etc.) when you have engaged in conversations about race, racism, whiteness?
 - a. If so, how did you deal with those emotions?
 - b. What helps you process those emotions and keep engaging?
2. Can you tell me about a time when someone told you that you did/said something racist or racially harmful? How did you feel? How did you react?
 - a. *[Alternatively]* Can you tell me about a time when you realized that you were implicated in racism because you are White? How did you feel? How did you react?
 - b. What keeps you engaged and committed to growth in spite of the challenges?

An additional way that the theories from CWS and White emotionality influenced my research approach was how I engaged with my own identity as a White researcher. I am not immune from the critiques of CWS and must be aware of my own desires to claim innocence, avoid complicity, and be impacted by my own emotionality in unproductive ways. Thus, I sought to identify and wrestle with my own emotions and positionality throughout this study. Later in this chapter, I discuss how I navigated my own whiteness and emotionality through

methodological self-consciousness, researcher journaling, and accountability. But first, I explain my study design in more detail.

Research Methods

Accounting for the objectives of CGT, as well as my epistemological perspective, theoretical framework, and critical goals for this study, I used interviews as the primary means of data collection as they allow for concentrated exploration of participant experiences. The following section describes the specifics of my research plan and implementation. I discuss participants, recruitment, risks and benefits of participation, consent and confidentiality, and, finally, data collection procedures using intensive interviewing techniques.

Participants and Recruitment

Given the emergent and open-ended nature of CGT, there are no precise guidelines that outline the number of participants and/or interviews required for a credible study. Some scholars say twelve interviews are sufficient, some studies have only six participants (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2014), “Grounded theorists have taken contradictory positions on the amount of data you need. Some grounded theorists emphasize saturating concepts and eschew attention to large interview samples. Others advocate comparing many incidents and, thus, require thorough data collection” (p. 107). Ultimately, Charmaz (2014) maintained that “the number of interviews depends on the analytic level to which the researcher aspires” (p. 106), as well as the purpose of the study (e.g., developing formal theory, attaining generalizability, publication, completing thesis or dissertation requirements, etc.). For this study, my goal was to focus on saturating concepts, per Charmaz’s recommendation, and seek to build a substantive, but not formal, theory.

I initially estimated that I would interview 10-12 White college students, but allowed the ongoing data analysis to drive my ultimate number, knowing that I might have needed to increase participants in order to more fully answer my questions. Admittedly, this estimation was arbitrary, but I hoped to be able to gather enough data to do credible comparative analysis and create conceptual categories that would contribute to current research on White racial justice accomplices. Beyond numbers, my plan was to identify students who identified as White, had at least three years of college experience in the U.S., as well as an expressed commitment to racial justice. I also hoped to include participants with a variety of other identities and experiences (primarily: gender identity, sexual orientation, school type and region).

I recruited participants through email, social media posts, and informant networks (see Appendix A, B, and C). My emails were forwarded by informants to various email distribution lists, as well as personal contacts and social media networks they had. The recruitment invitation explained my study goals and asked that, if interested, potential participants complete a short intake questionnaire (see Appendix D). The questionnaire gathered the following information: (1) relevant demographics (year in school, school name, racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation); (2) whether or not they identify as a racial justice advocate; (3) to what degree they have reflected on their own whiteness and the nature of racism; and (4) their interest in participating in an interview over Zoom.

I received 24 responses to the intake questionnaire over five months of data collection. Of those, twelve were interviewed and twelve were not. One response was excluded because it appeared to be a joke (the answers to the scale questions about racism and reflection on whiteness were inconsistent and contradictory and they put random letters as the school name, skipped questions for pronouns, sexual orientation and gender, and included what appeared to be

a fake Gmail address). One response was omitted because they indicated they did not identify as White. Of the remaining ten responses that were not included: I emailed three who never responded or were not able to set up an interview time; one who wanted to be interviewed near the end of data collection, but I had reached saturation with the eleven interviews and did not feel this person, with their identities, would add more depth to the study; and six who filled out the questionnaire toward the end of data collection and were never emailed for an interview.

Of the 12 students who participated, one interview was not included in the analysis because the student was an international student, which I did not realize until the interview was underway. That student identified as White, but was born and raised in Russia. As the interview proceeded, it was clear they were not socialized into U.S. whiteness and saw race and racism from a very different perspective rooted in a Euro-centric worldview. Additionally, they did not have many of the emotionality barriers that U.S. students display. Thus, I excluded their interview entirely from analysis and inclusion in the study. Upon reflection, I should have included a question about international student status in my intake questionnaire.

Of the 11 that I interviewed and included in the study, the first seven were selected based on the order that they responded to the intake questionnaire, as well as their fit for the study based on their questionnaire responses. The first interview I conducted was with Elliot (pseudonym), the only participant with less than three years in college. I chose to interview Elliot, despite being a second year student, because I was eager to begin data collection and I was getting very few initial responses to the questionnaire (likely because it was summer). I thought that if she did not have much to add to the study as a second year student, I could always exclude her and note her as a practice interview. However, Elliot shared so much about how her initial year in college had affected her that I decided she was a meaningful participant to include

in the final analysis. So, on one hand, if I do a study like this again, I will be more patient in waiting for participants that fit my ideal proposed research criteria more precisely. But, on the other hand, Elliot added a great deal to the study and I am thankful she participated. My initial assumption that more time in college would directly correlate with better data for this study was not substantiated.

After the first seven interviews and initial data analysis, I began to be more intentional with who I chose to include in the study moving forward. As I had more responses than I needed at that point, I was able to seek greater diversity in my participant pool. The final four participants were selected based on their school type and location, as well as their gender and sexual identities. These choices helped to create a more diverse participant pool in terms of school type and geographic region, but did not alter the pool significantly in terms of gender and sexuality as the participants were already quite skewed towards queer woman identities. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for this report. The final participant pool is outlined below in Table 1. Additionally, to share the participants' stories more fully, I wrote individual vignettes for each participant. Due to space constraints, I do not include them in this chapter, but they are included as Appendix J.

It is noteworthy that all of the participants identified as part of the queer community and only one was a cisgender-man. Of the 24 that filled out the intake questionnaire, there were only two straight people (and they both identified as cis-women), but they did so too late in data collection to be included. I thought about including them even though I felt my concepts were already saturated at that point, but I concluded their straight identity would likely not impact the findings in a significant way and the participant group was already majority cis-women. It is also noteworthy that no straight men even filled out the intake form.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Name	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	School Year	School Type	School Location
Alyssa (she/her)	Cis-Woman	Pansexual	Third	Small Private	South
Dylan (he/him)	Cis-Man	Pansexual	Fourth	Large Public	Mountain West
Elliot (she/her)	Cis-Woman	Queer	Second	Large Public	Mountain West
Finn (she/her)	Cis-Woman	Queer/Pansexual	Fourth	Small Private	Midwest
Georgie (he/him)	Trans-Man	Queer/Pansexual	Fourth	Small Private	Midwest
Laura (she/her)	Cis-Woman	Bisexual/Gay	Fourth	Small Private	Midwest
Leila (they/them)	Non-Binary	Queer	Fourth	Small Private	Midwest
Monica (she/her)	Cis-Woman	Bisexual	Third	Large Public	West Coast
Olivia (she/her)	Cis-Woman	Bisexual	Third	Large Public	Pacific Northwest
Sage (they/them)	Questioning	Questioning	Third	Small Private	Southwest
Saoirse (she/her)	Cis-Woman	Bisexual	Third	Large Public	Pacific Northwest

As I sought to make sense of the participant demographics, I found myself wondering why all of my participants identified along the queer spectrum and why there was only one cis-man who sought to participate in this study. Why did no straight, cisgender men express interest in participating in this study? Was there something about their queer identities that led these students to be more open to participating? I speculate that two things might have influenced this. One, I identify as a queer woman. A simple Google search would bring up pictures of me and activities I am involved with that would indicate my queer identity. Therefore, it is possible that queer students felt more comfortable participating given our shared identities. Second, and more compelling for me, is that these queer students possessed an increased commitment to racial justice issues due to their own experiences of discrimination and marginalization. This increased commitment led them to be willing to give their time to this study. Throughout the interviews it

was clear that sexual orientation and gender identity did impact the participants' journey toward accompliceship. I discuss the impact of these and other marginalized identities in Chapter 4.

Consent and Confidentiality

Several steps were taken to ensure proper consent and confidentiality protocols were followed. When potential participants received the invitation to fill out the recruitment questionnaire, they were informed of the purpose of the study, any risks and/or benefits, as well as the voluntary nature of participation (see Appendix B). They indicated their consent to move forward by clicking on the link to the questionnaire. The follow-up email to those who expressed interest in being interviewed also reiterated the purpose of the study, possible risks/benefits, and voluntary nature of participation (see Appendix E). Additionally, at the beginning of each interview, I read the information again to the participants over Zoom and obtained verbal consent before proceeding with the interview (see Appendix F).

I did not anticipate nor discover any significant risks to the participants. A minor risk could be feelings of discomfort, if they felt challenged in their whiteness or reminded of difficult experiences related to guilt and shame around their White identity. This risk was minimal given the nature of grounded theory interview methods, which focus on allowing the participant to share their experiences in their own way and, thus, self-directing much of the interview process (Charmaz, 2014). My role, as the researcher, was only to follow up on the participants' comments to further understand their perspectives (Charmaz, 2014). No participant expressed experiencing any discomfort or distress during the study. In fact, most shared that they found the conversation rewarding. A second risk, as with any research involving human subjects, was the potential for data containing personal identity information (e.g., gender or sexuality) to be compromised. To minimize this risk, I kept all data secure in my password protected Colorado

State University OneDrive account. Additionally, in the coding software, as well as for this write-up, I used pseudonyms in lieu of real names, to protect participant privacy.

While there were no direct benefits of participating in this type of research, one possible incidental benefit of participating in this study includes increased self-understanding due to personal reflection generated through the interview process. I hope that by asking the students to reflect on their experiences and their growth, they gained additional insight into themselves in a deeper way. Indeed, a few participants indicated that talking with me was helpful for them and their thinking about their journey. Additionally, while this is not a benefit, per se, I provided the participants a \$25 gift card to thank them for their time.

Data Collection Procedures

As with all aspects of the method, data collection in grounded theory is “inductive, emergent, open-ended, and iterative” (Charmaz, 2017a, p. 2). Following the CGT process outlined by Charmaz (2014), I conducted intensive interviews with each participant that lasted 60-90 minutes each. Charmaz (2014) defines an intensive interview as “a gently-guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants’ perspective on their personal experience with the research topic” (p. 56). Intensive interviews are minimally guided by the researcher through broad, open-ended questions designed to allow the participant to tell their story in their own way. Early interviews using CGT are participant-centered and the researcher listens with an open mind. Since this method uses constant comparison, data analysis began during data collection, as I explain more below. Once tentative categories are constructed from early interviews, later interviews in CGT can shift to be more conversational where the researcher can ask about developing theoretical ideas that have come from initial analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

As noted above, because grounded theory calls for an open-ended, iterative, flexible process of data collection, I did not have a set number of interviews I planned to conduct. I allowed my analysis to develop after each interview and guide how many interviews I conducted, as well as what topics I focused on in the interviews. As my interviews and analysis proceeded, I began to reach saturation on some questions and developed additional questions to further explore my developing theory. I adjusted the focus of my interview questions in the later interviews to dig deeper into more theoretical themes (see Appendices F, H, and I). Consistent with best practices for interview-based research, it was important to establish rapport and respect with my participants (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, I began each interview asking participants to share about themselves and their backgrounds more generally, as well as inviting them to ask any questions they might have for me. I invited participants to ask me to clarify any questions they did not understand, and I worked to keep the interviews conversational and non-judgmental. While it was an option in my initial study design, I did not interview any participant more than once. Interviews were recorded with otter.ai software and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

The following section outlines how I approached data analysis. I explain how I used constant comparison, multiple cycles of coding, memo writing, sensitizing concepts, methodological doubt, and methodological self-consciousness techniques. These practices are outlined by scholars as fundamental aspects of rigorous CGT methods (Charmaz, 2014, 2017b, 2017a; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019). After each interview, I edited the otter.ai generated transcript against the audio recording to ensure accuracy of the transcript. I then emailed the transcript to the participant and asked them to review it to make sure it captured their ideas accurately and invited them to add any new thoughts or clarifications via email.

Constant Comparison

As mentioned above, CGT is an iterative method whereby the researcher is continually engaged in data collection and analysis at the same time. I followed Charmaz's (2014) guidelines for data analysis using constant comparison techniques. CGT analysis is flexible and fluid to allow the researcher to follow lines of inquiry that arise during data collection. Charmaz and Belgrave (2019) noted that a critical part of CGT is viewing data as nuanced, complex, problematic, shaped by context, and co-constructed with the researcher. While the core guidelines for CGT data analysis are clear, they are also not purely formulaic. The researcher guides the process with the participants as the study evolves. Thus, my ideas, interpretations, biases, questions, and positionality were influential components in my analysis. After each interview, I performed preliminary analysis of the transcript and wrote a memo and a journal entry with my initial thoughts and personal reflections. This process helped me clarify what ideas, categories, or themes were relevant to pursue in subsequent interviews. As the interviews progressed, my memos became spaces for me to write about how each new interview compared to previous ones and what it might add to my emerging ideas. I discuss more about using memos and journaling below.

Coding

I used Dedoose coding software to code all interviews. There are two standard cycles of coding in CGT methodology. The first stage is line-by-line coding where I coded with an eye toward actions and processes occurring in the data. The emphasis is on "what is happening in the scene" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4) from the participants' point of view. I created short descriptive codes from fragments of data, trying to stick with the participant's language whenever possible. For example, Saoirse used the phrase "leaning into discomfort," which I used as an initial code.

Elliot spoke about her motivations to engage in racial justice and I created the codes “seeing discrimination,” “empathizing with POC,” and “noticing injustice.” Charmaz (2014) highlighted that this stage should be done quickly without overthinking and open-mindedly letting the researcher be guided by the data. As I reviewed each transcript, I continually asked myself “What is happening? What processes are occurring?” These questions helped me stay focused on the actions and processes instead of using codes to name topics and themes.

Charmaz (2014) also suggested that researchers “code with words that reflect action” (p. 116), using gerunds whenever possible. “A gerund is a verb in its present participle form (root verb + ‘ing’) that acts as a noun in a sentence” (*What Is a Gerund?*, 2022). You create a gerund by adding “-ing” to a verb, turning the verb into the subject and focusing the phrase or sentence on the action happening. Whenever possible, I tried to create codes with action-focused gerunds. For example, when creating codes for how the students talked about complicity, I could have created the code “complicity,” which identifies the theme or topic I am interested in. Instead, I created codes like “accepting complicity,” “navigating guilt and complicity,” “wrestling with complicity,” which helped me focus on actions and processes the participants were engaged in.

I completed the first five interviews using this initial coding process after each interview, followed by memo writing, and comparing with previous interviews. Memo writing is a fundamental characteristic of grounded theory data analysis. Memos are extended notes that help the researcher develop and crystalize their ideas (Charmaz, 2014). They served as an analytic tool for me to explore connections in the data between codes, categories and evolving ideas (Charmaz, 2014, 2017a). I wrote memos after each interview and after each successive stage of coding. In this way, I used a writing-as-thinking approach that allowed my thoughts to take shape on the page without any pressure to be correct or need to use any specific content in my

final dissertation. Once my codes and ideas began to crystalize, I would write a memo on a particular category and how I was seeing it in the data. I wrote about how I saw the processes unfolding for the participants and how my theoretical categories might connect with one another. I used these memos to craft my analysis in Chapter 4.

Once I had the first five transcripts initially coded, I began to apply focused coding techniques to each transcript. Focused coding is the second round of coding in grounded theory. I went through each transcript again, looking at my initial codes and began to sort and synthesize them into broader theoretical and analytical categories. As Charmaz stated, “focused coding moves you out of immersion in data and brings you further to analysis” (2014, p. 145). I created focused codes that centered on the more frequent initial codes, as well as reflected actions that could inform and illuminate answers to my research questions. While focused codes can be quotes from the data, they are more conceptual and analytical than initial codes. For example, when Monica talked about working through her anxiety around Black students, my initial codes were “checking myself when talking to Black person,” “overthinking when talking with BIPOC,” “being terrified of saying the wrong thing,” and “working through anxiety.” I began to explore the concept of agency in my memos early on in my data analysis, noting how participants felt in charge of their own responses to situations. With this initial analysis in mind, the focused code that I created for this portion of the transcript was “Agency: working through anxiety.”

For each interview after the first five, I immediately completed the initial coding and memo writing, followed by focused coding and constant comparison analysis through additional memo writing. I folded in each subsequent interview into the bigger picture that was forming into my analysis. I compared focused codes between transcripts to look for overlap or

contradictions in categories and I began to construct conceptual categories to explain my evolving ideas. The goal was for the categories to become more theoretical in successive levels of analysis resulting in a more “abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4). In this way, the theory is grounded in the data. In the end, I created 966 codes, 206 of which were focused codes. From those focused codes, I collapsed those I could into other similar codes and created 11 broad categories to explain what was happening with the participants as they navigated their journey of development. Many of these broad categories and focused codes became titles for categories, sections, and subsections in my findings chapter.

Using Theoretical Frameworks as Sensitizing Concepts

Constructivist grounded theory asks the researcher to remain open-minded to what is in the data and not bring preconceptions about what the data will reveal (see discussion on doubt below). And yet, consistent with my theoretical framework and critical goals, as well as to adequately answer my research questions, my analysis was focused on if and how my participants were challenging whiteness or breaking out of typical White patterns that uphold White domination. Thus, I followed CGT recommendations for applying theoretical concepts in data analysis by treating them as sensitizing concepts.

During data analysis, CGT methods recommend that concepts from the researcher’s theoretical framework “remain in the background until they become relevant for immediate analytic problems” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 311). Charmaz encouraged researchers to treat theoretical framework ideas as sensitizing concepts. A sensitizing concept is an idea, theory, or principal that “sparks your thinking about a topic” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30). These concepts give researchers questions to explore about the topic of study and concepts to guide them during analysis, as needed. As Charmaz (2014) instructed,

Sensitizing concepts may guide but do not command inquiry, much less commandeer it (Charmaz, 2008e). Treat these concepts as points of departure for studying the empirical world while retaining the openness for exploring it. In short, sensitizing concepts can provide a place to *start* inquiry, not to *end* it. [italics in original] (p. 30-31)

Thus, sensitizing concepts are critical to name and use as a gentle guide, while remaining open to new ideas and concepts that might be revealed in the data. They play a key role in making sense of the data, especially in expanding analysis with a lens toward power and oppression. However, these concepts should not limit or preclude an openness to what the data is saying through inductive analysis.

I used concepts from CWS and White emotionality as sensitizing concepts in my data analysis. During the initial coding phase, I tightly concentrated my codes on naming what was happening, line-by-line in the data, without intentional influence from sensitizing concepts. As I proceeded with focused coding, I allowed these sensitizing concepts to inform what ideas I considered significant in the initial codes, as well as how I made meaning of them to create broader categories. For example, I created categories that were informed by CWS concepts such as white complicity and the good/bad binary as I saw them appearing in the data through multiple cycles of coding. Then, as I sought to make meaning of the categories, as well as remain focused on answering my research questions, I allowed those sensitizing concepts to keep my analysis centered on the critical goals of my study.

Doubt

In contrast to using sensitizing concepts to influence interpretation of data, CGT also encourages the researcher to embrace doubt as a way to remain grounded in the data. Along with any hunches, assumptions, or sensitizing concepts, I approached data analysis with doubt. This quote from Charmaz (2017b) explains how doubt is used in CGT:

Doubt involves having reservations about what is happening or happened, defining uncertainty, and interrogating ready explanations. Questions flow from our perspectives...Doubt can generate theory. We need to begin from a perspective of doubt, not only about empirical events but also about how we view, analyze, and represent them. (p. 34)

Charmaz (2017b) encouraged researchers to bring doubt to the process of analysis, to not be overly influenced by previous assumptions or research. The goal is to inductively explore the data for what is actually happening, not what we think is or should be happening. Thus, while I acknowledge that I am influenced by critical frameworks, it was crucial that I remained open-minded to new ideas that might challenge my assumptions. As Charmaz (2014) advised, “we do not force preconceived ideas and theories on our data” (p. 32). Literature and previous knowledge in the area of study can be useful (and is unavoidable), but CGT researchers must “remain as open to what we see and sense in our research” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 32) as possible. In employing doubt, I attempted to remain open to surprises in the data or ideas that might challenge my assumptions about how White students grow and wrestle with white hegemony. For example, as data analysis proceeded, I found my analysis focusing on the most positive aspects about the participants. I used doubt to call into question my own desires to see my participants in a positive light and allowed that doubt to challenge my interpretations to look more critically at my participants experiences. This use of doubt resulted in several helpful journal entries about my positionality as a White researcher and added more depth and quality to my analysis.

Methodological Self-Consciousness

A final aspect of data analysis in grounded theory that I employed was methodological self-consciousness. In approaching data, Charmaz and Belgrave (2019) advocated for the centrality of deep reflexivity for grounded theory researchers attempting to conduct research

from a constructivist paradigm. Constructivist researchers understand that data is co-constructed with the researcher as an integral factor; data is not neutral (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019).

Charmaz (2014) also stated, “We are not passive receptacles into which data are poured” (p. 27).

We are influenced by our own values and experiences as we collect and analyze data. Therefore,

CGT researchers must practice methodological self-consciousness, understanding that:

data are mediated by language and meaning. All data reflect the historical, material, social, and situational conditions of their production. We must acknowledge that language, culture, historical moment, perspective, and situation shape what we see or construct as data. (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019, p. 751)

By intentionally engaging in methodological self-consciousness, I explored and questioned the ways that I was affecting the research process, data collection, and data analysis.

Part of the process of methodological self-consciousness was explicitly exploring my White identity. I am aware, as a White person, that I could very well be engaging in any of the ideologies and actions that critical whiteness and emotionality research critiques. It was important, then, to practice reflexivity to explore how I might be engaging in acts of ignorance, innocence, complicity, or color-evasiveness. Naming and reflecting on how my identities shaped the entire research process was an important aspect of having my research align with my epistemology. As a White person studying whiteness, there is always the potential for me to miss the ways that my enculturation into white ideologies have shaped my worldview, thus reproducing white hegemony. It was crucial for me to have accountability processes in place, as I explain below. Additionally, as a qualitative researcher I know that my role is not set apart from what, who, and when I study. I am a co-constructor of knowledge and data with my participants (Charmaz, 2014). My experiences, identities, and values shaped how I functioned as an interpreter of data and co-constructor of knowledge (Charmaz, 2014, 2017a; Jones et al., 2014).

For this study, I relied on several strategies to enact my commitment to methodological self-consciousness specifically with regard to my dominant White identity. As I discuss below, I engaged in reflective journaling, as a separate practice from memo writing, to explore my own personal journey, struggles, and reflections during this project. I also engaged in accountability conversations with trusted mentors, as well as two of my cohort peers who are also working on their own whiteness. They read my work, asked important questions, and provided critical feedback. I expand more in the next section on what these strategies looked like and how they added to the trustworthiness of this study.

Trustworthiness Criteria

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is about determining whether a study is of high quality and whether the reader can have “confidence in the research findings” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 36). While there are numerous ways to ensure a qualitative study is trustworthy, I employed the following measures in this study: Rigorous reflexivity achieved through methodological self-consciousness (Charmaz, 2017b), researcher journaling, member checking, and peer reviewers.

Methodological Self-Consciousness and Researcher Journaling

As discussed above, employing rigorous reflexivity is a critical aspect of CGT. As Charmaz and Belgrave (2019) described:

Methodological self-consciousness involves a searching self-scrutiny beyond that which qualitative researchers commonly engage. It entails learning to recognize how our worldviews, language, meanings, and unearned privileges enter our research in tacit ways as well as examining ourselves *in* the research process. (p. 750)

Understanding that my identities and experiences shape how I engage in research, as well as what conclusions I draw, I committed to exploring how these factors were present in and affected the research process. Knowing that my own socialization in whiteness and privilege would

influence my role as a researcher, I kept a researcher journal where I explored my identities and biases, as well as my feelings and insecurities throughout the research process.

At first, my journal entries were short and focused on my excitement and positive energy as I began data collection. I reflected on my actions as an interviewer (i.e., how much to talk vs. listen). I also reflected on the realization of my power as a researcher. In an early journal entry, I wrote, “I have the power to give meaning and interpretation to their stories, their truths. This feels like a huge responsibility.” I knew this, intellectually, prior to beginning this study, but it hit home in a new way as I collected and analyzed data. I felt the responsibility of accurately representing my participants and of understanding and revealing how much they were trying to work through their whiteness and grow as an accomplice for racial justice. But I also felt the responsibility as a critical researcher to not simply accept their version at face value, but to complicate their stories through a critical lens. This created tension for me throughout data collection, analysis, and writing.

I truly enjoyed talking with my participants and developed an affinity for them. Because we shared a White identity and a commitment to racial justice, I felt like I understood what they were going through and I resonated with so many of their stories and feelings. I felt encouraged to see these young White students wrestling with their identities in ways that I would never have dreamed of as an undergraduate student. Many of the concepts they are wrestling with were things that I did not learn about until after college. I used journaling to explore and struggle with the tension I felt in seeing them so positively, while not wanting to miss critical aspects of whiteness and white hegemony. I found myself wondering if I was being too easy on them; if I was celebrating their progress as if that was good enough; if I doing a disservice to my critical goals. I journaled about these questions and explored my own emotional responses. I used these

types of journal entries to develop questions and discussion topics for my mentors and accountability partners. We discussed the tension of not being critical “enough” and what that might mean. I did more soul searching and journaling, and talked with my therapist about my fears of not being a “good enough” critical scholar. This process helped me identify my fears and explore how they might be affecting my data analysis.

This process of journaling through my doubts and fears was also informed by the theoretical constructs of CWS and White emotionality. I wondered if I was being too defensive. I wrestled with my own fragility and fears of being accused of not being a good enough accomplice. I explored my own emotional responses to my participants’ stories and looked for ways I was looking to restore my own racial equilibrium or avoid discomfort.

Member Checking and Peer Reviewers

After each interview was transcribed, I emailed it to the participant to check for accuracy and to invite them to add to or clarify anything in the transcript (see Appendix G). Four participants responded letting me know that their transcript accurately captured their thoughts. Two wrote back with minor corrections or clarifications for the transcripts. The other five did not reply.

I also worked with two peer reviewers from my cohort to discuss my emerging analysis, thoughts, and hunches. As mentioned above, these two peer reviewers are White scholars who are working through their own whiteness and are committed to racial justice. They were, therefore, well positioned to ask critical and challenging questions, as well as hold me accountable to my commitment to reflexivity. They asked helpful questions and helped me clarify my theoretical categories and ideas. This research project is better due to their input. At the end of this study, I am confident that, while not perfect, this study faithfully employed the

processes of rigorous reflectivity, journaling, member checking, and peer reviewers, resulting in a trustworthy research study.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations to this study include the small number of participants with a narrow spectrum of identities, as well as the potential impact of current events. As mentioned above, the participants were overwhelmingly queer and non-male. The study may have been richer or deeper if there had been experiences of White students who identify as straight and/or male included. But, given the time constraints of this project, I was not able to recruit a more diverse set of participants. As the findings of this study are limited to the participants and cannot be generalized to broader populations, it is impossible to tell how more diverse identities might have affected my findings. Additionally, this study took place at a time when our world is still dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational environments have been substantially impacted for two years, which is roughly half of the time that participants spend in college. There is no way of knowing how these conditions might have influenced participants' exposure to educational environments, programs, or diverse ideas, and thus impacted their growth.

One delimitation is that the study was focused on White students who self-identify in some way as racial justice allies or advocates. Even though some were recruited by mentors and others in my informant networks, each student signed-up for the study on their own. As I did not interview other people in the participants' lives, I have no way of knowing how much the participants' self-understanding aligns with their actions or the experiences of others, especially BIPOC people, in their lives.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the methodological framework that was used to explore my research questions about how White students grow as racial justice accomplices. Given my interest growth processes of students and how their experiences shape their understandings, I explained how critical constructivist epistemology, critical qualitative methodology, and grounded theory methods were well suited for my study. I also explained how I recruited participants, collected data, and approached data analysis within a constructivist grounded theory framework. I discussed the importance of practicing methodological self-consciousness through personal journaling and peer accountability in order to account for my own whiteness. Finally, I discussed how I achieved trustworthiness, as well as limitations and delimitations in my study. Chapter 4 discusses the findings and theoretical model that I developed through my data analysis.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter explores the theoretical model and conceptual categories that I developed through my analysis of interview transcripts. I first introduce the Development of Emerging White Accomplices model and explain how the model describes the process of growth and learning the participants are undergoing. After explaining the overview of the model broadly, I then unpack how each category appeared in the data in more depth and how I made sense of the participants' stories, including how sensitizing concepts from my theoretical framework influenced how I analyzed the data.

As a reminder, the research question and sub-questions that guided my analysis are:

1. How do White students grow in their commitment to racial justice in college?
 - a. What types of experiences in college contribute to developing a commitment to racial justice?
 - b. How do White students come to understand racism as a systemic reality and not merely individual bad actions or beliefs?
 - c. How do White students navigate their emotionality while developing a commitment to racial justice?

The Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model

Through analysis of transcript data, cycles of initial coding, focused coding, and memo writing, keeping in mind sensitizing concepts from my theoretical framework, I developed a theoretical model to describe how I see the participants process of growth happening. The core of the model is the first category, the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*. Then there are three other categories in the model: *Impactful Experiences*, *Coming to Terms with Myself*, and *Finding My*

Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice. These three categories interact with each other through the core category of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* and they each describe a process of growth and learning that the participants are experiencing. The first section of this chapter presents a brief synopsis of each category and how they interact in the model, as illustrated in Figure 1. Then, throughout the rest of this chapter, I discuss each of the categories and their subcategories more in-depth with examples provided from the data.



Figure 1

The Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model⁴

⁴ Graphic created by Dr. Pamela Graglia.

Category 1: The Emerging Accomplice Mindset

By mindset, I mean the outlook, attitude, disposition, and way of thinking I observed in each participant. The *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* (or *Mindset*) includes five components: Curiosity, Agency, Empathy, Acceptance of Discomfort, and Persistence in the Journey. This mindset helps the participants interpret information and experiences, and sustains them as they learn about systems of oppression. Curiosity drives their openness to explore new concepts and desire to understand new perspectives that challenge their pre-existing worldview. Agency drives their sense of responsibility and ability to make choices to act. Empathy provides motivation to engage as they see the suffering of others. Acceptance of Discomfort helps them remain engaged instead of withdrawing in defensiveness, guilt, or shame. Persistence in the Journey also keeps them engaged in spite of setbacks, confusion, and failures. These characteristics sustain the emerging accomplices' engagement as they navigate their whiteness, complicity, socialization, and emotional responses. Everything the participants learn and do is mediated by this mindset. Thus, it serves as the linchpin that connects each category in the model. It informs how they navigate their experiences and how they wrestle with their identity, as well as what actions they choose as they work to find their place in efforts for racial justice.

Category 2: Impactful Experiences

Each participant discussed varied experiences in college that influenced how they see the world, who they befriended, and how they think about themselves and their place in society. These experiences take place in the context of new environments, new learning, and new community. The types of experiences include influences of the campus environment, student body diversity, coursework, roommates, student organizations, mentors, role models, and more. New environments challenge previous assumptions and spotlight formerly invisible norms. New

learning happens as students build knowledge through coursework and co-curricular involvement. The participants' understanding of racism is complicated as they move from individual to systemic understandings and their commitment to racial justice is deepened. Through new community they are challenged and supported by friends and mentors. Every experience is processed through the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* and the qualities of the *Mindset* shape the responses of participants to those experiences. This is shown in the model by the dotted-line arrows going in and out of *Impactful Experiences* through the *Mindset*. For example, emotions such as guilt are outweighed by feelings of curiosity and empathy, which allows students to stay engaged in experiences that challenge their worldview and helps them make sense of new information they are learning. The *Mindset* is also what connects the category of *Impactful Experiences* to the other categories in the model, as also indicated by the arrows going through the *Mindset* to the other categories.

Category 3: Coming to Terms with Myself

In the *Coming to Terms with Myself* category, students wrestle with their White identity, positionality, socialization, complicity, privilege, and responsibility. The development of this category was the most influenced by the sensitizing concepts in my theoretical framework, as ideas such as complicity, privilege, color-evasiveness, and emotionality come up most frequently in this category. As the students begin to process what they are learning through their experiences and evolving understanding of racism, they start to grapple with their dominant positionality and the impact of their socialization. They confront their own complicity and work to integrate their White identity with their marginalized identities. They begin to challenge the color-evasive narratives they were raised with, particularly the good/bad binary. As they confront their place in the system, they feel a deepening sense of responsibility to be part of the solution.

This category is inward-focused. They are navigating emotions such as guilt, fear, anxiety, insecurity, and defensiveness. This inner work is influenced and sustained by the *Mindset* characteristics and also influences how students choose new experiences, as well as how they make sense of them, thus connecting the *Impactful Experiences* category to the *Coming to Terms with Myself* category through the center hub of the *Mindset*. This process is seen in the circular, dotted-line arrows between the categories. As they grapple with their White positionality and their growing sense of responsibility, the participants also are engaging in action.

Category 4: Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice

As students take action, they incorporate what they have learned through their experiences and their growing understanding of their whiteness. They choose experiences where they can practice standing up and speaking up in various ways and their commitment to racial justice continues to grow and is shaped by these new experiences. The participants are a work in progress. They struggle with motivations, missteps, failure, saviorism, and delayed learning. Their *Mindset* helps them navigate mistakes as they draw upon motivating emotions such as empathy, care, and anger at injustice, to keep them engaged. And their commitment to persistence will not allow them to stop trying and learning. Again, the arrows indicate that as the students take action and work to find their place as White accomplices, they are influenced by their *Mindset*, which filters these experiences, keeps them engaged, and allows these experiences to impact how they continue to do the inner work in *Coming to Terms with Myself*.

The Model as a Singular Process

The three developmental categories of *Impactful Experiences*, *Coming to Terms with Myself*, and *Finding My Place*, are continually filtered through the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* as participants seek to make meaning of new knowledge and new experiences. In this

way, all of the categories connect to each other and influence the others through the *Mindset*. It is important to note that the process of growth and learning described in the model is non-linear. It is interconnected, where each category impacts the others as students move back and forth between them. The process does not happen in any particular order. The participants move between having experiences, taking action, doing inner work, asking questions, feeling challenged, taking new actions, and moving back into inner work, then choosing new experiences. Thus, there is no beginning and no end. Each event serves to deepen the emerging accomplices' understanding and commitment to racial justice. Thus, the model must be taken as a whole, without emphasis on steps or linear development.

Additionally, as this study focuses on how college impacts the development of racial justice accomplices, the “beginning,” where I enter the conversation, starts with exploring the college experiences of participants, then moves clockwise to the other two categories. But these students do not arrive at their universities as empty vessels. They bring with them experiences, assumptions, identities, and knowledge that informs how they engage. So even my beginning here is not their beginning. It is simply the place I enter into the conversation. Thus, while I describe each category in a certain order here, the explication of the model in this way does not imply linear development. Aspects of these categories may happen simultaneously or in different orders for each student. They cycle through similar lessons time and again, each time experiencing less resistance and discomfort, thus, creating cycles of re-learning, unlearning, and deeper learning. This model shows how I see the process working for the participants in this study, bearing in mind that the journey is more complicated, messier, and more nuanced than any one model can make it appear. Taken together, the categories in the model show how these

emerging White accomplices are navigating their journey of growth, setbacks, and commitments to action.

In the following sections, I explain in more depth the process unfolding in each of the categories with examples from the data. I begin by exploring the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* as it is the core component that mediates and connects the others. I follow with sections on each of the three outer categories: *Impactful Experiences*, *Coming to Terms with Myself*, and *Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice*.

The Emerging Accomplice Mindset

All of the participants had a similar outlook which shaped their responses to new experiences, new knowledge, and uncomfortable emotions. Through analysis of participant transcripts, I identified five subcategories that make up the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*: Curiosity, Agency, Empathy, Acceptance of Discomfort, and Persistence in the Journey. These subcategories are characteristics and dispositions that are present in these emerging White accomplices. Figure 2 highlights the portion of the model that contains the *Mindset* category.

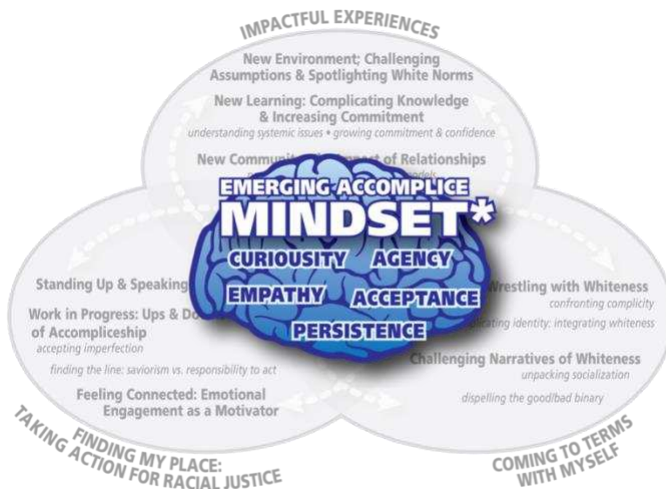


Figure 2

The Emerging Accomplice Mindset Category of the Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model

Each participant, in their own way, talked about having an open mind, a curiosity about new information, and a desire to understand that which was not immediately understandable to them. They also had a sense of agency over how they responded to new information and hard emotions; they saw that they had a choice in how to respond. Through their journey, participants also discussed accepting the reality of the challenge involved in exploring their White identity and were committed to persisting onward. They accepted it would be uncomfortable and yet they chose to lean into the discomfort. These choices, this agency, was often driven by empathy. Drawing on their own hardships and marginalized identities, each participant talked about care, compassion, and empathy for the pain of others. The *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* acts as a filter, or mediator, for how the White students engage in the world. It shapes how they make sense of their experiences and emotions. It informs how they see their place and role in society; it guides the decisions they make, the experiences they pursue, and how they navigate the emotions that come with those experiences. Below, I explore each of the five characteristics within the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* and illustrate them with examples from the data.

Curiosity

Every participant, when discussing how they were learning about systemic racism and their White positionality, named an intrinsic interest in understanding the issues more deeply. Many used the term “curious” specifically. Others discussed how they find it “interesting,” “fascinating,” and/or “invigorating” to learn these things, to untangle complex systems, and understand peoples’ experiences more fully. For example, Elliot shared, “I think I’ve always had kind of an innate curiosity about the world and just trying to understand the world. So that

definitely makes it easier to want to learn things in general.”⁵ Other participants spoke similarly. Monica got excited as she shared what she learned at a workshop on understanding unconscious bias. When she realized how she was socialized to fear Black people, she reflected “I just found that really fascinating...How are we not seeing that the system has touched us and made us re-see them as [less-than] and not even existing in that system?! It’s just nuts!” Looking at this with the sensitizing concepts of White emotionality, innocence, and complicity in mind (Cabrera, 2019; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Matias, 2016), I presume that other students, without a mindset of curiosity, would have likely responded defensively. But, here, the emerging accomplices’ curiosity mediates any defensiveness and drives them to stay engaged. Curiosity appeared in the data in two ways. Intellectual curiosity showed up as a deep desire to understand. And reflective curiosity was seen in ongoing, intentional reflection. I explore each of these aspects below.

Wanting to Understand: Intellectual Curiosity

Intellectual curiosity allows students to wrestle intellectually and academically with complex systems of oppression. For example, Sage’s mindset is particularly grounded in intellectual curiosity. They shared that they felt “invigorated by [social justice studies], in terms of learning the deeper structures of how we experience reality and how that varies different on bodies and locations.” Their coursework has exposed them to their privileged position and complicity in a system designed to oppress BIPOC people. Sage felt energized in response to that information and desired to learn more about it. They shared,

I took this class my freshman year...called “Beyond Walls and Cages: Critical Abolition,” and it was primarily focused on the abolition of the prison industrial complex. And I had never known any of the things that we learned about in that class. Even just in really having an understanding about how deeply race is a social construct and has become ingrained in the way that we separate people. Not only in our minds, but in our

⁵ For all quoted excerpts, I made small, unmarked, edits for readability. For example, I removed repeated words, as well as phrases such as: “like,” “you know,” “I mean,” “yeah,” “right?,” or “whatever.” When redacting parts of excerpts for length or analysis, I use ellipses to indicate that other content has been removed.

physical world and reality. And it just like fuckin' blew my mind. Like it absolutely blew my mind!

After that class, Sage changed their major to social justice studies so that they could continue to learn more. It was their desire to understand the system, as well as their place in the world, that fueled this change. They explained,

And wanting to really understand all of these different stigmas and experiences that I have with race as a White person, and how to work with those and move around them or through them or whatever language you want to use, *just being curious about, wanting to dive deeper* into how we separate people in our world... Obviously, people deserve life affirming institutions and systems that support their wellbeing. But never had I before realized how intensely that wasn't happening. And learning about different histories of colonization and the real historical process of constructing race at the same time as capitalism was coming into creation was just really fascinating. It just made the world make sense in a way I'd never experienced before.

As a White student who was raised and socialized as male (even though now questioning that identity), Sage could have withdrawn in defensiveness or denial. They could have avoided dissonance through white innocence or color-evasive tactics. But instead, Sage allowed their curiosity and desire to understand change their life direction. And Sage has allowed their new knowledge about oppression to help them make sense of the world in a new way.

Another example of how intellectual curiosity appeared in the data is from Monica's story. She shared her reaction when she learned about the concept of unconscious bias:

I think that it just makes me want to learn more... [The] unconscious bias that I've had since I was kid, that I don't realize that I have, but every time I learned that one exists, I just want to read a book, just educate myself on the way that the system is so messed up. So I can flood my brain [with knowledge] and get rid of this [bias].

When confronted with the reality of her own bias, Monica's response was a desire to learn more, to read more, and to educate herself more, so she could understand more fully. This type of curiosity was evident in many of the participants. They enroll in classes to learn more. They join book groups and attend workshops so they can understand complex issues more deeply.

Reflective Curiosity

As participants navigate issues of race, socialization, and whiteness, they understand the complexity of identities and experiences, as well as the complexity of intersecting systems of oppression more clearly. The sense of curiosity fueled a reflective approach to understanding these complex situations. When thinking about how, despite her intentions, she might be contributing to oppression, Olivia talked about “letting it ruminate and then going from there.” Sage discussed needing to continually “sit with” new information about their own complicity. Dylan shared that his fascination with race fueled his continual reflection on systems of oppression until he felt he understood them better:

So I learned it through, a lot of it was self-analysis. I just find the concept of race incredibly fascinating as a subject. And so we would talk about these larger systems of oppression in class and I would just kind of take it apart and try to figure out how all of these components play into all sorts of different systems of oppression.

It was the fascination and desire to understand more deeply that enabled Dylan to keep asking questions and unpacking not only broader systems of oppression, but his own complex positionality within those systems, even outside of his coursework. Dylan also talked about growing up in poverty and needing to work to integrate his white privilege with his self-concept as poor. He was able to do this because he spent time reflecting on how his different identities and experiences fit together in a complex world. I share more about Dylan’s reflections in the *Coming to Terms with Myself* category. Next, I outline characteristics of the Agency subcategory of the *Mindset*.

Agency

Another characteristic that helps White students engage productively in issues of privilege and complicity is agency. As I am using it here, agency is simply the sense of control one has over their life. It is the desire to take action and initiative due to the belief in one’s ability

to impact outcomes. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines this type of agency as “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power” (n.d.). It is the opposite of a mentality that perceives events as happening *to* you, where you have little or no ability to influence results. All the participants in this study, in some way, discussed their belief in their ability and choice to act in response to what they were learning about injustice and whiteness. And this focus on action helps them navigate the uncomfortable emotions along the way.

Olivia talked about feeling guilt and then moving from guilt to action. She shared,

I think part of the initial response is to kind of push [guilt] away and not think about it, and try to say, no, there’s not really room for that...But what I’m learning...is feeling those emotions and recognizing where it comes from really helps with navigating, especially the guilt. And just thinking about what I’m doing that could be harmful that could be contributing to any sort of oppression or just kind of letting that be, letting it ruminate and then kind of going from there like, okay, I felt it and now what’s something helpful [to do]?

Olivia is learning that it is ok to acknowledge the emotions that come with learning about her role in systems of oppression. She is also learning that it is equally, if not more, important to move on from those feelings and do “something helpful.” The feelings are not the end, they are merely part of the process.

Instead of staying in guilt, defensiveness, or anxiety, the participants see a choice to act at every step. Elliot articulated this mindset well:

I do totally benefit from being White in a system that actively discriminates against People of Color. I remember sitting with that and I was like, damn, that sucks. I may not mean to, but I’m definitely participating in a system that is benefiting me for no reason...And I remember sitting with that, thinking about that a lot and then thinking about the guilt that I had felt about my ancestors benefiting from slavery. And I just, I remember sitting and I was like, okay, well, this kind of sucks a lot. But I remember thinking, too, that, it’s at the end of the day, *I feel like I have a choice*. I can either sit here and feel bad about myself and feel guilty or I can actually try to do something that felt a little bit more productive and because I felt like if I just didn’t do anything, I was just going to continue to benefit from a system that I had no business benefiting from.

Elliot sees a choice between giving into guilt and staying still or moving forward and doing something to help. Not acting is a choice. Recognizing the ability to choose is a key ingredient to how agency appears in the data. It is this agency that helps students like Elliot push through the uncomfortable emotions that come up on the White accomplice development journey. Elliot went on later in the interview to unpack this perspective:

If I'm refusing to learn more stuff, because it makes me uncomfortable then I am, you know, *everything is a choice*. If I choose not to learn more, then I'm choosing to be complicit in a system that is actively harming people.

Elliot's sense of agency provides her with a valuable perspective: Everything is a choice. Choosing "not to learn more" is a choice to be complicit. She sees the power of her choices and the ability to make choices that will contribute to either harm or justice.

Throughout the data, this theme of choice rises up. Everything is a choice. The participants desire to use their agency to be accomplices for racial justice. The participants all have a sense of agency that empowers them to navigate the emerging accomplice journey in a way that avoids feelings of helplessness or powerlessness. It empowers them to take accomplice actions. This aspect of agency, using it for anti-racist purposes, is a critical element of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*. Another critical element of the *Mindset* highlights the role of empathy. I unpack this characteristic next.

Empathy

The third of five *Mindset* characteristics is empathy. Every participant transcript included focused codes for empathy as a critical component to their engagement in racial justice. They are able to see things from the perspective of others. They put themselves in the shoes of BIPOC people and think about how they might feel. Even though it might be hard and uncomfortable, they lean into the emotions. They are driven by empathy. It helps them feel connected to the

issue because they are upset by the suffering caused by racism. They see the pain that white hegemony has caused for others, especially those in their lives they care about. They also use their own experiences of hardship and marginalization to connect personally to the issue, to understand how awful it must feel. These aspects of empathy create a strong motivation for the White students interviewed. I explore how empathy appeared in the data by showing how it serves as a motivating force and how the participants draw on their past experiences and identities to sustain empathy.

The Motivating Power of Empathy

The data displayed empathy in many ways. Some participants named it directly; some simply talked about how much they cared or how upset and impacted they felt by injustice. But all have the ability to see things from the perspective of another person and choose to lean into the emotions created from understanding that perspective of pain and suffering. For example, Sage shared that “it sucks to see people suffer and sucks to know people are suffering and hurting. And learning about all of these different things at times, I’ve just felt in absolute despair.” And Dylan said, “you can’t understand somebody else’s experience, but I can empathize with some of the experiences that other people have.” I heard similar sentiments in all the interviews. Emerging accomplices allow the suffering of others to impact them, even when it is hard. They look for ways to empathize and allow those feelings to motivate them.

Alyssa displayed empathetic perspectives throughout her interview and specifically named empathy as a driving factor for her, as well as something she has learned to value more in college. She unpacked her empathy mindset directly when asked about what keeps her engaged despite the difficulties. She said,

I began looking into racial justice or any other social issue is because I want to be empathetic towards other people...It’s something I don’t see often, unfortunately, in our

current climate. And I just think empathy is, it's one of the few ways to relate to other people. We, so this past solidarity week, our theme was radical empathy. And we defined it as actively striving to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. And we framed it as a way you can only really participate in social justice if you feel empathy for other people because that's the only way you'll be able to actively help others and make the world a better place.

A driving factor in Alyssa's engagement with racial justice issues is her commitment to understanding where other people are coming from and to see things from their perspective. And she intentionally draws on the value of empathy in doing so.

Finn's eye-opening realization came when she put herself in the shoes of a Black student she was having conflict with:

This is what I put her, this is what she went through. This was what she felt and I kind of tried to look at it from her point of view before I thought about how it would affect me because I knew that I would just feel bad about myself and stuff like that... That's what I think the point of view shift was for me was believing. Believing that she felt this way, rather than assuming that she was overreacting... and it sounds so silly now to think, obviously I should have believed her when she said that she felt a certain way... One way or another, she was hurting. Her mental health was suffering... And once I realized if I go through this and actually believe the way she feels about these things, and don't think about it as overexaggerating in anyway, then, oh shit. That's awful. She went through something awful. And I was the one who put her through that.

It was putting herself in another's shoes that helped bring about a shift in perspective for Finn. It was listening and believing the experiences of others. She started to approach the situation with empathy, exploring what it must feel like on the other side of the conflict, which helped her be a better listener instead of being defensive. She centered the other person's experience and not her own. This approach eventually led to Finn understanding the harm she caused, taking accountability for it, apologizing, and committing to do better in the future. When stuck in defensiveness, empathy put her back on the path toward emerging accompliceship.

Choosing empathy, seeing the suffering of others and caring, letting those emotions drive you, that is the mindset of an emerging White accomplice. Many emerging White accomplices

also draw on past struggles and marginalized identities they hold to bolster their sense of empathy.

Drawing on Past Experiences and Identities

One way that emerging accomplices strengthen their empathy and emotional connection to issues of racial justice is by drawing on their own experiences of hardship and discrimination. While not equating their experiences with racism, the participants are able to draw on their own experiences and emotions to more acutely imagine the impact of racism on BIPOC people. They are able to make a personal connection.

Dylan is an example of drawing on past hardship to fuel commitment to fighting oppression. Raised in poverty, with a host of family issues, Dylan has experienced his fair share of suffering. He shared,

But I think just growing up I saw so much struggle, not only in the life that I had, but also the friends that I had. Because again, they were mostly, they identify as minority populations. And so not only were they struggling with the same poverty that I was, but also the implications of not having white skin. They're dealing with racism, they're dealing with different cultural norms and all sorts of other stuff...I'll say it over and over again, the world is such a shitty place that we have to put some amount of goodness back into it. And if the friends that I had in high school and the social workers that I had in my life and the few teachers that came along and helped me changed the entire course of my life. And so if all of them can do that, I can do that for the next person and kind of give back to those people who allowed me to be in this position that I find myself in now.

Remembering how hard it was to be so poor, and remembering the social workers, teachers, and friends who helped him survive, combined with his deepening understanding of his positionality and whiteness, drives his empathy for others who are suffering. He is able to see how even though he suffered, others suffer in different, more complex ways due to race. And he wants to use his position as White to change that for others; to pay it forward.

Additionally, using their own marginalized identities, participants are able to build empathy and understanding. For example, Georgie uses his experiences of marginalization to

connect with racism. As a trans* man, Georgie has experienced discrimination, both personally and institutionally. In discussing this identity, he shared,

I mean, to some extent, I think it's helpful because I understand the experience of being marginalized. And, obviously, I will never understand what it feels like to experience racism, but I understand the experience of being isolated and being discriminated against and feeling shitty about yourself because of certain identities that you hold. And so I think it's helped me build empathy and be able to understand. But again, I would never say, oh, I understand what it feels like to experience racism. I don't.

Even though he recognizes that trans* oppression is not the same as racial oppression, Georgie understands the pain of experiencing discrimination. He is able to draw parallels in how that experience might feel for BIPOC folks. He also understands that he is White and, therefore, cannot fully understand the experience of racism. But he uses his empathy to reflect on how awful it might feel, which motivates him to act.

On the whole, emerging White accomplices use a mindset of empathy in many ways to help them engage and stay engaged in efforts of racial justice. They do not shy away from emotional engagement. In fact, they lean into their emotions for motivation and deeper understanding. Empathy drives their curiosity to know more, to learn more, because they care. They allow themselves to care about others in a way they hope others might care about them. This sense of care, connection, and understanding allows them to engage emotionally even if it is uncomfortable. Their care and connection outweigh the discomfort, which leads to the next critical aspect of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*, acceptance of discomfort.

Acceptance of Discomfort

Accepting the inevitability of difficult, uncomfortable emotions without resistance or denial is a crucial component of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*. Instead of avoiding discomfort as a primary strategy, these emerging accomplices accept the reality of discomfort and look for ways to engage positively with it. They see discomfort as an opportunity to grow, to

learn more. They put their own discomfort into perspective by comparing it with the suffering of racism. They allow their empathy, agency, and curiosity to override any desire to flee discomfort. They choose instead to actively lean into discomfort, knowing that it signals a path of growth in an area that may need attention. In this section, I discuss both how the participants work to accept difficult emotions and how they lean into discomfort as a strategy for growth.

Acceptance of Difficult Emotions

Every participant was asked to discuss how they approach any challenges in being a White person committed to racial justice. They discussed, among other things, the reality of difficult emotions. A common theme was the fact that they all accepted the reality of discomfort on the journey and did not let it stand in their way.

For example, Dylan talked about discomfort and how he accepts it will be part of his journey. Recognizing the complexity of identities and systems of oppression, he sees discomfort as an essential part of the process:

You know my journey through whiteness has been a lot of being uncomfortable and trying to work through it and then being uncomfortable and trying to apply it and then being uncomfortable and talking about it. And that's not an easy thing to do. For anybody, regardless of identity, it's not easy...I just think it's really hard to work through that space. And acknowledging that and really considering that is probably one of the few things we need to do before we can take another step forward as White people participating in racial justice.

Dylan sees the complexity of identity, power, and oppression, and concludes that discomfort is inevitable in such complicated spaces. Acknowledging that working through the discomfort is not only inevitable, but something White people need to do before we can move forward in pursuing racial justice is striking. Working through the discomfort, then, becomes a crucial piece in developing as a White accomplice.

Another useful example of accepting hard emotions and not letting them deter them is Sage. Sage did not enter college with a pre-existing commitment to racial justice. But after taking some classes on issues of inequity and social justice, their world was turned upside down. When asked why they keep going even though there is a lot of discomfort, they said,

I don't know why I keep going. Because it's never easy. I've had a total identity crisis this fall because my first class was called "Intro to Ethnic Studies" and it was a deep dive into race. And then my second class was called "Men and Masculinities," deep dive into gender, specifically around men. And I'm like, it's all fucking made up! Like who am I? It's all fucking made up! So it's a confusing damn thing, you know? It's a really confusing thing to grapple with. And I have moments where I'm like, oh, am I just doing this because that little White saviorist voice wants to be put on a pedestal and be like, oh well, Sage was a good White person, even though all of his ancestors weren't? Maybe. That's probably a piece of it. There's probably some reflection to be done there. I don't know. But...it's not fun in the way that outdoor ed was fun, like learning about rock climbing, you know? I'll be sitting in class and I'm like, oh my god, my identity, my entire identity is socialized. Just wrestling with some big shit.

Sage is having what they describe as a "total identity crisis." Anyone who has experienced an identity crisis knows that sort of season can be very difficult and disorienting. Sage is questioning their gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship with masculinity, relationship with whiteness, and their lifetime of socialization. They accept that this wrestling with "big shit" is an important part of the process. It is not something to be avoided or distanced from. Sage is allowing it to be hard and messy. This type of approach was consistent across participants. They know that there will be hard emotions and challenges that speak to the core of their identity. They accept it as part of the process and part of their commitment to racial justice. They even lean into it.

Leaning Into Discomfort

As they accept difficult emotions and uncomfortable situations, these emerging White accomplices choose to lean into discomfort as a strategy not only for coping with the discomfort, but also for growing as an accomplice. Saoirse learned about the practice of leaning into

discomfort from a workshop on confronting whiteness that she attended at her university. She reflected,

I think the biggest thing that I took away from the workshop was leaning into discomfort and that these conversations can be really difficult and uncomfortable. And leaving space and having grace for that set of emotions is not something that I've never really talked about before...it felt uncomfortable almost. I was like, why would I be uncomfortable? So many people have been uncomfortable for so many years. What do I have to be uncomfortable for? That kind of narrative. But then realizing that it can be super hard and then not always comfortable. I think letting myself acknowledge that was big. Because that felt almost kind of a no-no to allow that kind of emotion in because you should not be feeling that way. If you are, then that's a problem. But moving away from the kind of finger pointing and just being like it's all really messy and it's okay to sift through it.

Through the workshop, Saoirse was given permission to acknowledge the difficulty and the discomfort involved in confronting whiteness and that made all the difference for her to begin “sifting” through what that means for her. Before learning to lean into the discomfort, she felt guilty for being uncomfortable, because so many other people suffer so much more under racist structures. But after realizing the benefit of allowing the discomfort and looking for what it can teach you, she felt released to explore her whiteness in a new way. She now gives herself space to feel what she needs to feel and, more importantly, ask herself what those feelings might mean for her and what she should do about it.

Georgie's perspective is also a good example of how this theme played out in the data.

He shared,

To ethically have relationships with and love the People of Color in my life, which is a lot of people, I have to lean into this discomfort in the same way that my cis-friends have to lean into the discomfort of hearing about trans* people in order to be close to me. I think it's my responsibility as a good friend/person.

As discussed above, Georgie does not equate racial oppression with trans* oppression, but he draws on his own experiences of oppression to cultivate empathy for others who experience oppression. He also practices the golden rule: treat others as you want them to treat you. As a

trans* man, he wants his friends to engage in issues critical to his identity and experience. So, in the same vein, he is willing to accept the potential discomfort of engaging in racial issues because he understands how it feels on the other side of a different oppression with gender. As he continues to do his own internal work around his whiteness (as he hopes others will do around their cis-ness), he knows it will be uncomfortable for him. But for Georgie, leaning into discomfort is an act of love.

The acceptance of discomfort characteristic of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* is a critical factor in the participants' process of growth. They do not fight the feelings, they do not resist or flee from discomfort. They know and, more importantly, appreciate the presence of the discomfort as it signals areas for growth and reflection. They then choose to lean into the discomfort as a critical part of their journey toward unraveling their own whiteness and complicity in whiteness. As they accept and work through discomfort, the participants draw on the fifth and final characteristic of the *Mindset* to sustain their commitment: persistence. I explore what this looks like in the following section.

Persistence in the Journey

Emerging White accomplices recognize a crucial thing about accompliceship—it is a journey of ups and downs, curves and U-turns, stops and starts. And the journey requires a determination to keep going. These participants understand this fact and are finding their way toward a deeper commitment each time they face a challenge or learn something new. Alyssa describes this perspective well: “Obviously, there’s going to be obstacles and obviously there’s going to be challenges. And if you just stop halfway then what was the point of doing all of the other things? So I guess I just don’t see a reason to stop. I have too many reasons to not stop.” She is determined to keep going. Persistence in the journey shows up in two ways, when

participants refuse to give up when things get difficult, and as they realize that they still have a lot of work to do that requires a long-term commitment.

Elliot shared an example of refusing to give up. She talked about the motivational struggle of engaging in protests on campus when the campus administration chooses to ignore them:

I guess the thing that makes it the most difficult to engage in that kind of activism, it's just...feelings of defeat. Like what you're doing doesn't matter...The hardest thing is just getting people to listen and then whenever they don't listen, finding the courage and the hope to keep trying...And it's so easy for [administrators] to just say "No, I don't want to do that"...because all they have to do is sit in their offices and let it happen. And that's really disheartening and really discouraging. Feeling like you're so close quite literally to someone who could make change happen and they're just not listening or looking the other way. That sucks. And especially boosting morale, it's really easy to go to protests on campus and then nothing happens afterwards. And then getting people to be like okay, let's go try again. That's really hard, too, but I think there are always people that are willing to keep going and you just have to *actively practice hope*. It was really hard, but I feel like it's a skill. Sometimes you just have to hope for no other reason...So, I guess that would be the hardest, the biggest challenge was to protesting on campus was getting people to believe, keep going.

For Elliot, and the other emerging accomplices, they see the road ahead and they chose to practice hope. They choose to keep going despite setbacks and failures. Like Alyssa, Elliot is not going to stop. They know that the journey is long, that change will not come quickly, or even at all, yet they embrace the mindset of determination and want to keep going and growing no matter what.

Similarly, Dylan spoke about the ongoing cycle of inner-work, engaging in change-making, seeing your privilege, doing more inner-work, and so on. When asked about challenges related to seeing his role in systems of whiteness, he said:

I think it was hard at first...there was a lot of guilt. I never want to hurt, upset, oppress, anyone, you know what I mean? And yet, I'm participating in these systems that are doing just that. And so there's initially a lot of heavy white guilt...Then the next challenging thing is that once you get past this white guilt, you're hit with this white saviorism and then you have to go through the white guilt again, where you're really

trying to navigate this incredibly complicated space of being a White person participating in racial justice, while also trying to make sure that you're not speaking for anyone else... And so knowing all of this larger societal context and knowing all of the shitty things that White people have done to literally everyone else, you're really faced with this complexity of like, what do I do now? And that's the challenge that you have to face with these facts is as a White person with this privilege, with this power, with this placement in society, what do I do? The more important question isn't what do I do, but how do I do it right. How do I do it in the most just way? And that's, I think, the biggest challenge for me and it still is that it never goes away and never, it just changes, you just have to constantly be thinking about it and considering how to do it better.

Dylan sees the difficult journey of navigating his whiteness, privilege, and power, coupled with his desire to make change and do good. He knows navigating his place in racial justice is complex and he is committed to remaining engaged to work through the complexity.

In addition to refusing to give up when things get difficult, the participants accept that their commitment to racial justice is a long-term project. They realize that they are not done yet, they have not "arrived" at accompliceship. They know that there is much wrestling, navigating, exploring, and unpacking left to do. And they display a humility and openness to new learning, to correction, and to ongoing growth. Realizing that unpacking her whiteness will be a lifelong journey, Elliot shared "I'm still trying to learn more stuff. I think I'll always be learning more stuff. I don't think that'll ever really stop." One of Finn's realizations after reflecting on her learning regarding the conflict she caused was, "I realized now that I still have so much work to do." She shared that prior to this incident she thought of herself as a strong White ally, but after it, she hesitates to label herself in that way and just prefers to say that she is continually working on herself. Finn knows she is at the beginning of her journey.

Each participant displayed an understanding of the long-term nature of their commitment to racial justice. They have embraced the journey and recognize they are still growing and learning. When they get discouraged, they remind themselves that they do not need to have it all figured out at this point in their life; they realize they are closer to the beginning of their journey

than the end. In the midst of the discomfort and challenges, these emerging accomplices show tenacity and a willingness to ask hard questions of themselves as they commit to the long-term journey.

Bringing it Together: The Emerging White Accomplice Mindset

The five elements of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*—Curiosity, Agency, Empathy, Acceptance of Discomfort, and Persistence in the Journey—work to influence how these White students see and interact with the world around them. The *Mindset* acts like a filter for decisions, emotions, analysis, understanding, actions, and more. The *Mindset* characteristics mediate each experience, shaping how the participant integrates that new experience into their life. So when they learn hard truths (i.e., complicity, privilege, the suffering of others), the difficulty is interpreted through the *Mindset* and influences how the White student responds. It sustains them on their journey.

The *Mindset* is not a perfection filter. These emerging accomplices still have holes in their understanding, feelings of defensiveness and guilt, and act from mixed motivations. But the characteristics in the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* inform how they move forward on their journey and continue to grow and learn. The mindset allows for new cycles of processing and learning to begin after each new experience. Also, the *Mindset* informs future decisions on what experiences to pursue. The curiosity and acceptance of discomfort propel the participants to choose experiences that will help deepen their understanding, even if it might make them uncomfortable. The empathy, agency, and persistence drive them to engage in action when seeing of the pain or oppression of another. These experiences, in return, impact and strengthen the mindset. Empathy deepens. Agency and confidence are strengthened. The commitment to persistence and acceptance of discomfort is renewed. Curiosity is rewarded with understanding

and a growing feeling that the world makes sense in new ways. This interconnectedness is shown in the model by the arrows leading in and out of the *Mindset* from the other categories.

Building from the centrality of the *Mindset*, the following sections of this chapter explore the experiences, emotions, reflections, and actions that I identified in my analysis of the data in the other three main categories, *Impactful Experiences*, *Coming to Terms with Myself*, and *Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice*. Each of these theoretical categories inform and are informed by the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*. In this way, the *Mindset* is the hub, touching and touched by everything else in the White students' college experience. Keeping this in mind, I start with college experiences that impact growth as an emerging accomplice. After that, I turn to *Coming to Terms with Myself*, followed by *Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice*.

Impactful Experiences

There are a number of experiences that showed up in the data among participants that positively influenced and challenged the participants. Each of these experiences provided opportunities for the participants to challenge pre-existing assumptions and norms, learn new information, complicate existing knowledge, understand systemic impacts, and build new relationships with supportive community. It is these new experiences in a new environment that lead to development in both commitment, confidence, and understanding of issues of racism. After analyzing transcripts, I created three subcategories that reveal how various experiences in college help the participants expand and complicate their knowledge of racism and racist structures. It is new environments, new learning, as well as connection to a new community, that work together to influence the participants in positive ways. Figure 3 shows the portion of the model that highlights this category.

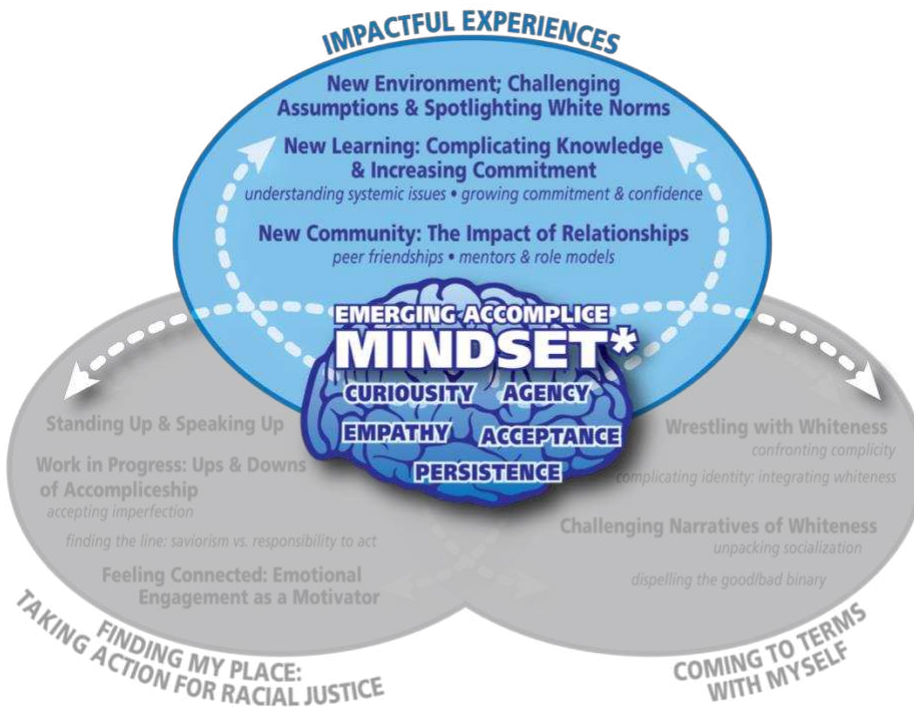


Figure 3

Impactful Experiences Category of the Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model

New Environments: Challenging Assumptions and Spotighting White Norms

The new environment of a college campus was an important factor for the participants. As compared to their K-12 experiences, campuses with both greater racial diversity and lesser racial diversity proved meaningful. White students who chose to attend a university that was more racially diverse than their home community shared the positive impact the new environment made on their growth by expanding their assumptions and challenging comfort zones. Moreover, the students who grew up in communities with greater racial diversity and now attend a campus with less diversity noted overwhelming whiteness as a contributing factor in deepening their understanding of their own identity.

Campuses with greater racial diversity provided opportunities for participants to connect across difference on campus. Leila shared a reflection about the impact of campus demographics in facilitating their growth:

One thing I really like about college is that you meet a lot of people that you maybe wouldn't have otherwise or wouldn't have expected to be friends with. I'm friends with a bunch of people from the suburbs, as well. I was not expecting that. It was very different. Very different. But it's just like a meeting place that a lot of different identities and it makes you work towards an understanding with each other and communicating more with each other...But I think if people look for those experiences and want to meet people with different backgrounds and lives and identities, you can find it. And those friendships, I think, can shape you a lot.

Even though Leila recognizes their school is a PWI (Predominantly White Institution) and “not as diverse as [it] should be,” they also recognize that the campus community and environment provides impactful opportunities for growth through building relationships across different identities and experiences. Leila has built relationships with others who grew up differently, with different norms and lifestyles, which has broadened her understanding of her own experience and identity within whiteness. I share more about Leila's journey in the *Coming to Terms with Myself* section.

Olivia also spoke about both the positive and challenging dynamics of attending a more diverse university:

I'm in a more racially diverse community than I was before. I'm in a place where I see people that don't identify the same as me all the time. And so I might be in a group of people where I can't guarantee that they'll have the same opinion or the same background as me. And so that can definitely make it more difficult...to engage in conversations around racism.

When asked how that made it more difficult, she shared that she is sometimes “nervous about saying the wrong thing.” However, that process is getting easier for her the more she engages in such conversations. In this way, the greater diversity she is being exposed to has become an environment where she is challenging her comfort zone and growing because of it.

An additional factor that I identified in the data was the impact of less diverse campuses on participants. Several participants grew up in diverse communities and then enrolled at PWIs. They spoke of the culture shock of whiteness and how that impacted their reflections on their own identity. Georgie's reflection is a perfect example:

I did not really think about race much growing up mostly because...I was not really surrounded by other White people. My high school was minority White. Most of my friends growing up were Asian, honestly. But it was pretty diverse. I lived in Taiwan [for a year] and I was...often the only White person in the spaces I found myself in...I thought about race a lot, but not whiteness, I guess. And the same thing growing up. My friends would mostly just, I'd be the honorary Asian all the time...And so it took coming to [College] and being surrounded by so many White people in [State] for the first time for me to be like, oh shit, I am White and that means a lot.

It took being surrounded by whiteness, coupled with personal reflection on his identity, to emphasize his own positionality as White. The White environment is challenging Georgie's previous assumptions about the salience of race in his own identity.

Saoirse similarly shared about the "culture shock" of attending a White campus after experiencing greater diversity in high school:

[In] high school...I was the only White kid on the [basketball] team...I was the only White person consistently. I was going there six times a week and we had conversations about race and what it's like to be Black in [City]. And you know, I sat there and I listened and I learned a lot through that experience...And then coming here, I had kind of like a culture shock...It's really White here. And it was really strange. I was just like damn, it's different here. And I think that was just kind of like a paradigm switch. Okay, so I'm in this [high school] community, I'm having these conversations, I'm making connections and then I come here and it was just, okay, it was a good reminder that this is [State] and this is how everything kind of works here.

Attending a PWI in a White community, Saoirse was able to realize the broader impact of the norms of whiteness. She learned a lot in high school about the impact of racism through relationships with BIPOC peers. But once she was in a sea of whiteness, she had a paradigm shift that revealed the dominance of whiteness and she was able to see it in a new way.

The new campus environments challenged assumptions and understandings about identity and highlighted existing White norms for the participants in new ways which caused them to experience growth in their understanding of their own White positionality. The characteristics of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* helped the participants view any newness or challenge as an opportunity. In particular, their curiosity and ability to accept discomfort were key. Their curiosity frames new people and new ideas as opportunities to explore new things. The ability to stay with any discomfort caused by a different environment allowed them to be challenged and shaped by the new environment that their campuses provided.

New Learning: Complicating Knowledge & Increasing Commitment

The second subcategory of *Impactful Experiences* explores how the participants obtain new information, leading to a deeper understanding of the nuances of historical oppression, which complicates their understanding of racism and their place in the world. With this new information and deeper understanding, the participants expressed a greater commitment to racial justice and increased confidence in engaging in conversations with others. The participants were exposed to new information in several ways, but coursework was primary. University-level coursework exposed participants to new ideas and information, shaping their worldview in new ways and was seen to have the greatest impact on participants' understanding of systemic injustice, moving ideas past the individual to the social world. In addition to academic learning, participants were also impacted by their involvement in co-curricular opportunities. As with coursework, these experiences served to deepen, challenge, and grow these White students' commitment to and understanding of race-related issues. The participants were involved in campus programs for first-generation students, they attended workshops on whiteness, and they

worked in centers focused on social justice issues. In this section, I explain how these themes of complicating knowledge and growing in commitment and confidence appeared in the data.

Complicating Knowledge: Understanding Systemic Issues

The first theme that highlights the impact of new learning emphasizes how participants learn about systemic oppression in critical ways. Participants shared how their experiences in college helped them understand the broader interlocking systems of oppression in ways that go beyond individual racial prejudice. Dylan shared how his classes have given him “new lenses” to see the world:

Sociology is probably my favorite thing on this entire planet. And it’s helped me understand all of these massive sets of inequities within systems that I don’t think I would have been able to if I hadn’t have taken certain classes...It’s continuing to provide new lenses to view the world and, in the end, because I’m a White male, so I have had the lens of privilege my whole life until I started to learn how to not do that necessarily.

While Dylan entered college with a basic understanding of oppression and a commitment to racial justice, his coursework has provided him with “new lenses” to understand how ingrained inequity is into our systems of power. He went on to share,

But the big formative class, that was really important in understanding how all of this plays out in life was the “Sociology of Race and Racism.” Understanding how ingrained it is within everything that we do. After every lesson, I realized more and more that there’s not a single interaction that we have in the social world that is not influenced by some sort of racial context.

Dylan’s classes have enabled him to understand the depth of impact that race and racism have on the U.S. social world and society. Interpreted with the sensitizing concept of color-evasiveness and white hegemony, Dylan is learning to see beyond individual racist actions to the impact of hegemonic whiteness. White supremacy within systems is no longer invisible to him and racism is no longer about good people and bad people. It is about systems and socialization.

Another example of how coursework contributes to systemic understanding is from Alyssa. Alyssa talked about how her classes have illuminated concepts like white normativity and how being White is viewed systemically:

Something that I've thought about a lot and talked about a lot in some of my courses is this idea that a lot of White people see themselves as not having race, not having a racial identity, per se, which allows them to move about the world in a way that we don't think about our race every single day of our lives...And so that's something I've had to come to terms with myself. And it's something that I've had to realize, yes, I am White and I identify as White and that's not a horrible thing. I'm not an awful person for being White, obviously. But it's important to realize that yes, I do have a race. And I'm not the default. And I can't go about the world not being aware of my race and how I might impact other people.

While she did not use the CWS terminology of white normativity, Alyssa's courses have exposed her to the problem of societal norms being aligned with whiteness. Additionally, like Dylan, she is beginning to see that the good/bad binary is an unhelpful concept when racism is built into systems. Being White does not make her an "awful person" individually, but it does have societal and contextual significance; it matters and she needs to reckon with that.

Outside of coursework, the participants also took advantage of opportunities on campus to further explore issues of racial justice in ways that shifted their focus away from the personal to the systemic nature of racism. For example, Monica spoke at length about the impact of a workshop on unconscious bias she attended:

The seminar really changed my life actually...It just made me realize how much every person has an unconscious bias and we need to start talking about it. It doesn't make you a bad person. It's unconscious. You're not consciously being racist towards somebody. But we as human beings, from a biological perspective are meant to put things into categories and that's how we survived when we were cavemen. It's turned into though, with the way that society is set up, these ideas of who people are based on what they look like and our brain subconsciously will put people into categories and associate adjectives with them without even realizing it. It's insane how much unconscious bias exists...and it's just, it's in us.

Monica shared that she realized through the workshop that she had unconscious bias toward Black people because, one, she did not grow up with many Black people in her life and, two, society has wired her brain in certain ways that create what she described as “white anxiety.” She has accepted this about herself and is working on noticing it and resisting it.

Growing Commitment and Confidence

One of the positive byproducts of this increased knowledge was greater commitment and confidence. Elliot shared how the new knowledge she gained from sociology coursework has impacted her:

I think it has opened my eyes to other forms of injustice that maybe wasn't super cognizant about or just maybe even not as educated on. Before, I was aware of the fact that there were racial inequities in the healthcare system and that People of Color are treated differently in healthcare, but then I took an intro sociology class and actually got some statistics about it. And I was like wow, it just blew my mind because I was able to gain more information about stuff which, I guess it did kind of strengthen my commitment to racial justice. But it wasn't like oh, now I know the facts, now I believe sort of thing. But it did, I guess it gave me more information to kind of engage in hopefully constructive debate with other people who maybe don't, for example, believe that People of Color are treated differently in the healthcare system.

The knowledge gained from that course gave Elliot information that not only strengthened her overall commitment to racial justice, but also provided her with more confidence to engage in advocacy conversations.

As a co-curricular example, Olivia joined a student-run book club with other engineering students centered on social justice issues. She shared how helpful it was for her to get more comfortable talking about important issues with students in this group: “But when it comes to conversations about racism, I think I've come to a place where I'm a lot more secure in my beliefs, and a lot more secure and telling people about my commitment to racial justice and that that is a core part of who I am and I'm not gonna be quiet about it.” Having a group of students

to practice talking about issues with has given Olivia the confidence she needs to speak up in other settings about racial justice.

Overall, being exposed to new concepts through courses and co-curricular programs allowed each of these emerging accomplices to take in new information and intellectually explore in ways that complicated their understanding of the world. For those who already had a commitment to justice, their understanding was deepened, reinforcing their commitment. For those who had limited knowledge and little commitment, they were exposed to realities that were unknown to them before, piercing any sense of ignorance they had and driving a commitment to learn more. Their mindset of curiosity and empathy compelled them to enroll in courses and sign-up for workshops and other opportunities to learn more. Their sense of agency and persistence kept them engaged as they worked to integrate “mind-blowing” information into their worldview. This type of critical learning was a benefit to every participant, especially in understanding systemic racism on a broad level. It also caused them to wrestle with their privilege, socialization and complicity in systems in new ways. I explore how this wrestling played out when I discuss the category of *Coming to Terms with Myself*. For now, I turn to the last category of experiences that proved impactful for participants, relationships.

New Community: The Impact of Relationships

Another consistent theme in the data was the importance of relationships. Emerging White accomplices are not navigating their journeys alone. They have White friends who are traveling alongside them. They have BIPOC friends who are pushing them forward. They have role models who are a few steps ahead of them. And they have mentors who are further ahead, calling them down the path. Navigating the journey in community with others creates a space of safety, as well as a challenge; a space where White students can be vulnerable and receive

critical feedback; a space to be productively called out and called in. In this section, I outline how the impact of these trusting relationships appeared in the participants' stories, in both peer and mentor relationships.

Growing Through Peer Friendships

All of the participants talked about their friends and fellow students as being key players in their growth journeys. Friends provided conversation, guidance, empathy, challenge, and corrective feedback. Friendships with like-minded peers helped participants know they were not alone. Olivia shared, "talking to people who also are in the same position as me...and learning what other White people were doing for racial justice really opened my eyes to, okay, I'm not by myself in the guilt that I feel." Similarly, Alyssa shared: "I think a big part of it was also having friends that were learning alongside me...that I could have conversations with...realizing that obviously other people were having the same emotions and the same thoughts." Feeling connected to peers on a similar journey reinforced and validated the feelings and experiences Alyssa and Olivia were having. In these ways, supportive community played a vital role in the development of these emerging White accomplices.

Another example is how Laura's first-year Black roommate connected her to other Black students on campus and she ended up frequently attending meetings and events with the Black Student Union (BSU). When her Black friends initially invited her to attend, she said "Oh, I'm not Black," but they responded, "It doesn't matter," and she was welcome to attend. Her junior year, Laura was roommates with the Vice President of the BSU and she attended most of the BSU meetings. She reported learning a lot about how Black students felt on campus, especially in the tumultuous time after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. She pointed to the

strong, authentic friendships she built with Black students in the BSU as driving her commitment to racial justice.

Leila's story contains several examples of close BIPOC friendships that spurred her growth. Leila recounted a story about their best friend, a Black woman, calling them out on comments about how they feel different from other White people:

In my summer program, I definitely was deep in the "I'm not like other White people" thing...then when my best friend came on campus, I was like, "yeah, I didn't really get along with the White passing students"...I said it off hand and she got really upset with me because she was like, "Why do you think you can say that? And I don't know, you can't."...And she was, "I have to call you out right now because this is not acceptable. And you are White, and you can't say these things about people."...I think I got very used to talking like that and doing a lot of shitting on White people even though I am White. So she was just like, "No, no, no this has to stop."...I think that conversation was a good one. And also I feel like, of anybody in the world who would call me out, I know that she loves me. And she's not saying I'm an awful, terrible person, but she's saying it because she loves me. So the person I would take the best from would be her.

Leila's comment identifying the security they feel in the love of their friend is illuminating.

Because Leila trusts the love of their friend, they were able to better accept critical feedback, even if it was hard to hear. Juxtaposed with "shitting on White people," Leila's story shows how authentic, trusting friendships with BIPOC peers can provide a powerful avenue for challenge and growth.

Finn also received challenging, corrective feedback from someone she knew cared about her, her partner, while she was working through the conflict with the Black student:

And I think it was really, really helpful for me to have my partner be there at the meeting with the mediators...He didn't say anything the whole meeting, he just sat there quietly. That was the agreement so that he could help me unpack it later, because I wanted someone who was on my side but also wanted the best for me as a person to grow and become a better person.

Finn wanted someone she trusted had her best interest at heart to help challenge her. That trust helped lower her defenses so that the challenge could be effective. Finn went on to explain that

when she responded defensively to something said in the meeting, her partner later challenged her, saying “That’s kind of fucked up.” They continued to discuss and reflect together about the situation. She shared, “He was the person that I came to that conclusion with eventually that I’ve been treating her badly. He was really helpful. And I appreciated having someone else to help me through that I think. Someone who wasn’t just there to I guess enable me in it.” Hearing corrective feedback from someone who Finn knew cared about her and wanted the best for her growth was critical.

The impactful nature of these relationships lies in the fact that they are safe and trusting enough relationships that Finn, and others, are able to receive correction and challenge and allow it to change them. The trust bypasses any defensive mechanisms because they are authentic relationships with shared experiences and histories. These trusting, peer relationships support participants as they navigate their own emotions, questions, and confusion. And they help them feel less alone, which facilitates continued engagement on their racial justice accomplice journey.

Learning From Mentors and Role Models

The other type of significant relationships the participants had were those with older adults on campus who they trust. Whether they were faculty or staff, these mentors provided essential support, challenge, and feedback to the emerging White accomplices. During the stressful conflict, Finn sought out support and mentorship from the Dean of Students, a Black woman, who asked critical questions and challenged her to reflect on her own White identity. Alyssa pointed to the mentorship of a White women’s studies professor, as well as a Black staff member, her boss and the Director at the Diversity and Inclusion Office, as being influential for her growth. Sage’s White faculty advisor has become a mentor to them over the past two years.

They shared, “I was grappling with a lot of big questions. And so she’s someone that I really trust in terms of being able to really candidly speak to and...working through a lot of racial stigmas I didn’t even know I had.” Sage names the importance of the trust they have with their advisor. Because they look up to her and trust her, they can be honest about their questions and struggles and they are open to her wisdom and advice.

Saoirse has an important mentor relationship with her boss, the director of the Women and Gender Center. She shared,

She’s been a really fantastic mentor, but she’s White. And has done just a lot of [her own] work. And so it’s really helpful for me to have someone who’s White, sometimes it can be super helpful. Because...I don’t want to ask for the labor of someone who’s a Person of Color to be, you’re being racist or you’re not being racist. So having White labor is a little bit different in this scenario. So that’s been really helpful. I really value their feedback.

Saoirse pointed to the importance of having a role model who is White, who has done a lot of their own inner work, and who can challenge and unpack whiteness with her. She shared a story of one way her mentor has challenged her: “Sophomore year, my boss had us fill out this survey [that asked], what are identities that you think about a lot? And I didn’t put my race. And my boss was like, ‘So think about that.’ [I was] like, yeah, you’re right, it’s not something that I have to think about.” A year later, Saoirse is still reflecting on that feedback and unpacking what it means for her to be able to opt out of racial reflection when her BIPOC peers do not have that luxury. Saoirse is also working on integrating that feedback and now tries to be more intentional about thinking about her racial identity and place in whiteness.

Each of the participants spoke of having mentors and friends who both care about them and want to challenge them to be the best version of themselves. These relationships serve to provide critical feedback, comforting conversations, and safe-enough places to ask questions and be vulnerable. These relationships also serve to bolster the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*

characteristics. By connecting with peers on the journey, the participants are encouraged to persist because they know they are not alone. They see others persisting and accepting challenges and discomfort and know it can be done. They become more empathetic and stay engaged because they love the people they are in relationship with. They see others with curiosity learning new things and they have mentors that will stimulate their curiosity with thought-provoking feedback. The common theme is that authentic relationships with like-minded friends and mentors create trust and opens the door for impactful moments of growth, reflection and learning.

Summary: Impactful Experiences

In the category of *Impactful Experiences*, the data show that new environments, new learning, and new community all have significant impact on White participants' growth as emerging racial justice accomplices. The new environments provide experiences that challenge previously held assumptions and norms. Both exposure to more racial diversity, as well as an environment with less diversity proved impactful in highlighting cultures of whiteness and the White identity of the participants in new ways. Academic engagement in coursework, as well as learning through co-curricular activities, complicated participants' understanding of racism and showed to be a key factor in increasing students' commitment and confidence, as well as deepening their understanding of racism on a systemic level. And finally, authentic relationships within supportive, yet challenging, friendships and mentorships proved to be a critical component that keeps students feeling connected with the work of racial justice so they can continue their journey of growth. Curiosity and acceptance of discomfort are the two *Mindset* characteristics that prove the most helpful in this category. They keep the students open to new, possibly uncomfortable information and personal challenges. In the following section, I move on

to the next theoretical category in the Development of Emerging White Accomplices model, *Coming to Terms with Myself*.

Coming to Terms with Myself

In this category, the participants wrestle with their own whiteness and complicity. The students are doing a lot of inner work and reflection. They are confronting their complicity within systems of whiteness and owning their internal biases. They are also integrating their White identity with their other identities in critical ways. The participants are working out what it means to have been socialized in whiteness their whole lives. Growing up, these emerging White accomplices were taught that to be racist is one of the worst types of human you could be. And yet, the more they learn about the system and their place in it, the more they feel implicated in oppression, which causes them to grapple with their own sense of self and their place in the world. They are accepting their own biases and realizing that they can be good people and still participate in racism; admitting their own racial bias does not condemn them to the category of an immoral, horrible person. Instead, they see accepting their whiteness as placing them in a position of responsibility. They are asking “Now what?” Now that they know more, they begin to feel accountable for their knowledge. And they have a choice. They can wallow in their fear of appearing racist, run away in defensiveness or guilt, or they can engage and do something about it. Because this wrestling with their place in the system is mediated by their mindset of agency, these emerging accomplices choose the latter. They accept their place in the system while embracing their responsibility to act to change the system. Through it all, they are working on coming to terms with themselves, their socialization, their biases, and their responsibility to act. Figure 4 highlights the portion of the model that illustrates this category.



Figure 4

Coming to Terms with Myself Category of the Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model

An excerpt that outlines this category well is when Monica shared about her inner journey:

I'm also *coming to terms with myself* because I've had this whole idea my whole life of, "I'm not racist, I'm not racist," but I have racist tendencies. There were parts of my brain that are wired in certain ways just from being from a White family and being surrounded by White people and consuming the media that I consume. Of course, there are going to be things that I've seen that have been racist that I haven't recognized have been racist, or things that will come out or I'll put people in these categories that are incredibly racist. So why am I doing that? That doesn't necessarily mean I'm being consciously racist, but it does mean that I am being racist without realizing it. So it's being able to say, hey, I'm a good person, but I also need to work on being unconsciously racist and recognize where it's coming from. And I think a lot of people have trouble with unconscious bias because they don't want to admit that they're racist. Or they don't want to admit or say that they're a bad person or that they're even having these thoughts. But the truth is that everybody has them...It definitely sucks...especially because I'm somebody who considers themselves an ally...and I do not think of myself as a racist person, but it is *coming to terms with* everything that I've been taught without realizing it...How do I change this, so that I am actively doing something to stop it and actively fighting it...So I've been able to consume a lot more knowledge and understand a lot more by looking

inward and saying all of these unconscious behaviors are not okay. So now let's go and talk to somebody about it and have conversations about it or expose myself to ways in which the system is incredibly corrupt. How do we start fighting the system after learning how we're a part of the problem?

This excerpt from Monica's interview outlines how the *Coming to Terms with Myself* process works. It involves realizing complicity in racist structures and bias within yourself, having emotional reactions, grappling with your socialization, and working through it to move on to taking action, all while wrestling with your ongoing intentions and actions. I unpack how this grappling occurs in two primary ways. Participants discussed how they were wrestling with their own whiteness and how they were challenging narratives of whiteness they were raised with.

Wrestling with Whiteness

A significant part of the participants' coming to terms with themselves happens by facing and accepting their own biases and privileges in a world of hegemonic whiteness. They confront their complicity, white privilege/immunity, and internal bias. They also work to integrate their White identity with their other salient identities. As they accept their own whiteness they frequently navigate the guilt and insecurities that develop. The following two subsections discuss how the participants navigate issues of complicity and complicate their own identities by accepting their whiteness.

Confronting Complicity

For these participants, confronting complicity is a logical response to understanding the systemic nature of racism. When asked how their understanding of racism has changed since coming to college, Leila shared: "I definitely think I'm more aware of the institutional aspects of it...But I also think that [the] biggest thing is realizing that I'm also complicit in it and it's not like I'm exempt just because my friends might say that I am." Being exposed to the institutional nature of racism allowed Leila to realize that racism is not merely individual acts of prejudice,

but is built into structures and systems in a way that implicates them as they participate in those structures and systems. Even as their friends affirm their individual behavior and values, Leila is wrestling with how they are complicit in upholding structures of whiteness.

Dylan and Elliot both similarly wrestle with their role in a system that privileges whiteness. Dylan struggles with what to do with his role in benefiting from that system: “I am a White man in society and regardless of if I’m doing all of this work surrounding racial justice and trying to be a better person, I’m still benefiting from the system.” Elliot shared similar thoughts: “I do totally benefit from being White in a system that actively discriminates against People of Color. I remember sitting with that and I was like, damn, that sucks. I may not mean to, but I’m definitely participating in a system that is benefiting me for no reason.” Both Dylan and Elliot see their privilege and talked about the guilt this caused them to feel. Dylan shared, “...facing those facts...there’s initially a lot of heavy White guilt.” Similarly, Elliot shared, “I remember sitting with that, thinking about that a lot and then thinking about the guilt that I had felt...And I was like, Okay, well, this kind of sucks a lot.” Part of the inner struggle Dylan and Elliot are having is feeling powerless to do anything about the unjust system they feel forced to navigate, which causes guilt.

Another aspect of confronting complicity was how the participants recognize their own internal biases and how they impact others. As she reflected on the harm that she caused another student, Finn shared, “It was really hard to *come to terms with* [my bias]. It still kind of is.” Similar to Monica, Finn considered herself an ally and, yet, is now grappling with how her bias showed up when she was navigating inter-racial conflict. Another example of seeing their own bias is how Laura described her feelings of seeing a Black man at night:

But I think we all have it in with us,...just the biases we all have. Whenever I’m in my car, and [College Town] is more Black than [Hometown], and if I’m in my car personally

at night and I see a Black guy, I kind of have this inherent like, “oh, [no],” but then I told myself, that’s your racism inside you.

Like Finn and Monica, Laura has accepted that she has internalized biases and she is no longer afraid to name them in herself. She realizes that she has been socialized to have a particular reaction and she is working on naming and then resisting it.

These emerging accomplices are in the midst of reflecting on themselves and their place in the work of anti-racism. The participants displayed a growing self-awareness and deepening reflection on identity and positionality. They realize they can be both good, aspiring allies, and complicit, biased people. This is the grappling and inner-wrestling work that happens when White students work to come to terms with themselves. The next aspect in this subsection explores how the participants are adding complexity and nuance to their inner sense of identity.

Complicating Identity: Integrating Whiteness

In this second theme under “Wrestling with Whiteness,” the participants are learning to accept their White identity and integrate it with their other identities to form a more nuanced sense of self. They are working to embrace the complicated nature of identity and accept that their whiteness plays a bigger role for them than they thought prior to college. All of the participants carry multiple identities, and at least one marginalized identity, in addition to their whiteness. They are working to create a sense of self that includes their whiteness, as well as their religious, ethnic, gender, sexual, and socioeconomic identities.

For example, Olivia struggled, at first, to accept her whiteness due to the salience of her Jewish identity and her experiences in college have helped her come to accept her White identity. She explained,

Something that was pushed at us a lot [growing up] was knowing the history of Jewish oppression. And knowing the history, knowing everything about the Holocaust, and then just identifying with that...Then coming into college, knowing that so many people and

me all came here and identify the same way, I identify as White, coming from so many different backgrounds. I can't just identify with the Judaism as much as I did, as my ethnic identity... But just kind of coming to realize this broader White identity that I keep hearing about, that's me.

Being part of a campus community that was more White than she was used to helped Olivia realize her connection with whiteness. The more White, non-Jewish people she was around, the more she was able to see the common ground of whiteness they all shared. She still values her Jewish identity, but she has also worked to integrate her whiteness and understand how that impacts her identity.

Some participants grappled with integrating their White identity with their gender and sexuality, as well as their experiences being low-income. For example, Georgie is working on integrating his White identity with his trans*, queer, and poor identities:

I'm trans* and queer. And particularly being trans* is a marginalized identity and trans* people deal with a lot of shit...it's hard to, at the beginning, understand that your marginalized identity can coexist with your whiteness and you can still benefit from the privilege of being White and also be marginalized because you're trans* or poor...I can discuss my whiteness and the privilege I get from that and it doesn't take away from me being marginalized as a trans* and poor person. And at the same time, I can talk about being trans* or poor with the asterisk of 'and also I'm White,' so I get all these benefits.

It was hard at first, but Georgie has accepted the fact that his whiteness can coexist with his trans*-ness. Georgie went on to share how he has made sense of his socioeconomic status and his whiteness:

Class, it's like a whole 'nother can of worms that it's harder to, it's so much more connected to race, I think. Because, yes, I grew up poor, but also I'm no longer struggling so much...I rent a room in a house. I have food. I don't go hungry in the ways that I used to, I used to be homeless at times. And a lot of that is due to my white privilege...And people are kinder to me and I get the benefits of older, middle aged White people taking pity on me, giving me jobs, letting me rent a room in a house. I feel very lucky that my experience of poverty and homelessness has really not been as same as someone who is not White and I acknowledge that. And also, at the same time, acknowledged that it fucking sucks to be poor, no matter what race you are.

Through his deepening understanding of systems of oppression and the complexity of identity, as well as the *Mindset* of accepting discomfort, Georgie has been able to complicate his White identity in important ways. He can see how he is both marginalized and privileged. Additionally, as quoted previously in the *Mindset* category, Georgie also uses his experiences of oppression to build empathy that deepens his commitment to racial justice.

Some of the participants who identify as cis-women discussed how their gender identity impacted their journey of understanding their whiteness. For example, Saoirse is learning to integrate her feminist urge to speak up as a woman with her growing awareness of how much space she is taking up as a White woman. She shared:

[Entering college], I had the kind of White feminist, well, I'm a woman, so I can do whatever the hell I want to do. I'm gonna keep talking...But figuring out, well, there are other spaces where that's not always needed...In a class here, I'm gonna talk...Political Science classes have a lot of dudes. So those spaces then I don't usually hold back, especially since I feel like I'm usually the only voice who's talking about specific things...But in spaces like at work when it's, I'm very conscious in our staff, when we're having group conversations, and we're talking about issues of race. And I noticed the three White women are talking. And we're talking about race, and there's seven other Women of Color who haven't said anything yet. So those kinds of spaces, I've become very conscious [of how much space I take up].

Saoirse is learning how to navigate her desire to resist patriarchal culture by speaking up, on one hand, and resist whiteness culture by staying silent, on the other hand. She is learning that context and the identities of those in the room matter.

The participants are learning how complex systems of oppression create complex dynamics of identity. They are accepting their own whiteness while also navigating their own experiences of oppression. They are learning how their white privilege mitigates, to varying degrees, the negative impacts of other marginalized identities. As they accept their dominant White identity in new ways, they are grappling with what that means for their complicity in systems of oppression. And they are navigating the guilt and other emotions that come with that

realization. This is where the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* is a helpful mediator—persistence in the journey, accepting the discomfort, using agency to act, leaning into the motivating factors of empathy and curiosity—all of these things work together to keep these emerging accomplices moving forward as they wrestle with these big concepts and systems. The second subcategory of *Coming to Terms with Myself* explores how the participants are wrestling with their socialization into ideologies of whiteness.

Challenging Narratives of Whiteness

As they accept their complicity, privilege, bias, and whiteness, participants try to resist and change. They then see how deeply they have been socialized into ideologies of whiteness. Not only are they accepting their White identity, they are struggling with how difficult it is to disentangle their hearts and minds from the hegemonic whiteness that they have been steeped in for their entire lives. They are beginning to understand the disconnect between the narratives of color-evasive whiteness they have been raised with and the realities of the world. I explore this dynamic in this subsection of how participants are working to come to terms with themselves. It includes realizing the impact of their socialization and confronting color-evasive ideologies.

Unpacking Socialization

As participants deepen their understanding of systems of oppression, whiteness, and complex identities, they come face-to-face with the insidious, intractable nature of White socialization. They are starting to see anew how pervasive racism is and how extensive its reach in our society and in their lives. Sage shared, “I was having all these interpersonal confusions that were then explained by learning, oh, from the moment you’re born, you’re socialized into recognizing people differently dependent on their race and making different class associations dependent on skin color.” Realizing the pervasive impact of socialization was a part of why Sage

struggled so much with feeling inherently harmful in their whiteness. They are coming to terms with the fact that their entire lived experience has programmed them to make assumptions about people based on skin color. Saoirse similarly shared how she is trying to unpack the depth of her socialization into whiteness and shared that it was painful to realize: “There’s still so much stuff that I’ve been socialized to feel and think. That’s super painful...I can work as hard as I want to dismantle those things, but it’s what I’ve been fed since I was an infant.” Saoirse is trying to reject the narratives of hegemonic whiteness she was raised with and is realizing what a difficult task that is. So much of it is ingrained into her way of thinking and seeing the world.

All participants, in one way or another, are challenging the narratives they were brought up with. They are confronting the fact that they cannot just turn off these messages; they are more ingrained than they realized. As Elliot shared, she is now “accepting that there are things, and there are thoughts and things that I’ve been taught, things that I need to unlearn.” This unlearning is a process, just as learning it was, and the emerging accomplices know it will not be easy to disentangle themselves from their socialization.

Dispelling the Good/Bad Binary

One of the most significant narratives of whiteness participants are challenging is the color-evasive ideology of the good/bad binary (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Confronting their own bias and socialization while striving to develop as an accomplice challenges the participants self-image and their sense of their own moral goodness. They have been taught their entire lives that racists are the immoral people in the history books that do bad things with bad intentions. Every participant discussed in some way how they thought about themselves as a decent person and how accepting their complicity and bias challenged those ideas because of their socialization into color-evasive racist ideology. Dispelling the good/bad myth is a critical factor in the

development of these emerging accomplices. It helps them move past guilt and individual moral indictments that often come with the narrative that teaches only bad people are racist and good people cannot be racist. Because of their *Mindset* of agency and acceptance of discomfort, participants accepted the guilt and other emotions, but chose to focus on embracing their responsibility to bring change instead of wallowing in the guilt. Focusing on their responsibility helped them channel their guilt in a way that felt productive to them.

Finn's narrative illustrates how participants confront the good/bad myth. When confronted with the harm she had done, Finn shared, "I kind of freaked out because I was like, am I secretly an awful person and a horrible racist?" Finn went to the Dean of Students for guidance and the dean's advice helped her to think about herself as more than just a good or bad person, helping Finn see past this binary understanding of racism. Finn reflected on how embracing the good/bad binary had been a big part of her initial defensiveness in the conflict with the Black student:

Going to a liberal college and growing up on Tumblr and with all my friends who are all progressive, it's that whole thought of, I don't call people slurs and I treat people the same and I think there needs to be racial justice and stuff like that...And I think I felt a bit threatened in that security of, I'm a good person and I don't hurt people and I don't let my biases affect me, which we all know is not true. And I think part of that identity of mine was just threatened there of like, but I'm a good person. I can't do bad things. And if I can, if I apologize, then that's fine.

Finn has learned the nuances of how racism and White socialization play out in a racist system. She learned that focusing on her identity as a good person only distracts from the issue and causes further harm. At the end of the interview, I asked how she thought about herself now, after so much learning and reflection. She said,

I'm surprised how okay I am with it. Not in terms of it's okay that I did that, but in terms of I don't think I'm an awful person now that I realized that I actually did hurt someone. I am realizing I think that it's based on the biases that I've had and the lack of learning that I've had to do up until now...I don't think I'm a bad person. I think I'm someone who

made a couple of mistakes and who let my biases in my lack of understanding of how to interact with people, you know, that hurt someone and I hurt someone. And I'm taking responsibility for that and moving forward rather than ruminating on it because there's like the "White tears don't fix things" or something like that, where, am I just going to sit there and feel bad about myself? Or am I going to make some change?...I'm going to change and I'm going to make myself a better person.

Finn's experience of navigating the conflict and the harm she caused profoundly shifted how she viewed herself and where she chose to focus her energy. In the end, she realized that focusing on her own individual morality would not fix anything and would not help her or the ideals that she professed to support. Instead, she now accepts her biases and is choosing to work on herself to unpack her biases. She sees that simply feeling "bad about myself" is not a productive or helpful choice.

While the other participants did not have a single, profound incident like Finn did, they expressed similar ideas around learning to challenge the good/bad binary ideology they were taught. Monica shared how learning about unconscious bias relieved her of a lot of the guilt and pressure to defend her moral character:

I think it's actually talking about [unconscious bias] and saying that you're not a bad person. You just have these things that you have to work through...I just feel like we have to start saying that hey, it is unconscious and it's not your fault. But let's find a way to...reverse what society has taught us our entire lives and like reprogram these ideas of what ideas we have with people.

When asked why it was important to address the issue of whether she is a bad person, she explained,

I think it's important because white anxiety is definitely something that I had, I still have a little bit of it, but it's just, I think a lot of White people have and I just found some relief. And talking about that sort of thing and talking about unconscious bias and talking about like, okay, I had this thought...and I didn't mean to have this thought, so why did I have it and let's work through that. And I think it is your fault if you are starting to recognize that you're having those thoughts unconsciously and you're doing nothing to change it. That's where I think that there's a divide.

Monica “found some relief” in realizing that her anxiety around Black people was a result of socialized, unconscious bias and not because of an inherent moral failure. With her new knowledge, she has now embraced the responsibility to “work through that” and challenge her socialization. To Monica, if you are aware of your bias and not doing anything to challenge it, that is when it becomes a moral problem. Realizing that her worldview and socialization has programmed her to view people in a certain way removed the individual guilt and replaced it with responsibility.

The participants are finding ways to navigate the guilt and defensiveness that comes with understanding how their White identity was formed in normative systems of whiteness. They are learning to resist the narratives they have been taught that only bad people can be racist and move toward a more nuanced understanding of themselves within the broader system of white hegemony. By refusing to get stuck in unhelpful narratives, the participants are able to focus on their responsibility to make change and challenge the system. This processing and learning takes place through the lens of the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*. Their curiosity, openness to learning, and acceptance of discomfort allows them to navigate the disorientation that comes with realizing the color-evasive ideology they hold is wrong and the way they have been taught the world works is, in fact, a lie. Their agency, empathy, and persistence keep them focused on how they can act in response to their learning instead of getting stuck in emotions.

Summary: Coming to Terms with Myself

In this section, I discussed how the participants wrestle with themselves and their place in systems of whiteness. Through their experiences in college, they have been exposed to new ways of seeing the world and deeper ways of understanding how oppression works. They accept their own White identity, see their privilege, and wrestle with their complicity to varying degrees.

They are complicating their identities by integrating their White and marginalized identities. They are beginning to understand the depth and power of their socialization into whiteness and they are struggling with how to resist and challenge their inherent beliefs. They are also challenging the color-evasive ideologies they were raised with. They are learning they can both be implicated in oppression, believe racist ideas, AND be committed to racial justice and work on being a better person. The two ideas are not mutually exclusive. Because they now understand more deeply how they have been socialized by hegemonic whiteness, they also now accept that they do not need to focus on individual moral guilt in the same way as before. They are now more able to move past the guilt and embrace their responsibility to work for change in an unjust system.

The emerging *White Accomplice Mindset* plays a critical role in the process the participants are experiencing. Their curiosity, agency, empathy, acceptance of discomfort, and persistence in the journey are all key factors that help them navigate the new worldview they are beginning to embrace. Due to curiosity, they want to understand things that at first seem contrary to the narratives they have been raised with; they allow new ideas to ruminate through reflection until they start to make more sense. With empathy, they care about the suffering of others and wrestle with their place in that system of suffering, as well as ways to decrease harm and increase justice. And, even though it is uncomfortable, they persist as they continue to learn and work through the messiness and discomfort of it all.

Each of these subcategories within *Coming to Terms with Myself* are not linear. They are simultaneous, they are cyclical, they are repetitive. And while the learning can be repetitive, their understanding deepens each time. Their resistance, guilt, and defensiveness are lowered and easier to work through each time. As Elliot shared near the end of her interview, “I don’t think I

have much of a reaction anymore...I feel like I've gone through a lot of the different emotions already." Elliot, and the other participants, are getting to a place where it is less about their emotions and more about their responsibility to act on the knowledge they now have. This leads them to action. I unpack how various accomplice actions appeared in the data in the next section on *Finding My Place*.

Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice

The final category in the development of emerging accomplices focuses on how the participants navigate taking concrete action in support of racial justice. In this section, I explore how these emerging accomplices work to accept the journey of growth that comes with engaging in accomplice actions, including the mistakes, fears, and insecurity. There are three subsections in this category. By "Standing Up and Speaking Up," the participants seek to challenge individual whiteness, in themselves and other White people. They show up for protests and engage in direct action alongside others. They use their leadership roles on campus to advocate for change and to speak up about racial issues on campus. In "Work in Progress: The Ups and Downs of Accompliceship," the participants share their failures and struggles. They miss opportunities to speak up. They are learning to accept imperfection. Empowered by both their empathy and agency, they desire to act, yet they struggle with the line between accompliceship and savior-ism and do not always know what they should do. Finally, in "Feeling Connected: Emotional Engagement as a Motivator," the emerging accomplices draw on their emotions to remain engaged, leveraging passion, anger, and care for others to keep them going. In all these things, the participants are practicing their emerging accompliceship and working to find their place in the work of racial justice. Figure 5 highlights the portion of the model that illustrates this category.



Figure 5

Finding My Place Category of the Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model

Standing Up and Speaking Up

As the participants work to find their place as White people committed to racial justice, they step up to take concrete action in line with their values. They are looking for ways to disrupt whiteness and racism both individually and communally. They are working to educate their White friends and family and they are speaking up in their communities to push for systemic change more publicly. Standing up and speaking up happens in two primary ways, challenging whiteness individually in fellow White people and challenging whiteness in systems and practices.

Some participants discussed how they center their actions as White accomplices on challenging whiteness in others, as well as themselves. Olivia shared, “Now, I would include internal work as activism. I would include work among White peers and among my friends and

family as activism. And ... [it] definitely [includes] the internal work and the researching, the journaling, ... processing my feelings.” Olivia realizes that much of her engagement at this point has been on understanding herself, her socialization, and her feelings. It has also involved sharing that learning with her White friends and family.

Similarly, Leila shared, “I do feel like that’s some of the best allyship I can do is in White spaces, hold people accountable there, too. Because it shouldn’t be on the people who it affects to keep people in check all the time, that’s exhausting.” Leila realizes that a helpful way to contribute is to challenge other White people with the knowledge they have learned. Leila realizes that BIPOC people should not have to be the ones putting in the emotional and intellectual labor to educate White people. Saoirse agreed, saying, “I don’t want to ask for the labor of someone who’s a Person of Color to be like, you’re being racist or you’re not being racist. So having White labor is a little bit different.” Saoirse feels that White people can, and should, do more labor to educate and confront other White people. Putting that labor on BIPOC people is not fair. The participants are striving to be thoughtful about their role in racial justice work by taking more responsibility for challenging and educating fellow White people. They see this as a productive way to engage in concrete action as a White person, while alleviating the burden from BIPOC activists.

Participants also are taking action to influence broader change on more systemic levels, both on campus and in their communities. Many of them spoke about attending marches, protests, and other direct actions. Leila, Laura, Alyssa, Georgie, and Elliot all talked about attending protest events, either on or off campus. In addition, some participants are using their positions and involvement on campus to advocate for change. For example, Laura was elected to student government her junior year and used her platform to speak out after a series of anti-Asian

hate crimes in the spring of 2021. She recalled, “One night I wrote up this [email] and I call out Donald Trump and all this stuff and then we just sent it out. We got in so much trouble because there was one student that was like, ‘I don’t feel this represents the entire student body because I voted for Trump.’” Laura shared this story with pride, not regret. That year, Laura was also asked to speak at the annual Unity Walk event, organized by the BSU. She explained,

My junior year, my friend, [Name], was the leader of it all. And she asked me, “Do you want to speak at it?” And I was like, “Do you want me to speak at that? I don’t think I have anything special to say,” and she was like, “No, you just got elected as the student body vice president, you should speak at it.” So I did. And I mostly talked about white privilege, because I didn’t think it was my space to talk about the Black experience.

Laura was navigating, for the first time, how to speak up and get involved in a public demonstration as a White person. She felt it was important to focus on White identity and her own knowledge as a way of using her voice and leave space for BIPOC voices to speak to BIPOC experiences.

Work in Progress: The Ups and Downs of Accompliceship

The second subsection of *Finding My Place* addresses the struggles and missteps of the participants. While these emerging accomplices are growing in experience and confidence with each action, they still struggle with insecurities, failures and question the best way to engage. As I discussed as part of the persistence in the journey aspect of *Mindset*, the participants recognize that there will be ups and downs as they learn to navigate their way forward as White people committed to racial justice. They recognize the need for ongoing growth and they acknowledge that they have not figured out how to do it all well yet. In this section, I explore how the participants accept mistakes and failures, yet remain committed. They do not use imperfection as an excuse to disengage or stop trying. They also struggle with the risk of savior-ism and are trying to navigate how to best engage in appropriate ways as White people.

Accepting Imperfection

The participants shared stories of missed opportunities and how sometimes their fears and insecurities get in the way of action. Oliva admitted that she is not confident enough to speak up sometimes. She explained that her confidence is

definitely not there all the time. Just like with most people, there's some days where I'm just not going to engage right now. I just can't...I know I should probably engage this person because they're my White coworker and they're saying something that just should not be said. But, yeah, so it's just up and down.

Olivia knows that she is not always going to engage in every opportunity. She also struggles with fear of “say[ing] the wrong thing” and, yet, has come to accept that “saying something in support is...probably better than not saying anything at all... [because] people don't think about what you say for the rest of their lives. It's an uncomfortable moment and then it kind of moves on and you learn from it.” Olivia is learning to accept failures and mistakes, but she still maintains her commitment to growth. By believing that speaking up and possibly making a mistake is better than staying silent, she is working to center her desire to impact change over her fears.

Another example of insecurities getting in the way of action was in Leila's story. They shared about how they were given feedback that they were taking up too much space during a whiteness discussion group they participated in their first year. Leila described how they “took it pretty hard” at first. They took it as a personal criticism, felt very defensive and shut down. Leila returned to the group one time, but was too self-conscious to speak, and never went back after that. Leila called it a “fall on my face” experience. They reflected back on their actions, sharing, “it was a good fall on the face because I needed that. Because it was happening in a lot of spaces of my life.” A few years later, they now see the experience as an impactful learning experience, even though they did not handle it well at the time. Leila now focuses on taking up less space in their activism. This story is an example of delayed learning after missteps. Initially, Leila left the

discussion group because of discomfort related to being critiqued. But later, after reflection, they have incorporated that lesson into their actions in important ways.

Olivia and Leila, as well as the other participants, are willing to accept mistakes, reflect on them, and learn from them. Sometimes their fears and insecurities get the best of them and they do not act. They know their accompliceship is not perfect. They know they are not perfect. Yet they continue to engage and work to improve.

Finding the Line: Saviorism vs. Responsibility to Act

As part of their *Mindset*, the participants feel a strong sense of responsibility in several ways. As part of their sense of agency, they know they have the ability and power to act. As they come to terms with their complicity, their whiteness, and their privilege, they feel a responsibility to be part of the solution. They believe that, as Dylan said, their power can be a “useful tool of change rather than a tool of oppression.” And as Alyssa put it, “I can choose to use the privilege that I have in a way that might make changes for others...I guess I just have a really strong sense of, if something’s wrong, you have to fix it.” While the sense of responsibility the participants have is a positive aspect of their development as an accomplice, they also wrestle with the line between helpful accomplice actions and counterproductive White savior actions.

An example of Monica trying to find the line between acting and savior-ing came in one of her classes. Monica observed a disagreement between several students in a class discussion related to the use of the N-word in art and literature. She wrestled with what to do, how to do it, and the anxiety that came along with the situation. She shared,

And then there was a Black girl who came in interjected and said, “I don't think it's okay to use in any context.”...It creates this sort of environment where I feel maybe the anxiety has gotten worse... We're at a university where it's important to be an ally. And it's important to back up those people but also know your place and know that you haven't had those experiences and sort of be an ally kind of in the background. I wanted to back her up in that scenario and be like, “hey, she's right.” But I also was like, she can

handle herself. I don't want this whole White savior complex...and I just feel like she has the most experience with this. So she knows what she's talking about...It's hard because I think that I never want to insert myself into a situation where...she's obviously the most educated about those issues, way more than I could ever be...So I think, just like recognizing you're not there to save them, but you're there to make sure that they're okay.

Monica felt stuck between her desire to be an ally by speaking up in support and her fear of crossing the line into savior behaviors. She was thinking through how to “know [her] place” and how to be the most effective and appropriate ally/accomplice she can be. Ultimately, she resisted her desire to speak up because she trusted the BIPOC student should be the expert of their own experience in that moment, but she remained alert for opportunities to speak up if needed.

Other participants also grappled with the best way to act in support of racial justice, while navigating their positionality and privilege as White. As partially quoted above when I discussed persistence and not giving up, Dylan thoughtfully expressed the complexity of engaging in justice and identity work as a White man:

Then the next challenging thing is that once you get past this white guilt, you're hit with this white saviorism, and then you have to go through the white guilt again. Where you're really trying to navigate this incredibly complicated space of being a White person participating in racial justice, while also trying to make sure that you're not speaking for anyone else. You're trying to be as culturally competent as you possibly can, making sure that you're doing the right things for others. And that may not look the same for different racial groups or even individuals within racial groups. And so you're just faced with all of these questions of, am I doing things right that I need to be doing right? And so knowing all of this larger societal context and knowing all of the shitty things that White people have done to literally everyone else, you're really faced with this complexity of, what do I do now? And that's the challenge that you have to face with these facts as a White person, with this privilege, with this power, with this placement in society, what do I do? The more important question isn't what do I do, but how do I do it right? How do I do it in the most just way?

In this excerpt, we see Dylan wrestling with how to engage in racial justice work while being constantly aware of his identity and the power dynamics involved. He is wondering, like the other participants, how to engage in the most just way. He knows that he needs to act; he feels a

responsibility to do so as a White person in response to knowing all the “shitty things” that White people have done. He wants to be different. He wants to act. But he does not want to further harm or act as a savior and he is still wrestling with how to do that well.

Georgie wrestled with similar issues after engaging in direct action activism after the murders of George Floyd and Dante Wright. Georgie jumped in and both led protests and attended protests. Only after did he reflect on what his role could have or should have been:

Georgie: I don't know if I should have [done it that way]. Again, back to the whole if you hold a dominant identity and speak up, whatever that means, it can often just be bad for various reasons. Because you take space from other marginalized people. Because you might just be straight up wrong. So what does that look like? I guess I think especially when Dante Wright was killed, I was pretty active in protesting. I went to protest every night at the police precinct and got kettled by police. And experienced the whole shebang and was pretty active on campus organizing. And talking about it in my classes, telling professors, making announcements in class, being like everybody should get involved...It was a really intense two weeks, and extremely emotional and after everything calmed down and I was able to reflect more, and the other organizers were able to reflect more, we were like, okay, we did go about this wrong in many ways. One, we all went really hard and got really burnt out. Also, we took a bunch of racially diverse, but predominantly upper middle to upper class college students, to this [location], which is a predominantly Black low income, suburb of [City]. And we're protesting there in their streets, causing damage, bringing police attention there. Was that the right move? Did it accomplish anything? I don't know. And I was a part of that. And so, did I know shit about organizing or police brutality? Well, okay, I do know some shit. But at the time, perhaps I should have left it to people who knew better. And also people who were not White. So I don't know if I would have, if today, that was two years ago, I don't know if I would react differently if something like that happened again.

Ellie: Think, so take a minute and imagine it happening again. How would you go about handling it now? Or if you're not sure, what would be the questions you would ask to sort of struggle with that?

Georgie: I think I would get involved. But again, I wouldn't want to be the face of anything...I think what I've learned since then, is that my primary responsibility as a White person when things like that happen is educating other White people. Because those are the spaces in which I can do the least harm while doing the most good. It often falls on People of Color to educate White people. And so if I, as a White person with a somewhat nuanced understanding of racial justice, can be the one to step up and do that, then it should be me. And so I think I would lean more into that.

Georgie’s story is an example of how passion without deeper understanding can be harmful. After the intensity of the experience, Georgie and his peers reflected on what happened and wondered if it accomplished anything helpful. Two years later, his understanding of his own positionality in these systemic issues has deepened and he would engage differently now.

All of the emerging accomplices in this study are works in progress. They are not perfect. They miss opportunities to step up or speak up. They are still learning, failing, and deepening their understanding. They feel insecure and question what the right move is in various circumstances. They are sometimes more concerned about messing up than they are about fighting racism. But they want to act; they do not want to contribute to harm. And yet, they are human. White humans. This adds complexity to an already complex issue. Even though they sometimes fail to act and sometimes act in ways that they would change upon reflection, buoyed by their *Mindset*, they continue to try and engage. Their agency, acceptance of discomfort, and persistence in the journey are particularly helpful here. And, while their passion and empathetic desire to help can sometimes backfire and cause harm, these types of emotions also lead to a deeper sense of connection that keeps them going.

Feeling Connected: Emotional Engagement as a Motivator

The final subsection in *Finding My Place* highlights the positive impact of emotions. Along with emotions that stall growth or lead to inaction, the data in this study also reveal that emotions are a driving force in keeping White students engaged in the work. Many of the participants talked about feeling passion, excitement, anger, sadness, love, and care; all of which motivated them to stay engaged. Sage feels “invigorated and fired up” by their coursework on social justice. Alyssa talked about empathy driving her passion: “If you don’t have empathy, if you’re apathetic about things, you’re not going to feel the passion or the drive that’s needed in

order to make changes.” For Alyssa, feeling connected to the issue emotionally is a critical factor of staying the course. She also noted, racial inequities “that might not necessarily affect me, but are obviously affecting the people around me and affecting the people I care about” is an important motivator.

Georgie talked about channeling emotions such as sadness and anger instead of focusing on guilt: “I try to just feel sadness and feel anger and frustration and I try to hold on to those emotions, because I feel like I can do something with that.” As discussed above, Georgie sees guilt as an unproductive emotion, but allowing himself to be angry and sad at the consequences of injustice fuels his accomplice commitment. Similarly, Leila shared how seeing injustice is upsetting and how their deep care for others keeps them motivated: “I think also the amount of history/personal experiences that I’ve heard that are really upsetting to read about and hear about, I always come back to it...It is something that I care about a lot.” Leila’s emotional engagement helps drive them. They get upset. They care deeply. This care leads them to want to stand up for others.

All of the participants have a sense of passion and feel a connection to the work of racial justice. They have an emotional investment that comes from different motivating experiences. As discussed above, many feel connected to the issue because they, too, know what it feels like to experience discrimination and injustice. Others are driven by a care for those they love. But all of them feel connected. Emotions drive their engagement in positive ways. In fact, it was likely these motivating emotions that led them to volunteer for this study. This is the empathy *Mindset* in action and it keeps them going.

Summary: Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice

This final category in the Development of Emerging White Accomplices model introduced how the participants are navigating their responsibility to act for justice. They are standing up and speaking up by challenging whiteness in individuals and in institutions. They feel that it is their responsibility as White people to take on that labor of educating and challenging White people and ideologies of whiteness. They are working to use their leadership positions and access to spaces and people to advocate for change. They are also a work in progress. They are not confident all of the time, they do not speak up all of the time, they wrestle with finding the line between helpful action and saviorism. They want to act, but are not sure how to do it well, or appropriately, given their White positionality. In the end, they feel connected emotionally and personally to the issue of racism, so they keep pressing on toward deeper growth and understanding.

The *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* helps the participants navigate the mistakes, confusion, and discouragement that come. Their agency causes them to continue to believe they can contribute to change if they keep trying. Their empathy will not allow them to disengage while others around them are still suffering. Their acceptance of discomfort frees them to put more energy into helpful actions than resisting or wallowing in hard feelings. And, finally, their persistence helps them leverage their agency and empathy for continued action. They are all, as Elliot shared, “finding the courage and the hope to keep trying.” They are actively practicing hope through their persistence. And they are learning and growing along the way.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the development of emerging White racial justice accomplices as identified through my grounded theory analysis of the data. In seeking to answer my research

question on understanding how White students grown in their commitment to racial justice while in college, I explored what types of experiences contribute to growth, as well as how White students wrestle with their own whiteness and come to understand the systemic nature of racism, and, finally, how they navigate their emotionality and positionality while engaging in their commitment to racial justice. Through my analysis, I formed a theoretical model for how the participants develop as emerging accomplices for racial justice while in college. Figure 6 shows the full model again, for reference.



Figure 6

The Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model

The Development of Emerging White Accomplices model has four primary categories: *The Emerging Accomplice Mindset*, *Impactful Experiences*, *Coming to Terms with Myself*, and *Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice*. The *Mindset* serves as the hub that connects, shapes, and mediates the other categories. As such, it is the center of the model and the core element that drives the others. The other three categories each illuminate a different aspect of how the students grow in commitment and confidence, how they wrestle with their new knowledge, confront their own whiteness, and how they work to take action in response to all they are learning.

The *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* has five characteristics: Curiosity, Agency, Empathy, Acceptance of Discomfort, and Persistence in the Journey. Each of these qualities serve as a mediator and interpreter for the student experiences. In the *Impactful Experiences* category, students are exposed to new environments that challenge assumptions and highlight their White identity in new ways; they obtain deeper knowledge about the systemic nature of oppression and increase their commitment to racial justice; and they build important relationships with peers, mentors, and role models that both encourage and challenge them. With the *Mindset* mediators in place, the emerging White accomplices navigate their experiences in a way that leads them to face their own complicity, socialization, bias, and guilt, as outlined in the *Coming to Terms with Myself* category. They accept their complicity in systems of oppression, work to integrate their new understanding of their White identity, and wrestle with their own socialization into color-evasive ideologies. In the final category, *Finding My Place: Taking Action for Racial Justice*, drawing on emotional connection, emerging accomplices take action to challenge whiteness while navigating how to do it responsibly and mindful of their positionality. They are also still a work in progress, as they fail to act and miss opportunities sometimes, as well.

These experiences do not happen in a neat, linear fashion, but happen simultaneously, cyclically, and repetitively as they deepen students' learning along the way. Consistent themes of wrestling with new information, grappling with self-understanding, and confronting dominant narratives weave throughout each category. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings in conversation with my theoretical framework and relevant literature, exploring how they might both reinforce and complicate these students' stories and their process of growth. The next chapter will also explore implications of this study for higher education educators, researchers, and policymakers.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of White students and how they develop as White people committed to racial justice in college. My research question and sub-questions were:

1. How do White students grow in their commitment to racial justice in college?
 - a. What types of experiences in college contribute to developing a commitment to racial justice?
 - b. How do White students come to understand racism as a systemic reality and not merely individual actions or beliefs?
 - c. How do White students navigate their emotionality while developing a commitment to racial justice?

In this chapter, I discuss my findings and my resulting model through the lens of my theoretical framework and the relevant literature. I then discuss how my findings speak to the research questions in this study, followed by exploring implications for practice, policy, and research, as well as study limitations. I end with a personal reflection on my own journey throughout this project. I insert the illustration of the graphic below again as Figure 7 for reference.

Findings in Conversation with Theoretical Framework and Literature

As discussed in previous chapters, my theoretical framework contains concepts from Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) and White emotionality research. In particular, CWS scholars highlight the concepts of white normativity, hegemony, ignorance, innocence, complicity, and color-evasive ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009). These concepts work together to reinforce the domination of whiteness.



*** EMERGING ACCOMPLICE MINDSET**

Curiosity - wanting to understand: intellectual curiosity & reflective curiosity
Agency - accountability, responsibility & the power of choice
Empathy - the motivating power of empathy, drawing on past experiences & identities
Acceptance of Discomfort - acceptance of difficult emotions & leaning into discomfort
Persistence in the Journey - not giving up, humility & long-term commitment

Figure 7

The Development of Emerging White Accomplices Model

Additionally, White emotionality literature frames emotions such as guilt, fear, shame, and defensiveness as problematic barriers to White engagement in issues of race and racial justice (Cabrera et al., 2017; Matias, 2016; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Emotions are not race-neutral and they most frequently serve to uphold white hegemony. As I noted in my literature review, these critiques highlight the propensity of White people to over-individualize racism while ignoring systemic issues and, therefore, focus their energy on portraying a non-racist identity instead of taking action to reduce racism.

As explained in Chapter 3, I used these ideas as sensitizing concepts which allowed them to inform, but not direct, my analysis of the data. However, in keeping with a critical approach, it is important to more intentionally apply these critical theories to my findings. In the following section, I put my findings in conversation with the constructs from my theoretical framework and the relevant literature. First, I discuss how the findings support and add nuance to the White development literature, as well as how CWS complicates the benefits of diverse environments for White students. Second, I put each CWS concept from my theoretical framework in conversation with the findings. I show how White agency can both confront and uphold the hegemonic domination of white normativity. I discuss how the participants are combating white ignorance by increasing knowledge about systems of oppression and resisting innocence through complicity. I also highlight the important impact that dispelling the good/bad binary had on participant growth. Finally, before moving on to address the research questions, I discuss how the findings shed light on the importance of addressing emotions and providing enough safety for students to process their emotions and grow in the midst of them.

Expanding on White Ally Development Literature

The development of emerging White accomplices displayed in this study is multi-faceted, complex, and non-linear. These findings support my critiques of the ally development models noted in Chapter 2 that argue most models are too linear and present racism as an individual problem that can be solved through exposure to more information or simply building relationships with BIPOC people. The findings in this study show a more complex reality where students wrestle not only with their individual biases, norms, and assumptions, but also their place within broader systems of oppression and white hegemony. The model I developed for this study is most similar to Linder's (2015) model, which has a cyclical component that highlights

the emotional wrestling and ongoing nature of White identity exploration. While Linder's model highlights the problems and roadblocks on the White ally development journey, the model outlined in this study centers the progress and pathways forward more directly.

Additionally, a central finding of this study is that campus experiences, and especially coursework, play a vital role in increasing the participants' knowledge and understanding of both racism and their place within a world of white hegemony. This finding is in line with the student development research that highlights the importance of moving students away from an individual focus toward a more nuanced, systemic understanding of racial structures (Linder, 2015; Reason, 2007). My analysis showed that as students expanded their understanding of racism away from the personal and more toward the systemic, they grew in their commitment, which spurred them to continue to pursue more knowledge.

Campus racial diversity, or lack thereof, was also impactful for the participants in this study. In the following subsection, I discuss how critical theories add challenges and nuance to the benefit of racial diversity for White students.

Challenging the Benefits of Diverse Environments

The findings related to the benefit of diverse campus environments support some of what the research already shows and adds to the body of research in important ways. The new environments of each campus culture exposed the participants to new experiences which moved them along in their journey. As they experienced greater racial diversity, their own assumptions and stereotypes about BIPOC people were challenged and they were able to see the disparate impacts of power and privilege in new ways as they made friends with BIPOC peers. This lines up with development models such as Helms (1993) and Reason, Millar, et al. (2005), that show as students' exposure increases, they become more tolerant and understanding of differences. It

also reinforces the research that shows racially diverse relationships are a characteristic of racial justice allies (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Edwards, 2006; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kluttz et al., 2020; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005).

The critical question remains: At whose expense is this greater exposure to diversity? As we see in Finn's story, she experienced a great deal of growth at the expense of a Black peer. The Black student that she hurt had to vulnerably expose her pain more than once for Finn to reflect on and learn from. Yes, Finn did her own work in the process and showed persistence, self-reflection, humility, and willingness to accept responsibility in the end. But at what cost? This fact challenges any strength that greater diversity brings to White students on diverse campuses. Matias and DiAngelo (2013) called this behavior "racial cray-cray" (p. 4), the "crazy making" (p. 4) that results from a performance of fragility, stemming from "white anxiety" (p. 4), that denies racial realities and results in a kind of racial gaslighting of BIPOC people. This is what Finn did for months. She centered her defensiveness and need for understanding in a way that only served to extend the harm she caused and reinforce the centrality of whiteness. This was white fragility in action.

As a critical scholar, I must be careful not to center the educational benefits of racial diversity for White people. As a White educator invested in helping White students grow, this creates a tension for me. White people need exposure to other ways of being and other cultural norms to challenge our own sense of white normativity (Edwards, 2006; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Reason, Roosa Millar, et al., 2005). Additionally, BIPOC students should attend any university they want to, even, and especially, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). But ultimately, BIPOC students are not there for the educational benefit of White students, despite the political, legal, and social narrative that has historically justified diversity in higher education

as a benefit to White students. If research shows this is a positive byproduct, wonderful. But it must not be the goal of diversity. Racial diversity is not centrally for the benefit of White people.

Another noteworthy finding from this study regarding diversity on campus that I have not seen in the research was the impact of campuses with *less* diversity than students had experienced in their home communities. The participants who came from racially diverse communities had not before had to reckon with the oppressiveness of whiteness. They, of course, knew they were White, but since they were surrounded by BIPOC communities growing up, they did not identify closely with their whiteness, nor did they wrestle with the dominance of whiteness in any meaningful way. Seeing whiteness all around them on their PWI campuses served to spotlight White norms in ways that challenged these White students' sense of identity. They are not "honorary [*insert BIPOC group here*]." They are White and whiteness offers no exceptions (Leonardo, 2009). This "troubled knowledge" (Zembylas, 2012, p. 114) was pivotal for these emerging accomplices, pushing them to wrestle with their positionality and complicity in important new ways.

This section put the findings from this study in conversation with the literature on White ally development, noting how the findings both support and challenge ally development models. Additionally, critical whiteness scholarship problematizes the findings that show the developmental benefit of racial diversity for White students. The following sections move on to explore the findings through the lens of the CWS construct in my theoretical framework.

Confronting the Problem of White Normativity and Hegemony

White normativity is the positioning of whiteness and White people as normal, universal, and as un-raced (Cabrera, 2019; Leonardo, 2009). White hegemony is the system of social domination created by white normativity that serves to uphold inequity (Cabrera, 2018). The

power and influence of white normativity and hegemony was evident in the participants in this study. Two significant things the participants are coming to terms with are the depth of their socialization into White norms and ideologies, and their place of power and privilege within hegemonic whiteness. They are beginning to see how brainwashed they have been in whiteness and they are struggling to disentangle themselves from the narratives they have been raised with. This is a hopeful finding from this study, as the participants are trying to disentangle themselves from hegemonic whiteness. I posit that having to deal with heteronormativity as queer identified people helped the participants understand and believe in the power of white normativity. Additionally, as they accept they not only have privilege due to their White identity, they also realize they have power, and they are questioning what to do with that power society has given them. In a world of white normativity and hegemony, most White people easily walk away and conclude that inequities in the world are “just the way it is” (Cabrera, 2018, 2019; Leonardo, 2009, 2013). But these participants are learning to name whiteness and challenge their place in the system. Challenging their place of power in the system brings up complicated questions about their role in using their power to change the system.

Complicating White Agency

The agency *Mindset* is a critical factor in challenging white normativity and hegemony. For the participants, agency encourages action and offers them a choice to use the power the system has given them to dismantle that very system. And agency is akin to power. As these emerging accomplices learn more and more about systems of oppression, they see their power can be a tool for change. This is similar to the idea of being a scyborg in la paperson’s (2017) creative vision for sabotaging systems from the inside. la paperson defines scyborg as “a queer turn of word... to name the structural agency of persons who have picked up colonial

technologies and reassembled them to decolonizing purposes” (p. xiv). These White students are accepting the responsibility of their “structural agency” and want to use it to deconstruct. As Dylan concluded, “that power you have as a White male [can be] useful as a tool of change rather than a tool of oppression.” They are not wasting energy fighting the notion of privilege or power within a system of white hegemony. They accept it and push through the guilt by asking “Now what should I do with it?” I see this perspective as a critical step in the accomplice journey. White agency is a natural response for White people to have. After all, they have been socialized to believe they are the most powerful one in a society of lesser humans. While there are dangers and pitfalls to this mindset, as I discuss next, I believe that White agency can be a colonial technology used for decolonizing purposes.

Agency, by itself, is not guaranteed to produce positive outcomes, however. There are pitfalls and dangers to having such a strong sense of agency. The downside of using power and privilege to make change is the fine line between accomplice actions and savior actions. White saviorism frames action for justice as something done *for* BIPOC people by a benevolent powerful White person; something they could not do for themselves (Edwards, 2006; Ford & Orlandella, 2015; Kluttz et al., 2020). It is a problematic perspective that paints BIPOC people as powerless, voiceless, and in need of rescue. It serves to reinforce the supremacy of whiteness all while helping White people feel good about themselves and avoid their complicity in oppression (Edwards, 2006). This was displayed in Georgie’s story when he jumped passionately into protesting before thinking through the efficacy or appropriateness of his actions. The drive to help, while admirable, potentially caused harm in the communities where the actions were taking place. Georgie and his peers learned through later reflection that their approach was not ideal and he will engage differently in the future. However, what was the cost of this growth? In this case,

we do not really know. But the implications of this question raise difficult and conflicting concerns. People learn by trying, failing, and trying again. But at whose expense is this growth for White people happening? And in what way does this replicate continued oppression and harm of BIPOC people at the hands of White people? This is the tension in any educational work. We want people to grow, and growth often happens through failure. As discussed in Chapter 4, most of the participants talked about wrestling with saviorism. They discussed wanting to help, yet not save. They want to support their BIPOC friends, but not talk over them or make decisions for them. This highlights the messiness of accompliceship, especially in these young accomplices.

Given the purpose of this study and the questions I was asking of the data, I saw agency showing up largely as a helpful factor in how the emerging accomplices were navigating their journeys. The desire to help and the belief that they can do good is a part of what keeps these emerging accomplices motivated and engaged, it drives their ability to persist. Additionally, their agency helps them work through many of the other pitfalls that CWS and White emotionality name. Still, if agency is akin to power, it is important to name that power has always been problematic. The temptation to let power do what power does is always present and complicates the participants' sense of agency. This is also where other aspects of the *Mindset* can help mediate this danger. Curiosity drives the desire to learn more about how systems work, including how well-meaning White agency can be problematic. This curiosity can keep emerging accomplices in a mindful place, thoughtful about their positionality and the impact of their actions.

Increasing Knowledge to Combat White Ignorance

White ignorance is employed by White people as a way to avoid confronting new information that conflicts with previously held beliefs and to evade even talking about racial

issues (Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Leonardo, 2009). It is also often employed by White people to avoid the discomfort and dissonance that comes from confronting new information (Cabrera et al., 2016). The students in this study are not using ignorance in this way as an excuse. They are doing the opposite. They are actively trying to learn more to combat any sense of ignorance, and they are open to new ideas in critical ways. The participants' curiosity to understand new things and openness to new information and experiences is a strength of their *Mindset* that helps them avoid the pitfalls of white ignorance. Additionally, leaning into discomfort, as opposed to avoiding it, is a key pedagogic strategy for them. The students in this study are embracing the discomfort and the dissonance and not allowing those feelings to distract them from the work of challenging whiteness in themselves and others. Additionally, the new learning taking place for the participants is complicating their knowledge about systemic racism in ways that combat white ignorance and lead to deeper learning and engagement.

Most of the participants entered college with some degree of commitment to racial justice. However, two did not. Both Sage and Laura entered college fairly sheltered and unaware of the depth of the horrors of racial injustice. In this way, they were truly ignorant in the way DiAngelo (2011, 2018) described, having "little to no authentic information about racism" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 58) due to their socialization in segregated communities. Their K-12 education taught them society is set up fairly and everyone has equal opportunities. They believed and embraced color-evasive ideas like individualism and meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). It was not until they were exposed to the realities of systemic racialized injustice in college that they were challenged out of their ignorance. Instead of planting a flag in their ignorance and avoiding the discussion altogether, their *Mindset* characteristics, such as curiosity, empathy, and agency, pushed them toward pursuing greater understanding instead of avoidance.

White Innocence and the Benefit of White Complicity Pedagogy

As discussed in Chapter 2, white innocence names the attempt to avoid admitting complicity in ongoing systems of oppression by maintaining a sense of moral innocence (Gotanda, 2004; Gutierrez, 2006; Poon, 2018) and white complicity “illuminates the ways white people, regardless of intentions, attitudes, or beliefs, are implicated in the maintenance and production of white supremacy” (Foste & Irwin, 2020, p. 444). Admitting complicity means naming the inherent complexity of inhabiting a White body in a white supremacist world (Foste & Irwin, 2020). Sage is wrestling with this reality when he says he feels “inherently harmful” as a White person. Education scholars (Cabrera, 2012; Ford & Orlandella, 2015; Foste, 2019) advocate for a pedagogy of complicity to combat white innocence in White students. Such a pedagogy pushes White students to acknowledge their complicity in ongoing systems of oppression, even as they are striving for accompliceship. The findings in this study support the benefit of a white complicity pedagogy. As participants learned more and more about the insidious ways that whiteness infuses systems and institutions, they could not help but recognize how they benefit from the system due to their White identity. Even as they are working individually to root out bias and racism from their hearts and minds, they realize they still have to participate as White in a world of white hegemony. Dylan’s comments especially reflect this tension as he shared about the struggle of engaging in systems he knows benefit him over others. This is the white complicity that Foste and Irwin (2020) advocated for.

For these participants, confronting complicity is the inevitable response to understanding the systemic nature of racism. Again, this is the opposite of what we see in White students who are employing white innocence claims. The participants are accepting their complicity. They are wrestling with it. As they learn about their complicity, their belief in their own ability to enact

change and control their own lives (i.e., agency) drives them to feel responsible for their knowledge. They are not looking to uphold their innocence, but to respond responsibly to the reality of their complicity. And as agency creates responsibility, responsibility leads to action over emotions.

One of the critical benefits of accepting complicity in this study is how it challenged the participants by adding nuance and complexity to their experiences of oppression due to their own marginalized identities. They are accepting that whiteness, along with its power and privilege, exists alongside these other aspects of their identities. They see both their privilege and their oppression, creating a more realistic, complicated sense of identity. They are not good or bad, oppressed or privileged. They are both/and, signaling their increasing maturity in their own identities.

This is not to say that the participants are perfect. They still feel challenged by the depth of their socialization and they still feel defensive at times. Monica's story of learning about unconscious bias is an example of this tension between both accepting and wanting to avoid complicity. Her feeling of relief at learning that her bias "is not [her] fault" and, thus, she is "not a bad person" is an example of wanting to avoid complicity. Yes, she is acknowledging her internal bias, but she is also wanting to push away any feelings of blame or moral responsibility. She is taking responsibility to act on her new knowledge of unconscious bias moving forward, but in some ways she also wants to maintain an image as a good White person without deliberate or conscious bias. Monica and the other participants are still a work in progress.

Seeing Through Color-Evasive Ideologies and Dispelling the Good/Bad Binary

During the *Coming to Terms with Myself* process, the students grapple with the color-evasive ideologies they were raised with. Consistent with research explored in Chapter 2, as the

participants start to reckon with the depth of their socialization into whiteness, they feel guilt, shame and defensiveness. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) explained, these feelings are rooted in an individualistic understanding of racism that equates racists with immoral people and seeks to explain societal problems in “anything-but-race” terms. We saw this defensiveness most clearly when Finn said, “Am I secretly an awful person and a horrible racist?” The emerging accomplices in this study are not immune from the influence of the good/bad binary. They have been steeped in it for their entire K-12 education. The intellectual and academic (un)learning that the participants are engaged in is critical for them as they start to challenge these narratives of whiteness. They are seeing the systemic nature of racism more clearly. The participants are beginning to see how ingrained racism is into the very structures of our society, leading them to conclude that racism is more than just bad people doing bad things.

Color-evasive ideologies would have the participants believe that to accept any complicity means that they are horrible people (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). But these emerging accomplices are now able to see the complicated nature of identity and the impact of socialization. They understand that any binary morality is an oversimplification of a complex reality. As they learn about the ways that the system is set up to privilege White people over BIPOC people, they accept that there is no good/bad binary. There is only responsibility. There is only choice—a choice in how they respond to the reality of the world and their place in it.

The previous sections used the CWS constructs from my theoretical framework in applied to the findings from this study. The next and final section exploring the findings in conversation with my theoretical framework focuses on how the participants’ experiences both confirm and challenge the literature on White emotionality. I discuss how the participants are navigating their emotions in ways that support the research on White emotionality. I also explore

how the participants are challenging the critiques of safe space highlighted in Chapter 2. And, finally, I consider how the participants are adding positive dimensions to the notion of White emotionality that are often overlooked in the literature.

Navigating White Emotionality

The literature on White emotionality, as discussed in Chapter 2, reveals that emotions are not neutral and that they often serve to uphold the centrality and dominance of whiteness and White people (Cabrera, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; Matias, 2016; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). When topics of race come up, White people experience discomfoting emotions, such as guilt, shame, fear, defensiveness, anger. As mentioned above, these emotions are largely rooted in color-evasive ideologies that equate racism with moral failure and, when acted upon, become maneuvers to avoid cognitive dissonance and uphold a positive self-image (Cabrera et al., 2016; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). The result is often further disengagement in matters of race and entrenchment in defensive posturing. Watt (2007) argued that the cognitive dissonance, created by confronting racial realities, generates discomfort which stimulates a natural, primal response of defensiveness. Similarly, other scholars argue that White people need to develop the stamina to engage with the uncomfortable emotions that come with confronting their whiteness (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018; Matias, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Watt, 2007).

The findings in this study support the conclusions in the literature that White people will benefit from greater stamina in regards to engaging with discomfort. Accepting discomfort and staying engaged builds such stamina and moves students toward accompliceship. The participants in this study experience dissonance and defensiveness, but find ways to remain engaged. They view discomfoting emotions as signaling an opportunity for growth. The participants, particularly in the *Coming to Terms with Myself* category, are wrestling with their

troubled knowledge in critical and productive ways. Yet the cognitive dissonance they are experiencing is not leaving them stuck in a state of “racial arrested development” (p. 130) as Cabrera et al.’s (2016) research showed happens with White students. In this case, they are pressing forward in their development, making room for complexity and contradiction. Robbins and Jones (2016) explained racial dissonance as “the moment when an individual’s schema for making meaning of racial interactions no longer makes sense or violates a moral principle” (p. 633). When one’s way of making sense of the world is challenged, it touches on identity and ideology in a deep way and discomfort is a natural response. We see this when Sage talks about having a complete “identity crisis” while learning about how his identity (racially, sexually, and gendered) is completely socialized. Research shows many White students disengage at this level of dissonance (Cabrera et al., 2016; Matias, 2016; Robbins & Jones, 2016). These participants are different. Due to their *Mindset*, the emerging accomplices in this study are able to work through the cognitive dissonance, toward a more nuanced racial cognizance. Their curiosity, agency, empathy, acceptance of discomfort, and persistence allows them to move forward and take action instead of staying in guilt or defensiveness. As they push through discomfort, they lean on their relationships for support.

The Positive Impact of Safe Relationships

The last section under *Impactful Experiences* in Chapter 4 explores the importance of relationships for the participants, which spotlights a controversial topic. The critical relationships that the participants talked about brings up a worthwhile conversation on the importance of emotional safety for their growth. Scholars debate the problematic concept of providing “safe space” for White students to explore their identity (Cabrera et al., 2016; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Yet the findings in this study underscore the importance of authentic, trusting

relationships as a means of both challenge and support for the participants. This fact creates tension because it runs the risk of centering White comfort over BIPOC oppression.

Nevertheless, none of the participants spoke about being called out or challenged in helpful ways by anyone other than those they were in trusting relationships with. In fact, the participants shared that they were able to receive correction and challenge from people precisely because they trusted in that person's authentic care for them. In essence, that person was *safe*.

These findings align with those who point to the "fragile pedagogical space" (Zembylas, 2012, p. 119) where educators centering empathy can create inroads that disrupt white fragility and create opportunities for growth in White students. Leonardo and Porter (2010) referred to this as a hermeneutic of empathy; Matias and Zembylas (2014) called it strategic empathy. Zembylas (2018) later called this approach a pedagogy of discomfort, where educators provide "a *relatively safe* [emphasis added] space to challenge individuals' comfort zones and transform the emotionality of Whites" (p. 87). Cabrera et al. (2016), on the other hand, while not altogether disagreeing with the need for such strategic approaches, argued for a pedagogy of racial agitation, one which prioritizes growth over comfort. In my analysis, the participants are choosing experiences that provide such agitation and are working out their journey within safe relationships that prioritize their growth. In this study then, trusting, authentic relationships provide the critical, challenging, *safe-enough* space for students to do the internal wrestling necessary for coming to terms with their dominant identity.

Leila's comment about their Black friend calling them out illustrates this crucial dynamic. They shared, "Of anybody in the world who would call me out, I know that she loves me. And she's not saying I'm an awful, terrible person, but she's saying it because she loves me. So the person I would take the best from would be her." Similarly, Finn was able to hear

correction from her partner because she trusted his intentions toward her. She shared, “I wanted someone who was on my side but also wanted the best for me as a person to grow and become a better person.” Both Sage and Saoirse also spoke of the powerful impact of mentors and role models and how they were able to share candidly with them and receive challenge from them in important ways.

These types of comments support the ideas of Zembylas (2018) and Leonardo and Porter (2010) who advocate for an environment that is safe *enough* to support risk taking; safe enough to prioritize growth over stagnant comfort. Leonardo and Porter (2010) explored the nuance involved in balancing comfort and risk, “if it is a safe condition, then it is the safety of being able to take risks, of putting oneself at risk, a condition many people of color already navigate” (p. 141). Calling for a hermeneutic of empathy, they conclude that framing the accomplice journey as one of risk and courage, not safety or comfort, will lead to more transformative learning for White students, “for it is guided by an ethic of concern for and not a desire to expose whites as simply racist” (p. 153). My analysis in this study brings me to a similar conclusion: White students need safe-enough spaces and relationships that support their growth. The participants have people in their lives who love them and want them to become better versions of themselves, which drives those friends and mentors to correct and challenge whiteness and racism within them. It is these crucial relationships that speak truth into the lives of these White students in transformative ways.

The Positive Impact of Emotions

In addition to the challenging aspects that emotions bring to the project of racial justice, the findings in this study also point to the positive impact of emotions. The findings show how emotions contribute to growth and stamina building in the emerging accomplices. The

participants are motivated because of their emotionality, not in spite of it. Empathy is critical, but so is passion, anger, pain, and love. It is because they are emotionally connected that these emerging accomplices accept the discomfort and persist where others do not. This shows the power of emotions to keep these students engaged despite challenges, discomfort, setbacks, and fears.

The empathy seen in this study served to counter some of the critiques noted in White emotionality literature. Critical scholars argue that White emotions most often serve to recenter whiteness and White people, as well as uphold the status quo of white hegemony (Cabrera et al., 2017; Matias, 2016). Based on the findings in this study, I argue that empathy serves as a good check on those tendencies. Empathy serves to center the pain of others. Even when informed by past experiences and identities, empathy is decidedly other-centered. Instead of focusing their emotional energy on themselves, to the detriment of their growth, the participants' empathy encourages them to center the experience of others. This is consistent with the research that says emotions can be a positive motivator for some students, driving constructive engagement with racial issues (Cabrera et al., 2017; Estrada & Matthews, 2016; Todd et al., 2010). Additionally, empathy is deeply humanizing. As scholars have discussed, engaging with students' emotional worlds is a critical factor in the project of anti-racism and empathy provides a strategic inroad (Matias & Allen, 2013; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Zembylas, 2012). This perspective aligns with the motivating power of empathy that I saw in the participants' stories.

The participants are not perfect though. As discussed above, the literature on White emotionality spotlights how White emotions often limit productive engagement by White people. The data in this study reveal that these emerging accomplices are not immune to this critique. Even though they are learning to accept discomfort and admit complicity, they still get derailed

due to emotional reactions at times. Olivia and Leila admitted that they sometimes choose not to speak up due to fears of being wrong or fears of conflict. Leila shared that they felt so uncomfortable after being told they were taking up too much space that they disengaged in a whiteness discussion group altogether, temporarily stalling their growth. This is an example of white fragility in action. And it shows that even White students who are doing the hard work are not perfect and still have work to do.

This section has put the findings from Chapter 4 into conversation with the theoretical framework for this study, as well as the relevant literature on White student development. Constructs from CWS and White emotionality literature add complexity and nuance to the findings in important ways. By centering a critique of the dominance of whiteness, CWS both affirms and challenges the benefits of diversity on college campuses. Notions of agency and empathy in White students become more complex when seen through the problem of White power and White emotionality. Constructs from CWS also frame the participants' journeys in helpful ways. Seeing their journey through the lens of white ignorance and innocence, we recognize the emerging accomplices are working to counter any temptations to claim ignorance or innocence, while struggling to accept complicity. Color-evasive theories in CWS highlight the ways the good/bad binary is used to uphold systemic oppression and the findings in this study support the critical importance of dismantling that ideology to facilitate students' growth. Finally, the findings largely align with the literature on White emotionality that foregrounds the detrimental impact of White emotions. However, the findings also challenge the idea that educators should disregard White emotions or the need for White students to feel safe-enough as they encounter these difficult topics. In the end, the CWS and White emotionality literature both affirm and complicate aspects of the Development of Emerging White Accomplices model.

Answering the Research Questions

In the following section, I discuss how the findings answer the research questions for this study. I begin by discussing the sub-questions first, as they form the foundation for answering the primary question.

What types of experiences in college contribute to developing a commitment to racial justice?

The types of experiences that contribute to growth for the participants are the ones that complicate knowledge by moving conversations about racism toward the systemic rather than individual. They are experiences that push students out of their comfort zones and into their growth zones, and they happen in community with others on the journey. There were many experiences the participants shared that influenced their commitment to racial justice, ranging from racial diversity on campus, to classes, to mentors. They were challenged to grow through new environments, new learning, and new community. Both the new environments and the new learning pushed the participants to reconcile previous assumptions and norms with the new knowledge they are developing about systems of oppression. They confronted their own whiteness by interacting with others on campus, as well as by engaging intellectually with issues of oppression where both their worldviews and understanding of racism are complicated and deepened. Additionally, the new community on campus provided participants with safe-enough spaces that offered both challenge and support.

The more they learn about racism and whiteness, the more secure the emerging accomplices feel in their convictions and are more likely to stand up and act on them. Opportunities to engage in action contribute to the students' commitment. Attending protests with other like-minded peers builds momentum and confidence. As they talk more about race

with peers and speak up to challenge whiteness, they get more comfortable and are more likely to speak up in the future.

How do White students come to understand racism as a systemic reality and not merely individual bad actions or beliefs?

Coursework was the biggest factor in moving the participants from individualistic understandings of racism toward systemic understandings. The classroom environment provided opportunities to engage intellectually with new learning, especially in disciplines such as sociology, ethnic studies, gender and women's studies, and social work. The participants shared how they were exposed to new knowledge and realities that high school never taught them about. They are being exposed to complex systems of oppression that rule our society for the first time. One of the results of this new knowledge is that the participants are now able to challenge the dominant color-evasive narratives they were raised with. They realize that they have been socialized from infancy to think a certain way and to believe the world works in a certain way, rooted in color-evasive ideologies like individualism and meritocracy. Once they learn that their socialization has impacted them so deeply, they are able to begin disentangling themselves from good/bad binary notions of racism. Their former, simplistic ideology of an either/or binary morality no longer fits the complex nature of the world as they now understand it. This allows them to accept complicity while also holding onto anti-racist goals and ideals. Monica is a good example of this realization. Once she realized she was essentially pre-programmed to have racial bias, she felt relieved that she no longer had to focus on defending her moral purity. She could move forward to focus on challenging and unlearning her bias.

The participants' *Mindset* is a critical factor in how they come to accept the pervasiveness of racism and systems of oppression. These students' curiosity causes them to work to integrate

new information into their worldview. Other students might simply dismiss or evade information that conflicts with the color-evasive ideologies they were raised with. But these emerging accomplices are able to sit with any dissonance that the new information brings up for them and are still able to integrate it into their worldview, even if that means letting go of fundamental narratives. They are open to challenge and they do not see new information as a threat.

How do White students navigate their emotionality while developing a commitment to racial justice?

The *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* is the key to navigating difficult emotions while maintaining and growing a commitment to racial justice. The participants in this study experience all of the emotions identified in the research on White emotionality. They feel guilt when learning about their privilege. They feel defensive when told they hold racist ideologies. They feel uncomfortable when learning about their bias and their complicity. They are afraid of messing up and afraid of the judgment of others. In essence, they are humans with emotions just like everyone else. The difference in these participants was in the choices they made when confronted with strong, uncomfortable emotions. They recognized their emotions, they wrestled with them, explored them, and reflected on them. And it was their *Mindset* that helped them navigate the emotions and stay on the path of growth toward accompliceship.

While all of the characteristics in the *Mindset* sustain the participants when they might otherwise be tempted to disengage, acceptance of discomfort is the critical factor in navigating emotionality. The participants have learned, through mentors, workshops, classes, and conversations with peers, that discomfort is a normal and inevitable part of the process when exploring identity issues such as race. As Leonardo (2009) articulated, race “touches tender histories” (p. 122) in the lives of White students. It is deeply personal. And, as White students

raised and educated in the U.S., the participants have been taught that racists are the bad guys. Thus, as the participants learn about their own privilege and complicity, it is natural for them to feel challenged and uncomfortable. As Elliot said, they have to “unlearn” so much of what they have been taught. The difference in these participants is that they have been encouraged to accept the discomfort that comes and not run away from it. They have been taught that it is part of the process of growth and they lean on their other *Mindset* strengths for the motivation to accept the discomfort and keep going.

These other aspects of the *Mindset* play a key role in helping the participants accept the discomfort. Their curiosity keeps them reflective and intellectually engaged as they seek to understand new information that might not initially make sense given their socialization in whiteness. Their agency keeps them focused on their own ability and responsibility to act and make choices, instead of allowing themselves to feel like a helpless victim to the system. Their empathy toward the pain of others complicates, if not overrides, any of their own self-focused emotions, motivating them to continue to grapple with their positionality so they can take action for others. Their persistence also plays a role in keeping them on the path of accompliceship as they know they have work to do and embrace the long-term journey ahead of them. For these emerging accomplices, at the end of the day, they know it is going to be hard, but they believe it will be worth it to become part of the solution to racism and not just the part of the problem.

The other noteworthy factor in navigating emotionality for the participants is the mentors and role models in their lives who validate their feelings while challenging them to not center those feelings. Saoirse’s mentor is a good example of this. She challenged Saoirse to think more about her racial identity in new ways by asking critical questions while also modeling the way through their own journey. Most of the participants had similar mentors in their lives that were

able to empathetically support them on their journey while not prioritizing their comfort over their growth.

Primary Question: How do White students grow in their commitment to racial justice in college?

The Development of Emerging White Accomplices model elucidates the process by which the participants in this study have grown while in college. They have impactful educational experiences on campus, they do the inner work of coming to terms with their positionality and making sense of new knowledge, they challenge narratives of whiteness in themselves and others, and they take action aligned with their values as they learn how they best fit into the work of racial justice. This experience is complex, non-linear, and nuanced for each individual, yet there are commonalities in the themes and some experiences showed to be consistently helpful. Being in a new environment with other students from different backgrounds is helpful to broaden the participants' understanding of what is "normal." Experiences that allow for academic engagement and deeper intellectual understanding are crucial. All of the participants have deepened their understanding of racism to include systemic perspectives. They understand complex, intersecting systems of oppression in new ways which move them past individual guilt and toward action to challenge systems of oppression. This learning is critical in increasing and reinforcing their commitment, as well as giving them confidence to speak up about issues of racial justice. Finally, experiences that put the participants in community with others on the same journey help move the participants forward in their commitment.

All of the participants have also dedicated time and energy to their own inner work. Olivia spoke about journaling about her feelings, Finn talked about prayer and reflection being a big part of her processing, Sage talked about taking time to "sit with" new information to fit it

into their shifting worldview. These emerging accomplices are not only accepting new narratives about white hegemony, but they are wrestling with their place in it all. They are wrestling with and accepting their complicity. They are not only trying to be better people individually, but they are confronting larger ideologies of whiteness. A critical factor in their growth is dispelling the myth of the good/bad binary. The participants are beginning to accept the complicated nature of identity and morality; nothing is a binary. And as they realize the depth of their socialization, they embrace the long-term commitment of continuing to disentangle themselves from whiteness. Driven by their agency and growing passion for justice, the participants are also taking action which contributes to their growth. They are applying what they are learning by speaking up and challenging whiteness. They are also missing opportunities, making mistakes and learning from those mistakes.

The *Emerging Accomplice Mindset* is what sets these students apart from the White students in the literature who tend to disengage when confronted with their complicity or who refuse to accept anything other than color-evasive ideologies. These emerging accomplices are curious, empathetic, action oriented, and display a persistence that sustains them as they wrestle with hard truths that challenge their worldview. They also have mentors and guides on the journey to help them navigate the challenges, both emotionally and cognitively. Their mindset does not make them the perfect accomplices. They still have gaps in their knowledge. They still make mistakes and get stuck in their own insecurities. But their mindset keeps them on the road of growth. They accept that their effort toward accompliceship will be life-long and they are pointed in the right direction.

Recommendations for Educators

The following section addresses how educators, both faculty and administrators, can use these findings to impact their work with White students. The findings in this study can inform how educators design approaches and programs to support and challenge White students toward a greater commitment to racial justice. I explore several of these opportunities below. First, since experiences and new learning are processed and mediated by the *Emerging Accomplice Mindset*, a clear implication from this study is to encourage and strengthen the characteristics of curiosity, agency, empathy, acceptance of discomfort, and persistence in the journey in White students. Additionally, the importance of mentors, role models, and supportive community emerged as an important finding, thus educators can prioritize mentoring and supporting White students who show interest in racial justice. Educators can also leverage campus demographics to create opportunities for reflection on White identity. Finally, it is critical to move conversations from the personal to the systemic and challenge the good/bad binary if we want White students to move forward in their growth as emerging accomplices. I explore each of these opportunities for praxis in this section, followed by sections on recommendations for White students, policy-makers, and researchers.

Develop and Nurture the Mindset

As the *Mindset* is the lynchpin of the model, my primary recommendation centers on strengthening the characteristics of the *Mindset* in White students. To nurture the *Mindset* characteristics, practitioners must foster a culture of curiosity and engage students intellectually; foster a culture of empathy and engage the heart; normalize discomfort; and provide space and grace to grow along a life-long journey. I discuss each of these aspects here.

Foster a Culture of Curiosity and Engage the Mind

Educators, both faculty and administrators, must cultivate classroom and campus norms where students are encouraged to explore new information in ways that allow for questioning and wrestling with knowledge. A culture that centers this type of curiosity can acknowledge the difficulty of questioning deeply held ideologies and allow for growth to take place over time. We should not require, nor expect, immediate understanding or instant integration, but allow for questions and mistakes along the way. This aligns with Leonardo's (2009) call to teach White students "aggressively and yet tenderly" (p. 122). These types of environments create space for curiosity to flourish. Institutions of higher education are unique places where a culture of curiosity can thrive as exploration of knowledge is an integral part of the mission.

If a culture of curiosity is cultivated, then faculty can draw on the strengths of the curiosity *Mindset* by naming whiteness and exposing systems of oppression within their curriculum. Some disciplines already center ideas of equity and social justice. But every discipline can incorporate curricula that serve to challenge the hegemony of whiteness, from the scholars and authors centered in the syllabus, to the ways discussions are held and knowledge is disseminated. Many universities are adopting diversity requirements into the curriculum, but how are these courses discussing whiteness? Some are simply providing an opportunity to learn about a culture or historical tradition in hopes that White students walk away enriched in some nebulous way. Breaking down systems of oppression requires more than appreciation of other cultures. It requires naming and then dismantling systems of whiteness. These courses must discuss power, privilege, and whiteness. Courses and programs that focus on moving conversations about racism from the personal toward the systemic can strengthen curiosity while disarming personal defensiveness and paving the way forward toward justice.

Naming and educating about whiteness must be done strategically, given the reality of white fragility and reactive defenses such as white ignorance and innocence. Several scholars have important ideas on how to do this in a way that might move White students toward growth, especially if these students are approaching with an open, curious mind. Zembylas (2012, 2018) and Matias and Zembylas (2014) proposed a pedagogy of discomfort which centered humanizing solidarity and can challenge dominant identities in an environment of strategic empathy and critical compassion. Similarly, Leonardo and Porter (2010) proposed a hermeneutic of empathy that creates an environment that is safe-enough for White students to take risks. The findings in this study support these proposals. The participants experienced growth in environments where they could engage their mind and wrestle with new truths in a way that did not feel so threatening as to engage the White defensiveness that we see in the fragility literature. The intellectual learning that the participants have experienced has changed them and changed the trajectory of their lives. This was only able to happen in an environment that fostered their curiosity and framed the journey of inner-wrestling and discomfort as a hopeful and liberating journey. This type of personal reflection and learning cannot happen in a culture that centers fear or blame. This is where the strength of empathy can be leveraged.

Foster a Culture of Empathy and Engage the Heart

Beyond the intellect, we must engage students' hearts. To avoid a culture of fear or blame, educators must also center empathy and help White students connect with other motivating emotions such as love, care, and even anger. The work of racial justice is motivated from the heart. I firmly believe critical, humanizing love is the only way to sustain racial justice work in the long run. Intellectual understanding is critical for understanding complex systems

and for moving beyond individual morality conversations, but empathy and love are critical for sustaining the hard work of disentangling oneself from whiteness.

Educators must embrace, teach, and model an ethic of love because domination, oppression, and injustice cannot coexist with love (hooks, 2001). Along with other scholars, I propose pedagogies of strategic empathy and critical love as essential to the project of anti-racism (hooks, 2001; Matias & Allen, 2013; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Zembylas, 2012). As Zembylas (2012) argued, “anti-racist pedagogies...are essentially pedagogies of emotion” (p. 118). Educators need to consider White students’ emotional reactions, “reevaluate the moral undertones of our pedagogies..., [and work] tactically” (Zembylas, 2012, p. 113) to address them. Critique alone is not adequate to address the deeply socialized emotions of resistance in White students. Strategic empathy involves efforts to avoid alienating students too early so that educators can empathetically work with their discomfort in order to gradually move them toward anti-racist commitment (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). It is empathy as a tool for justice; empathy that sees the humanity in the other. This is a radical approach involving radical empathy and radical, humanizing love.

I am not arguing for an empathy that protects or seeks to provide comfort. I am arguing for a pedagogy of discomfort (Zembylas, 2012, 2018) rooted in critical love (hooks, 1994, 2001).

As Matias and Allen (2013) described,

A critical praxis of love is born of a painful process...For those of oppressor groups, it is about self-enlisting in a painful process of learning how one contributes to the sadistic infliction of trauma on others. It is about coming to terms with how being a part of an oppressor group and participating in their sadomasochism is traumatic to them such that they “forfeit their chance to be happy” (hooks, p. 83). Learning to replace dehumanization with love, a love that pays forward with further and further humanization of all, is the goal. (p. 293)

For White people, embracing humanizing love involves the willingness to look at how we contribute to harm, because love cannot exist without justice (hooks, 2001). Empathy motivates. It allows the pain of others to affect you, to become your pain. It hurts. It is deeply humanizing. Empathy is also courageous and vulnerable. It centers others and it does not always feel powerful. It leaves you open to attack. Empathy is not what we often do anymore. In the current, divisive political environment, we more often seek to win. We fight. We fear. We blame. Empathy, on the other hand, is humility in emotional form. This approach is one rooted in humanizing love, a radical love for others that draws people together (Matias & Allen, 2013). This is a hopeful and beautiful way to imagine the world that is possible when whiteness is not at the center. And, with hooks (1994), I argue that the call to love is a call to participate in our own path to freedom. And that path is not always comfortable.

Normalize Discomfort

It is important that students learn that discomfort is part of the process and does not signal problems, but, in fact, signals possibilities. This can be done simply by naming the reality of discomfort and reminding students that issues of race and racism touch on tender identities and firmly entrenched ideologies. The power of the White supremacist colonialist capitalist patriarchy is real, so of course it will be uncomfortable for White students to decolonize their hearts and minds. The role of mentors and role models can be critical here. This path of growth is deeply personal, emotional, and human, and it takes community to support the journey of growth the participants are on. White educators can model the acceptance of discomfort by sharing their emotions and struggles with students. We can be vulnerable and share how we do not have it all figured out yet either and how our biases and emotions sometimes get in the way of helpful action. In this, we are also modeling persistence by showing that even though we may be many

years down the road and possess more knowledge, we are still White people, in White bodies, navigating our deeply ingrained White socialization. Mentors and role models can model agency through their own actions of taking accountability and responsibility for their whiteness, their mistakes, and their dominant identities. White mentors can model the way and be transparent with White students about their journey so that they can have realistic expectations for their own. We must model for students that it is ok to feel uncomfortable. We must teach that discomfort is natural and human. They must learn to expect it and not be surprised by it.

Provide Space and Grace to Grow

In addition to engaging the heart and mind, and normalizing discomfort, educators must allow for growth over time. This journey toward accompliceship is life-long. No White college student will be perfect. We must teach students that they will make mistakes and that does not mean they are “bad,” but that mistakes simply indicate areas of further growth on a life-long journey. This truth is perhaps the most difficult to accept. The pain and pervasiveness of racism are pressing upon us now. People are suffering. It is hard to hear that we need to wait for White people to catch up. But this is how growth happens, over time. The participants in this study are experiencing this growth over time. Some shared stories of how they reacted to things their first year and how they would react differently now that they have learned more and done more internal work. We must leave time and space for this learning. And this is understandably difficult for the BIPOC activists and White accomplices who are on the front lines combating whiteness every day. However, it reflects the reality of the world we live in right now and underscores the insidious grip of whiteness on White college students; a grip that takes time to disentangle. The sooner educators can accept this, the sooner we can spend our energy on things that are possible instead of demanding the impossible from White young adults.

Educators need to provide opportunities for White students to engage at different levels to learn about whiteness and racism. We must meet them where they are coming from and work on helping them down the path. Some students need to start by accepting white privilege. Others come in ready to be challenged on their complicity. And still others arrive ready to take action but need mentorship on how to do that appropriately. Educators may need to use different strategies to address different readiness levels. The participants in this study held marginalized identities, already had a strong sense of empathy, and were ready to be challenged more deeply on issues like complicity. A different approach may be needed for straight, cis-gender men in order to develop their empathy and understanding. Sometimes we will see huge steps forward, like with Sage. Sometimes we will merely plant seeds, that others will water, only to bloom years later. But higher education can lay the foundation for a lifetime of forward movement for White students.

By working to nurture the *Mindset* characteristics discussed here, educators can put students on that hopeful path toward unlearning their whiteness. Engaging with both the mind and the heart, naming whiteness, normalizing discomfort, and providing space to grow can help White students develop the tools they need to navigate their own journey toward accompliceship. Other implications for practice from this study include addressing campus racial demographics and prioritizing systemic issues over personal issues.

Leverage Campus Demographics Where Appropriate

An interesting finding in this study was that Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCUs) can provide an environment that challenges identity in White students in formative ways, especially when those White students come from more diverse environments. This finding provides an interesting opportunity for educators at such institutions to frame conversations and

encourage reflection on what whiteness looks like and how all White students, regardless of background are implicated in whiteness. Students from diverse backgrounds can then be challenged to reflect on how they fit in at an HWCU in ways that BIPOC friends from their high school might not. This is an overlooked opportunity to engage White students in conversations around whiteness.

Move Conversations from Personal to Systemic

The final implication for educators I want to highlight is the importance of dispelling the good/bad binary. As students are able to let go of the defensiveness involved in personal moral indictments, they are able to start really grappling with their complicity. CWS scholars (Cabrera et al., 2016, 2017; Leonardo, 2009) argue that White people must move past white ignorance and innocence claims. Foste (2019) and others (Cabrera, 2012; Ford & Orlandella, 2015; Foste & Irwin, 2020) call for a pedagogy of complicity to move White students forward. To get to complicity, students must stop seeing it as an assault on their character, on the very core of their being. White students need to understand that racism is less of an individual moral failure and much more an intergenerational, societal moral failure. As they accept this, they are freed to focus on being part of the solution instead of feeling blamed for the problem. Understanding how society has been racially structured and identities have been historically created for oppression, White students can begin to unpack the lies they have been taught.

Educators need to help White students wrestle with their complicity. To do this productively and with integrity, we need to dismantle the good/bad binary in ourselves, too. We too often project blame and anger onto individual White people without complicating the story, which only reinforces the binary in our students. Educators need to model that the good/bad binary is a false and unproductive lie, distracting us from real change and systemic movements

for justice. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) said, “Hunting for racists tends to get us off what we need to correctly understand the workings of racism in society... We are all affected by racialization and racial ideology” (p. xv). We can model moving away from individual moral indictments toward dissecting how the system has set us all up to dehumanize each other. Educators can model the way through critical love, by inviting White students into their full humanity and into the journey of unlearning their socialization into white hegemony. While educators play a significant role in the development of White racial justice accomplices, the students are the central actors and must work to build their commitment and stamina for this journey, as well.

Recommendations for White Students

This section speaks directly to White students interested in racial justice and how they can use the findings from this study to further their journey as an accomplice. I have three primary recommendations. First, think systemically. Second, choose empathy. Third, find community.

Think Systemically

Throw away any notion of a good/bad binary reality. Reality is much more complex. A critical step on the road toward accomplice actions is to move your thinking away from the personal and individual, and toward the systemically imbedded reality of racism. Take classes that address systemic social injustice. Sign-up for workshops and other programs where you can be exposed to new perspectives on how racism operates. If you focus on whiteness as a system you were socialized into and not solely a personal moral failing, you can be freed from defensiveness to pursue growth. As DiAngelo said, “Entering the conversation with this understanding is freeing because it allows us to focus on *how*—rather than *if*—our racism is manifest” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 129). You must accept the discomfort of knowing you are

complicit in racist structures, even if you have the best of intentions. Then you will be free to focus energy on the work of creating more justice in the world. Part of the accomplice journey includes deep reflection on how you have been socialized into whiteness. Feel your feelings, explore your reactions and motivations, but do not let that reflection turn into self-serving navel-gazing. And even as you reflect, frame your thinking on how you show up within systems of white hegemony and how you can disrupt and subvert those systems.

Choose Empathy

As you pursue greater intellectual understanding of how systems of inequity work, do not forget to keep your heart engaged. Make the choice to lean into empathy. Practice perspective-taking. Look beyond your point of view and try to think about how others, especially BIPOC folks, might be experiencing the world. While you will never know exactly what it is like for BIPOC individuals, try your best to put yourself in their shoes and imagine how that might feel. Engage your emotions. Resist the temptation to over-intellectualize. Let yourself be led by your heart. And be humble. Empathy is humility in emotional form; it listens and believes the experiences of others.

Find Community

Find like-minded friends, role models and mentors. Do not attempt this journey alone. Individualism is a hallmark of whiteness and it must be resisted. To do this work alone is antithetical to the mission of anti-racism and goal of humanizing love. We are meant to be connected in community with others. Know it will take time to unravel your socialization into whiteness and make sure you are on the journey with others who will both challenge you and support you when you make a mistake. Cultivate authentic, mutually beneficial relationships with BIPOC people in your life. These are not token friendships to make you feel like a good

ally. Authentic relationships are grounded in true care and mutual investment in one another. Authentic friends can speak truthfully, with both challenge and support. In the end, the journey may be long, but well worth it when done with others in loving community.

Recommendations for Policy

The following section explores recommendations for policymakers based on my findings. This study reveals the benefits of campus initiatives that challenge White students within supportive and diverse environments. If intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas is a critical aspect of enabling White students to wrestle with systemic oppression and their place within white hegemony, then we must create policies that support the exploration of different ideas, ideologies, and ways of thinking about the world. With an unprecedented 21 bills introduced in 13 states (and still rising) since December 2022, state legislatures around the country are attempting to legislate white fragility by writing color-evasiveness into education law (Lu, 2023b). Under the guise of nondiscrimination, they are arguing that exploring critical race theory is the problem and that naming inequities in the system is what divides us. For example, Florida is attempting to prohibit colleges from funding diversity initiatives, intimidate faculty with post-tenure reviews, and ban gender studies majors (Diep, 2023; Whittington, 2023); West Virginia is attempting to ban diversity statements in hiring and mandatory diversity trainings (Lu, 2023a; *WV - HB3503*, n.d.); and Texas has introduced a bill that would “prohibit the funding, promotion, sponsorship, or support of offices that support the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion.” (Lu, 2023a; Tepper, n.d.). This is white fragility in governmental form and only serves to enshrine fragility and color-evasive ideologies further into our culture of hegemonic whiteness.

Instead of creating laws that ban ideologies, theories, or scholars, higher education must fight for spaces to explore those ideologies and thinkers. Lawmakers, instead, should name the importance of exploring how our past societal failings continue to influence our present reality. Policy makers must abandon the outdated idea that education should serve as a propaganda machine to create patriots through a one-sided narrative of U.S. history and values (Evans, 2004). We must face our history head-on. It is the only way we can hope to heal the scars of the past. There was a time when higher education was viewed largely as a public good, meant to educate and equip future leaders in service of society (Labaree, 1997). While this originally meant serving White society, I argue that now it must mean serving the diverse needs of a diverse society with a problematic history of power and oppression. Thus, instead of dismantling diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) offices, statements, and trainings, policy makers should increase funding for such efforts. Perhaps then White students who become White law- and policymakers will not be so afraid of our history. And higher education can become a public good for *all* of the public.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can explore how to effectively develop the *Mindset* characteristics in White students. Researchers can explore how to foster a greater sense of agency, to help students strengthen the ability to take responsibility for their positionality and not claim innocence or ignorance. As the ability to tolerate discomfort is a key aspect for these emerging accomplices, researchers can study ways to help White students increase their ability to sit with discomfort to build the needed emotional stamina to engage in race conversations. Additionally, future studies can explore what types of environments might foster greater curiosity and empathy. As this study

was limited in scope to only eleven participants, the model would benefit from being studied with other students' experiences to see if it applies beyond my limited sample.

Further research is also needed on what constitutes the *safe-enough* environment where White students can be challenged to face their identities in difficult ways while not pushing them into disengagement. We need approaches that can deal with the messiness of human identity, power, privilege, domination, oppression, and emotions. We need more complex strategies that can help us engage individual White students in systemic understandings and empower them to dismantle white hegemony.

Additionally, there are interesting opportunities for researchers related to intersecting identities. Even though it was not my goal or study design, all the participants in this study identified along the queer spectrum and only one identified as a cisgender man. Thus, future research can explore how educators can leverage these marginalized identities in White students to create more understanding, empathy and connection with racial struggles. Furthermore, researchers need to explicitly study how racial justice commitment is developed in students without any marginalized identities, to explore how, and if, the model aligns with the experiences of straight, cis-male, White students. We need to know more about how to engage that population of students, and unfortunately, my study might not speak to that group.

Another interesting avenue for future research would be a longitudinal study with the same participants after they leave college to explore how and if this process of growth continues outside of the higher education environment.

Limitations

While the goal of this study was to explore how White students grow in their commitment to racial justice in college, the findings in this study are limited to the eleven

participants and cannot be generalized beyond this study. A much broader grounded theory study would be needed to move the findings toward a formal theory of White accomplice development. Additionally, as discussed above, the participants' sexual and gender identities are interesting to note. No one identified as straight and seven of the eleven participants identified as cis-women and only one identified as a cis-man, with the remaining three identifying as trans*, non-binary, and questioning. It is difficult to conclude how these identities impacted the study, as they were not a focal point of my study design, other than to note the nuances involved added to the complexity of identity growth in how the participants integrate marginalized and dominant aspects of identity. Thus, the findings here are even more limited if thinking about how they might impact straight cis-men or straight cis-women.

Another limitation is my novice status as a researcher. In this study, I was learning the intricacies of the method as I was applying it. Only closer to the end of the study did I really discover the value and role that memo writing and journaling play. If I ran this study again, I would use those tools more fully from the beginning, which perhaps could lead to more developed findings. Additionally, a more seasoned researcher might have asked different follow-up questions in the interviews, potentially leading to more nuanced conclusions, as well.

A final limitation to note was the lack of exploration of how current events in the U.S. may have impacted the participants. As this study was designed to focus narrowly on college experiences, I did not intentionally explore the broader political climate with the participants. Topics like the Black Lives Matter movement, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Donald Trump, and the impact of social media came up in the interviews, but only tangentially in relation to events or conversations happening on campus. Given the significant impact these events have had on Americans across the country, I am certain they were part of the overall picture of growth

for the participants in this study, as well. The research questions and time constraints for this study simply did not allow for exploring these impacts further.

The final section of this chapter explores my own personal reflections on the process of conducting this research and how I wrestled with my own identity and insecurities as a White researcher committed to racial justice.

Personal Reflection

The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom.

– bell hooks

When I began this doctoral program, I identified as a White person committed to racial justice. I knew I still had growing to do, but I had no idea how much deep, personal work this program and this research topic would require of me. Looking back at the journey, I feel grateful. This project has challenged me, stretched me, and helped me find myself and my voice. I feel more confident of my place in the work of racial justice now. And I feel my head and heart more aligned than ever before.

In Chapter 3, I shared how I utilized methodological self-consciousness for this study, especially through journaling. Throughout this project I questioned myself. Was I a “good enough” critical scholar? Was I being too easy on my White student participants? Should I focus more on how they are creating harm and not glorify their small steps of growth? I consulted friends and mentors. I journaled. I felt afraid of critique, especially from BIPOC scholars and mentors. I was afraid of not being good enough, not critical enough, or too positive or hopeful. As an example, a journal entry from around the midpoint of data collection and analysis reads:

I want to see the good things in the students and in White folks because I am sick of the negative. I feel beaten down by the fucked up stuff. By the lack of hope. The lack of love. The lack of justice. I am looking for hope. Is that such a bad thing? But I can't let my longing for harmony, love, and justice tint my view with rose colored glasses. We can't gloss over the prejudice. We must. I must shine a light in the darkness. Expose unjust ways of being. Unjust and oppressive whiteness. But I can't just shine the light and say "Look! How fucked up!" - I need to find hope, find pathways forward... This feels like a tension in my work. In my accompliceship. Do accomplices just expose or do they rebuild? Do they shine a light on a path forward? I must. To be congruent with my heart. And I can't sustain in this work unless I am congruent with my heart...

Am I being too easy on these White students? Maybe. But my RQs [research questions] are not about how are they perpetuating whiteness. My RQs are about how are they challenging and growing in ability to challenge whiteness. It might not be good enough...but they are 20. If they are on the journey...where might they be by 30 or 40? But again is that giving them a pass? I lean on Matias, Zembylas, hooks...love calls for justice AND love sees the humanity of others. Humanizing love. Strategic empathy. Or just plain empathy. Maybe for BIPOC it is more strategic, more of a choice. For me it is easier. I empathize with the human in front of me. I have that gift. That heart. So I want to use that gift to push change. To infiltrate the system like la paperson.

I asked myself hard questions throughout this project. And I came face-to-face with my own fragility and insecurities. I was scared to do it wrong. I was scared to be rejected from the family of scholars I have felt at home with over these past five years. I wrestled with my motivation. But the wrestling was worth it. It made my research better and it made me better. It set me on a path of healing in new ways. Healing from my fear of the judgment of others. Healing from my fear of never being a good enough White person.

What I know now is that even the idea of "good enough" is rooted in whiteness. The pressure to perform, to prove oneself, to achieve, to strive to be more and do more, are all reflections of my socialization into whiteness. As I work to unpack that, I have learned that my approach to research and activism has to line up with my heart, who I am at my core. I recognize that as a White person I can work for justice in a different way than BIPOC folx. I do not think everyone should do racial justice work the way I do, but through this project, I am learning to come into alignment with myself. I feel more free to be me, knowing that I do not have to be

perfect. I will never be perfect. I just have to be me. And that is enough. And if others choose to critique, that is fine. I know there are valid critiques. And I know not everyone will see the work with White students the way I do. And that is ok.

I am embracing what Leonardo (2009) said about White racial justice accomplices: “Taken strategically, critical pedagogy must forge a third space for neo-abolitionist whites as neither enemy nor ally but a concrete subject of struggle, an identity which is ‘always more than one thing, and never the same thing twice’” (p. 186). I am working on settling into that third space for myself. I will always have the benefit of immunity from racial oppression. I will always carry whiteness in my bones. As long as neoliberal capitalist patriarchy is twisted up with White power, I will always inhabit a complicated body and a complicated heart. Moving forward, my mind will always see through eyes socialized in whiteness yet overlaid with critical imagination. I imagine a better future, a better way of being with those around us. As Duncan-Andrade (2009) said, “there are always cracks in the concrete” (p. 186). I will be looking for those cracks. For me, this is love as the practice of freedom.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a discussion of my findings in conversation with the relevant literature, theoretical framework, and research questions, as well as recommendations for educators, students, policymakers, and researchers. When seen through the lens of CWS and White emotionality literature, the Development of Emerging White Accomplices model becomes more nuanced. The participants are both challenging White dominance in alignment with CWS concepts, as well as enacting problematic concepts like white fragility and struggling with the appropriate use of White power. Additionally, the study findings speak to the research questions in important ways, highlighting the importance of moving White students toward systemic

conversations about racism and the especially helpful role that coursework plays in that. The findings also provide insight for educators, students, policymakers, and researchers. Educators can help White students develop and deepen a commitment to racial justice by strengthening the *Mindset* characteristics. White students must also do their part by thinking more systemically, nurturing a heart of empathy, and doing the work in community. Policymakers should increase funding for DEI initiatives, capitalizing on the intellectual exploration of the college environment to support campuses in serving the public good by dismantling whiteness in higher education. Finally, I shared my own personal reflection, concluding that (along with all White people), I will always inhabit a complicated body and I will always be on my own journey as I strive to leave fear behind and embrace love in pursuit of freedom.

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APPENDIX A: EMAIL TO INFORMANT NETWORKS

Greetings *[name]*,

My name is Ellie Ash-Balá and I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University in the Higher Education Leadership program. I am conducting a research study on White students who are committed to racial justice. The Principal Investigator is Dra. Susana Muñoz-Rodriguez and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

I am reaching out today to ask for your assistance in recruiting participants for my study. I am seeking participants who identify as White, are committed to racial justice, and are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in the U.S. Would you be willing to send out a recruitment email on my behalf to any of your listservs or networks that you feel might include qualified participants?

I have attached my recruitment email here, so you can read more about my study and what I will be initially asking of potential participants. Please let me know if you have any questions or if you would like to connect over phone or zoom to discuss possibilities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Ellie Ash-Balá

Co-Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate
ecashbala@colostate.edu

* Attachment: Appendix B

APPENDIX B: INITIAL RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Greetings,

My name is Ellie Ash-Balá and I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University in the Higher Education Leadership program. I am conducting a research study on White students who are committed to racial justice. The Principal Investigator is Dra. Susana Muñoz-Rodríguez and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

I am recruiting participants who identify as White, are committed to racial justice, and are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in the U.S. If this fits you and you are interested in participating or in finding out more information please complete the brief screening questionnaire (3-5 minutes) link at the bottom of this email.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

I will be asking for your name, email, school name, year in school, racial identity, gender, and sexual orientation. When I report and share the data with others, I will combine the data from all participants. I will keep your data confidential; your name and personal data will be kept separately on a password protected drive accessible only to the research team. The only exception to this is if I am asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

While there are no direct benefits to you, I hope to gain more knowledge on how White students grow as racial justice accomplices while in college and how they navigate emotions in the process. The questionnaire will also ask if you are willing to participate in a zoom interview with me to explore your experiences. Each participant who participates in an interview will be provided a \$25 Amazon or Starbucks gift card (your choice) as a thank you for your time.

There are no known risks associated with completing this questionnaire. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

To indicate your willingness to participate in this research and to continue on to the survey, click here: <insert link>.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me at eashbala@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

Dra. Susana Muñoz-Rodríguez
Principal Investigator
Associate Professor

Ellie Ash-Balá
Co-Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX C: SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Are you a White college student who cares about racial justice? Interested in being interviewed about your experiences for a research study?

<CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE>*

** Link will direct to a webpage with the full text of “Appendix B – Initial Recruitment Email.” From there, interested participants can click on the link to take the intake survey.*

APPENDIX D: INTAKE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Contact Information:

Your FIRST Name: [text box]

Your Email: [text box]

Your Pronouns (optional): [text box]

Demographics:

Racially, do you identify as White? [yes/no]

Are you currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in the U.S.? (If you just graduated this spring, please select yes.) [yes/no]

[If no] Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

[If yes, proceeds to the following questions]

What institution do you currently attend? [text box]

What year in school are you: [first year, second year, third year, fourth year, fifth year or more]

Sexual Orientation (optional): [text box]

Gender Identity (optional): [text box]

Screening Questions:

To what degree do you agree with the following statements? [strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree]

- I identify as a racial justice ally/advocate/accomplice.
- I have spoken up and taken action on issues related to racial justice.
- I have thought a lot about what it means to be White in the U.S.
- White people in the U.S. experience unearned privileges.
- Racism is largely an issue of individual attitudes and prejudice.
- Racism is largely a systemic issue that discriminates against, and limits opportunities for, People of Color.

Are you interested in participating in a 60-90 minute interview over Zoom to discuss your experiences in college related to being a racial justice advocate? (Someone will reach out to you via email if you indicate yes or request more information.)

[yes, no, maybe/I'd like more information]

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW INVITATION EMAIL

Greetings *[name]*,

You recently completed a questionnaire for my research study on White students' commitment to racial justice. I am following up because you indicated interest in participating in a zoom interview for this study. Thank you for your interest.

I anticipate the interview will take approximately one hour. You will be asked several questions related to your own experiences as a White college student in learning about race/racism and developing a commitment to racial justice. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time.

While there are no direct benefits to you, I hope to gain more knowledge on how White students grow as racial justice accomplices while in college and how they navigate emotions in the process. Each participant who completes an interview will be provided a \$25 Amazon or Starbucks gift card (your choice) as a thank you for your time.

Possible risks include emotional discomfort due to recounting challenges related to white privilege, racial guilt, and the journey of becoming a racial justice ally. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

Please reply to this email and let me know that you are still interested or if you have any questions. You may also provide me with times that will work well for your schedule for the interview. If not, I will follow up with an email with possible times.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me at eashbala@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

Dra. Susana Muñoz-Rodríguez
Principal Investigator
Associate Professor

Ellie Ash-Balá
Co-Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL A

Pre-Interview Script:

Hello *[name]*.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview with me today. As I said in the recruitment email, I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University in the Higher Education Leadership program.

I anticipate this interview will take approximately one hour. I will ask you several questions related to your own experiences as a White college student in learning about race/racism and developing a commitment to racial justice. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time.

To protect your identity, you will be given the choice to choose a different name by which you will be identified in the research project. I will be recording this interview for audio transcription. All recordings and transcripts will be kept confidential on a password protected drive accessible only me and my advisor. The only exception to this would be if I am asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the Colorado State Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary. In addition, since I am providing small compensation for this interview, the Colorado State financial management team may also request an audit of research expenditures. For financial audits, only the fact that you participated would be shared, not any research data.

While there are no direct benefits to you, I hope to gain more knowledge on how White students grow as racial justice accomplices while in college and how they navigate emotionality in the process. This knowledge can be used to inform educators who work with White students in higher education. As a thank you for your time you will be provided a \$25 Amazon or Starbucks gift card (your choice) for participating in this interview.

Possible risks to you include emotional discomfort due to recounting challenges related to white privilege, racial guilt, and the journey of becoming a racial justice ally. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

Would you like to participate?

[If yes, proceed to questions. If no, thank them for their time and end interview.]

Interview Questions:

3. Intro questions to establish rapport and personal connection: Tell me a little about yourself? Where are you from? What is your major?
4. How do you understand/define racism?
 - a. [If relevant] How did you come to understand racism as a systemic reality and not just personal bad actors?
5. How have you grown/changed in your understanding of racism while in college?
 - a. What experiences contributed to that growth?
6. In thinking about your White identity, how have you grown or developed while in college?
 - a. What experiences contributed to your growth?
7. What has made it difficult or challenging to engage in issues of race and racism on campus?
 - a. Have you experienced emotional reactions (such as guilt, defensiveness, fear, shame, anger, etc.) when you have engaged in conversations about race and racism?
 - b. If so, how did you deal with those emotions?
8. Can you tell me about a time when someone told you that you did/said something racist or racially harmful? How did you feel? How did you react?
 - a. [Alternatively] Can you tell me about a time when you realized that you were implicated in racism because you are White? How did you feel? How did you react?
9. What drives your commitment to racial justice?
 - a. What keeps you engaged and committed to growth in spite of the challenges?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about these topics that I haven't asked about?

Post-Interview Script:

Thank you so much for your time today. I will be transcribing this interview and I plan to email you the transcript. If you have time, I would appreciate it if you could read it over and reply to me with any corrections or clarifications. I do this because I want to ensure that I have accurately captured your story. It is not required that you do this, however.

Also, as a thank you for your time, I will email you a link to a \$25 gift card to either Amazon or Starbucks. Which would you prefer?

And finally, part of the process for my data collection might involve circling back around to discuss some of my developing ideas with you to see if they resonate with your experience or not. If that is the case, you'll receive an email from me requesting an additional interview. Just like with this interview, your participation is voluntary and not required. Simply reply and let me know either way.

Do you have any questions for me about this study before we log off? If you think of any, please feel free to email me.

APPENDIX G: POST-INTERVIEW FOLLOW-UP EMAIL

Hello *[name]*,

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me on *[DATE]* and share about your experiences and growth as a White person interested in racial justice. I enjoyed our time together. As I mentioned, I am emailing you the attached transcript of your interview. If you have time, please review the transcript and notify me of any corrections or additions that you would like to make. While reviewing the transcript is not required, it will help me ensure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and experiences. I appreciate your time and willingness to contribute to this important research.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Best,

Ellie Ash-Balá

Co-Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate
eashbala@colostate.edu

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL B – ADJUSTED QUESTIONS

Interview Questions – part 2:

1. Intro questions to establish rapport and personal connection: Tell me a little about yourself? Where are you from? How did you choose X school? What is your major?
2. Tell me about how you came to **your commitment to racial justice**?
 - a. Have there been any important events (or people) that have influenced your commitment?
 - b. How as this commitment changed/shifted while in college? What experiences in college have driven that change/shift?
3. On the survey, when asked if racism was an issue of individual attitudes and/or systemic issue, you put XXX.
 - a. Tell me about why you chose that?
 - b. *[If relevant]* Tell me more about how you came to understand racism as a systemic reality and not just personal bad actors?
 - c. What experiences in college have contributed to your understanding of racism as systemic?
4. How does your understanding of systemic racism impact your feelings about your White identity?
 - a. *[Alternatively]* How does it feel to know that you are complicit/implicated in racism/racist structure?
 - b. How does it impact your commitment and actions regarding racial justice?
5. On the survey, when asked about reflecting on your White identity, you said XXXXX, tell me more about that.
 - a. What experiences in college have contributed to your understanding of whiteness?
6. Have you experienced emotional reactions (such as guilt, defensiveness, fear, shame, anger, etc.) when you have engaged in conversations about race, racism, whiteness?
 - a. If so, how did you deal with those emotions?
 - b. What helps you process those emotions and keep engaging?**
7. Can you tell me about a time when someone told you that you did/said something racist or racially harmful? How did you feel? How did you react?
 - a. *[Alternatively]* Can you tell me about a time when you realized that you were implicated in racism because you are White? How did you feel? How did you react?
 - b. What keeps you engaged and committed to growth in spite of the challenges?**
8. On the survey, you said XXXX, when ask if you'd taken action/spoke up about racial justice. Tell me about that.
9. Is there something else you think I should know about these topics that I haven't asked about?
10. Would like to be identified by a different first name in my dissertation? If so, what name would you prefer?
11. Starbucks or Amazon?

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL C – ADJUSTED QUESTIONS

Interview Questions – part 3:

1. Intro questions to establish rapport and personal connection: Tell me a little about yourself? Where are you from? How did you choose X school? What is your major?
2. Tell me about how you came to **your commitment to racial justice**?
 - a. How as this commitment changed/shifted while in college?
3. On the survey, when asked if racism was an issue of individual attitudes and/or systemic issue, you put XXX. Tell me about why you chose that?
4. **How does your understanding of racism as systemic impact how you feel about being White? OR How does that make you feel as a white person, knowing that racism is built into our systems?**
 - a. How does it impact your commitment and actions regarding racial justice?
5. On the survey, when asked about reflecting on your White identity, you said XXXXX, tell me more about that.
6. **How do your other identities impact how you navigate race and your whiteness?**
7. Have you experienced emotional reactions (such as guilt, defensiveness, fear, shame, anger, etc.) when you have engaged in conversations about race, racism, whiteness?
 - a. **What helps you process those emotions and keep engaging?**
8. **What keeps you engaged and committed to growth in spite of the challenges? Why do you stay engaged when it's hard?**
9. On the survey, you said XXXX, when ask if you'd taken action/spoke up about racial justice. Tell me about that.
10. Is there something else you think I should know about these topics that I haven't asked about?
11. Would like to be identified by a different first name in my dissertation? If so, what name would you prefer?
12. Starbucks or Amazon?

APPENDIX J: PARTICIPANT VIGNETTES

While grounded theory methods do not foreground individual stories as other methods do, a critical approach necessitates layering the nuance of individual experience into the theoretical-level findings. Knowing that life experiences and identities shape how we interpret the world, it is important to consider the stories and backgrounds of each participant. The theoretical categories that I developed came from exploring each individual story and using constant comparison techniques to fold each new story into the greater whole as the interviews progressed. Below, I share a vignette of each participant to give the reader a sense of each person individually and to honor their stories.

Alyssa

Alyssa (she/her) is a third-year psychology major with a minor in women and gender studies at a small private school in the South. She grew up in another southern state with very conservative parents, identifies as pansexual, and started questioning some of the beliefs she was raised with during high school. She was influenced by the events surrounding the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests at the end of her senior year of high school, which led her to participate in a local protest for the first time. Hearing testimonies of police brutality at the protest impacted her and open her eyes to systemic racism in a new way. When she entered college, she possessed an emerging commitment to racial justice and a curiosity to understand more. Once on campus, Alyssa chose to participate in opportunities to learn more about racial justice issues and was exposed to new information and new terminology. Terms like intersectionality and anti-racist were new to her. She got a job at the Diversity and Inclusion Office where she developed mentoring relationships with the director, as well as with older

students. She also got a job working for the faculty director of the women and gender studies program. Through these relationships and coursework that exposed her to a wealth of information, she has deepened her understanding of systems of injustice and her place as White in the midst of them.

Dylan

Dylan (he/him) is a fourth-year student at a large public university in the Western U.S. He grew up two and a half hours away from campus in a poor, racially diverse community. Growing up with many financial and family struggles, Dylan entered college wanting to major in a helping profession to assist families like his. His interests in social justice issues centered on family systems and poverty, which led him to choose a major in social work and a minor in sociology. It was not until he took a social work class called “Privilege and Oppression” that he really started to explore his role as White within the larger structures of injustice. He credits his sociology courses with helping him see the deep inequities within systems and giving him a new lens to see the world. Both his social work and sociology classes have helped him complicate identities and experiences, especially as he works to integrate his own dominant White identity with his experience of economic oppression and poverty. During our interview, Dylan was particularly reflective about how he wrestles with emotions and actions within a cycle of guilt, responsibility, action, saviorism, and then guilt again. While not as central to his story, other impactful identities for Dylan include that he is pansexual and a cisgender man.

Elliot

Elliot (she/her) is a second-year student at a large public institution in the western U.S. A first-generation college student, Elliot grew up in a conservative state and wanted to go to college in a different state, looking for what she considered a more balanced education. She

identifies as a queer cisgender woman and was the youngest participant in my study in her second year of college. Elliot grew up in a racially diverse county, had many BIPOC friends, went to diverse schools, and entered the university with a pre-existing concern for social justice issues, including racial justice. Upon entering her university, she felt a sense of “culture shock” at the lack of racial diversity, noticing how few BIPOC students were in her classes. Through involvement with student organizations, Elliot has been able to participate in several social justice protests, both on and off campus. She started college as a psychology major, but has since changed her major to a double major in sociology and political science with a concentration in U.S. government, law, and policy. Elliot is also involved in the Women and Gender Center and the Pride Center on campus. One of the more impactful experiences for her was the program for first-generation students that she participated in her first year, which included a group seminar course, as well as a group living experience. Through that program, she learned more about the importance of identity in navigating college and formed friendships with BIPOC students of color. Her short time at her university has served to strengthen her commitment to racial justice, as well as deepen her understanding of systemic oppression.

Finn

Finn (she/her) is a fourth-year, queer/pansexual, cisgender woman at a small private school in the Midwest. Finn grew up in a city about two hours away from the college she now attends, in the same state. She has majors in music and languages (Spanish and French) with a concentration in law and society. Much of our interview revolved around unpacking her learning from a specific, very impactful incident that has unfolded over the previous six months. Finn unintentionally harmed several BIPOC students by giving their names and contact information to the student newspaper during a drive to unionize student staff positions. Some students,

including Finn, were striking and some, including the BIPOC students, were not. In Finn's mind, her actions were meant to provide them the opportunity to have their voices and perspectives heard on campus. The impact, however, was far from her intention, as she did not consider the privacy issues and racial dynamics involved in giving out BIPOC students' personal information and outing them as not striking. One student, a Black woman, called her out on her actions, saying she felt unsafe having her information shared without her consent. Finn's initial response was defensive, wanting to explain her good intent so as not to be perceived as racist. She ended up participating in a mediated conversation with the Black student that went poorly and things unraveled from there. Over the next few months, Finn sought out feedback from friends and help from student affairs professionals to try and understand what had gone wrong. She spent time reflecting on herself, her language, and her actions. Finn used her own marginalized identities as low-income, queer, and having mental health struggles as a path for building empathy for the BIPOC students. In the end, Finn accepted responsibility for her actions, took accountability steps, apologized to the affected students and is now committed to working more on unpacking her own biases.

Georgie

Georgie (he/they) is a fourth-year geography and Asian studies major with a data science minor at a small private college in the Midwest. Georgie grew up poor in a southern state and identifies as a queer/pansexual transgender man, all of which play a role in the way he has navigated his racial awareness journey. Growing up poor also meant growing up in racially diverse communities, so his arrival at a private college in the Midwest was a culture shock of wealth and whiteness. Georgie entered college with a general commitment to social and racial justice. And while he had thought about race broadly prior to college, he had not really thought

about his White identity before. On campus, he joined a group on unlearning white supremacy where he explored his privilege and power as a White person. He also has friendships with others who have modeled for him how to integrate both marginalized and dominant identities.

Throughout the last few years in school, Georgie has accepted that his trans* and poor identities can coexist with his White identity. A noteworthy part of this complicating of identity is that he is able to use his experiences as a trans* man to connect and empathize with BIPOC people in a new way, while also understanding that there are differences and nuances involved with racial identities.

Laura

Laura (she/her) just finished her fourth, and last, year at a small Catholic college in the Midwest. She double majored in political science and international studies, with minors in environmental studies and theology. Laura grew up in a largely White community near where the university is located and shared that she had not thought much about race or racial justice prior to college. During her time in college, she came to identify as bisexual, which she noted has helped her make sense of her interest in social justice issues, including race. A pivotal, early point in her development was when she was assigned a Black roommate her first year. Laura became friends with her and several other Black women as a result, which connected her with the small Black student community on campus. Laura attended Black Student Union (BSU) meetings after the murder of George Floyd and learned more about broader struggles for racial justice beyond campus. Elected the student body vice president her senior year, Laura strived to use her position to bring about greater racial equity on campus.

Leila

Leila (they/them) is a fourth-year student at a small private school in the Midwest and identifies as a queer non-binary woman. They are a biology major, with other emphases in environmental studies and music. Leila is also a low-income, Jewish student from New York City, which impacts how they engage with issues of social justice. While they entered college with a pre-existing commitment to racial justice, their experience in college has considerably shaped how they understand their own identity as White. Prior to college they did not feel connected with the White, privileged aspect of their identity because they were more connected with their then identity as a cis-woman, and their low-income, Jewish, immigrant family experience in New York. Leila shared that they were very “White feminist” when they entered college, more focused on gender oppression to the exclusion of other identities and intersecting oppressions. Their experiences at their small PWI have helped them understand and accept that they are a part of whiteness and carry both privilege and responsibility due to that identity. They attribute much of this growth to having authentic, trusting friendships with BIPOC students who they were able to receive hard feedback from because they knew those friends cared about their growth.

Monica

Monica (she/her) is a third-year student at a large public university on the west coast. Growing up in a nearby area that is mostly White and Asian, her university experience has exposed her to more Black students, specifically, than ever before. Monica has a chronic illness as well as mental health struggles that inform her empathy and compassion for people. She also identifies as bisexual, although that was not a significant identity that came up in our interview. She entered college with a pre-existing commitment to racial justice due to childhood

involvement in a summer “peace camp,” as well as having liberal parents. Like other participants, Monica pointed to university-level learning as significantly deepening her understanding of racism and systemic oppression. Specifically, Monica discussed the impact of a seminar she attended on unconscious bias as pivotal in her understanding of her own socialization into whiteness. Accepting that she has unconscious bias and understanding where it comes from relieved her of the guilt and anxiety that often comes with accepting a White identity.

Olivia

Olivia (she/her) is a junior ecological engineering major at a large public university in the Pacific Northwest. She grew up in the same state, about an hour away from the university she now attends. Olivia attended a Jewish K-8 school and a Catholic high school, both of which she credits with shaping her pre-existing commitment to social justice issues. Olivia identifies as a bisexual, cisgender, Jewish woman. During her time in college, she has taken the initiative to learn more and continue to deepen her understanding of social justice issues, which has led her to join a student-run social justice book club and participate in a university-run workshop on understanding White identity. She points to these and other experiences as helping her to unpack her White identity and the privileges that come with it and integrate that with her marginalized Jewish identity.

Sage

Sage (they/them) is a third-year student at a small private school in the Southwest. They grew up in a predominantly White city in a different state. Coming to college has dramatically changed the course of Sage’s life. They did not have a prior commitment to racial or social justice and initially planned to major in adventure education. Then, in their first year, they took a

class about the U.S./Mexico border in the fall, followed by a class on prison abolition in the spring, and had a dramatic awakening to the ways systemic injustice perpetuates through corporations and institutions. Sage changed their major to social justice studies, describing how their mind was blown when learning about the deeper structures of injustice. Additionally, after learning more about how race, gender, and sexuality are all socially constructed, Sage describes experiencing an “identity crisis” in realizing their “entire identity is socialized.” They are now exploring their sexuality and gender identity in new ways and describe themselves as questioning in both categories. Even while no longer identifying as straight or cisgender male, Sage recognized that they were socialized in the “most privileged body type.” Due to all of these awakenings, one strong theme in Sage’s college experience has been wrestling with White guilt and how they understand their place in the system. They credit a White mentor/professor, as well as friendships with other White students, as critical components of support in their journey.

Saoirse

Saoirse (she/her) is a third-year student at a large public university in the Pacific Northwest. Coming from a diverse, inner-city high school a few hours away, she entered college with a pre-existing commitment to racial justice and experienced a feeling of culture shock at the predominance of White students at the university. In her first year, Saoirse took an ethnic studies class and a sociology class, which led her to promptly change her major from business to liberal studies, where she designed her own course of study with a focus on public policy, political science, women and gender studies, and sociology. Even though she had mostly BIPOC friends in high school, she described not ever critically thinking about what it meant for her to be White before she got to college. A huge factor in her college experience has been exploring her own whiteness through learning about systemic issues in her courses, as well as exploring

intersectionality while working at the Women and Gender Center on campus. Another significant influence in college has been having a White mentor, who she is able to talk to about navigating her identity as a White woman. Saoirse is grappling with her desire to speak up as a woman, yet not wanting to speak too much or take up too much space as a White person. She credits her White mentor with not only giving her good feedback but also teaching her the importance of “leaning into discomfort” as she feels the pain of her place in the system as a White person.