Understandings of Race and Negotiations of Theory Among Women’s Center Professionals: A Critical Phenomenological Exploration

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

Women’s center professionals, volunteers, and supporters have worked for over 55 years to create opportunities for women, advance gender equity, and dismantle institutional sexism in U.S. higher education. This critical phenomenological study explores how women’s center professionals negotiate their racial and ethnic identities in their work for gender equity as well as how theory critically shapes their experiences.

Two questions are explored:

1. How do women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity related to their roles and work in women’s centers?
2. How do feminist theories inform, support, and/or fail women’s center professionals as they negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work?

Eight participants completed the three stages of this study, which included two in-depth interviews and a journaling exercise; additionally, the researcher engaged in heuristic inquiry, implicating herself directly in knowledge creation. The study is significant for its implications for feminist and antiracist practice and its exploration of the varied and complicated roles of feminist theory and intersectionality in women’s and other identity-based centers.
Dedication

For those who came before and made women’s centers possible

For those who currently work in centers and make center missions come alive

Because of you, the future we dream of and strive for is in the process of becoming

Thank you
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Pursuing my doctoral education and developing, researching, and writing a dissertation has been a marathon experience: I could not have sustained my steady pace nor the final sprint without the support of dozens of colleagues, current and former students, friends, and family members. I am inordinately grateful to the people listed in these acknowledgments as well as those who I may have inadvertently forgotten to list in this section. Without your encouragement, advice, check-ins, “tough talks,” and thousands of other kindnesses, I would not be here.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Women’s center professionals, volunteers, and supporters have worked for over 55 years to create opportunities for women, advance gender equity, and dismantle institutional sexism in U.S. higher education. With declared emphases on safety, education and awareness, support and advocacy, equity, and community (Kunkel, 1994, 2002), as well as leadership, internationalization, and technology (Davie, 2002a), the missions and activities of women’s centers are rooted in feminism and feminist theories (Gould, 1989; Zaytoun Byrne, 2000), particularly intersectionality (Goettsch, Holgerson, Morrow, Rose-Mockry, Seasholes, & Vlasnik, 2015; Goettsch, Linden, Vanzant, & Waugh, 2012;). An understanding of intersectionality—that is, how identities and systems of oppression are interlocking—within women’s centers has caused staff members to more clearly link center activities and missions to struggles against sexism and misogyny and also other antioppression movements in the academy and the community, specifically movements that fight racism, homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, classism, and ableism. While the work of some centers has incorporated intersectionality since their inceptions, these intentional connections are new for others, and it rests upon the individuals who work in women’s centers to declare and define how
intersectionality and feminist theories can enhance the missions and activities of their centers, as well as to enact these theories in their own professional practices.

Women’s center literature explores some of the ways that intersectionality can help practitioners to address and accomplish their center missions. Yet, the current literature is also problematic in that it tends to explore the theory in ways that separate intersectionality from its roots in the scholarship of Black and women of color feminists; it is also limited because it does not systematically examine the intersecting identities of women’s center employees and how their understandings of their intersectional selves inform their professional practices. At conferences in recent years, attention has been given to the “whiteness” of the field and how White women who work in women’s centers can and must do work that is antiracist (e.g., Allington, Chang, Russo, & Washington, 2005; Campos, DiLapi, Graham, Holgerson, Kulton, & LeBel, 2005; Holgerson & Bartlow, 2013; Holgerson & Kulton, 2008). It is in this larger context that I sought to understand how the race and ethnicity of women’s center staff members shape their professional practices, perspectives, and activities in the academy, as well as the role of theory in these understandings. In this study, I asked two questions:

1. How do women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity related to their roles and work in women’s centers?
2. How do feminist theories inform, support, and/or fail women’s center professionals as they negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work?

I focused on how women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity as an acknowledgment that intersectionality “sometimes requires contingent, race-only
methods for antiracist results” (Luft, 2009, p. 100). This “temporary deployment of singular, race-centric methods” (p. 101) inside the intersectional context of women’s centers is a necessary strategy given the current, seeming intractable logic of race and racism in the academy.

**Significance**

This study is significant for many reasons. Women’s centers are important locations of individual support, institutional critique, and transformation related to women’s issues, the “very heart of feminist engagement with the academy” (Marine, 2011, p. 16). And yet, little is know about the likely thousands of staff members whose visions, values, and commitments shape the work of their centers (Marine, 2011), particularly related to antiracist work (DiLapi & Gay, 2002). Importantly, it is not known how contemporary professionals who identify as White understand their whiteness and may be influenced, or not, by Black feminist thought or intersectionality; similarly, there is nothing in the literature that explores the experiences of women of color who work in women’s centers, or if and how women’s center professionals prepare or put forth antiracist visions or positions on behalf of their centers. The older literature does demonstrate that, as of the late 1980s, the majority of staff members were White (Clevenger, 1988), and this notion is often repeated in newer publications (e.g., Bonebright, Cottledge, & Lonnquist, 2012) and at national conferences (e.g., Holgerson & Bartlow, 2013) despite the lack of an updated national survey of women’s center professional demographics. As a result, women of color who work in women’s centers can be overlooked or rendered invisible in women’s center professional groups (e.g.,
Adams, Ambrosio, Burton, Cottledge, Linsenmeyer, & Meman, 2014; Holgerson & Bartlow, 2013) and in the literature by a common story of how “White” women’s center work is, as well as discussions that focus on whiteness and antiracism without putting the lives of Black women or women of color at the center of analysis.

In this study, I directly explored these questions from the literature by inviting women’s center staff members of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to be reflexive about how their personal identities intersect with their professional identities, negotiations, and strategies for making change in the academy. The goal of this reflexivity was to understand the phenomenon of negotiating race in women’s center practice and to uncover new pathways and means by which women’s center professionals might engage in their work. This study contributes to the field because there is scant literature to assist women’s center employees in negotiating their identities in their professional practice, and it is important for its potential to engage in a deeper dialogue with women’s center professionals about the daily negotiations in their work lives and the important purposes of identity-based centers in U.S. higher education.

It is important to note that while women’s center employees are the focus of this study, the research is also significant for higher education professionals engaged in other institutional diversity roles and activities. Cultural, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), disability, and other units dedicated to serving specific populations on campuses as well as chief diversity officers (CDOs) will also benefit from the study’s exploration of difficult and important questions about the identities, perspectives, actions, and experiences of higher education diversity practitioners. These professionals are
charged with advancing their institutions’ diversity agendas yet are rarely studied—or even acknowledged—as individuals with their own complex, diverse, and intersectional identities and experiences. In this study, the experiences of one set of diversity practitioners were examined, offering insight about their perspectives, training, and negotiations of race and ethnicity.

Lastly, I sought to uncover the multiple, varied, and complicated roles of feminist theory in helping women’s center professionals to understand and deepen their work. As feminist practitioners who in many cases have studied theory as well as planned programs that explore it, the literature lacks an examination of how women’s center professionals enact theory in/through their centers. This study explored how theory inform women’s center professionals’ negotiations of their race and ethnicity in their work—a topic that is currently completely absent from the women’s center literature and will also be of use to other areas of higher education administration and student affairs. The study also contributes to the discipline of women’s and gender studies, as it deepens the literature on how theory is practiced and utilized to enact individual, group, and institutional social change.

**Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality, and the Work of Women’s Centers**

Over the past 40 years, women of color feminist scholars have systematically exposed the persistent and ongoing nature of racism—particularly as it interlocks with sexism, classism, and other oppressions—in the academy and in women’s movements (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1999; Collins, 1991; Combahee River Collective, 1982; hooks, 1984; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). Their critiques and
theoretical advances altered the field of women’s studies, and today it is impossible to imagine teaching feminist theory or engaging in feminist research without exploring the theorizing and scholarly contributions of women of color feminist scholars. Among many contributions, Black feminist scholars have, in particular, challenged predominantly White, liberal feminism and worked to place Black women at the center of inquiry and analysis. In the words of Barbara Smith (1980):

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement. (p. 48)

White scholars heard the call for feminists to actively work to dismantle sexism and racism, and they generated a rich body of scholarship that explores White privilege, whiteness, and antiracism (e.g., Bulkin, Pratt, & Smith, 1984; Frankenberg, 1993, 1997; Kendall, 2006; Kimmel, 2002; Lazarre, 1996; McIntosh, 1988; Rich, 1986; Sholock, 2012). As a result of this literature, White women who are feminist scholars and practitioners working in the academy today are asked to consider how they are supporting, serving, and being allies with women of color and also how their whiteness impacts their teaching and research, their activism, their relationships, and their conceptual frameworks for making change in higher education.
Intersectionality also offers critical insights, frameworks, and strategies for antiracist efforts. The term *intersectionality*, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), challenges the essentialist and fragmenting discourse that asks individuals—particularly those who are marginalized—to separate their identities into discrete categories. Intersectionality works from the understanding that we are all of our identities at the same time and that these identities cannot be split off from each other. The theory particularly focuses on women of color, who experience sexism and racism in ways that also cannot be separated. Grillo (1995) reminds us, “But remember, we speak with multiple voices only because we have categories that describe these voices as separate from each other” (p. 18). Intersectionality also considers how an individual’s unique and intersecting identities merge into a single self and create a unique vantage point through which an individual sees, experiences, and interacts with the world.

Over the past three decades, the recognition of intersectionality has changed the field of women’s studies, and the effects on women’s centers have also been noted (Goettsch et al., 2012; Goettsch et al., 2015). Yet, one of the greatest challenges in the field of women’s centers is how little is known about what is currently happening in centers or about how professionals understand the theory. While it is clear that centers are already utilizing intersectionality in at least some of their work, the extent to which intersectionality currently structures the day-to-day activities of centers across the nation is currently unknown. It is also unknown if women’s center professionals truly understand the theory of intersectionality, or if they have internalized it in the abstract, potentially uncritical ways that are of concern to many scholars (e.g., Collins, 2009;
Davis, 2008; Luft, 2009). More research is needed in these areas, and this study aims to contribute to this conversation by examining how women’s center professionals—themselves intersectional individuals—understand and strategize their work within the context of their institutions.

Another important challenge to intersectional work in women’s centers is an institutional structure that frequently does not support this kind of thinking and action. Just as there are few academic centers for intersectional research (Dill, 2009), most women’s centers are not organizationally or structurally designed to provide intersectional resources, advocacy, programming, and activism. Many campuses have separate academic programs for women’s, ethnic, LGBT, and/or disability studies, and most institutions still structure their diversity efforts in separate identity-based centers, programs, and offices. This approach results in a structural fragmenting of identities and social issues that is at odds with the tenets of intersectionality, and relationships among these offices vary greatly across campuses due to their reporting lines, missions, resources, leadership, and institutional mandates about collaboration, as well as the needs of particular campuses. While individual academic disciplines and administrative programs can and should utilize intersectionality in their scholarship, teaching, service, and activism, they do so often at odds with the bureaucracy and hierarchy of their institutions. In practice, intersectional work often persists in spite of rather than because of higher education institutions.

In partnership with cultural and LGBT centers, women’s centers are actively working against this historical inheritance, but the practice—as evidenced by challenging,
frustrating, and sometimes contentious discussions among women’s center professionals—is difficult and largely without a guidebook. It is my hope that this study provides some pathways and support for the professionals who navigate this journey by encouraging them to explore how the theory of intersectionality does or could inform their understandings of their race and ethnicity in their work.

**Situating the Researcher: My Commitments and Subjectivities**

I came to this research topic through 17 years of involvement in three campus-based women’s centers; 13 of those years were as a full-time employee and leader of a center. I began my career after sustained and varied involvement in the largely student-run women’s center at my undergraduate institution, a small Catholic liberal arts college in the upper Midwest. As an undergraduate student majoring in International Studies and Spanish and minoring in Peace and Justice Studies, my understanding of privilege and power was systematically explored in terms of being from the United States (the “West” or the “Global North,” the “developed” or “First World”), and I developed both an understanding of unearned privilege and a commitment to social justice from this education. My undergraduate experiences with my whiteness, however, were limited, and I can think of only two specific sets of experiences that challenged me to understand my racial and ethnic status: when I studied for a semester in Santiago, Chile, and when I worked as the residence hall director for the summer ESL institute. These two undergraduate experiences, while sustained and meaningful in helping me to understand unearned privilege related to national origin, did not help me understand my whiteness as a silent but central aspect of my life and experiences in the United States. In my
undergraduate women’s center, these issues rarely surfaced, and I distinctly remember being asked to write the three identities that were most important in my life and experiences for one of my classes: I wrote “woman, student, U.S. citizen.”

After graduation, I moved to the Deep South to serve as the first full-time professional staff member of the women’s center at the flagship institution in the state. Within days of arriving on campus, my whiteness became central to my experience, as did my youth. If I were to repeat that undergraduate class exercise, I would say that for the 3 and 1/2 years I was at the institution, my race, gender, and age were the three identities that most shaped my life, experiences, and work. In my first year, I entered an intense period of education about race and privilege, aided by the YWCA Dialogues on Race (which I did twice and then got involved in the organization, serving on its Public Policy Committee and eventually the board), coursework in my master’s program, sustained involvement and eventually committee leadership with the Black Faculty & Staff Caucus on campus, and active participation in the Women’s Centers Committee of the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA). I was quickly awakened to my own White privilege, the roles that racism and prejudice played on campus and in the community, and how racism and sexism were institutionalized in the academy. Luckily my undergraduate coursework, while not preparing me to engage in a meaningful way in dialogues about race, helped me to more quickly grasp how race and ethnicity are structured and the impact they have on our lives. My understanding of the unearned privilege of having been born in the United States and how it benefited me helped me to internalize that I similarly benefited from the unearned privilege of being White.
It was during this time that I learned how important it was for White feminist practitioners to read and engage with Black feminist theory, and I learned from others of all racial backgrounds about the gifts of Black feminist thought (e.g., Lemons, 2008). In my own practice, I personally and professionally benefited from my engagement with Black feminist thought through my graduate coursework, independent reading, and engagement with the women’s center programs that I also worked to plan. Specifically, Black feminist thought challenged me to explore the following: the ways in which feminist movements and approaches can be racist and oppressive to women of color; the interconnections of race, class, gender, and sexuality; individual, group, and institutional oppression; history as it was taught to me, including the history of feminism; why it is important to include men—the whole community—in feminist movements; my whiteness, which was ever-present; and my “good intentions,” which were not enough to make me antiracist, among other learning. From antiracist White scholars, who often build from the work of Black and women of color feminist thinkers, I learned ways to enter into the conversation about race and racism in the feminist movement, to deepen my understanding of the individual and personal commitment it takes to uncover and recognize White privilege, and to adopt methods of unlearning my whiteness. The path was difficult and often painful—and it is ongoing.

Critical engagement with Black feminist thought continues to support me as I work to think, act, see, and understand differently. Engaging with this body of theory also increases the likelihood that I am doing my share of the hard work of unlearning racism and whiteness myself, rather than relying on women of color to educate me. I am
informed by Rushin (1983), who penned, “[I’m] sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people” (p. xxi) and agree with Collins (1996), who notes that “the constant drumbeat of having to support white women in their efforts to foster an anti-racist white feminism…diverts black women’s energy away from addressing social issues facing African-American communities” (p. 14). For myself, engagement with Black feminist theory and some of its critical edited texts such as *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull et al., 1982), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Smith, 1983), and *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (Guy-Sheftall, 1995a) provided a starting place as I sought to take responsibility for educating myself.

While I made strides in understanding my racial privilege and how it intersected with my other identities, particularly as a woman, I also made painful mistakes related to my limited understanding of whiteness and the privileges it afforded me. For all of my life, I had been conditioned to believe that my history, views, opportunities, experiences, and thought processes were not only “normal” but also made me a “good person” to whom people should listen. As I slowly learned about privilege, I made many mistakes—small and large—that were harmful to the women’s centers where I worked in building gender equity for all individuals, hurtful to colleagues (particularly colleagues of color), and challenged my personal belief that I was a “good person” and my professional belief that I was doing “good work.” Through my years in the South, I learned that it would be an ongoing project to uncover my racist thoughts and actions, as well as to expose the ways in which I “get in the way” of the important work of women’s centers. I also
learned and internalized that women’s centers must do antiracist work in order to challenge higher education leaders and institutional structures that are sexist and racist in ways that cannot typically be teased apart: the movements for gender and racial equity are intertwined, just as racism and sexism are interlocking oppressions. I also recognized that while this work must be done, even to this day I often don’t know how to do it.

For over 9 years, I worked at a women’s center at a large public midwestern institution that is less than 50 years old. There, my identity as a women’s center professional continued to evolve, and I came to understand myself as a White woman working to end oppression in higher education and engaging in diversity and social justice education. I wore many hats in that women’s center role: advocate, program developer, referral agent, mentor, policymaker, consultant, supervisor, event planner, internship coordinator, office manager, publicist, diversity trainer/facilitator, grant writer, assessment officer, student organization advisor, and fundraiser, to name a few. To enact these many roles as a White woman in a women’s center was a constant negotiation of relationships and encounters at all levels, and I often found myself simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, aware and unaware of my own racial privilege, power, and prejudice. It was a constant conversation with myself, with colleagues, and with students to understand not just others and the institution but myself working with and within them.

As a White women’s center director, I learned the importance of seeking to recognize when my whiteness “shows up” in my work, to understand my White privilege, and to advocate antiracism in my work. It is crucial for many reasons, both individually and institutionally. As an individual, it is critical so I can best fulfill my personal mission
to work for social justice, so I can model antiracist behavior and be an ally to colleagues and students of color, so I can “see more” of what must change about higher education, and so I can work to become more fully human (Pence, 1982; Smith, 1980), among so many other reasons. Institutionally, antiracism is critical so that centers can dismantle multiple and interlocked systems of oppression, so they can advocate for the needs and rights of women across their differences, and so they can best work to fulfill the missions of their centers. Black feminist thought and intersectionality have much to offer in these areas, particularly for White women who are committed to challenging oppression and working for social change.

It is in part because of this set of experiences that I came to my research questions about how women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity and how the theory shapes these understandings. These questions have never been asked in the literature and greatly add to the field.

**Research Design**

A constructionist epistemology was used for this study, which advances that individuals make sense of the world by interacting with objects and each other to construct—not create—meaning (Crotty, 1998). In this epistemological view, there is no “objective” knowledge. Most closely connected to the social world (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014), constructionism advances that “all knowledge…is developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42); for this reason, social constructionism is the most common form of constructionism. This research study explored the participants’ understandings of the influence of race and ethnicity on their
women’s centers as well as how theory shaped these understandings. The study employed the tradition of heuristics and critical phenomenology, an emerging methodological approach.

Phenomenology—the “study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Sokolowski, 2000)—was the main methodological approach to this study. Phenomenologists are not concerned with finding the objective “truth” of what happened in an experience, but rather they are interested in how people understand these experiences and incorporate their meaning into worldviews and “life-worlds” (Gallagher, 2012). The phenomenon under study here is the negotiation of race and ethnicity in women’s center work. I was interested in how people who work in women’s centers understand this phenomenon and how these understandings may surface in their life-world and in their day-to-day work. In this study, the phenomenology is critical in that it tries to go beyond phenomenological description to understand why things are this way: to inquire, for instance, into what we mean by feeling, how it comes about, what it implies, and what broader cultural and political forces are involved. In addition, the phenomenology is critical because it tries to take into account the makings of its own perceptions. (Desjarlais, 1997, p. 25)

I sought to expand critical phenomenology, which is currently utilized in the discipline of anthropology (Cleaveland, 2013; Desjarlais, 1997; Willen, 2007), to the discipline of higher education by exploring theory as a force that can circumscribe, limit, expand, impose, and enrich meaning-making.
In this study, I also utilized the methodological tradition of heuristic inquiry. Heuristics, meaning to discover or find, is a type of phenomenology that involves the researcher—who shares “personal experience with and intense interest in the phenomenon under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 107)—as well as the participants in the discovery of knowledge. Given the research questions—what drew me to them and that I worked for 17 years in women’s centers—heuristic inquiry was important to this critical phenomenological study.

Participants in the study were invited through two regional higher education associations; because I had an affiliation with the associations, participants had higher levels of rapport and trust with me, and in this study, I explored being a “known stranger” to the participants, who were both familiar and unfamiliar with my researcher role. An unanticipated aspect of the study was that immediately prior to the start of data collection, I left my women’s center leadership position to focus full-time on the study. This shift in identities—from a women’s center administrator to a full-time doctoral candidate—was difficult in some ways as I mourned the loss of daily interactions with colleagues and students, as well as the ability to directly enact change through center programs and activities. At the same time, the distance I achieved by removing myself from the daily bustle of my own women’s center allowed me to more fully explore the experiences of my participants in their own centers. In the end, this separation proved fruitful for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

This study utilized Patton’s (2015) purposeful sampling to gain “information-rich cases for in-depth study” (p. 264). Particularly, the study employed criterion sampling
(Patton, 2015) in four key ways: (a) the women’s center professional worked full- or part-time in a women’s center for at least 1 year; (b) there was evidence of diverse roles/positions within women’s centers among the participants, both in position titles and “hats worn”; (c) there was diversity in how often participants reported thinking about race and ethnicity in their professional roles; and (d) when possible, there was evidence of variety in institution types (e.g., public, private, and religious). Graduate assistants, student employees, and other individuals for whom their primary institutional affiliation was “student” were excluded from the study. Consistent with the methodology, eight participants were selected and completed the three stages of the study.

After participants were selected for the study, the first phase involved an in-depth interview, conducted via Skype, utilizing a thought prompt protocol as adapted from Pitt and Britzman (2003) to uncover “difficult knowledge” (p. 755). I then sent journaling prompts to the participants and asked them to write reflexively prior to the second interview. They digitally submitted their writing prior to the second interview, during which I clarified data from the first interviews, explored emerging themes from the study, and asked an additional set of questions. Interviews and notebooks were transcribed and analyzed as they were generated. Two peer debriefers—a student affairs graduate student and a women’s studies professor—assisted in the heuristic nature of the study by interviewing me and/or providing feedback on my interpretations of the data and emerging themes.
Study Overview

In Chapter 2, I engage in a rigorous review of three areas of scholarly literature—the histories, roles, and opportunities of women’s centers; Black feminist thought and White antiracist scholarship; and intersectionality—placing these literatures in conversation with each other. Chapter 3 reviews the feminist methodology literature relative to this critical phenomenological research, outlines the study’s conceptual framework and methodology, and details the research design. In Chapter 4, I introduce the study participants and share the study findings, while Chapter 5 discusses the implications for research, methodology, and higher education practice that emerged from the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In seeking to understand how the race and ethnicity of women’s center professionals shape and inform their work, it is necessary to engage with multiple yet connected areas of scholarship. In this chapter I engage in a rigorous review of three areas of scholarly literature: campus-based women’s centers, Black feminist thought and White antiracist scholarship, and intersectionality. Woven through the review of literature in each area are discussions of how the other two areas relate to the review at hand; in other words, the literatures are placed in conversation with each other.

First, the contours around the many forms of women’s centers in U.S. higher education, the staff members who lead and work within them, and the centers’ commitments and contributions to antiracism are traced. The scholarly literature about women’s centers is relatively small despite the numerous contributions of women’s centers to higher education over the past half century. As with any small body of literature, there is a risk of giving too much importance to too few articles, calling upon them again and again, regardless of how well (or not) they capture the scope, missions, and diversity of women’s centers. While small, the women’s center literature is rich and this chapter draws upon it widely to paint as full of a picture as possible of the important work of women’s centers and, specifically, the staff who work within them.
This chapter continues with a discussion of Black feminist thought and the foundation it laid by critiquing early feminist thought in the academy—which was often put forth by White women—as essentializing of women and their experiences, as well as exclusionary in that it did not reflect the experiences of women of color. Black feminist thought also critiques and challenges us to understand how racism and sexism are simultaneously experienced by women of color, and how White women may retain allegiances to White patriarchy through their privilege. The section explores the core tenets of Black feminist thought as well as White antiracist scholarship, much of which was inspired by Black feminist thought and the scholarship of women of color, and also what this literature can add to this study.

Finally, the chapter reviews intersectionality and explores how it can be used theoretically and practically in women’s centers. Rooted in critical race theory, critical race feminism, and Black feminist thought, intersectionality takes the arguments of Black feminist thought related to how race and gender—as well as racism and sexism—are experienced simultaneously and operationalizes them into a theoretical and pragmatic approach. How intersectionality offers many opportunities and paths for the work of women’s centers, and how women’s center professionals have much to gain as individuals and in coalition with others by engaging with the theory in their work, are both argued.

**Campus-based Women’s Centers**

The first campus-based women’s center in the United States opened in 1960 at the University of Minnesota (Bonebright et al., 2012); called the Minnesota Planning and
Counseling Center for Women, it was designed to “address the needs of women whose education had been interrupted by marriage and motherhood” (University of Minnesota, 2015, para. 1). Aligned with the women’s movement and the establishment of women’s studies programs (Chamberlain, 1988), centers that started in the late 1960s and early 1970s were “typically at the heart of the most pressing student issues for women on campus” (National Women’s Studies Association, 1990, p. iv). These centers were activist in nature and sought to create a more inclusive higher education environment for women. Gould (1989) wrote:

The creation of women’s centers on college campuses was a natural response to the growing awareness…of the unmet needs of women. Acknowledging the extent and depth of discrimination against all women, campus women’s centers were created to raise and examine new questions about women’s lives, roles and expectations; to help women develop a feminist consciousness; to combat feelings of isolation; and to establish a sense of community among women. The goal was to provide or to help institutions to provide programs and services which would enable women to achieve equity in all aspects of their education, work, and life. (p. 219)

These broad-reaching goals for women’s centers ensured that many constituencies—on and off campus—were interested and invested in their work.

In these early years, women’s centers were new administrative structures by which institutions of higher education addressed equity issues among their students, faculty, and staff. When introducing the Women’s Center at Barnard College, Stimpson
(1971) stated: “The Barnard Women’s Center is a new program for an old need: the dignity, autonomy, and equality of women. More than a place, more than a project, it symbolizes the way in which a college may gather its energies on behalf of women” (p. 3). Prior to women’s centers, some institutions “gathered energies” for women students through Continuing Education for Women (CEW) programs (Rice, 1989; Tittle & Denker, 1980) or their Deans of Women (Brooks, 1988; Schwartz, 1997). Starting in the 1950s, CEW programs sought to offer support for women returning to higher education after breaks for marriage, homemaking, and raising children. These programs were distinct from women’s centers in that they focused on only one female student demographic. Some institutions called their CEW programs a “women’s center” but quickly moved to expand the mission of the center to serve the diversity of women on the campus and respond to the women’s movement of the 1970s (Chamberlain, 1988); this was the case at the nation’s first women’s center at the University of Minnesota (Bonebright et al., 2012).

Deans of Women are another historical institutional root of women’s centers. The position was created by coeducational institutions in the mid- to late 1800s to meet the needs of women students (Brooks, 1988; Nidiffer, 2003); Deans of Women and Deans of Men positions were typically merged in the 1950s and 1960s into the contemporary Dean of Students position, a position most often inhabited by men (Brooks, 1988). While many women’s centers started shortly after Deans of Women disappeared at coeducational institutions, Brooks (1988) does not believe that women’s centers became the “new deans of women” (p. 19). She instead suggested that while they may have had parallel goals,
there was new work for women’s centers. She wrote, “Grand as her role was, the dean had little real power (except in a few notable instances) to change the total climate for women on campus” (p. 20). From their earliest days, women’s centers were tasked with this specific mandate and were given resources and access to key discussions to affect the campus climate, marking a distinction in the roles of Deans of Women and the women’s centers that followed.

Defining the new institutional structure called a “women’s center” was particularly difficult during these early years. The only definition of a women’s center in the literature is offered by Girard (1977), who created a five-part definition to distinguish campus-based women’s centers from their community counterparts and other forms of women’s organizing on university campuses. Girard created the following criteria for women’s centers:

1) They call themselves a women’s center; 2) They have their own space; 3) There is an identifiable group of people who organize and conduct activities through the center; 4) The group has an identity separate from other campus programs and separate from specific individuals; and 5) The organization has the willingness (if not the current capacity) to respond to a wide variety of women’s needs. (p. 2)

While this definition creates some parameters for campus-based women’s centers, no uniform definition has been adopted in the past 55 years. It is significant that national studies examining the structures, programs, services, and resources of women’s centers have never attempted to define women’s centers as having one form (e.g., Clevenger,
In the case of women’s centers, which readily adapt to the needs of their constituents and in some ways resist the university hierarchies of which they are part, a definition is perhaps less helpful and has the potential to limit the varied efforts of women’s centers across the nation. Rather than a definition, Goettsch et al. (2012) offered four broad types of contemporary women’s centers:

1. **Community activist/action centers.** Often staffed by volunteers, including students, or by part-time staff, such centers provide places to meet, find support, organize, and take action for social change.

2. **Student services/resource centers.** Often led by a master’s-level professional director, though increasingly led by doctoral-level directors, these student-focused centers are typically located in student affairs divisions. They are generally strong on programs and services, and less focused on influencing or setting institutional policy.

3. **Synthesis centers.** Often led by professional directors with doctorates or by faculty, these centers are more likely to be housed in academic affairs divisions and to serve a broad constituency. They also play a role in curriculum and policy transformation as well as offer programs and services.

4. **Research centers.** Staffed primarily by faculty, these centers focus on research and publication of scholarly reports on gender issues. (p. 3)
This classification system is largely based on the missions as well as the staffing of the centers, and it illustrates the diversity of centers in higher education today. It is important to note that the last type—women’s research centers—are rooted not just in scholarship by women but also about women, and often the centers have strong links with women’s studies departments, programs, and curricula at their institutions (Stimpson, 1986).

The lack of a uniform definition of a women’s center encourages institutions to found centers that best fit their needs, but it creates questions about understanding the numbers of centers in U.S. higher education, particularly over time. Over the past half century, hundreds of women’s centers—likely well over a thousand—have been founded, closed, or sustained at 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. Numbers fluctuate from 215 centers in 1974 (Bertelsen, 1974), 600 centers in 1979 (Association of American Colleges, 1979, in Chamberlain, 1988), 360 centers in 1990 (National Women’s Studies Association, 1990), 442 centers in 2002 (Gribi, 2002), and then almost 500 centers in 2010 (National Women’s Studies Association, n.d., in Vlasnik, 2010). These changing numbers show the ebb and flow of women’s centers in the higher education landscape but also may speak to the various criteria utilized to create each list. Unfortunately, with the removal of the women’s centers database from the National Women’s Studies Association website in late 2010, there is no official list available at this time. However, the NWSA Women’s Centers Committee (2015) is conducting a crowd-sourcing activity to update the list via the committee’s blog; this project is expected to be complete in mid-2016.
Today, the approximate 500 women’s centers have varying constituencies, missions, points of distinction, and, importantly, reporting lines. A center’s reporting line is important, because where a university structurally locates a women’s center can be an indication of its relative importance as well as its support. Additionally, the reporting line of a center often dictates its mission. In a national survey, Kasper (2004a) found that approximately 42% of centers report within student affairs divisions and 22% report within academic affairs; the rest of the centers in her study reported a wide range of other reporting lines and structures. In a more recent albeit smaller study, Goettsch et al. (2012) stated that of the 21 women’s centers in Ohio, 50% report to student affairs divisions, 35% report to academic affairs, and 15% report to other divisions. Given the role that reporting lines and organizational structures play in determining the work that women’s centers can and cannot do on their campuses, more research is needed on the institutional freedoms, constraints, and considerations related to these diverse reporting lines.

In spite of the vast diversity of women’s center reporting lines and missions that are defined by the specific needs of their communities and institutions (Clevenger, 1988; Vlasnik, 2010), centers have typically “shared common goals and values” (Gould, 1989, p. 221). These goals and values include commitments to feminist, womanist, or gender-centered theories as well as to social and institutional change. These shared commitments in turn create common areas in which centers do their work. In 1994, Charlotte Kunkel identified five areas in which women needed special attention and services on campus and asserted that women’s centers are an important way to meet these needs: safety [both “freedom from danger” and “the freedom to act” (p. 16)], education and awareness,
support and advocacy, equity, and community. Almost a decade later, Kunkel (2002) reasserted that these areas remain problematic for women. In addition to Kunkel’s work, Davie (2002a) added leadership, internationalization, and technology as additional foci for women’s center programs and services. Kunkel and Davie proposed that these areas of concentration represent the most pressing needs of women in higher education, and that women’s centers are well situated to address them.

While women’s centers share these critical areas in which they do their work, individual centers can choose to develop this work in ways that best meet the particular needs of their institutions. In her study of women’s center professionals, Marine (2011) found that staff identified three major influences for their work: “their specific institutional context, the attendant political milieu, and the relative weight/importance of student, faculty, and staff needs and concerns, which tended to be mutually reinforcing, rather than distinct, categories” (p. 19). All three areas will vary widely across institutions and women’s centers and create unique missions, opportunities, challenges, and environments in which women’s centers operate.

This said, there are many similarities in the work of women’s centers. In 2010, a group of Ohio women’s center professionals engaged in a creative project to generate this shared statement of philosophy, which aptly captures the commitments and contributions of contemporary campus-based women’s centers:

Women's centers reflect the unique needs of their institutions and communities, yet share a commitment to historically underserved individuals and groups. Additionally, women’s centers play a leadership role in understanding the
changing workplace and preparing members of the university community to engage successfully with an increasingly complex world. Women's centers are integral to transforming institutions into inclusive environments; through community-building, advocacy, education, support, and research, they encourage the full participation and success of women. (Vlasnik, 2010, p. 5)

In this statement as well as the list of critical questions raised in the project (Vlasnik, 2010, pp. 3–4), the parallel histories, concerns, preoccupations, and hopes for the future of women’s centers emerge.

These shared commitments and philosophy mean that women’s centers, even when tasked with various missions by their campuses, tend to do parallel work and approach their work in similar ways, perhaps because of the interconnectedness of issues that women face on college campuses. A shared list of tasks for centers might include, among many others: to advocate for equitable opportunities for women and women-identified individuals; to address and prevent sexual violence; to increase the recruitment and retention of women, particularly in fields in which they are underrepresented; to build community among diverse groups of women and their allies; to reimagine gender roles and opportunities; to educate the campus about women’s and other gender-related issues; to provide intervention and referrals in both crisis and noncrisis situations; to change institutional policies, practices, and procedures that have a detrimental effect on individuals based on gender; and to create tangible links between the research and theory discussed in women’s and gender studies and other classrooms to feminist praxis and to the experiences of women on campus and in the community.
The Professional Staff of Women’s Centers

An examination of the work of centers is not complete without a discussion of the professionals who lead them. As Marine (2011) wrote, women’s centers represent the very heart of feminist engagement with the academy. As a microcosm of women’s leadership, this engagement is vitally shaped by the commitments of those who lead and support women’s centers, whose values in turn direct the work yet to be done. (p. 16)

This discussion is particularly important when, as this study establishes, there are multiple configurations and missions of centers. As a result, women’s center professionals must play many roles and wear many hats: no two positions expect the same contributions and there are no uniform degree requirements, trainings, or sets of experiences for women’s center professionals. Yet, women’s center employees require a wide range of skills and knowledge (Vlasnik & DeButz, 2013), including the ability to advance feminism in the academy by challenging the status quo. In describing their staffing needs, for example, Iowa State University (1984) asserted:

The Women’s Center Coordinator has to be a feminist in a non-feminist University; has to work with and serve many faculty, staff, and students who are not feminists; has to work for change in a place where many don’t even see a need for it; has to criticize and speak out against the University while at the same time retaining the respect to speak for it. (p. 17)

The tensions described are real and at times binding for women’s center professionals who are attempting to do work on behalf of and for the benefit of women in an
environment where many people in the institution do not understand the reasons or importance of their work. What is not said here is that these professionals also do their work in communities and institutions in which women—particularly women who experience multiple oppressions based on race, sexual orientation, ability, and class—are chronically undervalued and marginalized. Not only are they constrained by the ability of their institution and its administrators to “see” injustices but also by institutional structures that are not easy to change, even when administrators are supportive.

Despite the inherent pressures and tensions of their positions, women’s center professionals have found ways to make their work possible and impactful. In addition to thoughtful strategies at their institutions, they have changed the conversation about gender equity in the scholarly literature as well, primarily through publishing scholarly and other articles about the myriad aspects of their work (Vlasnik, 2016). The women’s center scholarly literature is almost entirely generated by women’s center professionals. They have written about many important themes: missions, purposes, and histories of centers; collaborative connections of centers with academic units (particularly women’s studies), with other campus units, and with the community; how centers serve students, faculty, and staff; the role of centers in building equitable and inclusive institutions; and the continuing need for gender equity work in higher education. Yet, to date, only a few articles turned the lens onto the authors of this important literature, and none have systematically attempted to understand who is staffing centers, much less their understandings and negotiations of their race and ethnicity in their women’s center roles, as this study did.
Susan Marine (2011), a former women’s center director, conducted the only qualitative study of women’s center staff that expressly asked them about their roles and approaches to the work (rather than the roles and approaches of their centers). Her research explored how “professional feminists” understood their work, challenges, and allies, as well as their commitments and views about their work for gender equity in higher education. Several of her findings are relevant to this study, as her research participants discussed the difficulty of enacting intersectional approaches and their struggles with the ongoing issue of creating an environment that is inclusive of the needs and concerns of women of diverse backgrounds, as opposed to functioning as a women’s center that continues to be disproportionately responsive to the values and priorities of White, middle-class feminists. (p. 23)

While it was not the purpose of Marine’s study to engage a deep discussion of how race and ethnicity and their attendant privileges or oppressions inform the work of center staff, it is significant that women’s centers were discussed in some detail as locations that must struggle with not just ending gender oppression but other forms of oppression as well.

Another hole in the women’s center literature is a deep understanding of the identities and competencies of women’s center professionals. A recent issue brief from the Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities (GCCCU) and the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE) Women’s Centers Committee explored the contemporary competencies of professional staff (Vlasnik & DeButz, 2013), but there is limited knowledge of the staff members who have worked in
women’s centers over the past 55 years. In fact, there are only three national surveys that
collected data about staff beyond the title, full-time equivalent (FTE), and educational
background of the leader of the unit. From these surveys, significant changes between the
women’s centers of the 1970s and 1980s emerge.

Sweeney (1978) and Phillips (1978) published the results from a 1976 national
survey of women’s centers that was replicated 2 years later in 1978 (Girard & Sweeney,
1984). Phillips revealed that in 1976, 27.7% of centers had African American
representation among their staff, 22.3% included “Spanish Surnamed/Spanish Speaking”
(p. 5) staff, 5.7% included Asian staff, and 17.3% of centers included staff members who
identified as Native American. A large number of students and unpaid staff seem to be
included in these numbers, as 27% of centers reported being entirely student-run and 39%
of centers reported members of their staff as receiving academic credit for their center
work. While the survey did not report the race and ethnicity of just the professional staff
of women’s centers, Sweeney and Phillips prove that centers were locations where
diverse women made contributions.

In 1978, the national needs survey was again implemented. Girard and Sweeney
(1984) document that in just 2 years, the demographics of women’s centers were
beginning to shift. African American staff members were now present in 29% of
women’s centers (an increase of over 4%) and 9% of centers reported Asian staff (an
increase of over 36%), but only 16% of centers reported Hispanic staff members (a
decrease of over 28%). The authors did not explain why these demographic shifts might
have occurred, and without access to the original report of the 1978 national needs assessment, additional comparisons related to staff are limited.

The third and only other national survey that helps us to understand the race and ethnicity of women’s center staff is Clevenger’s 1987 research project. Her results demonstrated that the 189 full-time employees and 1,112 part-time employees of the 124 women’s centers in the survey were 85.9% White (Clevenger, 1988). This percentage, just a decade after Phillips (1978), Sweeney (1978), and Girard and Sweeney (1984) reported much greater racial and ethnic diversity among the staff of women’s center professionals, is as surprising as it is significant. While these figures raise more questions than the answers they provide, it is important that women’s centers seem to have become much more White in the 10 years between the national surveys, not just among the paid professional staff but also the student staff, who Clevenger (1988) similarly includes in her study. Unfortunately, there are no national data available since Clevenger’s study, nor are there membership demographics available from national professional associations. However, the literature frequently states that the majority of professional staff of women’s centers (typically excluding student staff) continues to be White and that this creates challenges to the work of women’s centers as they seek to fulfill their missions (Bonebright et al., 2012; Marine, 2011).

In this study, how the race and ethnicity of staff impact their work in women’s centers and how these factors shape their approaches to their work are of major interest. As stated, little is known about the race and ethnicity of women’s center professionals, not just demographically but also how these professionals view their work through the
lens of their intersecting identities. Women’s centers have a long tradition of concern
with ending sexism and creating opportunities for all women, yet discussions of who staff
members are as not just gendered but also racialized professionals is all but missing in the
literature. In recent years, a more explicit commitment to doing antiracist work in
women’s centers has emerged at professional gatherings (e.g., Bartlow, Boyd-Keyes,
Holgerson, Kulton, & Smith, 2010a, 2010b; Bartlow, Holgerson, Smith, Boyd-Keyes, &
Whitehead, 2011; DiLapi & Kulton, 2006; Holgerson, 2009; National Women’s Studies
Association Women of Color Caucus & Anti-White Supremacy Task Force, 2005); this
commitment creates an even more pressing need for women’s center staff members to
understand how their identities create—or do not create—privileges and opportunities for
themselves as individuals who are working to end sexism and oppression in the academy.

**Women’s Centers’ Commitments to Antiracism**

While explorations of antiracism are regularly present in national conferences
(e.g., Allington et al., 2005; Campos et al., 2005; Holgerson, Kulton, Smith, & Waugh,
2009), they are less present in the women’s center literature. The 9th edition of the CAS
standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015), which
typically guide women’s centers that report within divisions of student affairs, include
minor yet important mentions of how Women and Gender Programs and Services
(WGPS) should address racism. Significantly, they state:

WGPS must provide educational programs, offer experiential opportunities, and
engage in informal education that…increase understanding of systems of social
privilege and oppression and the interrelationship between sexism and the systems
of power and privilege associated with other marginalized social identities and experiences. (p. 494)

The inclusion of intersectionality and expressly naming systems of power and privilege as areas to which attention should be given are important reminders for those women’s centers that follow the CAS standards. However, these statements are directed toward the work of women’s centers, not the staff members who lead the work; even while the document has two pages of guidance for the behaviors, competencies, and training of WGPS staff, the standards fall short of asking professionals to examine their own identities, attitudes, and understandings about privilege, racism, classism, homophobia, or even sexism.

Many women’s centers have been willing to answer calls—such as those outlined in the CAS standards—that they become more responsive to women of color and challenge racism in the academy, and the women’s center literature has a few guideposts for this work. Buford (1988) explored multicultural programming in a women’s center, offering a case example of the California State University (CSU) Dominguez Hills Women’s Center, proudly claiming that “family issues, cultural issues, and issues of race and class are examined with an intensity generally not otherwise found in cocurricular programming at the institution” (p. 33). In addition to programming and myriad other examples, a notable instance of their center engaging in antiracist work includes that their student interns are exposed to “discussions of prejudice, intolerance, discrimination, and racism” (p. 33) as part of their coursework in the center. While it is not stated in the article, it is reasonable to assume that women’s center professionals are leading the
students in these discussions; this indirect reference is one of the few in the literature about women’s center professionals engaging in discussions about racism and privilege within their centers.

DiLapi and Gay’s (2002) chapter in Sharon Davie’s (2002b) book on women’s centers is the only explicit scholarly source about the roles that women’s centers might play in dismantling racism. The authors stated that the “connection between ‘isms,’ in particular, the link between sexism and racism, is an important focus for women’s center activity” (p. 207). In their discussion, they uncovered five areas in which women’s centers respond to racism. Centers support women of color by providing spaces for minority women to “acknowledge and understand the nature of their negative experiences based on racism and/or sexism” (p. 209). Additional strategies include mentoring programs, creating student organizations for women of color or interest groups for White women who are committed to exploring privilege, and supporting the work of student organizations and sororities who serve women of color. Educational programming is the second means by which women’s centers can respond to racism, including hosting reactive and proactive programs about the impact of racism, conducting trainings, bringing women of color as speakers and lecturers, and participating in recognized celebrations such as International Women’s Day, among other strategies. Collaboration and coalition building, both inside and outside of the center, is another way centers can combat racism, specifically with and among student organizations, women’s studies programs, ethnic studies programs, and minority staff and faculty organizations. It is curious that the authors did not include cultural/ethnic centers or multicultural offices in
their detailed exploration of coalition building, as these offices would be well situated to understand, uncover, and address racism at their institutions; study is needed of the ways that women’s centers work collaboratively with multicultural and ethnicity-based centers and programs.

DiLapi and Gay (2002) outlined two final areas in which women’s centers engage in antiracist work: addressing institutional racism and sexism and sharing resources and sharing power. For the former area, centers may play a role in the formation of institutional policies, practices, and procedures; chair or participate in task forces or campus committees about campus climate; help to establish presidential commissions on the status of women; and request the regular collection of race and gender data about members of their university communities. For the latter area—sharing resources and sharing power—women’s centers can share money, information, and people to bolster the success of initiatives and organizations that serve women of color. They noted, “understanding that this support [for women of color] is not always best provided within a women’s center, particularly on predominately white campuses, is essential” (p. 221). Their five areas and detailed examples are a helpful roadmap for centers wishing to engage in antiracist work in ways that are both needed and accountable, but the chapter does not discuss in detail the responsibilities of women’s center professionals to understand their own race and ethnicity and how its attendant privileges or oppressions shape their responses to racism.

While DiLapi and Gay’s (2002) discussion focused on organizational responses to racism, there are two short pieces in the literature that discuss strategies for uncovering
and addressing privilege in women’s centers (Santovec, 2008, 2009). The articles, which are summaries of presentations at two of the annual conferences of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) by Chris Linder and Claire Robbins (Santovec, 2008) and Linder (Santovec, 2009), offer some context and a list of strategies for women’s center professionals to recognize and address privilege in women’s centers. These short write-ups are not able to convey what were likely rich discussions of not just how women’s centers can respond to privilege but also the nuances of doing antiracism work in women’s centers. Both articles have brief mention of how women’s center professionals may have to start this work of uncovering privilege with self-examination. Santovec (2009) noted that

much of the onus to promote this change [to serve all people] is on white women. They need to be self-honest in exposing and eliminating remnants of white supremacy. They also need to educate themselves about their dominant identities. Don’t expect those with marginalized identities to educate you, Linder warned. (p. 15)

This is the only mention in the women’s center literature of how antiracism work must start with the individuals who work in the centers: that it is also “inner work,” not just external or organizational work to combat racism. This inner work was of interest to this study.

A final discussion of women’s centers as locations of antiracism work is in Goettsch et al. (2012). In a section on intersectionality in women’s centers, the authors wrote: “There is now more focus within women’s centers on explicitly anti-racist/anti-
oppression work and the broader category of gender and its fluidity. Such work requires a supportive, collaborative relationship with multicultural and LGBTQ centers and diversity affairs offices” (p. 8). Unfortunately, a discussion of these relationships or how centers engage in antiracism work was not the purpose of the issue brief; however, this mention affirms that antioppression work and specifically antiracism remain important in contemporary women’s centers.

Overall, while the women’s center literature often discusses the roles of women’s centers in advocating for institutional change, it is usually framed in the context of challenging sexism. What is missing from the conversation in the literature—even in the articles specifically exploring racism—is the consistent acknowledgment that these institutional structures are also racist (and heterosexist, ableist, classist, and transphobic). In addition, there is not a deep or consistent conversation in the literature about the need for centers to do antiracism work and the related discussion about how women’s center staff understand or prepare themselves for this work. And yet, a commitment to fighting racism and dismantling White privilege among women’s center staff is imperative for the future of women’s centers. DiLapi and Gay (2002) asserted that “given the persistent institutional barriers to the advancement of women of color in academe, it is critical that white leadership in women’s centers, where it exists, be an important force for institutional change and development of an antiracist women’s agenda” (p. 207). If women’s center professionals—particularly those who are White—do not have this commitment to antiracism, women’s centers will likely not engage with this important work. Women’s center professionals, particularly those who are White, must have a two-
part education: first, learning about Black feminist and antiracist scholarship, and second, committing to work to understand whiteness and how it informs the work of women center professionals. While it is worthwhile and important to also read the scholarship and experiences of all women of color scholars, including Chicana, Asian, and indigenous scholars, this study focused on the contributions of Black feminist thought. The next section traces Black feminist thought as it relates to this study, including traditions, tenets, and areas of scholarship that Black feminist thinkers helped to establish within the larger field of feminist theory.

**Black Feminist Thought**

Over the past 50 years—approximately the same amount of time that women’s centers have been a part of the landscape of higher education—feminist theory has emerged as a rich and vibrant scholarly literature and tradition. In its beginnings in the academy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminist theory was revolutionary as it fought for women’s experiences, histories, and voices to be heard, valued, and included. Generated primarily by White women—who were a minority in the academic ranks overall but the majority of women in the academy—feminist theory held the promise of creating not just better institutions of higher education but a more just society. However, many women of color and some White women became discontent with the forms of feminist theory generated in women’s studies and by scholars who purported to care about all women while only representing the views and interests of the majority. While feminist theory began as revolutionary, many felt it became less radical as White women
academics made concessions to gain tenure and promotion, publish, and attain other forms of legitimacy in the academy. Smith (1980) called these women women’s studies or academic feminists. Women who teach, research, and publish about women, but who are not involved in any way in making radical social and political change, women who are not involved in making the lives of living breathing women more viable. (p. 49)

In addition to this critique of some of its scholars, feminist theory was critiqued as essentialist for claiming truths on behalf of all women while neglecting diversity among women, and also for overlooking entire bodies of scholarship generated by women of color that were simultaneously developing in academic and community settings.

Black feminist thought is one of these bodies of scholarship. While it acknowledges the contributions of feminist theory that call for equality between men and women while also working to critique it, Black feminism draws from a different intellectual tradition. In the words of Rich (1986):

If we read Audre Lorde or Gloria Joseph or Barbara Smith, do we understand that the intellectual roots of this feminist theory are not white liberalism or white Euro-American feminism, but the analyses of Afro-American experience articulated by Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, C. L. R. James, Malcolm X, Lorraine Hansberry, Fannie Lou Hamer, among others? That Black feminism cannot be marginalized and circumscribed as simply a response to white feminist racism or an augmentation of white feminism; that it is an
organic development of the Black movements and philosophies of the past, their practice and their printed writings? (p. 231)

This mischaracterization of Black feminist thought—as only a response to White liberal feminism—is not only inaccurate, but it renders invisible a rich Black intellectual tradition as well as the contributions of countless Black women activists over the centuries in the United States. The Combahee River Collective (1982), a group of Black feminists who began meeting in 1974, acknowledged their intellectual lineage as the following:

As Angela Davis points out in “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,” Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters. (p. 14)

So, while it is true that Black feminist tradition exposes the limits of the call of White liberal feminism for equality and critiques its protection of racial, class, and other forms of privilege, it also represents the work of Black academic women to bring a rich and
powerful Black intellectual discussion into the conversation about feminism theory, an intellectual tradition that had long been—and in some ways continues to be—ignored.

Black feminist thought also critiqued Black nationalist, separatist, and other Black groups dedicated to fighting racism for their lack of attention to sexism and other forms of oppression (e.g., Hull et al., 1982; Weathers, 1995). When writing about the term “Black feminism,” Patricia Hill Collins (1996) explained:

Using the term “black feminism” disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective “black” challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both white and black women…The term “black feminist” also disrupts a longstanding and largely unquestioned reliance on black racial solidarity as a deep tap root in black political philosophies, especially black nationalist and cultural pluralist frameworks. (p. 13)

But, as Collins acknowledged, Black feminism faces a great challenge in that it “must come to terms with a white feminist agenda incapable of seeing its own racism as well as a black nationalist one resistant to grappling with its own sexism” (p. 15). Additionally, it can find itself at odds with Black women, some of whom “have been expounding all their energies in ‘liberating’ black men” (Weathers, 1995, p.158), as well as others who reject the term “feminist” in favor of “womanist,” which Alice Walker argued was “a more culturally appropriate label for black feminists or feminists of color” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995b, p. 19) for many reasons, including its commitment to the survival and well-being of the whole community. Lastly, while Black feminist thought battled for recognition in
the academy and beyond, it also struggled against appropriation by others, particularly White feminist academics who recognized its potential for “fresh” analysis and positive social change. As a White researcher, I grappled with this latter issue in many forms, all of which are outlined in Chapter 3.

**Core Tenets and Contributions**

Black feminism, at its core, calls for a deep discussion about how differences among women on the basis of race, class, sexual orientation, and nationhood, for example, fundamentally shape all our lives. This response to the prevailing feminist discourse—which often centered around the issues and needs of White middle- and upper-class women—challenges essentialism by bringing the complexities of Black women’s lives to the conversation (e.g., Combahee River Collective, 1982; hooks, 1984). For example, bell hooks (1984) argued for a feminism that is larger and more complicated than merely a fight for women’s equality, which is often the focus of the media, politicians, and many middle- and upper-class White feminists. She stated that this analysis was rarely, if ever, shared by women of color who saw that men of color were oppressed and not equal to White men: “Knowing that men in their groups do not have social, political, and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status” (p. 18). As a result, hooks called for a feminism that understands not only how sexism operates and is structured but also how it interlocks with other forms of oppression such as racism and heterosexism. In her explorations of what she termed “the margins” of feminist theory, where Black identities, experiences, and theorizing have often been relegated but where they have also flourished, hooks attempted to redraw the
lines around feminism and feminist theory. Indeed, she defined feminism as the “struggle to end sexist oppression” (hooks, 1984, p. 26) and in later work expanded her definition to “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 1); while seemingly simple rewordings, these definitions form a radically different framework from which White women’s center professionals could benefit.

Black feminist theory puts Black women’s lives and experiences at the center of analysis. When this happens, a more complicated identity politics emerges. Specifically, Black feminism contributes an understanding that the identities of Black women—and by extension women of color—cannot be placed into discrete categories. As the Combahee River Collective (1982) stated, “We find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (p. 16). Audre Lorde (1984) spoke and wrote frequently about her inability to extricate her identities—and her unwillingness to do so. Drawing from these interconnected identities as a source of personal and political strength, she wrote:

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different

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selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living. (pp. 120–121)

Lorde’s refusal to live or function as only one of her social identities highlights the critique of many Black feminists, who did not see issues of race meaningfully discussed by the feminist movement or issues of gender meaningfully addressed in the antiracism or civil rights movement. Crenshaw (1991) wrote succinctly of the cost of these phenomena to women of color:

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. These mutual elisions present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of color. (p. 1252)

Black feminist thought is concerned with bringing attention to these dilemmas and with seeking pathways to address sexism and racism simultaneously.

Related to the assertion that race, class, gender, and other identities are experienced at once—instead of using an additive model—is the exploration by Black feminist theorists of how racism and sexism are simultaneously experienced by women of color. Additionally, the systems themselves are theorized as interlocking and reinforcing each other; as a result, they cannot be addressed separately (e.g., Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984). Antiracism work must also be antisexist, and vice versa. Grillo (1995) wrote:
The lessons of anti-essentialism and intersectionality are that the oppressions cannot be dismantled separately because they mutually reinforce each other. Racism uses sexism as its enforcer. Homophobia enforces sexism by making people pay a heavy price for departing from socialized gender roles. And those of us who are middle-class, or members of otherwise privileged elites, can be used as unwitting perpetuators of the subordination of others. (p. 36)

This analysis makes clear that feminists interested in fighting sexism and improving the lives of women cannot do this work without also fighting racism and working to improve the lives of people of color. This raises interesting questions for women’s centers, as little is known about the extent to which they work to fight racism.

Grillo (1995) and others are also clear that Black feminist thought asks each of us to consider the ways in which we may have privilege and may harm others as a result. Collins (1991) stated:

Placing African-American women and other excluded groups in the center of analysis opens up possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance, one in which all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system. In this system, for example, white women are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race. Depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. (p. 225)

To dismantle oppression, then, Black feminist thought brings “its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and
economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change” (p. 221). Applied to women’s centers, both the people who work within them and the structures of centers themselves must be challenged and changed.

Black feminist thought is also concerned with uncovering how White women may retain allegiances to White patriarchy through their privilege. While used by scholars and activists in various ways, Audre Lorde’s now famous line, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” is, in context, a call to recognize the differences among women as strengths as well as an analysis of the ways in which feminism—particularly within the academy—can be racist. Lorde (1984) wrote:

The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support. (p. 112)

Lorde called on White women to “make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (p. 112). This possibility for a “sister outsider” (Lorde, 1978, 1984), for coalition among women across their differences, was Lorde’s call for a reenvisioned feminist movement, one in which women of color are not seen as outsiders and White women grapple with their commitments to patriarchy and racial privilege.

It is powerful to imagine what would be different if Lorde’s call were answered, if only in the context of women’s centers on college campuses. What would a women’s center look like if women of color were not outsiders and if White women interrogated
the ways in which they remain committed to patriarchy in exchange for racial privilege? And yet, how can those who work in women’s centers build gender equity and opportunities for all women if they have not examined their own privilege or the ways in which the missions of women’s centers place more emphasis on gender equity (White liberal feminism) than hook’s feminism, which seeks to “end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 1)? Black feminist thought provides several means for White women to understand this privilege, and new areas of scholarship have started in significant part because of the work of Black feminist scholars. Three significant areas of such scholarship are explored in this proposal: standpoint theory and White antiracist scholarship are discussed next, while intersectionality is discussed in a later section.

**Standpoint Theory**

Brooks (2007) concisely explained feminist standpoint epistemology as “a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to (1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change” (p. 55). Built on the work of many scholars—including Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith, and Nancy Hartsock—standpoint theory would not exist in its current form without the contributions of Patricia Hill Collins. In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins (1991) suggested: “Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it” (p. 22). In the
text, Collins synthesized the work of many Black women scholars and activists into a lineage for contemporary Black feminism that is rooted in the lived experiences of Black women. Holding that these lived experiences and the vantage points they provide are the starting place for Black feminist theory, Collins utilized the unique knowledge of this standpoint to critique individual, group, and institutional levels of oppression and offer pathways for change.

Standpoint theory, particularly as it relates to Black women’s lived experiences, is a powerful means for White feminists to learn about race, racism, and their own privilege. Since White women cannot experientially understand the lived, daily experience of racism faced by women of color, standpoint theory allows them an avenue to intellectually explore these lived experiences and viewpoints without having to rely on the people of color they may (or may not) happen to know in their lives. However, there are dangers inherent in standpoint theory, particularly the dangers of essentializing women’s experiences or identities and of assigning “automatic epistemic privilege” (Wylie, 2003, p. 28). The former danger occurs when a particular standpoint is used to “speak for” or “represent” all members of the group (as if there is a monolithic lesbian standpoint or Black woman’s standpoint, for example). The latter danger occurs when a particular standpoint is privileged as “know[ing] more, or know[ing] better, by virtue of [its] social, political location” (Wylie, 2003, p. 28), thus devaluing, discounting, or oppressing the experiences and viewpoints of others. Standpoint theory argues for a different and valid way of knowing, but not an inherently better way. For White
feminists, in particular, it is an important avenue for understanding the many and varied lived experiences and perspectives of women of color.

**White Antiracist Scholarship**

As Black feminist thought has been read and considered by White feminist scholars, a rich antiracist literature has emerged (e.g., Bulkin, Pratt, & Smith, 1984; Frankenberg, 1993; 1997; Kendall, 2006; Kimmel, 2002; Lazarre, 1996; McIntosh, 1988; Rich, 1986; Sholock, 2012). This section partially explores this large body of scholarship by focusing on three core contributions of White antiracist scholarship that may be of particular importance to White women’s center professionals: recognizing and claiming whiteness, exploring and understanding privilege, and unlearning whiteness.

**Recognizing and claiming whiteness.** Identifying and claiming whiteness is a critical component for White women interested in antiracist work, and particularly for women’s center professionals who are White. Without understanding their own racial identities, White women are often unable to conceptualize oppressions as interlocking and simultaneous, and they may not be able to understand their role in oppressing other people. As noted by Grillo (1995), while White women face oppression based on their gender:

> It is dangerous at the least to expect that experiencing one oppression means that one understands the others. In fact, to expect so is disrespectful in that it wipes out the true, lived experience of that group in exchange for one’s own, self-serving fantasy. (p. 36)
The journey of recognizing whiteness in the lives of White women often begins with understanding the unique contours of racism as well as how racism intersects with sexism in the lives of women of color. The writings of Black feminist scholars are instructive for this purpose, as well as for how unexamined whiteness sustains racism and what is at stake for White people if racism continues. As early as 1977, the Combahee River Collective (1982) asserted:

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women’s movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women’s movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue. (p. 21)

Smith (1980) later commented that White women “have got to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women, that racism affects your chances for survival too and that it is very definitely your issue. Until you understand this no fundamental change will come about” (p. 48). The sentiment that racism diminishes the humanity of everyone is put forth by many early White antiracist scholars and activists (e.g., Pence, 1982; Rich, 1986).

Recognizing racism and even working to dismantle it is not enough to make change. Lazarre (1996) wrote that “racism involves power, an intricate pattern of
privilege we enjoy as white Americans whether we are aware of it or not, whether we want it or not” (p. xvi). Privilege and whiteness are silent, amorphous, and invisible factors in the lives of most White Americans. Kimmel (2002) likened being White to “running with the wind at your back. It feels like just plain running, and we rarely if ever get a chance to see how we are sustained, supported, and even propelled by that wind” (para. 3). And yet, privilege and whiteness fundamentally shape our experiences, including the ability to be oblivious about their impact on our lives and experiences (Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006; Kimmel, 2002). Jane Lazarre (1996) succinctly named various manifestations of her whiteness in her life:

I think of all the times I felt white, powerfully white, obliviously white, visibly white, shamefully white: seeing a policeman come toward me at night and feeling the relief of his protection; walking into a country store in a strange town with no sense of anxiety that I might frighten the owner; speaking up for my outspoken [African American] mother-in-law when we are stymied by white institutions and she thinks my whiteness might more quickly get us what we want; feeling myself at the center when scholars talk about “women’s history” and “women’s rights;” planning my life, all of my life, constructing my dreams, without taking race into consideration at all. (pp. 40-41)

While whiteness is often stubbornly difficult to locate and claim in the experiences of White people—often because they were never taught to recognize it as an important part of their identities—White women and men interested in antiracist work must do this inner work.
In *White Women, Race Matters*, pivotal scholarship by Ruth Frankenberg (1993), the author conducted life histories of White women to understand how racism shaped their lives, how White women were “created as social actors primed to reproduce racism within the feminist movement” (p. 5), and how they could resist racism from their social locations. In naming the term “whiteness” (p. 1), which Frankenberg identified as having structural, positional, and cultural dimensions, she came to three important realizations through her interactions with a network predominantly composed of women of color:

First, that there is frequently a gulf of experience of racism between white people and people of color; second, that white women might have a range of awareness in relation to racism, with greater awareness based on, among other things, their long-term connectedness to communities of color...; third, that there is a cultural/racial specificity to white people, at times more obvious to people who are not white than to white individuals. (p. 5)

These realizations grounded her research, and Frankenberg’s (1993) naming and exploration of whiteness, as well as her subsequent scholarship (e.g., Frankenberg, 1997), greatly enriched the emerging field of White antiracism scholarship, as well as this study’s theoretical framework (see Chapter 3).

**Exploring and understanding privilege.** In 1988, Peggy McIntosh published a working paper that documented her growing understanding of her own White privilege. Over 25 years later, she is one of the foundational scholars on understanding White privilege, and her work is widely anthologized and implemented in diversity trainings, particularly in higher education. She stated:
I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. (pp. 1-2)

The paper continues with a list of 46 privileges that McIntosh identified in her own life as related to her whiteness, including: “I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial” (p. 7); “If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn’t a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have” (p. 8); and “I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared” (p. 7). Her list surfaced whiteness in many facets of social, economic, and political life and made visible the unearned privileges White people enjoy merely for being White in contemporary society.

Frances Kendall (2006) defined White privilege as an “institutional, rather than personal, set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who hold the power positions in our institutions” (p. 63). Because we are taught to be oblivious and never “see” these privileges or how they affect us (e.g., Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006; Kimmel, 2002; McIntosh, 1988), it can be particularly painful for White people to acknowledge them, as they must also admit their complicity in White superiority and racism in institutions. And yet, as Kendall wrote:
All of us who are white receive white privileges. They are bestowed on us impersonally and systematically, but they affect us personally. We can’t not get them and we can’t give them back. Our choice is to use them in such a way as to dismantle the systems that keep the superiority of whiteness in place. (p. 62)

To dismantle racism and White superiority, White antiracist scholars often discuss the process of unlearning whiteness. The following section briefly explores this scholarship.

**Unlearning whiteness.** As the majority of women’s center professionals are currently thought to be White (Bonebright et al., 2012; Clevenger, 1988), the practice of unlearning whiteness may be particularly important for those who do work in the academy on behalf of women. Adale Sholock (2012), a former director of a women’s center, proposed a “methodology of the privileged” (p. 703) that can be employed by White Western feminists as they attempt to undo their ignorance about privilege, racism, and geopolitical inequities and engage in coalitional work with women of color. Her proposed methodology includes three methods, or strategies, for accomplishing this work: *protracted self-reflection* (e.g., Pratt, 1984; Rich, 1986), *racial sedition* (e.g., Segrest, 1994)—both well-established traditions—and Sholock’s reframing of *epistemic uncertainty*. A methodology of the privileged and the accompanying methods are a helpful framing for White women who are committed to antiracist feminism and willing to examine their own racial privilege, but who do not necessarily know how to do so. Sholock calls this lack of knowing “epistemic uncertainty,” framing it as “a methodology that highlights the necessary interdependence of the privileged and the oppressed in struggles to eliminate injustice” (p. 710) in that it is only in relation to women of color.
that White women can render their racial privilege visible and seek to understand it. Without this contrast, privilege would continue to be invisible to those who have it. Sholock asserted that “a methodology of the privileged might embrace the discomforts of epistemic uncertainty as an indication of effectiveness rather than failure within coalitional politics” (p. 710), as it indicates the visibility of racial oppression and White privilege.

Sholock’s (2012) methodology of the privileged offered three potential methods for White women’s center professionals to understand and take action in relation to their racial privilege. She opined:

What concerns me most is the self-doubt—not to mention emotional pain, anger, embarrassment, and frustration with one’s harmful impact upon other women—that can result from the confrontation with one’s ignorance and the repeated failure to maintain an antiracist standpoint. (p. 703)

Sholock called for antiracist White feminists to work to better tolerate their uncertainties and “epistemic blank spots” (Bailey, 2007, in Sholock, 2012, p. 703). She pointed to these spots as a place from which stronger coalitional work can be built, as they point to where White women most need the help of the women of color and antiracist feminists with whom they are interdependent. Sholock asserted that a methodology of the privileged might help the privileged to “learn to transform painful confusion, self-doubt, and fragmentation into flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and creativity for the betterment of antiracist and transnational feminist alliances” (p. 711).
A meaningful understanding of intersectionality may be a path to this kind of transformation among women’s center professionals. The next section explores intersectionality and the women’s center literature in relation to this theory. It concludes with a discussion of the possibilities and employments of intersectionality in the work of women’s centers.

**Intersectionality**

The theory of intersectionality has generated vigorous intellectual engagement and debate in the academy and beyond. While the term was coined and its metaphor first explained by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), its lineage includes the rich intellectual tradition of Black feminist thought, critical race theory, critical race feminism, and “the research, writings, and teaching by and about women of color in the United States (both native and migrant)” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009a, p. 3). At its core, intersectionality challenges discourse that asks women—particularly women of color—to separate their identities into discrete categories. Intersectionality asserts the understanding that individuals are all of their identities at the same time and that these identities cannot be split off from each other, particularly for women of color, who experience sexism and racism in ways that also cannot be separated. Intersectionality provides a theoretical and practical framework that encourages the understanding of these categories of identities, experiences, and oppressions as simultaneous and interlocking.

Over the past 3 decades, growing understandings of intersectionality have changed the field of women’s studies: McCall (2005) said of the theory, “One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s
studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (p. 1771). The impact of the theory on women’s centers and their work in U.S. higher education has also been noted and discussed (e.g., Goettsch et al., 2012; Goettsch et al., 2015). This section, written in two major parts, first explores the history of intersectionality, with its core tenets, critiques, and tensions, particularly as they relate to the academy. The second section explores the current application of intersectionality in women’s centers, as well as the promises and challenges of applying and enacting it.

**Traditions and Origins**

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a UCLA law professor and prominent critical race theorist, named intersectionality in the late 1980s. Her work also grows out of Black feminist thought, which established that individuals are all of their identities at the same time and that these identities cannot be split off from each other; they inform experiences at all times and interconnect in ways that cannot be extricated. In particular, Black feminist thought established that Black women—and by extension, women of color—cannot separate their race and their gender in order to pursue gender equity or racial equity as distinct movements. In other words, for women of color, race influences their experiences of sexism, and gender influences their experiences of racism. Intersectionality offers a theoretical framework for understanding individual experiences as well as systems of power. In explaining intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989) wrote:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it
can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions, sometimes from all of them. Similarly, if a black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (p. 149)

Crenshaw used this understanding of intersectionality to explore the experiences of Black women who bring forth employment discrimination cases, demonstrating that they are only aided by the law when their experiences parallel those of Black men or White women, and that as a result, many Black women are not able to gain justice through the legal system. In this foundational text, Crenshaw exposed the limits of single-identity social justice work and asked legal scholars, practitioners, and activists to consider the uses of intersectionality in understanding oppression.

Crenshaw (1991) later expanded her argument to outline structural, political, and representational intersectionalities related to violence against women of color. She charted theoretical opportunities for feminism and antiracism, as well as demonstrates the possibilities of intersectionality as a way of understanding not only individual experiences but also systems of oppression and coalitional work:

Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices
expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling. (p. 1242)

With these two articles, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) brought together multiple discourses, gave intersectionality its name, and showed rigorous and detailed examples of how an intersectional analysis would change legal, interpersonal, identity, feminist, and antiracism work, as well as coalition building. These articles are the pillars for a rich, generative, and often difficult intersectionality discourse.

While Crenshaw (1989, 1991) propelled the theory into the spotlight, more recently, scholars have reexamined the intellectual roots of the theory. Collins (2009) wrote:

We need to remember that such a wide range of scholar/activists developed various aspects of this approach through the 1970s and 1980s that, when Kimberlé Crenshaw penned the term “intersectionality” in 1991, she basically named a heterogeneous set of practices that had gone on for some time. (p. viii)

These practices and thinking were developed and published by Black feminist scholars (e.g., Collins, 1991; Combahee River Collective, 1982; hooks, 1984; Hull et al., 1982; Lorde, 1984) and women of color scholars (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1999; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) in the decade prior to Crenshaw’s (1991) naming of “intersectionality.” It is important to note that while the publication of these foundational works began in the 1980s, almost all of these scholars discussed long traditions of named and unnamed women of color in their respective communities who understood the interrelatedness of their race, gender, and other social identities as well as the interconnectedness of
oppression. For example, the Combahee River Collective (1982), a group of Black feminists that began meeting in 1974, acknowledged their intellectual lineage as including Black women activists such as Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells Barnett but also “thousands upon thousands unknown” (p. 14) Black women activists. In the 1980s, women of color gained some footing in the academy and the publishing world and began to share these intellectual traditions as well as their own unique scholarly contributions, laying the groundwork for intersectionality.

Core Tenets

Today, the importance of intersectionality to multiple fields has been established (McCall, 2005), and Bonnie Thornton Dill (2009) has asserted that “intersectionality is the intellectual core of diversity work” (p. 229). For women’s center professionals, the core tenets of intersectionality both support and challenge their work. The core tenets, as I synthesized them from the literature, are: (a) antiessentialism through acknowledging our diverse experiences, histories, and identities; (b) an understanding of identities and oppressions as simultaneous and intersecting; (c) the acknowledgment that individuals can be privileged and oppressed at the same time; (d) placing the lives and experiences of marginalized groups—particularly women of color—at the center of analysis; (e) the exploration of individual and institutional levels of analysis; and (f) the commitment to effecting change. This section will explore each of these core tenets in detail.

The first tenet, antiessentialism, is directly related to the roots of intersectionality in Black feminist theory, which critiqued White liberal feminist discourse for seeking gender equity at the exclusion of other categories of difference such as race and class.
The result of this single-issue approach to feminism was the theoretical and practical denial of differences among women. hooks (1984) wrote that “white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group” (p. 3). This statement exposes the essentialism present at the time of the writing, and naming it was one of the practices Collins (2009) asserted was present prior to the theoretical emergence of intersectionality. Antiessentialism, which in this case rejects the idea of a monolithic or “essential” experience to being a woman, is a critical component of intersectionality scholarship and activism. Grillo (1995) linked antiessentialism and intersectionality, claiming that “these two concepts embody what is essentially the same critique, but made from two different starting points” (p. 31). Grillo later wrote of their uses: “anti-essentialism and intersectionality are checks on us; they help us make sure that we do not speak for those we cannot speak for or ask others to share our agenda while they patiently wait for their own” (p. 38).

Intersectionality addresses essentialism through its second tenet, the understanding of identities and oppressions as simultaneous and intersecting. As stated previously, intersectionality puts forth that we are all of our identities at the same time: we cannot extricate these identities in our own experiences or in our work against oppression. At the same time, our experiences of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are also simultaneous and cannot be teased apart. Crenshaw (1989) explained:

Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often
does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender. These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. (p. 140)

As a result, intersectionality asks us to understand identity categories as intersecting rather than additive (Smooth, 2010) and to also see oppressions—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and others—as similarly intersecting rather than additive (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). As Crenshaw (1989) stated in the previous quote, “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (p. 140), which forces those interested in the theory to seek understanding of the ways that oppression compounds under an intersectional versus a single-issue lens.

A third core tenet of intersectionality is the acknowledgment that individuals can be privileged and oppressed at the same time. For example, a White woman is privileged in terms of race but may experience oppression because of gender. Additionally, as previously quoted by Collins (1991): “depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed” (p. 225). In other words, for a White woman in a mixed-gender group of White people, it is likely fair to describe her as a member of an oppressed group, as her gender puts her at a disadvantage. In an interracial group of women, however, her racial privilege may likely cast her as oppressor. In an interracial group of men and women, her identity as a
White woman becomes both privileged and disadvantaged. Intersectionality encourages practitioners to better understand the shifting nature of privilege and oppression in order to more effectively challenge power, racism, and sexism. This component of intersectionality is perhaps one of the most difficult for White women, in that it asks them to understand their privileges based on race and other dominant identities (heterosexual, able-bodied, and cisgender, among others), if they are present.

Scholars and practitioners can work to understand individual and institutional privilege through the fourth tenet of intersectionality, that of placing the lives and experiences of marginalized individuals “whose voices have been ignored” (Nash, 2008, p. 3) at the center of analysis. This form of analysis makes clear the illogic of privilege and oppression as well as allows us to imagine new approaches for making social change. Harding (1991) gave multiple examples of what happens when we “think from the perspective of lesbian lives” (p. 249), one of which is that it “centers female sexuality, and female sexuality as constructed by women” (p. 259). Rooted in standpoint theory, centering the lives and experiences of women of color yields important insights into the complex interconnections between race and gender, and racism and sexism, as well as their connection with other identities and oppression. It also serves to de-center privilege. When White women’s experiences and lives are no longer the center of analysis, new agendas for action and change emerge.

The fifth tenet of intersectionality is a commitment to both individual and institutional levels of analysis. The theory is concerned with understanding identities and individual experiences as well as institutions and structures of oppression. In the past 20
years, intersectionality has been embraced and utilized by a variety of disciplines, including higher education, where it has particularly enhanced identity research (e.g., Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones, 2009; Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012). In addition, there is a rich scholarship about utilizing intersectionality to dismantle institutional barriers in the academy (e.g., Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Dill & Zambrana, 2009b). However, to date, the women’s center literature has only a few mentions of either level—individual or institutional—of analysis put forth by intersectionality.

A final tenet of intersectionality is its commitment to effecting positive change. Dill (2002), after finishing a study exploring the perspectives of faculty who engage in intersectional work, wrote that “the ultimate goal of this work is to contribute to the creation of a more just society” (p. 5). This commitment to social justice manifests at the individual and institutional levels, in the academy and in society. It can be accomplished through intersectional research, teaching, activism, and work to build coalitions among various identity-based and/or antioppression groups. Dill and Zambrana (2009a), when citing the work of Collins (2000), perhaps best described the multiple impacts of intersectionality and its ability to create social change in the following passage:

Intersectional analysis explores and unpacks relations of domination and subordination, privilege and agency, in the structural arrangements through which various services, resources, and other social rewards are delivered; in the interpersonal experiences of individuals and groups; in the practices that characterize and sustain bureaucratic hierarchies; and in the ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies that shape consciousness. (p. 5)
In the end, the theory of intersectionality is concerned with changing the power relations and structures it exposes to advance social justice for all.

**Critiques, Tensions, and Challenges**

Intersectionality is clearly a rich and promising theoretical lens, yet the term and the theory are often misunderstood or only partially applied (Collins, 2009; Davis, 2008; Dill, 2009), and engagement with critique of intersectionality is also important (Warner & Shields, 2013). For example, applications of intersectionality have been critiqued for being too much about identity and not enough about dismantling oppressive social systems (Collins, 2009) or for “flattening difference” (Luft, 2009, p. 100) when utilized as a matter of course rather than strategically. These critiques typically point to when a core tenet, as described in the previous section, is not sufficiently or diligently attended to in intersectional work; in other words, it is in the application of the theory where gaps or difficulties may occur rather than in the theory itself. This leaves intersectional theorists and practitioners with a clear warning that they must pay attention to and balance the multiple dimensions of the theory. This section explores these critiques, as well as the theoretical interventions of intersectionality as outlined by Dill and Zambrana (2009a) as a path for guiding intersectional work and avoiding some of the pitfalls described here.

Intersectionality has become enormously popular in the discipline of women’s studies and many other fields. It is so popular that Kathy Davis (2008) called it a “buzzword” after she offered an intersectionality seminar in Germany that drew great interest from scholars and students across the region. Through leading the workshop, Davis came to understand that scholars and practitioners knew that intersectionality was
important but didn’t really understand what it was about. Davis wrote that the seminar participants “were all convinced that intersectionality was absolutely essential to feminist theory and they had no intention of ‘missing the boat’” (p. 67). Intersectionality as a theoretical and practical strategy, while widely praised and cited, must be more than just a buzzword or trend in the academy.

So why is intersectionality so popular and also so important for women’s studies and the disciplines? Davis (2008) argued that the success of intersectionality lies in its focus on a pervasive and fundamental concern in feminist theory, its provision of novelty, its appeal to the generalists as well as the specialists of the discipline, and its inherent ambiguity and open-endedness that beg for further critique and elaboration. (p. 70)

With Davis’s words in mind, it is understandable why so many would be interested in intersectionality, even those who do not know much about its actual workings. As intersectionality is incorporated into and utilized by various disciplines or functional areas in higher education—women’s centers, for example—it is critical that it be clearly understood and strategically deployed.

A tension of intersectionality is revealed in Jennifer Nash’s (2008) provocative question, “Who is intersectional?” (p. 9), which asked whether intersectionality “primarily concerns those with multiple marginalized identities or whether it is a more generalized theory of identity that involves the identity intersections of all individuals” (Warner & Shields, 2013, p. 804). Nash (2008) noted that this tension is unresolved, and scholars and practitioners continue to use the theory in both of these ways. As a result,
the current body of intersectionality scholarship encompasses both veins of Nash’s question.

Another critique of intersectionality studies is that they can become too focused on the individual or identity level of the theory rather than the social or structural level. In introducing Dill and Zambrana’s (2009b) volume, Patricia Hill Collins (2009) succinctly explained this danger and its impact:

In recent years, intersectional analyses have far too often turned inward, to the level of personal identity narratives, in part, because intersectionality can be grasped far more easily when constructing one’s own autobiography. This stress on identity narratives, especially individual identity narratives, does provide an important contribution to fleshing out our understandings of how people experience and construct identities within intersecting systems of power. Yet this turning inward also reflects the shift within American society away from social structural analyses of social problems, for example, the role of schools, prisons, and workplace practices in producing poverty, and the growing rejection of institutional responses to social inequities, e.g., how governmental social policies might address this intractable social problem. (p. ix)

In addition to Collins’s concern about identity discussions without structural analysis or a commitment to social change, Jones (2014) noted that “to only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power” (p. xii). These concerns about the misuse of intersectionality are based on the application of the theory, not on the theory
itself. With a core tenet of understanding power and privilege on both individual and institutional levels, intersectionality does not propose to pursue one at the exclusion of the other. Collins (2009) is asking intersectionality scholars and practitioners to include these analyses of structural and institutional power in their work as well, with the implied reason that social change—another core tenet—cannot be achieved with both levels of analyses and activism. Jones (2014) similarly asked, “What exactly does intersectionality ask those of us who work in higher education to do?” (p. xii), clearly stating the need for action to move beyond mere identity analysis.

The tendency to stay at the level of “personal identity narratives” and “constructing one’s own autobiography” (Collins, 2009, p. ix) might be particularly true for White women who are also privileged in terms of class, sexual orientation, and ability, among other categories. For White women who experience privilege in almost every other category, understanding their own personal identity narrative is a means of entering into the conversation about intersectionality and exploring the theory. However, “honoring the day-to-day experiences of each person…is not a core function of intersectionality” (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 11), and the analysis cannot end at this level. Intersectionality is important because it can help White women to understand how they are simultaneously oppressed and the oppressor. As Davis (2008) wrote, intersectionality “can—by definition—be employed by any (feminist) scholar willing to use her own social location, whatever it may be, as an analytic resource rather than just an identity marker” (p. 72). What is problematic is when this understanding ends at the individual “identity marker” (p. 72) level and does not include the group, structural, or
institutional analyses with which intersectionality clearly asks scholars and practitioners to engage.

But how can this analysis be done? Wijeyesinghe and Jones (2014) offered that intersectionality “attends to identity by placing it within a macrolevel analysis that ties individual experience to a person’s membership in social groups, during a particular social and historical period, and within larger, interlocking systems of advantage and access” (p. 11). For White women who are most comfortable with the identity level of intersectionality, this framework offers a means of deeper analysis by placing individual experience into a structural framework. Additionally, intersectionality can help people to expose the “interconnections between systems of power and privilege in which personal narratives related to identity develop, evolve, and are understood” (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 11). This awareness—that individual narratives can be bound by structural forces—is particularly important for researchers seeking to understand individual experiences and propose means of structural change.

An additional critique of intersectionality is Luft’s (2009) incisive analysis about how the theory has the potential to “flatten difference” (p. 100). While a proponent of intersectionality, Luft wrote:

I have also come to believe that emphasizing the simultaneous and interactive workings of gender, race, and other axes of identity and oppression is not always the most effective approach in certain contexts when the aim is intervention. By intervention here I mean intentional acts of resistance, designed to interrupt hegemonic attitudes or practices regarding gender and/or race. (p. 102)
While Luft saw the importance of intersectionality in “broad interventions” (p. 102), she argued that during initial discussions of race or gender, particularly at the microlevel, intersectional analyses may reinforce backlash and resistance. Additionally, it may permit “the appropriation of ‘race, class, and gender’ language for the progressive currency it brings, without attendant antiracist, anticlassist, and antisexist practices” (p. 103). This second danger can be linked to Collins’s (2009) critique that intersectionality stops at the level of identity narratives and does not engage with structural issues. To counter this, Luft proposed that single-issue analysis, when critically and strategically employed, may be needed for an unlearning of racism to occur. When done well, it encourages White women, for example, to take responsibility for their race privilege without offering the option to escape to the safety of being a White woman (and therefore simultaneously privileged and oppressed, which is an intersectional understanding). This single-issue strategy requires that White women take responsibility and ownership of their whiteness, men of color to take responsibility and ownership of their male privilege, and so on.

Luft’s (2009) analysis, in which she worked to locate intersectionality within current race and gender logics as well as contemporary sociopolitical contexts, is important for higher education practitioners who are engaged in diversity education. Luft was particularly concerned with the “universally applied, uncritical practice of intersectionality” (p. 101) that occurs the theory is not used strategically. Luft’s critique, paired with Dill’s (2009) assertion that “intersectionality is the intellectual core of diversity work” (p. 229), created an imperative for diversity educators—including women’s center professionals—to engage with intersectionality in ways that are deep,
strategic, and often difficult. It also created important questions about the critical and strategic use of single-issue approaches, particularly for introductory learning experiences related to race and gender.

It is clear that intersectionality is not without challenges, concerns, and tensions. The theory has a complicated set of considerations that must be fully explored and balanced, and the strategic deployment of intersectional analyses is imperative. While balancing and answering these tensions is highly contextual when using the theory to understand and address oppression, the rewards are great. Intersectionality radically alters how we create knowledge, understand experiences and oppression, and move forward, particularly in coalitions, in search of social change. Specifically, Dill and Zambrana (2009a) offered four theoretical interventions that intersectionality provides. These interventions can serve as both a guidepost for those engaged in the work as well as a clarion call for those who are interested but anchorless in employing intersectional analyses. The authors distinguished the four theoretical interventions of intersectionality as:

1) Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory; 2) Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized; 3) Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression; and 4) Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the
eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions.

(p. 5)
These interventions are critical in any application of the theory, but they are particularly critical for the work of women’s centers in U.S. higher education. The following sections explore the possibilities and challenges of utilizing intersectional analyses in women’s centers.

**Intersectionality and the Women’s Center Literature**

While intersectionality has much to offer women’s centers and their staffs, limited exploration has been undertaken in the women’s center literature and there are few explicit references to the importance of intersectionality. Perhaps most significantly, Goettsch et al. (2015) wrote, in the newest contextual statement for the CAS standards:

> With a commitment to the continuous examination of power, privilege, interlocking oppressions, and the intersection of gender with other identities, WGPS seek to support and advocate for the positive educational experiences of all members of college and university communities while simultaneously maintaining a specific focus on gender and women. As a result of this intersectional framework, traditionally under-served, underrepresented, and marginalized populations across gender identities engage in and benefit from WGPS. (p. 491)

Intersectionality is specifically named as the theory that guides this focus. The statement is also significant for its mention of the commitment of women’s centers to examine power and privilege; while this commitment is evident at the national meetings of
women’s center professionals (e.g., Allington et al., 2005; Bartlow et al., 2010a, 2010b; Bartlow et al., 2011; Campos et al., 2005; DiLapi & Kulton, 2006; Holgerson, 2009; Holgerson & Kulton, 2008; Holgerson et al., 2009), it is not often referenced in the literature. Lastly, the statement calls for a difficult and perhaps impossible balance: to do work that is intersectional while also maintaining a strong focus on gender and women. The document and the accompanying CAS standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015) do not offer specific discussion or guidance about how to accomplish this, pointing to a major gap in the women’s center literature.

Other references to intersectionality in the literature are minor but similarly revealing. For example, Ohio women’s center professionals raised two questions related to intersectionality when they created a list of 32 critical questions that would be helpful in generating their statement of philosophy, asking, “How do women’s centers address intersectionality?” and “How do women’s centers understand their relationships with cultural centers? What intersects? What is distinct?” (Vlasnik, 2010, p. 4). The inclusion of questions related to intersectionality is as important as the way the questions are framed. Asking how women’s centers address intersectionality rather than engage with the theory is a distinction that raises the question of whether women’s center professionals view intersectional work as something that they do (external action) versus a theory that guides their work (internal motivation/guide). It also raises the question of how critical this practice might be. The second question about women’s centers and their relationships with cultural centers, which seems to use intersectionality from a more theoretical perspective, seems to suggest that the theory is incomplete, as it asks for how
the work of women’s centers is distinct from cultural centers. Additional research about the coalitions, connections, and disjunctures between women’s centers and cultural centers is clearly critical for understanding the contemporary work of women’s centers in the academy.

Goettsch et al. (2012) named three trends currently influencing women’s centers: the (re)naming of women’s centers; the continued relevance of Davie’s (2002a) call for centers to engage with internationalization, technology, and leadership; and inclusivity and intersectionality. The authors stated that “feminism, foundational to women’s center work, has become more inclusive, intersectional, and social justice-oriented” (p. 8) and explored some of the ways in which centers have expanded their understanding of both constituents and issues, with many centers now serving men and transgender individuals. While the authors do not explicitly explore how intersectionality influences centers, their inclusion of the theory in their list of contemporary trends in women’s center invites us to consider how it shapes and impacts the work of centers.

As stated in Chapter 1, most women’s centers are not organizationally or structurally designed to be intersectional. Colleges and universities tend to create and institutionalize separate identity-based centers for women, racial and ethnic groups, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) individuals. As a result, there is a structural fragmenting of identities that is at odds with the work of intersectionality and can, at times, pit identity-based centers and programs against each other as they “compete” for resources, constituents, media attention, reputation, and “ownership” of various programs and initiatives on campus. While it is difficult to overcome these
institutionalized and historical barriers to coalition building, it is imperative to realizing
the missions of women’s centers. Unfortunately, women’s centers have much work to do
in this area. As Linder and Robbins (in Santovec, 2008) stated, “We’ve had lots of
students say they don’t want to choose their identity of the week, we want you to be more
inclusive” (p. 21). And Marine’s (2011) study of women’s center professionals included a
participant who shared that “there’s a lot of work being done on my campus with race,
class, and other [individual] identities, and we are not doing everything we could be or
should be around intersectionality” (p. 23). The failure to be inclusive and to employ
intersectionality as a strategy both for understanding themselves as professionals as well
as the work of women’s centers is perhaps one of the most pressing issues for twenty-
first-century women’s centers.

**Intersectionality in Women’s Centers**

While the literature has limited discussion of intersectionality in relation to the
work of women’s centers, there are many ways that intersectionality could complicate,
deepen, and advance the work of women’s centers and many ways that it already does.
Just as Davis (2008) stated that it is “unimaginable that a women’s studies programme
would only focus on gender” (p. 68), it is increasingly difficult to imagine that a women’s
center, as well, would only focus on gender. As a result, it is difficult to imagine how
centers might look radically different because in many ways they have already started to
change. However, particular tensions arise in the work of women’s centers, which are
diverse in terms of their structural location within their institutions, are staffed by
individuals with widely ranging credentials and training, and, unlike women’s and gender studies, are not necessarily protected by academic freedom.

The proposition of exploring intersectionality in women’s centers begins with Crenshaw (1991) when she proposed that intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics. It is helpful in this regard to distinguish intersectionality from the closely related perspective of antiessentialism, from which women of color have critically engaged white feminism for the absence of women of color on the one hand, and for speaking for women of color on the other. (p. 1296)

To work in a university women’s center is, on the one hand, to constantly explore diversity among women and their multiple identities, and, on the other hand, to advocate for women as a whole. It is also about working to understand the interlocking nature of sexism, racism, classism, and other oppressions in order to dismantle them in the academy. These difficult tasks are continually in tension with each other, and individuals as well as the institution often want women’s center professionals to do both at the same time. Crenshaw made a distinction that we must separate this tension from critiques of White feminism, which is helpful in that many women’s centers were founded on the principles of White feminism. As a result, women’s centers have faced many of the same critiques as White feminism by women of color—particularly for excluding them and their concerns as well as presuming to speaking for them.
In addition, women’s center professionals must negotiate their intersecting identities in the service of the larger social justice mission of intersectionality. In some situations, the theoretical intervention of intersectionality of placing the experiences of women of color at the center (Dill & Zambrana, 2009a) can provide a means of negotiating and mediating the whiteness of staff members or of the institution, while in other situations, a strategic employment of single-issue politics as described by Luft (2009) might be the best way to educate a group of students or administrators about a particular oppression. More attention to and exploration of the intentional and strategic use of—or decision not to use—intersectionality in the work of women’s centers is needed to understand what is gained and what is lost in these approaches. This study sought to map the approaches, negotiations, and struggles of women’s center professionals to understand how theory influences individual action as well as to map how intersectionality is employed to further the work of women’s centers in U.S. higher education.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored and placed three bodies of literature in conversation with each other—women’s centers, Black feminist thought and White antiracist scholarship, and intersectionality—while contextualizing this study’s research questions about how women’s center professionals negotiate their race and ethnicity in their various center roles and how theory informs these understandings. In Chapter 3, I explore how these literatures inform the study’s theoretical framework, as well as outline the design, methods, and procedures of this critical phenomenological research study.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter first explains the epistemological and theoretical foundations of the study, and then critical phenomenology and heuristic inquiry are defined and explored as the methodological approaches. Next, research design, including site, sampling procedures, and data collection, management, and analysis, are described. Last is a discussion of trustworthiness and validity, as well as the reciprocity that emerged throughout the study. Discussion of ethical issues such as representation, relationships, and insider research are woven throughout, with a focus on three concepts applied in an effort to complicate, deepen, and unsettle the conventions of the methodology and my own potential ease as researcher: (a) research as difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998; Pitt & Britzman, 2003); (b) research as betrayal (Islam, 2000; Visweswaran, 1994); and (c) the researcher as a “known stranger,” a concept I developed to explore my unique and simultaneous insider and outsider researcher status.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study is to understand how women’s center professionals negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work in the academy and how theory informs these negotiations. Toward that understanding, two questions emerged:
1. How do women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity related to their roles and work in women’s centers?
2. How do feminist theories inform, support, and/or fail women’s center professionals as they negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work?

**Epistemological and Theoretical Foundations**

All research, whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged, is grounded in a particular epistemological tradition and at least one theoretical perspective, and it utilizes a theoretical framework (Jones et al., 2014). These interconnections are laid out in this section, with specific focus on how they manifest in and inform this study.

First, *epistemology* concerns the nature of knowledge (Schwandt, 2015) and can be defined as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). The epistemological foundation of this study is social constructionism (Crotty, 1998) and is detailed in a subsequent section.

*Theoretical perspective* and *theoretical framework* are perhaps more difficult to tease apart. Jones et al. (2014) delineated these two terms as the following:

Whereas theoretical perspective influences how the researcher will approach and design the study and influences how the researcher will approach the topic under study in more abstract terms, the theoretical framework offers suppositions that inform the phenomenon under study and comes from existing scholarly literature.

(p. 22)

These definitions were utilized to tease apart the study’s theoretical perspective from its framework. The larger theoretical approach can best be located within feminist and
critical research and feminist methodologies, and the study’s theoretical framework is woven together from three feminist literatures: Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and White antiracist scholarship. Each of these areas is explored at the end of this section.

**Epistemological Foundation: Constructionism**

My epistemological approach is constructionist, which advances that individuals make sense of the world by interacting with objects and each other to construct—not create—meaning (Crotty, 1998). In this epistemological view, there is no “objective” knowledge. Most closely connected to the social world (Jones et al., 2014), constructionism advances that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). For this reason social constructionism is the most common form of constructionism.

While sometimes more associated with ontology than with epistemology (Jones et al., 2014), constructionism is an established epistemological paradigm often closely aligned—or confused—with constructivism and interpretivism (Crotty, 1998). I spent significant time reading and carefully delineating between constructivism and constructionism. Crotty (1998) was the most helpful in this endeavor when he suggested “to reserve the term constructivism for epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on ‘the meaning-making activity of the individual mind’ and to use constructionism where the focus includes ‘the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning’ ” (p. 58). Even more specifically, Crotty (1998) wrote:
Constructivism...points up the unique experience of each of us....that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit. On the other hand, social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world. This shaping of our minds by culture is to be welcomed as what makes us human and endows us with the freedom we enjoy. For all that, there are social constructionists aplenty who recognise that it is limiting as well as liberating and warn that, while welcome, it must also be called into question. On these terms, it can be said that constructivism tends to resist the critical spirit, while constructionism tends to foster it. (p. 58)

Given the critical phenomenological, heuristic, and feminist nature of this study, social constructionism is a more fitting approach; each of these methodological approaches takes into account “the hold culture has on us” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58) and works to critically understand how the individual, in relationship with others, constructs meaning about the world.

**Theoretical Perspective: Feminist and Critical Research**

My theoretical perspective, or “philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3), is that of feminist and critical research and feminist methodologies. As a feminist practitioner in higher education for over a decade, it felt like a natural transition to become a feminist researcher. Lather (1986a) said, “The overt ideological goal of
feminist research is to correct both the *invisibility* and the *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (p. 68). I have long been interested in understanding/changing unequal power relationships, listening to silences, and challenging binaries, all hallmarks of feminist research.

Consistent with the view that gender is socially constructed (Beauvoir, 1953; Lorber, 1994), the critical theoretical perspective, which interrogates the power and politics of knowledge in determining our realities, is particularly useful. Specifically, the perspective seeks to expose the ways in which knowledge reifies social inequities. Guba and Lincoln (2004) concisely stated that the goal of critical theory is to “critique and [transform]…the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind” (p. 30). Particularly, the critical research paradigm is an activist paradigm that seeks to challenge and overthrow the status quo. Critical researchers therefore play the role of “instigator and facilitator” (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 30) as well as social change agent (Glesne, 2011).

The feminist and critical paradigms are noted for being particularly aligned and linked (Glesne, 2011), and they fundamentally informed my qualitative research agenda. The study illuminated the invisibility of the work of women’s center professionals while working to support my participants—and eventually others in our field—in their fight against sexism and racism and “women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1986a, p. 68). Feminist research methodology was employed, which is best described as “an abstract classification that refers to a variety of methodological stances, conceptual approaches, and research strategies” (Fonow & Cook, 2005, p. 2213). Feminist research can be
implemented across many methodological traditions, which explains the unique connections between phenomenology, critical theory, and heuristics, described subsequently. In this study, two specific feminist research concerns were applied in an effort to complicate, deepen, and unsettle the conventions of the methodology and my potential ease as researcher: *researching difficult knowledge* (Britzman, 1998; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) and *research as betrayal* (Islam, 2000; Visweswaran, 1994).

**Researching difficult knowledge.** In “Speculations on Qualities of Difficult Knowledge in Teaching and Learning,” Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman (2003) utilized psychoanalysis to grapple with how students and professors make meaning of their experiences with “difficult knowledge” (p. 755). Rather than a traditional interview, they instead created 15 themes related to encounters or experiences with difficult knowledge and listed subprompts to evoke narrations from their participants. For example, for the theme “thinking about fighting with knowledge,” prompts include “times when your ideas and your feelings were at odds with each other” and “times when you could not separate the good from the bad in knowledge” (p. 771). This unusual protocol was shared with participants 2 days prior to the scheduled interview so they could think about which prompts they wished to address. While the design made the study more demanding for the researchers and the participants, it also caused Pitt and Britzman to understand that “research must be understood as provoking, not representing, knowledge” (p. 769).

I believed that this study’s design would “provoke, not represent, knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769), particularly among White participants whose racial identity is likely not a constant and salient feature of their identities. The study was
structured so that writing, thinking, talking, and making sense of current and past experiences would provoke new understandings for the participants, for myself as a co-researcher, and for us together. This process was messy, layered, and potentially demanding. What I asked was its own form of “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755), as participants narrated experiences that were only partially understood and perhaps unknowable not just to me but also to them. Pitt and Britzman reminded that in using the psychoanalytic concept of deferred action, “old experiences can be revised and new psychical significance to current and past events can be constructed. The new event, however, bears the traces of the dynamics of earlier experience even as the earlier experience can be revised” (p. 758). Individuals often cannot make sense of their experiences right away, so the telling and retelling serves to change both past and present meaning.

Pitt and Britzman (2003) caused me to acknowledge that researching how women’s center professionals understand and negotiate their race and privilege was to research difficult knowledge. Just as the researchers struggled to elicit and then understand stories they learned in the field, I struggled to do the same. They also struggled with themselves as researchers:

Indeed…we learn something of our own knowledge when we stumble in the face of our own persistent blind spots, and we collude with interviewees in their production of satisfying narratives that dance around the surprise of self-implication. (p. 769)
Just as my interview protocol was designed to learn about failures of knowing, I too was implicated for my “persistent blind spots.” Throughout data collection and analysis, I was reminded of Sholock’s (2012) discussion of epistemic uncertainty in the face of understanding how to be a White antiracist feminist committed to coalition. The heuristic design of this study required my own discovery alongside those of participants. And yet, my own “persistent blind spots” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769) and “epistemic uncertainty” (Sholock, 2012, p. 703) must also be considered in this study—another manifestation of difficult knowledge.

Finally, the ethics of difficult knowledge were concerning. What did it mean to ask participants to speak about experiences for which they may not have words? Experiences in which they may have been harmed or caused harm? What did this layered process of storytelling, meaning-making, and examination provoke in them and in me? How might my blind spots prevent me from anticipating or responding to ethical issues?

At the beginning of the study, I was reminded that the ethics are implicated in and must be attended to at every step of the process, and that it is the researcher’s responsibility to anticipate and respond to ethical concerns (Jones et al., 2014). Throughout this chapter, ethical issues related to the research topic and design, relationships in the field, and the representation of difficult knowledge are discussed.

**Research as betrayal.** Research is not a value-neutral, seamless experience for the participants or the researcher; each has potentially conflicting goals, hopes, and concerns. Also complicating is that desires may shift throughout the process. As I pondered this study about difficult knowledge and my research role complicated by
heuristic inquiry, and my change in status with the participant from insider to outsider researcher, I wondered if I might betray the desires of the participants. This betrayal could be personal (e.g., I learned or shared something against the wishes of the participant) or professional (e.g., I shared data that do not place women’s center professionals or their work in the best light), or perhaps a betrayal that I still cannot imagine. I danced with the implication that I could also be the one betrayed.

Kamala Visweswaran (1994) grappled with her own betrayal as well as the betrayal of her participants in her ethnographic fieldwork in India. Of her own, she wrote, “If this is a story about ‘betrayal,’ then the central, unspoken betrayal here is of course my own assumption of a universal sisterhood between women” (p. 41). In the field, she found that her participants told conflicting or partial stories, shared information about each other that the other participants did not want to tell, and actively resisted telling her what she asked. As a result, Visweswaran must consider “what anthropology looks like when the acts of subjects deflecting or refusing our inquiries form a part of the analysis” (p. 13). Their acts of resistance push back against Visweswaran’s notion of universal sisterhood, under which their shared interests would encourage them to participate without reservation, or at least without active resistance. But her questions and very presence triggered myriad betrayals to the women as well, who in various ways were compelled to share information that they wished to keep private. To understand what happened to both the researcher and the researched, Visweswaran invoked Spivak’s deconstructive position of “saying an impossible no to a structure that one critiques, yet
inhabits intimately” (p. 73). And yet, Visweswaran noted that the betrayals defy explanation.

Visweswaran (1994) explored the necessary betrayals of feminist research, which has lost its innocence, and feminist theory, which is “repositioning itself along the lines of difference” (p. 41). Implicated in this loss of innocence is not just the notion of universal sisterhood, but also the researcher’s ability to make sense of and represent the lives of others. Also now explicit are the ways that the process of research and the researcher herself can betray participants, who come to the research process with not only differing but also shifting desires.

Naheed Islam (2000) experienced these dilemmas when she conducted insider research within the Bangladeshi immigrant community in Los Angeles. Over the course of her data collection, she was seen as betraying the community by “acting White” and because she would not collude in their meaning-making or their racism. Islam became increasingly concerned with how to represent the complexities of the Bangladeshi community, a community about which she cared deeply and that has been underresearched. She faced a dilemma because in her research about the community’s experiences with racism in the United States, she also uncovered racism on the part of some Bangladeshis toward other groups, particularly African Americans. Islam wrote: “Should I reveal this ‘dirty laundry’…? By doing so, will I be distancing myself from and claiming to be better than the rest of ‘my community’?...How should I represent a marginalized community in my work?” (p. 58). Ultimately, in her concern with her own potential betrayal to antiracism, Islam made the choice to include the data and framed it
as an antiessentialist move toward understanding the multiple layers, components, and perspectives of this community.

There are many parallels between Visweswaran’s (1994) and Islam’s (2000) discussions of necessary betrayal and this study. I was an insider to women’s center work and was similarly concerned with how women’s centers and the people who work within them were represented. Because of my regard for the community and belief in its important work, I felt bound between resisting a heroic tale of women’s center professionals and also not negating their good work or undermining the tentative authority they have earned, day by day, on their university campuses. The thought of airing “dirty laundry” (Islam, 2000, p. 58), “walk[ing] a line between a victory story… and a despairing story” (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. xvi), or becoming a traitor to women’s center work was uncomfortable, concerning, and potentially inevitable. Additionally, while I believed that study participants would be interested in building knowledge about their field, it would be naïve to think that this is all that might be at work: just as in the research of Islam and Visweswaran, I anticipated that my participants would have their own agendas and might resist telling me the very knowledge I wished to uncover. I anticipated that the necessary betrayals of feminist research—my own, theirs, and our shared loss of innocence about engaging in research—would continue to surface.

Throughout this insider/outsider study, I grappled with these topics in my research journal and with my peer debriefers. Writing up the data was the biggest struggle, as I was dually concerned with the anonymity of participants (see discussion that follows) and the potential betrayal of adding “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755) to
the limited literature about women’s centers. I worked to resolve this tension by rigorous reflection and journaling whenever I noted it, as well as checking in with participants about the representation of their experiences and thoughts about the research findings. These two struggles informed every stage of the study and are fundamental to its feminist and critical theoretical perspective.

**Theoretical Framework**

Three theoretical traditions compose this study’s framework and guided my thinking and approach: (a) Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984; Lorde 1984); (b) intersectionality (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dill, 2002); and (c) White antiracist scholarship (Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006; Sholock, 2012).

**Black feminist thought.** Through its critique of White liberal feminism (Lorde 1984) and desire to put the experiences of Black women at the center of discussion (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984), Black feminist thought informed this study—particularly the conflicting attitudes of White women participants who, as Black feminist thought has demonstrated, may remain committed to patriarchy and White privilege despite their attempts to be allies (Smith, 1980). Black feminist theory also helped me to understand the silences of White women participants (Lorde, 1984; Smith, 1980). Lastly, Black feminist thought checked me as a White researcher, challenging me to understand my own responses, experiences, and knowledge, as well as to keep me uncomfortable with the possibility of appropriating the responses, experiences, and knowledge of Black participants in the name of research and fresh insight about the research questions.
Black feminist thought also informed how I understood the experiences of participants who identified as Black or African American. Women of color are a minority not only in the academy but also in this study, and it was imperative to me that their experiences be placed in the center of the dialogue and not relegated to marginal status; the work of bell hooks (1984) and other theorists explored in Chapter 2 helped to enrich and complicate this conversation.

Black feminist thought also helped me to understand the structural issues related to women’s centers. As stated in Chapter 2, women’s and other identity-based centers are often viewed by their institutions as single-issue centers, regardless of how they actually engage with their work. The majority of women’s centers have missions for gender equity that align them with White liberal feminism, an older form of academic feminism that has been institutionalized in women’s centers. Black feminist theory challenges those who work in women’s centers to enact a broader agenda and attempt to serve women of color in meaningful ways.

**Intersectionality.** Black feminist thought helped me to see the work that must be done, and intersectionality helps to provide the roadmap. Intersectionality aided me in seeing how social identities caused participants to be simultaneously privileged and oppressed (Collins, 1991). Because of the intersectional framework, I could not make clean categories and was forced into a more complex analysis of individual and institutionalized instances of racism and sexism. In addition, intersectionality provided a framework for understanding the experiences of women of color, who were caught in multiple systems of oppression, while also offering the possibility for seeing the path
toward coalition. Crenshaw (1991) acknowledged that “through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which [they]…find expression in constructing group politics” (p. 1299).

Intersectionality utilized in research is not without difficulties (Hancock, 2007). By its design, intersectional research, according to Dill (2002), is an analytical strategy, an approach to understanding human life and behavior rooted in the experiences and struggles of marginalized people. It is also an important tool linking theory with practice that can aid in the empowerment of communities and individuals. Finally, it is a theoretical perspective that insists on examining the multi-dimensionality of human experience. (p. 6)

These are not necessarily easy categories to address in any one study. Additionally, when intersectionality is used as a research paradigm, analysis must include the “individual integrated with institutional” (Hancock, 2007, p. 64), rather than a mere additive analysis of the individual and the institutional. While I struggled with these components of intersectionality, they enriched the research design, as well as the data collection and analysis. Hancock’s (2007) warning particularly enriched the critical phenomenological methodology of the study and therefore the findings.

**White antiracist scholarship.** The final contribution to the theoretical framework of this study comes from White antiracist scholarship. Frankenberg (1993) wrote:

Whiteness…has a set of linked dimensions. First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from
which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (p. 1) White antiracist scholarship addresses these three areas as well as delineates how White privilege is conferred and the choices that White people have in the face of coming to understand their privilege (Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006). This body of scholarship served to illuminate the ways in which privilege manifested (e.g., Kimmel, 2002; McIntosh, 1988) in the lives of my participants and highlighted how they spoke about their privilege (Hurtado & Stewart, 2004).

In particular, Sholock (2012) provided a framework to understand the antiracism commitments of White women through her methodology of the privileged, which includes three methods that informed my research design and were discussed in Chapter 2: (a) protracted self-reflection (apparent in the study’s journaling exercise), (b) racial sedition (present in the interview protocol), and (c) epistemic uncertainty (evident in the interview protocol). Of particular interest to me was how “epistemic blank spots” (Bailey, 2007, in Sholock, 2012, p. 703) might manifest in White women, and how they may inform their work in women’s centers.

The next section outlines the study’s critical phenomenological and heuristic methodology, which fits with the epistemological and theoretical foundations just outlined.

**Methodology**

Harding (1987) defined methodology as a “theory of how research is done or should proceed” (p. 2). I was interested in the knowledge and experiences of women’s
center professionals and explored how participants understand their race and ethnicity related to their roles in women’s centers, as well as how theory informed, defined, and assisted as participants interpreted these experiences. The study wove together critical phenomenology, an emerging methodological approach, and the tradition of heuristic inquiry. Here, the methodological lens is narrowed from phenomenology to critical phenomenology to heuristic inquiry.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology—the “study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Sokolowski, 2000)—was the major methodological tradition utilized. It has been noted as a “complex, multifaceted philosophy [that] defies simple characterization because it is not a single unified philosophical standpoint” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 234). Phenomenology is rooted in the work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty; each started a distinct branch of phenomenology—transcendental, hermeneutic, and existential, respectively (Jones et al., 2014). All of these traditions operate from the assumption that “there is an essence or essences to shared experience” (Patton, 2015, p. 116). The goal of phenomenological research is to understand how we make sense of these experiences individually and collectively, an understanding that can only come “by turning from things to their meaning, from what is to the nature of what is” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 234).

Philosophically and methodologically, phenomenology is focused on lived experience and how individuals experience their life-world or *Lebenswelt*. The life-world is the “intersubjective world of human experience and social action…of common-sense
knowledge of everyday life. It is constituted by the thoughts and acts of individuals and the social expressions of those thoughts and acts (e.g., laws, institutions) (Schwandt, 2015, p. 185). Phenomenologists are also interested in how people transform experiences into consciousness; it is an important distinction that they are not concerned with finding the objective “truth” of what happened but rather how individuals understand experiences and incorporate their meaning into their worldviews and life-worlds (Gallagher, 2012). The challenge for phenomenologists, then, is as Patton (2015) wrote, “methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, talk about it with others” (p. 115).

The phenomenological researcher seeks to put aside all presuppositions about phenomena through a process called *epoche*, during which the researcher “looks inside to become aware of personal bias, eliminate personal involvement with the subject material—that is, eliminate, or at least gain clarity about, preconceptions” (Patton, 2015, p. 575). During data collection and analysis, *epoche* is utilized by “relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). By bracketing both the researcher’s own prejudgments uncovered through *epoche* and the phenomena under investigation, the researcher takes it out of the world and examines it to uncover its essence (Patton, 2015).

The phenomenon under study here was the negotiation of race and ethnicity in women’s center work—how it was understood by people who work in women’s centers and how these understandings may surface in their life-world, in their day-to-day
decisions, saliencies, uncertainties, clarities, and disjunctures about their work. To attempt to understand the life-world, phenomenologists collect data from participants “in the form of descriptions of lived-through moments, experiential anecdotal accounts, remembered stories of particular experiences, narrative fragments, and fictional experiences” (Adams & van Manen, 2008, p. 615). I was interested in all of these descriptions and developed a protocol for unearthing this “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003; see previous discussion). In the protocol, participants were to do as Crotty (1998) asked and “lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, [so that] possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning” (p. 78). But, as this study’s theoretical framework included Black feminist thought and intersectionality, both of which also emphasize the importance of structural and institutional analyses, I sought to push the limits of phenomenology to ask how feminist theories shape not only lived experiences but also how the theories were felt, interpreted, and incorporated into life-worlds.

**Critical Phenomenology**

Critical phenomenology focuses on both lived experiences and the political, economic, social, and/or cultural forces that inform them, thus “acknowledg[ing] that interpretations are shaped via political and economic contexts” (Cleaveland, 2013). Based on a blend of phenomenology and critical theory, this emerging approach, according to Desjarlais (1997),
can help us not only to describe what people feel, think, or experience but also to grasp how the processes of feeling or experiencing come about through multiple, interlocking interactions. Such an approach is phenomenological because it would entail a close, unassuming study of “phenomena,”…how, for instance, people tend to feel in a certain cultural situation. But the approach is also critical in that it tries to go beyond phenomenological description to understand why things are this way: to inquire, for instance, into what we mean by feeling, how it comes about, what it implies, and what broader cultural and political forces are involved. In addition, the phenomenology is critical because it tries to take into account the makings of its own perceptions. (p. 25)

Critical phenomenology is currently applied in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology to studies of homelessness (Desjarlais, 1997) and immigration and migration (Cleaveland, 2013; Willen, 2007). This study sought to expand critical phenomenology to the discipline of higher education; specifically, to explore theory as a force that can circumscribe, limit, expand, impose, and enrich meaning-making. While phenomenology has the potential to gather in-depth data about the experiences of women’s center professionals in negotiating their race and ethnicity (data not currently present in the literature), critical phenomenology encourages these experiences to also be understood in the context of the theories that helped to make them salient. In other words, the experiences of negotiating race and ethnicity are bound within an individual’s theoretical framework, which shapes initial experiences as well as each subsequent rethinking, reinterpretation, and meaning-making in a person’s life-world. Therefore, this
study also explored how theoretical understandings and applications inform the understandings of women’s center staff members related to their race and ethnicity in their professional work.

Critical phenomenology is exciting for its potential to understand the interplay between structures and lived experience, yet it is not without its challenges. The approach raises questions that are not currently answered in the literature about the role of the researcher, specifically how *epoche* and bracketing would work when the structures and world around experience are also under study. How can a researcher bracket or remove a phenomenon from the world when the world both describes and prescribes it (as critical phenomenology advances)? How are the researcher’s experiences understood in data collection and analysis? How does critical phenomenological analysis occur? The researchers behind exemplar critical phenomenological studies (e.g., Cleaveland, 2013; Dejarlais, 1997; Willen, 2007) do not divulge how they resolved this tension. To address this concern, I turn to heuristic inquiry and explore its potential to uniquely address the role of the researcher and enhance critical phenomenological analysis.

**Heuristic Inquiry**

This study utilized the methodological tradition of heuristic inquiry, which fundamentally asks, “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (Patton, 2015, p. 118); in this study, the phenomena under investigation are the essential experience of women’s center professionals negotiating their racial and ethnic identities and the roles of theory in these negotiations. Heuristics, meaning to discover or find, involves both the
researcher and the participant in the discovery of knowledge. This form of phenomenological study requires the researcher to “have personal experience with and intense interest in the phenomenon under study. Second, others (co-researchers) who are part of the study must share an intensity of experience with the phenomenon” (Patton, 2015, p. 119). To work in a university women’s center is an intense experience, but more prominently, it is an intense experience to be an intersectional individual (a person with multiple interlocking identities) who does intersectional work (addressing sexism, racism, and other oppressions) in what academic institutions often see as a single-issue identity center. Women’s center professionals face daily inescapable tensions of what the institution wants them to attend to related to women’s issues, as well as their experience of their own and others’ intersectional selves. These tensions both created a powerful bond among women’s center professionals and constituted an intense, shared experience in the study.

Given the nature of the topic—what drew me to it, my ongoing interest in understanding how my whiteness influences my own women’s center work, and the fact that I worked in a women’s center until I began to collect data—heuristic inquiry was a fitting methodological approach. In the tradition of Moustakas (1990), I worked to not only deepen what could be learned but also co-implicated myself as researcher and participant in provoking understanding, knowledge, and experiences of negotiating race and ethnicity in women’s center work.

Heuristic inquiry addresses the concerns laid out in the previous section about the researcher’s relationship to *epoche* and bracketing under critical phenomenology.
Heuristic research involves explicit processes for the researcher such as self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and an internal frame of reference (Moustakas, 1990), all means to uncover researcher experiences, suppositions, and knowledge of the phenomena under study; through these processes, *epoche* is replaced. Moustakas also outlines six phases for heuristic research that do not remove the phenomena from the world—initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis—thus discarding bracketing as a means of engaging in heuristic research. Notably, only during the final stage does the researcher “move outward by engaging with the experiences of others who have shared the experience of the phenomenon under inquiry and can provide additional data, insights, and feedback” (Patton, 2015, p. 120). In the creative synthesis stage, Moustakas (1990) reminded that behavior is governed and experience is determined by the unique perceptions, feelings, intuitions, beliefs, and judgments housed in the internal frame of reference of a person. Meanings are inherent in a particular world view, an individual life, and the connections between self, other, and world. (p. 32)

Through rigorously integrating the experiences of researcher and participants, the heuristic researcher is able to creatively address the methodological tensions that arise between phenomenology and critical theory. As the researcher is ever-present, phenomenological *epoche* and bracketing are placed aside in favor of the heuristic process (Moustakas, 1990). In other words, while *epoche*, bracketing, and the suspension of presuppositions are fundamental tools of phenomenological analysis, they are detriments to heuristic inquiry in which the researcher’s knowledge, experiences, and
intuitions in their life-world are fully explored. In this study, the heuristic process resolves the tensions between phenomenology and critical phenomenology, allowing the researcher a means to clearly draw the world into the analysis of the phenomena.

Challenges exist as well. For example, while women’s center professionals may share the intense experiences of negotiating their race and ethnicity, this is not a guarantee that they want or even know how to talk about it. The intensity of the experience, while making the topic fertile for heuristic inquiry, sometimes renders words, feelings, and experiences difficult to express and understand. As such, the concept of “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755) was previously introduced to assist in research design and analysis.

As a methodological integration of critical phenomenology and heuristic inquiry, this study advances a new framework for critical phenomenological research in the discipline of higher education. The next section outlines the design and procedures of this qualitative study.

Research Design and Procedures

Study sites, my relationships with participants, and issues of confidentiality and anonymity are first explored in this section; then, sampling, the study’s data collection timeline and protocols, and data management/security are discussed. Last, data analysis and coding, an exploration of the “trustworthiness” as outlined by Lather (1986a), and the multiple means of reciprocity in which I engaged with study participants throughout the duration of the research study are covered.
Study Sites

This study had two sites, both regional higher education associations exhibiting a strong commitment to supporting and advancing women’s centers. “Regional Higher Education Association” and “Local Higher Education Organization”—pseudonyms to increase the anonymity of study participants—together represent almost 40 institutions of higher education diverse in terms of public, private, religious affiliation, location, size, and level of research intensity. They have among their combined mailing lists 22 women’s centers. The executive directors of both sites provided letters indicating their willingness to sponsor the research, should it be approved by The Ohio State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Rationale. In choosing these sites, I both chose against other options as well as made an affirmative choice for these associations. I chose against a national survey of women’s center professionals for two primary reasons: a different focus to antiracism discussions within the national group and a practical desire to interview professionals in all roles within centers. I affirmatively chose these particular associations to allow for the richest data collection. Their diversity—in the many ways described—allowed for engagement with professionals at all levels. Additionally, the associations plan professional conferences and development opportunities that specifically address how to improve daily practice, the focus of this study.

Researcher relationship with the sites and participants. Prior to the research study, I had a relationship with both sites through attending their professional development opportunities, and I had relationships with other women’s center
professionals through these events. Over many years, we had conversations about our professional identities and discussions of theory in relation to our shared work. The research design, while enhanced by these relationships, was also complicated by them. This section outlines my approach to this unusual form of insider research (Glesne, 2011) and explores the researcher as a “known stranger.”

**Friendship and fieldwork.** Kirsch (2005) delineated distinctions for feminist researchers between friendliness and friendship in the context of interviews when she wrote:

> Unlike friendships, which develop over time and are built on reciprocal trust and shared information and activities, interviews are likely to be asymmetrical interactions, with one party—the party generally with the most institutional power—asking the questions and the other answering. (p. 2165)

Kirsch asked feminist researchers to distinguish between feelings of friendliness and friendship—the former possible in the context of a research relationship, and the latter ethically and practically difficult. I grappled with this issue throughout the research process and read extensively to understand my relationships with participants. Ridler (1996) perhaps came the closest to capturing my complicated sense of friendship:

> In the case of adults’ friendships too, the ongoing and repetitive nature of many practical activities establishes a chronology which forms a framework for *reciprocity, mutual obligation, and deep awareness of a shared history of experience itself* [emphasis added]. These dimensions are universally buttressed by narrative accounts born from such histories. Much of their experiential force is,
as an outsider is always aware, derived precisely from the supposition that teller and listener have in common enough background understanding to celebrate together their unspoken meanings and associations. (pp. 249–250)

While Ridler came to friendship through fieldwork (rather than preexisting friendly relationships prior to data collection), his description of a timeline of shared activities that creates “reciprocity, mutual obligation, and deep awareness of a shared history of experience itself” (p. 249) was present in my own study and deepened its heuristic nature; shared history strengthened the intensity of the phenomenon under study and our “common enough background” (p. 250) enriched meaning-making during the interviews and throughout data analysis.

However, this characterization cannot solely explain my relationship. Ridler (1996) himself admitted the difficulties of friendship, particularly in phenomenological research:

Friendships are of all relationships those which play most freely in the interspace between individual intention and cultural constraint, between agency and structure, in the lifeworld as it is concretely experienced. In this sense, they are by nature indeterminate, open to future possibility in unpredictable ways, and finally, enigmatic. In writing about specific friendships, there is an indefinable yet nonetheless real point at which they defy motivational analysis or reflection, while simultaneously providing a richly suggestive field for thinking outward toward an understanding of our experience and beyond that, of cultural practice. (pp. 254–155)
This description was perhaps the most helpful as I played at the edges of “individual intention and cultural constraint” and engaged in rigorous thinking and writing about relationships that, in the end, helped me to think “outward toward an understanding of [my] experience.” It became, ultimately, more important to understand myself in relationship than the relationship itself.

*The researcher as a “known stranger.”* Not knowing how to understand these preexisting relationships, I read widely to try to characterize myself as a researcher in relationship with participants (e.g., Reinharz, 1992; Sprague, 2005, among many others). Researchers as potentially “kindred spirits” or “friendly strangers” (Letherby, 2003) or “interviewer as friend” (Segura, 1989, in Reinharz, 1992) did not capture the real, possible, imaginable, or even unimaginable relationship dimensions and tensions. To think through my specific tensions, I started to conceptualize myself, in my research role, as a “known stranger.”

By “known stranger,” I suppose that I can be both familiar and unfamiliar with participants with whom I did or did not interact prior to the study. This status occurred in multiple ways. I was rendered “familiar” because of our shared experiences, which presented me as a comrade in arms who had identifiable and welcome attributes as a former women’s center practitioner. “Known stranger” correctly labeled my status as “unfamiliar” in that I had not met all participants, but “familiar” in that they knew my name through the research sites or a shared colleague. The phrase can also be taken apart: I may have been “known” to those with whom I had worked closely but also a “stranger” due to my new role, sanctioned by the IRB and the academy. I wondered if my
participants would recognize me as a researcher when we sat down to record an interview, or how the study would affect my long-term relationships with the participants, which I anticipated would continue after the study. Did I become “stranger”—now used as an adverb instead of a noun—once I not only knew but also represented their stories in ways that would or would not be intelligible to them? Or did I become more “known,” as they came to see me more clearly, even after years of working together, through the research process?

While potentially limiting, I explored being a “known stranger” throughout the study as a means of remaining uncomfortable in/about my varying levels of preexisting relationships. It was also a means to challenge the idea of a static researcher: I would not occupy only one role, relationship, or status with participants but rather multiple positions over the course of the study or perhaps even in one encounter. In the end, I described being a “known stranger” as being on unsteady ground, a place where I must continually work to understand the uncomfortable edges of my researcher role while also acknowledging that participants have preexisting relationships with me that may cast me as familiar or unfamiliar in ways that I cannot always predict.

Confidentiality and anonymity. Confidentiality concerns participants’ expectations that the information they share inside the research relationship will not be shared without their consent, while anonymity “suggests that if and when information is shared, no identifiable data will be disclosed” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 176). In this study, confidentiality procedures were reviewed by The Ohio State University’s IRB and carefully explained through the informed consent and reiterated at several points. To
ensure anonymity, I pledged that participants’ names and institutions would not be used in any reports or publications that resulted from the study, and that if quoted, I would protect their identity/university and not use any identifying characteristics. In addition to these standard confidentiality and anonymity practices (Patton, 2002), I built safeguards into the study’s design. I anonymized the research sites and participants were able to place brackets around information deemed identifying or that they wished to withhold from the write-up in the journaling activity (see “Journal Protocol,” for detailed procedures).

**Sampling**

This study utilized Patton’s (2015) purposeful sampling to gain “information-rich cases for in-depth study” (p. 264). Particularly, the study employed criterion sampling in four key ways: (a) the women’s center professional worked full- or part-time in a women’s center for at least 1 year; (b) there was evidence of diverse roles/positions within women’s centers among the participants, both in position titles and “hats worn”; (c) there was diversity in how often participants report thinking about race and ethnicity in their professional roles; and (d) when possible, there was evidence of variety in institution types (e.g., public, private, and religious). Graduate assistants, student employees, and other individuals for whom their primary institutional affiliation was “student” were excluded from the study.

**Sampling procedures and protocol.** To construct the study sample, the two sites e-mailed two research invitations on my behalf: one to women’s center professionals on their mailing list and the other directly to all women’s center professionals in their service
areas, utilizing a list I created by visiting the websites of eligible centers for current staff information. Both invitations asked women’s center professionals to e-mail me directly to learn more about participation. Those who contacted me received an e-mail explaining the study’s topics, purpose, eligibility, risks, and protocol, as well as a consent form (see Appendix A, “Informed Consent”). From the first e-mail, I received eight inquiries from individuals who fit the criterion of the study as described; six were interested in proceeding after reviewing this information and returned a signed informed consent. The second e-mail yielded three additional inquiries, of which two elected to participate and returned a signed informed consent. I then signed and returned the fully executed informed consent, and in the same e-mail sent a data collection sheet (see Appendix B, “Data Collection Sheet”) asking for demographic and career information as well as data about the institution and current roles to ensure purposeful sampling. Participants were accepted on a rolling basis, with four of the individuals accepted after I had started interviewing. Sampling choices were carefully made with attention to a diverse sample in terms of positions held by participants, as well as the prospect to include information-rich cases.

**Sample size.** No rigid requirements for sample size exist in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). Wolff (2002) offered that sample size is particularly difficult in phenomenological research and that self-reflection is the key to understanding when the sample is large enough:

> The answer lies not in some externally sanctioned number, but inside the one who embodies the research process…The researcher comes to understand that one
does not “decide” when the description is over and the reduction is about to begin; rather, one recognizes that the reduction has already begun and that the description is in the process of ending. (p. 117)

Wolff acknowledged that this “creates an uneasy, problematic situation for phenomenological researchers—particularly for first-timers” (p. 117), as researchers must pay close attention to when they become “less awash in description and more awash in emerging themes” (p. 118). With this in mind, I proposed eight to twelve participants when designing the study, with the responsibility to include more if reduction—as described by Wolff—was not happening based on the original sample. Participants were accepted on a rolling basis, and ultimately, I felt that “reduction [had] already begun” (p. 117) after interviewing seven participants, and I closed recruitment after reaching eight total participants who met the criterion sampling procedures and maximized the diversity of the sample. Each of the eight participants completed the three stages of the study, providing a complete data set for analysis.

Data Collection

As part of the recruitment phase, I shared the study’s timeline and tasks with all potential participants. They were asked to participate in two Skype interviews and complete a journal writing activity (see Appendix C, “Research Design Flowchart,” for a visual representation).

Study protocol and timeline. As the sample was constructed, I began scheduling initial interviews of 90 to 120 minutes. Participants could take part in this interview at a time and location of their choosing, as long as they had Internet access and a Skype
account. At the close of the first interview, I e-mailed five journal writing prompts to each participant; they could determine how much time to take with the writing exercise. After 3 to 4 weeks, I scheduled a second Skype interview, which lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

In all, recruitment for the study began on July 1, 2015, with participants selected and scheduled for initial interviews in late July and August. Participants journaled in August and early September. The majority of second interviews took place in late September and early October, with the final interview conducted on October 13, 2015. The timeline for each participant was slightly different based on availability, and approximately a third of the interviews were rescheduled due to illness or work duties.

**Procedures for Skype interviews.** Given geographical distance and advancements in video-conferencing technology, interviews were held via Skype and recorded with Ecamm Call Recorder for Skype, an add-on software program that compressed video/audio interview files into high-quality audio-only files. Skype and Call Recorder worked seamlessly, and I was able to send the files out for transcription immediately after each interview. By retaining the original video file, I was able to fill into the transcribed files facial expressions, hand motions, and the occasional missing word from the audio file, thereby ensuring greater accuracy.

I began each interview by exchanging pleasantries, troubleshooting video or audio issues, and then reading the interview script (see Appendices D and E). After reading the opening script, I began the Call Recorder and the formal interview by asking for consent to participate and record. After completing the entire interview protocol, I asked for any
final comments. After the recording was stopped, we continued the Skype conversation and discussed housekeeping items. Responses to items such as pseudonyms or availability for the next interview were recorded in my interview notes for each participant; the notes were later scanned and stored digitally.

**First interview protocol.** The protocol for the first interview was standard for all participants (see Appendix D). While I originally wrote traditional questions designed to get at the study’s inquiry, I discarded them in favor of a more difficult, generative, and potentially dangerous interview protocol after reading the work of Pitt and Britzman (2003; see Appendix E). I sent the protocol to participants 2 to 3 days before the scheduled interview so that they could begin thinking about the prompts. In all cases, participants had printed the thought prompt exercise in advance, and, as hoped, the majority had marked the page or jotted notes in the margins of the exercise to remind them of stories, experiences, or thoughts they wished to share in the interview.

The questions for the first interview were grouped into four major areas. Background questions were first explored to learn about their daily work and to establish rapport. Next, participants were asked to explore the thought prompts that were relevant or interesting to them, and I asked follow-up questions to either clarify stories or ask how they felt race—as a general concept or their own racial identity—mattered in their responses. I found that follow-up questions were often necessary, as many participants shared stories, perspectives, or tentative thinking about race and racism without always directly claiming their own racial identity in the storytelling; these follow-up questions
required participants to directly voice how race mattered or racism was implicated in what they were sharing, often leading to new insights.

The third set of questions explored theory, which was followed by the concluding set of questions designed to explore my own blind spots in relation to the study. By asking participants if there was anything else they wanted to say, I attempted, for example, to ensure that my follow-up questions hadn’t taken them away from a story they intended to share. I also asked participants if there was anything else that they thought I should be taking into consideration about this topic. Both questions typically yielded either rich information or no answer.

**Journal protocol.** At the conclusion of the first interview, I discussed journaling as the second stage of the study. I asked participants to write reflexive responses to several prompts (see Appendix F, “Journal Protocol”) before we met for the second interview, 3 to 4 weeks later. To encourage frank and reflective disclosure, participants had the option to put brackets around parts of their writing that they deemed identifying or private. These sections helped me understand their experiences and perspectives, but I did not quote them in any way in the final write-up. Three participants utilized this strategy to protect names and stories. Each participant’s journal was collected prior to the second interview and analyzed for use in the second interview.

**Second interview protocol.** Part of the second interview protocol was standardized and part was written for each participant (see Appendix G). All second interviews were conducted in four parts. The interview began with customized content about the participant’s involvement to date, in which I asked for reflection on the
journaling exercise. My clarifying questions were based on the first interview transcript and journal to further tease out key concepts, experiences, or ideas and ensure that what I thought I was seeing was what the participant intended to convey.

The second part of the interview focused on additional questions about race and ethnicity and women’s center work, while the third part shared early findings from the first round of interviews in the form of 10 emerging themes. Last, I shared my own surprises and unexpected outcomes and asked my standard concluding questions (see previous section).

**Additional documents for analysis.** Additional documents were analyzed, including data collection sheets, copies of the thought prompts that participants marked up prior to the interviews, my research journal, and my interview notes. One participant e-mailed after her first interview to modify a particular response, with specific notation permitting me to use it.

**Data Management and Security**

I collected 460 single-spaced typed pages of data from my eight participants’ interview transcripts, journals, data collection sheets, my interview notes, additional documents shared by participants, and their data collection sheets; all data were coded. My research journal was an additional 43 single-spaced typed pages, also coded. All data were securely stored on my personal computer and backed up on a password-protected external drive. Digital files were password protected; paper field notes stored in a locked filing cabinet. Audio files were securely uploaded to the transcription service’s website.
Data Analysis

Data were analyzed as they were collected and either transcribed or converted into a form suitable for coding. To assist with the large volume of data, I utilized MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program, to code the first round of interviews and journals using the same codebook. I then utilized it to code the second round of interviews, creating a second codebook.

Interviews were transcribed as I proceeded, and I began document analysis after receiving transcripts and journals from participants. I analyzed the first round of interviews and journals, looking for themes across individuals and their experiences. I then analyzed each person’s data corpus as a discrete set of documents, which helped me to understand the individual and her unique experiences and perspectives.

Units of analysis. Patton (2002) notes that units of analysis in qualitative research are not mutually exclusive. In this study, the first unit of analysis is the phenomena, examined through the experiences of the participants. The second unit of analysis is the individual—in whose lived experiences and meaning-making I was interested, and for whom I have a smaller data corpus.

Coding procedures. Coding began as soon as transcription was completed, using MAXQDA. I cycled through at least two coding episodes for each round of data collection to maximize new discoveries. While coding the first round of interviews and journals, I used three primary coding methods, all as defined by Saldaña (2013): (a) process coding, which looks for “actions intertwined with the dynamics of time, such as things that emerge, change, occur in particular sequences, or become strategically
implemented” (p. 266); (b) values coding, which “reflect[s] a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (p. 268); and (c) emotion coding, the “label[ing of] the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant” (p. 263). These coding methods exposed core experiences of the phenomena under investigation in the study, which I then grouped together utilizing pattern coding in the second coding episode of the first round of interviews and the journals. Pattern coding creates “meta-code[s]…and organizes the corpus into sets, themes, or constructs and attributes meaning to that organization” (p. 266). These pattern codes were shared with participants in second interviews. Coding episodes for the second-round interviews worked to refine and reorganize the pattern codes into the core experiences described in Chapter 4.

Analysis followed, which Savin-Baden and Major (2013) described as “an ongoing process that involves breaking data into meaningful parts for the purpose of examining them” (p. 435). Alternately, Glesne (2006) paraphrased Wolcott (1994) when describing data analysis as “the identification of key factors in the study and the relationships among them” (Glesne 2006, p. 164). I considered the data and codes for how they might relate to each other, both in the larger data corpus and within the individual data corps.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a “qualitative paradigmatic means by which to assure a study is of high quality” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 35) and confers “confidence in the research findings” (p. 36). **Trustworthiness** is often the term used in qualitative research, while
 validity or rigor might be used in quantitative research (Glesne, 2011; Jones et al., 2014). Creswell (1998) described eight interventions that work to build trustworthiness: prolonged engagement and persistent observation; triangulation; peer review or debriefing; negative case analysis; clarifying researcher bias; member checks; rich, thick description; and external audits. Creswell advised that “qualitative researchers engage in at least two of [these procedures] in any given study” (p. 203). In this study, five of Creswell’s interventions were utilized, including triangulation, peer review or debriefing, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, and rich, thick description.

I specifically adopted Lather’s (1986a) feminist framework for evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research: triangulation of methods, construct validity, catalytic validity, and face validity. I discuss each in the following sections as well as how the study adopted Creswell’s (1998) practices of triangulation, peer review and debriefing, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, and rich, thick description. These practices and means of trustworthiness are congruent with those outlined by heuristic inquiry, which is also discussed.

**Triangulation.** Methods were triangulated through the traditional employment of multiple methods, specifically interviews and document analysis, as well as multiple theoretical perspectives (Creswell, 1998; Lather, 1986a); both aspects are outlined earlier in this chapter. Triangulation additionally occurred through my own heuristic practice and by talking through concepts and data with two peer debriefers. Both latter means of triangulation are discussed next.
**Heuristic practice.** As this study employs heuristics, I engaged in rigorous examination of my own experiences in relation to the study’s topics. Heuristic practice was also a means of triangulation in that my own experiences were another dimension of the study and were acknowledged and critically examined. To begin this process, Moustakas (1990) wrote, “Self-dialogue is the critical beginning; the recognition that if one is going to be able to discover the constituents and qualities that make up an experience, one must begin with oneself” (p. 16). I engaged in many means of self-dialogue, recording my thinking within the research journal and with my peer debriefers (discussed in the next section). By rigorously examining my own thoughts, experiences, and meaning-making, another layer of data emerged. I found this formalized heuristic practice to also be a means to clarify my researcher biases (Creswell, 1998).

Validity in heuristic research centers on the researcher and her diligent analysis of the data. Moustakas (1990) characterized heuristic validity in the following manner:

The question of validity is one of meaning: Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? This judgment is made by the primary researcher, who is the only person in the investigation who has undergone the heuristic inquiry from the beginning formulation of the question through phases of incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis not only with himself or herself but with each and every co-researcher. The primary investigator has collected and analyzed all of the material—reflecting, sifting, exploring,
judging its relevance or meaning, and ultimately elucidating the themes and essences that comprehensively, distinctly, and accurately depict the experience.

(p. 32)

This form of validity requires deep and rigorous engagement with the research questions and data. I continually worked toward heuristic validity (Moustakas, 1990) through my 9-month dedication to data analysis and write-up—as well as an almost 3-year process of planning, refining, designing, and implementing the study—endlessly seeking to represent the essence of the experience “comprehensively, distinctly, and accurately.”

I also shared the results of my heuristic practice with my participants. Rubin and Rubin (2012) asserted that as researchers, “You can increase the richness of your study by introducing your own ideas about a topic into the conversation and listening to your interviewees discuss them” (p. 106). I did this explicitly in the second interview protocol, when I shared my own learning, but also in smaller ways throughout the study by introducing a thought or concept relevant to a participant’s stories, or sharing a story of my own to build rapport or deepen conversation. Heuristic inquiry allowed me to go deeper with my own thoughts and experiences, enriched the data collection process, and created an additional data corpus for analysis.

Peer debriefing. Two peer debriefers assisted in the heuristic and feminist nature of the study by discussing, on a one-on-one basis, various aspects of the process and data collected. The first debriefer was a graduate student in a student affairs program who interviewed me using my own protocol and then processed the interviewing afterward with me. To engage in reciprocity for her time and effort, I followed up with resources
we discussed in our sessions and, given her student status, I offered a $25 Amazon gift card for her services. The second debriefer was a women’s studies professor with whom I discussed my interpretations of data and themes. This relationship began after I commenced coding the first round of interviews, and we spoke several times during data analysis. As I have served in this kind of capacity for this peer debriefer’s research and writing in the past, I did not offer a cash incentive for her time and services.

**Construct validity.** Lather (1986b) challenged researchers to consider these difficult questions about construct validity:

Where are the weak points of the theoretical tradition we are operating within? Are we extending theory? Revising it? Testing it? Corroborating it? Determining that constructs are actually occurring, rather than they are merely inventions of the researcher's perspective, requires a self-critical attitude toward how one's own preconceptions affect the research. (p. 271)

One solution for this is “systematized reflexivity” (Lather, 1986a, p. 67; Lather, 1986b). As a feminist researcher, it is important to practice careful reflexivity throughout the research process. I agree with Peshkin (1988), Pillow (2003), and many others that subjectivities must be systematically explored, discussed, and monitored, as they are “insistently present in both the research and nonresearch parts of our life” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). It is not enough to lay them out in the beginning of the study; rather, I considered my subjectivity at every stage. Researchers have shared their subjectivities in relation to their research design and activities in multiple ways: in their introduction (e.g., Martinez & Waldron, 2006), woven throughout the work (e.g., Lather and Smithies, 1997), or as an
explicit part of the story and data (e.g., Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000). By utilizing heuristic inquiry, I committed not only to reflexivity but to including my own discoveries as data. By my own parallel participation, I paid attention to what I thought I would hear and allowed my data to speak more fully once analysis began; as a result, I was able to better understand myself throughout the research process and also enrich trustworthiness.

Catalytic validity. While this study was not designed as action research, Pitt and Britzman (2003) reminded me that “research must be understood as provoking, not representing, knowledge” (p. 769). The research design allowed for deep reflection and meaning-making that may be uncomfortable as participants face, name, narrate, and share “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755). Lather (1986a) wrote that research must “consciously channel this impact so that respondents gain self-understanding and, ideally, self-determination through research participation” (p. 67). While I designed the study to maximize self-understanding, I asked participants explicitly at the end of the second interview if they thought differently about themselves as women’s center practitioners or about their roles as a result of participating in this study (see the second interview protocol in Appendix G). All reported that they did and offered examples of how they deepened their understanding of their own racial identities and perspectives, gained insights for how to engage in antiracism work and claim their identities at work, felt affirmed in various ways that led them to feel more confident about their work, and/or were forced to think more deeply about difficult topics as a result of the study’s protocol in ways that they identified as helpful to their future practice.
Face validity. Face validity, or “recycling categories, emerging analysis, and conclusions back through at least a subsample of respondents” (Lather, 1986a, p. 78), was built into the study’s design at several points. Sometimes called member checks (Glesne, 2011; Jones et al., 2014; Lather, 1986a), face validity is a means of “elaborat[ing] on the findings [that should be] treated as additional data” (Lather, 2003, in Jones et al., 2014, p. 36).

Face validity greatly enriched this study. First, participants responded to emerging themes from the first round of interviews in their second interviews; this activity was designed to “elaborate on the findings” (Lather, 2003, in Jones et al., 2014, p. 36) through asking follow-up questions and eliciting further reactions, experiences, stories, and perspectives. Additionally, I asked participants in the final interview if they wanted an opportunity to read their transcripts and provide feedback. One of the eight participants expressed this interest and was sent her transcripts; she made only minor modifications to the first interview. Last, all participants elected to read and respond to their participant profile (see Chapter 4), which opened additional conversations and meaning-making as well as strengthened the anonymity of the participants.

Reciprocity

While reciprocity is often discussed in terms of monetary incentives in qualitative research, it can be a much deeper practice (Glesne, 2011). At its simplest, Patton (2002) asserted that “participants in research provide us with something of great value, their stories and their perspectives on their world. We show that we value what they give us by offering something in exchange” (p. 415). There is no standard for reciprocity in
qualitative inquiry, merely considerations for the researcher. In this study, reciprocity was planned and unplanned, formal and informal. This section describes several means of reciprocity that I was able to provide, including listening deeply, sharing information and connections, and monetary incentives.

**Listening deeply.** Deep listening is a staple of qualitative research by which the researcher “encourage[s] richer answers by listening intently when an interviewee gives detailed answers or presents narratives or stories” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 106). However, it was not until the first round of interviews that I began to view deep listening as form of reciprocity as well. By listening deeply, I offered something to my participants in exchange for their stories. Glesne (2011) described reciprocity in interviewing in the following way:

> By listening to participants carefully and seriously, you give them a sense of importance and specialness. By providing the opportunity to reflect on and voice answers to your questions, you assist them to better understand some aspect of themselves. If your questions identify issues of importance to interviewees, then interviewees will invariably both enjoy and find useful their roles as information providers. By the quality of your listening, you provide context for personal exploration by your interviewees. (p. 178)

All aspects presented here by Glesne held true in my interviews. Participants self-reported these aspects in various ways, and I was able to ask more meaningful questions as a result. By deep listening, I enriched the data collected as well as engaged in an
unexpected form of reciprocity that allowed participants to maximize their “personal exploration” (p. 178).

**Sharing information, resources, and connections.** It has long been a part of my feminist practice to share information and resources freely, as well as connect people who may be able to assist each other. As a result, this form of reciprocity emerged organically in the first round of interviews, when I began jotting resources in the margins of my interview notes to offer in response to questions or needs shared. I saved these notes until the housekeeping time at the conclusion of the interview, and asked participants if they were interested in what I compiled. In all cases, they responded affirmatively, and so I followed up with not only a formal thank-you e-mail with the journal prompts (as described previously) but also with at least one additional e-mail that shared these resources. Examples included articles and citations from the women’s center bibliography I maintain (Vlasnik, 2016), newspaper articles or videos, instructions about how to sign up for women’s center–related listservs, and websites relevant to the participant.

After the emergence of this reciprocity in the first round of interviews, I adapted my second interview protocol to formally ask each participant, “Is there anything I can do or share to be reciprocal and help you?” (see Appendix G). Additional requests came, which I fulfilled. I also left the door open in my final thank-you to participants, noting to please let me know if I could assist them as they proceeded with their work. Several remained in touch with me after the study’s conclusion to continue conversations that
drew from my expertise and experiences. Lastly, all participants will receive a digital copy of my completed dissertation.

**Monetary incentives.** In trying to decide whether to offer a monetary incentive to participants, I asked many people for their opinions and read extensively in the qualitative research literature about the pros and cons of this approach. I believed that women’s center professionals would be interested in participating because they found the topic compelling and would likely do so without compensation; however, I also worried that participants might become busy and not complete the next level of the study. Compensation would assist with this concern. Additionally, as a feminist, I wanted to honor my participants’ time and expertise: too often women are expected to work for free and I did not want to replicate this unjust situation. Lastly, I was concerned with the ethics of asking women’s center professionals, many of whom knew me, to work for me for free. I anticipated (correctly) that several of my participants, because they knew me, were interested in helping me. Given these circumstances, I chose to utilize as many forms of reciprocity as I could and decided to offer a monetary incentive.

The study’s monetary incentive increased with each level of participation, as required by the IRB. Participants who completed all three stages (initial interview, journaling activity, second interview) received a $50 Amazon gift card as compensation. In the study’s informed consent, I noted that participants who completed stage 1 only would receive a $15 Amazon gift card and those who completed stages 1 and 2 only would receive a $30 Amazon gift card. All participants completed all stages and all monetary incentives were distributed.
Chapter Summary

This chapter has described the methodology of this critical phenomenological (Dejarlias, 1997) and heuristic study (Moustakas, 1990) of how women’s center professionals negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work and how theory informs these negotiations. Constructionism, feminist and critical theories, and feminist methodologies informed the epistemological and theoretical foundations of the study. Additionally, this chapter covered the study’s research design, including site selection, sampling, data collection and protocol, and analysis. Finally, it explored the study’s trustworthiness and reflexivity that was planned and that emerged in the research process. The study’s findings are presented next, in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this critical phenomenological study was to investigate how women’s center professionals negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work in the academy and how theory informs these negotiations. The study’s research questions included:

1. How do women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity related to their roles and work in women’s centers?
2. How do feminist theories inform, support, and/or fail women’s center professionals as they negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work?

There are four major sections in this chapter. First, participants are introduced, while the second and third sections present the findings related to the study’s two research questions. In the second section, the phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in women’s centers is explored through the core experiences of the study’s Black participants, White participants, and shared experiences among them. The study’s Black participants described a state of simultaneous hyper-visibility and invisibility that are best expressed as (a) surprise to encounter Black women in women’s centers and (b) potential erasure of their contributions to their campuses and the field of women’s center work. The study’s White participants described how they could avoid much of the
difficulties and dissonance of thinking about their own racial identities in their women’s center practice, if they wished, due to White privilege and described their experiences as (a) “easy” if they chose them to be and (b) missing opportunities for more intersectional practice or broad impact due to their blind spots caused by White privilege or by how they were perceived by their constituents, colleagues, and campuses. Participants also noted shared core experiences of the phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in their women’s center work, most notably (a) the immediacy of the institution in shaping their experiences, commitments, and actions and (b) clashes with “authority” about issues of race and racism, including with supervisors.

The third section explores the phenomenon of theory in negotiations of race and ethnicity in women’s center professional practice. Theory was of widely varying importance and immediacy to participants in this study. Interestingly, my framing of the research question proved prescient, as participants described theory in ways that can be described as supporting, informing, and failing them in their work. “I know that it is there,” Grace’s words to describe theory, perhaps best capture the core experience among participants related to this phenomenon, as all participants acknowledge that theory—whether it supports, informs, or fails them—plays a role in their daily negotiations of race and ethnicity in the women’s center. The third section explores each of these in turn. Last, a fourth section advances an elusive composite phenomenological description of race, ethnicity, and theory in women’s center professional practice.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Self-Identified Race</th>
<th>Self-Identified Ethnicity</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Years Working in Higher Education</th>
<th>Years Working in a Women’s Center</th>
<th>Current Women’s Center Role</th>
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<td>Assistant/Associate Director</td>
<td>4-year, private, doctoral-granting, highest research activity</td>
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Participant Profiles

This section introduces the eight participants in the study, each of whom completed the data collection sheet, two interviews, and a journaling exercise as outlined in Chapter 3. To introduce each of them, I wove together data from these sources, as well as my research notes. The participants are introduced in alphabetical order, utilizing the pseudonyms they chose for themselves. To acquaint the reader with their unique perspectives and voices, I closed each introduction by sharing responses to the question, “If you could say what you wanted to say [about the study’s topics] without repercussion, what would you say?”

In addition, Table 1 outlines the information that each participant self-disclosed on the data collection sheet during the study’s recruitment phase. To protect their anonymity, I standardized position titles and used the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Trustees of Indiana University, 2015) to share institutional characteristics rather than the names of their campuses.

Abigail

Abigail finished her master’s degree in Women’s Studies and was hired as a women’s center program coordinator just months after graduation. After working on feminist issues as a graduate student, she felt that employment in a women’s center was “the best-case scenario” for using her degree: “I am not necessarily sure that I knew what went into women’s center work, but I was pretty sure that I would enjoy it.” In the job for several years now, she serves as the primary program planner for her unit and also does a
significant amount of administrative work, particularly financial and light clerical work, because of the center’s small staff.

As a White woman developing programs on a predominantly White campus, Abigail is committed to collaborating with many identity-based units and organizations and “wants the women’s center to be a space that all people feel welcome in….I try to be really intentional about the ways that we are more welcoming to women of color.” While she is committed to this work, Abigail “really struggles with it….I feel like an awkward outsider who is trying to connect with people who probably don’t see me as someone who can understand them, for totally valid reasons.” She describes difficulties and clashes in perspectives with her supervisor, who was “really hard to disagree with,” and some colleagues on campus, particularly around outreach to women of color and how to address racial microaggressions and issues of campus climate related to race.

Absent repercussions, Abigail would say:

Just because you have a [university] president who’s a person of color doesn’t mean you’re doing that well in the race department. I wish the university would work with the students who are interested in the Black Lives Matter movement and listen, and not try to figure out ways to kick them out of [university buildings] just because they’re there after hours. I feel the university could do so much and have so much power if we were engaging with those things that are important to our students.
Allison

Allison was introduced to women’s center work through her graduate assistantship; after 2 years in a center and completing her master’s in Student Affairs, Allison knew that women’s center work “was definitely what I wanted to be doing” and was hired as a program coordinator at a different women’s center shortly after her graduation. In this role, she plans events, manages the center’s website and social media, and represents the center on many campus diversity-related committees. In all these aspects, Allison tries to “make sure [programs and events] represent a lot of different types of people....I make a really concerted effort in our social media, in our website, in our own space, to make sure that visually the people represented are diverse even if that isn’t the case on our actual campus.”

Working on a conservative, private campus with a “mind-blowing” lack of diversity, Allison—a White woman—came into her role aware that engaging in diversity work might not be easy and that “who I am as a professional and who I am as a person aren’t the same on this campus because they cannot be.” Restricted in expressing some aspects of her feminist identity by the campus climate, such as her support for reproductive justice and her antiracism commitments because of her status as a staff member, Allison is aware that she is perceived in various ways for “being a woman, being White, and, I don’t know if this counts, but being outspoken. That’s not really an identity but it has definitely shaped a lot of different things for me [on my campus].” These identities, along with being young, have made Allison aware of when she is speaking for herself and when she is speaking from the vantage of her professional role.
Without these restrictions, Allison professes the following:
I have no problems saying how it is or how I see it, but I would want to do it
directly to certain people…[especially] upper-level administration, because I feel
like a lot of the people I work with get it. But we don’t have a whole lot of power
to change it and I don’t think most of the students have the words or the
understanding to take it on. The very few people who could say it to the people
who need to hear it have said it so many times, and it’s fallen on deaf ears. I’m
not so sure that they have the strength to do it any more.

All these issues are just reoccurring, reoccurring, reoccurring; nothing’s
changed. Maybe a couple of things have changed. I am always afraid, when I do
speak up, of who am I offending. I have no problem offending White people, I
really don’t. I say all I want, for better or for worse. But when it comes to people
of color, I’m hypersensitive about offending. So maybe that does hold me back. If
it’s all White people, I say it like it is. But if it’s not all White people, I feel a little
bit uncomfortable. I might still say something, but really it’s less about the
message and more about who needs to hear it.

Annie

Annie earned a master’s in Women’s Studies and doctoral degree in Educational
Studies, all while working in various capacities in a women’s center. Over more than a
decade, she worked her way up through several positions and was recently appointed
director, a position that she describes as “doing it all.” Annie is now responsible for staff
supervision; unit administration such as budget, assessment, and strategic planning; and
campus-wide leadership efforts. She also holds a teaching appointment in Women’s Studies. She describes the mission and work of the women’s center as “central in directly supporting the diversity…and academic missions [of the institution]. However, in terms of how we’re structured and how we’re located in the institution, it doesn’t always feel that way. We’re not always directly involved as key decision makers.” This reality is juxtaposed by Annie’s daily work, which she describes as “like all other identity-based centers, we’re on the front lines providing [support] as practitioners, working to create inclusive campus learning environments, working to create space for marginalized students.” As director, she often navigates these dual realities for her unit and her staff, who look to her for leadership on these issues.

As a White woman working at an institution where there has been significant racial unrest related to the Black Lives Matter movement, Annie tries “to identify my whiteness as much as possible. I understand my racial identity as a driving force in the formation of my gender identity.” As a result, Annie regularly discusses being a White woman and her White privilege and how these might impact her work and leadership. She also critiques the institution and the ways in which institutionalized racism unfolds on her campus.

If there were no institutional repercussions, Annie would like to say:

I’m so aware of the difference between intent and impact. As a White woman, I’ve learned that it’s important to be in conversation with people that I’m wanting to support or wanting to use my privilege to serve, and this is where it’s tough because wanting to check in with them was putting more burden on people who
are most affected. Really what I would love to do is scream, “This institution is so freaking White and so racist! We have racist hiring practices. We have racist evaluation measures. We have racist ways of understanding the world, and we practice those in really hurtful racist ways!”

I would like to just call out power and privilege. Ask them how do they think they’re using that. Maybe not necessarily making a statement but more like asking what I understand to be pretty difficult questions. And not just to White folks but to people of color who are in positions of power who are doing [or] acting in really racist ways by silencing, by not seeing race and racism at play, by not being willing to speak out against it. That’s what I would like to do: call that out and seek understanding.

**Bridget**

Bridget began women’s center work after almost a decade as a work-at-home mom, and she completed a bachelor’s degree in Women’s Studies and a master’s in Sociology while employed at a women’s center. When she started working in women’s centers, Bridget says she didn’t “have a knowledge of women’s issues so much as I do now. And of course, I was older, and initially I was in an era where women’s issues weren’t as out there. A lot of the things that are out there now, we didn’t talk about.” As Bridget worked in the center, planning and attending programs, she was slowly transformed and “realized [women’s centers and feminism] are where my passion is.” She moved through several positions to her current role as an assistant/associate director,
where she is responsible for budget planning and running the internal operations of the
center, responding to walk-ins, and supervising student staff.

Bridget is aware that “being White makes it difficult to discuss race, because I can
do just about anything I want without thinking about my skin color.” She struggles with
speaking up about race and racism at times, but more and more realizes that “I’m tired of
ignoring it…and this is my work and if I’m going to be inclusive, then I have to speak
out….I’m not going to feel good about my passion for my work if I don’t do my work the
best that I can.” Bridget points to her age as a major factor that has changed her thinking:
“Sometimes now, I don’t care. I don’t care what people think about me. I’ve done this
work long enough. If they won’t listen to me, and they won’t value what I say, then to
hell with them. Seriously.” Dedicated to inclusive programming and staffing structures
within the women’s center, Bridget enacts these antiracist commitments in other ways as
well.

Without repercussions or “people arguing with me,” Bridget offers:
I’d probably say something like, “White people are fucked up. You really don’t
understand. You need to really educate yourself and understand that there is a
problem, that there is a difference in treatment, and again, you’re White; you get
to do everything you want to. Think about that.” That’s without any
repercussions, without people arguing with me. That’s what I’d really like to say.

Grace

After many years of community-based work, including for women’s
organizations, Grace came to higher education as a women’s center program coordinator.
The graduate of a historically black college or university (HBCU) with a bachelor’s degree in African American Studies, Grace describes her undergraduate experience as a “race first, then woman kind of identity, not intersectional at all.” Her current position as program coordinator focuses on in-person and social media outreach, broad committee work for which she represents the center, and collaboration with many campus units and student organizations to deliver programming and events.

A Black woman working at a predominantly White institution (PWI), Grace knew that she was likely to be “the only Black person in the room when I went places on this campus, and…as an employee that is definitely the experience.” Grace describes this as a “lonely place sometimes,” particularly when she hears campus leaders talk about the women’s center as a “White space…[it’s] so much erasure. I am there. I am not a White woman. I am doing this work and I am reaching out to people. I am the public face of the women’s center when I go around and speak about the work that we’re doing.” While she finds this “difficult to manage,” Grace remains committed to the work of the women’s center and putting herself forth on behalf of what she calls “a decidedly feminist space.”

Without worry about repercussion, Grace shares:

I’m thinking of how I would say it, but the gist of it centers on it’s better to name the problem and to then go forth with some type of accountability as opposed to running or shirking away, or trying to name it as something else. We have a racism problem. We have problems with racial oppression on this campus. We’re not the only campus. It should not be surprising: these systems operate at every level. But if you cannot say that sentence, then I can’t trust you to do any work to
address it. If that has been stated to leadership here, I don’t think that they either
heard it or they’ve understood it.

Janelle

Janelle graduated from an HBCU with a bachelor’s in Communication and then
worked for private business for several years before choosing to return to her hometown.
She had always been involved in women’s organizations, which were “just always an
interest of mine,” and she found a natural fit working at a university planning large-scale
events. Janelle eventually moved into the newly created position of women’s center
program coordinator, a position housed within a multicultural center that she describes as
being “what you make it. We have a budget and I can pretty much do what I want. I feel
like my job is to support the students in what they want to do.” Because of the size of her
university, she controls a large budget, coordinates annual programming, and provides
intensive leadership opportunities for women students. Under Janelle’s leadership,
programming efforts have grown exponentially, as well as fundraising for women’s
scholarships and programs.

Janelle, a Black woman, understands that “my charge is to program for majority,
18 to 21, White women, and I’ve never been that….I had to get the women in here and
ask them what they wanted. And this may sound weird, but study them almost.”
Navigating the racial and gender politics of her institution takes an increasing portion of
Janelle’s time and energy, and she finds the few other Black women leaders on campus
are “the most unhelpful people in the situation…perhaps because they’re bottom-line
people…dealing with their own issues around race and ethnicity in their work.” Janelle
pours her efforts into her students, who are currently organizing around increased resources for the women’s center and the programming needs of women on campus.

Absent repercussions, Janelle offers:

At my institution I’m appalled at the [senior Student Affairs leadership] for not supporting women and more specifically women of color. For the most part, I say what I want to say so I was trying to think of something that I don’t totally feel comfortable saying and this is it. I would draw the line in speaking publicly against those [senior Black women administrators]. I’m very disappointed in them, and also in [my department leader]. He’s a Black male. I know it probably sounds like there’s a ton of Black people, but that’s it. Everyone else is not. So just being disappointed in those three, but mainly the two women.

Nikki

Nikki, with a master’s in Sociology, has worked in her current role as director of her institution’s women’s center for over 15 years. She came into the role after several related positions at the same institution and has led the center through over a decade of growth and institutional change, including the movement toward “thinking much more intersectionally and from a social justice perspective.” Nikki describes her director duties as “supervision, programming, budget oversight, advocacy, trying to become aware of what the issues are for students as well as faculty and staff, making connections that assist folks individually with their needs or in group settings for needs within the institution…and representing the center to the internal campus community and to external agencies.”
Nikki is “very aware of my whiteness, increasingly so, but I am absolutely certain not always as much as I should be. That is the privilege.” Increasingly attuned to the many ways in which being White “shows up” in her work, Nikki doesn’t believe “that we talk as much as we should” about race in her division—which is almost entirely staffed by White professionals—on her predominantly White, rural campus. Nikki also grapples with the difficulties of antiracism and coalition in her current environment. When a small group of racially minoritized professionals on her campus recently organized around Black Lives Matter, Nikki knew that “there again is the privilege that allows those of us who identify as White to say, ‘Well, I can opt in on that,’ and be supportive and be a good ally, or maybe I can opt out because I need to work on something else.” While Nikki chooses to opt in, many of her colleagues do not.

Lacking repercussions, Nikki offers:

I’d probably say that, as an institution, we’re more racist than we like to think we are. And as individuals, myself included, we’re more prejudiced than we’d like to think.

**Nneka**

Nneka, with a master’s in Public Administration, is passionate about science education and has formal training in philanthropy and fundraising. She came to women’s center work approximately 4 years ago with the goal to advance and retain women and girls in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and support women students in their academic pursuits. Her current position as assistant/associate director focuses primarily on student advocacy, academic success initiatives, student
mentorship and organizational advising, community outreach, and retention efforts.

Working in the women’s center has been “challenging,” and Nneka resigned from her position after experiencing a pattern of unequal treatment with her White peers and a shift in her job purpose, which she opposed; approximately a year later, the center’s leadership changed and she returned to her previous position, which was redesigned and now back in alignment with its original purpose.

Identifying as an African American woman, Nneka states that her identity at work “is framed around what I look like and how I present myself. I must admit that I do wear a mask when I come into work. I find myself spending more effort assimilating to their ideals than sometimes being my true self.” Over the years, she brought forth many race and diversity-related issues to her colleagues and supervisor within the center, which “has gotten me into a lot of trouble.” Until recently Nneka has often been the lone voice raising issues around race and ethnicity in a center that “has done a lot to tote the feminist movement, which historically has not been very inclusive to women of color” without offering explicit programming, analysis, or leadership around race, racism, or issues facing women of color.

Without fear of repercussion, Nneka offers:

I would say, “Why does it always have to be your way? Why is it always your perception?”

Today we were interviewing a [Latina] woman. They started asking her about community outreach. She kept talking about going into high schools, middle schools, access, first generation; she talked about over the summer
bringing students in and having conversations about the challenges, the starting points for college, right?

We [do] community outreach, [which] is our Board doing activities out in the community where they have speakers at their homes during the day. So there are privileged people in the room, who are already well educated as it relates to books and maybe a degree, having a conversation. That’s considered community outreach.

So I’m in a committee meeting, and the chair said, “You know, [the Latina candidate is] really focused on community outreach as far as first generation populations and I don’t know if that’s our focus.” I said, “I think it’s a different scope and lens than what our center is accustomed to. We’re in a bubble that consists of privileged people entertaining other privileged people about issues that impact privileged people in the community. That is one form of community outreach but we need to be mindful of other ways to do community outreach where we are working with people who aren’t privileged and are in need of other forms of support. What she’s proposing is very grassroots-oriented. You’re exposing underserved individuals to what a women’s center is, what women’s empowerment looks like. So maybe we need to change our perspective of what community outreach looks like so that we are more inclusive, to have students, staff, and faculty contributing to our fundraising activities. Right now we’re relying on these big-hitters to provide us with donations. But if we were touching people in a different way, we could be receiving funds from students, staff,
faculty, and community. A dollar, five dollars: imagine how many people we could impact by changing the way that we're implementing programs and activities to support our women’s center by giving back to the community.”

I think it’s a different lens and I was glad I was able to share that, and it gave a different perception to decision makers in the room.

Summary of Participant Profiles

While these introductions cannot capture the unique complexity of each participant, they introduce their educational backgrounds, roles within the women’s center, and perspectives on how their race matters. The remainder of this chapter explores the two phenomena at hand.

The Phenomenon of Negotiating Race and Ethnicity in a Women’s Center

*How do women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity related to their roles and work in women’s centers?*

In the second interviews, I shared emerging themes from the first round of interviews. After hearing these themes, Janelle reflected: “Sometimes you need 10 things, right? We might want just three things, but sometimes it leads you to 10.” Her wisdom rang in my ears as I analyzed data and wrote findings about how women’s center professionals understood their race and ethnicity related to their roles and work. While some aspects of race in the women’s center were shared among all participants, there were also marked differences between White and Black participants. Rather than flatten these differences (Luft, 2009), I instead attempted to show the contours and dimensions of daily negotiations of race within women’s centers. While race is highlighted in this
section and in the overall study, it is noteworthy that participants largely answered questions and described experiences from the vantage as a White woman or Black woman. Their framing of their race and gender as inextricable was informed by their understandings of intersectionality (see the subsequent section on theory) and also by working in identity-based centers that focused on gender, thus increasing the saliency of being a woman for the participants. This section overviews the core experiences of the study’s Black participants, White participants, and shared experiences among them.

The study’s Black participants—Grace, Janelle, and Nneka—were diverse in many ways, including their educational paths, roles in the women’s center, perspectives about feminism, and approaches to their positions. But they also described shared core experiences related to being Black women on their campuses and within their women’s centers. These shared core experiences must be understood as multiple and contradictory, as the three women described a state of simultaneous hyper-visibility and invisibility. These concurrent statuses are best expressed as (a) surprise to encounter Black women in women’s centers and (b) potential erasure of their contributions to their campuses and the field of women’s center work. These core experiences occur in a heightened situation of monitoring, scrutiny, and expectations from supervisors, colleagues, students, and the institution. Black participants described these circumstances as underlying to their women’s center work and rarely avoidable, and they had developed means to negotiate race in their work.

The study’s White participants—Abigail, Allison, Annie, Bridget, and Nikki—were also diverse, particularly in age, career paths, and levels of awareness of White
privilege and their White identity. The core experiences described by these participants were also marked by contradiction, though of a different nature, and centered on their understanding that it was a function of White privilege to not be forced to identify as White in most situations. They understood that they could avoid much of the difficulties and dissonance of thinking about their own racial identities in their women’s center practice if they wished. As a result, the participants understood being a White woman working in a women’s center as (a) “easy” if they chose it to be—they could “blend in” with the White majority on their predominantly White campuses—and (b) missing opportunities for more intersectional practice or broad impact due to their blind spots caused by White privilege or by how they were perceived by their constituents, colleagues, and campuses. Because they chose to think about being White in their women’s center roles, the participants described responsibilities, failures, and commitments to antiracism that they knew they must undertake even while not always knowing how to proceed.

There were also shared core experiences of the phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in their women’s center work, most notably (a) the immediacy of the institution in shaping their experiences, commitments, and actions and (b) clashes with “authority” about issues of race and racism, including with supervisors.

“Race is Definitely a Thing”: Being Black in the Women’s Center

When asked what it meant to be a Black woman working in a women’s center, Black participants uniformly shared that they could not ignore this aspect of their identity and, as Janelle stated, “Race is definitely a thing.” The participants reported differing
levels of daily awareness of their own Black identity depending on the climate of the women’s center. Janelle commented, in full:

You’re a minority and a more extreme minority. It’s not like 60 percent and 40 percent. It’s like 90 percent and 10 percent, and probably even less than that as far as women of color. It’s extremely disproportionate. That’s reflected in both the student body and staff and faculty. It means that race is a thing. I think it’s up to the person how big of a thing it is. But race is definitely a thing.

While Janelle had mixed experiences of support as a Black women, Nneka experienced minimal support from within her women’s center, other than one allied White colleague. Nneka shared:

What is it like for me as an African-American woman in [the women’s center]? No one’s really interested in my population. It’s not something that they’re passionate about. It’s something that if I’m invited to the conversation, they’d like to talk about. But it’s not the primary focus.…

But I love the work I do. And I love working with women. I’m providing a support and I know that I’m providing that support, but I can’t say that I think the women’s center is definitely providing me with that type of support. There are individuals that happen to come through the door and they’re more receptive and want to support me in my efforts, but as a general culture, I don’t think that that really exists.

In Nnkea’s description of her women’s center, she described a feminist framework for the issues that often excluded issues and concerns for women of color; for example,
discussions of equal pay did not include an examination of how women of color earned different wages from White women. This overarching lack of support for issues related to women of color played heavily into Nneka’s disaffection for feminism, which is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Grace generally reported more support, noting “I don’t know where else in this particular institution I could [be in my career so long].” Still, she faced frustration with being one of the few women of color in the space.

Last [term], I got frustrated, and I said, “You know, it’s hard sometimes being the only Black person in the Center. If I don’t come in, this is a White woman’s space.” And [my White colleagues] are like, “No, we have student workers.” [And I said,] “That’s not the same, that’s not professional staff. They do excellent work, we definitely need them here, but it’s me. It’s been me for a while.”

This sense of isolation and solitariness expressed by Grace within her own center is only amplified in the larger campus community.

When asked what it meant to be Black women working at their institutions—moving beyond the physical space of the women’s center and out into the larger university communities—participants reported more uniform experiences of institutional expectations, type-casting, and scrutiny based on race. Nneka offered:

Race plays a significant role on the perception that people have of me on this campus, when I’m walking the street, everything….it depends on how I’m dressed that day and who I’m talking to who’s also in a position of power, if they take me seriously or not.
Grace described a sense of shifting perceptions as a Black woman on her campus:

If I leave the physical space of the Women’s Center, and I’m walking alone, just a Black woman moving through the space of the university…I immediately go from a professional of some sort to [a] service person or just one of the community members walking through, even from folks who I feel like I’ve met several times in a professional way, they’re still shocked that I’m part of the staff here. It’s a very different kind of experience when I move around….

I think this is the first time I’m naming that experience: I am—my identity is—unexpected/surprising to find in the women’s center while at the same time being unexpected/suspicious to find on campus. I walk into the women’s center and sometimes I feel like the person meeting me has a feeling of “Oh, I didn’t expect to meet a person like you in this space.” I walk around on campus and I have a feeling of “Make sure you can be readily identified as an employee. Keep your ID and keys in your hand.”

Grace’s description of how the perception of her Black identity shifts in different situations hints at the more explicit themes uncovered among Black participants, whose responses are best categorized as (a) surprise to encounter Black women in women’s centers and (b) potential erasure of their contributions to their campuses and the field of women’s center work. These core experiences occur in a heightened situation of monitoring, scrutiny, and expectations from supervisors, colleagues, students, and the institution.
“Why is she here?”: Surprise as a response to Black women’s center professionals. Participants routinely discussed managing reactions from students, staff, and faculty who were surprised to encounter them in their roles. Managing this surprise was a regular part of their experiences when Janelle and Grace identified themselves as being part of the women’s center staff. Grace shared:

Every once in a while I meet someone who maybe has talked to me on the phone or read something, expected something different, hasn’t seen me for some reason, and then when they come in it’s like, “Oh, this Black woman is the person I’ve been corresponding with the whole time!” And sometimes it’s a really slight kind of thing, but other times it takes them a moment and I can see them matching my voice with my face, and I’m like, “Yes, we’ve been talking for a while and I’m here to help you.” Sometimes it’s funny, but sometimes it’s like, “Yes, we still have work to do in this space.” And then sometimes I try to check myself like, “Grace, are you just putting that on this person?”

Grace described the disorienting feeling these situations create, but knowing that it is based on race, she “move[s] through it” in her women’s center practice.

Janelle shared similar experiences of surprise when people meet her in her role:

So there’s a look that Black women are familiar with from White women. I don’t know all of what’s behind the look, it may be different for each person, but there’s a look that says “something is behind this.” Like, “Why is she here? I’m not really listening to her. I’m not coming back. I’m sitting here just so I’m not rude [by] getting up and leav[ing].” What is interesting is that I’ve grown to be
familiar with it here. I don’t think I had experienced it before [this institution]. It’s not rude, overt “Who are you? What are you doing here?” It’s like, “I’m not coming back to this meeting any more.”

In most of these situations, Janelle lets it “roll off me.” But she describes getting this look from students, faculty, and staff who seem surprised to find her in her women’s center role.

While Grace and Janelle describe the general surprise that some will find when they learn that they are Black professionals in a women’s center, they also describe surprise and subsequent suspicion by others. Grace shared stories of being in her women’s center after hours and having security stop by to ask her why she was there, asking to see identification. When she told her White women’s center colleagues this, they were amazed and outraged, as they had never been monitored in their own workspace by security. Grace contrasts this experience with visiting other women’s centers: “When I show up at different women’s centers, no one questions why I’m in there, or what I’m doing, or what I’m coming to see. None of that happens. But in this university, oh for sure.” Grace described the institutional climate around race as particularly difficult in her institution, and the monitoring of Black people on campus as more noticeable and discussed.

Janelle described surprise followed by suspicion in a different way:

You get questions...I can tell the question they want to ask is “how did you get that job?” But it’s more of like, “What were you doing before here?” Or, “how
did you hear about the job?”…They’re trying to get to the point of how did you get that job.

Janelle perceives receiving some of these questions because her position is “highly sought after. …a lot of women would love this job.” But the questions are also often pointed, as people try to understand how she came to work at a predominantly White institution.

The Black participants also all noted ways in which their physical appearance—namely their clothing and hair—surprised or influenced those whom they met. It is important to note that none of the White participants mentioned their clothing or hair as a means of how they were perceived by others, at least in the context of race. But Janelle noted that her love of a particular trendy brand commonly worn by “20-year-old White girls” was often surprising to others, Nneka cited her outfit choice as a mediator of how some people related to her, and Grace described wearing different hairstyles and how people reacted.

A partial outlier to the component of surprise was Nneka, who sought to avoid discussions about being an African American woman working in women’s center by only identifying as working in the center while on the campus, but in the community or “[on my] résumé, definitely not.” She offered:

I think the women’s center would give me the kind of advocate feminist, lesbian, White, gay, I don’t know…I just think it would add to the existing challenges that I already have. I don’t want any more challenges when it comes to you looking at my information on paper and getting a sense of who I am. I want to do the best
job that I can speaking up for myself and my experience and education. I’m already going to have to make up for my race, I don’t want to add another layer to that around women’s center stuff. It just feels like it’s another “one up” I have to overcome and I don’t feel like I need to do that. Especially for a women’s center or feminism…that’s really not all-inclusive anyway.

By rejecting the women’s center label on her résumé and while doing her women’s center–related work outside of the institution, Nneka attempts to avoid compounding stereotypes, surprise, and questions about her work. Overall, navigating surprise—or the desire to avoid surprise—at seeing a Black woman in a prominent, professional women’s center role was a core experience for the study’s participants.

“But I work there and I am not White”: Obscuring, denying, or erasing Black professional contributions in women’s centers. Participants shared many instances in which their contributions or presence were obscured, denied, or potentially erased on the basis of race in the course of their women’s center employment by their peers or institutional leadership. Grace’s previous comments in this chapter explored this core experience, and she added:

About two and a half years ago, I had a conversation with our [senior student affairs leadership, a Black woman] about how I was feeling in the Women’s Center and some conflict we were working through at that time, and the remark was made, “That’s a White space, that’s a White center.” I paused for a second and I was like, “But I work there and I am not White.” I feel like I do good work there, and whatever conflicts we’re having, I’m not being let go, so my work is
valued at some level. I really struggle with that comment.

Comments about women’s centers being predominantly White spaces were also presented by White study participants, including by participants who had colleagues within their women’s center who were not White. This circumstance will be further explored in the implications section of Chapter 5.

Another aspect of this core experience relates to obscuring the additional work Black women engage in because minoritized students identify with them and seek their counsel. Grace described how she is sought out by identities that don’t see themselves in the [Black cultural center] or maybe don’t feel as welcomed in the [LGBT] Center….It wasn’t until my most recent review that I shared with my supervisor the level of support that I have been giving. “These are the kind of things that are coming up in our conversations. This is what I mean when I need extra time for when this student comes in and I say, ‘Just let them come back.’ This is why I am saying that.” I feel like that is just now being seen in the [women’s center] and I don’t feel it is supported in a consistent way across the division.

In response to Grace’s story, I offered that this kind of work was “care work…[and] emotional labor, but it’s also good student affairs practice.” Grace agreed, but it is only recently that her supervisor could “see” this racialized layer of her daily women’s center contributions.

Nneka described a situation in which learned she was making less than colleagues with the same title, education, and core set of duties as her. In discovering this, she also
realized that she had more duties to support her programs as well.

I was very overwhelmed with the outreach activities that we were doing in the community, and all of my programs kept growing and…one of the other responsibilities I had as [assistant/associate director] that my colleagues didn’t was also fundraising [and a separate banquet event]. I wanted to lessen the load for myself and I was constantly pushing back and asking questions: “What can we do about this? How can we make this work?” And I was told time and time again, “Everybody else is overwhelmed. Everybody else is doing good. You should be doing good, too. It’s no big deal.”…And I’m just like, I can’t do all of this.

Nneka felt that, in part, the unequal distribution of work within her center and the dismissal of her concerns was based on the idea that “as a woman of color, I had already been socially assigned to not want more.” This sentiment bore out in other interactions with her supervisor around work conditions, pay, pursuing further education, and the possibility of professional advancement.

“I’m just doing what I know how to do”: Summary. Despite facing challenges related to being Black women working in women’s centers, participants were motivated to keep moving forward by the mission of their centers and/or their specific job tasks. Additionally, participants noted the intersection of their race and gender in their experiences and negotiations. Janelle offered:

I’ve only ever been a Black woman. I don’t know how they would respond if I was a White woman and fighting for this cause. Would there be a different
approach from someone who’s not a Black woman? I’m just doing what I know how to do.

For Nneka, “leadership is everything,” and she described increased support from her new supervisor, who “allows me to be autonomous in my role.” New leadership encouraged her to return to the role she loves advocating for women students and engaging in community outreach. She now “feel[s] less stress” around being a Black woman working in a women’s center. Lastly, Grace described a situation in which she felt race was not at the forefront, which gave her hope:

Today I met with the student I’m currently supervising for part of their internship….In that hour of interaction with that student, I very much felt like “I’m Grace and I work in the [women’s center], and this is the work that we do.” It was a moment of such joy…this is the kind of work that is the center of our mission. I feel so whole doing this work right here, I wish that I could do more of it. I have the thought of how can I sustain this feeling outside of any condition or other social uprise, upheaval, how can I remember this moment and really center my work and my ability as a person working in a women’s center in this kind of moment? I felt like I was being a good supervisor, a good student affairs practitioner, asking the right questions, challenging and stretching a student, and the only identity I thought about at that time was the person who was trying to share with another person how they can do what they want to do in a feminist setting.
Grace’s everyday awareness of being Black in her women’s center professional practice and the relief and hope felt when she had a short but significant interaction in which race “seemed to matter less” serve as poignant reminders of the work yet to be done in higher education. Her experiences contrast with those of White participants, whose experiences are discussed in the following section.

“Go Along Pretty Smoothly”: Being White in the Women’s Center

When asked what it meant to be a White woman working in a women’s center, White participants shared variations of the theme that, if they chose to ignore race and racism, they could—in the words of Abigail—“go along pretty smoothly.” Participants were explicit that because of White privilege, institutionalized racism, and widespread campus acceptance about White women working in women’s centers, they were able to move forward without thinking about race if they so chose; in other words, it was possible for them to act as women professionals without acknowledging or discussing their White identities. Abigail stated, in full:

The first word that came to mind…was “easy.” Not that I think my work is easy, but I think that women’s centers are historically seen as places for White women. And that you can be a White woman and work in a women’s center and probably go along pretty smoothly. Unless you’re a person who is really interested in doing difficult antiracist work and trying to figure out how to do that in a way that’s useful or effective, I feel like being a White woman in a women’s center is just a really easy connection.
Allison echoed much of this sentiment of ease, while also adding her own antiracist commitments:

Honestly, if I did not want to think about, talk about, or even acknowledge my race and overall identity in my work, I wouldn’t have to. I work on a campus that is overwhelmingly White and where nearly every student comes from a very privileged background. Thinking about race and the intersection of various identities is not on the radar of the majority of people on campus…[and] if I didn’t want to [think about being White], I wouldn’t have to do it. It would save myself a lot of stress, that’s for sure.

Both Abigail and Allison outline the ease of being a White woman in their daily women’s center work, a sentiment supported by other White participants. Nikki stated that being a White woman working in a women’s center at her PWI is to “be a part of the vast majority,” and Bridget offered, “I think it feels great.” However, since they choose to engage with their White identities and privilege, their “ease” was not a taken-for-granted constant in their work.

Annie best captured the complex dynamic for women’s center professionals who are White and committed to antiracism:

Feminism and campus-based women’s center work is just generally very White, you know? There are opportunities for us…to interrogate our racial identities, to center racism and antiracism work in our work. And often times, because we’re not doing that, I fear that we’re reinforcing some of those power structures, you know? And so what it means to be a White woman, for me, is to be aware that I
could be complicit and reproducing some of that if I’m not consciously aware of my racial identity and how that positions me in the work. That I’m not just another stereotypical White woman running a White women’s center.

Her comments outline the challenges for White women committed to antiracism and also the possibility of retreat that can mark complicity with the predominantly White institution and institutional norms about race. This possibility of retreat was not present for the study’s Black participants and is an important marker for White women’s center professionals—even those who are committed to antiracism—as White privilege allows the ongoing possibility of disengagement with issues of race and racism and little repercussion for this disengagement.

**“Blending in”: Strategies to utilize Whiteness.** While there is an ease of being a White women’s center professional for many participants, several described strategies that used their Whiteness for antiracist purposes. Allison, in particular, described the ability to “blend in” as a White woman, something that both would automatically happen on her predominantly White campus as well as a strategy she consciously employed to challenge norms:

> I think because I look this way, what I say has a little bit more weight to some people. Whether that’s right or wrong, I definitely feel that way. And I definitely feel like I have a responsibility to make sure that I am putting things out there that need to be said because I can.

Allison described surprising people at times with her comments in meetings about race, racism, or diversity:
We’re hiring a new [senior leader] and it’s a closed search. Basically the only input that we were able to give was with the search firm. There was an open forum for [each constituency group] and the staff forum was packed. Everyone showed up because we all had something to say…. This whole time I’m debating whether or not to say the comment that I really wanted to say which had to do with the fact that [our institution’s] reputation [about diversity] is not as great in the [local] community as people who go here and people who are alumni and some of the people who work here think it is.

Finally I was like, “Screw it, I’m going to say it.” So I get up to the microphone and I’m the last person to talk. I said something like, “People are talking about the reputation that [the institution] has in the community and how they want to uphold the values of being welcoming, friendly, and open. I would like to know who are we welcoming. I used to work at [another institution] and when I first told some of the students [of color] about getting my first full-time job here, their reaction wasn’t ‘congratulations,’ it was ‘oh.’ So I just want to be careful about what we say about who we are welcoming. Are we really welcoming the [local, racially diverse] community? Because there’s a lot of people who don’t have a good image of [our institution] because it is very exclusive. There are people in this community who do not see [our institution] as a very welcoming place. So I think we need to be very careful about who we are welcoming and who we’re not welcoming.”
You could hear a pin drop when I said that people’s first reaction wasn’t “congratulations” it was “oh.” I think people were shocked a little bit. They have rose-colored glasses. They see everything as so good because it’s so good for them. It’s not like that for everyone.

Allison shared this story as an example of when she used her ability to “blend in” as a strategy to deliver a message to her predominantly White colleagues about diversity and inclusion. It mirrors a strategy I shared with Nneka when she described “the meeting before the meeting” with a White colleague so that they could collectively raise issues related to race. I shared my own experiences with this strategy:

[A Black cultural center colleague] and I used to enjoy going to meetings and having me be the one who’s talking about Black men and her being the one saying, “What about student parents?” In some ways, [we were] messing with people. But really we were trying to disrupt the normal way we talk about these issues, which hasn’t gotten us to where we want to be. We thought if we could disrupt that dynamic a little bit, maybe somebody new will bring something to the conversation or maybe we’ll see a different solution or, if nothing else, people will leave the meeting thinking, “Huh! That was a little different meeting.” It’s something at least.

By disrupting the racial and role dynamic of who raises issues of race and gender, I consciously utilized my White identity and privilege and acted against the ease of “blending in” as a White women’s center professional. While blending in can serve as the
default mode, actions to disrupt the dynamic can prove effective antiracist strategies for White professionals.

Annie noted a different manifestation of this strategy when she shared her perspective about being an ally and using her White privilege in partnership with her colleagues of color:

As a White, cisgender, straight woman who increasingly had more formal power in terms of my leadership position at the [women’s center] and also seniority on our campus, I tried to always be aware of the privilege that I held and the way that I could use my voice to speak truth to power. I know sometimes I failed, particularly [in] more personal relationships…and caused a lot of pain. But institutionally, I did try to take advantage of moments where I felt, particularly around racism, [I could speak]. I would continue to see our identity-based centers that served students and staff and faculty of color, this burden placed on them to be the ones both on the front lines in terms of providing support, but then also themselves often times directly impacted by these issues and also having to then navigate then the political landscape of campus in terms of moving some of this work forward. So I tried to be ready in those moments to step up as a campus-based women’s center administrator and as a White women to lend my voice in allyship with folks of color on our campus.

Annie noted the difficulties of this form of structural allyship, which offers another pathway for White women to utilize their positionality and privilege for antiracism and coalitional efforts.
“Miss[ing] opportunities”: Blind spots related to privilege. Aligned with Annie’s fear of “be[ing] complicit and reproducing” racist institutional structures is the idea of missing opportunities. Nikki concisely described the concern that being a White woman working in a women’s center “means to miss opportunities, unless you’re very, very skilled and very, very committed. [You miss opportunities] to be more intersectional, to be more focused on experiences of nonwhite women or women of color.” She went on to share a recent example related to Women’s Equality Day, an annual celebration to commemorate the passage of the 19th amendment to the Constitution, which granted women the legal right to vote in the United States:

Yesterday was Women’s Equality Day, which is really a poorly named, now that I think of it. Annually we do a voter registration activity with our local League of Women Voters. [Later in the day,] I happen to see on Facebook the graphic and then the commentary about it’s a great day but we need to report it accurately and here’s the reality[: that women of color were, in practice, excluded from voting in the United States despite the constitutional amendment, and had to fight for many more decades to be able to access voting and, in some cases, are still struggling for this right].

There was a great example of what I felt was a blind spot. I just blithely assumed somehow; I didn’t even think about it. It wasn’t an assumption because that almost sounds like that was an action on my part. It didn’t even occur to me to think, because of my White privilege, that not all women were equally franchised on that date. So thinking about how to respond to that on our Facebook
post to say, “Yay, we had a great event and I’m so proud of our staff for that, and...” It’s the “yes and—not the “but”—but the “yes and” it’s a little more complicated than we might think.” That felt like a really good example of “oops, missed that one.” Didn’t even think about it… We claim that we’re going to be intersectional so then at the get-go really we need to be thinking. We need to be asking ourselves questions as we’re putting programs together and none of us did.

This instance of missing the opportunity to discuss the diversity of women’s experiences with voting and to tell a more accurate history was not uncommon for other participants. Abigail also shared a story about Women’s Equality Day and her pride in redesigning materials for the annual event to present information of more “intersectional interest.” While she described changes to women’s center programming before the event, she demonstrated awareness that she had almost missed the complexities and potential inaccuracies of the day because of her White privilege.

Other examples of missing opportunities centered on not knowing how an all White or predominantly White women’s center staffing structure impacted the communities each center served. How could participants know what the differences might be for their center if they had never seen the possibility? Bridget described her center’s close physical proximity to the Black cultural center and the challenges of not knowing if it was truly serving women of color:

I see women students of color and they go to the [Black cultural center]. Being a White woman working in a women’s center, I think, might deter some women of color from coming in because… they’re not really guaranteed [to see someone
who looks like them]. If they don’t, some of them…are not going to come in. Matter of fact, just recently, there was a student of color who was out in our lobby area and was apprehensive and then saw [one of our new professional staff members who is a woman of color] and came in.…

Those who come in possibly in crisis or needing support, they may not think that the White women understand. I feel like, over the years, I have been an asset in this women’s center…but I think that if we had had more people of color, we may have been able to draw in more people of color. I look at the students that do hang out and our volunteers…. We have those few, but we’re mostly White.

The study’s White participants all worked on mostly White or all White women’s center staffs, and they expressed similar concerns about being able to accurately understand the impact of their staff’s whiteness on their constituents and framed this not knowing as a potential missed opportunity for enacting all aspects of their women’s center’s missions.

Disappointment, embarrassment, feeling “so damn bad”: Learning from failures. As a result of their commitment to address race and racism in their work, White participants described mistakes made and numerous occasions when they had failed as allies. They shared painful stories related to unexamined prejudice or personal attributes that were interpreted in particular settings as potentially prejudiced or racist. They also expressed varying emotions associated with these failures, from disappointment with themselves, embarrassment, regret, and—in the words of Abigail—feeling “so damn bad.” A few of these stories are noted in this section as markers of the difficulties of antiracism work, learning on the job, and the ongoing work necessary to be an ally.
Nikki, when talking about her relationships with Black women students who volunteer in the women’s center, told this story:

I know as well as the next person hair is so important to the African American women’s community. I know better than to ever touch any person’s hair. But one of [the center’s Black] students has gotten long beautiful braids and I couldn’t resist it.…I touched her hair. I was immediately appalled that I had done that and I apologized profusely. But there again you wonder, “Did I do the damage unintentionally, but still foolishly, carelessly?” So I wonder…why did I?

Nikki goes on to describe her embarrassment and deep disappointment in herself, as well as the self-reflection in which she engaged after this incident about her own White privilege, her ingrained sense of entitlement, and the ways in which she had interacted with each of the Black women students involved that term in the women’s center.

Abigail shared a story from when she first started at the women’s center about how her difficulty in remembering faces played out among White and Black students at her PWI, as well as the role of learned racism in her interactions:

The center had a student worker named Jessica who is African American and then [another identity-based center] had a student worker named Taylor who is African American; the women had [similar heights, builds, and hairstyles]. Taylor, was walking towards me at an event and I had been thinking about Jessica because she had missed something that she was supposed to have come to earlier. I saw Taylor from afar and I assumed that she was Jessica and started talking to her like she was. Taylor was completely confused and I realized what I was doing far too late.
Taylor was really sweet about it, but I was just mortified and felt horrible, like, “Oh my God, I am a diversity educator and I have just confused two of the very few Black women that I know on this entire campus.”…It was bad and I just felt so damn bad. At the time, I tried to say something to Taylor, but [saying that I’m bad with faces] just comes off as a shitty excuse….She said something nice, but it was something that made me think this has happened so many times….And I really didn’t know how to address it or explain to her how shitty I felt and that I am trying really hard to be an antiracist activist and I just failed miserably right now.

This mistake haunted Abigail years later, and she described her ongoing work to remember the hundreds of students she meets and interacts with. While she notes some progress in recognizing faces by consciously trying harder, it is “still a struggle.” Her experience, while still painful, allowed her to recognize how her universal difficulty in recognizing people she has only met a few times maps onto race dynamics and relations on her campus and in society. She noted:

In terms of learned from my mistakes…it definitely makes me think about my ingrained racism and what’s going on in my head and what I needed to change about my actions. I get super anxious about it and find myself trying to study people’s faces more when I meet them and they’re not a White person, because if I do that to White people, it’s embarrassing but it’s not racist.

Of the White participants, Annie spoke about the lack of institutional support in navigating relationships with colleagues across differences, and some of the pain that she
both caused and experienced as a result of consciously working through these relationships:

You form really close personal relationships with people that you’re working with and it can become really painful to work through [addressing issues of race] when there’s other inherent power dynamics at play structurally. Sometimes I’m supervising those staff or I was trying to support women of color who are supervising White women and who in that supervisory relationship are experiencing and trying to navigate issues directly around racism. How can we best do that? We’re going to mess up and we’re going to fail and it can be really personally hurtful to do that when there’s not a structure to support that work. I haven’t always experienced [support for this] in our women’s center.

Annie’s description of the lack of structural support from the institution and specifically the women’s center were not uncommon among White participants. While all participants discussed some form of failure being an ally, these stories best capture the personal, interpersonal, and structural issues associated with failing as a White women’s center professional. The disappointment, embarrassment, feeling “so damn bad,” and pain described in these stories went hand in hand with White participants who were working to enact antiracist strategies in their daily women’s center practice.

“I want to be part of that process”: Summary. Despite the difficulties of rejecting the “easy” path of ignoring their White privilege, navigating blind spots and “missed opportunities,” and the pain of failing to be an ally, White participants expressed ongoing commitments to antiracism. Indeed, study participants described their identities
as White women, rarely extracting their White identities from their identities as women. They cited various reasons for their commitments. For example, Annie noted:

- It’s crucial for us to figure out how to have these conversations, how to make meaning of our own experiences around our multiple identities because it definitely is directly related to our work. And if we can’t do it ourselves, then how in the world are we supposed to support students’ learning and development in those areas?

This desire to model positive relationships across differences and antiracist practices was a major motivator for Annie. For Bridget, it was wanting to be part of the change she saw as necessary. While she still “struggles” with speaking up at times, Bridget has also gained confidence, too.” She shares that antiracism work “needs to be done, I want it to be done, and I want to be part of that process…of bringing awareness and being more inclusive and not making this world and everything we do so White all the time.” Lastly, Allison offered a broader commitment to her campus and profession: “I wouldn’t be doing my job justice or anyone else justice if I wasn’t thinking about being White on this campus and in my work.”

“**It is Heavy**: Addressing “Antiracism Work from the Place of a Women’s Center”

Across racial and ethnic identities, participants also described shared core experiences of the phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in their women’s center work, most notably (a) the immediacy of the institution in shaping their experiences, commitments, and actions and (b) clashes with “authority” about issues of race and
racism. Participants described enormous personal and professional challenges to raising
issues of race, racism, and privilege. Annie asserted:

    There’s not always an acknowledgement or recognition of how important it is to
do antiracism work from the place of a women’s center. [We hear] “It’s not our
place. That’s not our mission and there are other centers that do that.” That means
that it does fall to the person, to the individuals to try to navigate. And that’s just
really hard.…It is heavy.

Participants’ “heavy” experiences navigating the institution and their supervisors as
individuals in their professional practice are explored in this section.

   “The institution is just so White”: Race, racism, and the institution.
Participants uniformly described their institutions’ lack of deep commitment or support
for addressing institutional racism as well as the lack of spaces for meaningful
conversations about race; depending on the women’s center—its leadership, location, and
climate—this critique extended to the center itself. The phrase “the institution is just so
White,” taken from my research journal, describes my observation that silence, racism,
and White privilege were institutionalized in so many of the stories shared by
participants; I used this as a thematic code and included it, to positive and affirmative
responses, when sharing first-round coding themes during second interviews. “The
institution is just so White,” in the words of Annie, “is very simple and names it in a
powerful way….It really helps to frame [institutional climate and resistance] that way.”

    There are multiple components of this core experience of women’s center
professionals, including the Whiteness of institutional leadership, an overall inhospitable
campus climate for people of color, and institutionalized White privilege and racism. The first is related to the senior leadership of participants’ institutions, which was routinely described as majority White; even when there were people of color in prominent leadership positions, such as vice presidencies, chief diversity officers, or even university presidencies, little was structurally changed in the institution. This evoked great frustration among participants, as they saw missed opportunities for their institution to change. Allison described this issue at her institution:

It definitely starts at the top and it’s not getting any better. I would say it’s getting worse….There is a lot of turnover in all the top positions in the past year because we’re getting a new president. All of the appointments that have been made have been all White males to the top positions. Granted, I think previously they were White males holding those positions anyway, but I’m not even sure they even considered anyone else. I didn’t know of any searches or anything like that. [I find out through our internal staff communication], here’s a picture of another White man being appointed to this top position. Nothing is changing.

…At least people at the level where I am, we talked about how it’s not right, how things need to change but we aren’t in the seats of power to be able to do that….So not only are women and anyone of color not represented in the higher positions, I don’t see any of that changing either.

Allison’s frustration with the lost opportunities at her institution to diversify senior leadership only increased from the first interview, as additional White men were appointed to top positions by the time we spoke for the second interview.
Bridget echoed the idea of almost all White leadership, and then spoke to the trickle-down effect that this has for her institution:

I can talk about the whiteness of the institution… I’m going to look at the higher ups, all those in power, and I’m going to put a little gender in here because most of them are men, and most of them are White…. We did have several women, but now the women are leaving and being replaced by White men. So, when you look at [our institution] and the upper administration, it’s very much a White institution. And even walking around campus, it’s very much a White institution…. I think students [of color] look at coming here and think, “This place doesn’t look like me.”

Nikki shared a similar concern about the overall dearth of people of color in leadership positions on her campus, including among her own division:

There is one out of roughly 20 [unit leaders] who identify as other than White, racially or ethically. And he is just beyond fed up, frankly, and it is not just with this institution, it is higher education in general. It’s challenging in that context to know how to talk about it…. I would imagine that it would be a challenge for him as the sole Black man in the group: “Okay, what do you want me to say? Look around, clearly there is a problem.”

While Nikki has allied with her colleague in the past on some of these issues, silence on behalf of the White division leader makes it difficult to raise issues of race, racism, and privilege.

It is important to note that racism intersects with sexism in many situations
described by participants, such as Annie’s experiences with her Black woman supervisor who “shut down” various discussions of race and racism within the division and the women’s center, and Janelle’s previous description of Black women in senior leadership positions in her division. After our final interview, Janelle wrote to me:

There’s a difference between women being at the table and women being represented at the table. I feel like that’s what happens at [my institution]. It seems like [institutional leaders] have perfected picking women and other minorities who don’t stand for any social justice issue. Is that the key to moving up? Not being overly committed to any social justice issue?

At her institution (and at other participants’ institutions), just because women and minorities occupy positions of institutional power and leadership does not mean that they address issues of race or racism. This evoked great frustration, as participants felt little support for raising antiracism questions and concerns and saw little change in terms of campus climate. Allison previously described the result of this lack of institutional leadership as creating a situation in which White people wear “rose-colored glasses”: “They see everything as so good because it’s so good for them. It’s not like that for everyone.” Nikki asserted, “I have not encountered many personal instances of race-based oppression because ‘whiteness’ is so normalized at my institution.” The lack of leadership to address racism contributes to the sense that “the institution is just so White.”

Campus climate was another component of “the institution is just so White.” It was routinely described as inhospitable to people of color and difficult to navigate,
particularly for Black study participants, as they described in the previous section.

Participant after participant told stories of incidents that increased racial tensions on their campus in the past year or so. For example, Nneka described the impact of a consultant’s write-up of institutional culture:

[The consultant] said that many of the students of color needed to dress differently and that they needed to do a better job of identifying that they were affiliated with the university, because our university is in the middle of the city. A lot of our students of color were very displeased and they started a movement [to show that they belong here].

Students of color at Nneka’s campus organized across race and ethnicity in order to challenge the idea that students of color had to look or act a certain way to be a part of their university community. The situation allowed Nneka to see that that “it’s not just my experience. The students are experiencing it, too.”

Nneka’s story illustrates campus climate related to belonging, and Allison shared another dimension of this reality for students of color. She wrote in her journal:

Students of color share example after example of how they are disproportionately targeted by campus police, dismissed by their White peers, and not supported in meaningful ways by the institution. They feel like a number towards diversity. From what I can tell by how our higher-level administrators respond to issues and situations, the students aren’t too far off.

This lack of response by administration is another compounding component of poor campus climate related to race and racism.
While Nneka’s and Allison’s stories explore issues of belonging, most participants outlined increasing unrest on their campuses as a result of police killings of unarmed Black men and the rise of Black Lives Matter protests among students. Several of the campuses are located near nationally publicized incidents of White police officers killing unarmed Black men, and participants’ students were highly involved in campus and community protests. Several White participants—Abigail, Bridget, and Nikki—described feeling unsure how to support their students, particularly related to how being White was perceived by activist student leaders. Allison described participating in on-campus protests in support of Black Lives Matter:

We ended up doing a die-in three days in a row. There were a good amount of students, faculty, and staff….For an entire hour we were outside of [the union] holding up signs, not talking. The first 50 minutes you just stood there in silence….Then the last 10 minutes, one of the students would say, “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” And then everyone would fall to the ground and lay there for 10 minutes. It was freezing. It was miserable. We did that three days in a row and the response on Yik Yak was disgusting. But it made me really happy to see other students [and] other faculty and staff who were there with the students. This was organized by [our multicultural center]. It was powerful to see, but also really disheartening for how many people walked by and said, “All Lives Matter.”

It is important to note that Allison participated in an event sponsored by an on-campus office. Other participants described protests sponsored by ad hoc student and community groups, and there was little or no guidance from their supervisors or institutions about the
degree to which they were encouraged to participate. In the cases of Abigail, Annie, and Grace, their institutions were actively trying to shut down Black Lives Matter protests. Abigail lamented that the institution was silent on these matters and that she did not receive direction about whether it was encouraged that she participate in these protests or work with student protesters as a staff member; on the other hand, Annie and Grace received clear direction from senior administrators to not participate in the protests or work with student activists. Annie specifically spoke of the way that the institution monitored and silenced her and the women’s center related to taking an antiracism stand and supporting Black Lives Matter. She shared an incident that happened shortly after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, which also underlines another means by which “the institution is just so White”:

A lot of our students were coming to us seeking support, a lot of our colleagues were as well. Our colleagues in some of the other identity-based centers were themselves feeling really traumatized by what was happening in the larger community and also the lack of institutional response. So the Women’s Center again wanted to engage some of that kind of work…. We essentially just opened our center and held space—that’s what we said, we were going to hold space for people to come together and just sit. There was no other agenda. There was no planned facilitator, but we knew it was a political thing to do, which is why we felt we needed to do it. And I will have to say, I was shocked at the response from our senior administration in that move. They found out that we were holding space, they attended this meeting, and by doing so really made what was intended
to be a safe space not a safe space. And later,…the Women’s Center was really called out for “acting out,” it wasn’t our role, it wasn’t our place, that needed to be done by…to be honest, I don’t really know what their rationale was, but the message was clear that that’s not our work. And I think that is really a shame and it undermines our institution’s ability to do inclusion and equity work. If we aren’t seen as critical partners in that, then it really limits the impact that our institution can do around some of this work. So, that example in particular will continue to stand out to me of a really strong example as an institutional failure, but an organizational win, because I think it reminded people of where we stood in the work, that we see ourselves as active allies.

Annie’s experiences speak to institutionalized White privilege and racism, which leaders often replicated through their silences, monitoring of employees and students, inaction, or neglect of the women’s center and/or antiracism efforts. Allison offered this example of inaction:

Every time [the institution goes through accreditation], we get dinged really badly on diversity. Every time, they convene this committee and bring people together and say you need to make recommendations. But [my supervisor] has been on this committee multiple times and they never do anything.

Allison continued to describe her and her supervisor’s shared frustration that despite “lip service” to the importance of diversity, inaction between accreditation cycles continued. Janelle offered an example of how neglect was used as a strategy by the institution and administrators toward the women’s center. When asked if she thinks
scrutiny is higher for her as a Black woman and the center when it addresses issues of race, she answered:

Yes and no. I feel like it’s not because no one cares about [us] right now because it’s not a huge part of the budget. We haven’t made as much noise as we can. [My unit] is already the stepchild of [our division]. And then [the women’s center] is the stepchild of [my unit]. So I’m not really scrutinized because no one really pays any attention. But I think when it becomes a big thing, when [the students] start to make noise, I think it will like that. The more attention it gets, the more I reach out to people [the more scrutiny I receive].

While some participants described ways that they could “fly under the radar” and address issues of race and racism, the more controversial or larger the effort, the more they described institutional constraint. In the end, institutional lack of deep commitment or support for addressing racism perpetuated racism, White privilege, and the sense that “the institution is just so White.” Janelle described how difficult this made her job:

People have said things like “You’re angry,” or “You’re such an activist.” And I think it’s interesting 1. Because I am angry, and 2. I guess I am an activist now. But…I think they should focus more on the institution and say, “The institution is wrong,” or “Thank you for stepping up for students and speaking up for students.” Some people do say that…and “I’m behind you. Let me know what next steps are, how can I help?”
This professional price for raising issues was real among participants, who worried about walking a line with the institution to say what they wanted to say and still keep their jobs. Allison poignantly outlined her recent realization about her career:

> There need to be White people who [speak up]. And I’m starting to realize it can’t be me if I want to keep my job. And I have fully come to the conclusion that if I don’t leave [my institution] eventually, I will probably get pushed out. They just can’t deal with me….I just can’t in good conscience allow this to happen my entire time. I’m not going to be able to spend 30 years here if it’s like this. That’s not a possibility….Either I’m going to change some things myself or I’m going to have to leave.

Four of the participants—Allison, Annie, Grace, and Nneka—described significant enough disappointment with their institutions related, in part, to race and racism to seriously consider leaving their positions, a powerful statement of how an institution that is “just so White” can affect the career longevity of its women’s center professionals.

“We were on different pages”: Encountering resistance from institutional leaders and supervisors. This section explores participants’ challenges in navigating interpersonal relationships with institutional leaders and supervisors. All participants described discord with a current or past supervisor on the basis of race, ideas about race-based oppression or how race mattered in their work, or commitments to antiracism. While overall Allison, in particular, described being aligned with her White supervisor about these kinds of issues, and Janelle described support from her Black male
supervisor—“he gets it”—all other participants had a wide range of stories of disagreement, verbalized or not, with their past or current supervisors.

Abigail, who previously described her supervisor as “really hard to disagree with,” added that she would regularly talk with her supervisor about being White in their women’s center practice, but felt “like sometimes we were on different pages about what was a good idea and what was not a good idea.” She shared stories of how this manifested on micro and macro levels in their women’s center and its programs. Nikki described a disappointing interaction with her White male supervisor, who when updated about a group of allied faculty and staff who were meeting to talk about race issues, commented, “Why can’t it be all lives matter?” Nikki offered back, “Because right now we need to talk about how Black lives and trans lives matter.” Supervisors being on “different pages” than their employees was a common experience.

Nneka experienced perhaps the most fraught relationship with her supervisor, a White woman in her 70s who was “very stuck in her perception of people like me and how I should be, how I should behave: that I should be complacent and be fine with where I am.” Nneka described story after story of her supervisor relating to her in problematic ways around race-related issues, calling her out as the sole woman of color on the professional staff, or placing responsibility for issues related to race on her to address or resolve. Nneka shared:

We don’t have programs around women of color issues. The last time I brought that up with my [supervisor], she said, “Well, then you create it.” I said [to her], “Well, okay.” I said to myself, “I can create it, but it should be something that we
all are tackling because I get it. I don’t think you get it.” It’s been…challenging is the best way to put it.

After several years she departed, in large part because of this untenable supervisory relationship.

“It’s painful to be a systems thinker in the system”: Summary. In Annie’s second interview, I jotted down that phrase. As we were sharing our experiences, I told Annie what I wrote, which immediately provoked agreement from her. I explained my thinking:

It’s painful to be a systems thinker in the system because not everyone thinks that way in general or even understands that there is a system that they are replicating through their positions, their behaviors, their choices, the policies, the practices….It can be so painful to see it and not have the power to fix it or to address it or to speak to it all the time.

Annie’s agreement, as well as others’ discussions of the anger, pain, and frustration of trying to make change within their centers and institutions, highlights the means through which women’s center practitioners are so often system thinkers who are trying to navigate their own identities in their work and create social and institutional change. They do so often from positions and institutional locations where they are unable to have direct impact in the institutional decision making that they clearly see as perpetuating institutionalized race-based oppression, racism, and White privilege.
The Phenomenon of Theory in Race Negotiations in a Women’s Center

How do feminist theories inform, support, and/or fail women’s center professionals as they negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work?

The study’s second research question related to how participants utilize theory in negotiating their racial and ethnic identities in their professional roles. Participants named combinations of feminist theory and feminism, intersectionality, critical race theory, Black feminist thought, womanism, student development theory, and social change theory as guiding their women’s center practice. While I initially imagined theory as a major lens through which participants would understand experience, giving language as well as serving as a background to participants’ racialized experiences in the women’s center, theory was of widely varying importance and immediacy in this study. Interestingly, my framing of the research question proved prescient, as participants described theory in ways that can be described as supporting, informing, and failing them in their work. This section explores each of these in turn.

“The Work That I Am Doing Is Validated”: Theory as Supporting the Work of the Women’s Center and Its Practitioners

Serving as a bedrock and reference point for practice, theory was helpful to participants in that it grounded their practice and supported work tasks such as planning programming, working with students, and enacting theory to practice. Grace explained daily uses of theory:

It is useful in that I know the things that I am doing are directly connected to theory. And I know our programming and the way that the [women’s center] staff
work, [we have] been intentional about that. How it’s connected to theory I can’t always reference as well but I know that it is there. So that makes me feel like the work that I am doing is validated, is valuable, and is rooted in something more than just, “We put this program on.” No, “We put this on because we know that we have these connections” or, “We can point it to these articles.” Or, “This is actually how it is happening.”

For Grace, the knowledge that her work is grounded in theory is valuable to her, as is “the fact that I can speak to that.” Bridget noted that theory was useful in her women’s center because it gave her work “that tangibility…. [Theory] exists, where if it’s just something that I myself want to do, without any kind of tangibility, maybe others wouldn’t want that program to happen or would not want that focus to be there.”

Annie also noted how intersectionality and critical race theories supported programming:

We draw on [these theories] in different stages of our program development….For example, intersectionality and thinking about that as a theory but then also as a practice has been critical in our programming. We use those kinds of writings or research throughout to make sense of the work that we’re doing and then we go back to that often times at the conclusion or maybe at a critical point in the program to say, “Okay, how did we experience this particular issue or how did we work through this or how did it play out?” We do it with our full-time staff, but we do it with our students as well.
In her example, intersectionality is a means to deepen programming and also student and staff learning experiences.

Participants also gave specific examples of how theory helped them to understand various aspects of their women’s center work. Abigail offered that she often think[s] about the different waves of feminism and the feminist theory that goes along with those waves. I find those useful when dealing with different groups of women that utilize the [center]…. [One supporter] who is 70 or 80 has very second wave feelings about feminism and how can these young women call themselves feminist and still wear short skirts?... And so I find it useful to keep those ideologies in mind when I am working with someone like her and trying to put her in conversation with maybe some younger feminists who have really different opinions.

Other participants cited that rather than utilize specific theories in their work, knowledge of these theories informs their overall approach and framework. Nikki wrote in her journal, “I probably rely on intersectional and social justice approaches to feminism more than specific theories.” Allison similarly wrote, “I rarely think about how I use theory in my day-to-day work. I just know that I approach things through a feminist lens.”

“[Women’s Studies] in action”: Women’s centers as locations of theory to practice. Participants noted multiple means through which women’s centers enact theory in their daily practice, often in collaboration with women’s studies programs. Nikki offered, “I do think theories can be very helpful in working with student staff because they can provide a framework for our training efforts and can also model for students
how theory can be integrated into practice.” Allison goes into more detail about how her women’s center practice is rooted in helping students to explore theory:

I work closely with the faculty in [women’s studies] to create initiatives and programs that align with what students are learning in the classroom. Feminist theory is at the foundation of women’s center work, and I like to describe it as [women’s studies] in action. All this stuff that you learn in a women’s studies class, like how things are set up and how things are run and structure-wise and the activist piece of it and the advocacy piece of all of this is pretty well done through women’s center work. And not all women’s centers are like that, but I know the two I’ve been in have been.

Most participants work in some capacity with women’s studies on their campus, and the idea of women’s centers as sites where theory is translated into practice was common.

Bridget illustrated this idea in her journal. Reflecting on the first interview and recent happenings in her professional life, she wrote about how her perspective shifted:

Practice is important, but having an understanding of the theory bridges it all together. Working closely with [women’s studies] is a major asset to bridging theory to practice. Through internships, volunteer work, activism (all feminist practice), students are able to have a more interdisciplinary understanding of feminist theory.

We don’t really realize that we are using theory, or that we are helping to put the theory that [students are] learning in [women’s] studies classes into practice. It’s like you’re not conscious of it until you…actually put it on paper or
take the whole picture, come full circle, I guess, with the fact that feminist theory and feminist practice do go together. I often would think, “I don’t do anything with feminist theory. I don’t teach. That’s women’s studies. That’s their responsibility.” But I do it in a way that I don’t realize. It’s just hard to put in words, but feminist theory is used, it’s just not something that [I] myself as a women’s center staff person realize…is part of what I do.

…But what I have realized, that [women’s studies people] do the theory, but we help put it to practice, and that’s what bridges us together, and that’s why we collaborate and work so well together, and that’s why we, women centers, and academic programs should….It’s a very big plus. It just pulls it all into perspective and give[s] them that interdisciplinarity, the intersectionality that we want them to have when they leave the university, and we’re playing a part, and I didn’t realize that’s how we were.

Bridget’s realization of the links between women’s studies and women’s centers was the most detailed account given in this study. While others shared her belief, they often framed the idea of women’s centers as locations of theory to practice as a fundamental understanding of their daily work, their perspective on their center and its mission, and their framework for understanding their professional practice.

“**I wish that I knew more**”: Theory as an acknowledged area of growth.

Lastly, participants often signaled theory as an area in which they wished to grow. Nikki named critical race theory—“which I know so little about and I wish that I knew more”—as an area she wished to strengthen to better understand White privilege and antiracism
efforts. Janelle shared that she was “not well versed in feminist theory or women’s center research” and expressed her desire to learn more to better engage in her professional role. Last, Grace shared an ongoing desire to “understand how it works so that I can show other people.” The desire to grow in relation to understanding and practicing theory was explicitly linked to the acknowledgment that this growth would only strengthen and support them as women’s center practitioners.

“Theory Provides Clarity”: Theory as Informing Negotiations of Race in Women’s Center Practice

Whereas theory was supportive of general daily practice for many women’s center professionals in this study, for some, theory directly shaped and informed daily negotiations of their race and ethnicity in the women’s center; theory helped them to understand their racial identities in their work and at their institutions, as well as how to strategize to make change.

“Theory gives me tools”: Theory informing understanding and negotiation. Participants identified several means by which theory helped them to understand their racial identities related to their work or to direct their action. When asked how intersectionality helped her to understand being White in her work, Allison stated:

It makes me think more dimensionally about what I do, that there’s different aspects to everyone and everything, and different reasons that we do things the way that we do. Just because I say that I work with a feminist lens isn’t the same as someone else who says the exact same thing.
For Allison, the theory of intersectionality gave her a means to understand others and her work, as well as how being White influenced her own ways of thinking and understanding feminism.

Annie mirrored that theory helped her to understand herself and her “position in the work”:

Doing advocacy work, pushing up against the institution and systems, it is important to maintain a big picture way of understanding. This can be tough, particularly when you’ve been doing the work for a long time, with the same players. It becomes personal. Sometimes too personal, threatening the effectiveness of the advocacy. Using theoretical lenses can help work against this threat, highlighting the personal as political. My theoretical frameworks have helped me not feel crazy, alone, hyper-sensitive, radical, and needy. Theory gives me tools to better understand my own intersecting identities and how these position me in my work so that I can be most effective and as self-aware as possible. They have helped me know when and how to take care of myself in a system that can be toxic and very difficult. Theory provides clarity.

In Annie’s experience, theory is a means through which she can find insight, perspective, and strength. Theory is a fundamental way in which she can “try to create some distance from the work so [I] can make the best choices as possible to move it forward.”

Annie additionally wrote about theory as means for staff to understand themselves and each other. She gave the example of using theory as a professional development exercise in which the staff might read particular pieces and then “use those to help us
flesh out some of our own lived experiences. That can actually be a safe way to open up some dialogue for how we’re experiencing different parts of our identities.” The idea of theory as “giving tools” is evident in other participants who share that theory is a means through which they have come to understand themselves, others, and their work in more complicated ways.

“It’s a critical tool”: Theory informing practice and work for structural change. Theory functioned beyond the level of negotiating identity; additionally, it directly informed women’s center practice and work for structural change. When asked about salient ways that she utilized theory, Grace offered that intersectionality was “the biggest piece” that helped her, noting that she continually worked to “understand it, wrestle with it, constantly using it to hold myself accountable, to uphold the work that I am doing [so that it is] accountable, to hold other people accountable.” In discussing this in her women’s center practice, Grace credited intersectionality with informing her “big picture” view of her work.

Of the participants, Annie expressed the deepest commitment and interest in theory, articulating many means through which it was essential in helping her:

I see part of what we’re trying to do, on a very basic level, is to highlight “the personal is political.” So often we can get stuck in the personal because [the women’s center’s space is] about hearing individual stories. The theory helps us bring it out to the political. It’s a critical tool in doing that, both for us when we’re “in it,” in the moment, in the personal through a particular issue, but then also for students, too, to make sense of, “This isn’t just me. This isn’t just something
that’s happening to me.” That tool is then something that they have and they can connect with others; it helps to develop coalition and build relationship over a particular political issue.

For Annie, theory is “absolutely critical” in her work with students and the issues of the women’s center. However, she stated that it is similarly critical for herself:

Drawing on those frameworks to continuously ground and guide the work is really helpful when you’re feeling lost in terms of how to navigate….Without those frameworks I would not have been able to pull myself out of it sometimes when I felt so down and discouraged, so beaten down personally, sometimes with the survivor [of sexual violence], and I don’t know that I would have been able to move from that place of feeling so hurt and silenced and marginalized to feeling like, “Okay, what is the issue here? What is the system? How are we going to be able to identify it and work to solve it?” without those frameworks.

For Annie, it was virtually unimaginable to talk about her women’s center practice without discussing the role of theory in shaping her approaches. It was also difficult to imagine being able to continually navigate her work on a personal level without the gift of theory.

“I Am Just Doing the Work”: Theory as Failing Women’s Center Practitioners, Constituents, and Missions

Participants, even those with affection for theory, critiqued it in three key ways: through its jargon, immateriality, and inaccessibility; by the time it takes to work with;
and by its sometimes narrow framing and implementation within women’s centers and institutions.

“Are you for real?”: Theoretical jargon, inaccessibility, and immateriality.

Several participants lamented the esoteric nature of theory and how it was sometimes disconnected from “real life” or from impacting women’s material experiences and lives. Bridget offered:

When you think about theory, it’s a theory. I know they’re real, but they’re theories, whereas I’m more of a material person, I like to work with the concrete. I like to work with “what you see is real and concrete” and those are the issues and the things that I like to do programming on. We’ve done programming here in the past that I didn’t even understand the title of the keynote speeches or what the speakers were talking about. And I’m like, “Are you for real?” Let me have a dictionary and I need to look this up before I can even tell anybody else. Even then I didn’t know what it was!

I’m concerned with having things presented in a way that is understandable to everybody….To be honest, feminist theory, I know it’s important, but in my work, I am more passionate about the issues that need more awareness. That’s more of what I’m concerned with. Maybe I’ll leave the theory to the director.

The means for constituents to connect with and understand theory was important to participants, and “accessible” was used by several to describe their hope for what theory could be. For example, Abigail discussed her initial experiences with feminist theories in
graduate school: “I have struggled with understanding theory and applying it and making it something that I felt was accessible. I often found theory to be frustrating and sometimes hard for me to understand.” She noted that while she feels less worried about it today, accessibility remains a concern.

Nneka raised a different concern about language, namely that it can become trendy and empty of meaning and action:

I have noticed that people tend to use the words diversity and intersectionality as buzzwords. But there’s no action around what are you going to do to make sure that it’s diverse, or to make sure that you’re addressing these intersectionalities. I’ve become quite pet-peeved to the word intersectionality. I like to use inclusivity.

Her rejection of diversity and intersectionality as empty buzzwords speaks to how theoretical concepts can become meaningless jargon. In this sense, theory fails when it generates popularized terminology that is not accompanied by action and depth.

Related to issues of language, another aspect of theory is that often participants felt they were enacting theory without knowing the words. Grace shared:

I find myself not “naming” theory but practicing the content….I find myself in this space of living theory, practicing it even, without being able to precisely name it. For example, I read hooks and Gidding just because it seemed interesting when I was younger, but nothing they wrote about seemed foreign to me because I could see myself living what they were describing. When I first came to understand concepts of intersectionality..., I again found myself not blown away
by some new concept, but more like “Oh, that’s the name for how other people understand who I am as a person.”

…The not useful piece [about theory] is that I am just doing the work. And sometimes our community partners are doing the work, they don’t have the theory background either…Not knowing doesn’t stop the work from happening…So I think that’s where it can be useful having the language to speak to what it is you are actually doing. And sometimes it’s not useful if you do not have that language. Not very many people can see your work without that language.

In these senses, theory was less useful to participants, who were enacting, explaining, or exploring theories without using theoretical labels or language. Nikki similarly explained: “I have always felt less equipped to use and explain how I use theory in my daily work. I didn’t come up through a women’s studies program so I don’t have…that theory language.” Allison also named this challenge: “I don’t use the language in my day-to-day. I don’t want to embarrass myself.” Language was a barrier for constituents and participants alike.

Many shared that—in the past or currently—they felt a lack of confidence or even shame for not understanding theory or being able to discuss it in their work. Grace confided, “I really started trying to check myself on shaming myself for these things, like ‘I just don’t know enough, I’ve not read enough,’ and saying, ‘No, your lived experience is valuable, too.’ ” Annie explained women’s center practitioners’ sometimes lack of confidence about theory:
I think in feminism, especially in the world of women’s studies and where so many of our centers are seen as being partners to [women’s studies], that field has become so high theory. And I think as they sought legitimacy in the academy, even women’s studies scholars don’t feel [that theory is accessible]….There’s that question of legitimacy always, so I think it makes sense for us practitioners, we’ve kind of internalized some of that and back away a little bit from it, feeling like we’re not prepared and that’s just bullshit. Theory is meaning-making of our experiences whether that be in the academy, reading theorists, or just making sense of our work on our own. And I think it’s too bad that we have let ourselves buy into that idea of what theory is.

Jargon, the inaccessibility of theoretical concepts and language for constituents and practitioners, and the potentially esoteric nature of theory were common failures of theory among participants.

“You just have to trust that it’s happening”: Limited time for theory.

Participants described work lives that happened at an incredibly fast pace. As a consequence, participants often described drawing on their base in theory but limited routine engagement with the theories, theoretical thinking, or theory building. Allison stated:

If you’re doing your job right, you’re not going to have time to relate everything back to feminist theory. You just have to trust that it’s happening and that you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing….I know I have the groundwork and it’s there. I know that I’m using this lens. I know it. However, I don’t analyze it. I
don’t critique it, I don’t think about it, because I don’t have time. I don’t have
time to lay it out that way and honestly, it’s not me who can teach the
fundamentals of it….Really students should be getting that from [women’s
studies], which is why I would like to see that program really bolstered because I
can’t do it justice. I’m not an academic. I could put it into practice and I think I do
a pretty good job of that.

The lack of time for engaging with theory was noted across participants.

Because of her busy work life and relative lack of interest in “studying women’s
studies or feminist theory,” Janelle described that she has “not applied a lot of theory
because I’m not very familiar with theory. I read articles that I find online or things that
would help me….It’s researching and serving the students and asking the students what
they need and want.” In Janelle’s case, she has worked hard to educate herself on
women’s issues and stay in touch with the needs of the diverse students she serves;
however, she engages in this work largely without the use or exploration of formal
theories.

Annie discussed her lack of time for engaging with theory in a different way.
Describing the fast pace of her work life, she noted that theory
is labor-intensive. In the busy-ness and the day-to-day-ness of all we have to do,
to try to carve out and prioritize time to “do theory” is tough. And it’s not always
legitimized by the institution, because how are we then going to measure that?
The lack of institutional support for theory and theorizing within women’s centers adds yet another layer of difficulty for participants, none of whom are rewarded or evaluated for understanding, enacting, or building theory in their women’s center roles.

“I haven’t seen a lot of forward movement”: Limited framing and implementing. For one participant—Nneka—theory, at least the theory advanced by her women’s center, did not help her to negotiate her race or ethnicity. In fact, the particular theory put forth by her center actually served to render her, communities that looked like her, and the issues that she cared about invisible because of the narrow lens that was applied in her center. As a result, Nneka had a disaffection for feminism and feminist theory, in particular, because of how they were used to frame the agenda of her women’s center.

I haven’t seen a lot of forward movement around feminist theory unless I’m missing something. It still doesn’t feel all-inclusive to me….If I identify that I feel differently or that I feel that other students would feel differently, it hasn’t been very well received. As an example, we’re a [women’s center] and everything is about feminism theory and practice. And I’ve said quite frankly, quite often, “I don’t identify as a feminist and it makes me feel uncomfortable that everything needs to fall under the feminist umbrella.” It should be a women’s empowerment umbrella where you’re able to self-select what you want to be….it’s made me feel isolated. It’s made me feel like diversity to certain folks means that I can look different but I should think just the way that you do.

Identifying as a womanist, Nneka has time and again raised issues within her women’s
center about the narrow feminist theoretical lens through which it operates. She shared another story of reviewing a list of criteria for a staff vacancy within the center:

There was a question, “What’s their understanding of the feminist lens?” And then my question to her is, “Why is it a feminist lens? It’s a [women’s center], right? So if it’s a [women’s center], it should be around women’s empowerment. Feminism is a part of that conversation but it isn’t the conversation in itself or we should just call it a feminist center.”

…I think she kind of understood it. She was not a person of color, she was a woman of privilege. With [a prominent member of the center’s advisory board], I expressed [a similar sentiment] to her but she continues to want to use feminism to describe everything, regardless if it’s inclusive of others or not. I don’t think that she’s necessarily conscious of it because she’s of the mindset that because feminism says it’s all encompassing that means that we are, but for me that means nothing if there’s no advocacy or action done around it. I don’t want to claim something that’s not going to work to support or push forward objectives that are going to support people who look like me. And for me, [the feminist] movement is not doing anything to up our landscape economically, socially, [or in terms of] access.

In raising issues about the static theoretical lens used in her women’s center, Nneka was regularly shut down, silenced, or ignored. While some of this has changed in more recent months, Nneka continues to feel that feminist theory has, more often than not, failed her, people of color, and the populations she is working to serve in her women’s center role.
As a result of her years of experience in the women’s center, Nneka offers these final thoughts on feminism that is narrowly framed and implemented:

So I’m not necessarily going to say that I’m not a fan of feminism, but I’ll say that I think that it needs a lot of tweaking if it’s to be accepted, respected, or for people to get behind it. Again, if there’s no conversation about privileged versus not privileged or income versus being poor as all get out, if there’s no conversations about how race plays a role in that perception component, then it’s not doing anything beneficial to support the people it’s supposed to be supporting. Am I a little biased because of my experience working here? Absolutely. Did I hear about it or understand it before? Absolutely not. Do I feel that I understand it and what it’s supposed to be and what it actually is? Yes. And I think even if I wasn’t in this Women’s Center I would still have the same perception? Yes, I don’t see any national movements to support women of color in a way where it’s enhancing their ability to be successful.

While not all women’s centers enact feminism in the narrow frame of Nneka’s center, her words are an important reminder of the impact of limited framing and implementing of theory in women’s center practice and how it can alienate staff and constituents, as well as deter from the center’s ability to pursue its mission.

“I Know That It Is There”: Summary

In this exploration of the study’s second research question related to how women’s center participants utilize theory in negotiating their racial and ethnic identities in their professional roles, participants described theory in ways that can be described as
supporting, informing, and failing them in their women’s center practice. In all, theory was of widely varying importance. “I know that it is there”—Grace’s words to describe theory—perhaps best capture the core experience among participants related to this phenomenon. Whether it is supporting, informing, or failing the study participants, they all acknowledge that theory plays a role in their daily negotiations of race and ethnicity in the women’s center.

**An Elusive Composite Picture: The Phenomena of Race, Ethnicity, and Theory in Women’s Centers**

While a singular composite portrait of the phenomena of race, ethnicity, and theory in campus-based women’s centers remains elusive given the unique experiences of professionals based on race, the study’s two research questions and findings construct a larger picture of the phenomena. In particular, the study demonstrates that negotiating race and ethnicity is a salient experience for women’s center professionals, whether it is through managing others’ responses to their race and ethnicity or through internally/individually working to advance an antiracism agenda in and through their women’s center professional practice. Theory was similarly present for all participants, serving as a tool to aid in understanding or to chart paths for some participants and constraining others depending on the scope of its framing and implementation. However, in the end, theory was not the major critical force in participants’ daily women’s center practice. Instead, it was their institutions and individual centers—primarily defined through unit leadership, colleagues, programs, resources, and institutional location—that were the primary lenses through which participants understood their experiences with
negotiating race, ethnicity, and theory. The institutional structure that surrounded them was the strongest force in these negotiations, serving to prohibit, regulate/monitor, punish, and try to condition them to not want more/not speak out: the institution created the critical boundaries around participants’ experiences of negotiating race, ethnicity, and theory in their women’s center practice.

**Chapter Summary**

After introducing the study’s participants, this chapter explored the study’s findings in relation to the two major research questions. Participants described shared core experiences of negotiating race and ethnicity in their women’s center practice and how theory supported, informed, and failed them in these negotiations of race and ethnicity in their work. Specifically, the study’s Black participants described a state of simultaneous hyper-visibility and invisibility in their women’s center practice, while White participants described how they could avoid much of the difficulties and dissonance of thinking about their own racial identities in their women’s center practice if they wished due to White privilege. Participants noted shared core experiences of the phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in their women’s center work, most notably the primacy of the institution in informing their experiences, commitments, and actions, as well as clashes with institutional authority, including supervisors, about issues of race and racism. Theory was of widely varying importance and immediacy to participants as a tool for negotiating their race and ethnicity in their work. The chapter closes by describing the elusive composite picture of the study’s phenomenological
research questions. In the next chapter, these findings are discussed in relation to the research questions, literature, theory, and practice.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This final chapter first discusses the study’s findings in relation to the research questions, illustrating the core experiences of the phenomena as detailed in Chapter 4. Next, findings are discussed in relation to the literature, specifically Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984), intersectionality (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dill, 2002), and White antiracist scholarship (Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006; Sholock, 2012). The chapter then turns to implications for higher education practice and institutional change; in keeping with intersectionality’s tenet that analysis must occur on the individual as well as institution levels (Collins, 1991), recommendations in both areas—as well as those that bridge the individual and institution—are woven together in this section.

Next, implications related to the study’s unique methodology are explored, specifically: the tension between “provok[ing]…knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769) and co-research, the researcher and also the participants as “known strangers,” and the implementation of critical phenomenology in the field of higher education. The chapter additionally lays out the study’s limitations and strengths and then points to areas of future research. It closes with the voices of the participants, who directly share what they hope that others will take from the study and its topics.
Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

The goal of this research was to explore how women’s center professionals negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work in the academy and how theory informs these negotiations. Restated, these questions are:

1. How do women’s center professionals understand their race and ethnicity related to their roles and work in women’s centers?

2. How do feminist theories inform, support, and/or fail women’s center professionals as they negotiate their race and ethnicity in their work?

For the first question, participants described core experiences of the phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in their women’s center work, most notably the immediacy of the institution in shaping their experiences, commitments, and actions, as well as clashes with authority about issues of race and racism, including with their supervisors. Findings also varied by race, with Black participants noting a state of simultaneous hyper-visibility and invisibility; these concurrent statuses are best expressed as surprise to encounter Black women in women’s centers and the potential erasure of their contributions to their campuses and the field of women’s center work. These core experiences occur in a heightened situation of monitoring, scrutiny, and expectations from supervisors, colleagues, students, and the institution. Black participants described these circumstances as underlying to their women’s center work and rarely avoidable, and they had developed means to negotiate race in their work.

The study’s White participants described shared core experiences of understanding that it was a function of White privilege to not be forced to identify as
White in most situations. They understood that they could avoid much of the difficulties and dissonance of thinking about their own racial identities in their women’s center practice if they wished. As a result, the participants understood being a White woman working in a women’s center as “easy” if they chose it to be—they could “blend in” with the White majority on their predominantly White campuses—and as missing opportunities for more intersectional practice or broad impact due to the blind spots caused by White privilege or by how they were perceived by their constituents, colleagues, and campuses. Because they chose to think about being White in their women’s center roles, the participants described responsibilities, failures, and commitments to antiracism that they knew they must undertake even while not always knowing how to proceed.

The findings in relation to the first research question demonstrate the tensions of negotiating race and ethnicity in women’s center work. These tensions often constrained the participants from fully performing their job duties or fully enacting an intersectional and/or antiracism mission in their women’s center. Additionally, these tensions limited the professional growth and opportunities of participants, as they often were pinned between personal/professional commitments and pressure from institutional leaders and the institution to, in the words of participant Nneka, “not want more.”

Findings in relation to the second research question related to how women’s center participants utilize theory in negotiating their racial and ethnic identities in their professional roles. Participants named combinations of feminist theory and feminism, intersectionality, critical race theory, Black feminist thought, womanism, student
development theory, and social change theory as guiding their women’s center practice. These theories were of widely varying importance to women’s center professionals in this study, and participants described theory in ways that can be described as *supporting*, *informing*, and *failing* them in their work. Theory was *supporting* in that participants were clear how it grounded them in their practice and grounded their women’s center—in particular, their center’s programming—providing a strong foundation from which they could engage in their work. They described women’s centers as locations of theory to practice—or, in the words of participant Allison, “[women’s studies] in action”—and also acknowledged that theory was an area where they wished to grow.

Theory was *informing* in that it gave participants “tools” to understand and negotiate their racial identity in their women’s center practice as well as their work for broader social and structural change. Theory was *failing* to participants in that it was often filled with jargon, inaccessible, and immaterial. Additionally, participants noted limited time for theory in the “busy-ness” of their women’s center practice as well as sometimes limited framing and implementing of theory within the women’s center in ways that failed them as racialized individuals within the space, as well as limited or even prohibited the women’s center from advancing an antiracist agenda.

The findings in relation to the second research question demonstrate the complexities of enacting theory in women’s center practice. Participants varied widely in their utilization of theory in understanding and negotiating their race and ethnicity, with some vocalizing how theory simultaneously supported, informed, and *failed* them personally and professionally.
In considering the two research questions in conversation with each other, the institution and individual centers—primarily defined through unit leadership, colleagues, programs, resources, and institutional location—were the primary lenses through which participants understood their experience. Theory may serve as a strategy to aid in understanding or a tool to chart paths for some, but overall it was not the major critical force in their daily women’s center work. Instead, it was the institutional structure that surrounded them, which could serve to prohibit, regulate/monitor, punish, and try to condition them to not want more/not speak out, that created the critical boundaries around participants’ experiences of negotiating race and ethnicity in their women’s center practice.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature**

In this section, I explore the findings in relation to the literature presented in Chapter 2; this literature also informed the study’s theoretical framework. These three areas of literature are (a) Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984), (b) intersectionality (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dill, 2002), and (c) White antiracist scholarship (Frankenberg, 1993; Kendall, 2006; Sholock, 2012).

**Black Feminist Thought**

In Chapter 2, I thoroughly reviewed the core tenets and traditions of Black feminist thought, its critique of White liberal feminism (Lorde, 1984), and its desire to put the experiences of Black women at the center of discussion (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984). First and foremost, study findings related to Black participants’ descriptions of
being simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible as women’s center professionals is affirmed in Black feminist thought. Lorde (1984) wrote of this tension:

In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. (p. 42)

Participants Grace, Janelle, and Nneka described this very tension when discussing their concurrent statuses as surprising to encounter as Black women in women’s centers and the potential erasure of their contributions to their campuses and the field of women’s center work through patterns of comments that either ignored their Blackness or rendered them invisible within their centers. These core experiences were unavoidable for participants, and they demonstrate the ongoing struggle within feminism and women’s centers—“women’s movement[s]” (Lorde, 1984, p. 42)—for Black women to be seen and acknowledged.

Black feminist thought also critiques the conflicting attitudes of White women who may remain committed to patriarchy and White privilege despite their attempts to be allies (Smith, 1980). These conflicting attitudes are present in the responses of several
White participants, such as Annie, who spoke of her fear of replicating systems of oppression in the academy, as well as others who shared sometimes conflicting sentiments about taking a stand against racism, noting that they were not afraid to speak up and then later stating that they were not sure that it was safe, worrying about retaining their jobs, and thus remaining silent. Again, Black feminist thought is helpful here in its discussion of the silences of White women (Lorde, 1984; Smith, 1980), which were also present in the findings.

The study’s findings also provide important counterexamples to ideas advanced by Black feminist thought. As stated in Chapter 2, women’s and other identity-based centers are often viewed by their institutions as single-issue centers, regardless of how they actually engage with their work. The majority of women’s centers have printed or historical missions for gender equity that align them with White liberal feminism, an older form of academic feminism that has been institutionalized in women’s centers. Black feminist theory critiques this and while some centers—such as the center in which Nneka works—might align with this critique, many participants described centers that were actively working against their historical framing of feminism and women’s issues. Most notably, Annie’s story of “holding space” after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, is an important counterexample and a possible pathway for other women’s centers committed to antiracism.

**Intersectionality**

Several of the study’s findings exemplify the intersectionality literature. Above all, it is important to note that participants routinely discussed their race, gender, and
other identity markers—as well as racism and sexism—as intertwined and inseparable, one of the core tenets of intersectionality, and being simultaneously privileged and oppressed (Collins, 1991) because of various aspects of their identities. As a researcher, I could not make clean categories of my participants’ stories and was forced into a more complex analysis of individual and institutionalized instances of racism and sexism, often noted by cross-referencing participant stories across aspects of the phenomenological findings.

Intersectionality provided a framework for understanding the experiences of Black study participants, who were caught in multiple systems of oppression, while also offering the possibility for seeing the path toward coalition. As I noted in Chapter 3 when discussing the study’s theoretical framework, Crenshaw (1991) acknowledged that “through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which [they]…find expression in constructing group politics” (p. 1299). While there are certain elements of the phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in women’s center practice that defy group experience, the study findings demonstrate the possibilities of coalition across differences and core experiences within women’s centers that bear further discussion and research.

Perhaps most importantly, the study findings support the literature that explores intersectionality as a research paradigm. In Chapter 3, I noted that intersectional analysis must include the “individual integrated with institutional” (Hancock, 2007, p. 64), rather than a mere additive analysis of the individual and the institutional. The study findings related to the primacy of the institution in shaping individual experiences offer a
powerful example of how women’s center professionals are caught between personal and work commitments to antiracism and institutional leadership roles with rigid expectations and limitations for making change. This analysis could not be done without understanding Hancock’s (2007) framing of intersectional research: without the institution, critical aspects of the seeming individual phenomenon of negotiating race and ethnicity in the women’s center would literally not exist.

**White Antiracist Scholarship**

The final area of literature that will be explored in relation to the findings is White antiracist scholarship. When discussing the study’s theoretical framework in Chapter 3, I quoted Frankenberg (1993):

> Whiteness…has a set of linked dimensions. First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (p. 1)

Study findings strongly support these three linked dimensions. White study participants clearly discussed their White privilege as an “unearned asset” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 1) and a location of advantage in their women’s center practice; they also routinely used whiteness as a standpoint to look at themselves as well as their colleagues, constituents, centers, and institutions and to offer critique. The core shared experience of fearing that they were “missing opportunities” related to their White privilege, an acknowledgment that whiteness was “usually unmarked and unnamed” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1) despite participant attempts to uncover it in their professional practice.
In particular, study findings strongly support Sholock’s (2012) methodology of the privileged. Findings related to White study participants’ experiences of negotiating race in their women’s center practice demonstrated Sholock’s three methods, as I outlined them in Chapter 2. First, White participants’ paths to continuing to engage in discussions about being White and what it meant in their work links with Sholock’s concept of *protracted self-reflection*, while their strategizing around using “blending in” to reject the status quo and raise issues of race and racism demonstrates *racial sedition*. Last, participants’ discussion of “missing opportunities” because their White privilege speaks to *epistemic uncertainty* and the “epistemic blank spots” (Bailey, 2007, in Sholock, 2012, p. 703) that can plague White antiracist feminists. This study’s findings support Sholock’s methodology of the privileged, offering salient examples of her theoretical model among women’s center professionals.

**Implications for Higher Education Practice and Institutional Change**

While the study’s findings are both supported by and support the literature and advance several components of theory, as discussed in the previous section, they also point to multiple implications for women’s center professionals and other identity-center practitioners, as well as for enacting institutional change. In keeping with intersectionality’s tenet that analysis must occur on the individual as well as institution levels (Collins, 1991), recommendations in both areas are discussed; they are woven together in this chapter, as several recommendations bridge the individual and institutional levels, further demonstrating Hancock’s (2007) assertion that intersectional analysis must include the “individual integrated with institutional” (p. 64).
It is important to note that while women’s center employees are the focus of this study, the research is also significant for higher education professionals engaged in other institutional diversity roles and activities. Cultural; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT); disability; and other units dedicated to serving specific populations on campuses as well as chief diversity officers (CDOs) also benefit from the study’s findings and recommendations.

The findings generate multiple recommendations for higher education practice. First, participants emphasized the importance of examining their racial and ethnic identities in their work, and also how hard this was to do given the “busy-ness” of their professional lives and the fast pace of work in their women’s centers. It is important for those who work in women’s centers to set aside time and create intentional safe spaces to explore how identity—particularly race—informs their individual professional practice and the missions, programs, and activities of the center. Particularly those who lead women’s centers and those to whom women’s centers report should create spaces and incentivize these means of protracted self-reflection (Sholock, 2012).

Participants also discussed that they lacked particular training around race, privilege, and antiracism, speaking to the importance of directly relatable training and the ability to then implement what is learned in professional practice. Women’s centers, as well as individual practitioners, would benefit from these kinds of training, as practitioners would have the most direct impact in shaping their center’s programming to include these topics.
Study participants who were not directors, in particular, spoke about how they lacked opportunities to implement an antiracism vision beyond their women’s center and did not have access to key university conversations where they felt they could work for change. As higher education professionals committed to issues of diversity beyond women’s issues and gender, their participation in university diversity committees, policy formation, and higher-level institutional decision making means that there will be more voices advocating for an institution that, in the words of participant Bridget, is not “so White all the time.”

Midway through data collection, I wrote in my research journal about the finding that women’s center professionals were using theoretical approaches but were not always clear about which exact theory informed their practices. While exact theories are not always required in women’s center work, I remarked that so many of [the participants were] doing the hardest part: using different theories in their daily work. Explicitly naming these theories would only boost their confidence that they were doing important work, formally ground their practice, and also give them new currency with which to push for change within their institutions.

Taking the time, with guidance if needed, to expressly link their daily work with theory is therefore a recommendation of this study, with the potential benefits as noted.

While engaging in reflexive journaling, I noted that I was the only person in the study who had worked at more than one institution as a full-time women’s center staff
Engaging in women’s center work in three different institution climates means that I have acquired a broad complement of tools and practices learned from various experiences, supervisors, allies, students, etc. While this doesn’t mean that I “know better” or that I am a better practitioner, it does seem to mean that I view institutions and their leadership as more fluid and changing. Because I have experienced different environments, different environments seem more possible.

I have also always been fortunate to be at centers where my professional development and involvement with regional and national women’s center activities were encouraged and supported; this involvement fundamentally shaped my perspectives about the field of women’s and identity-based centers and showed me new possibilities and directions for professional practice. While it may seem fundamental that higher education professionals have access to these forms of professional development, the often bare-bones budgets of women’s centers can, at times, preclude the involvement of staff members who are not the unit leader; in difficult budget years, even the unit leader may not be able to secure the funds to participate. It is therefore a recommendation for institutions to provide broader support for staff of all levels to be involved in regional/state/national women’s center professional gatherings, whether they are formally or informally organized. At minimum, institutional leaders should encourage all staff to visit other centers to learn about their missions, operations, and activities as a form of professional development.
Another recommendation for higher education practice is directed toward those who supervise women’s center professionals. As Nneka shared, “leadership is everything,” and supervisors shape the daily experiences of women’s center professionals regardless of rank. It is therefore critically important for supervisors to do many of the opposite actions that the supervisors in this study did. For example, supervisors must create safe spaces for dialogue and learning about race and identity, listen to their employees when they raise issues of race and racism, take a stand as needed from their position of institutional leadership to advance antiracism, and model inclusion and antiracism in their own practice. Nneka, in particular, would have benefited from a supervisor who was willing to acknowledge how race, gender, and other identities intersected and shaped her daily experiences in the women’s center; however, most participants described instances with supervisors in which they felt race mattered and yet it was difficult to discuss. Supervisors who are able to create spaces where difficult discussions can happen among the staff—through retreats, staff meetings, training opportunities, program debriefs, or any other means—will also be more likely to retain outstanding women’s center professionals committed to antiracism such as those who participated in this study.

Almost uniformly, participants described their institutions as silent on issues of race-based oppression, racism, and institutionalized White privilege. For racist structures to change in higher education, institutional leaders must be willing to engage in difficult dialogues about these issues. Participants pointed to their institutions’ responses to the Black Lives Matter protests as a critical place where institutional leadership could begin
this shift. As participant Abigail stated about her disappointment with her institution’s lack of engagement with Black Lives Matter, “The university could do so much and have so much power if we were engaging with those things that are important to our students.”

Additionally, the study’s findings hold multiple implications for utilizing and building theory. If theory is to be useful to women’s centers, practitioners and scholars also must continue to strive for it to accessible, inclusive, and relevant to making change in the material lives of individuals and communities. Additionally, theories must be enacted in whole—not in part—within women’s centers and within individual practice; participants pointed to difficulties with allies, supervisors, or the feminist framework of their women’s centers when theories were evoked but not fully implemented. Nneka’s ongoing frustration with her past supervisor and with the explicitly feminist framework of her women’s center, which did not include issues affecting women of color, illustrated the impact of this concern. If explicitly used to guide practice, theory must be carefully, mindfully, and wholly implemented, or else it can do harm to those whom it wishes to serve.

Lastly, and perhaps most critical, the findings in this study point to the ways in which Black professional contributions in women’s centers are erased when individuals—including some of the study’s White participants—discuss women’s center work as work that is done by White women. It was additionally concerning to learn the stories of Black study participants who felt themselves, their identities, and their contributions erased in their own centers by colleagues and institutional leadership. As explored in Chapter 2, the women’s center literature has not been updated in almost 30
years related to the racial and ethnic makeup of staff, meaning that there is no grounding in the literature to support the claim that most women’s centers are predominantly staffed by White women. This “story” about women’s center work is potentially fiction and—until updated research reveals otherwise—should be immediately discontinued as an antiracist commitment on behalf of all women’s center practitioners and those who support diversity work in higher education. The contributions of women of color professionals to their women’s centers must be seen, discussed, and understood as important, even if it is not in every center or on every campus; these contributions to the overall profession should be honored, recognized, and valued by their individual centers, institutions, and the profession.

**Methodological Implications**

Given the study’s unique design, implications related to the methodology were also explored. This section reviews the three major methodological implications: the tension between “provok[ing]…knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769) and co-research, the researcher and also the participants as “known strangers,” and the implementation of critical phenomenology in the field of higher education.

**“Provoking Knowledge”/Knowledge Provoked**

In Chapter 3, I wrote extensively about how I believed that this study would “provoke, not represent, knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769). The study was structured so that writing, thinking, talking, and making sense of current and past experiences would provoke new understandings for the participants, for myself as a co-researcher, and for us together. This proved to be true in the study’s implementation, as
participants vocalized many “aha” moments and instances of “I haven’t thought of it that way before,” demonstrating a shift in perspective as a result of telling or retelling their stories. Three study participants experienced major shifts in their understanding of self linked with their involvement: Allison realized she could not stay at her institution if she had to keep hiding parts of herself, Bridget realized that she did indeed use theory in her women’s center practice, and Janelle came to understand herself as someone who is willing to “agitate the system” to make positive change and fight for women to have a voice at her institution. While all three participants had circumstances at their institutions that led them to these shifts in understanding, they vocalized that the research process was a catalyst for understanding themselves and their practice differently, a form of provoking knowledge.

My own knowledge was also provoked, as I was forced to reexamine my understandings of women’s center practice. I modeled this in a very public way through sharing my own learning from the research in the second interview protocol, and then processing this list with each participant, inviting them to provide feedback that then pushed me to again rethink what I thought I knew about myself and women’s center practice, recasting my own experiences in a new light. With each participant, my own learning and understanding deepened as they provoked me to reconsider what I thought I knew.

While provoking knowledge among participants and myself was anticipated—though not wholly imaginable—at the start of the study, this process became at odds with the heuristic design of the study, which called for us to co-create knowledge. There were
instances in interviews when a participant and I were exchanging thoughts on a particular experience they had and the cocreation of knowledge was not possible because our experiences of race and ethnicity in our women’s center professional practice were so fundamentally different. This was most evident in discussions with the study’s Black participants, as their experiences with race were, unsurprisingly, essentially different from my own. In these moments, while each of was provoked in terms of uncovering knowledge about our own experiences, this knowledge could not be co-created between us. As a result, the study’s first phenomenological research question cannot be answered in a uniform way. While there were shared essential aspects of negotiating race and ethnicity in the women’s center that were uncovered through cocreation, there were also race-specific essential aspects of women’s center practice that were uncovered through individual processes of provoking knowledge: cocreation was, in some instances, a necessary impossibility.

The “Known Stranger”

As noted in Chapter 3, prior to the start of data collection, an undeniable element of friendliness existed with many study participants that surpassed shared professional affiliation and bordered on friendship. When I saw individuals through my research sites, we shared hugs, gave updates about our professional and personal lives, followed up on past conversations, and genuinely cared about each other. Overall, I felt the “sense of collaboration” described by Glesne (2011, p. 171). I wrote the following in the research proposal for this study:
I have not been able to locate qualitative research literature that would help me to understand relationships that, prior to the start of research, fit Kirsch’s (2005) characterization of friendship in that they “develop over time and are built on reciprocal trust and shared information and activities” (p. 2165). I am unsure if our relationships constitute personal friendships or friendliness that is deepened by shared professional experiences and alignment in political commitments.

Interestingly, in the time between proposal development and the start of data collection, I resigned from my directorship of a women’s center and transitioned to become a full-time doctoral candidate, a process that clarified the uncertainty I expressed in my research proposal. For the participants with whom our collegial relationships had moved beyond friendliness to friendship, I have maintained these relationships for multiple reasons: because they chose to opt into the study, because of sharing resources and supporting each other in our work (with my work shifting from leading a center to conducting a study and completing a dissertation), and because of sharing life events, both theirs and mine, such as new jobs, awards, pregnancies, new dating partners, and more. With the participants I knew and with whom I was friendly, we have continued a light relationship on LinkedIn or an occasional e-mail to share information. Throughout the process, I strived to remain open to my participants and found it surprising that with the two participants I knew the least, I have had the most sustained conversations about the study—they continue to e-mail me thoughts, insights, articles, and questions. In one case, we have developed an ongoing friendly relationship in which my reciprocity with
her took the form of being a sounding board for a difficult professional situation she was experiencing as I concluded data collection.

Overall, the concept of being a “known stranger,” as outlined in Chapter 3, accomplished what I hoped it might do: it kept me unsettled about my relationships with participants throughout the research process. Through this concept, I continually journaled to understand the uncomfortable edges of my researcher role with participants who knew me in multiple settings and in multiple capacities. When I shared this concept with participant Nikki, she found it intriguing and commented that the researcher-participant relationships in this study “were not likely to happen in lots of research. This is fairly unique.” I concluded that I indeed became more “known” and more “strange” through the research process but was surprised how participants also became more “known” and more “strange” to me. In my original conception, I imagined the concept as only applying to me, the researcher. But in practice, participants also shifted and changed, surprising me with their admissions, stories, unexpected outbursts, and outlooks during the interviews themselves but also through data analysis, as I read, reread, and sought to deeply understand their perspectives. In the end, the researcher and the participants have all become more “known” and more “strange,” to ourselves and to each other.

**Critical Phenomenology in Higher Education Research**

As advanced in Chapter 3, this study sought to expand critical phenomenology to the discipline of higher education; specifically, I hoped to explore theory as a force that could circumscribe, limit, expand, impose, and enrich meaning-making. As found in
Chapter 4, institutional context proved to be the strongest critical force in determining how women’s center professionals negotiated race and ethnicity in their work; rather than the negotiations of race and ethnicity being bound within an individual’s theoretical framework, they were largely bound within their institutional contexts. It was participants’ understandings of their institution that shaped their initial experiences as well as each subsequent rethinking, reinterpretation, and meaning-making in a person’s life-world. While theory was a tool for some participants to rethink these more immediate meaning-makings, theory was not uniformly a means through which participant experience was bound.

Critical phenomenology is exciting for its potential to understand the interplay between structures and lived experience, particularly in higher education. This study is, to my knowledge, the first application of critical phenomenology within the field of higher education. While the methodology was at times difficult to maneuver, it also provided a rich lens to understand the study’s research questions; indeed, they could not have been answered phenomenologically without the critical aspect. As a prominent social structure in the lives of millions across the world, higher education merits further study through critical phenomenological means.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

This study was conducted with participants who all worked in women’s centers at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Conducting this study with women’s center professionals who work at historically black colleges or universities (HBCUs) or tribal colleges, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) or Asian American and Native American
Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), could further enrich the literature. Additionally, participants in this study identified as Black or White only; additional study of women’s center professionals who identify as Latinx, Asian, American Indian, or multiracial could enhance this discussion. Future studies exploring these expanded institutional types and individual identity markers would add to the field and allow for a fuller picture of how race and ethnicity matter among/in/through women’s centers professionals.

Another limitation of this study is that while I proposed to study ethnicity as well as race, ethnicity did not emerge as a salient identity for my particular participants. Regardless, ethnicity among women’s center professionals merits study.

My identity as a White woman formed a limitation for the study, as I had my own blind spots, both discovered and undiscovered, in this research process. Pitt and Britzman (2003) similarly struggled with themselves as researchers. As I quoted in Chapter 3:

Indeed…we learn something of our own knowledge when we stumble in the face of our own persistent blind spots, and we collude with interviewees in their production of satisfying narratives that dance around the surprise of self-implication. (p. 769)

Just as my interview protocol was designed to learn about failures of knowing, I too was implicated for my “persistent blind spots.” While I made great effort to systematically examine and uncover them, the very nature of White privilege continues to obscure this process. Throughout data collection and analysis, I was reminded of Sholock’s (2012) discussion of epistemic uncertainty in the face of understanding how to be a White
antiracist feminist committed to coalition. The heuristic design of this study required my own discovery alongside those of participants. And yet, my own “persistent blind spots” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769) and “epistemic uncertainty” (Sholock, 2012, p. 703) must also be considered.

Additionally, I may have colluded with participants at various points in the research process, as there were times during interviews when White participants told a troubling story or seemed unaware of how their White privilege was “showing up” in their stories. In some of these cases, I asked follow-up questions, but often I let these comments or sightings go unquestioned in order to maintain rapport. With Black participants, I sometimes did not address inaccuracies as participants misspoke about or mischaracterized theories to similarly maintain rapport and to avoid assuming the role of the stereotypical White woman who “knows better” than everyone, particularly women of color, and would correct them. Future research by researchers of all identities would greatly strengthen the literature related to the study topics.

Lastly, the literature continues to lack explorations of how theory grounds and is enacted through women’s centers. While this study provides important insight from the perspective of individual professionals, it does not fully explore these questions from an institutional/unit-based perspective. Additional study is needed to more fully explore how theory guides individuals and grounds women’s center missions, programs, and activities.

**Strengths of the Study**

There are also significant strengths of this study. In Chapter 1, I outlined how little was known about the staff members whose visions, values, and commitments shape
the work of their centers (Marine, 2011), particularly related to antiracist work (DiLapi & Gay, 2002). In particular, women of color who work in centers can be overlooked or rendered invisible in women’s center professional groups (e.g., Adams et al., 2014; Holgerson & Bartlow, 2013) and in the literature by discussions that focus on whiteness and antiracism without putting the lives of Black women or women of color at the center of analysis. By directly exploring these questions from the literature and inviting women’s center staff members of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to be reflexive about how their personal identities intersected with their professional identities, negotiations, and strategies for making change in the academy, this study serves as an important first step toward addressing this literature gap. The study contributes to the field by offering affirmation for women’s center professionals as well as pathways to assist them in negotiating their work identities.

The study’s methodology, while it created particular difficulties, was also one of its strengths. By using thought prompts in the first interviews to uncover “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755), and protracted self-reflection (Sholock, 2012) and heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) throughout the research process, the study resisted easy pathways and conclusions. The critical phenomenological lens, while imperfect, uncovered new questions and means through which meaning is made in women’s centers and resisted phenomenological bracketing (Patton, 2015), which would have removed the phenomena under consideration from the very context that proved so important to understanding them.
The reciprocity that emerged as part of this study was also a strength. While I built in formal means of reciprocity such as sharing emerging themes and offering incentives, informal means of reciprocity also emerged that added richness to my relationships with participants and created possibilities for ongoing growth and understanding. By engaging in deep listening, sharing information and resources, making connections on their behalf, and engaging in other forms of reciprocity based on the needs of participants, as described in Chapter 3, I was able to better support those who so generously shared their time, experiences, and thinking with me.

Lastly, this study begins to uncover the multiple, varied, and complicated roles of feminist theory in helping women’s center professionals to understand and deepen their practice. As feminist/womanist practitioners who in many cases have studied theory as well as planned programs that explore it, the literature lacked an examination of how women’s center professionals enact theory in/through their centers. This study’s exploration of how theory informed women’s center professionals’ negotiations of their race and ethnicity in their work—a topic currently completely absent from the women’s center literature—is also of use to other areas of higher education administration and student affairs. The findings also contribute to the discipline of women’s and gender studies, as they deepen the literature on how theory is practiced and utilized to enact individual, group, and institutional social change.

Conclusion

As I worked to “provoke, not represent, knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769) in myself and my participants, I have—like my participants—been changed through
my participation as a co-researcher in this study. I chose to close this document with the voices of my participants. They described three aspects of participating in the study that continue to encourage and trouble me. First, Abigail noted the study’s importance and what she learned from participating:

   It’s such an important topic and it’s so hard to talk about….Since I’ve had the opportunity [to participate in this study], it’s been great to force me to think about these things and to think about ways that I can be more mindful and intentional in the choices I make around owning my whiteness and then encouraging other folks in the university to talk about whiteness or race and racism.

   Her words mark the hope that I feel for this work, for my colleagues—particularly those who are White—who work in women’s centers, and for the ability of engaged, committed women’s center professionals to make change.

   Grace offered another perspective about what the study might accomplish:

   I think this is so important. I feel like there is this moment of backtracking around so many identities and rights and just progressive ideals, not just in women’s centers and higher education but the country and community at large. I see projects like this as something that can serve as a place of uniting and holding accountable feminism.

   I am excited that you are working on this because this is one of those things where people will be like, “Well, feminism is just for White women. Women’s centers don’t understand!” and I will be like, “No! People are studying this and this is a real thing that they are incorporating their race and gender,
they’re interrogating how all of that works together.”…That is incredibly exciting to me to know that that is happening.

Grace’s words about what the study might accomplish in the broader field encapsulated my hopes and highlighted the responsibility of the researcher, a weight that I continued to feel even as this study came to a close. This responsibility will continue to shape my perspectives and commitments to research that seeks to make change.

Finally, Nneka offered the following about her involvement:

I feel very privileged to be a part of the conversation. Whatever it is that comes from this research is going to be a lot better received than maybe what I would share. And so if there’s a way to get it across to some degree to our peers in order to make women’s centers more inclusive, I’m all for it.

Nneka’s words reminded me of the White privilege I continue to embody and from which I benefit as a researcher and higher education practitioner, as well as what I am seeking to change in the academy. I carry her words—and those of all my participants— with me as I continue forward in my research and my practice, and I invite all higher education practitioners and scholars to do so as well.
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Appendix A: Informed Consent

Study Title: *Women’s Center Employees Negotiating Race and Ethnicity in their Professional Roles*

Researcher: Amber Vlasnik, The Ohio State University
Tatiana Suspitsyna, The Ohio State University

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “Women’s Center Employees Negotiating Race and Ethnicity in their Professional Roles.” This project will serve as Amber Vlasnik’s dissertation research for the requirements of the Doctorate of Philosophy in Educational Studies/Higher Education & Student Affairs at The Ohio State University.

**This is a consent form for research participation.** It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. **Your participation is voluntary.** Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

**Purpose**
This qualitative study will examine how women’s center practitioners make meaning of their race and ethnicity in their work, looking specifically at how theory influences the practices of women’s center practitioners in higher education.

**Eligibility**
In order to participate, you must be someone who: (1) has worked full- or part-time in a women’s center for at least one year; and (2) has a primary status with your institution as an employee, not as a student.

If you agree to participate in this study, and return this informed consent form, you will receive a data collection sheet that will ask about your past and current women’s center staff positions and roles, information about your current institution, and how often you think about your racial and ethnic identities in your daily women’s center work. This data sheet information will then be used to create the most diverse pool possible. If you fill out
the data sheet, but are not selected, I am still happy to share the results of the study with you.

**Procedures/Tasks and Duration**
If selected, you will be asked to participate in two interviews (either in-person or via Skype) and to complete a journal writing activity.

Once selected, I will contact you to schedule an interview that will last approximately 90–120 minutes. You can participate in this interview at a location of your choosing, as long as you have internet access and a form of internet based video conferencing, such as Skype. In preparation for the first interview, you will be given a thought prompt for you to reflect upon prior to our discussion. At the close of the interview, I will give you a journal with writing prompts; you can determine how much time to take with this exercise. After approximately three weeks, I will schedule a second interview, which will last approximately 60–90 minutes. Both interviews will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected information and will be transcribed into a written record. The journal will be collected at the time of the second interview and will be transcribed into a written record; your journal will be returned to you at the end of the study.

You are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits**
The primary risk of participation is a potential breach of confidentiality. Although every effort to protect confidentiality will be made, no guarantee of internet security can be given as, although unlikely, transmissions can be intercepted and IP addresses can be identified.

You may benefit from this activity by having the opportunity to talk about your women’s center experience and how you create change, your racial and ethnic identities, and the influence of theory on your professional practice. Other women’s center and higher education practitioners may benefit from this research, as well as institutions of higher education across the country.

There are no monetary costs associated with participation in this study. There is, however, a time cost associated with participating.

**Confidentiality**
Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for participants, and identifying information will not be removed from the write-up. Participants will also have an opportunity to limit the use of potentially identifying quotes from their journal. All audio and text files will be stored on a
password-protected external hard drive. The researcher will use the most updated Skype and internet security, and will advise participants to do likewise.

At the conclusion of the study, a digital copy of the dissertation will be shared with each participant and with those who were interested but not selected to participate. Also at the conclusion of the study, journals will be returned to participants.

**Incentives**
There are three sequential stages in this study (initial interview, journaling activity, second interview). Participants who complete all three stages will receive a $50 Amazon gift card as compensation. Participants who complete stage one only will receive a $15 Amazon gift card and participants who complete stages one and two only will receive a $30 Amazon gift card.

All incentives will be distributed at the conclusion of the study. By law, payments to research subjects are considered taxable income.

**Participant Rights**
You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study. The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and determined it exempt from IRB review.

**Contacts and Questions**
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or if you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna, suspitsyna.1@osu.edu or 614-247-8232.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
Signing the Consent Form
I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

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<th>Printed Name</th>
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Investigator/Research Staff
I have explained the research to the participant before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant.

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Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project entitled “Women’s Center Employees Negotiating Race and Ethnicity in their Professional Roles.” This confidential data sheet is being used to create the most diverse pool of participants possible. If you fill out the data sheet indicating a desire to participate but are not selected, I will still share the results of the study with you. Thank you for your interest and assistance.

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<th>Current Position Title</th>
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**My current position is**… *(Please check one)*
- Full-time
- Part-time (Please indicate FTE: __________)

**Have you held other positions within your current center?** *(Please check one)*
- No
- Yes
  - If yes, please list titles of previous positions: ________________________________

**Have you held center positions at other institutions?** *(Please check one)*
- No
- Yes
  - If yes, please list position(s), length of service, and institution(s): ____________
For the purpose of this study, I am seeking professionals from diverse institutions. Please check the following that apply to your current institution:

- Public
- Private
- Liberal arts college
- Religious (Affiliation: ________________________________)
- Other: __________________________________________

For the purpose of this study, I am seeking professionals who inhabit diverse roles within centers regardless of title. Please check all that apply to your current position:

- Advocate
- Assessment officer
- Program developer
- Referral agent
- Mentor
- Policymaker
- Diversity consultant
- Supervisor
- Event planner
- Internships coordinator
- Office manager
- Publicist
- Diversity trainer/facilitator
- Grant writer
- Fundraiser
- Student organization advisor
- Other: __________________________________________

On the scale below, please indicate how often you think about your racial identity in your current day-to-day center work.

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<th>Seldom Think</th>
<th>Sometimes Think</th>
<th>Often Think</th>
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On the scale below, please indicate how often you think about your *ethnic identity* in your current day-to-day center work.

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How do you describe your racial identity? ________________________________

How do you describe your ethnic identity? ________________________________

Total number of years in a staff and/or faculty position in higher education

- Less than 5
- 5–9
- 10–14
- 15–19
- 20–24

Contact Information:

Phone: __________________________ E-mail: __________________________

Please return this sheet as an e-mail attachment to Amber Vlasnik at [redacted]@osu.edu.

I can be reached for questions at [redacted].
Appendix C: Research Design Flowchart

1. Advertisement
2. Participants Opt In
3. Informed Consent
4. After Signed
5. Data Collection Sheet
6. Selected
7. Not Selected
8. Send Results When Done
9. Member Checks
10. Interview #1 (Thought prompt sent two days prior)
11. Share journal prompts at end of interview
12. Participants engage in Journal Activity
13. Approx. 3 weeks; participants submit journal prior to interview
14. Interview #2 (Includes discussion of initial findings)
Appendix D: First Interview Protocol

Name: ___________________  Institution: ___________________

Date: ___________________

Start Time: _______________  End Time: ___________________

Hello, I’m Amber Vlasnik and I am a doctoral candidate in Higher Education & Student Affairs at Ohio State. I am working on a research project that looks at how women’s center practitioners make meaning of their race and ethnicity in their work, looking specifically at how theory influences the practices of women’s center practitioners in higher education. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. The information you share with me will be of great value in helping me to complete this research project, the results of which will help build the field of women’s center work.

The interview will take approximately 60–90 minutes of your time. As I mentioned in my e-mail, I will be recording our conversation. Because we are using an internet-based video conferencing system, there is a small risk of a breach of confidentiality, but all efforts will be made to keep everything you tell me in the strictest confidence. Your name and institution will not be used in any reports or publications that result from this research study. If I quote you, I will be sure to protect your identity, and that of your university, and I will not use your name or any identifying characteristics. There are no other expected risks of participation.

Participation is voluntary. You can decide not to participate, decline to answer any question, or stop participating at any time, without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions concerning this research or your participation in it, please feel free to contact me, my dissertation supervisor or our university research office at any time.
Do you have any questions for me before we get started? Do you agree to participate and may I record our discussion?

Thank you, let’s begin…

Background Information
1. I’d love to hear a little bit about your background. How did you come to work in a campus-based women’s center? If you’ve had more than one position in a campus-based women’s center, can you walk me through your career progression?
2. Can you briefly tell me about your current role in your women’s center? What are your major duties?
3. Can you describe your current women’s center work in relation to
   a. Your institution’s diversity mission?
   b. The academic program of women’s/gender studies? Other departments or programs?
   c. Any other identity-based centers or programs at your institution? (e.g., multicultural, veteran’s, and/or international center, disability services, etc.)

Thought Prompts
4. In advance of our discussion, I sent you a thought prompt exercise. Is there a prompt that you were excited to discuss? Let’s start there.
5. What other thought prompts caught your attention? Can you please tell me about your experiences in relation to the prompts that interested you?
6. What is the prompt with which you least want to engage, if any? Can you share why?

I’d like to talk now about theory and your work in the women’s center.
7. Can you tell me a little bit about your formal or informal training with feminist theories?
8. What theories currently guide your practice in your women’s center?
   a. Why these theories?
   b. How are they useful or not useful to you?
   c. What are some salient ways that you utilize theory?

Concluding Questions
9. Is there anything else you’d like to say about anything we talked about?
10. Is there anything that you think I should be taking into consideration about this topic?
Appendix E: First Interview Thought Prompts

Below are the thought prompts for our first interview, which I am sending in advance of our discussion. Based on a thought experiment by Pitt and Britzman,¹ the prompts are deliberately multiple and open-ended. They are designed to help you think about experiences, situations, and moments when you 1) knowingly or unknowingly negotiated your race and ethnicity in your women’s center role(s), and 2) you felt your race and ethnicity mattered in your work and/or when others felt that it mattered. Broadly speaking, I am interested in understanding how you navigate your race, ethnicity, and other identities in your day-to-day women’s center work.

It is not expected that all topic areas will apply to you and/or resonate with you. Please feel free to mark on these pages in advance of our discussion so that we can focus on the prompts that you feel are most relevant to sharing your negotiations of race and ethnicity in your women’s center position and its duties. When we meet, I will ask you some brief preliminary questions and then ask you to discuss the prompts you have identified.

1. **Thinking about identities in your work life**
   - Times you named/claimed your identities
   - Times someone named your identities for you
   - Times you rejected your identities
   - Times someone did not want to discuss or name their identities
   - Times shared identities strengthened your work or when they created strains
   - Times identities intersected

2. **Thinking about encountering Whiteness**
   - Times you recognized your own Whiteness and/or the Whiteness of others
   - Times people around you acknowledged Whiteness
   - Times Whiteness got in the way or was an asset
   - Times you talked about Whiteness

3. **Thinking about encountering privilege**
   Times you tried to use your privilege to help someone or to fulfill your work duties
   Times privilege was pointed out to you or when you pointed out privilege to others
   Times you didn’t understand how privilege was working
   Times privilege failed you
   Times privilege felt overwhelming or when privilege was a burden

4. **Thinking about race/ethnicity and relationships with others**
   Times you felt understood/acknowledged/heard in a relationship
   Times you were frustrated with or disagreed with others
   Times relationships fractured or were healed
   Times relationships were impossible

5. **Thinking about race/ethnicity and experiences with allies**
   Times you felt supported by allies
   Times you trusted someone to be an ally
   Times your trust was broken and/or someone didn’t meet your expectation of being an ally
   Times you tried to be an ally to others
   Times you wanted to be an ally but didn’t know how
   Times you talked with others about being an ally
   Times you received feedback about being an ally
   Times you felt conflicted about being an ally

6. **Thinking about race/ethnicity and learning from experience**
   Times you incorporated new knowledge/learning into your daily practice
   Times you learned from mistakes
   Times you acted differently or changed your approach because of something you learned
   Times past hurts kept you from action or compelled you to act

7. **Thinking about race/ethnicity and encounters with speaking truth to power**
   Times you spoke up or chose not to speak
   Times you felt at risk or when speaking felt perilous
   Times you felt passionate about speaking and/or you couldn’t not speak
   Times you spoke and were not effective
   Times you encountered resistance or hostility
   Times you felt you should speak but you didn’t know how

8. **Thinking about race/ethnicity and encounters with oppression**
   Times you recognized the oppression of others
   Times you faced oppression in your work
   Times you worked alone or with others to dismantle oppression
   Times you were able to make progress in dismantling oppression

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9. Thinking about race/ethnicity and encounters with your institution
   Times your institution did or did not support you in your work
   Times your institution did or did not support collaboration
   Times your institution was open or was not open to change
   Times you were frustrated with or you were proud of your institution

10. Thinking about the role of theory in your work
    Times theory supported you and/or your work
    Times theory helped you to understand or gave you a new perspective
    Times theory felt too esoteric, confusing, or inaccessible
    Times theory informed your practice and/or when your practice informed theory
    Times theory was inadequate and/or failed you

11. Thinking about race/ethnicity and encounters with not knowing
    Times you didn’t know what was happening or how to proceed
    Times you didn’t know what you didn’t know
    Times not knowing felt scary or felt freeing
    Times you needed to ask for help
Appendix F: Journal Protocol

Thank you for speaking with me in the interview; your participation is greatly appreciated. At this stage of the study, I am sending you a journal with the request that you spend some time reflecting on and writing about the prompts below. The journal provides an opportunity to deepen the conversation we have started about how your race and ethnicity informs your women’s center practice.

Journals are confidential and will only be seen by me, the researcher; I will return your journal to you at the conclusion of the study. In these pages, please express yourself in whatever writing form or style you would like when exploring the prompts; if you would prefer to type your responses and submit them electronically or in print, you are also welcome to do so. Regardless of format, I invite you to place brackets [ ] around any writing or stories that you deem identifying or private. As a researcher, I will use bracketed sections to help me understand your overall experiences and perspectives, but I will not quote or paraphrase bracketed stories or sections in any way in the final project. This technique is utilized to create a safe space for you to explore your experiences without concern for how the data will be presented in the final report.

I ask that you journal about each of the prompts below—in whatever order you wish—before our second interview, and return the journal to me. You may write as much or as little as you like for each question, and can write in any format or style. Whether you are writing by hand or typing, I hope that you will share your thoughts, stories, and experiences as freely as you wish.

Thank you, again, for your time, commitment, and sharing!

Writing Prompts

1. What was the experience of discussing the thought prompts like for you? Any unexpected outcomes?

2. How, if at all, do you talk about your race and ethnicity in your women’s center work? More broadly, how do you frame your identity/identities in your work?
3. What are the uses of theory in your women’s center work? In what ways has theory helped (or not helped) you in your women’s center work? Please name specific theories as appropriate or desired.

4. Please choose the most intriguing/compelling thought prompt (1–11) for you in this current moment and explore some of the sub-prompts in relation to your current women’s center work.

5. Lastly, is there anything that you wish I was asking in relation to the study’s topic? What might you like to share related to the study topic that you have not been asked?
Appendix G: Second Interview Protocol

Name: ___________________  Institution: ___________________
Date: ___________________
Start Time: _______________  End Time: _______________

Thank you for continuing our conversation, and for submitting your journal. Today’s interview will take approximately 60–90 minutes of your time. Like the first interview, I will be recording our conversation. Because we are using an internet-based video conferencing system, there is a small risk of a breach of confidentiality, but all efforts will be made to keep everything you tell me in the strictest confidentiality. Your name and institution will not be used in any reports or publications that result from this research study. If I quote you, I will be sure to protect your identity, and that of your university, and I will not use your name or any identifying characteristics. There are no other expected risks of participation.

Participation is voluntary. You can decide not to participate, decline to answer any question, or stop participating at any time, without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions concerning this research or your participation in it, please feel free to contact me, my dissertation supervisor or our university research office at any time.

Do you have any questions for me before we get started? Do you agree to participate and may I record our discussion?

Great, let’s begin…
Discussion of Participation to Date

11. I want to start by asking you about the experience of journaling. How did it go? Any surprises or unexpected outcomes?

12. I would like to ask for clarification of a few things from your first interview and journal. Can you please clarify the following?
   a. In your interview, [Individualized Question #1]
      i. [Sub-question A]
   b. In your interview, [Individualized Question #2]
      i. [Sub-question A]
      ii. [Sub-question B]
   c. In your journal, [Individualized Question #3]
      i. [Sub-question A]
      ii. [Sub-question B]
   d. In your journal, [Individualized Question #4]
      i. [Sub-question A]

Additional Questions

13. In what settings and with what individuals have you talked about your racial identity in relation to your women’s center role?
   a. Why these settings and not others?
   b. What, if any, are the “unwritten rules” for these kinds of discussions?
   c. In the experiences you describe, what difference do you think being [insert how participant identified their race in the Data Collection sheet] has made?

14. What does it mean to be a [insert how participant identified their race in the Data Collection sheet] woman and work in a women’s center? To work at your institution? Are these the same or different questions?

15. In this study I am deliberately talking with professionals who identify as various races and ethnicities (rather than, for example, speaking with only White women, Black women, Latinas, etc.). What do you hope to learn from the other study participants?

Early Findings

16. As you’re aware, I am doing this process with multiple participants. As I analyze what participants are sharing, I have some initial findings and would like to run them by you for your thoughts.
   a. Wondering when/how to speak up (Who has my back?; uncertainty if I should speak up—are comments welcome?)
      i. If you could say what you wanted to say without repercussion, what would you say?
   b. Safe spaces for dialogue
      i. What conditions would make it safe, if ever, to speak up when you see racism or racial injustice in your work?
ii. What would encourage you to speak up or make you feel like you could?

c. Publicly claiming identities (difficulties of this)
d. Naming racism when it happens (defining it; courage to address it)
e. “The institution is just so white” (Using whiteness to blend in; recognizing whiteness)
f. Not knowing (how to be an ally; what was happening; how to link thinking to action)
g. Race without racism
h. Encounters with authority, particularly supervisors
i. Engaging with BLM movement (discomfort with personal beliefs vs. institutional roles, how to support student activists, role of WC in supporting students)
j. Challenges of finding allies (women are not always allies to each other, even with shared/similar experiences of race; “not many people I can go to for help”)

17. Do you have any gut reactions, confirmations, challenges, or anything you’d like to share about these themes?

18. Do these findings resonate with you?

Concluding Questions
19. I asked you if you’ve had any surprises or unexpected outcomes from your participation, and to be reciprocal, I want to quickly share a few of mine as well and see your thoughts about them.

   a. I have been thinking a lot about my own 12+ years of women’s center practice and my ongoing desires to be antiracist and just how difficult the practice of antiracism can be. I have also been thinking about my willingness to speak up about issues of race and racism and wondering how much of that is speaking up was related to my personality (outgoing, talkative), my upbringing (listened to within my family and always knew I was going to college), my antiracism commitment (wanting to be an ally and, to be honest, my desire to be seen as an ally), my Whiteness (not worrying about being seen as angry or “always talking about race”), my training, being able to practice (time to refine strategies, opportunities to speak, nothing terrible happened), reporting through Academic Affairs (academic freedom, supervisors who began as faculty), my director title and role (in charge of unit for all 12 years of professional career, seen as and expected to be a diversity advocate), etc.

   b. Unexpected outcome=incredible gratitude I feel for colleagues who are trusting with me with uneasy knowledge, difficult experiences, and hurts they have caused or incurred related to this work.

   c. Do you have any feedback, thoughts, or questions about my reactions?
20. Have you thought differently about yourself as a women’s center practitioner or about your women’s center role as a result of participating in this study? If yes, how so?
21. Is there anything else you’d like to say about anything we talked about?
22. Is there anything that you think I should be taking into consideration about these topics?

Housekeeping
23. Please choose a pseudonym.
24. In the next few months, I will continue analyzing data and move to writing findings and implications.
   a. Can I contact you for reaction on other themes?
   b. Would you like to read your transcripts and provide feedback?
25. Is there anything I can do or share to be reciprocal and help you?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study. I am grateful for your time and sharing. If you have any additional questions, comments, or concerns about this study and its topics, please feel free to contact me.