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# Confronting White Femininity in Community-based Social Work Practice: An Autoethnography and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

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Confronting White Femininity in Community-based Social Work Practice: An Autoethnography  
and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

Understanding the effects of White femininity on social work practice is a worthy endeavour provided the disproportionate numbers of White women that have built and occupied the professional role of social worker from the origins of colonization to present. Mainstream accounts of social work history narrate the profession to be a pursuit of well-intentioned middle- and upper-class White women, concealing the colonial operations that underpin the formation of social work as a White feminine project. Additionally, this dominant discourse conceals the racial segregation prominent in the field of social work that prevents Indigenous, Black, and other racialized people from gaining entry into the profession. While Whiteness and its effects within social work have been a subject of study, the intersection of gender and Whiteness has been minimally addressed, disregarding significant nuances that inform the relationship between the project of colonization and social work.

This thesis study provides a detailed analysis of semi-structured interviews with eight White, woman-identified social workers who have practiced in community-based social work for a minimum of two years in Alberta, Canada. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis and drawing from autoethnographic techniques, I trace the ways the participants perform, witness, and disrupt the dominant discourse of White femininity. The findings illuminate the social work profession's ongoing complicity with its colonial origins, which collude with White femininity and ultimately foster practices steeped in racism. A vital need to disentangle social work from its colonial and racist scripts is emphasized.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible without the support of a few significant people in my life. First and for most I want to thank my graduate supervisor, Dr. Christine Walsh, who offered much needed expertise, thoughtfulness, and most of all kindness throughout this process, for which I am deeply grateful.

To the women who graciously offered their wisdom, and stories as participants in this research project, knowing full well my approach would be at times critical towards their words and practices. It was an honour to hear from each and every one of you, and my own future social work practice will be shaped by what you have taught me.

Next, to the many racialized social workers, colleagues, peers, and friends, (thanks J.C., V.K., A.E., R.T., A.S., S.L.) who supported, challenged, and deepened my work far beyond what I thought was in my capacity. These learnings were at times painful, but from each point of sadness or frustration I encountered, I was able to grow and enrich my work for the better. Anti-racism work as a White woman, and social worker is a lifelong journey and a process of continual humbling. I plan to continue this path however imperfectly, with the hopes of contributing to a more socially just profession.

Lastly, to my friends and family who endured this arduous process alongside me with ongoing love and support. This thesis is truly an outcome of both family and community, and I would not have been able to accomplish it without the childcare my parents (M & W) and siblings (E & D) provided; the ongoing discussions that helped me to process and support my inner, often confused world (thanks H.K.); and the countless hours of writing and thinking that demanded more from my partner and children than I would have imagined. A special thanks to my mom, who has been my rock in every capacity, and my inspiration to pursue higher level

education. Without you, I would not be here. To my partner A, who never ceases to support my ideas, and challenges me more than anyone else I know—Thanks for teaching me how to dream. To my daughters F & L, you are my greatest teachers, and you inspire me every day—Even though the professional path I have chosen keeps me busy and you miss me, as I do you, your hearts and futures are, and always will be at the centre of my work.

## **Dedication**

For my dad, who taught me the significance of humility and the value of education. You are missed.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Dedication .....	v
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
1.1 The Use of Language .....	2
1.2 Situating the Research Project .....	3
1.3 Thesis Organization .....	7
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	8
2.1 Benefits of Whiteness Studies and Theory in Social Work Education .....	9
2.2 Frameworks for Teaching Whiteness in Social Work Education .....	11
2.3 Critiques of Common Theories Used to Educate on Whiteness .....	18
2.4 Conceptualizing Whiteness .....	24
2.5 Critiquing Whiteness Means Critiquing Social Work .....	27
2.6 Whiteness is Invisible.....	28
2.7 Securing Whiteness .....	29
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	33
3.1 Objective of Research Study .....	33
3.2 Theoretical Framework.....	34
3.21 <i>A Phenomenology of Whiteness</i> .....	35
3.22 <i>Intersectionality</i> .....	42
3.3 Research Design .....	46
3.31 <i>Foucauldian Discourse Analysis</i> .....	46
3.32 <i>Autoethnography</i> .....	52
3.4 Ethics.....	56
3.5 Rigour.....	60
Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion .....	63
4.1 Introduction.....	63
4.2 Fulfilling A Moral Imperative .....	63
4.21 <i>The Desire to Help</i> .....	65
4.22 <i>Childhood Adversity and Trauma as Settler Move to Innocence</i> .....	69
4.23 <i>When Social Work Bodies Fail to Fit the White Feminine Script</i> .....	76

<b>4.3 Talking about Race: Silence, Discomfort, Dilution, and Conflation as Tools to Conceal Race, Racism, and Colonization in Social Work .....</b>	<b>82</b>
4.31 <i>Silence and Discomfort</i> .....	84
4.32 <i>Dilution and Conflation</i> .....	88
4.321 White Femininity Secures Neoliberalism. ....	92
4.33 <i>White but Racialized</i> .....	94
<b>4.4 Defending, Witnessing, and Disrupting White Femininity .....</b>	<b>98</b>
4.41 <i>Defending One's Orientation Point</i> .....	100
4.42 <i>Witnessing One's Orientation Point</i> .....	107
4.421 Talking About Whiteness. ....	107
4.422 Talking About White Femininity. ....	114
4.43 <i>Illuminating Pathways to Disrupting One's Orientation Point</i> .....	120
4.431 Collectivism as Resistance.....	122
<b>4.5 Chapter Conclusion .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>5.1 Limitations.....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>5.2 Implications for Education, Practice, and Policy .....</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>5.3 Implications for Research .....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>5.4 Closing Remarks .....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>Appendix A: Call for Participation .....</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>Appendix B: Consent to Participate.....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>Appendix C: Interview Guide.....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>148</b>



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis study examines the effects of the dominant discourse of White femininity on community-based social work practice in the Canadian context. Social work as a profession has colonial roots that have significantly impacted the ways in which social workers have been positioned in relationship to the people they serve. While contemporary social work is premised on social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2020), the discursive scripts social workers fulfill contradict this foundational praxis (Mandell, 2008; Rossiter, 2001; Margolin, 1997). This paradoxical role that social workers embody, of both helping and harming, demands attention. Kelly and Chapman (2015) refer to this dual role as an adversarial alliance, stating that "a professional is frequently regarded as an adversary to be approached with suspicion as well as, inconsistently, the elusive political ally" (p. 47).

Alongside exploring this adversarial alliance in social work, I became interested in the disproportionate numbers of White women occupying roles in the field. Having experienced a growing awareness of this phenomenon over the years I have practiced as a social worker, the reasons for it have always been elusive. This research study has sought to unearth this phenomenon, illuminating the ways in which White women unknowingly act as agents of the state through their professional performances as moral gatekeepers. A Foucauldian discourse analysis was completed, which traced the ways in which White, woman-identified community-based social workers performed the dominant discourse of White femininity. Additionally, I have drawn from autoethnographic techniques in order to implicate myself as a White, woman-identified social worker. This research study contributes to the growing literature in the areas of colonialism, critical Whiteness studies, and anti-racism in the context of social work practice.

The following paragraphs both illuminate the context of this thesis study and outline how the thesis is organized.

## **1.1 The Use of Language**

Choosing the appropriate language to speak about racialized individuals and communities in this thesis study was a terrain I chose to navigate thoughtfully throughout the entire process. Particularly my position as a White person made the significance about language choice that much greater. Duhaney and El-Lahib (2021) speak to discursive resistance in the context of terminology used to describe racialized bodies. Discursive resistance the authors describe as an interrogation of language and discourse to examine how both can shape power dynamics and relationships (p. 425). The terms used to label people that are racialized are far from neutral. Often the labels are applied by the dominant group and ultimately homogenize diverse groups of people based on skin colour (Duhaney & El-Lahib, 2021). The effects of the homogenization of groups of people that share a skin colour is the neglect of significant histories, cultures, and identities (Duhaney & El-Lahib, 2021). Further, through this classification process the bifurcation between White people and racialized people persists, elevating Whiteness and denigrating racialized people (Duhaney & El-Lahib, 2021).

There is not an easy answer to this contentious issue, and as a White person studying and writing about issues that directly affect racialized people I do not have a position to state what is best or appropriate. Throughout this writing I largely use the term racialized, and in some instances use the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour), or people of colour or women of colour. I chose to primarily use the term racialized because a study (Badwall, 2014) similar to my own and conducted by a racialized scholar used the term. In cases where I specifically refer to a particular racial or ethnic group, ie. Black, Indigenous or White, I

capitalize the term. It took some contemplation on whether to capitalize the term "White," because on the one hand I saw it as placing importance on the term and thus contributing to reifying Whiteness, but on the other hand I did not want White to be perceived as the "normal" or the default identity because it was not distinguished through capitalization. As Painter (2020) argues in reference to the American context, "White Americans had the choice of being something vague, something unraced and separate from race. A capitalized 'White' challenges that freedom, by unmasking 'Whiteness' as an American racial identity" (para.11).

## **1.2 Situating the Research Project**

The profession of social work is disproportionately occupied by White women (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Thobani, 2007). In the following, I contextualize this reality by providing a brief overview of social work history, which grounds my research that seeks to examine the impacts of White femininity on social workers that work in community contexts. Further rationale for this particular demographic is provided in my methodology section of this thesis. Prior to unpacking social work history in Canada, I define White femininity as it is this dominant discourse that is the focus of my research study.

According to Shome (2001), White femininity is "not meant to suggest a physical body or a property with some ontological order" (p. 323), rather she states:

I use [White femininity] to mean an ideological construction through which meanings about White women and their place in the social order are naturalized. As symbols of motherhood, as markers of feminine beauty (a marker denied to other women), as translators (and hence preservers) of bloodlines, as signifiers of national domesticity, as sites for the reproduction of heterosexuality, as causes in the name of which narratives of national defense and protection are launched, as symbols of national unity, and as sites

through which "otherness"—racial, sexual, classed, gendered, and nationality—is negotiated, White femininity constitutes the locus through which borders of race, gender, sexuality and nationality are guarded and secured. This consequently marks it as a threat, since it is a site through which the nation can spill into otherness. (p. 323).

Banerjee and Connell (2018) expand the notion of white femininity through a decolonial, southern theory lens. Drawing from numerous critical, postcolonial, racialized feminist and transfeminist scholars from the global north and south (Bulbeck, 1998; hooks, 1984; Collins, 1997; Lazreg, 1990; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1988), Banerjee and Connell (2018) describe the ways in which the white women construct the self through the stereotypes of 'Other' women, for example, as victims; and through the exclusion of experiences of women of colour, centering their own experience as White women as the normative definition of woman. It is imperative that understandings of White femininity are not limited to knowledge developed in the global north and include perspectives from the global south to fully grasp its meaning and effects.

The standard account of social work history depicts the profession to be an endeavour of White, upper and middle-class women (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Stokes, 2017). In fact, social work was formed in response to the impacts of industrialization that resulted in mass social upheaval (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Stokes, 2017). To deal with the socio-economic challenges of industrialization both the Charitable Organization Societies (COS), and the Settlement House Movement were established (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Stokes, 2017). The development of the COS, attributed to Mary Richmond, cultivated the scientific model of practice, known as casework (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Stokes, 2017). The settlement houses, commonly associated with the work of Jane Addams, formed a more radical arm of

social work, dedicated to supporting and improving the conditions of the poor (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Stokes, 2017). These two historic social work pathways were taken up almost exclusively by upper and middle class, White women, originally in Britain and soon after, in Canada.

A narrative rendered invisible by this dominant account of social work history is the inability for racialized women to work in the public sector due to racist public policies. Thobani (2007) underscores this reality, arguing that the development of the public sector expanded employment opportunities for White women only- in particular the ‘caring professions’ such as social work, healthcare, and education. She further asserts that it was not until the 1960s and 70s, when public policy was liberalized, that women of colour were able to access education and therefore gain employment in the public sector period (Thobani, 2007). This reality, that caring professions were only available to White women, challenges the dominant story of social work history as a project taken up by White women-- it was not that racialized women were unwilling to work in caring professions, they were actively restricted from doing so.

Equally, the investments of White women in social work are presented as strictly altruistic, ignoring the political agency in the social sphere that social work provided for them (Johnstone, 2018; Thobani, 2007). This desire for agency by White women that came to fruition through the care for others was also of great benefit to the Canadian nation-state (Johnstone, 2018; Thobani, 2007). Thobani (2007) provides the example of child welfare services protecting Indigenous children and the corresponding securement of their professional identity as caring and compassionate. This securement of a benevolent professional identity was significantly reinforced in the context of Indigenous children who were seen as particularly vulnerable and "their protection and care defined as an especially laudable responsibility" (Thobani, 2007, p.

127). This example demonstrates how White women positioned themselves as experts in the public sphere by denigrating specific populations by the nation-state. In turn, the nation-state was able to subject its values and norms, which were rooted in White supremacy, through the caring professional into Indigenous communities and other segments of the nation-state that were deemed a threat to Canadian nationalism (Thobani, 2007).

Overall, this brief invitation into the complexities surrounding the history of social work in Canada, also articulates how power is tethered to the denigration of the ‘Other’. The Other in Thobani’s (2007) writings being the Indigenous person, but equally the immigrant, the disabled, or the racialized person, or, in fact, any person with traits divergent from the ideal national subject. Thobani (2007) then casts light on this binary describing how these two modernist distinctive categorizations of identity are conceptualized:

The national is law-abiding where the outsider is susceptible to lawlessness; the national is compassionate where the outsider is intolerant, placing loyalty to ties of kin and clan above all else; and more recently, the national is supportive of gender equality where the outsider is irremediably patriarchal. (p. 5)

This positioning of identity, particularly the subjugation of the Other as morally degenerate, justifies the ongoing intervention of social workers into the lives of the Other.

The prominence of White women in social work remains evident today. As an example, Salsberg et al. (2017) gathered data from the American Community Survey (ACS), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau; the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); and the Integrated Post-Secondary Data System (IPEDS), managed by the U.S. Department of Education (Salsberg, 2017) to create a profile of the social work workforce. The sample size included social work practitioners with a non-social work bachelor's degree ( $n=291, 169$ ) and those with a Bachelors

of Social Work or Masters of Social Work or higher ( $n=380, 659$ ) (Salsberg et al., 2017). The vast majority of social workers were women (83%), 68.8% of whom identify as White (Salsberg et al., 2017). Whilst these statistics are American, and this study is focused on the Canadian context, they do shed light on the state of Western social work today.

### **1.3 Thesis Organization**

Following the introductory chapter, chapter two reviews the social work literature relevant to this thesis study. Due to the limited amount of research completed in the area of White femininity and social work, I primarily draw from empirical studies and conceptual articles that look at Whiteness and its effects on social work education and practice. Notably, there are few studies in this area of research as well. Next, Chapter three outlines the study methodology. Beginning with the theoretical framework, Ahmed's (2007) 'phenomenology of whiteness' and intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2021) are detailed. I then describe the research design, which consists of Foucauldian discourse analysis (Macias, 2015a) and autoethnography (Chang, 2008). The chapter concludes with a section dedicated to methods and research ethics. Chapter four details the findings and discussion of this thesis study, and finally chapter five describes the study's limitations, along with future recommendations for social work policy, education, practice, and research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

To date, little research has been published with regards to the effects of White femininity on social work practice. While a few critical books have addressed the topic of White femininity in unique contexts, see for example, *White women, race matters* (Frankenberg, 1993); or *Desire for development: Whiteness, gender, and the helping imperative* (Heron, 2007), the intersections of Whiteness and gender and their intersecting implications for the social work practitioner remain uncharted territory in the field of social work research. In this chapter I introduce the literature that was reviewed to frame my MSW thesis research and discuss the significance and relevance of my research topic for social work as both a field of study and practice.

The purpose of this literature review was to discover what information exists about White femininity according to the narratives of community-based social work practitioners, specifically. The following databases were searched between the fall of 2020, and the spring of 2021: Scopus, Social Service Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, and SocINDEX. The terms used to search the databases were: social work\* AND postcolonial OR Whiteness OR decolon\* OR educat\* OR postsecondary OR college OR university. Databases were searched from 2010, with some flexibility due to the limited number of articles and books, and to include some of the seminal articles written prior to 2010. Articles were limited to the English language. Altogether 642 articles were reviewed for relevancy to the topic. This included first looking at the title of the article, then abstract, and if both had relevancy, the article was read in its entirety. Of the 642 reviewed articles, 15 were selected for this literature review. Of the 15 articles 8 are from Canada, 3 are each from Australia and the United States, and 1 is from the United Kingdom.

The literature is presented in a logical thread to navigate the ideas portrayed in the articles, organizing within the following themes: Benefits of Whiteness Studies and Theory in



Social Work Education; Frameworks for Teaching about Whiteness in Social Work Education; Critiques of Common Theories Used to Educate on Whiteness; Conceptualizing Whiteness; Critiquing Whiteness Means Critiquing Social Work; Whiteness is Invisible; and Securing Whiteness. The themes identified communicate the primary arguments and findings in the literature, which form a storyline that draws the reader from the broadest aspects of the literature relevant to my study, to the studies that trace most closely to my study.

## **2.1 Benefits of Whiteness Studies and Theory in Social Work Education**

Three articles were found arguing for the inclusion of Whiteness studies and/or critical Whiteness theory in social work education (Jeyasingham, 2012; Lerner, 2021; Young & Zubrycki, 2011). Whiteness studies as a field is concerned with "how white identities and whiteness as a social structure operate within racial hierarchies" (Jeyasingham, 2012, p. 670). Critical Whiteness theory is a "*description* of how privilege is raced and invisible; a *method* of unsettling this privilege; and it offers *guidance* for more inclusive and respectful human relationships" (Young & Zubrzycki, 2011, p. 165, italics in original).

The articles within this theme identify advantages to including Whiteness studies and theory into social work education. Scholars who stress the need to incorporate Whiteness studies in social work education, premise their arguments most commonly on the roots of social work, which are Eurocentric and colonial (Bussey, 2019; Lerner, 2021; Young, 2008; Young & Zubrzycki, 2011). Though social work as a profession has evolved since its genesis, the thread to colonialism and Eurocentrism are evident contemporarily, particularly in its complicity to White supremacy and Eurocentric or Western ways of knowing (i.e., Bussey, 2020; Lerner, 2021; Young, 2008; Young & Zubrzycki, 2011). The consequence of these invisible foundational aspects of social work is the cultivation of practitioners who lack the skillset to support clients

that are racialized or non-Western, which results in the perpetuation of their oppression (Lerner, 2021). Several scholars cite social work's role in the cultural genocide of Indigenous people and the disproportionate rates of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system as consequences of the colonial structure of social work (Blackstock, 2009; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Lerner, 2021; McKenzie et al., 2016; Young, 2008).

In order to dismantle social work's complicity with colonialism and western ways of knowing, Whiteness studies and Whiteness theories are suggested as possibilities for transformation, starting within the social work education system. A beneficial outcome of educating on Whiteness is the shift from focusing on the individual acts of racism that result in violence and oppression towards racialized individuals and communities, to understanding racial hierarchy and the power dynamics that permeate everyday life that result in acts of violence (Jeysingman, 2012). Not only does this shift in paradigm educate social work students on how normative practices sustain individual acts of racism, but it also demonstrates that within social work itself, White values and knowledge are privileged (Jeysingham, 2012; Young & Zubrzycki, 2011).

As students begin to see the ways in which Whiteness is privileged in social work education, White students, in particular, can start to see how they themselves have internalized a White or colonized lens (Lerner, 2021). This significant point of self-reflection among White students offers opportunity for them to name, explore, and dismantle the culture of Whiteness within (Lerner, 2021). Through this process of naming, exploring, and dismantling Whiteness, Lerner (2021) argues, that White students would be better equipped to form relationships with racialized students. Lerner (2021) adds that White culture fuels disconnection and mistrust, and overtime as this lens is uncovered, White students can begin to trust and build connections. This

process that Whiteness studies (Lerner, 2021) advances, is pivotal for social work to properly reflect its own social justice principles.

Another benefit of Whiteness theory within social work education is the cultivation of racial cognizance. Young and Zubrzycki (2011) define racial cognizance as an active state which "relies on practitioners being able and willing to confront their personal, social and political histories and endeavouring to apply the resultant understanding in practical actions for change" (p. 169). Therefore, racial cognizance takes self-reflection one step further, requiring White students to also act upon what they are learning through their work alongside racialized clients. Lastly, Whiteness theory supports social work students to understand Whiteness from an intersectional lens. Whiteness is not monolithic according to Jeysingham (2021), and Whiteness theory is able to teach students about the ways in which Whiteness is shaped by social class, geography, and ethnicity. This deepened understanding of Whiteness is beneficial for students because it increases their capacity to negotiate the effects of Whiteness according to the context it exists within. Overall, these studies encourage the inclusion of Whiteness studies and theory into social work education.

## **2.2 Frameworks for Teaching Whiteness in Social Work Education**

Several frameworks for teaching about Whiteness have been proposed. Australian researchers Young and Zubrzycki (2011) recommend combining critical Whiteness theory and Indigenous social work as a useful approach to social work education. In arguing for this framework, they assert it captures local knowledges (Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing) while using critical Whiteness theory to deconstruct dominant culture to see the ways in which it colonizes knowledge systems and upholds White values. They further propose that to

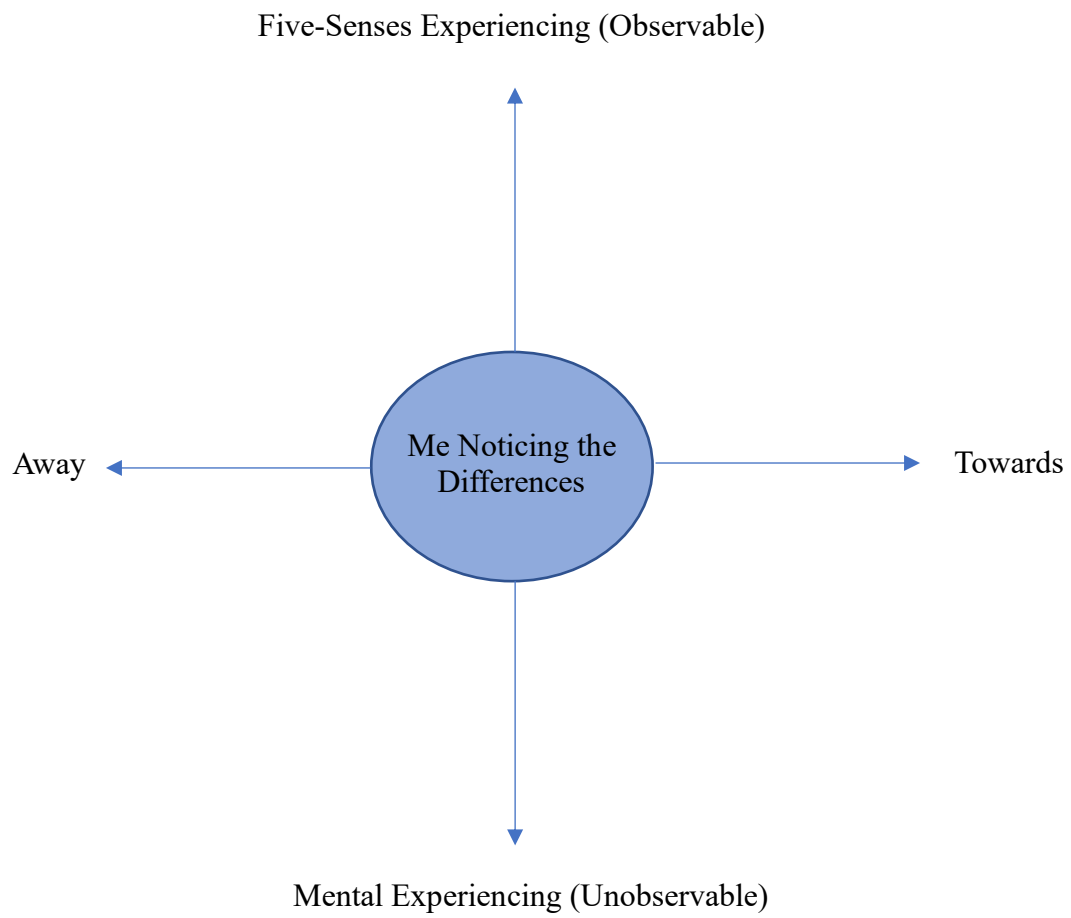
effectively practice Indigenous social work in Australia, it is vital to understand how mainstream social work operates according to White norms.

Another approach offered to effectively teach about Whiteness in social work education is the performativity of Whiteness. The performativity of Whiteness assumes that "Whiteness only comes into being through the repetition of normalising and exclusionary statements and practices that, over time, create the sense of a pre-existing social structure" (Jeyasingham, 2012, p. 681). Jeyasingham (2012) advances that the utility of a White performativity approach to teaching Whiteness in a social work classroom, is that it permits an exploration of racialized issues in the context of social work. They offer the following example: if students within a social work classroom are in dialogue, they can together unpack and hold one another accountable to the ways in which Whiteness shows up in their day-to-day interactions in the context of a social work environment. In other words, White performativity views Whiteness not as uniform, but instead shaped and performed in accordance with the context.

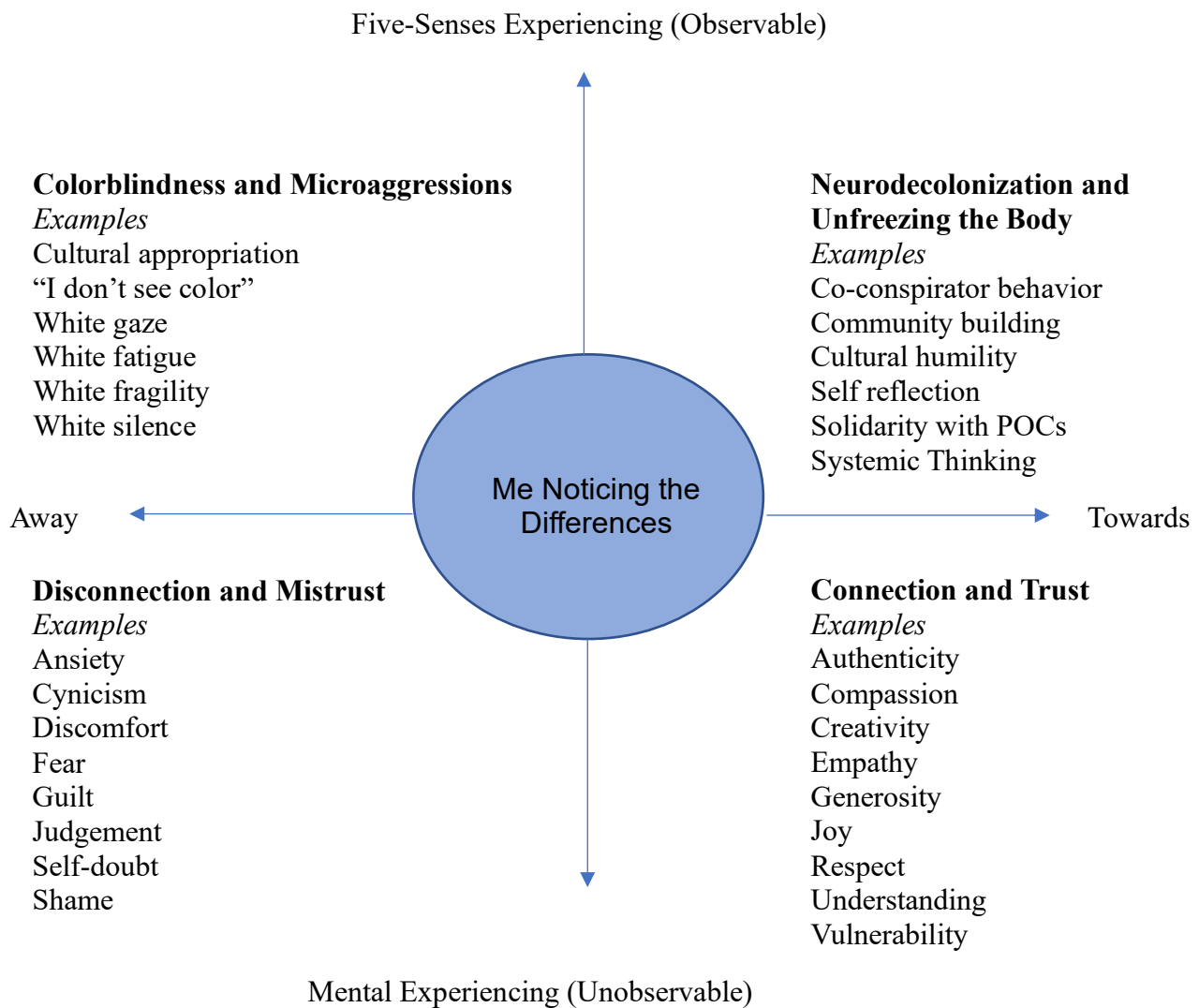
Critical race theory (CRT) has been recommended as a theoretical orientation to help White students understand Whiteness. CRT sees racism as a ubiquitous social construct that often goes unaddressed due to its invisibility among White people (Constance-Huggins, 2019; Lerner, 2021; Razack & Jeffery, 2002). CRT asserts that racialized people are uniquely positioned by history and are therefore considered legitimate sources of knowing and understanding racism based on their lived experiences. Lerner (2021) suggests that when CRT is used in the classroom, there is an understanding that when racialized people discuss issues surrounding racism, that White students should believe them. Complementary to CRT is the theory of cultural humility. Cultural humility views learning about another culture as a life-long pursuit, not as a skill one can master (Lerner, 2021; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Tervalon &

Murray-García, 1998). Cultural humility encourages the acknowledgment within the practitioner that there are layers of cultural identity; it emphasizes critical self-reflection; it suggests that in order to understand clients, practitioners must understand themselves, their communities, and their colleagues; it recognizes power imbalances, and the importance of challenging them; and it demands institutional accountability (Fisher-Born et al., 2015). These two approaches together prepare students for their "real" training in the field with clients.

Lerner (2021) also recommends a therapeutic approach to engaging White students about Whiteness, based on Polk's (2014) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model (see Figure 1). Lerner (2021) adapted Polk's ACT model to assist White students in reflecting on Whiteness (see Figure 2). In Lerner's (2021) four-quadrant model, White students can identify where they are positioned based on a variety of factors. Overall, the chart emphasizes two spectrums: the first spectrum depicted on the x-axis locates "away" at one end and "towards" at the other; the second spectrum organized on the y-axis locates "mental experiencing (unobservable)" at one end and "Five-senses Experiencing (Observable)" at the other. The four quadrants are labelled in the following way: Quadrant 1 (Colorblindness and Microaggressions-Away and Five-Senses Experiencing); Quadrant 2 (Neurodecolonization and Unfreezing the Body- Towards and Five-Senses Experiencing); Quadrant 3 (Disconnection and Mistrust- Away and Mental Experiencing); and Quadrant 4 (Connection and Trust- Towards and Mental Experiencing). Quadrant 1 is observable experiences that people want to move away from; Quadrant 2 is observable experiences people want to move towards; Quadrant 3 is unobservable experiences people want to move away from; and lastly, Quadrant 4 is unobservable experiences people want to move toward.



**Figure 1.** The acceptance and commitment matrix (Polk, 2014)



**Figure 2.** The acceptance and commitment matrix applied to reflecting on Whiteness in the classroom (Lerner, 2021 adapted from Polk, 2014)

Lerner (2021) recommends several strategies to deepen social work students' reflections on Whiteness, including: acknowledging mistakes; not comforting discomfort; countering White fatigue; race-based caucusing; cultural humility for people of colour; and underpinning personal changes with institutional and cultural changes. Acknowledging mistakes simply means creating a learning environment where students can make mistakes without feeling shame. By

normalizing making mistakes in the classroom, students, and in particular White students, are more likely to engage in conversations about race. Since White students are often silent in classrooms when conversations about race arise, the unintended consequence is the maintenance of White supremacy. Lerner (2021) suggest that through developing a classroom culture of making mistakes, students deepen their reflexivity, cultivate increased self-awareness, and begin to engage in the behaviours identified as examples listed in Quadrants 1 and 2.

The next strategy, not comforting discomfort, is directed towards White people that centre themselves in conversations about race based on their fragility in navigating racism (Lerner, 2021). An example of a behaviour that reflects White fragility is crying, either intentionally or unintentionally when engaging in discussions of race and racism. The consequence of White people enacting White fragility in these contexts is that they become victims needing comfort from the other students, often at the expense of racialized students who have actually been directly harmed by racism. As a way to mitigate this tendency of White students, Lerner (2021) suggests instructors help them to be in discomfort, through for example, assigning self-reflective writing. The outcome of not comforting discomfort potentiates White students transitioning from Quadrants 1 and 3 to Quadrants 2 and 4.

Race based caucusing is the third suggested practice for deepening reflections on Whiteness. This practice, though available to any group that shares a racial identity, is a useful strategy for White students to come together to discuss their privilege, which could include looking at White fragility, White guilt, White silence, cultural appropriation and colourblindness (Lerner, 2021). Doing this work separately from racialized students prevents causing unnecessary harm. When all the students are then in class together and issues surrounding race and racism arise, White students are then more aware of how to conduct themselves



meaningfully and appropriately, which Lerner (2021) argues is needed prior to interracial healing. Again, by participating in race-based caucusing, the potential for White students to move from Quadrants 1 and 3 to 2 and 4 increases.

The final suggested strategy for deepening reflections on Whiteness in a classroom setting is cultural humility. Cultural humility, in this context asks White students to understand how White supremacy has shaped the behaviours of racialized individuals. Lerner (2021) provides the example of how racialized students in classroom settings are perceived as embodying cultural humility. In reality, White supremacy has subjected an elevated status onto White students, which results in racialized students experiencing internalized racism-- feelings of shame, unworthiness, self-hatred etc. (Lerner, 2021). Therefore, what is perceived as cultural humility, is in fact, "submissiveness and self-questioning" (Lerner, 2021, p. 13). When White students engage in cultural humility themselves their chances of understanding the presentation of racialized students in the classroom increases and their own performance of Whiteness decreases. Referring to Figure 2, when White students engage in cultural humility, they are more likely to embody characteristics described in Quadrants 2 and 4, moving away from characteristics described in Quadrants 1 and 3.

The diverse educational frameworks offered in the literature as useful to teach about Whiteness in the social work classroom, leave out an important lens for understanding Whiteness in the social work context- an intersectional lens. An intersectional lens applied to exploration of Whiteness, deepens the analysis of Whiteness and therefore clarifies its operation in the context of multifaceted identities. The concept of intersectionality can be attributed to Crenshaw (1991), who was interested in understanding how "race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (p. 1244). Since the

concept originated, the use of intersectionality to explore identity has had numerous iterations (Mattsson, 2014). In social work intersectionality has been used to "explore gender, sexuality, class, and race as complex, intertwined, and mutually reinforcing categories of oppression and social structures" (Mattsson, 2014, p. 9). In my own study, instead of using intersectionality to understand how locations of oppression are mutually reinforcing, I use this lens to discover how a location of dominance (Whiteness) shapes gender (femininity), and the effects this intersection has on community-based social work practice. In a field disproportionately made up of White women, it seems pertinent for social work students to learn about what the effects of this racial and gendered identity are and how they inform the social work subject. While exploration in the literature have occurred regarding the effects of Whiteness, the ways in which Whiteness shapes gender has yet to be addressed.

### **2.3 Critiques of Common Theories Used to Educate on Whiteness**

Several conceptual articles critique common theories used in social work education to address Whiteness and racism in the social work classroom and in practice. Numerous theories taught in contemporary social work education are under the umbrella of emancipatory theories, and therefore much of the literature critiques the collection of theories that fall into this category. Some of the emancipatory theories are anti-oppressive practice; feminist theory, critical theory; radical theory and structural social work. The criticisms aimed at this group of theories largely pertains to the essentialist lens applied to identity formation, at the expense of significant nuances that if honored would lead to more complex understandings of the lived experiences of clients and practitioners themselves (Walter et al., 2011). Further Walter et al. (2011) advise that emancipatory theories entrench the client and professional relationship in a hierarchical fashion, which can risk disempowering the client.

While the aim of emancipatory theories in social work education is to dismantle power relationships based on hierarchical social arrangements, including the elevation of Whiteness over racialized identities, it is primarily understood in the context of White professionals and racialized clients (Walter et al., 2011; Young & Zubrzycki, 2011). The formulaic operation of these frameworks does not consider scenarios that challenge these kinds of hierarchies. For example, Badwall (2015) critiques the challenges faced by racialized practitioners working with White clients. According to Badwall (2015) the mainstream social work theories and practices strictly see power in the hands of professionals, therefore silencing the racism directed towards racialized workers by White clients. Badwall's (2015) assertion does not erase the other all too common instances of racism that occur within social work contexts, including the White social worker toward the racialized client, or the White social worker towards the racialized social worker-- all iterations must be addressed, but specifically she is interested in the unique dynamic between the White client and racialized social worker. Ultimately, emancipatory theories originate from a Western lens that fails to adequately address Whiteness in the context of social work education and practice (Walter et al., 2011). In referencing Gray and Fook's (2004) seminal question "What is Western social work" (p. 627), Walter et al. (2011) pose their better question: "How is Western social work informed by race?" (p. 13).

Reflexive practice is frequently taught to social work students as an avenue to cultivate deeper awareness of how power informs the client-practitioner relationship (Badwall, 2016). As noted earlier, the emancipatory theories, though rooted in power analysis, are often too simplified to address the nuances that form the relationship between practitioner and client (Jeysingham, 2012; Young & Zubrzycki, 2011). This simplification translates into reflective practices that are built into emancipatory framework, which Jeysingham (2012), drawing on the

work of Ferguson (2001), indicates are too tied to structural impacts on identity devaluing the potential of the individual to critically reflect and transform their relationship to power.

Heron (2005) builds on Ferguson's (2001) criticisms in promoting a critical reflexivity with White social work students that holds space for nuanced and unfixed identity positions instead of seeing identity through a fixed social location. Heron (2005) suggests that social work students and practitioners should engage in critical reflexivity through understanding one's subject position and ways in which as individuals we can perform and resist it. For example, instead of simply identifying Whiteness as privilege, can students and practitioners identify what it means to be White, and ask what are the expectations, the social conditioning and the discourses that define Whiteness. By responding to these questions, students and practitioners can trace the ways they both perform this role and resist it and through this deeper analysis of one's identity they are better situated to understand their impact on clients and how they can make changes to reduce power relations embedded in racist structures, ultimately minimizing harm.

While Heron's (2005) approach to critical reflexivity in the context of Whiteness and racism in social work presents as useful for addressing unequal power relations between practitioners and clients, researchers outside the field of social work have criticized the use of personal reflection as an avenue for addressing racism (Ahmed, 2004; Andersen, 2003). The risks associated with relying solely on critical reflection as a tool to dismantle racism in social work practice include: the centering of White experiences of enacting racism and therefore using White expertise as the knowledge-base for understanding Whiteness at the expense of racialized scholars who have been unwilling victims and survivors of the impacts of Whiteness;

additionally, the creation of a positive White subjectivity is formed through this avenue for navigating Whiteness.

Drawing from Ahmed (2004), Jeyasingham (2012) states a positive White subjectivity is a subject position that is "classically bourgeois - one that is self-conscious, self-managing and is able to reflect on itself" (p. 676). When White people perform this particular subject position, they take up a position of innocence that holds racism as a the "responsibility of unselfconscious, unregulated, White subjectivities" (Jeyasingham, 2012, p. 676). This shift in subject position on behalf of White people does not address racism, it "only changes the position that the speaker takes up in relation to racism" (Jeyasingham, 2012, p. 676). Badwall (2016) advances this critique in arguing "that the movement of an unmarked helper identity to a marked critical worker does very little to de-center White dominance in social work" (p. 2). Badwall (2016) situates the problem of Whiteness in social work and the use of critical reflection by social workers as the tool to dismantle it, as ineffective because of social work's foundations in Western knowledge production-- she argues that enacting critical reflexivity, risks reifying Whiteness.

Reifying Whiteness occurs through the use of critical reflexivity in social work practice because it serves as a regulatory technology (Badwall, 2016). One of the ways Whiteness is secured in helping professions is through the desire to help (Heron, 1999), which translates to the professional identity of social workers that depends on doing and being good (Heron, 2005; Margolin, 1997). The construction of the social work professional identity stems from historical practices aimed at moral regulation (Badwall, 2016). Indigenous populations, and the growing numbers of immigrants entering Canada, was experienced as a threat to many White settlers, and consequentially, Canada's national identity, which was deeply invested in moral bourgeois respectability (Badwall, 2016). In order to maintain the bourgeois identity, it was believed to be

necessary for civilized subjects, for example social workers, to regulate and control Outsiders who were deemed threatening. This regulation and control, according to Badwall (2016), was "largely masked through discourses of helping and charity" (p. 7). It is important to note that social workers were not consciously aware that they were complicit in a process of managing Others, they were of the belief that in fulfilling the role that was bestowed upon them, they were doing good.

Contemporarily, the performance of being/doing good and helping as a social worker is equally relevant but has shifted in its manifestation. Now, being/doing good and helping in social work means counteracting the colonial operation of social work historically and ongoing forces (Margolin, 1997). This pivot for practitioners looks like equalizing power relations with clients and embodying a critical social work identity (Badwall, 2016). Therefore, when harm does occur to clients and communities involved with social workers, critical reflexivity is the tool used by social workers to address it. This form of accountability is not directed towards the clients and communities that have been harmed but instead used by practitioners as a means to redeem oneself "through the practice of naming any transgressions and trespasses" (Badwall, 2016, p. 8). This process of redeeming oneself by naming harm results in a restoration of confidence within social workers and a return to innocence that justifies one's intervention into the lives of Others (Badwall, 2016). Thus, "critical reflexivity can function as a regulatory technology to govern how social workers are to perform 'good' and 'critical' identities" (Badwall, 2016, p. 8).

Overall, Badwall (2016) states that contemporary social work replicates historical social work via critical reflexivity in that "[t]o admit bad practice is to restore one's sense of self as good, loving, and, in its contemporary manifestation, a critical social work subject" (p. 8). While Badwall's (2016) standpoint is significant, I argue that critical reflection in social work practice

can go beyond simply restoring oneself as good. When social workers critically reflect, and engage in praxis, future actions can be amended to account for harms that have occurred. Young (2004) advanced that using critical reflection to improve practice is only possible in a very minor capacity. Perhaps engagement with critical reflexivity needs to go beyond reflecting only on one's social location, beliefs, and values and how they serve to help or hinder a client, and as Jeyasingham (2012) suggested, focus more on performativity. By performativity I mean, the ways in which social workers fulfill the discourses prescribed to them, for example, the discourse of White femininity, and how these performances uphold systems of oppression. This engagement with reflexivity Jeyasingham (2012) suggests, moves students from a place of understanding Whiteness through internal value systems alone, "towards more difficult work that requires students to scrutinise their own and their colleagues' norms of social interaction" (p. 682).

A final commonly used framework in social work education to engage students in awareness and engagement with Whiteness is White privilege pedagogy (Margolin, 2015). Developed by Peggy McIntosh in the 1980s, White privilege was a technique aimed to enlist the support of White people in the fight against racism (as cited in Margolin, 2015). The method used within White privilege pedagogy was to engage White people in conversations about how "their membership in the majority race makes their lives easier" (Margolin, 2015, p. 3). McIntosh (1988) established what is known as the invisible knapsack, which contained the privileges White people unconsciously carried. While seemingly effective in building awareness of Whiteness and its impacts among White people, White privilege, according to Margolin (2015), operates to secure White privilege, not dismantle it. Margolin (2015) critiques White privilege pedagogy as it "operates in large part as an antiracist cover, a sham that allows whites to have

their cake and eat it too by providing them the appearance of selflessness and antiracism without requiring them to do anything selfless or antiracist” (p. 4).

Margolin's (2015) cites both Foucault (1977a) and Neizche (1910) to support his argument. He states that:

[K]nowledge is never disinterested... [it] always conceals a purpose-- the preservation of a power structure, a race, a class, a community, an ideology... [therefore] it is possible to imagine that the knowledge whites gain from unpacking their invisible knapsacks allows them to not only retain their imagined innocence and moral elevation, it allows them to retain the very privileges they claim to be renouncing. (p. 4)

The assertions made in Margolin's (2015) conceptual article are comparable to Badwall's (2016) criticisms of critical reflexivity. Both frameworks reify Whiteness despite their stated purpose to dismantle it. Unlike critical reflexivity, which I believe can be adjusted to effectively make changes to the ways that social workers uphold White supremacy, White privilege pedagogy does not offer much more than a list that White people can check off to feel like they are being anti-racist, when in fact they are simply stating how they benefit from their Whiteness without any accountability to act differently.

## **2.4 Conceptualizing Whiteness**

For social workers to effectively minimize harm caused by racism in their practice, understanding Whiteness is significant. Vanidestine and Aparicio (2019) conducted a qualitative study to investigate how social welfare and health professionals understood race, racism, and Whiteness within health disparities discourse. Of the total 15 participants, five each were from Social Work, Nursing, and Medicine. Data was collected using semi-structured life-world qualitative interviews and analyzed using a constructivist approach to grounded theory through a



social justice lens. Four theoretical categories were formulated through the coding process including: "conceptual conflation and unfamiliarity"; "prejudgement and discrimination"; "self-defined skin colour"; and "privilege and power" (Vanidestine & Aparicio, 2019, p. 436). These theoretical categories underscored an overarching core theoretical category, which the researchers named "interpreting 'race,' racism, and Whiteness" (p. 436).

Overall, the participants demonstrated challenges defining the concepts of race, racism, and Whiteness. They conflated Whiteness, for example, with definitions of race and perceived it as a grouping of individuals based on skin colour. Whiteness was described by two participants as an attitude and other participants admitted having never thought of it before. Racism was also conceptualized in different ways among participants: most described racism as "some form of negative (pre)judgements, values, and stereotypes, while fewer respondents also included discrimination as a result of those beliefs" (Vanidestine & Aparicio, 2019, p. 437). The third theoretical category of "self-defined skin color" was based on at least two participants from each profession defining "race", racism, and Whiteness as "self-defined skin color" (Vanidestine & Aparicio, 2019, p. 438). The last theoretical category, "privilege and power" represents participants who went beyond the understanding of "race" as a demographic characteristic, expanding the definition to include concepts such as privilege and power. The researchers assert that these participants saw the three racial concepts through a social justice and critical race lens.

Vanidenstine and Aparicio (2019) spoke to the ambivalence that thread through their findings regarding the understanding of "race," racism, and Whiteness by health professionals. This ambivalence, they assert, highlights the need for health professionals to receive social justice and critical race informed theoretical knowledge to better equip themselves to work alongside racial and ethnic groups. The researchers also note that their findings reflect the need

for like-minded people within institutions, communities, and governments to come together to address racism in healthcare. Lastly, these researchers call for "structural conceptualizations of racism, whiteness, social power, and our intersecting systems as concepts to guide... future interventions" (Vanidestine & Aparicio, 2019, p. 440). A significant limitation identified by the researchers was the lack of comparison between each category of health professional regarding the conceptualization of race, racism, and Whiteness.

Using case study methodology, Olcon (2020) sought to understand the experiences of eight White social work students "as they become exposed to whiteness while studying abroad in West Africa" and, "the impact of these experiences on their understanding of whiteness and their white racial identity" (p. 320). Olcon (2020) found four story types that reflect how the students engaged with learning about Whiteness, which she termed: "Avoiding racial discomfort"; "Turnaround"; "From white savior to white humility"; and "Back and forth".

"Avoiding racial discomfort" refers to the silence, an expression of discomfort and awkwardness, exhibited by some participants regarding the topics of race and Whiteness. The next storyline, "Turnaround", describes student responses to learning about Whiteness as starting from a place of defensiveness and resistance and progressing to a "desire and steps toward becoming an anti-racist advocate" (Olcon, 2020, p. 323). The storyline of "white savior to white humility" portrays students who initially approached the study abroad with a White savior mentality, desiring to "help" people of colour and, through their experience abroad, became aware of their own culpability with Whiteness and were consequently humbled. Lastly, the "Back and forth" storyline depicts those students who, through their experience in West Africa, developed a "non-oppressive White identity" that they would fulfill in fluctuation with the racial comfort of Whiteness (Olcon, 2020, p. 327).

Vanidenstine and Aparicio's (2019) and Olcon's (2020) studies provide insight into the limited understanding of race, racism, and Whiteness among health care professional and social work students. Olcon (2020) speaks to the risk of harm in the field of social work, if Whiteness is not sufficiently understood among new social work graduates, they are, she suggests, "at risk of perpetuating racism and oppression by being unaware of the role their racial identity plays in their work with clients from historically excluded racial and ethnic groups" (p. 328). In this study I aim to reveal the influence of White femininity on community-based social work practitioners with the end goal of producing knowledge that could be directed at reducing what Olcon (2020) identifies as risk of harm.

## **2.5 Critiquing Whiteness Means Critiquing Social Work**

In a study of anti-racism in social work education, social work scholar Jeffery (2005), interviewed 13 (12 female, 1 male) racially diverse social work educators who had significant experience in anti-racist education in schools of social work. In determining how race was defined as a problem for the profession and the education of new social workers, Jeffery (2005) revealed a paradoxical relationship between being a social worker and doing social work. She articulated that "Whiteness as a set of practices very much resembles social work as a set of practices" and further "when we teach people to be self-reflexive and critical of whiteness, we are, at the same time inviting them to be critical of social work" (p. 410). She then posed the question, "if you have to 'give up' whiteness, how can you be a good social worker?" (p. 410). While Jeffery (2005) draws attention to social work as a project of Whiteness, and thus the critiquing of Whiteness in the field as precarious, her work is centered on problematizing social work education. The examination of Whiteness in social work practice, the focus of my study, has received little attention, and thus remains invisible within the context of social work practice.

## 2.6 Whiteness is Invisible

Two research studies specifically articulate the invisibility of Whiteness in clinical settings. Lee and Bhuyan (2013) use feminist conversation analysis to examine "video- and audio-recorded clinical sessions of cross-cultural dyads in clinical practice" to trace how Whiteness operates as an unmarked yet salient feature of talk in therapeutic contexts (p. 100). Their findings suggest that several enactments of Whiteness operate in the therapeutic context including emphasis on Western values to guide clinical assessment and treatment options; and various discursive strategies that recruit clients into performing invisible scripts of Whiteness. Their findings illustrate how clients resist and conform to the therapist's worldview by "positioning themselves within or resisting a discourse of whiteness" (p. 121).

Maurer (2016) draws upon Lee and Bhuyan's (2013) cross-cultural clinical approach to complete a critical analysis of Carol Ganzer's (2016) case presentation, *Becoming visible: The case of Collette*. In the original case presentation, Ganzer (2016) aimed to uncover clinical decision making based on a psychoanalytic object relations approach in the therapeutic relationship. Maurer (2016) uses Ganzer's (2016) demonstration as an opportunity to complete a critical analysis in order to "explore the social reproduction of discriminatory and oppressive ideologies structurally and as hidden performances of whiteness in cross-cultural therapy" (p. 352). Upon completing her analysis, Maurer (2016) concludes that when Whiteness remains invisible in therapeutic contexts, the hierarchical and oppressive dynamics in therapeutic relationships are also rendered invisible. These two studies, which use critical analysis to reveal how discourses of Whiteness are operating in a particular practice context, is relevant to my proposed study. However, neither specifically attends to how Whiteness shapes femininity and in turn, how these two social locations shape practitioners, the contribution of my own work.

## 2.7 Securing Whiteness

Several Canadian studies examine the numerous ways that Whiteness is secured through both the desire to be morally good and through the negation of race and racism. In their research Heron (2007) and Todd (2011), for instance, demonstrate the ways in which White subjects in helping roles re-inscribe Whiteness through their investment in ‘innocence’. Additionally, Badwall’s (2015) research documents how White scripts regulate racialized social workers via the negation of racist encounters with their clients, ultimately centering Whiteness.

Heron’s (2007, 1999), seminal 1996 research study, involved lengthy, open-ended interviews with 17 White, middle-class women who did development work in sub-Saharan Africa for two or more years. In 2005, she expanded her work to interview include 10 additional women. The aim of Heron’s (2007) research was to understand her participants’ desire/investments in doing development work. She was particularly interested in analyzing what they were willing and unwilling to disclose. Using discursive practices, narrative strategies, positionings of self, and narrative shifts within an ethnographic framework, Heron (2007) was able to trace the ways in which participants shifted their subject positions; negotiated power relations; and enacted resistance.

Heron (2007) concluded that discourses of White bourgeois femininity are implicated in the constitution of the development worker. Simply put, White bourgeois femininity is a desire for and investment in innocence via willful ignorance of one’s complicity in domination (Heron, 2007). If White development workers were, for example, to assume responsibility for dominance in their development work in the Global South, their moral elevation or moral ‘goodness’, which is the ultimate performance of White, bourgeois femininity, would be fractured (Heron, 2007). She further argues that this discourse is evident in the development worker from past to present,

which was made clear through her use of postcolonial theory (Heron, 2007). Heron (2007) also addresses the parallel relationship between development workers in the Global South and bourgeois subjects in Canada, asserting that the power relationship to the Other is not only evident within development work, but here in Canada, where bourgeois subjects (i.e., social workers) have power over non-White and Indigenous people. The implications she makes for the Canadian context alludes to a research gap that my study seeks to fulfill.

A research study by Todd (2011) attempts to understand how community development discourses secure Whiteness by adopting Foucauldian analysis to examine community development textbooks used in social work classrooms, and interviews with eight White feminist community organizers. She found three discursive strategies used in community development texts that unintentionally secure Whiteness including: resolving racism through technique, particularly self-reflection on one's privilege; a focus on racism related issues as outside the self and contained in broader society; and the notion that community practitioners can practice ethically by learning as much as they can about 'Others' (Todd, 2011).

The discourses of White feminist community organizers are complicit with four discursive strategies that secure Whiteness, including: unable or unwilling to name how they themselves are complicit with Whiteness; telling stories of good work alongside racialized communities; "telling stories of consuming cultural, culinary/creative otherness as proof of ... [their] own exceptionality as good white subject"; and "individualizing the problems with white interventions in racialized communities rather than challenging the entire practice as being fraught with irresolvable tensions" (p. 126). Todd's (2011) study illustrates how community development operates unknowingly/knowingly as a colonial/White project and thus, constitutes the subjectivity of community workers as colonial and White.

Todd (2011) also argues that the development of the White community worker subject is specifically one who aims for social justice while simultaneously avoiding their own complicity with colonialism, Whiteness, and racism. Her findings support my motivation to examine how even in the purportedly most radical contexts of social work (Occhiuto & Rowlands, 2019; Todd, 2011), for example community work, White femininity is produced and reproduced. Todd (2011), however, fails to interrogate how Whiteness intersects with femininity, even though her participants are White women. Incorporating an intersectional lens would have yielded a deeper and more nuanced analysis of Whiteness.

Badwall (2015) interviewed racialized social workers to "trace the ongoing mechanisms of whiteness in social work in order to reveal the ways in which racialized bodies are regulated through discourses that re-centre whiteness within the profession" (p. 4). In her research, participants were asked about their institutional settings and relationships with colleagues and managers and using Foucauldian discourse analysis, Badwall's (2015) reveals that "professional practices are intertwined with colonial constructions of morality, in which imperial practices are tightly interwoven in scripts of civility to shape goodness" (p. 19). She further notes that her findings illustrate that racialized social workers are not able to fulfill this conception of goodness, regardless of whether they perform it, because the moment racism is unveiled (a guarantee when one is racialized), a disruption of the profession's ideals occurs. While Badwall's (2015) theoretical and methodological framework is employed to trace how White scripts regulate racialized social workers, my framework will trace how White, woman-identified social workers perform scripts of White femininity.

The aforementioned studies contain various elements that inform my research. They interweave the relationship between social work as a White project, the investments and desires

of social workers/development workers to be ‘good’, and the implication of both these realities on White and racialized workers. While the relationship between Whiteness and the construction of the social work identity is studied, a notable gap related to how the performance of Whiteness shapes gender in social work remains. While Heron (2007) does speak to White bourgeois femininity, her study is exclusively on development workers, not social workers, per se. Also, Badwall (2015) only addresses White femininity in a cursory fashion as her primary focus is on Whiteness. My study addresses how both Whiteness and femininity inform the practice of White, community-based social workers. This literature serves as a foundation for my research study, while the next chapter, focuses on the methodology that scaffolds it.



### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research methodology. Specifically, it outlines the purpose of the research study, provides a review of the research question, which informed my data collection and analysis, and details my approach to data collection and analysis.

#### **3.1 Objective of Research Study**

Understanding the impacts of White femininity on social work practice is a worthy endeavour within the field of social work. Whiteness as a subject of study within social work has not been taken on with the rigour it should, given its complicity in the maintenance of White supremacy (Gregory, 2021) and the disproportionate numbers of White professionals in the field. Gregory (2021) offers a reason for the profession's lack of engagement with this topic, asserting:

Perhaps the paucity of substantive, collective engagement by social work with a critical examination of Whiteness can reasonably be attributed to the fact that such an undertaking threatens the integrity of social work in a different way than it does any other profession or discipline. (p. 17)

Equally, grasping how Whiteness shapes gender offers a more nuanced understanding of how Whiteness operates. Given the social, economic, and political transformations that are taking place in society today there is a significant ethical responsibility from professions that work directly with racialized, Indigenous and other marginalized populations (Jacobs et al., 2021). In recent years, the combination of social media, globalization, and social movements such as Black Lives Matter,<sup>1</sup> Idle No More,<sup>2</sup> #MeToo,<sup>3</sup> and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered

<sup>1</sup> <https://blacklivesmatter.com>

<sup>2</sup> <https://idlenomore.ca>

<sup>3</sup> <https://metoomvmt.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/>

Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)<sup>4</sup> loudly unveiled structural oppressions, notably addressing issues such racism and violence perpetuated by policing systems. Taking this call further, I assert it is time for the profession of social work to actively address its own complicity in systems of oppression. Through this research study I hope to unveil how community social work is complicit with White femininity, and the consequences that result from this complicity.

My **research question** is: What can narratives of White, woman-identified community-based social workers in Alberta tell us about how the dominant discourse of White femininity shapes community social work practice? The **specific objectives** for the proposed project are:

- to elicit the narratives of White, community-based social workers and trace how their social work practice is shaped by discourses of White femininity;
- to explore not only threads that demonstrate the production and reproduction of White femininity but threads that resist White femininity also; and
- to explore new possibilities for social work practice, which dismantle White femininity instead of reproducing it. These practice possibilities can only be discovered through building awareness among social workers, agencies, researchers and policy makers of the inherent complicity to White femininity within current social work practices, even in presumably more radical contexts of social work, such as community-based social work.

### **3.2 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guides my study is comprised of a "phenomenology of whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007); and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2020), each of which are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### ***3.21 A Phenomenology of Whiteness***

The theory of a "phenomenology of whiteness" is attributed to the scholarly work of Sara Ahmed (2007). Her theorization offers a unique approach couched just outside the umbrella of critical Whiteness studies. White phenomenology seeks to examine Whiteness through the lens of phenomenology. Phenomenology, on its most basic level, is the study of conscious experience from a subjective or first-person point of view (Smith, 2018). Phenomenology is interested in the "meaning things have in our experience, notably, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others, as these things arise and are experienced in our 'life-world'" (Smith, 2018, para. 6). Therefore, to examine Whiteness through a phenomenological lens means, according to Ahmed (2007), noticing how "Whiteness is lived as a background to experience" (p. 150).

Ahmed's (2007) conception of a phenomenology of Whiteness draws in part from Alcoff's (1999) scholarly work on a phenomenology of racial embodiment, which outlines three ways in which race theory attempts to address "ideologies of race" (p. 16). The first ideology of race Alcoff's (1999) refers to as nominalism, that is the view of race defers to the scientific understanding that race is not real and therefore not a biological category. This assertion of race, in consequence argues for the abandonment of racial concepts as an anti-racist agenda because it is only through the biological meaning of racial concepts that racism has manifest (Alcoff, 1999). The second position of race ideology is essentialism. This position assumes that racial identity is easily categorized, and homogenous (Alcoff, 1999). An essentialist position on race also claims that one's race is the most salient aspect of identity, and that through racial identity is shared political interests and history. The final position on race ideology is what Alcoff (1999) refers to as contextualism. A contextualist approach views "race as socially constructed, historically

malleable, culturally contextual, and produced through learned perceptual practice" (Alcoff, 1999, p. 17).

Alcoff (1999) suggests that this third position is the best option for understanding race as it can "acknowledge the current devastating reality of race while holding open the possibility that present-day racial formations may change significantly or perhaps wither away" (p. 17). Within the contextual position on race, two branches are possible— objectivist and subjectivist. A simplified explanation of an objectivist notion of race is the use of a generalized definition of race that can be applied across diverse contexts. Alcoff (1999) uses the examples of census categories, sociological facts, and histories of how race was developed and how it organizes social relations to demonstrate the uses of an objectivist approach.

While Alcoff (1999) makes note that the objectivist approach to race is commonplace in discussions and debates surrounding race, it fails to address the "everydayness of racial experience" (p. 17). This gap that an objectivist approach fails to address, highlights the usefulness of a subjectivist approach to race. A subjectivist lens values lived experiences of racialization and reveals "how race is constitutive of bodily experience, subjectivity, judgement, and epistemic relationships" (Alcoff, 1999, p. 17). It is this subjective position on race that shapes Ahmed's (2007) use of phenomenology to examine Whiteness.

Ahmed's (2007) theoretical positioning also relies heavily on the work of Husserl (1969; 1989) in her characterization of orientations. Orientations, Ahmed (2007) describes as starting points, that represent how the world unfolds from the place where one begins. Ahmed (2007) notes that one's orientation is neither meaningless nor neutral, instead it represents certain things about a person. She provides the example of Husserl's orientation to his writing desk. His positioning indicates his occupation: a philosopher. She argues that not just any kind of table will

determine his occupation as a philosopher. It is the writing table that signifies this, whereas a kitchen table for example would represent perhaps another kind of occupation. Ahmed (2007) asserts further, "[w]hat you come into contact with is shaped by what you do: bodies are oriented when they are occupied in time and space" (p.152).

Fanon (1986) informs Ahmed's (2007) relationship between Whiteness and orientation, and, in doing so, grounds the concept of orientation into the experience of Whiteness. Fanon (1986) describes how colonization made the world White. Whiteness, to the world is much like fascia to the body: invisible, yet everywhere, a vital component of the body's operation. The invisibility of Whiteness is only invisible to the bodies that are at home in a world made White, that is White bodies. On the other hand, non-White bodies have a contrasting experience. Ahmed (2007) explains:

[f]or bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions. Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of *stopping device*: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires that you stop. (p. 161)

For White bodies in a White world, there is a seat at the table, there is access, there is an ease to obtain things and to do things. For non-White bodies, quite the opposite: there is disorientation, interruption, there is no seat at the table.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty's (2002) articulation of the notion of "habit worlds" is most relevant to Ahmed's (2007) conceptualization of the phenomenology of Whiteness and specifically to this study (p. 156) informed by Merleau-Ponty's (2002) phenomenological writings. Habit worlds describe how Whiteness holds its place through the "habitual actions of

bodies" (Ahmed, 2007). It is through the repeated actions of bodies that spaces take shape. Nasiri (2021) speaks to the Whiteness of institutions as an example. Institutions are not White prior to White bodies, institutions become White due to the gathering of White bodies and not other bodies. Nasiri (2021) describes this phenomenon through their own experience as a racialized, Muslim student in a graduate-class, using the sea as a metaphor for Whiteness. They state:

While the arrival and departure of my White classmates would go unnoticed, the sea hindered my movement, rendered me hypervisible in its space, and asked me to account for my presence by its noticing my bodily comportment and the distal quality of its historic-racial schema. (p. 451)

In a parallel way Ahmed (2007) argues that non-White bodies are also at risk of not seeing Whiteness if they permit themselves to "learn not to see it, even when they are not it" (p. 157). She asserts that non-White bodies can learn to fade into the background, and not disrupt the sea of Whiteness, but sometimes they refuse or simply can't (Ahmed, 2007).

White phenomenology is relevant to this research study as I am interested in the effects of the White feminine in the field of social work. If social work is comprised disproportionately of White women, then the public spaces, i.e., institutions and organizations reflect the White feminine. What does this mean for the clientele that uses social work services who are often disproportionately Indigenous or Black? Ahmed (2007) states, "Whiteness itself is a straightening device: bodies disappear into the 'sea of whiteness' when they 'line up'" (p. 159). I cannot help but think of an Indigenous family arriving in a child welfare office. They show up to a White space, with a White worker, who is not aware of the White space they occupy nor the comforts they experience as an extension of the White space. The Indigenous family on the other hand, experiences the Whiteness loudly, aggressively, perhaps choosing to rebel against it or

perform it, either way not at *home*. The choices they then must face in their encounter with institutional Whiteness, is to stay in their own skin and risk losing their dignity, their freedom, at worst their children or swim in the sea of Whiteness, to line up, to fit in, to survive, to keep their children. By using the phenomenology of Whiteness as a lens for my study, I can closely trace the ways in which the participants I interview take on the shape of the White feminine, and in turn inform how social work institutions themselves embody the White feminine. Through this study my hope is to make the orientation of Whiteness in social work visible in order to trouble its effects.

Whiteness studies are not without their criticisms. In fact, Whiteness studies is a particularly contentious field of study. The primary critique of Whiteness studies is it risks reifying the object of critique (Ahmed, 2004, 2007). Ahmed (2007) draws attention to this concern, questioning:

Does speaking about whiteness allow it to become an 'essential something'? If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness? What does making the invisible marks of privilege more visible actually do? Could whiteness studies produce an attachment to whiteness by holding it in place as an object? (p. 149)

In contending with her own questions Ahmed (2007), posits that time is better spent noticing what Whiteness is doing rather than getting stuck on whether one is serving to reproduce it. She adds that she is not dismissing the significance of how studying Whiteness can reify it, but desires to make clear that the reification of Whiteness did not originate in the study of it, instead reification itself is "what allows Whiteness to be done" (p. 150). Of relevance here is Rossiter's (2011) notion of 'unsettled practices,' which draws attention to social work practices that require the representation of the Other as both an act of justice and of harm. To embody unsettled

practices, social workers, she contends, must sit in this tension. I believe the study of Whiteness is a parallel tenuous act: both necessary for justice and equally risking harm. What I mean by this is that studying Whiteness through my own research study, will necessarily center Whiteness and center myself as a White scholar. This centering risks severing the very intention of this study, to dismantle the clutches of Whiteness on the profession of social work. Therefore, my decision to proceed with this study has meant weighing the risks and consequences alongside what could be named as an action towards justice. A question I have asked myself repeatedly is, can Whiteness be dismantled within social work, if White social workers do not know about Whiteness? If yes, then can a White researcher contribute to this knowledge-base? Can my practice be improved with racialized clients by knowing about the effects of my Whiteness and the White spaces that my profession occupies? While there are not definitive answers for me currently, this study is a journey to get closer to knowing whether it is effective to engage with Whiteness studies in social work.

A significant tension to address is the fit between poststructuralism and phenomenology. The epistemological and ontological underpinnings to these worldviews are often viewed as opposites (Berggren, 2014; Stoller, 2010). Provided the epistemological and ontological fabric of this study leans towards poststructuralism, it is of necessity to negotiate this discrepancy.

According to Freedman and Combs (2012):

Poststructuralists believe it is useful to focus on contextualized meaning making, rather than on universal truths or an all-encompassing reality. In this meaning-focused approach, culture, language, and discourse are explored in terms of how they contribute to the experience and identity of people in context. (p. 1036)



The emphasis of poststructuralism is that there is not an existence of an essential truth, there are multiple truths contingent on individual context.

Phenomenology on the other hand, though also focused on individual meaning making, regards these perceptions and experiences as essential truths. As Berggren (2014) notes, "[t]he overall merit of phenomenology is to take seriously lived bodies and lived experience" (p. 244). Therefore, in accordance to phenomenology, to give subjective experience the credence it deserves, would be to honor it as truth. While the contradictory elements are evident, Berggren (2014) argues that each philosophy fulfills the limitations of the other, making them highly complementary. Poststructuralism's strength is its view that subjects are positioned based on "intersecting and conflicting cultural norms (discourses) and to deconstruct that which is seemingly intact or stable" (Berggren, 2014, p. 244). However, the centering of discourse that poststructuralism emphasizes is also dissatisfactory. What is lacking Berggren (2014) contends is a full capturing of "experience, embodiment, and emotion/affect" (p. 244). She concludes by stating "phenomenology needs poststructuralism's deconstructive critique of power and discourse, while post-structuralism simultaneously needs phenomenology's recognition of embodiment and lived experience" (Berggren, 2014, p. 244).

Interestingly, Ahmed (2004, 2006, 2007) intertwines both philosophies offering a poststructuralist phenomenology, in both her depiction of White phenomenology and queer phenomenology (Berggren, 2014). In this study I speak to this intersection only in the context of the phenomenology of Whiteness. Ahmed (2004) offers a poststructural critique to suggest that Whiteness is not inherent. Although she does not blatantly articulate this, her assertion for example that the world is made White or that we need to "examine... how bodies become White" implies a social construct of Whiteness (Ahmed, 2007, p. 156). While not specifically

referencing the world as inherently White or authentically White, she proposes instead in reference to Fanon (1986), that colonization has constructed a White world. She also discusses the inheritance of Whiteness and race when she portrays inheritance as something passed down through history upon our arrival. She does not argue for the innateness of race but instead asserts that the construction of race, which occurred historically, becomes a social and bodily given which is inherited upon one's arrival. She then continues to state that this inheritance of Whiteness can be reproduced, which has poststructuralist connotations, particularly in her reference to what she speaks to as habits. Reproduction and sustainability of Whiteness occurs through the bodily repetition of acts, which could be described as habits. This seems relevant to the poststructuralist/Foucauldian notion of subjectivities, which describe the ways in which discourse shapes the individual and in turn the individual performs the discourse. This performance of discourse has a resonance with the notion of habits. Both philosophical concepts have a shared outcome, which is the sustainment of something, in this case, Whiteness.

### ***3.22 Intersectionality***

As White women ignore their built-in privilege of Whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become 'other,' the outsider whose experience and tradition is too alien to comprehend. (Lorde, 2007, p. 117)

Intersectionality is most often credited to the work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and her seminal article, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory and anti-racist politics," in which she coins intersectionality as a term and necessary method to be used in antidiscrimination legal cases. Criticizing the single-axis framework that is predominantly used in antidiscrimination law, Crenshaw (1989) argues that treating gender and race as mutually

exclusive categories fails to address the multidimensional reality of Black women. Instead, Crenshaw (1989) suggests that in analyses of race, sexism and patriarchy must be included, and in analyses of feminism, race must be included. Her demand for the use of intersectionality to address legal and social issues was further emphasized in her 1991 article "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color". A more robust definition of intersectionality, according to Hill Collins and Bilge (2021) is:

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, and gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age - among others - as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. (p. 2)

While Crenshaw (1989) was a critical player in the institutionalization of intersectionality, the origins of it are more nuanced than often described in the academic landscape (Collins & Bilge, 2021; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). The following paragraphs deepen the frequent surface description of intersectionality's history in order to engage in responsible stewardship (Moradi & Grzanka) of this important field of study.

Collins and Bilge (2021) bring attention to the influence of academia on history, and its tendency to approach it in an authoritative manner that elevates certain narratives over others, simultaneously producing a linear storyline that has a definitive starting point. Moradi and Grzanka (2017) support Collins and Bilge's (2021) critique of how intersectionality's history has been communicated within academia, asserting that to truly grasp intersectionality as a field of study, it is crucial to understand and give credit to its roots, which in this case are multifaceted

and nonlinear. Intersectionality originated in the 1960s and 70s, from the work of women of colour social justice activists and scholars who often identified as lesbian or queer and were heavily engaged in the civil rights movement (Collins & Bilge, 2021; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

Black feminist activists such as bell hooks (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (1989), Angela Davis (1983), Audre Lorde (1984), and the Combahee River Collective (1977/1983), were significant figures who emphasized the value of African American women's experiences and rights as fundamental to the fight for women's rights (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). They actively pointed to the interrelationship between systems of inequality, including classism, sexism, racism, and heterosexism, and vocalized that justice could only be achieved through addressing these issues together through coalition politics. These intersectional ideas were honored and expanded on by Chicana feminism, sub-altern studies (South Asian-based postcolonial scholarship), and transnational feminism. Noted figures from these movements include: Anzaldúa (1987), Mohanty (2003), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) and Spivak (1986). While the roots of intersectionality are often credited to African American women, it is evident that multiple alliances were formed between and among women of colour to address their interconnected everyday experiences of oppression and politicize them. It is important to note that these activist and social movements are often depicted in the mainstream as derivative of 2nd wave White feminism, but in reality they originated independently (Collins & Bilge, 2021).

Intersectionality was then introduced to academic institutions as a result of the activism of the 1960s and 70s. Prior to the 1980s and 90s, exclusionary measures were commonplace within academia, and therefore access for women of colour was greatly restricted. The political activity of the 1960s and 70s placed pressure on institutions for more inclusionary practices, and the demands were met by the academic sphere. As women of colour entered into this field as

students, instructors, and professors, they brought with them, their political ideas, including intersectionality. To come full circle, it was not Crenshaw's articles (1989, 1991) from which intersectionality grew, but instead, it was her articles that legitimized intersectionality within academia. Collins and Bilge (2021) discuss how Crenshaw's writings (1989, 1991), translated the meaning of intersectionality from an activist landscape into an academic landscape. The acceptance of intersectionality within academia transformed it into a method of critical inquiry and praxis (Collins & Bilge, 2021).

While a phenomenology of Whiteness (Ahmed, 2007) as a theory within this study provides a lens to trace the effects of Whiteness on community social work practice, it does not account for how Whiteness shapes and is shaped by other identity markers. Because this research study is interested in the operation of not only Whiteness, but White femininity, and its effects on community social work practice, intersectionality is an appropriate lens to incorporate. As mentioned previously, intersectionality looks at how identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, among others, mutually shape one another. In this study, this lens is used exclusively to shed light on the nuances specific to the relationship between Whiteness and femininity. While the prevailing use of intersectionality has been to explore the intersections of multiple markers of oppression, this study is uniquely looking at the intersections that constitute a privileged body: that of the White woman. Although class is not a primary focus of this research study, it is certainly an important element that cannot entirely be ignored. The professional positioning of a social worker is, in itself, a class marker that inevitably situates the social worker in a position of power not only in the social worker/client relationship, but within society at large. Therefore, it is not strictly the White woman that constitutes privilege, but the White woman who occupies the professional role of social worker who does so.

### 3.3 Research Design

For the purposes of this research study, I interweave both Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (Macias, 2015a) and autoethnography as my methodology. This section of my thesis details both methodologies, and their applicability to my study.

#### 3.31 *Foucauldian Discourse Analysis*

While numerous iterations of discourse analysis have been developed, I chose to implement FDA (Macias, 2015a) to analyze the data collected from my interviews. According to Mills (2004), Foucault's work cannot be translated into a distinct theory or system of ideas. Mills (2004) argues that Foucault studied a diverse range of topics, making it challenging to "pin him down as a historian, a philosopher, a psychologist or a critical theorist" (p. 15). In light of this complexity, Foucault's notion of discourse is not situated within a larger set of theoretical ideas. Mills (2004) suggests that the most effective way to understand Foucault's interpretation of discourse is to see how he uses it in his discussions of power, knowledge, and truth.

The following paragraphs discern Foucault's use of discourse, but first I outline some key definitions of it. Fook (2016) provides a simple definition of discourse, describing it as "all the ways in which knowledge is constituted in society" (p. 87). Foucault (1972) himself described discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49). Finally, a more robust definition of discourse offered by Chambon, Irving, and Epstein (2004) states:

Discourses are structures of knowledge and systematic ways of carving out reality that characterize particular historical moments. The embodied acts of discourse, or *discursive practices*, provide parameters for what can be known, said, and thought. How we think

about things is what constitutes them. Even the self is constituted through discourse. (p. 272)

This research study is focused on discourses of White femininity and its effects on community-based social work practice. This means, I am analyzing the effects of White femininity on what White women, community-based social workers are able to know, say, and think. This objective becomes clearer as I describe discourse in the context of Foucault's conceptualization of power, knowledge, and truth.

Mills (2004) asserts that in order to understand how discourse has "effects," it is important to "consider the factors of truth, power, and knowledge since it is because of these elements that discourse has effects" (p. 16). I begin with Foucault's (1977b) conception of truth. He states that:

Truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power... Truth is of the world: it is produced by multiple constraints. And it induces the regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 13)

According to this definition, truth is something that is produced as opposed to being an essential something. This assertion demonstrates Foucault's alignment with poststructuralism, or better said, poststructuralism's alignment with Foucault. The poststructuralist epistemological foundations perceive truth to be "contextual, historical, and, ultimately produced by rather than

reflected in language" (Strega, 2015, p. 131). This assumption about truth is contrary to the modernist epistemology, which says truth is certain and discoverable (Moosa-Mitha, 2015).

An example that demonstrates how truth is produced is provided by Coates and Wade (2007). They discuss the role of colonial discourse in misrepresenting Indigenous people in Canada, by labeling them as naturally deficient, while rendering White Europeans/settlers as morally superior (Coates & Wade, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2012). Mills (2004) further notes that discourses do not exist in a vacuum, which tells us that alongside the colonial discourse of Indigenous people being deficient, were numbers of discourses contradicting this narrative. A specific consequence of this colonial narrative of Indigenous people was the erasure of resistance of Indigenous communities to colonization (McKenzie et al., 2012; Simpson, 2011). Simpson (2011) reinforces this stance: "as long as there has been colonialism on our lands, there has been resistance" (p. 101). McKenzie et al. (2012) and Simpson (2011) site examples of acts of resistance against colonization, from hiding children from authorities assigned to remove children from their homes and be placed in residential schools; to teaching children their language; to caring for family members in the face of violence and poverty. These acts of resistance hold no relationship to deficiency, and begs the question that Foucault was most interested in, which asks why one discourse becomes dominant and accepted, and the alternative discourses are "treated with suspicion and... [are] sited both metaphorically and literally at the margins of society" (Mills, 2004, p. 17).

Understanding Foucault's notion of power, further unfolds his position on discourse and brings attention to a pivotal Foucauldian concept, that of subjectivity. Subjectivities, in the context of this research, are based on Foucauldian concepts of power (Foucault, 1978, 1980). Foucault conceptualized power not in terms of repression, but as a productive and constitutive



force. Accordingly, power is thought to be "exercised in a multi-directional fashion on both dominant and dominated groups in part through a process of 'self-formation or auto-colonization'" (Heron, 2005, p. 347). Heron (2005) maintains "[i]ndividuals take up or identify with particular subject positions structured through relations of power and made available through different discourses" (p. 347). Therefore, in this study, the notion of subjectivity is a relevant and useful mechanism to gain insight into how the discourse of White femininity constitutes social workers, and in turn how social workers invest in the discourse of White femininity. It also traces instances in which White social workers subvert or resist the discourse of White femininity.

The final element that is pivotal to understanding Foucault's use of discourse is his view of knowledge. Foucault saw knowledge as tethered to power, seeing it as a consequence of power struggle (Mills, 2004). His belief that power and knowledge are inseparable was significant enough that he preferred to place the terms together as power/knowledge or knowledge/power (White, 1991). Feder (2011) describes Foucault's views on these two inseparable terms:

The kind of knowledge to which Foucault directs us with this term, then, is one that has no clear source, but that a genealogical analysis-- an examination of the historical conditions of possibility-- illuminates, describing the accidents of history that result in particular consolidations of what counts as truth or knowledge. It is not the knowledge that is decreed by some authoritative body 'from on high', but is more precisely described in the passive voice: it is the kind of knowledge that is 'recognized as true', 'known to be the case'. For Foucault, this knowledge can only exist with the support of arrangements of

power, arrangements that likewise have no clear origin, no person or body who can be said to 'have' it. (p. 56)

With Foucault's view of power/knowledge in mind, this research study questions the taken for granted assumptions posed as truth in contemporary social work practices, specifically community-based practices. If the discourse of White femininity has been taken for granted and accepted as true, in what ways has it occupied the social work subject? In what ways have White, women social workers acted as conduits for White femininity and contributed to reinforcing this discourse as natural? While this research study is not genealogical, in the background section of this theses I have drawn attention to the historical underpinnings that have contributed to the formation of the modern-day social work subject.

Tonkiss (1998) speaks to the messiness of discourse analysis, describing it as “largely 'data-driven' it is difficult to formalize any standard approach to it” (p. 250). Amidst the ‘messy’, Tonkiss (1998) has managed to identify key themes and useful techniques to conduct discourse analysis. I use Tonkiss's (1998) approach to discourse analysis, particularly her techniques in sorting, coding, and analysing data to navigate the data collected for this research study. The techniques she suggests as useful include using key words and themes; looking for variation in the text; reading for emphasis and detail; and attending to silences. Using key words and themes entails strategies not unlike those used for traditional approaches to organizing and coding data. Tonkiss (1998) suggests that as one begins to sort through their data, identifying recurrent themes or terms can help bring a “more systematic order to the analytic process” (p. 254). As researchers start to organize their data around various themes, questions emerge that start to inform the analysis. Such inquiries about the themes might include: “What ideas and representations cluster around them? What associations are being established? Are particular

meanings being mobilized? Is a certain reading implied by the organization of the text?" (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 255).

Another useful practice for discourse analysis, is looking for variations in the text. The results of using this technique, which tracks differences, is a two-fold process, which on the one hand points to the text's "internal hesitations or inconsistencies" (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 255), and on the other hand demonstrates "the way that discourse aims to combat alternative accounts" (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 255). The third suggested method for analyzing the data according to Tonkiss (1998), consists of reading for emphasis and detail. While looking for patterns of variation is already a way of paying attention to emphasis and detail, in general what this technique entails is a deeper look at the ways in which the meanings within the text are put together. Whereas other forms of data analysis take what is said verbatim, discourse analysts are interested in how these meanings were made possible.

The final technique offered by Tonkiss (1998) for researchers embarking on discourse analysis, she refers to as attending to silences. Tonkiss (1998) discusses the double reading that takes place during discourse analysis: the first reading, the researcher reads *along* with the text, attending to the "meanings that are being created, to look at the way the text is organized and to pay attention to how things are being said" (p. 258). The second reading requires the researcher to read *against the grain* of the text; "to look to silences or gaps, to make conjectures about alternative accounts which are excluded by omission, as well as those which are countered by rhetoric" (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 258). Overall, discourse analysis is a complex, and interpretative process that is not beholden to any standardized approach. However, Tonkiss's (1998) suggested techniques for approaching discourse analysis provide helpful touchstones for researchers to connect with as they navigate the murky waters their data swims within.

### 3.32 Autoethnography

As a White, woman-identified social worker it is necessary to implicate myself in this study. What brought me to this research was not my own Whiteness, but my witnessing harm in my own and others' social work practice. Having spent several years working in child welfare I experienced ongoing ethical distress about the nature of the work, seeing it as both helping and harming, often simultaneously. It was not until I began exploring the literature in this area that all the instances of harm, I was naming, I came to understand as examples of Whiteness and colonization. Therefore, to situate myself clearly within this research study I intend to use autoethnography. While discourse analysis is used to analyze interview data, I will use elements of autoethnography to deepen my own understanding.

Autoethnography is a vast field of study. Numerous iterations of this methodology are available for qualitative research. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) broadly define autoethnography as an "approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (para. 1). Rigorous methods of autoethnography emphasize the necessity for the personal narratives of the researcher to be analyzed and interpreted likewise to data collected in any social scientific inquiry approach (Chang, 2008). Chang (2008), in reference to autoethnography, states "[a]t the end of a thorough self-examination in its cultural context, autoethnographers hope to gain a cultural understanding of self and others directly and indirectly connected to self" (p. 49).

For the purposes of this research study, I reflect on and interweave my own personal narrative based on events in my personal and professional life relative to the research. I am not adopting an ethnographic approach that expects a rigorous analyzes and interpretation of my own

stories as data, but instead I use this method of writing and researching as a way to critically reflect and situate myself as the researcher. In this way, my intention is to be accountable to that which is being studied and to the participants engaging in the research. Referring to personal narrative, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) argue that it encourages researchers:

. . . to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. (para. 22)

While traditional social science researchers would view this particular form of autoethnography as controversial in the realm of research (Ellis et al., 2011), I believe my use of discourse analysis alongside autoethnography makes solid these places of precarity. For example, on its own personal narrative is at risk of being too "aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic" (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 34). Equated more closely to an artform than science, critics of autoethnography argue that it is not a viable methodology. However, researchers that support the use of autoethnography assert that as a method, autoethnography "attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 36). While autoethnography can be used on its own, I am choosing to use it only in part because of its rigorous emphasis on self-reflexivity.

As a White woman and social worker myself I am implicated in the research study, and to either completely remove my story or only offer it in part would minimize the bias that shapes the study. Additionally, because the study interrogates Whiteness and I am White, I have an additional responsibility. Theologist, Karen Teel (2015), discusses the ongoing tension of White

people engaging in conversations about race. She documents this tension as three-fold, comprised of: White people talking about race can end up centering Whiteness, White guilt, and overall encouraging White, navel-gazing; White people researching in the area of race and racism can also mislead other White people into believing that White researchers in this area are experts on racism; and finally, research in this area by White people is at risk of asking for comfort from people of colour. Therefore, researching race or not researching race are both fraught (Teel, 2015). Teel (2015) references philosopher George Yancy (2012), a distinguished black scholar of critical Whiteness studies, in her choice to pursue research in the area of Whiteness as a White woman. She states:

George Yancy... has requested that White thinkers theorize how it feels to be a White problem. Depressing, demoralizing, and downright ugly as White racist self-disclosure can be, it appears that he finds it illuminating when White people attempt honestly the racist workings of our minds. On reflection, this makes sense. People of color know the effects of racism much more intimately than most White people ever will, but they can't get inside our White heads. (Teel, 2015, p. 23)

Overall, discourse analysis is an appropriate methodology to analyze the data to answer my research question, while autoethnography works alongside discourse analysis to effectively and rigorously situate myself as the researcher.

### **3.4 Methods**

This qualitative research study uses one to one, semi-structured interviews with community-based social workers in Alberta who have practised for a minimum of two years. My decision to interview community social workers specifically is based on the perception within the field of social work that community work is the more social justice oriented or "radical" form

of social work (Occhiuto & Rowlands, 2019). While there are a variety of community-based approaches within the field of social work, some of the overarching themes in this practice context include: collaboration with community members; early intervention; preventative action; use of local resources; and the empowerment of community members for the common good (Stepney & Popple, 2008). This form of social work practice contrasts with traditional approaches to social work which emphasizes reactive responses to client needs; practices shaped by institutional norms and expectations; professional expertise; and interventions directed at the individual based on notions of pathology (Stepney & Popple, 2008).

Due to the collaborative and empowerment practices foundational to community-based social work, a dangerous perception exists that community social workers are ‘always helpful’ to the people they work alongside and equally successful at "interrogating existing hierarchies of power" (Occhiuto & Rowlands, 2019, p. 197). Occhiuto and Rowlands (2019) emphasize that this danger in community work is heightened due to the disproportionate numbers of White practitioners within this particular field of social work. In part, my intention for this research study is to unveil that complicity with White femininity is inevitable in social work regardless of how radical one's field of practice is purported to be. Applebaum (2015), an education scholar, based off the work of Yancy (2015) contend that being a White anti-racist always requires vigilance-- there is never the top of a mountain or a place of arrival, instead there is the enduring, day to day work of tending to one's complicity with structures of Whiteness.

I used purposive sampling to recruit eight participants. Qualitative research studies focus on small sample sizes, achieved purposefully, to obtain "*information-rich* cases for study in depth" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). According to Patton (1990), information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the

research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling" (p. 169). A recruitment letter (see Appendix A) was sent via e-mail to invite potential participants. The letter was circulated through my social work network including former colleagues, peers, and friends, through the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW). Interested participants were invited to contact me via telephone or email.

I additionally used snowball techniques to build on my sample. Snowball sampling asks well-situated people who would be beneficial to recruit for the purposes of the research study (Patton, 1990). All interviews were conducted by Zoom video call due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. A written consent form (Appendix B) was provided to each research participant in advance of the interview to process, ask questions, and if interested, sign. More details regarding consent will be outlined in the ethics portion of this proposal below. Lastly, a field guide (Appendix C) was used as the foundation for my interviews.

### **3.4 Ethics**

I submitted a research proposal outlining ethical considerations to my supervisor Dr. Walsh. Ethics approval was then obtained from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board prior to commencing my study. I also completed the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics.

In order to receive informed consent from the research participants I ensured that each potential participant was made aware of what kinds of information would be needed from them; that they themselves had all the information required about the research study in order to provide informed consent; and lastly that the participants had free choice to provide consent (Wood & Ross-Kerr, 2011). For the purposes of this research study each participant was informed of the nature of the study, the duration of the study, and the purpose of the study. In this research study participants were asked partake in a one-time interview, lasting anywhere from 45 minutes to 90



minutes. They were informed that the purpose of the interviews would be to illicit each participant's narrative about their social work practice, which will in turn be interpreted by myself as the researcher to trace performances of White femininity and the contrary, instances where White femininity is resisted. Lastly, the potential participants were advised that the purpose of the study is to build awareness among social workers, researchers, policy-makers, and agencies about the influence of White femininity on practice in order to explore new possibilities for social work practice that are anti-racist.

Potential participants were also made aware of some of the risks posed to them by participating in the research study. For example, there is potential emotional harm that could be caused based on the nature of the research. Having White people talk about instances where they might have enacted racism, or been complicit in Whiteness could evoke emotional vulnerability that needs to be tended to. Additionally, because discourse analysis depends on the researcher interpreting the data obtained from the interviews, the participants might be unprepared for what the researcher's findings are. In order to address these concerns, the participants were made aware of the risk, offered the sharing of resources in the community, such as counselling services if needed, in order to address any emotional harm that might arise; and lastly, I made sure to provide the participants with the results of my analysis prior to publication to ensure fidelity. Participants were advised they had two weeks to review the transcripts and make requests for changes to the transcripts or removal of information in the transcripts that they were not comfortable having used in the analysis. They were advised that after the two-week time the transcripts were used by the researcher for the purposes of the research.

In the context of emotional vulnerability and thus, potential harm experienced by the participants, I ensured that I maintained my boundaries as a researcher and did not enact my

social work clinical skills, which are therapeutic. I also ensured each person consenting to participate in the study did so based on free choice. Because I am using purposive sampling, and distributing a letter through not only specific agencies, and the ACSW, but through my own personal and professional network, there is a risk that participants could feel pressured to participate in the study. To ensure each participant's freedom of choice I informed them they were allowed to withdraw at any time before or during the study without any penalty (Wood & Ross-Kerr, 2011). Potential participants did not receive any financial compensation and were informed that participation is voluntary (Wood & Ross-Kerr, 2011).

Wood and Ross-Kerr (2011) underscore the principle of beneficence within research studies. This principle asks what good a study does for anyone: does the study benefit the research subject? Does it benefit anyone else? Overall, Wood and Ross-Kerr (2011) assert that the benefits must outweigh any potential harm to the research participants. Some of the potential benefits accrued by the research participants in this study are increased awareness of their complicity with White femininity, and the ability to improve their social work practice based on these learnings. In turn, improvements in practice, based on increased awareness by not only the participants, but the readers, other researchers, policy makers, educators etc. will have great benefit to clients, who social worker practices are directed towards. It was critical to communicate not only the risks to potential research participants but the benefits too, so that they could make a fully informed decision to participate.

Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of participants is a significant ethical consideration. Confidentiality was addressed by securing any documentation I acquired in an encrypted, password protected folder on my computer, that only myself as the researcher had access to. Access could have been provided to my supervisor and any other potential researchers

that needed access to my raw data in order to replicate my findings, as indicated in the consent form (Appendix B), but thus far has not been necessary (Wood & Ross-Kerr, 2011). Anonymity has been ensured by not publishing the names of research participants and as the researcher I make every attempt possible to avoid revealing any personal characteristics about the participants when providing quoted material. All of these nuances were addressed with potential participants prior to them signing a participant consent form and ongoingly, as needed.

Autoethnography has some specific ethical considerations that I outline in the following paragraphs. A central ethical consideration within autoethnography is the portrayal of others in the context of the researcher's personal story (Lapadat, 2017). As much as possible autoethnographers need to obtain consent from the individuals referenced in their stories. This necessity can prove complicated due to the evolution of writing one's story over time. Equally, anonymity of the portrayal of others proves more challenging in autoethnography than other research methodologies because the researchers themselves are identified. Referring to the advice of Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis (2009), Lapadat (2017) states "that a way to approach ethical quandaries is to openly and repeatedly reexamine and make ethical decisions within each situational context, accepting often there is no unambiguous solution" (p. 594).

Ethical considerations of researcher vulnerability are important to address as well (Lapadat, 2017). Opening up and sharing one's personal stories as the researcher risks exposure to public scrutiny by readers or an audience (Lapadat, 2017). Preparing oneself as the researcher for these critiques is fundamental and understanding that professional consequences can occur in result is necessary (Lapadat, 2017). Having people to talk to and debrief with through the process of autoethnographic research is a way to care for oneself and prepare oneself for unforeseen consequences (Lapadat, 2017). The benefits of autoethnographic research outweigh the potential

consequences, but nonetheless, these risks need to be brought to the researcher's awareness and prepared for as much as possible.

### **3.5 Rigour**

When discussing the rigour of a qualitative research study, Creswell and Poth (2018) use the term validation. They consider that 'validation' in qualitative research... [is an] attempt to assess the 'accuracy' of the findings, as best described by the researcher, the participants, and the readers (or reviewers)" (p. 10). Validation in qualitative research from Creswell and Poth's (2018) perspective is a process, which opposed the use of validation as a verification strategy within quantitative research. This short section of my thesis speaks to my own validation strategies based on Creswell and Poth's (2018) suggested validation framework, which consists of nine strategies altogether including: "Having a peer review or debriefing of the data and research process;" "Corroborating evidence through triangulation;" "Discovering negative case analysis or disconfirming evidence;" "Clarifying researcher bias or engaging in reflexivity;" "Member checking or seeking participant feedback;" "Having a prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field;" "Collaborating with participants;" "Enabling external audits;" and "Generating rich, thick descriptions" (p. 18). Creswell and Poth (2018) do not recommend using all nine strategies but suggest selecting at least two to engage with. For the purposes of my research study, the validation strategies I engaged with included corroborating evidence through triangulation, member checking or seeking participant feedback, clarifying research bias and engaging in reflexivity, and having a peer review or debriefing of the data and research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To achieve credibility of my research study, I drew from multiple sources and theories that corroborated my findings. This process of triangulation was used throughout my study

process, from the planning stages of my research, to the data collection, and throughout my interpretations and writing. Member checking was an important aspect of my research process. Because discourse analysis is interpretive and therefore highly contingent on researcher bias, soliciting the perspectives of the research participants on the "data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions" (Creswell, 2018, p. 20) is critical to the credibility of the research study. Clarifying researcher bias and engaging in reflexivity is a validation strategy that I approached with significant rigour. Using autoethnography as part of my methodology, deepened the ways in which I could engage with the data, and the overall research study. The above methodology section outlines the uses of autoethnography and the ways in which it interweaves the personal narrative of the researcher throughout the interpretations of the data. This self-reflective approach to my research study ensured that my biases were articulated and as much as possible I attempted to demonstrate how these biases implicated my interpretations.

The last validation strategy that I engaged with was what Creswell (2018) refers to as having a peer review or debriefing of the data and research process. Creswell (2018) draws from Lincoln and Guba's (1945) work, suggesting that:

The role of the peer debriefer... [is] a 'devil's advocate,' an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings. (p. 18)

My supervisor, Dr. Walsh, effectively fulfilled these various roles throughout my research study. She has not only been a great support, but someone who has held me accountable and challenged me as I journeyed through this process. I believe her guidance and mentorship has helped me to achieve a credible and trustworthy research study.

The objective of my research is to trace the effects of the dominant discourse of White femininity on White woman-identified, community-based social workers. In this chapter I reviewed the purpose, theories, and methodology I used to collect and analyze the narratives of eight White woman-identified, community-based social work practitioners. The following chapter presents the results of my research study based on the methodology outlined in this chapter.

## **Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The following section details the findings of my research study. Aligning with numerous FDA studies, the interpretation or discussion will thread throughout the presentation of my findings, rather than in an additional chapter as in a more traditional qualitative study. The autoethnographic component of my study in this chapter is reflected in the use of my own personal narrative at the beginning of each section, presented in italics. The personal narrative serves to introduce the section topic within my own experience. Some narratives are deeply personal, others share day to day experiences both illuminate how the dominant discourse of White femininity has seeped in. My hope is to connect the reader to the findings on a deeper level and implicate myself in this study as a White woman-identified social worker. Following each personal narrative, I introduce the following discursive technologies: (1) Fulfilling a Moral Imperative; (2) Talking about Race: Silence, Discomfort, Dilution, and Conflation as Tools to Conceal Race, Racism, and Colonization in Social Work; and (3) Defending, Witnessing, and Disrupting White Femininity. In the following sections I describe each of the three discourses and provide illustrative quotes drawn from the transcripts and labelled with the participant's self-chosen pseudonym. I used the pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. Throughout the chapter, I draw in literature to situate my findings in the broader context of research in this area. I conclude this chapter by summarizing the details of my findings and discussion.

### **4.2 Fulfilling A Moral Imperative**

*My childhood is storied, as most are, and particular traumatic events have shaped a large part of my identity. I cannot talk about why I became a social worker without sharing these parts of myself. My parent's divorce when I was 12 was pivotal because it broke apart the world that I knew. It made me feel abnormal, ashamed, and broken, to the point that it took months to tell anyone. As a kid I really wanted to fit in and I was attached to the normative family life that married parents seemingly offered. My dad moved into a house not far away, and my two sisters and I spent the next several years moving back and forth between the two homes on a biweekly basis.*

*Sadly, my dad struggled, and never really recovered from the separation. His own childhood trauma took over and without my mom around, he was unable to cope with his demons. One night he went out to a bar, and outside in the smoking area he was passed a pipe, which he assumed had marijuana in it. He looked down at the round, silver bowl and saw a small White rock. Having had a few beers, he only paused for a second before taking a drag. It was this moment that sent him into a drug-addicted spiral for the next four years. While four years does not seem too long, it did enough damage to fill his arteries with plaque leading to an eventual heart attack. Dad was two years sober when he died, which offered some solace to us, his kids, for him to be 'himself' before he died.*

*Throughout this decade of difficult times that my family experienced I gained significant perspective and certainly a lot of skills. My empathy greatly increased, my judgement decreased, and my ability to talk to people about their struggles was apparent. Every time I talked to a friend or a family member about their challenges, they would thank me for my advice and compliment me on how great I was to talk to. The validation I was receiving was rewarding and made me feel like I had a purpose. Social work was my avenue to fulfill this purpose I had*



*stumbled upon. My desire to help was strong and there seemed to be no better fit than this career path.*

Almost all study participants identified similar justifications for pursuing social work professionally. Overarchingly the two discourses that emerged from the data that led participants to the social work profession are: the desire to help and childhood adverse experiences (ACEs). ACEs are "traumatic experiences that occur in a child's life that can result in poor outcomes in physical and mental health over the life course" (Strompolis et al., 2019, p. 310). Participants' desires to help secure the script of White femininity because of the moral foundations from which these desires arise. Also, the ways in which participants perform White femininity by employing their ACEs is a mutualizing experience to the trauma of oppression faced by clients. This mutualizing or "sameness" unconsciously employed by participants I categorize as a "settler moves to innocence" a term coined by Tuck and Wang (2012, p. 9).

#### ***4.21 The Desire to Help***

The desire to help is demonstrated by Katie's response when asked what made her decide to become a social worker:

I got into because you know what, man. I got into social work because I knew a kid next door who was in the foster care system and like, always talked really nice about their social worker. And I felt this is a really cool kid who's talking really nice about a social worker, and like, man, that sounds like a cool thing to do... just be able to help people... and that's kinda' like where the idea got rolling. But even then, you know, it comes from a place of, you know... I want to, like I can do good.

Katie's sentiment not only indicates her reasons for pursuing social work as a desire to help, but also "to do good". Although she uses slightly different language, Ellen, who grew up rurally,

talks about how this context shaped her desire to pursue social work. Her drive to give back shares the same intention:

[G]rowing up there was this real sense of community. Um, volunteerism in these small communities is really critical, um, in a way that it's maybe, you know, maybe more important than it would be in an urban centre. Um, and yeah, I think I always had a little bit of, uh, drive to give back, um, because it was very fortunate to grow up here and I had a lot of great experiences.

Ellen also states facetiously when asked about her motivation to become a social worker "you know, I think the common answer when people say, why did you become as social worker is, because I wanna' help, right?" The somewhat sarcastic tone underpinning Ellen's statement indicates her awareness that the desire to help that shapes the culture of the profession (Rossiter, 2001) is a cliché.

The desire to help, do good or give back as clearly identified by the study participants are reflections of dominant discourses of White femininity and specifically how it is enacted in social work. Heron (2007) discusses the formation of White femininity through the construction of the colonial empire, which required the role of the White feminine to subjugate non-normative subjects, i.e., the poor, disabled, racialized, Black, Indigenous person, through moral regulation. While the ideal and normative subject was the wealthy, property owning, White, European, male, his authority rested in the public realm of politics, economics, and the law. His counterpart in contrast, his virtuous wife, and mother to his children was designated power and control over the domestic sphere, which included the subject of morality. Morality was not under the jurisdiction of the White woman because of any inherent quality they embodied, instead it was applied as a method of regulation to reign in White women, who were regarded as sexually deviant,

passionate, and irrational (Heron, 2007). The White woman as the moral figurehead of the nation-state was inscribed through the roles of motherhood and Christianity, which became dutiful expectations of middle- and upper-class White women. These dual roles of the public and private realms that wealthy White men and women occupied formed the foothold and identity of the colonial empire (Heron, 2007; Thobani, 2007). It is significant to note that although White women were assigned the role of moral gatekeeper, the White male subject remained in ultimate control of this jurisdiction (Heron, 2007; Chapman & Withers, 2019).

Eventually White women resisted the confines of the domestic sphere and sought opportunities to enter into the public sphere (Heron, 2007; Thobani, 2007). Their most obtainable opportunities were in areas of philanthropy, which while under the control of White men, did not have the same level of gender-based restrictions that other positions enforced (Heron, 2007). Eventually philanthropic positions became occupied predominantly by White women and it fulfilled their domestic mission to "help" women and families of the working classes that failed to uphold the colonial standards of the masculine and feminine roles and therefore were considered morally degenerate (Heron, 2007; Thobani, 2007). It was through middle and upper-class White women's sensible and self-sacrificing attributes that the deserving poor could then be *saved*. The perpetuation of the White woman as savior rests on the standards held to her— if she failed to or chose not to fulfill the moral identity subscribed to her, she would no longer be considered worthy.

It is evident in each of the interviews in this research study, that scripts of White femininity are being fulfilled through the desire to help. Heron's (2007) theory, colonial continuities, is relevant here. Colonial continuities refer to the "historical derived commonalities that are productive of the identities of White middle-class identity in the world today" (Heron,

2007, p. 33). As already noted, discourses of goodness and self-sacrifice that constitute the larger discourse of White femininity were subjected onto middle and upper-class White women as the colonial empire sought to establish its roots. As White women entered the public sphere through philanthropy, these same discourses shaped the institutions philanthropy was conducted through, including social work. Contemporary social work is a key avenue for colonial power, as White women continue to be drawn to the profession for its promise to fulfill their desires to be good and helpful, ultimately reinforcing a morally elevated identity, which justifies intervention into the lives of Others.

Foucault's critical explorations emphasize the same conclusions made by Heron (2007) in her depiction of colonial continuities. Chambon, Irving, and Epstein (1999) summarize the aims of Foucault's work in stating:

Philosophically, Foucault framed his quest as uncovering the making of contemporary "self" and the mechanisms that constitute this self. Self cannot be understood outside history. It is not a naturally given essence but the dynamic result of events and changing circumstances. Defining *self* is therefore not the beginning of inquiry but rather its endpoint. (p. 52)

With this summation in mind, a curiosity about how social workers are invited to understand their identity is significant. Ahmed's (2007) assertion that Whiteness is an orientation point, most often invisible to the White person, illuminates the unconscious performance of White femininity in social work. While social work presents as a seemingly innocent project premised on social worker's desires to help and do good, the colonial underpinnings that shape the institution through the discursive framework of White femininity and manifest through the social work subject are concealed.

#### ***4.22 Childhood Adversity and Trauma as Settler Move to Innocence***

This section explores participants' motivations for pursuing social work as a profession childhood adversity and trauma as a "settler move to innocence" (Tuck & Wang, 2012, p. 9). In addition to the desire to help Badwall's (2014) study reveals that participants pursued social work as underpinned by a history of struggle and the ensuing pursuit of social justice. Regarding the participants in her research study, Badwall (2014) states, their "initial decisions to join social work are largely shaped by marginalization in their own lives and perceptions of social work as a site in which they may engage in processes to change the injustices that they know intimately" (p. 63). In other words, a history of struggle according to Badwall (2014) means more specifically a historical experience of marginalization. Additionally, it is these experiences of marginalization that led racialized social workers to the profession with a desire to dismantle or disrupt systems of oppression that they themselves experienced. This motivation to dismantle systems of oppression ultimately echoes a desire among the participants in Badwall's (2014) study, for social justice.

Social justice is not explicitly mentioned as a motivation for becoming a social worker among the participants in this research study. While threads of pursuing social justice are evident throughout the interviews in response to other questions, it is not identified directly as an initial reason to pursue social work professionally. This is unexpected considering the profession is premised on its pursuit (CASW, 2020). In contrast participants in this research study reveal ACEs as influential in their decision to pursue social work as a career. As White women their historical struggles are distinct from the racially identified social workers historical struggles in Badwall's (2014) study. A further distinction is that participants in this study identify that their

adversity in childhood inspired them to want to *help* others or themselves through social work, not pursue social justice.

Annette discusses her journey to social work stating "so one of the reasons I stepped into, well, initially addictions was because I came out of a history of addictive behaviour, like my family of origin, right. And I knew that I needed to deal with myself, with some of that hangover of some of that in myself." While Annette was originally in school for addictions counselling, she eventually transitioned into social work education. Her family of origin experiences of addiction both led her to the profession and became an avenue for her to learn more about her own challenges that stemmed from childhood. In a similar way as Annette, Ellen describes how her ACEs led to social work:

My father is an alcoholic. He's been in recovery for 20 plus years. Um, and so there was always this understanding as a child that you, you know, that you help, right? So, he was a sponsor to numerous people. He was involved with meetings and whatnot. My mother, having gone through the experience of, you know, of being, a first generation Canadian, and then also having grown up in a home impacted by alcoholism and divorce and that sort of thing, when it wasn't really the thing to be a part of, they had that understanding as well that you, that you just help and it's just what you do. So yeah, I think just those natural experiences led me to this work.

This thread retells my own story of how my father's addiction shaped my interest in social work. Prior to being in social work, I did not have a clear understanding of oppression and its operations. Equally there was a conflation in my mind between ACEs and the experience of oppression. My experience of childhood adversity, which ultimately caused trauma, led me to a naive assumption that my experience of pain was equivalent to the pain faced by clients (Tuck &

Wang, 2012). This is assertion is not to say that ACEs does not occur among clients or the racialized social workers who participated in Badwall's (2014) study, as it certainly does, instead I illuminate the problematic erasure of systemic oppression and its traumatic effects through dominant discourses of trauma, that thread through trauma-based assessments such as ACEs. This erasure invites middle-class and wealthy, White social workers to mutualize their ACEs with the systemic violence that is responsible for the trauma experienced by clients and social workers who embody intersections of oppressed identities, for example, the racialized client or social worker. The distinctiveness of these experiences of trauma is evident in Badwall's (2014) study of racialized social worker, who, through their own experiences of marginalization, were aware of the systemic implications of their experience and were then motivated to enact social justice through social work. Most of the White-identified social workers in this study on the other hand, prior to their entry into the field were unaware of the systemic implications of trauma. The lack of systemic violence experienced by the participants in this study may explain why their motivation to pursue social work is limited to the desire to help and not rooted in a broader desire for social justice.

While social justice is a complex and contested term, it has been situated as a "organizing value and foundation in social work" (Morgaine, 2014, p. 3) since the early twentieth century (Reisch, 2002). A social justice orientation within the profession of social work was an alternative to the charity model that was the dominant approach used prior to the twentieth century (Reisch, 2002). The charity model, dating back to the enactment of the British Poor Laws of 1601 and 1834 in England and Wales (Smith-Carrier, 2020), created a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. The deserving poor was categorized by the "infirm, disabled, or elderly," while the undeserving poor were the "able-bodied, employable subjects"

(Smith-Carrier, 2020, p. 158). Individuals who were classified as deserving were provided with limited assistance, while the undeserving were sent to workhouses to be taught the value of hard work (Smith-Carrier, 2020).

Private philanthropy and the rise of the Charity Organization Society (COS) in the late 1800s, provided care for individuals facing poverty. Support was given to individuals, but efforts to change the systemic conditions, which caused poverty in the first place were unaddressed. It was the settlement movement, attributed to the work of Jane Addams in Chicago, which led to social work's "distinct focus on justice and social change" (Smith-Carrier, 2020, p. 158). Addams recognized that the charity model would never solve the pervasive issue of poverty, and regarded the model as rooted in pity. The settlement reformers on the other hand sought to eradicate poverty through systemic change. The charity model in social work was the dominant approach until after the first and second world wars. As men returned from the war, and were subject to injury, disability, and financial loss, it became more widely recognized that poverty was not due to individual deficit, but a result of structural deficiencies therefore a structurally driven approach to social work became more commonplace (Smith-Carrier, 2020). While a social justice-oriented approach, which addresses the structural underpinnings to individual problems, is a foundation within modern social work, the charitable model also remains influential (Reisch, 2002; Smith-Carrier, 2020). The language of 'helping' used by the participants in this study, reflects the charity approach to social work, because it positions the social worker as a benefactor to the client, as opposed to an individual working alongside the client to fight against social injustice.

Returning to the discussion on the discourse of trauma, I continue to unravel the erasure of systemic violence as a root of trauma for marginalized populations. The literature is critical of



the language of trauma used in professional contexts due to its erasure of systemic violence that often underpins experiences of trauma, particularly among marginalized groups (Maxwell, 2014; McEwen & Gregerson, 2018). McEwen and Gregerson (2018), discuss the limitations of ACEs to address structural conditions that produce adversity. Felitti and colleagues (1998) seminal study developed the concept of ACEs, which included 10 types of experiences: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; emotional neglect; physical neglect; witnessing domestic violence; household substance use; mental illness in the household; parental separation or divorce; or a household member who had spent time in prison (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). In their critique McEwen and Gregerson (2018) assert that as the sample consisted of primarily of White, middle-class adults, it was not representative of the broader population and was therefore an "inadequate measure of adverse experiences" (p. 790).

To rectify the inaccuracy of the early ACEs research, McEwen and Gregerson (2018) suggest situating the research in "the broader context of the social determinants of health and the biology of social adversity" which "invites research, practice, and policy that address the significant adversities children face resulting from child poverty, economic and racial segregation, unaffordable housing, stagnant wages, and weak social supports for parents and caretakers" (p. 790). ACEs is but one example that demonstrates how dominant trauma and adversity discourses operate through professional individual assessments to situate the experiences of trauma and adversity as divorced from structural oppression, actively erasing the systemic violence that ultimately underpins the trauma experienced by marginalized groups.

Historical trauma, in contrast, is a concept in the literature that is used to distinguish trauma caused by systemic violence from mainstream conceptualizations of trauma (Grayshield

et al., 2015; Morgan & Freeman, 2009; Shea et al., 2019). Historical trauma, according to Shea et al. (2019), is comprised of three salient themes:

The first being the actual domination and assault of the dominant culture on the masses, the second being that the generation receiving the trauma demonstrates the biological, societal and psychological symptoms of the trauma, and the final phase being the transmission of those responses to successive generations. (p. 554)

The discourse of historical trauma is not without critique. Maxwell (2014) frames her critique in regard to Indigenous communities. Prior to the 1990s trauma as a concept, she advances, was rarely cited in Indigenous mental health literature in North America. If trauma was referenced, it was through a diagnostic lens, attributed solely to individual responses to events by an Indigenous person, events including sexual abuse, relocation, or participation in the Vietnam War (Maxwell, 2014). Maxwell (2014) asserts that trauma's "emergence in late 19th-century Europe and its subsequent trajectory can be understood as a 'dual genealogy,' involving a dialectic of moral ideas about victimhood and scientific ideas about pathology resulting from the experience of suffering" (p. 411). Therefore, Maxwell (2014) suggests that the analysis of trauma in certain groups should not only trace shifting clinical knowledge and practice but must look to the evolution of the social recognition of victimhood. As an example, Maxwell (2014) discusses how Canadian colonial professional discourses place blame on Indigenous parenting practices for their "children's social suffering and failure to assimilate" (p. 420). In result, trauma among Indigenous people becomes conflated with Indigenous parenting practices, concealing the effects of neocolonialism which perpetuate the social issues present in Indigenous communities and entrench the lens of Indigenous people as "always and only victims" (Maxwell, 2014, p. 420). To relate back to my previous critique of mainstream notions of ACE and trauma being conflated

with trauma that results from systemic oppression, Maxwell (2014) proves the danger of how the language of trauma, regardless of what iteration, can mask the role of colonization and neo-colonization in perpetuating violence and social issues in Indigenous communities.

The use of the word trauma in relationship to individuals who use social work services is problematic because it invites good intentioned social workers to see their own personalized experiences of trauma manifest through ACEs as equal to the systemic violence and oppression faced by individuals accessing social work services, who would not be accessing services if it was not for their experiences of oppression. This viewpoint, when unaccounted for, becomes another means to mask systemic violence. Additionally, the social worker who has experienced childhood adversity can also take on the victimhood subscribed to users of social work services, and thereby positioning them as innocent and not complicit in systemic oppression. This innocence established by social workers, is elaborated in Tuck and Wang's (2012) concept of "settler moves to innocence" (p. 9).

Settler moves to innocence is a phenomenon of Whiteness, particularly in relation to Indigenous people, consisting of "those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege" (Tuck & Wang, 2012, p. 10). Tuck and Wang (2012) further assert that as "pain is the token for oppression, claims to pain then equate to claims of being an innocent non-oppressor" (p. 16). Although participants in this study did not explicitly equate their childhood adversity to the trauma of oppression faced by the clients they work alongside, nor were they directly asked, without a clear discernment between childhood adversity/trauma experienced outside of systems of oppression versus trauma as a symptom of systemic violence within social work research, education, and practice, it is not difficult to imagine how this transgression could or does occur

as a means for social workers to claim a position of innocence, thus justifying their intervention into the lives of the Other and denying their complicity in systems of oppression. This claim to innocence maintains the virtuous image of the social worker, ensuring compliance with the expectations scripted into the discourse of White femininity (Badwall, 2014; Heron, 2005). Further research that invites White social workers to reflect on the meaning of their own trauma and its relationship to their pursuit of social work could clarify the extent to which this phenomenon is prevalent.

#### ***4.23 When Social Work Bodies Fail to Fit the White Feminine Script***

Significant to note is the subjugation of White femininity onto all social workers. While this narrative shapes the contours of all social worker bodies, its continuity is interrupted when subjugated onto or performed by racialized social workers. This assertion is demonstrated by Badwall's (2014) research, in which she argues that racialized social workers are unable to meet the standards of the "good" social worker when faced with racism from their clients. No longer able to enact empathy or client-centered practice which secure the identity of the proper moral subject, the racialized social worker disrupts the clutches of White supremacy when they decide not to ignore the racism they have experienced.

Two participants in this research study shared experiences which demonstrate their inability to fully enact the script of White femininity. For example, Katie talks about differences she embodies that distinguish her from the normative subject and consequently created barriers in her life:

I grew up in poverty, and I have a learning disability. I'm a single mom, and, you know, always getting that like, 'oh, you're so resilient, you're so strong.' And it's been offensive,

right, like because I shouldn't have to be. It really took me a really long time to understand why that bothered me so much.

For Katie, the frustration she expresses is largely due to the responses of other people, who, she says attempt to "mold... your hardships into something positive." This response from others, who represent the normative, while well intentioned, have a patronizing effect, establishing Katie as inferior and themselves as superior. These frustrating experiences she has had in her life have also occurred while in social work education, as for example, when the class is asked to discuss their social location, and Katie is marked by the social issues she has faced in her life positioning her as the Other.

Klara, another participant, shares her experience as a first-generation immigrant, referring to herself as "White but racialized", she elaborated:

One day I called Alberta Health Services, one of the departments of the Children's Hospital, and the nurse picked up, and she said, "by the way, what is your real name?" I said, "my real name is Klara." "Oh yeah, right, like all the Chinese. What is your real name?" I said, "my name is Klara." ... because she heard I had an accent, so she... thought that my name might be something else, and I really changed it just to anglophonize my name.

Visibly, Klara presents as White, but when she speaks and her accent is heard, she is no longer able to secure the discourse of the White feminine, shifting into the category of racialized Other, and subject to prejudice. These two examples illuminate the importance of intersectionality to understand the effects of Whiteness more fully. While an assumption can be made that White women fulfill the script of the White feminine completely, intersections including class, and ethnicity, demonstrated by these participants, disrupt the securement of this dominant discourse.

What are the effects of this disruption in the context of Ahmed's (2007) assertion that Whiteness is one's orientation point? Could it be assumed that these moments of disruption, particularly among White social workers, force them to see their orientation point, and therefore see the cloak of Whiteness or in the case of social work, the White feminine?

The thread of the White feminine can be disrupted by the racialized social worker and the poor or non-Western, White social worker. However, a significant distinction between the White social worker, regardless of other formative identities and the racialized social worker must be attended to. This distinction is the possibility for the White social worker to keep hidden or make invisible the points of difference that mark them as the Other, whereas the racialized social worker is unable to make invisible their racial difference. Katie discusses this reality, stating:

You don't know what I've had to go through unless I tell you, because you're not going to assume anything. When, guess what, you're sitting in a class of 20 people and you've got two people of colour in the class, and people start to make assumption right? ... And automatically people go to, 'oh, you know, I bet they had to work really hard to be here.' And, you know, you just want to be able to fit in... you know, like fit into the group. Everyone wants to be able to, you know, do really well, and stand out in their achievement. But they don't... yeah, they don't want to be patronized.

The choice to reveal one's differences experienced by the White social worker versus the lack of choice experienced by the racialized social worker is further evidenced by Ahmed's (2007) description of institutional Whiteness and recruitment:

The institutionalization of Whiteness involves work: the institution comes to have a body as an effect of this work. It is important that we do not reify institutions, by presuming they are simply given and that they decide what we do. Rather, institutions become given,

as an effect of the repetition of decisions made over time, which shapes the surface of institutional spaces. Institutions involve the accumulation of past decisions about how to allocate resources, as well as 'who' to recruit. Recruitment functions as a technology for the reproduction of Whiteness. (p. 157)

This institutional reproduction of Whiteness through the technology of reproduction can be translated into social work's recruitment of White women bodies as a mechanism to reproduce the White feminine institutionally. Ahmed (2007) further asserts that the institution does not desire Whiteness per se (or in this case the White feminine), but is oriented around Whiteness, therefore even in the instances where non-White bodies are recruited, the space demands for them to inhabit Whiteness. Ultimately, Ahmed (2007) contends, that White bodies recruited into White institutional spaces naturally align with the orientation of the institution. This she describes as a certain comfort or feeling of being at home, "[t]o be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappears from view" (p. 158).

The two participants that demonstrated their marked differences through class and ethnicity, describe their lack of belonging or feeling of being at home (Ahmed, 2007) in social work institutional spaces. However, because their appearance alone aligns with the institutional orientation of the White feminine, unless their differences are confessed, they can outwardly choose to blend into the sea of the White feminine. Of course, in the case of the one participant's ethnicity, which in this case became visible through her accent, the degree her marked difference can remain invisible is contingent on her silence. Therefore, her ability to blend in is only possible if she gives up her voice, which is certainly a powerful metaphor for oppression, and

puts into question her true agency to choose whether she confesses, as her confession is her voice.

Racialized social workers, as Badwall's (2014) findings suggest, are unable to choose to blend into the sea of the Whiteness and are thus noticed and marked by their black and brown bodies. This inability to disguise oneself on the one hand is an important opportunity for disrupting the White feminine as the power of Whiteness and the White feminine rests in its invisibility (Applebaum, 2016). When black or brown bodies enter White dominant spaces, it is their bodies of colour that, "re-confirm... the whiteness of the space" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). Badwall (2014) asserts that when these moments arise, and racialized social workers tell their own stories of social work, their narratives become "sites of resistance and directly challenge the ways in which whiteness is centred" in the field of social work (p. 189).

At the same time, the inability to disguise oneself to fit in, places oneself in a precarious position, vulnerable to the varied responses directed towards bodies of colour. Ahmed (2007) describes these instances as "moments of political or personal trouble" (p. 159), which could mean another person or group's moral superiority, racism, or physical violence. The agency to choose bestowed upon White bodies and denied to bodies of colour illuminates an important call to accountability for White bodies. For White bodies that do not fit alongside the institutional lines of the White feminine due to the various other lines their bodies subscribe to, whether they are lines of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., these internalized experiences of difference need to be acted upon to stand alongside bodies of colour and disrupt institutional White femininity. For White bodies that do subscribe fully to the lines of White femininity, they must be *made* aware of the implications of White femininity via other means, as their own lived



experience will not disrupt their fit, therefore their comfort will remain intact and White supremacy will retain its dominance.

Scripts of White femininity were performed by participants in this research study through their desire to help or do good. These performances are not unique to the participants but demonstrated throughout time from the origins of the colonial empire to present. Additionally, ACES underpinned several participants' desires to help or do good and those experiences were used as mutualizing agents between themselves as the social workers and the trauma experienced by clients they work alongside. Childhood adversity and the trauma of oppression, when equated, can be used by White social workers as a move to innocence, disentangling them from their complicity with systems of oppression, and further justifying their intervention into the lives of Others. While participants in this study noted the desire to help or do good as their motivation for pursuing social work, Badwall's (2014) research study underscored the motivation to pursue social justice as an underlying factor to choose social work as a profession, based on their own experiences of marginalization.

Finally, an unexpected finding in this research study, was the intersecting identities of participants that rendered the possibility of performing the White feminine fully, impossible. The participants' intersections of class and ethnicity with Whiteness disrupted the straight jacket of the White feminine, demonstrating the significance of an intersectional analysis to effectively understand the effects of the dominant discourse of White femininity. The findings of this study aligned with Badwall's (2014) findings, which illuminated how racialized social workers can only perform Whiteness to the degree that they do not experience racism. If racism does occur, they must respond or confront it, and therefore no longer fulfill the script of the "good" social worker, that is client-centered and empathetic (Badwall, 2014). While the similarities between

the disruptive effects of one's identity are significant in both this study and Badwall's (2014), it is perhaps more important to note the agency White social workers have to render invisible their markers of difference.

#### **4.3 Talking about Race: Silence, Discomfort, Dilution, and Conflation as Tools to Conceal Race, Racism, and Colonization in Social Work**

*I live in the inner city of Edmonton, Alberta, a neighbourhood of immigrants and refugees, Black and Indigenous folks, working class folks, and the part of the city that provides most of the social services for the unhoused, addicted, and poor folks. I am writing a statement about Black Lives Matter and police violence, that will go onto the community league website. A community league is a neighbourhood-based non-profit organization aimed at making the community a better place to live. I have worked as a social worker for six years, and I am pursuing a master's degree in the field. I am writing this letter and have no idea what language to use to describe people of colour. It seems trendy right now to use "BIPOC" (Black, Indigenous, person of colour), or should I just use racialized? Should I use people of colour? How have I practiced in a social justice profession that disproportionately serves people of colour, and I have nothing but doubt about the terminology to use? I go with BIPOC (because its trendy) and send off the statement to the all-White board that represents the community.*

*A year later I receive my ethics approval for my master's research study and I jump on the opportunity to get my call for participants out. My call for participants is advertised on a public forum for social workers. A day or two after it is posted I receive an email from a Black female social work scholar. She is critical of my study, and critical of why I am only interviewing White women. I have thought this through carefully. I know what to say. I quickly write a response citing how I am doing a discourse analysis and tracing how White women perform*

*White femininity in social work. I describe how I did not think it was appropriate for me as a White woman to trace performances of White femininity among BIPOC social workers. I am confident my response will be met with understanding. I am confident I am doing the right thing. I am wrong. She has several critiques, but what stood out to me as a truly ignorant error on my part was when I typed out Indigenous people and people of colour, I did not include Black people. Of course, the Black scholar is going to notice this. Of course, anyone who is engaging in anti-racism work is going to notice this. Why would I type out Indigenous and not Black? I recall writing it. I recall hesitating. Perhaps I would not have been in this predicament if I had just looked it up. A quick google search reveals that by singling out Black and Indigenous, BIPOC recognizes the unique relationship to Whiteness Black and Indigenous people have faced through slavery and colonization (Garcia, 2020). Yes, I can see now why leaving out Black was a problem, of course! How am I studying Whiteness through a critical lens, and I cannot even get the language right? Why is this so uncomfortable? The error is almost funny. The irony. I humble myself and shamefully apologize. My cheeks are hot as I type to her "I am a beginner." She responds, with less frustration this time, I picture her eyes rolling into the back of her head and a knowing smile on her face as she imagines the "do gooder" White girl. Maybe she isn't imagining that at all, but it's how I feel, a White girl wanting to do the right thing. "Good luck with your research," she replies. The conversation is over, and I think to myself how I will need much more than luck.*

Silence and discomfort about race are evident in most of the interviews. These behaviors, which operate as discursive technologies, were demonstrated through avoidance of talking about race and the conflation of race with other terms that the participants used to talk about race. The conflation of terms surrounding the conversation of race also points to other ways that unclear

distinctions within language conceal the operation of dominant narratives that subjugate some groups into the category of citizen and some groups into the category of Other. Equally language about race, in terms of who is deemed "raced" versus "not raced" illuminates the naturalization of certain identity categories, ie. Whiteness, while subverting or erasing the racialized Other. This section is significant because it signals a distinctive barrier to doing anti-racism work in the field of social work if White women social workers are unable or unwilling to talk about race.

#### ***4.31 Silence and Discomfort***

Silence and discomfort about race are discussed by Lerner (2021) in his research study on Whiteness in the social work classroom. He asserts that silence on issues of race is an indication that students have not self-reflected on their Whiteness and could be an indicator of colorblindness and therefore a lack of awareness of their complicity with racism. Lerner (2021) states, students experiencing discomfort about race results in an unwillingness to talk about it. Overall, he argues that when White students stay silent on issues of race whether due to discomfort or lack of awareness of their own complicity in race relations, the result is the maintenance of White supremacy. Olcon (2020) also discusses the avoidance of racial discomfort in her research on White social work students studying abroad in West Africa. Two of her participants demonstrated avoidance of racial discomfort through silence on issues of race, racism, and Whiteness. Upon further exploration with the students, Olcon (2020) learns that their silence is due to their lack of knowledge and experience with people of colour throughout their lives and therefore little confidence to speak on such matters.

While Lerner (2021) and Olcon (2020) illuminate possible explanations for why participants in this study are silent and uncomfortable about the subject of race, I assert that their racial discomfort is inextricably tied to performances of goodness subjugated onto social workers

through the dominant discourse of White femininity. Expectations of goodness that White femininity subjects onto social workers, results in the fear of taking risks and making mistakes. If a social worker breaks their silence on issues of race or racism, and says the wrong thing, the result would be a disruption to the script of White femininity and consequentially their own moral denigration would take place. White femininity subjects' expectations of morality and virtuosity onto the professional social worker, which the social worker in turn performs. These expectations and performances are what position the social worker as the expert, and when faced with breaking the silence on race, White social workers in particular risk losing the moral stature bestowed upon them. The reality that race relations, and conversations about race, racism, and Whiteness are non-linear, messy, and unpredictable, renders the impossibility for expertise in this arena, particularly among White people. Ultimately conversations about race in social work require the social worker to let go of their own investment in being the expert and the willingness to embrace both humility and imperfection as the starting point of their practice.

In each interview I ask participants about the demographics of the people they work alongside. I specifically ask for them to describe age, gender, race, and sexuality. Ellen responds, "so you know, age range is kind of right across the spectrum. We tend to have a lot of seniors in the area... gender wise, it's pretty split between men and women. We do have some transgender individuals in the community that we also support." Notably, Ellen is silent about race. I then prompt her and ask, "and in terms of race?" She responds stating that the rural area she resides in is "pretty homogenous" and the "majority of clientele are White in this area." When asked why she thinks it is homogenously White, Ellen replies "it is not somewhere you would just come if you had no purpose to be here, if that makes sense. Unless you were coming for a specific job or

were coming because you have had family previously here, it's not a natural area to transition to".

Marya also avoids speaking to the racial identity of clients. When asked, she says "diverse, all of the genders, male, female- everything in between. Income. I think all of my clients are on [social assistance], so for them that's like a lower income... what were the other parts of that? I'm just blanking right now." I prompt, "racial identity?" She responds similarly to Ellen, stating that "mostly everybody comes from a European background." When asked why in the urban centre she resides in there is a lack of racialized clients, Marya responds "I would say probably because we have a dominance of Caucasian people here." She then explains further, "I would also say maybe it's a culture thing and maybe people from other cultures, would first seek help or this kind of support within their network, right?"

Marya and Ellen, along with one other participant, discussed later in this chapter, avoid speaking to race in the question asked of them, and prompting is needed in response to their silence. While they cite a lack of racialized clients within their caseloads, indicating a possible explanation as to why they were silent about the racial identity of their clients, their silence on the Whiteness of their caseload exemplifies the unmarked and invisible nature of Whiteness and reflects Ahmed's (2007) theory that White people are unable to see Whiteness, and thus unable to see the place from which they orient from. Applebaum (2016) furthers this by stating, "[w]hiteness often goes unnoticed for those who benefit from it, but, for those who don't, Whiteness is often blatantly and painfully ubiquitous" (p. 2). The silence in response to my question about the racial identity of the people they work alongside, signifies that Whiteness is not considered a race. The invisibility of Whiteness exemplified through the un-naming of Whiteness as a race demonstrates the extent of its social power, which is reified whenever it goes

unnoticed. Equally, it can be asserted that the participants were silent about the racial identity of their clients because they were uncomfortable that their clients were all White. If they were to state the racial homogeneity of their clientele, they could potentially open themselves to unsettling questions.

In fact, when the participants were asked why their caseloads were disproportionately White, the participants responses lacked any systemic analysis, a cornerstone to social work practice (CASW, 2020). For example, Ellen describes that racialized people are not in her rural community because you would only come to the community if you previously had family there effectively erases the history of colonization in Canada by assuming the history of her community has always been White. This belief reflects settler national discourse, which Razack (2002) describes as the following:

A White settler society is one established by Europeans on non-European soil. Its origins lie in the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by the conquering Europeans. As it evolves, a White settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy. In the national mythologies of such societies, it is believed that White people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land. Aboriginal people are presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated. European settlers thus *become* the original inhabitants and the group most entitled to the fruits of citizenship. (pp. 1-2)

While certainly the overt intention of Ellen's statement was not to erase the presence of Indigenous people on the land now predominately occupied by White settlers, the narrative she offers as an explanation for the Whiteness of her community secures the script of settler national mythology by claiming that only White people in her community have families that were historically located there. The discourse of settler national mythology and discourse of White

femininity are interwoven scripts. The settler national mythology is contingent on the fulfillment of the well-intentioned social worker, seeking to help the morally denigrated, the poor, the working class, the Black, and Indigenous person, the person of colour, the differently abled, the queer and trans person, the immigrant, the refugee, the addicted, the unhoused, and the mentally ill, and so forth., The further one's identity is from the wealthy, White, male settler, the greater the likelihood one will experience the intervention of a social worker (Thobani, 2007).

This use of social workers by the colonial settler-state to control particular populations deemed as threatening under the guise of helping can be more deeply understood through Farris's (2017) theory of femonationalism. In using this particular term, Farris (2017) describe the "exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam ... campaigns and to the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality" (p. 4). Femonationalism is relevant here too, as has been demonstrated: The White woman's body and its subjugation of and performance of virtuosity through professionalism is exploited by the colonial settler-state to maintain its power over the Other. Through this act of Othering that the social work profession upholds, any threat to colonial power is repressed and the colonial system is secured.

#### ***4.32 Dilution and Conflation***

Another discursive technology noted among participants who spoke to race, was their use of terms that diluted the significance of race or terms that were conflated with race but indicated a lack of understanding about race. For example, Charlie, much like the Ellen and Mya, initially avoids speaking to race, and then when prompted responds by saying:



One thing is that it's, as over my course of working is that you really cannot make assumptions of people who you have in front of you. So even if you have an Aboriginal person in front of you, they may not identify as their culture.

She continues describing the risks of assuming one's race, stating:

I know you have to be mindful of it, but you have to be very much respectful if the person in front of you doesn't want to identify as, you know, say... let's say their cultural traditions, and you're saying, "well, you know, we should go talk to an Elder"... And they're like, "well, no. I've never done that before, so why would I?"

While Charlie's argument about the risk of assumptions has validity, and that making assumptions can be harmful, I maintain that her response to the question about race demonstrates discomfort with talking about race. Instead of answering directly, Charlie redirects the conversation away from naming race. She continues to discuss her error about assuming a woman was White but was White passing and identified as Metis. She avoids race asserting instead:

I always say, it's a potpourri of people I work with. From you know, I've had a few, uh, transgender on my file, I've had, over the times, people who identify themselves as gay... it's not all that person is about, you know what I mean? You have to look at the whole person.

Instead of speaking about race directly, Charlie uses a blanket term "potpourri" and alter in the interview as a "motley crew" to describe the people she works alongside. Further, in the example she gives of people she works with, she again avoids speaking about race, and instead refers to gender and sexual orientation. Her language erases the actual identities of her clients through the use of terms that at best are overly familiar and perhaps more concerningly belittling and

dehumanizing. Further, the term motley crew casts an image of a group of people not to be taken seriously. Equally her comment that one's identity is not all a person is about minimizes the significance of race and how it shapes the lived realities of racialized people who experience systemic violence on a day-to-day basis. Charlie's devaluation of race, and the effects of racism, mirror current events, in particular the Black Lives Matter movement, and its critics, who argue for "All Lives Matter." An interview conducted by Black scholar, George Yancy with White feminist philosopher Judith Butler, speaks to this matter. Butler states:

When some people rejoin with "All Lives Matter" they misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve. (Yancy & Butler, 2015, para. 19)

Butler continues to describe how "All Lives Matter" is a race-blind or colourblind approach to the inquiry: "which lives matter?" (Yancy & Butler, 2015, para. 20). She argues that "if we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, 'all lives matter,' we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of 'all lives' (Yancy & Butler, 2015, para. 20). Butler's critique is relevant to Charlie's consistent intention to universalize 'all' human experience as equal: equally challenging and equally rewarding. In doing so, she intentionally or inadvertently obscures the very unequal conditions that racialized individuals and communities face (Yancy & Butler, 2015). Lerner's (2021) asserts that colorblindness prevails when self-reflection on Whiteness has not taken place. As in the case of Charlie's attempt to universalize the experiences of her clients.

Ella also demonstrates race avoidance describing the demographic of her clientele as "pretty diverse, I don't know numbers and percentages, but like a lot of international students... a thriving queer community. There are a variety of ages as well... a growing Indigenous community as well." In her commentary, Ella distinguishes Indigenous people. This is markedly different when asked to speak about working with racialized clients. Ella offers the example of "international students". It is unclear initially what Ella means by the term international students but as her interview proceeds it becomes clear that she uses this term to describe racialized clients. In doing so, she conflates immigrant status with race. This is also demonstrated by several other participants who when asked to speak about an experience with a racialized client, referred to instances with immigrant clients.

All participants were asked "can you tell me about a time you perceived your practice negatively affecting a racialized client?" In response, Annette, for example describes a client she had that came to Canada from another country and had a family member that struggled to be independent. She recalls that the client quit his/her job to support the family member and when the client asked for financial support, Annette describes feeling herself "getting frustrated 'cause it sort of like, it felt like, you, know, coming to this country and then just hooking into all the resources and not really wanting to... contribute, better oneself, get involved, you know." She states further:

I tried my best to provide information and stay present and I knew inside of me that I was getting frustrated. And I knew that I was probably sending out some vibes that, you know, not the best vibes, even though I didn't say that in my words, but I knew that in my body, I was starting to feel frustrated and impatient.

Annette's practice in the context of race speaks to her xenophobia towards immigrants. The effects of her behavior that she describes as negatively impacting her client are not described in relation to the client's race, but the client's needs as an immigrant. Her example interestingly parallels with Marya's previous explanation that racialized clients in her community were perhaps not seeking social work services because "maybe it's a culture thing and maybe people from other cultures, would first seek help or this kind of support within their network, right?" Both examples conflate race with cultural differences and in doing so erases the identities of racialized people who are born in Canada and subscribe to Western cultural practices.

Thobani (2007) speaks to the racialization of immigrants and its effects on all people of colour. She proposes that the "racialization that constructs immigrants as less worthy of citizenship means that all people of colour are likewise perceived as outsiders, regardless of whether they are born in Canada or whether they have citizenship status" (p. 139). The conflation of race with immigrants, fulfills colonial discourse that establish the Canadian-born person of colour as an immigrant, putting into precarity their entitlements to citizenship, which ultimately serves to maintain the image of the Canadian citizen as White. This Othering that occurs to all people of colour, justifies the regulatory techniques expressed through professions like social work that manage anyone outside the preferred colonial identity. Further, Annette's prejudice towards her immigrant-identified client reflects the pathologizing of immigrants and people of colour within social services (Thobani, 2007), which place blame onto the client for the hardships they face, ignoring the structural implications that created their barriers to begin with.

#### **4.321 White Femininity Secures Neoliberalism.**

Annette's frustration with the immigrant-identified client on her caseload who she perceives as inappropriately accessing services due to her belief that the client is underserving of

accessing government support. Annette's belief secures the neoliberal discourse that "social problems and inequalities derive from deficits in individuals (i.e., some people are better than others at making 'good' choices and taking advantage of opportunities), rather than from other possible sources, such as unjust and oppressive sociopolitical structures " (LaMarre et al., 2019, p. 239; Lee & Bhuyan, 2013; Pollack & Rossiter, 2010).

While neoliberal discourses and their intersection with White femininity were not referred to in the literature review, Badwall's (2014) findings in part discuss how "ideals of social work conspire with institutional neoliberalism to secure Whiteness and perpetuate racial injuries" (p. 128). Annette's expectations that her racialized immigrant identified client should take personal responsibility for his/her financial hardship, demonstrates social work's allegiance to neoliberalism (Macias, 2015b; Pollack & Rossiter, 2010; Rossiter & Heron, 2011). Although Badwall (2014) speaks to how neoliberalism secures Whiteness, I take this line of reasoning further by suggesting that it also secures White femininity by situating the social worker as the *moral* gatekeeper of who is deserving versus undeserving of government support.

Maurer's (2016) critical analysis of a clinical group work case study presentation demonstrates how social workers act as agents of control positioned to determine whether clients are deserving or undeserving. The social worker in the case study describes the client of focus as "invisible" based on her lack of participation in the group. On the other hand, clients who are not deemed invisible are described as "complaining" and "demanding" (Maurer, 2016, p. 352). Ultimately, neither "type" of client is preferred. According to Maurer (2016) this clinical case study demonstrates how the social worker is positioned as the "unseen/unacknowledged arbiter of the value of the participation" (p. 352). The position of power the social worker is situated in permits their language of "complaints" and "demands" to translate to a client who is undeserving.

Maurer (2016) states, "the language that signifies undeservingness is an example of a concealed production of norms via the enactment of cross-cultural countertransference" (p. 352). Cross-cultural countertransference, according to Lee and Bhuyan (2013), "captures clinicians' own limitations of the extent to which we can acknowledge and be conscious of our sociocultural being" (p. 123). This limitation risks social workers/clinicians/helping professionals projecting their own sociocultural understandings and norms onto the client, and in the context of western therapeutic contexts, serve to reproduce the narrative of Whiteness (Lee & Bhuyan, 2013; Maurer, 2016). Even in circumstances where clients do not fit into the discursive expectations of Whiteness that they encounter via therapist bias, they often subscribe to White scripts regardless in order to be considered a 'good' White subject (Lee & Bhuyan, 2013). In this research study Annette subsumes the role of agent of control via the discourse of White femininity, which enforces neoliberal norms onto the racialized immigrant by rendering the client as undeserving based on their identity. Annette is unable to describe the impact of her frustration and bad "vibes" on the client. Is he/she aware of Annette's prejudice towards him/her and in response does he/she resist that prejudice or attempt to conform to the neoliberal expectations imposed upon him/her? Will he/she continue to seek financial support or will he/she 'pull himself up by his/her bootstraps' and find another job? This section evidenced the collusion of the discourse of White femininity with the discourse of neoliberalism in community-based social work practice, ultimately reflecting how social work secures multiple dominant discourses, which uphold systems of power.

#### ***4.33 White but Racialized***

The racialization of immigrants affects White-identified immigrants too. The participant, Klara's, identification as a White but racialized person, due to her lived experience as an ethnic

minority in her home country, reflects this reality. The ethnic oppression she faced in her country of origin and the discrimination she currently faces in Canada because of her accent she asserts is an experience of racism. Klara's identity illuminates the complexities of racial categories and their application universally. Grosfoguel (2016) states:

Depending on the different colonial histories in diverse regions of the world, the hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the lines of the human can be constructed through diverse racial markers. Racism can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion. (p. 10)

Grosfoguel's (2016) concern that definitions of racism are not contextualized, as elaborates:

Although since colonial times color racism has been the dominant marker of racism in most parts of the world, it is not the only or exclusive form of racist marker. On many occasions we confuse the particular/concrete social marker of racism in one region of the world with what is taken to be as the exclusive form or universal definition of racism. This has created an enormous amount of conceptual and theoretical problems. If we collapse the particular social form/marker that racism adopts in the region or country of the world we have been socialized (for example color racism) to make it a universal definition of racism, then we lose sight of the diverse racist markers that are not necessarily the same in other regions of the world. (p. 10)

To contend with this complexity and confusion that the social construction of identity and its fluidity across time and space create, Grosfoguel (2016) reinforces:

*Racialization* occurs through the marking of *bodies*. Some bodies are racialized as superior and other bodies are racialized as inferior. The important point here is that those subjects above the line of the human, as superior, live in what Afro-Caribbean

philosophers following Fanon's work called the 'zone of being,' while subjects that live on the inferior side of the demarcating line live in the 'zone of non-being.' (p. 11)

Overarchingly, the contextualization of racism and racialization within the colonial history of the nation-state or region in discussion makes sense. In Klara's case she is forced to grapple with her own racialization in her country of origin that translates differently in her host country. When ethnic discrimination is marked as a form of racism in Canada, the benefits of racial privilege are concealed. For example, does Klara have benefits as a White presenting woman, versus an immigrant of colour? How are these nuances taken into consideration, and to what extent are these nuances worthy of consideration? This finding within this research study was unexpected and highlights an important area for future research.

Vanidestine and Aparicio's (2019) research study sought to uncover how social welfare and health professionals understood common-place racial concepts found in dominant discourses of health disparities. The meaning of racial concepts: race, racism, and Whiteness were explored through the lens of the participants. Vanidestine and Aparicio's (2019) findings illuminate similar themes to sub-themes in this study. Most salient is their identified theme "conceptual conflation and unfamiliarity" (p. 437). Participants in their study struggled to define and distinguish the concepts from one another. Often the confusion was the result of contextual differences, supporting Grosfoguel's (2016) claim that definitions of race are dependent on time and space and cannot be universally applied. This study's participants mirror the confusion and conflation surrounding racial concepts, with participants unable to distinguish between immigrants, racialized people, and ethnicity. While Vanidestine, Aparicio (2019), and Grosfoguel's (2016) suggestions about definitions of race and racial concepts are offered as an innocent project, this study traces how the conflation and confusion about the language of race are not benign and



instead fulfill the discourse of White femininity in social work. This serves to uphold a larger colonial narrative that serves to Other immigrants, both immigrants of colour and White immigrants, and Canadian-born people of colour.

This section of my study's findings details participants' demonstrations of silence and discomfort regarding questions about race. It speaks to the effects of language on the conceptualization of race and race relations, highlighting the conflation of immigrants, racialized people, and culture. Tracing the effects of this conflation demonstrates upholding of colonial narratives. Similarly, neoliberal scripts were observed in a cursory fashion as underpinning the frustration experienced by one participant towards an immigrant of colour. The marked invisibility of Whiteness was also evident among participants, which in one case was viewed as "natural." The naturalization of Whiteness was shown to fulfill the settler-colonial discourse that positions White settlers as the original people of the land, and in effect the erasure of Indigenous people from the dominant narrative of Canada's history. At the beginning of this section, I outlined the negative implications for social workers, particularly White social workers, regarding their silence and discomfort talking about race. The confusion and complicity evidenced in the findings from this section indicate the clear need for conversations about race to occur. Only through dialogue can White social workers learn their limitations and make changes to their practice (Jeysingham, 2012; Lerner, 2021), otherwise complicity with White supremacy will endure. The need for dialogue about race, racism, and Whiteness in social work is reflected by Annette in her statement towards the end of her interview. She says "talking to you, I have learned a little bit better how to be with a person from another culture, right, by this conversation... so that was important to me. Like those are the kinds of things that can help me

be a better social worker." Nothing I said led to Annette's reflection, merely her speaking to her experience through dialogue led to her own consciousness raising.

#### **4.4 Defending, Witnessing, and Disrupting White Femininity**

*I work for an organization as a social worker. I have a direct supervisor who is male. Each person at this organization has their own office. I have my own, and he has his. The manager of the organization, she too has her own office. My supervisor and I are consulting. He has decided that he wants to break down power relations between supervisors and supervisees. I am excited about this idea, waiting to hear what his plan is. He tells me rather than sit across from him, he wants me sitting next to him. That way we can physically reduce the power imbalance. While his proposal is not what I expected, I comply, and move my chair around beside him. We begin to discuss my caseload, but he cannot orient himself beside me, he instead must turn his back to me to type what I am saying onto his computer. Now it is just me behind his back, speaking directly to his back. There is long vertical windows bordering the office door and my colleagues pass by and make faces and laugh at me through the window. They are laughing because there is no common sense attached to why I am sitting here behind the desk, facing my supervisor's back. It is humiliating.*

*I continue to meet with my supervisor this way. He seems to think this arrangement is progressive. I think it is ridiculous, but I feel too uncomfortable to say anything. We debrief a meeting we had recently. A meeting with another organization that we work alongside to meet the needs of the clients holistically. There is a disagreement among us; myself and the other frontline worker and our supervisors are "helping" us come to a consensus. I am a passionate advocate, and my voice shakes as I justify my position. It is this emotion that my supervisor points out to me. He says, "I get what you are trying to do, but a lot of people don't like an*

*outspoken female." When I begin to argue that his feedback is sexist, he reassures me that he supports me, it's just other people who think this way.*

*A few days later I decide to voice my apprehension to a female supervisor who I hoped I could trust with my concerns about my current supervisor. She seems to be taking me very seriously, and then brings up her worry that he could be pursuing a sexual relationship. I begin to say to her that I don't think that's the case, when she says, "you're a 10/10 Jill, and my advice would be not to ever wear white t-shirts." There are other colleagues in her office when she says this. Some of them I consider friends. I am bright red. I hope that someone might say something, but instead everyone laughs. I wonder if I am taking what she says too seriously, and laugh too, the risk feels too high to speak up. I decide I should probably just go to the manager about being re-assigned to another supervisor, or to at least let her know my concerns. I write her a formal email (this is her preference) and make suggestions as to how the problem might be resolved. Her response is supportive, but only to the extent that she agrees to assign me to a new supervisor. She makes sure to tell me that I should have really talked to my supervisor about my concerns first before coming to her. I feel like I am in trouble, and she acts as if she is doing me a big favour. I eventually leave my position. A few months later, I reach out by email to my previous manager for a reference for a new position. She calls me almost instantly and says, "I thought you really struggled in your position, you were very emotional, and it seemed like you couldn't handle the job." She will not be giving me a reference. I hang up. Confused, sad, angry. I want to call her back and say she is punishing me for speaking up, and I realize I will only be punished further. I do what she wants, and I stay quiet.*

The third section of this chapter speaks to the defensive and fragile responses to questions specific to race among participants. Kondrat and Fultz (2019) draw from the work of DiAngelo

(2011) and Powell et al. (2015), to describe White peoples' resistance to their own complicity in racism. DiAngelo (2011) named this resistance among White people as "White fragility."

Behaviors related to White fragility include avoiding shame and stress by pointing out flaws in other groups, normalizing behavior, minimizing the narrative disadvantage and explaining away the feelings and emotions of others, or the outright denial that structural inequality exists

(DiAngelo, 2011; Powell et al., 2015 as cited in Kondrat & Fultz, 2019). While White fragility is presented as a defense mechanism of White people facing their own complicity in racism, I contend that fragility and defensiveness arise among White women social workers when their good intentions/morality/virtuosity are challenged by conversations about race and racism.

While some participants responded to questions about Whiteness and White femininity with defensiveness, others responded with awareness obtained through critical reflexivity, and in some cases, articulated ways they act to resist and disrupt White femininity in their practice. The variety of ways the participants contend with their White identity can be situated within Ahmed's (2007) a phenomenology of whiteness. When participants respond with defensiveness, this reflects the lack of awareness of their White feminine orientation point, and upholds the dominant discourse of White femininity; when participants demonstrate awareness and critical thought surrounding the implications of the White feminine, this signifies a witnessing of one's orientation point, and situates a position of threat towards the White feminine; and lastly, when participants are able to articulate ways in which they resist the White feminine in their social work practice, this reflects an active disruption of their orientation point, ultimately dismantling the discourse of White femininity in their social work practice.

#### ***4.41 Defending One's Orientation Point***

As has been demonstrated throughout this research study, White femininity is the subjugation of morality and virtuosity onto the White woman-identified subject (Heron, 2007). Historically, this dominant discourse constituted the social work subject, as White women disproportionately occupied social work professional spaces. The access to the public sphere through helping professions such as social work, provided White women with a position of power that was premised on their moral superiority. Since colonization, White women have forged their identity and worth based on their pursuit and fulfillment of moral superiority, to the extent that their identity is contingent on the moral denigration of Others through the guise of helping. When conversations about race and racism occur among White women, and in this case White women social workers, their own complicity in harm is brought into question, and ultimately their identity and worth, which are inextricably tied to 'doing the right thing' are challenged. When White woman social workers must face accountability for their complicity in systems of oppression, not only must they grapple with their hand in harm, but they must also confront their own identity that has been forged from the oppression of the very individuals and communities they serve. It is in these invitations to accountability that White woman social workers can choose to defend their identity or look to transform it.

Defensiveness among some participants arose when questions about Whiteness and its effects were asked of them. When I asked Klara how she defines Whiteness, she replies:

Whiteness is the race I inherited from my ancestors. I didn't choose Whiteness. This is the genetic package that I come with. Exactly as an Indigenous, Black or mixed-race individual doesn't choose their skin color, this is a given thing. I am not of Anglophone, Francophone, Dutch, Spanish, or Portuguese heritage. My ancestors were not colonizers who oppressed, conquered, and eradicated nations. I was always part of an ethnic

minority group that lived among dominant groups that inflicted their oppressive power upon me in various ways, therefore, I have difficulties identifying with the current narrative of “Whites as oppressors” in the Western context. This is the package that I'm born with. This package comes with good and bad. It comes with the privilege of access to more resources in the West, I acknowledge that. Access to, perhaps, better education, more money, power, and dominance. This is what the White race comes with in the Western culture. But, again, if we believe that everybody has the same privileges just because you are White, um, we are mistaken, absolutely. For example, in my, in my practice I, as I said, I serve in two different clinics. One is a refugee clinic; one is my other mainstream clinic. I had 75 percent of all my patients were White, Canadian born, who lived in absolute dire multi-generational poverty. Addictions, mental illness, incarceration, divorces, really hectic lives that were highly traumatizing and stressful. So just by being White, just by the virtue of their Whiteness, they were not middle-class, they were not affluent, they did not hold power. They were as oppressed by society's norms as anybody else was, who wasn't White. So, I don't think, just by considering that somebody is White, it should not determine our perception of who they are.

This passage has a distinct beginning, middle, and end. The participant's first focus regarding the definition of Whiteness is to make clear that one cannot help if one is White, the first marker of defensiveness. Next Klara moves into articulating the privileges that attach to Whiteness, demonstrating her awareness that Whiteness has benefits, but then she minimizes the effects of these benefits by concluding with her concern for other forms of oppression that White people face, which ultimately have nothing to do with Whiteness but class oppression. Overarchingly,

Klara's response to a question that asks her to define Whiteness, results in her defense of Whiteness.

A similar pattern is evident in Charlie's interview. When asked how her Whiteness impacts her racialized clients, Charlie responds:

Well, you know, and I, rightly have reflected on this because I was very curious about your research, because there's an assumption because you are White, you're privileged... And that's not necessarily always the case. I think we, you know, we make [assumptions], you know, based on the colour of my skin, um that I'm privileged. And so, I'm very mindful of that even though I come from, and support people that maybe are Caucasian, I would never go to a person who is in poverty, with addictions, and they're Caucasian and say, "well, you're in a position of privilege, 'cause you're White.'

Similar to Klara, when asked about Whiteness, Charlie responds by defending it. Her argument is premised on her assertion that White people are oppressed too. Interestingly, Charlie is specifically asked about the effects of *her* Whiteness on the clients she works alongside, and her response is to speak to problematic assumptions made about Whiteness and how these assumptions impact White clients, ultimately deflecting from her own accountability to her Whiteness and its effects. Charlie's defensiveness around the subject of Whiteness continues when I ask her to describe it:

Wow, that's a ... (laughs) that's a very loaded question, right? You know, because, again, who we have in front of us, like if you saw me, you know, you would say, "oh, that's Charlie, she's White." But I didn't necessarily identify myself as White. So, I think we make assumptions based on just skin colour.

Charlie's response is best described as shock: her laughter, the use of the word "wow" and describing the question as "loaded," reflects a viewpoint that inquiries about Whiteness are out of the ordinary to the point of inappropriate and laden with assumptions. Much like Klara, Charlie is interested in using this question as a platform to address the victimization of White people based on the view that Whiteness means privilege. While the victimization of White people upheld by both Klara and Charlie is an example of Tuck and Wang's (2012) previously discussed concept Settler Moves to Innocence, this section interrogates how their reactions to questions about Whiteness operate as a defense mechanism.

The literature speaks to the tension experienced by White people that results when asked about the meaning of Whiteness. Fultz and Kondrat (2019) posit that the tension arises due to the invisibility of Whiteness that is made visible through posing the question "what does it mean to be White?" When Whiteness is made visible, White individuals are forced to witness Whiteness as distinct and not universal, ultimately requiring White people to engage with the history of violence that secured Whiteness (Fultz & Kondrat, 2019). Walter et al. (2011) further discuss the individual emphasis of Whiteness and how to conceptualize oneself as part of a racialized group is felt as "unfairly stigmatizing and not applicable to the self... [they] know" (p. 8). White people can respond to their White identity in numerous ways, a common response as identified in the literature is fragility manifest through defensiveness. In order to explain the abruptness of speaking about Whiteness among White people, Fultz and Kondrat (2019) offer a salient difference between White people and Black people in regards to their own relationship with their racial identity. Although Black identity is the example provided by the researchers to illustrate White people's struggles with Whiteness, other racialized identities could be used to exemplify this same reality.



White identity does not have the cultural depth, for example that Black identity does. Fultz and Kondrat (2019) speak to the history, culture, common ancestry, common language, or common identity that is interwoven into Black culture. Because Blackness has continuously been Othered, the distinctiveness of Blackness including its meaning and origins have been retained. This assertion is not to homogenize the Black experience but to highlight the ways in which identity and culture are interwoven to form a group identity that can be assumed by the individual, in whole or in part, and equally shaped according to the individual context (Fultz & Kondrat, 2019). This same depth cannot be mirrored by White individuals and is indicative as to why most White people do not see Whiteness as a cultural identity. Young (2004) drawing from Gunaratnam (2002), illustrates how people of colour are viewed as “as cultural beings”, whereas White people are seen “as individuals”. “It is as though individuals (white) are agents with their own agency but people of colour are determined by their culture” (p. 111).

Overarchingly Whiteness is perceived as “universal, uninteresting, and normal” (Fultz & Kondrat, 2019, p. 265). Fultz and Kondrat (2019) ask, “[i]f one were to apply the same logic that culture is developed through history, language, and ancestry, then what is the history of most White people today...?” (p. 265). To answer their own question, the researchers refer to anthropological literature (Kirmayer, 2012), which illuminates the short history of Whiteness. Historically, culture was associated with national heritage, for example, individuals from Germany, saw their culture as German, not White. Whiteness became a salient cultural distinction developed when previous cultural associations were “ignored, denied, or forgotten due to movements towards nationalistic identities” (Fultz & Kondrat, 2019, p. 265).

This erasure of past culture seems particularly relevant in settler states, where the populations are a conglomeration of individuals and groups with diverse national origins. As

individuals move away from their cultural origins, the pursuit of a new collective identity arises. Drawing from Kirmayer (2012), Fultz and Kondrat (2019) speak to this phenomenon:

Without those cultural roots to reflect a collective identity, new identities are assumed.

Those identities are thus developed based on behaviors and trends of a younger and more modern society. White culture as we see it today has a history of oppression, acculturation, assuming land and power, and violence against people of color and difference. (p. 265)

Fultz and Kondrat (2019) exemplify how the construction of Whiteness as a cultural identity was a mechanism to maintain power by the colonial state, ultimately a marked distinction from other racialized groups that have long and rich histories that have informed their cultural identity and thus their racial identity. Because Whiteness since colonization has been marked as the ‘natural’ race, its cultural associations have gone unnoticed. Oftentimes, when White people are forced to confront the meaning of their Whiteness, their response is defensive, because to truly face one's own Whiteness is to acknowledge its harmful effects. For the White woman social worker, who has been conscripted by the dominant discourse of White femininity into an identity built off moral elevation, this confrontation with their Whiteness is particularly heavy. It is one thing for an individual to find out they have caused unintentional harm when they have not had a significant investment in ‘doing the right thing’, but as social workers, one's entire identity is contingent on ‘doing the right thing’, therefore offering a possible explanation as to why some participants in this study reacted to questions about Whiteness and White femininity with fragility and defensiveness.

The inclusion of Whiteness studies/critical Whiteness theory into social work education could be a significant tool for minimizing the harmful effects of Whiteness in social work

practice (Jeysingham, 2012; Lerner, 2021; Young & Zubrycki, 2011). Although whether learning about Whiteness was included in study participants' education, the defensive responses of several participants indicate that learning and growth are needed in this area. The following section addresses the responses of participants to questions about Whiteness and White femininity, that demonstrate increased awareness of Whiteness and its effects.

#### ***4.42 Witnessing One's Orientation Point***

Numerous instances of witnessing one's orientation point were evident among the participants. Ahmed (2007) suggests that Whiteness is best understood as an orientation point, a place from which the world unfolds. In previous sections of this chapter I have illustrated the ways in which White woman-identified social workers orient from the discursive arrangements of the White feminine via their desire to do good; claims to innocence; how they talk about race; and their fragility and defensiveness when confronted with questions about Whiteness. This section I describe as witnessing one's orientation point, in which participants demonstrated the use of critical reflection through their descriptions of Whiteness. Additionally, when asked about how they would define White femininity, several participants' responses were characterized by dissonance as a consequence of the ways in which they saw how patriarchy, Christianity, and Whiteness operate in tandem to produce the White feminine, ultimately leaving them with concerns about whether the White feminine is a preferred demonstration of femininity.

##### **4.421 Talking About Whiteness.**

Several participants offered significant insight when asked to define Whiteness. The insight provided by the participants shows awareness of their White orientation point. This awareness can disrupt their personal performances of Whiteness by providing opportunity to resist their own subjugation (Heron, 2005). Although not always explicitly stated by participants

that critical reflection was the tool they used to deconstruct Whiteness, it is a fair assumption it is used based on participants own implication of self when discussing Whiteness. For example, when talking about Whiteness, instead of participants speaking about it as external to them, they talk about their own complicity with it. Further, critical reflection was cited by most participants throughout their interviews as a necessity for their practice, which is no surprise provided the emphasis on critical reflection in social work education and practice (Fook, 2016). For example, Kelly shared how her practice with racialized clients has changed over time:

Now I see the many ways in which I'm complicit to benefiting and leveraging my Whiteness and doing better at holding myself accountable and being more reflective than I was before... because I couldn't see it. I was like, "oh, I'm not complicit," or something like that.

Kate also speaks to the significance of critical reflection, she states:

Early in my social work education, one of the courses was specifically on, kind of troubling the practice in and of itself. I think, historically, it was kind of these wealthy, nice White women (laughs) who went out to these marginalized populations. And I think in some ways that's still perpetuated. Um, that's why I tend to attempt to steer away from that, that answer to, you know, why did you wanna' be a social worker? Well, because I wanted to help. Um, because there's power involved in that, isn't there? And there's kind of the implication that there's power over others, which is why critical self-reflection is so, so important 'cause I've seen social workers that have kind of fallen into that trap and it's dangerous and not where we're meant to position ourselves.

Critical research scholars argue that while critical reflection, anti-oppressive practice, and White privilege pedagogy are tools developed to decrease the power dynamic between the social

worker and client, however, in reality they serve to reproduce White, colonial dominance (Badwall, 2016; Jeffery, 2005; Young, 2004). I assert that critical reflection, in particular, is a necessary tool to cultivate awareness of complicity in harm, but that it cannot be an end point. For critical reflection to be effective, action must proceed it, reflecting the notion of praxis. Praxis, according to White (2007) is "ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable action" (p. 226). She states further, "in other words, praxis involves knowing, doing and being" (p. 226). Critical reflection in social work, unlike praxis, is situated in the realm of knowing and perhaps stretches into being, it is limited in its effects on doing. In order for social workers to minimize harm done to clients, moving beyond critical reflection into doing is necessary.

In response to the question, "how would you describe Whiteness," participants demonstrate critical reflection through their ability to talk about Whiteness and implicate themselves throughout their descriptions by using the language of "us" and "we." For example, Kelly states:

Whiteness is invisible to those who belong to it... a weapon to those who don't belong to it. It holds expectations about how people act, present, engage... How an essence of a person is deemed acceptable or not, or favored, or not. The rules belonging to Whiteness are entrenched and ingrained in us, who belong, who are White, but like a code or a maze to folks who are not White. People who are White hold this standard of an expectation of what they think is good, right, acceptable. And people outside of that are either placed in positions of resisting it, and then deemed not acceptable, or they're trying desperately to fit in and perform for the White guys. But White people would deny there is such a game at play.

Kelly's description of Whiteness reflects awareness of its effects on racialized people. There is accountability for her own complicity in Whiteness in her use of "us" when describing how the rules of Whiteness are entrenched in White-identified individuals. Whiteness is not something to be observed outside of her, but deeply ingrained in who she is. Marya's description of Whiteness is unique from Kelly's, articulating it as connected to trauma for her:

I think Whiteness has become just like this monster. I now view Whiteness as just being disconnected from yourself and I'm blanking on the quote. But my boyfriend just sent me a quote about how like when people came over, so when settlers came over to Canada from all over Europe, they were coming over already being treated really horrible... And then, they came here and really just took on the attitudes of the British and the French that were here... just like this dominant mentality, right? And so I think Whiteness, for me, is connected to trauma of all kinds, and I would actually say that's why we are, and not everybody. And of course, this is a generalization. But like Whiteness is obnoxious, and I think it's because we are all just very hurt and very lost. And so, we're just acting out.

For Marya, Whiteness is described as a "monster;" as "obnoxious," as "dominant," and as rooted in trauma. While Kelly is more focused on the operation of Whiteness, Marya brings attention to the roots of Whiteness. Much like Kelly, Marya also implicates herself in her description of Whiteness through her repeated use of the word "we." Occhiuto and Rowlands (2019) discuss the discursive strategy employed by White-identified participants in their research study that aimed to distance themselves from their complicity with Whiteness through focusing on "moments when their White privilege was inaccessible" (p. 198). For example, the researchers discuss when community workers make claims to Indigenous or racialized ancestry "so as to

distance themselves from the negative connotations of Whiteness, while still enjoying the unearned privileges of deeply racist societies" (pp. 198-199). This is similar to how participants' ACEs in this study was established as a settler move to innocence (Tuck & Wang, 2012), which ultimately distanced the participants from any accountability to their unearned privileges. In contrast, Kelly and Marya's language of "us" and "we" shows how they have resisted moves to innocence or strategies to distance themselves, effectively situating themselves as complicit in the effects of Whiteness within their critical stance of it. Ella also speaks to Whiteness, and her description of it is distinct from Kelly and Myra:

[W]e're talking a lot about what does it mean to be White, White culture, but to actually name it (laughs), like it is hard. White, how would I describe Whiteness? Definitely, I think it's been I would say, the removal of contextual, localized culture where we've moved away from what our heritage and those cultural pieces and instead have adopted or have embodied, this nondescript culture that is really about... this one way of seeing the world kind of thing that is privileged above all others.

Ella's definition of Whiteness as the removal of contextual culture aligns with Fultz and Kondrat's (2019) illustration of how Whiteness emerged out of necessity for a unified nation-state, at the expense of nationality, which prior to colonization informed cultural identity. Kelly's use of the word "nondescript" in reference to Whiteness also captures Fultz and Kondrat's (2019) position that Whiteness is "overly generic and plain" (p. 265). Again, much like Kelly and Marya, Ella's description of Whiteness implicates her as a complicit White person through her use of the word "we."

Critical reflection or critical self-reflexivity in contemporary social work, according to Young (2004), encourages social workers to:

Examine with a sceptical and critical eye the world in which they are going to [or do] operate, and ask questions which confront the accepted wisdom or status quo. Central to this process is the focus on self — one's personal values, beliefs and experiences. [Social work] [s]tudents and practitioners are encouraged to identify aspects of their backgrounds, identities and presence which are likely to help or hinder their work with people. (p. 116).

Critical social work researchers assert that critical reflection and self-reflexivity in social work uphold Whiteness and colonialism (Badwall, 2016; Jeffery, 2005; Young, 2004). Young (2004) posits that however well-meaning critical reflection might be, the notion of the self is both White and Western. She speaks to the collective paradigm of other cultures and how too much focus on the self can be detrimental to goals of the community, when she questions, "[h]ow then does the practitioner become aware of the contributors to the person s/he is without falling into the trap of reinforcing the privilege of individuality?" (p. 116). This is reinforced by Jeffrey (2005) who suggests that "Whiteness as a set of practices very much resembles social work as a set of practices", which then leads her to assert that "when we teach people to be self-reflexive and critical of Whiteness, we are, at the same time, inviting them to be critical of social work" (p. 410). Overall, her point is to question whether it is possible to be a good social worker if, by way of critical reflection, one is asked to give up Whiteness.

In a similar way Badwall (2016) emphasizes the paradoxical conditions racialized social workers face in their use of critical reflection. The paradox, she maintains, is a double bind; it occurs in circumstances in which racialized social workers experience racism from their clients but are unable to engage critical reflection as a tool to unpack issues of race and racism due to its moral discursive requirements. The moral discursive requirements of critical reflection pertain to



the expectation that the social worker is always positioned in the professional/client relationship as holding a position of power or dominance, while the client is always positioned as powerless/dominated. Consequently, when a racialized social worker experiences racism from a client, the client is always prioritized, making it impossible for the social worker to "claim an identity that experiences marginalization" (Badwall, 2016, p. 5). The moral discursive arrangements of critical reflection that place the marginalization of the client as central, actively erase issues of race and racism experienced by the social worker.

The use of critical reflection in social work is paradoxical. On the one hand it operates as a tool to build awareness among social workers about their own complicity in systems of oppression, while simultaneously entrenching the very oppressive systems it brings awareness to. This reality evokes Jeysingham's (2014) critique of teaching critical reflection in social work education, which requires students to locate themselves in relationship to systems of oppression through critical reflection. This process, much like what was demonstrated by the participants in their commentary, implicates the social worker in systems of oppression. When social workers are successfully able to fulfill the self-implicating requirements of critical reflection, they move from their position of the 'bad' White social worker to the position of the 'good' White social worker. Jeysingham (2014), drawing from Ahmed (2004), comments that this repositioning does not challenge racism, "it only changes the position that the speaker takes up in relation to racism" (p. 676).

This same criticism is made by Margolin (2015) related to White privilege pedagogy. First introduced by McIntosh (1988), the intent of White privilege pedagogy is to encourage White people to "examine their role in systems of oppression and domination without forcing them to grapple with uncomfortable levels of complicity or guilt" (Margolin, 2015, p. 3). In

action, White privilege pedagogy looks like White students gathering to "write down how their membership in the majority race makes their lives easier, then one-by-one read those privileges out loud to one another and the group as a whole" (Margolin, 2015, p. 3). Margolin (2015) argues that the listing off one's privileges only serves to benefit White people. Much like critical reflection, White privilege pedagogy provides a platform for White people to identify their complicity in perpetuating racism. Conveniently, White privilege pedagogy is an avenue for fulfilling the role of the 'good' social worker without needing to give up any unearned privileges, nor fulfill any actual expectations, have accountability, or commit to action that seeks to dismantle the object of critique. These mechanisms of awareness building, though well-intentioned, ultimately entrench the dominant structures that they intend to disrupt. Without avenues for translating awareness into action, the effects of these social work practices are minimal.

The tools of White privilege pedagogy and critical reflection are ideal for social workers shaped by the dominant discourse of White femininity in that they provide an avenue to moral elevation, that White femininity requires, while inadvertently sustaining the colonial structure. While critical reflection is a colonial tool, I assert that it is a necessary component of anti-racist work among White social workers, because without any cultivated awareness of one's orientation point, White social workers will fail to ally with their racialized colleagues and clients, and remain stuck in fragility, defensiveness, and moral superiority that are contingent on the invisibility of their White feminine orientation point. Nevertheless, critical reflection must serve as a bridge to action and not action itself, for it is when critical reflection is offered as a stopping point that institutional colonialism is upheld.

#### **4.422 Talking About White Femininity.**

When participants were asked to speak about White femininity, much like when asked to speak about Whiteness, some participants demonstrated awareness of its effects. Uniquely, when some participants discuss White femininity, they evoke a gender analysis, which illuminates the paradoxical relationship between Whiteness and femininity. The conflict between Whiteness and femininity aligns with the previous finding, "when social workers cannot fit White feminine scripts," because of the inability for the participants to fulfill the feminine role prescribed by patriarchy, which is necessary to uphold both Whiteness and colonialism.

This paradox reveals a unique complexity and begs the question, what does it mean when women are unable to fulfill the role of the feminine? Is White femininity just a cloak for White patriarchy? How are social workers being weaponized by the colonial state through White feminine discourse in order to 'manage' the Other and gatekeep resources? By engaging in critical reflection, participants in the study have been able to witness their own subjugation by the dominant discourse of White femininity, as illustrated when they describe the meaning of White femininity. For example, in response to, "how does Whiteness shape the feminine?" Marya reflects on her Christian upbringing and the personal exploration she has done in response to the trauma she experienced as an effect of Christianity. She offers:

Women have been removed from the narrative. Women's wisdom, and women are just naturally... because we are creators, like physically we are creators, so we have wisdom and we have connection to the land, the earth, mother earth who is also this feminine presence who also is the creator, we have just like this natural caregiving intellectual wisdom that would really... like if women were in charge of the world, the world would absolutely be a different place... that's a huge source of my frustration is just like women have been removed from the narrative and silenced, and treated like, abused and yeah.

And it's all, for me it's all tied to the dominance thing. And it's awful... So, then I guess Whiteness is present from here because this is my personal experience, I have been abused by White men. So, I think that's where it fits in for Whiteness. Like if we were, I just think about Indigenous cultures, where they naturally had clan mothers and mothers were the head of their communities and mothers took care of whatever, right... So I think when you get rid of that and when you silence a woman, which White people have historically done, you just cause a lot of harm to absolutely everything around you, everyone and everything.

This passage illuminates intersections between Christianity, patriarchy, and Whiteness, and its effects on the feminine. What Marya is suggesting is that the feminine outside of Whiteness is wise, creative, connected, and intellectual, and that White, Christian, and patriarchal discourses have ultimately defined the role of the feminine, rendering it void of its 'true' qualities. This thread of Christianity is referenced by other participants. For example, Ella says "I think of White femininity as having roots in the church, specifically the Western church". She continues:

I think it's the religion that has developed in tandem with colonization and that's been, and that has developed with power and control being part of its discourse and development. And how that has excluded so many different people in shaping what it looks like. And has also rendered it to look a lot differently than what I think Christianity, for example, is meant to look like... because it's excluded so many voices. So that would include racialized voices, but also White women too and when I think of White femininity, I think of something that has been defined a lot by... people in control who are not women.

Ella continues to discuss that the men who were defining the role of women historically through a Christian lens were not necessarily exclusively White men, but that certainly there were no women at the table determining their own role. She concludes by describing what she associates with White femininity, stating "when I think about White femininity, I think about not taking up space, [and] being the helper". Klara offers her own perspective on White femininity, relating it as "a little bit more all[ied] with the individuals in power. And they were the charity workers, the philanthropists whose husbands... made millions of dollars". Klara tempers her statement as stereotyping, but her view is supported by Katie's assertion that "the helping profession is a way for women to be in a position of power". Both Klara and Katie's statements reveal the association of White femininity with power.

The responses of the participants to the question, "how does Whiteness shape femininity," reflect Heron's (2007) articulation of the construction of White femininity historically. As previously considered, Heron (2007) illuminates how the interwoven scripts of patriarchy, Christianity, and Whiteness shaped the role of White women. Specifically, Heron's (2007) pointed out how the culmination of these discursive arrangements historically, continue to be performed contemporarily by the quintessential development worker, the wealthy, White woman from the Global North who desires to 'help' individuals and communities in the Global South. One of Heron's (2007) findings speaks to participants experiences of sexism while doing development work. They spoke to the hierarchy between men and women, and how White and African men were granted more respect than they were, as women. Heron (2007) asserts that gender is usually inextricable from Whiteness, but this particular context positioned race as secondary to gender. Although, significant to note, race was reintroduced into the social hierarchy between White and African women, reifying White women as more respected and

highlighting the interlocking oppressions faced by women of colour. Ultimately the hierarchical arrangements were negotiated and enforced by men, reflecting similar experiences to the participants in this research study who described the patriarchal influence on the prescribed role of women.

The subjugation of all women leads one to question the relations between White women and women of colour. If all women experience subjugation, why are there not more formed alliances between White women and women of colour? Moon and Holling's (2020) critique of White feminism offers insight to this inquiry:

As a progressive intervention into patriarchy, feminism has traditionally centered (white) women's experience, yet when sex and gender are combined with race, feminism tends to lose its progressive edge. In this way, the centering of women's experience becomes a double-edged sword; that is, endeavoring to advocate for all women, yet operating from a single identity or positionality that consequently jeopardizes the feminist project. (p. 253).

The researchers further articulate how White victimhood, a foundational element to White supremacy, locates itself in White feminism. Through White feminism, White women are positioned as victims of White patriarchy. This portrayal of victimization places sole responsibility for racism and sexism onto the White man. Moon and Holling (2020) assert that this allocation of responsibility ignores White women's complicity in these forms of oppression.

While I do not believe the intention of the participants in my study was to victimize themselves, their narratives fail to address how they themselves benefit from the discourse of White femininity. White women, due to their dual identity (one privileged and one oppressed) are faced with choosing to collude with and uphold White patriarchy or abandon it and commit

to femininity cut off from White, patriarchy. For White women, social workers this looks like giving up social work or most certainly White, Eurocentric social work. As long as the profession of social work orients from White, patriarchal, and colonial discourses, social workers will continue to reproduce them. This dissonance is woven throughout several of the interviews. For example, in discussing her frustration with social work Marya asks, "how can you take down the machine when the machine is holding you up?" In a similar way Katie talks about her own awareness of the effects of her Whiteness on clients, and the challenges she faces mitigating its effect:

I go in thinking that I look like everyone else who has ever hurt them before. And that's not necessarily the truth, right? But like, they have absolutely no reason to trust or believe in me and I work for a system that is oppressive. I am you know, a White girl with bleach blonde hair (laughs), who's driving up in my nice car, and my nice clothes and everything else and it's funny cause I'm like... You know, they tell you at one point, they tell you in school, "don't be Sally social worker." But there's no... it's almost like I don't know who else you want me to be because that's who I am, I guess.

Katie's words are particularly powerful. Her critical reflection invites her to witness her own complicity in harm, yet she is unsure what to do with that knowledge. Unlike some of the interviewees who responded to questions about Whiteness with defensiveness, Katie counters with dissonance. Again Jeffrey's (2005) critique comes to mind, where she questions if giving up Whiteness means giving up social work. In Katie's reflection it is as if she is asking, "if I give up Whiteness, am I giving up myself?" This inquiry replicates my assertion at the beginning of this section, that when White women are called upon to address the effects of their Whiteness, the result is a crisis of identity. Participants' responses to questions of Whiteness and White

femininity have either sought to defend their identity or engaged with meaningful reflection on their identity. Regardless, both responses are limited in its ability to shift the harmful implications for clients. In the following section, participants share ways in which they directly challenge the dominant discourse of White femininity in their practice, illuminating possibilities for future social work practice.

#### ***4.43 Illuminating Pathways to Disrupting One's Orientation Point***

This section illuminates the use of collectivism in social work practice as a method to disrupt the discourse of White femininity. Drawing from Ahmed (2007), I begin by situating the distinctiveness between White-identified individuals and non-White identified individuals in terms of disruption. While Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies disrupt White femininity the moment their bodies become visible, White bodies predominantly disrupt White femininity through their own built consciousness of their Whiteness, that is still only disrupted if acted upon. Unless this awareness is cultivated the performance of White femininity by White social workers is guaranteed and ultimately reproduces colonial structures of power. Ahmed (2007) speaks to articulates the inability for non-White bodies to fit into the "skin of the social" (p. 161). Drawing from Fanon (1986), Ahmed speaks to 'third person consciousness' experienced by the Black person, whose consciousness of their body leaves one feeling negated. Ahmed (2007) states:

To feel negated is to feel pressure upon your bodily surface; your body feels the pressure point, as a restriction of what it can do... If to be human is to be White, then to be not

White is to inhabit the negative: it is to be 'not.'" (p. 161)

She adds:



For bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions. Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of *stopping device*: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires that you be stopped. (p. 161)

This reality is reinforced by Badwall (2014), who, as described previously, illuminates the limitations of racialized social workers to fulfill the scripts of Whiteness embedded in social work institutions. This limitation arises when racialized social workers experience racism from their colleagues or their clients and choose to speak out about it. However, when they speak out about racism, just as Ahmed (2007) suggests, they are stopped. The discursive arrangements embedded in the mechanisms available to social workers demand a particular script to be followed, a White colonial script. Racism does not fit into this script, for the script is unidirectional. The script assigns social workers only to the position of power and the client only to a position of vulnerability; any experiences outside of these relational arrangements are stopped. If the racialized social worker persists with their complaint about racism, and refuse the ‘straight jacket’ of Whiteness, they lose their status as a ‘good’ social worker, but equally significant, resist the dominant discourses of Whiteness and colonization that shape social work institutions (Badwall, 2014).

For the White social worker disruption does not occur through the visibility of their body. The White body ‘fits’ the skin of the social, rendering ease of movement, and never being stopped, at least not outwardly. Previously, I offered examples of how critical reflection was a mechanism for the participants to witness their White feminine orientation point, I now contend that this critically reflective device is also a stopping point for White social workers. By critically

reflecting, they witness their complicity in systems of harm and their ease of movement is interrupted, forcing them to pause and sit in discomfort. While critical reflection serves as a stopping point for White social workers, it also functions as an end point. Yes, the social worker stops and reflects, perhaps vocalizing their complicity, but no further action is required in this process. This end point is challenged by two study participants, each of whom use collectivist values and practices to resist the White feminine discourse that shapes social work institutions and practices. In their narrations they reveal possibilities for future practices that actively challenge colonial dominance in social work.

#### **4.431 Collectivism as Resistance.**

Two participants in this research study spoke to the saliency of collectivism in their social work practice. Klara, a White-identified immigrant speaks to her collectivist values that underpin her social work practice:

[O]nce I found the immigrant serving sector, I felt at home. I completely felt at home.

The values that the immigrants came in with, they were always rooted in the same values as me, you know, living multi-generationally, collectivistically serving, being attentive to the collective's need... My need is not always the most important. The collective's need is important as well. And within the collective if the collective is set properly, then your needs will be taken care of as well. So, you don't have to be always this fighter and striving to achieve what I want to achieve individually, because I understand, and this is very similar to Indigenous perspective, where everything is interconnected in the world... You are breathing the same air as I do, you are relying on the same water sources that I do, you are eating similar foods to what I eat. If you are sad, it feels the same way as it feels within me. So, this concept of modern individuality, I find it's a very synthetic

concept to the human life and I don't think it brings, necessarily the best mental health...

[I]f we perceive we are alone in the world, in terms of I am my own individual, secluded and separated from you, I have to make it on my own. I have to prove to you that I'm as good or maybe better than you are. I have to do well financially. If I marry, or have a partner and have children, I have to prove that's a successful marriage, my kids are successful and wealthy, and I have to prove everything on my own. What a burden this is, what a burden this is.

Although Klara is a White woman, her collectivist value system as an immigrant from a non-Western nation is distinct from the individualistic value systems that are embodied by the mainstream White settler in Canada. Discourses of individualism operate in tandem with the discourse of White femininity, seen significantly in social work through the pathologizing of clients who need to be 'saved' by the morally elevated social worker (Thobani, 2007). Klara's collectivist values challenge discourses of individualism and White femininity, by emphasizing the health of the individual as contingent on the health of the collective.

Ella speaks to her use of what she names as "collective ethics" in her social work practice:

So, looking at collective ethics, which I think more and more I'm learning are essential to my social work practice. Where it's a very specific group articulating what is it that holds us together, who are we, what's important to us, and the shared responsibility of being accountable to that so it's not just on one person's shoulders to do it. So, it acknowledges that we all have different things impacting each of us and our ability to embody those as much as we're able to. And it's not about being perfect but doing it together and that we can't expect this all to be perfect on our own.

This passage illuminates possibilities for collective practice among social work practitioners. While Klara speaks to her personal values of collectivism and its effects, she does not describe how these values can be translated into practice, particularly social work practice rooted in Western ways of knowing. Ella offers a glimpse at how her social work team infuses a collective ethics into their practice, which ultimately resists the narratives of individualism that play a large part in upholding the dominant discourse of White femininity.

Houston (2016) draws from philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2006), to describe the rise of individualism in contemporary times. Bauman (2000, 2006) for examples, uses the concept of "liquidity" as a metaphor for modernity. Houston (2016) asserts that society mirrors liquidity because it has undergone significant transformation in its constitution. The fixed nature of social structures historically has become, in contemporary society, fluid and labile. In referencing time Houston (2016) notes that it "has become instantaneous and space more malleable in the 'so-called' liquid society" (p. 535). The implications for the fluidity of social structures Houston (2016) postulates:

Not only does a sense of liquidity reshape social institutions, but it also moulds social lives. Liquid life becomes noted for its precariousness, its uncertainty, the great pace and change of events which interlace personal biographies. From another angle, it can be seen as inaugurating new beginnings where we are encouraged to 'feel the fear and do it anyway.' Importantly, identity becomes privatised, fractured and frail as individuals are disembedded from their social moorings. Rather than identity being fixed, it is now a project of work, a performative responsibility. (p. 535)

This performative responsibility when translated into social work contexts drives individualist discourse which frames the social work professional's expectations of the client. The client is not

considered a product of structural violence but a product of their own making, an outcome of one's poor choices (LeMarre et al., 2019). The social worker on the other hand is a self-made product too. Unlike the client the social worker has made 'good' choices, choices that demonstrate self-control and responsibility, and commitment to self-knowledge and self-change (Chambon, 1999). Her success is presented as contingent on the good choices she has made, veiling the structural advantages that offered them choice to begin with. Individualist discourse suggests that all people are offered the same set of choices. If a person becomes addicted to alcohol and loses her job, individualism says this person failed to make good choices. If a person purchases a home and has a high paying salary, individualism says, this person earned this by making good choices. Social work capitalizes on this discourse by placing social workers in a superior position to the client based on the good choices they have made to become professionals. These good choices earn them access to the lives of those individuals who have made 'bad' choices in the hopes that the social worker can impart their expertise on how to be a successful citizen. If then the client fails to be 'successful' according to the standards of individualism, the social worker is never at fault, and more importantly the system is never at fault. Instead, the client is labelled as not ready, not wanting to change, or not willing to work hard enough — a product of their own personal failings.

This dependent relationship formed between social worker and client reflects what Foucault (1982) referred to as dividing practices. Dividing practices operate as a system of classification according to the binaries of good/bad, normal/pathological, and the self/other which "establish the multiple processes of affirmation and reward, surveillance and exclusion" (Chambon, 1999, p. 67). In the case of social work, the social worker represents the self, the good, and the normal, whereas the client fulfills the image of the Other, the bad, and the

pathological; in this way the social worker is affirmed and rewarded, while the client is excluded and subject to surveillance. Dividing practices serve to uphold relations of power, which ultimately stifles any threat to White, colonial power.

Freedman and Combs (2012) speak to Foucault's (1965, 1975, 1977c, 1985) conception of modern power, stating:

Modern power, instead of coming from a central authority, is carried in discourses. Through lobbying, advertising, participating on school boards, and a thousand other means, the more privileged people in a society have more influence on its discourses. We don't usually notice the powerful influence of these discourses... Modern power recruits us into policing ourselves. Influenced by the media, by what is readily available at the supermarket, by the standard curriculum for high schools, and by the clothes we see on pop stars, just to name a few, we tend to accept dominant discourses. We tend to try to live up to dominant discourses, to compare ourselves to what they deem good, or normal, or successful, and to judge ourselves in comparison. (p. 1038)

As noted throughout this thesis study, the dominant discourse of White femininity positioned White women as the moral figures of the colonial empire, which was the image taken up by the profession of social work as White women disproportionately occupied the role of social worker (Heron, 2007; Thobani, 2007). Contemporarily, this phenomenon continues, and social workers aim to fulfill this morally superior identity. Clients on the other hand have been subjected to alternative dominant discourses that have positioned them in disempowering ways. McKenzie et al. (2016) site the dominant narrative of "the drunken Indian," that was established historically through the process of colonization and that is reified contemporarily through mainstream media,

government policy, and some ethnographic research, which is an example of a disempowering dominant discourse that morally denigrates Indigenous people (p. 9).

Ultimately modern power removes the requirement for a central authority to exercise power over its citizens, as the citizens themselves exercise this power between one another and towards the self. The dominant discourse of individualism serves as both a dividing practice and avenue for modern power to take hold. As described previously, individualism supports the notion that people are products of their own good or bad choices, denying structural advantages and disadvantages that greatly benefit or impede individuals. When clients are unable to make ‘good’ choices due to structural violence and systemic barriers, they are led to believe by social workers who have bought into the script of individualism, that their failures are of their own making. This would naturally result in clients believing that they are inferior making it very challenging to illuminate alternative possibilities available to them outside the scripts of inferiority. In result of both the social worker and the client believing in the dominant discourse of individualism, social stratification is maintained, and White supremacy and colonization retain their power.

Only two participants in this study demonstrated disruption to the dominant discourse of White femininity through their commitment to collectivism in their practice. Collectivist discursive practices directly counter individualism, which is a salient feature of Western nations (Baskin, 2016), and a narrative that is inextricable from the dominant discourse of White femininity. In identifying the collectivist worldview prominent in non-Western societies, Baskin (2016) argues that professionals look to practices that encourage collective well-being. Her concern for the individualism that threads through Western social work practices, is the risk of

isolation that she believes underpins many of the problems people are dealing with, as she further asserts:

Indigenous knowledges and spiritual beliefs, which exist throughout the world on many continents and have no boundaries in terms of "race," teach us that to only focus on the self, has long lasting negative consequences. For centuries, many countries of the world have focused solely on their own national well-being without any thought for other peoples on the earth. Today, because the globalization of mass media has engendered an increased awareness of global issues, many of us are faced with the consequences of the selfishness of individualism. The values of individualism and competition are not working for most of earth's people and many of us know this. Rather than continuing on this path, perhaps it may help us all if we begin to look at how we relate to others, to the world, and to our professions in ways that honour care for collective well-being. (p. 129)

Baskin's (2016) sentiments on collectivism reflect the participants' own views on the use of collectivism in their social work practice. While White femininity is thread throughout all interviews, Ella and Klara's reflections on using collectivism in their social work practice illuminates possibilities for radical change in Western social work contexts that without disruption serve to uphold White, colonial structures through the dominant discourse of White femininity.

Reynolds (2019a, 2019b, 2014) also argues for the use of collectivist practices in helping contexts. Focused on supervision as an avenue for change, she developed collective ethics as a means to counter individualist and neoliberal discourses that hinder the work of helping professionals. Reynolds (2014) speaks to the messy, ethical terrain helping professionals face, claiming, the existence of "many paths to liberation and no theory or practice is harm-free. The



quest is not to find the perfect intervention, but to examine our ethical positioning and hold our practice to enacting these ethics" (p. 3). While Reynolds (2014) recognizes the use of traditional codes of ethics to set parameters and create aspirational goals, she believes these also need to be "critiqued, challenged, and change[d]" to be more effective (p. 3). Reynolds (2014) suggests the use of collective ethics or relational ethics, which are "less connected with philosophical and hypothetical judgements of right and wrong and more attuned to the immediate demands of circumstances in the social context of the lives of clients" (p. 3). This assertion challenges the moral elevation that White femininity is contingent on, which is a mechanism that maintains the social hierarchy between social workers and clients. If social work practice moves away from moral judgements, the social worker is then no longer situated 'above' the client as a system representative, but positioned next to the client, and therefore able to face and challenge the system together in partnership.

Reynolds (2014) posits that collective ethics are an "important points of connection that weave us together as workers" (p. 3). As the ethics that workers hold often go unnamed Reynolds (2014) recommends mapping out these ethics in supervision groups "in order to create shared meanings and invite a collective commitment to these ethics" (p. 3). Collective ethics are elicited through questions, for example Reynolds (2014) might ask her team members: "What are the ethics that drew you to this work?" "What ways of being in this work do you value, hold close, maybe even hold sacred?" "What ethics are required for your work, without which you would be unable to work?" "What is your history to these values and ethics? Who and what taught you this? What ethics or values do we hold collectively?" (p. 3).

This method of establishing ethics collectively as helping professionals moves away from the scripts of White femininity, which are invested in individualism. Historically speaking, social

work became a means for White women to access positions of power in the public sphere, demonstrating the use of marginalized populations to achieve individual success (Chapman & Wither, 2019). This access to power was further denied to women of colour, which questions the historical narrative that depicts professional social work as a feminist gain (Chapman & Wither, 2019). The full story of social work history instead illuminates how professional social work was truly a White feminist gain. While contemporary social work certainly includes social workers from racially diverse backgrounds, White women continue to occupy the greatest number of positions and a disproportionate number of those positions with the greatest power. Equally, success in the field of social work, as demonstrated in this thesis and illuminated by the literature (Badwall, 2014; Heron, 2007), is contingent on the extent to which the individual social worker fulfills the script of White femininity. Reynolds (2014) collective ethics counters this allegiance to individualism and thus White femininity by forming solidarity among team members and centering clients, as opposed to fostering competition among workers and centering the individual practitioner in the work.

A final note Reynolds (2014) makes regarding the use of collective ethics is that they must be enacted, not just talked about. This assertion aligns with my previous critiques concerning critical reflection, which often invites social workers into reflection without translating it into action, ultimately upholding the colonial threads that shape the social work institution. It is in the doing Reynolds (2014) states " that ethics are revealed through an examination of practice, or what we do. Both theory and practice exist in relationships with our ethical stances" (p. 5). Drawing from Kvale's (1996) "hermeneutics of suspicion" in which "claims are held in abeyance until the practice can be shown to reveal the theory" (p. 203), Reynolds (2014) supports the notion that workers should take a "critical distance from the claims

to ethics... [they] make, and invite[] a hopeful yet sceptical position, open to the possibility that our practice may reveal something other than our intention" (p. 5). This avoidance of certainty in ethics proposed by Reynolds (2014) is an ethical stance, and it secures the necessity for action as a testing ground, prior to asserting an ethical claim. This approach to ethics, through collectivity, is counter to the scripts of White femininity, that rely on the moral certainty of the individual practitioner to make expert decisions in relation to the clients they work alongside. While this study has demonstrated how practitioners perform, defend, and witness the dominant discourse of White femininity, those who spoke about the use of collectivist values and ethics in their practice elucidate possibilities for alternative practices that counter the dominant narrative that shapes Western social work practice.

#### **4.5 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter highlighted key findings in my research study and reviewed the findings in the context of the research literature relevant to them. This thesis study used FDA to trace instances where participants performed and resisted White femininity in their community-based social work practice. The findings demonstrated that performances of White femininity were evident among the participants through their desire to help; moves to innocence; and language used to talk about race. Neoliberal threads were discussed in a cursory fashion and were noted to be in collusion with White feminine discourse. Additionally, the fulfillment of scripts of White femininity were interrupted by some participants based on identity markers that were outside the parameters of the White feminine.

White femininity was also performed through defensive acts by some participants, who minimized the effects of race and racism in their work by responding to questions about Whiteness with examples of oppression faced by White people. Those who did not respond with

defensiveness and engaged with critical reflection bore to witness their Whiteness and its effects. I argued that critical reflection, while an avenue to build awareness among social workers about relations of power, and in the context of this study, the power of Whiteness, is ultimately considered the solution for unequal power relations among social workers and clients. I reason that translating reflection into action is a necessary step for social workers looking to dismantle colonial systems and disrupt the dominant discourse of White femininity. While most participants articulated ways they reflected on their identity markers of dominance, two participants cited the use of collectivist values and ethics in their practice, which I argue disrupt the individualistic discourses that shape contemporary, Western social work practice and collude with White feminine discourse. The following chapter provides recommendations for future social work education, policy, research, and practice based on the findings in this thesis study.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

This concluding section of my thesis addresses the study's limitations; future recommendations for social work research, education, policy, and practice based on my research findings; and concluding remarks.

### **5.1 Limitations**

Several limitations were identified in this research study. For example, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. While purposive sampling ensures participant credibility or expertise on the subject of the study, it limits the generalizability of the findings (Steinburg, 2015). Generalizability however, is not the purpose of qualitative research, instead qualitative research aims to illuminate meanings; study how things work; capture stories, experiences, and perspectives; understand how systems function; understand the contexts people live within; explore unexpected consequences; and look for patterns and themes across cases (Patton, 2015). The findings of this study are contextual and therefore only able to speak to the sample itself (Steinberg, 2015), that is the narratives of White, women, community-based social workers in Alberta. Therefore, inquiries into the narratives of other identities, including both racial, and gender identities could illuminate a more fulsome picture of the effects of the dominant discourse of White femininity on social work practice. Further, while FDA offers significant insights into the social and cultural practices embedded within social work, it does not

expose the micro-level effects of White femininity on those who would be most impacted, including racialized social workers and clients.

Additionally, FDA is limited in its ability to redress that which it critiques. For example, community-based participatory research (CBPR) requires that the issues addressed or unveiled through the research project are attended to with praxis, or "repeated cycles of reflection and action" (Branom, 2012, p. 261). This expectation is distinct from discourse analysis which uses critique to inform future action (El-Lahib, 2015), as opposed to being the action itself. Latour (2010) argues "what performs critique cannot also compose" (p. 475). He expands on this premise stating it is:

[R]eally a mundane question of having the right tools for the right job. With a hammer (or a sledge hammer) in hand you can do a lot of things: break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudices, but you cannot repair, assemble, reassemble, stitch together. (p. 475)

While this research study illuminates possibilities for future action, it is not action-based in its own right.

Lastly, the events of the COVID-19 pandemic limited my ability to interview participants in person. While the use of virtual technology satisfies the majority of my needs as a researcher and indeed allowed the participation of a geographically broader sample, in person interviews offer additional opportunities for observation that virtual interviews simply cannot provide (Shlegel et al., 2021). Shlegel et al. (2021) highlight the "natural flow of conversation and ability to read non-verbal cues" as a benefit of in person interviews (p. 4040). While I found for the majority of this research study's interviews the discussions were in depth and flowed naturally, the ability to read non-verbal cues was challenging. For example, one interview occurred on Zoom but without the use of video. This arrangement was necessary as the participant's internet

connection was unreliable. In consequence I could not see the participant and observe her non-verbal responses to questions. This circumstance illuminates how the technological requirements of virtual research has its own challenges. In other interviews there were delays in the internet videos, intermittent distorted audio, and sometimes poor video quality (Shelgel et al., 2021). These technological issues were never insurmountable barriers but contributed to awkward encounters at times with the participants (Shelgel et al., 2021). Overall I found that virtual landscape necessitated by COVID-19 met the requirements for qualitative research but did not have the same level of depth and quality an in person interview offers.

## **5.2 Implications for Education, Practice, and Policy**

My findings elucidate the harmful effects of the dominant discourse of White femininity on social work practice. In addition, and importantly, it also reveals the limitations of the primary tool used in social work, critical reflection, to effectively minimize the harm of such effects. Liberatory education has been proposed as one way to both engage in critical reflection and translate this theory into action (MacDonald et al., 2020). Drawing from Agger (2006), MacDonald (2020) suggests that "liberatory education can provide pathways to address the societal roots of oppression and... create radical alternatives" (p. 3). bell hooks (1994), inspired by Paulo Freire's (2008) work on critical education, writes that "education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor" (p. 14). This assertion illuminates that education as a liberatory practice is contingent on both instructor and student participation, as opposed to the traditional didactic style of instruction in which knowledge is imparted onto the student by the educator (hooks, 1994). In my opinion, this approach to pedagogy in social work education invites students to engage more meaningfully with the

consciousness raising tools offered to them, such as critical reflection, increasing the likelihood that these tools will be effectively utilized in their future practice.

I suggest that this same model can be applied to the practitioner/supervisor relationship in field education. MacDonald et al. (2020) and Preston et al. (2014) speak to the ways in which field education can be adjusted to better attend to social justice matters. The purpose of field education is to provide students with an opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom, in a practice setting under the supervision of a social work practitioner (MacDonald et al., 2020). While in theory this arrangement is considered to be highly effective, MacDonald et al. (2020) illuminate the contemporary challenges faced in field education in Canada. Due to the pervasiveness of neoliberalism and its "managerial logics," which ultimately emphasize "efficiency, effectiveness, and excellence," meaningful learning rooted in social justice is often dismissed (p. 2).

As my findings demonstrated neoliberal and individualist discourses collude with the discourse of White femininity, therefore the solutions to the problems posed by neoliberalism, can similarly address the harmful effects of the dominant discourse of White femininity. MacDonald et al. (2020) note that engagement with field supervisors as "allies and principal actors" in liberatory education is critical in the extent to which students experience social justice in practice and ultimately the radical transformation of the neoliberal landscape of field education (p. 14). Increasingly social justice in social work practice is an after-thought as opposed to the central force that drives the profession (MacDonald et al., 2020). Engaging future social workers from the classroom to the field in social justice praxis is particularly vital for social workers that hold positions of privilege, particularly White privilege, because without this perpetual engagement with justice-oriented praxis, "discourses that shape knowledge and



practice remain unquestioned as well as their own privilege in reinforcing oppression" (MacDonald et al., 2020, p. 14).

Additionally, it is imperative for social work to recruit and retain racialized bodies into the role of educator. Duhaney and El-Lahib (2021), both racialized social work educators, articulate the marginalization of racialized faculty within academia:

As social work students, and now educators, it was common to be taught by just a few racialized instructors during our entire degree. These anecdotes are typical in many social work departments in Canada where curricula about the "racialized Other" are designed, constructed, and delivered mostly by White educators and scholars. (p. 424)

While these authors speak to the necessity for diverse representation amongst faculty members, they also highlight the fraught terrain of academia faced by racialized educators. Challenges they enumerate include invisible labour dedicated to both supporting students and sitting on numerous committees specifically dedicated to equity and diversity; harmful stereotypes that delegitimize competency; and student scrutiny that undermines their authority. While "diversifying the social work knowledge base is necessary" as Duhaney and El-Lahib (2021, p. 432) advance, disrupting the grip of Whiteness/White femininity on social work should not be a means to offload anti-racism work onto the scant racialized educators. The problem of White supremacy and Whiteness in social work must be addressed by all educators. White educators need to do their own work to confront their complicity in systems of oppression, while finding ways to support racialized faculty in anti-racism work as co-conspirators and allies.

Representation is also relevant regarding policy development. Due to the disproportionate numbers of White men and women occupying leadership positions from the organizational level to the level of legislation, it is unrealistic to believe that Whiteness and White supremacy can be

dismantled within current policy tools. To return to Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of Whiteness, she proposes that institutional Whiteness is a product which results from the gathering of White bodies, and not other bodies. When we diversify or increase representation of non-White bodies in institutional spaces, a disorientation of what is taken for granted occurs (Ahmed, 2007; Nasiri, 2021). Nasiri (2021) asserts that this disorientation is of "vital importance," because "of what it can reveal to us about the everyday world" (p. 451). It is in these moments of disorientation, opportunity for disruption unfolds (Nasiri, 2021).

Much like Duhaney and El-Lahib (2021), Nasiri (2021) speaks to the invisible labour taken on by racialized faculty actively resisting the "habitual reproduction" of institutional Whiteness (p. 451). They also offers the benefit of having intentional spaces dedicated to "nurturing intellectual kinships between people-of-colour" as important sources of respite (p. 451). As a novice, White researcher studying Whiteness and looking to participate in anti-racism work, I am left to contend with my own current and future complicity in upholding institutional Whiteness. In what ways can I offer support to my colleagues of colour without over-drawing on them for guidance? In what ways can I disorient and disrupt institutional Whiteness as a White body? In what ways can I as an aspiring social work educator contribute to the disruption that Nasiri (2021) seeks?

### **5.3 Implications for Research**

Numerous avenues for future research were illuminated through this thesis study in which I sought to reveal the effects of the dominant discourse of White femininity on community-based social work practice. Of great interest to me as the researcher was the realization that the study of Whiteness and race is a highly contextual project. This study very much speaks to the Western, settler context, and does little to illuminate how Whiteness and White femininity are understood

and performed cross-culturally. For example, the interview with the participant who identified as White but racialized, challenged my assumptions about the operation of race globally. Future research is needed to untangle diverse understandings of race, ethnicity, Whiteness, and White femininity according to context.

I am writing this as Russia invades Ukraine, and I am paying close attention to the unfolding relationships between nationality, ethnicity, and race. Colorism is actively present in this war as BIPOC individuals are being prevented from leaving Ukraine, and violent acts towards BIPOC are being documented (Ferris-Rotman, 2022). Equally, the global response and attention given to this war, whilst conflicts of the same voracity have been taking place in predominantly nations made up of non-White citizens with little global attention granted (Bayoumi, 2022), speaks to the power of Whiteness on a global scale. There is much to understand within these nuances, and research that can capture the contextual differences will only be of benefit to the social work profession. Canada continues to grow as a multicultural nation and therefore social workers must be better prepared to work within immigrant and refugee contexts (Kusari & Walsh, 2021).

Another significant area for future research is looking at the effects of White femininity on racialized social workers through a micro-lens. As mentioned in the study limitations, discourse analysis offers a window into the social and cultural practices of social work, but does little to illuminate the day to day effects of White femininity on racialized bodies. I received criticism at the commencement of my study from several individuals who viewed my work as centering White women, and Whiteness. While the intention of my work was always to illuminate and problematize the presence of White femininity in social work institutions and practices, I am aware that the voices of racialized individuals are then absent. Future research

that elicits and centres the stories of racialized social workers and their experiences of working within institutional White femininity are necessary. It is through story that we are able to most connect to experience (Shaw, 2017), and I believe that radical disruption to the reproduction of White femininity in social work needs voices of racialized social workers to speak to their own realities to fully understand its effects. Additionally, hearing how racialized social workers resist the reproduction of White femininity in social work is of vital importance. Indeed, this form of resistance has been present since the commencement of professional social work and is critical to disrupt ongoing colonial practices.

#### **5.4 Closing Remarks**

This project arose out of my own experiences as a social worker practicing in contexts where the individuals, communities, and families I was serving were disproportionately Indigenous. I experienced ongoing spiritual pain (Reynolds, 2014) due to the paradoxical position I held as a White social worker, both helping and harming simultaneously. At the beginning of my thesis journey I spent significant time researching harm in social work. Influenced by the writings of Chapman and Withers (2019), and Blackstock (2009) I began to carve out a research study but felt I was missing something. I soon came across the scholarly work of Thobani (2007) and Badwall (2014) and realized what was in fact missing was a racial analysis of social work practice. Since this moment I have not been able to look away from the salience of race relations in social work— I believe it is a vital area of study for all social work researchers, educators, and practitioners who desire to work alongside marginalized populations.

Community-based social workers became the focus of my work in part due to a conversation with a racialized colleague who suggested I explore areas of social work that did not carry obvious threads of racism. For example, racism or colonial practices in child welfare

are obvious to the critical practitioner, whereas community-based practice, which is viewed in social work as a social change context, is positioned in the field as an innocent project (Rossiter, 2001). By recruiting participants from this field of social work practice, this study was able to unveil the white feminine colonial project even in the most social justice-oriented arm of social work. The significance of this unveiling is to illuminate the impossibility of innocence in social work (Rossiter, 2001). This research project is certainly not without my own strive for innocence or White feminine desire 'to do good.' I cannot deny this complicity. At the same time, I believe these parts of myself can be deconstructed with a critical lens and ultimately harnessed, albeit imperfectly, towards justice. I am inspired by the words of Alexis Shotwell (2016) who contemplates the "usefulness of thinking about complicity and compromise as a starting point for action" (p. 5) She states:

Often there is an implicit or explicit idea that in order to live authentically or ethically we ought to avoid potentially reprehensible results in our actions. Since it is not possible to avoid complicity, we do better to start from an assumption that everyone is implicated in situations we (at least in some way) repudiate. We are compromised and we have made compromises, and this will continue to be the way we craft the worlds to come, whatever they might turn out to be. (p. 5)

This research study was my first step on a journey towards an imagined different world, one in which the role of a professional social worker might be unnecessary. This statement is not to devalue all social work practice, but offer hope for a different kind of social work. A professional practice that I have seen glimmers of in my years as a social worker or read about in my studies or learned about from the participants I interviewed for this thesis project. I agree with Rossiter (2001) who speaks to her belief that "victories coexist with trespasses" (para. 27) She alludes that

these victories are “signals about what might be possible, and their acknowledgement and celebration adds weight to the possibility of keeping social work on the side of common decency: spiritually, politically and practically” (para. 27). I end this writing with gratitude and anticipation for this imagined future.

### **Appendix A: Call for Participation**



### **Research Participants Needed!**

## **WHITE FEMININITY & SOCIAL WORK**

**Seeking volunteer participants for a qualitative study looking at how community-based social work practice is shaped by white femininity.** Participants will be asked to share their stories and experiences in individual interviews. If you are of legal age, and identify as a white, female, who is currently practicing as a community-based social worker for a minimum of two years in Alberta, please contact Jill at [jill.hoselton@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jill.hoselton@ucalgary.ca). Interested participants should be current, regulated professionals. Interviews will occur on Zoom and will last between 45-90 minutes, and a \$25 Starbucks or Tim Horton's gift certificate will be provided upon completion of the interview. This study has been approved by CFREB.

## **Appendix B: Consent to Participate**

### **Consent Form**



#### **Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email**

Jill Hoselton, MSW Student  
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary  
(780) 964-4191/ jill.hoselton@ucalgary.ca

#### **Supervisor**

Dr. Christine Walsh  
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

#### **Title of Project:**

White Femininity in Community-Based Social Work: An Autoethnography and Discourse Analysis

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to collect the narratives of community-based social workers residing in Alberta about their practice and trace how their practice is shaped by discourses of White femininity. Participants will have practised social work for a minimum of two years, and are required to be current regulated professionals.

#### **What Will I Be Asked to Do?**

For this study you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview. The interview will consist of a one-on-one session with the interviewer. The session will last between 45 to 90 minutes depending on how long the conversation takes. You will be asked to describe your experience as a social worker, specifically regarding what brought you to social work, how you practice, why you practice the way you do, and how this shapes your experiences with clients. Some questions will specifically ask about how your racial and gender identity informs your practice and in particular working with racialized clients. Participation is voluntary, you may withdraw at any time, and you may decline to answer any or all of the questions.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your name, how long you have practiced as a social worker, what your education is (Diploma, BSW, MSW etc.), and what community-based context you work within, and what your role is.

The interviews will be conducted via University of Calgary's secure Zoom account and will require a login password to proceed with the interview. Zoom technology is able to create written transcripts. All audio-recording and written transcripts from your interview will be confidential. Confidentiality is maintained by ensuring interviews are conducted privately. Audio transcripts and written transcripts will be kept in a password protected folder on the researcher's computer accessible only by the researcher and her supervisor. All data will be stored on a secure server. All identifying information will be removed prior to any presentation or publication. However, for the purpose of this study, direct quotes of yours may be used in the researcher's future papers, presentations, and publications. All personal information, such as your name, and e-mail address, will be securely stored and will not be made publicly accessible.

Your identity (along with the identity of those you refer to in your interviews) will remain anonymous. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission to be audio-recorded: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

You may refer to me by a pseudonym of my choosing: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Are There Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There are no foreseeable risks for this study. However, subject matter may be considered sensitive to some participants. If you feel uncomfortable during the interview, you may elect to move on to the next question or stop the interview at any time. Alternatively, interview sessions can be carried on when you are ready to talk about your experience again. If required, resources to counseling services will be provided.

There are no costs associated with this interview. In addition, participation is voluntary and monetary imbursements will not be distributed. A \$25 Starbucks gift card will be provided to you as a token of appreciation for your time.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**



All personal information will remain confidential, and will be accessed only by the primary investigator and her supervisor. Your contributions to the study will be used in the manner you have requested above. For example, if you supply a pseudonym, that name will be referred to for any presentation or publication of results. Interview transcripts and audio files will be kept in a password protected folder on the researcher's computer accessible only by the researcher and her supervisor. All data will be stored on a secure server.

In the case that you choose to discontinue participation your last day to withdraw your data will be two weeks after the researcher provides you with a copy of the transcripts to review. After this time the data is considered the property of the researcher.

The researcher plans to use the data as part of her completion requirements for her Masters of Social Work thesis, as well as papers for publications in academic journals, and academic conference presentations or educational settings. In these future projects, participant anonymity will be a primary concern and be protected to the best of the researcher's ability.

Please initial the following options, which will give the researcher permission to use your narrative anonymously in the following types of future publications:

I grant permission for my narrative to be used for the completion of the researcher's Master of Social Work thesis \_\_\_\_\_

I grant permission for my narrative to be used for academic journal articles and conference presentations and educational activities \_\_\_\_\_

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time, or decline answering any questions throughout the interview process. There will be no penalty should you withdraw from the study. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participants Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participants Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Ms. Jill Hoselton

Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

phone number: (780) 964-4191

email: jill.hoselton@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Christine Walsh  
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary  
email: christine.walsh@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant, please contact an Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863. email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

### **Appendix C: Interview Guide**

1. Tell me about your professional social work practice?

Probe: how long have you practiced, in what field, terminal degree, etc

2. Can you share your interest in practising in a community setting?
3. What makes community social work different than other areas of social work practice?
4. Can you talk to me about your clients in terms of diversity, age, race, gender etc. . .
5. What practice framework do you use with your clients?
6. What is your perception of how your practice effects racialized clients?
7. Can you tell me about a time you perceived your practice positively effecting a client?
8. Can you tell me about a time you perceived your practice negatively effecting a client?
9. How has your practice with racialized clients changed over time?
10. What are the barriers you face working with racialized clients?
11. What would improve your practice with racialized clients?

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