Politically and Historically Bound: Examining Whiteness and Intersectionality among Self-Identified Feminists

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POLITICALLY AND HISTORICALLY BOUND: EXAMINING WHITENESS AND INTERSECTIONALITY AMONG SELF-IDENTIFIED FEMINISTS

by

Olivia M. McLaughlin

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
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POLITICALLY AND HISTORICALLY BOUND: EXAMINING WHITENESS AND INTERSECTIONALITY AMONG SELF-IDENTIFIED FEMINISTS

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Western Michigan University, 2020

This dissertation examined the perspectives and beliefs of 23 self-identified feminists who are White. Specifically, it explored whether—and if so, to what extent—Whites have adopted intersectionality. Intersectional feminism refers to the activism and scholarship that recognizes the multi-dimensional nature of power and privilege and stands in contrast to the white-centered feminism that has dominated most feminist spaces since the suffrage movement. Since Kimberlé Crenshaw’s seminal article where the concept of intersectionality was formally introduced to the academy, feminist scholars have characterized the most recent wave of feminism as the intersectional wave. This third, intersectional wave of feminist movement is believed to be more inclusive and cognizant of the unique experience of Black women and other doubly and triply marginalized groups of women. Empirical research, however, has not yet established if self-identified feminists who are White have adopted intersectionality into their beliefs and practices.

The purpose of this study is to explore Whites’ ideas about feminism, gender oppression, intersectionality, and race. The research questions posed are: how do self-identified feminists define feminism? What do they believe to be the most pressing issues? Do they view race as important? Are they cognizant of whiteness and privilege? Do they know what intersectional feminism is and, if so, do they identify with it? To answer these questions, Black feminist
perspectives on whiteness are centered in a mixed-methods research design. Online, anonymous survey responses from Black women were used to establish a Black feminist standpoint; the emergent themes from their open-ended responses formed the topics for discussion in one-on-one interviews with White, self-identified feminists. After the qualitative interviews, participants were invited to attend a focus group to discuss race and intersectionality in feminism.

Interviews revealed that whiteness remained centered for the majority of feminists in my sample. Although there were a handful who were committed to divesting from whiteness and centering the voices of multiply marginalized women, most participants held definitions of feminism that overwhelmingly privileged White, cisgender, middle-class women. Moreover, it was revealed that even when attempting to engaging in anti-racist discourse, several White feminists relied on racialized narratives of people of Color to make sense of race as it relates to sexism, feminism, and oppression. Participants often ascribed to individualistic definitions of feminism, race, and racism and, as a result, they struggled to meaningfully integrate the ideas underlying intersectionality into their feminist consciousness, even when explicitly identifying with intersectional feminism.

Findings of this study demonstrate that intersectional approaches to social justice cannot take hold in a movement where its members do not divest from white supremacy. The study also shows that when examining issues of power and oppression in social movements, the standpoint of marginalized individuals must be centered. Ultimately, these findings suggest that as long as privileged women fail to see how their oppression is related to the oppression of marginalized women, it is unlikely that whiteness will be displaced by intersectionality.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

  Statement of Problem ...................................................................................................... 1

  Outline of Dissertation .................................................................................................. 5

  Background Information ............................................................................................... 8

  Review of Relevant Literature ......................................................................................... 13

  Significance of the Study ............................................................................................... 17

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK .......................................................................................... 20

  Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 20

  Critical Whiteness Literature ........................................................................................ 20

  Feminist Theories ............................................................................................................ 28

  Chapter Summary .......................................................................................................... 53

III. RESEARCH DESIGN ........................................................................................................ 55

  Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 55

  Researcher Positioning .................................................................................................. 55
# Table of Contents—Continued

## CHAPTER

Methodological Approach ......................................................... 58

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis .................................. 67

Chapter Summary ........................................................................ 87

### IV. THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR FEMINISM ........................................ 89

Introduction ............................................................................ 89

Participant Demographics ....................................................... 89

Coming to Feminism ................................................................. 92

Defining Feminism ..................................................................... 99

Social Issues: What Matters? .................................................... 111

Including, Excluding: Who Matters? ......................................... 119

Chapter Summary .................................................................... 130

### V. SELF-IDENTIFIED FEMINISTS TALK RACE AND INTERSECTIONALITY ...... 134

Introduction ............................................................................ 134

Making Sense of Whiteness ...................................................... 135

Race, Racism, and Anti-Racism ............................................... 146

Conception of Intersectionality ............................................... 162

Chapter Summary .................................................................... 180
# Table of Contents—Continued

## CHAPTER

VI. CONCLUSION.............................................................................................................. 185

   Synopsis of Findings........................................................................................................ 185

   Limitations and Future Research .................................................................................. 191

   Contribution to the Discipline ...................................................................................... 194

REFERENCES ..................................................................................................................... 197

## APPENDICES

A. Statement of Informed Consent- Interview.................................................................. 212

B. Statement of Informed Consent- Focus Groups............................................................. 217

C. Online Survey Informed Consent .................................................................................. 221

D. Online Survey Instrument .............................................................................................. 223

E. Demographic Survey Instrument .................................................................................. 225

F. Interview Guide ............................................................................................................. 227

G. Focus Group Discussion Guide ..................................................................................... 229

H. Survey Recruitment Flyer .............................................................................................. 231

I. Interview Recruitment Flyer ........................................................................................... 233

J. HSIRB Approval Letter .................................................................................................... 235
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Feminist scholars and historians typically organize feminist movement and activity into waves, characterizing the most recent wave as the intersectional wave (Aune & Holyeoak 2018; Dahl Crossley 2017; Butler 2013; Tong 2013). Intersectional feminism refers to the activism, scholarship, and theoretical perspective that “recognizes that systems of power such as race, class, and gender do not act alone to shape our experiences but rather, are multiplicative, inextricably linked, and simultaneously experienced” (Burgess-Proctor 2011: 31). It stands in contrast to the white-centered feminism that dominated most feminist spaces since the suffrage movement (Collins 2015). This third, intersectional wave is believed to be more inclusive and cognizant of the particular form of oppression Black women and other women of Color must navigate as a result of their multiple oppressed identities (Tong 2013; Dahl Crossley 2017). Empirical research, however, has yet to establish if self-identified feminists have adopted intersectionality into their beliefs and practices the way the academy has institutionalized the perspective in their research and curricula.

Intersectionality was formally introduced to the academy in 1989 through Kimberlé Crenshaw’s article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” Since then, academics across several disciplines have been prolific in their application of the term both in their teaching and research (see Collins 2015 & Potter 2015). For many of these academics, Crenshaw’s piece served as their first introduction to the study of power as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (May 2015). In other words, her use of intersectionality provided a frame with which academics could
understand the lives of doubly and triply marginalized people (on their terms), possibly for the first time.

Crenshaw’s piece is often pointed to as evidence that feminists were beginning to think of gender as a system implicated by other identities and is commonly used as a starting point to trace Black women’s contribution to feminist theorizing (Potter 2015). Since “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, intersectionality and intersectional research has become a fixture within feminism and academia (Roth 2017; Collins 2015). According to Vivian E. May (2015), feminists tend to view the institutionalization of intersectionality as an indication of widespread acceptance of Black women within feminist movement and scholarship. Others question whether this quick acceptance of intersectionality is truly an indication of feminists engaging with women of Color’s theorizing in a profound way. They ask, has it only been adopted because feminists fail to understand the nuances of the concept (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Collins 2015)? Has it been co-opted (Bilge 2013)? This of course, begs the question: are self-identified feminists seriously engaging with intersectional theorizing on gender oppression?

For intersectionality to be meaningfully adopted, one must recognize that systems of power constantly interact with one another in significant ways (Crenshaw 1989; 1991), ways that stratify women differentially and enable some of us to exercise power over others (hooks 1984; Levine-Raskey 2011). Because Black women and other feminists of Color cannot separate their experience with gender oppression from their racial identity, the onus to establish an intersectional movement lies with Whites, specifically, multiply advantaged Whites.

This is not to say “White” is not a race and that White women’s experience with oppression is not intersected by their whiteness. On the contrary, race only exists for the purpose of establishing a white identity (Bonilla-Silva 2018). White feminists—even when they do not
know it—are always experiencing both the oppression of their gender along with the privilege of their race. Their orthodox theorizing merely erases the significance of race such that they are not required to engage with the reality of racial stratification in the United States (Moreton-Robinson 2000). Put simply, for intersectionality to be meaningfully adopted by feminists, whiteness (along with other privilege categories) must be recognized as a relevant variable in our experience with sexism; otherwise, the intersectional wave is a mere fabrication, a failed prediction.

Intersectionality cannot co-exist with unexamined privilege because power left unexamined is power maintained (Frankenberg 1993; hooks 2000; Lugones 2003; Ortega 2006; Trepagnier 2010; Levine-Raskey 2011; DiAngelo 2011, 2018). As of the writing of this dissertation, however, we lack empirical data on whether or not Whites have engaged with intersectionality at the level required for the hypothesized intersectional wave to be possible. Moreover, there has not been an effort to document the beliefs, behaviors, and perspectives of feminists who are White across the categories of gender identity, age, sexual orientation, and education. In simple terms, White, self-identified feminists need their proverbial temperature taken.

The purpose of this study was to explore Whites’ ideas about feminism, gender oppression, intersectionality, and race. The intention is to move the analytic lens in research on racism and feminism away from those who experience the harmful effects of racism and onto those responsible for its continued existence. Additionally, I examine the extent to which intersectionality has been meaningfully adopted by feminists who are White while engaging them in conversations surrounding privilege and oppression. I thus posed the following research questions:
1. How do self-identified feminists define feminism?
2. What do they believe to be the most pressing issues?
3. What groups of people are they concerned with?
4. How do White feminists understand race within the context of feminism? Are they cognizant of whiteness and privilege?
5. Do they know what intersectional feminism is and, if so, do they identify with it?

To answer these questions, I apply Black feminist perspectives on white feminism.

The overall research design utilizes Black feminist theories, feminist methodologies, and studying up literature to guide the data collection process. I make use of surveys to establish a Black feminist standpoint, interviews to understand the role of whiteness and intersectionality in Whites’ perspective on feminism, and focus groups to engage participants in a discussion on the significance of race in feminism. To determine whether intersectionality has been meaningfully adopted, I relied on the tradition of studying up (specifically, whiteness studies) and Black feminist theories. The research combines whiteness studies and intersectional theorizing, departing from the assumption that if whiteness is the source of racism (Feagin 2006), intersectionality cannot exist if whiteness is not deconstructed. I also designed this study with the awareness of the ways in which intersectionality has been mis-construed and wrongfully applied.

In line with contemporary multiracial feminist scholars (Collins 2015; Potter 2015; Bilge 2013; Alexander-Floyd 2012; Ortega 2006; Lugones 2003), I maintain that intersectionality is more than an awareness of the multiple identities an individual possesses. Intersectionality, instead, is treated as a perspective on social identities and a political project involving shared liberation (Taylor 2017; May 2015).

To be sure, by no means is race the only identity and system of power intersectional scholars are concerned with. The interconnection and interdependence of race on other systems of power is at the very center of all intersectional endeavors. Indeed, class, gender identity,
religion, and sexual orientation played an important role in the formation of participants’

feminist identity, their beliefs on gender oppression, and their opinions on how to go about

creating a more fair and just society. Intersectionality and other Black feminist contributions

enable a nuanced analysis of how participants’ other identities interact with their whiteness.

Thus, while whiteness serves as my entry point to examining intersectional feminism, under no

circumstances will I theorize whiteness in isolation.

Outline of the Dissertation

In what remains of this chapter, I will provide background information on the conceptual

roots of intersectionality and discuss its significance in examining whiteness within feminism. I

will also review the relevant literature and discuss why my research is significant and what it

contributes to extant literature. Chapter 2 presents my conceptual framework where I discuss the

feminist theories that inform not only this project, but the various ideas held by the informants.

This includes an analysis of white and Black feminist perspectives as well as a discussion on

power and how the various feminist theories have understood inequity and oppression in

women’s lives. I will end this chapter by conceptualizing white feminism.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods and methodologies I used to collect and analyze the data.

Here, I also discuss results from the online survey that was used to craft the qualitative interview

guide. In this chapter I also position myself as the researcher. The findings from this study are

presented in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4 I provide descriptions of participants’ feminists

beliefs including the social issues they are most concerned with and their opinions about who is

included in feminist movements. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on participants’ understandings

of race and their beliefs about the relationship between anti-racism and feminism. Using Black

feminist perspectives on white feminism, I examine the extent to which intersectionality has been
meaningfully adopted. In Chapter 6 I offer conclusions and a final discussion. Before moving on to the literature review, however, it is necessary to briefly explain some terminology.

Notes on Terminology

Words mean things. Words are used to include and exclude, to delegitimize or, conversely, to humanize. As such, I have tried to be thoughtful and self-reflective about the words used to describe the individuals who participated in this study and contributed to feminism and, ultimately, there was a lot to consider. For instance, it was difficult to determine how to refer to participants—is a feminist who is White necessarily the same as a “white feminist”? If I capitalize Black when referring to Black people, do I do the same with “white”? If so, does it follow that I also capitalize words like “blackness,” and “whiteness”? Moreover, who all is included in the category “woman”? What about the category “feminist”?

The issue of whether to capitalize racial identities such as Black and White is complex and highly nuanced. Following Potter’s (2015) argument that racial and ethnic descriptors should be capitalized because they are central to one’s experience in life, I capitalize the first letter in Black and White (as well as any other racial identity) when referring to a person. When referring to a mixed-race group of people who do not identify as White, the term person/ woman/ man of Color will be used; however, whenever possible I will avoid essentializing marginalized races into one single category.

Since Potter capitalizes “White” and “Black” because they are identities, I take this to mean that when they are used as descriptors for non-human subjects, they should not be capitalized. Of course, by taking this route I risk alienating people who always capitalize Black in an effort to subvert white dominance and draw attention to the subjugated position of Black
people in the United States (e.g., Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins). To acknowledge this tradition, I break from Potter’s contention that capitalization should be used when referring to individual identities and capitalize Black regardless of whether it is used to refer to a person, a movement, or a theoretical tradition. When using the word “white” in reference to anything other than an individual’s identity (e.g., white supremacy, whiteness, white womanhood), I will not capitalize the first letter of the descriptor. This is to help myself and the reader differentiate white feminists, those who hold perspectives on gender oppression that are identity-blind, from White feminists, the individuals who make up the sample in the qualitative portion of this study. I realize that in differentiating some White feminists from white feminism, I risk participating in white racial solidarity by shying away from generalizations of White people (DiAngelo 2018). However, I believe my findings will make it clear as to why a White feminist does not necessarily have to be a white feminist.

Regarding the category of woman: the term “woman,” refers to anyone who identifies as a woman, regardless of their gender identity and gender assigned at birth. When it becomes necessary to differentiate women’s various gender identities, I will use the term cis or cisgender woman to refer to women who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and trans or transgender woman to refer to an individual who was assigned male at birth and eventually moved away from this category to realize their true identity as a woman. The same holds true for cisgender men and transgender men.

At this point, it is also important to mention that this study is specifically focused on feminist movements and theories in the United States. As Nicholson (2010) points out, feminist activity in the United States does not always reflect feminist activity in other parts of the world. As such, it would not be logical or wise to attempt to generalize US feminist theory and activism
to feminism in other parts of the world. Unless it is stated otherwise, whenever I discuss feminists or feminism, it should be inferred that I am only referring to feminist activity within the United States. Finally, the term “intersectionality” is used interchangeably with Black feminism as all Black feminist theorizing is necessarily intersectional.

Background Information

So, what exactly is intersectionality? Put simply, it is an analytic tool that helps illustrate the process by which hierarchies such as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism (to name a few) compound upon, mitigate, and otherwise interact with one another. The central precept of intersectionality is that identities, and the access to power they produce, are not mutually exclusive but rather interdependent (Bowleg 2008). It serves as a critique of single axis thinking within legal studies, knowledge production, and social movements (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall 2013). Intersectionality helps us understand how someone can be simultaneously privileged and oppressed but, more importantly, intersectionality provides a frame with which we can understand how Black women’s oppression is markedly different from the oppression of White women and Black men.

Many of Black women’s ideas about how power and inequality work are honed at the intersection of social movements for racial justice and sex equality (White 1986). In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (Crenshaw 1989), Crenshaw shows how Black women’s discrimination suits were mishandled by judges who rejected the claim that someone could experience two forms of oppression at once. In the case study proffered by Crenshaw, she shows how the legal system lacked an adequate frame with which to make sense of Black women’s experience with discrimination in the workforce. Thus, Crenshaw argues, she came up with the term in hopes of providing the courts with a frame that would allow them to
appreciate the particular experience of Black women. The court’s inability to recognize Black
women’s unique social position parallels their experience in “women’s” movements and civil
rights movements (Hull et al. 1987).

The ideas behind intersectionality have been extensively discussed by Black women for
hundreds of years. To use only Crenshaw’s articles as our point of departure in explaining the
history of intersectionality is inaccurate. It feeds into the whitewashing of feminist movements
and theorizing that would have us believe that Black women’s contributions to feminist
organizing and intellect are only decades old (Potter 2015; Collins 1990). Put simply, to suggest
intersectionality was “discovered” or “coined” in the 1980s is a claim that is inadequate at best,
and revisionist at worst. As I will show in Chapter 2, intersectionality is merely a term that
consolidates hundreds of years of marginal theorizing regarding the nature of interconnected
identities and their interaction with oppressive power structures.

According to Hillary Potter (2015), although intersectionality was “particularized” in
Crenshaw’s articles, the concept is, in essence, a “retooling and special application of Black
feminist thought and critical race theory” (Potter 2015: 2). Critical race theory (CRT) was
established by critical legal scholars, lawyers, activists, and “radical feminists” (Delgado &
Stefancic 2012). Adherents to CRT maintain that race is a social construction and approach
racism from a “realist” perspective. In short, they view racism as an ordinary part of society that
cannot be undone or resolved with legislation. Critical race theorists examine the various ways in
which the legal system privileges White people over people of Color (Wing 1997). The
conceptual relationship between intersectionality and CRT is quite clear when we examine the
“voice-of-color thesis” which calls on people of Color to theorize and publicly speak out about
their experience with oppression and discrimination in the legal system and to “apply their own
unique perspectives to assess law’s master narratives” (Delgado and Stefancic 2012: 10).

Similar ideas are found in Black feminist theory, a perspective that preceded critical race theory (Potter 2015). As such, to understand intersectionality, we must delve deeper, and more thoughtfully, into the history of African American feminist thought and activism.

Often, when intersectionality is presented or applied it is severed from its Black feminist roots, thereby “rewriting history and rebranding the concept” (Potter 2015: 40). Bilge (2013) argues that this distancing of intersectionality from Black feminism is purposeful, representing an effort to make intersectionality more “palatable” to orthodox disciplines seeking to broaden its genealogy. Regardless of the reason why intersectionality is often presented in isolation from Black feminism, a review of the literature indicates that the term intersectionality is synonymous with several other concepts.

Frances M. Beal (1970) for instance, used the term double jeopardy to describe the burden of Black women’s oppressed race and gender identities. She later modified the phrase to include sexual orientation, naming the triply oppressed experience of being Black, queer and a woman triple jeopardy. The Combahee River Collective (1977) theorized on the concept of how identities combine to create specific experiences with oppression and, thus, specific political solutions. Their statement drew ideological lines between white women’s feminism and Black women’s feminism, outlining the limitations of white feminist’s “fixation” on gender-only analyses. In 1988 Deborah K. King expanded Beale’s conceptualization a step further advocating for the use of the term multiple jeopardy.

Nearly ten years later, Adrien K. Wing (1997: 31) stipulated the importance of thinking about identities as multiplicative rather than additive arguing, “women of Color are not merely White women plus color or men of Color plus gender. Instead, their identities must be multiplied
together to create a holistic One when analyzing the nature of discrimination against them.” She preferred the term *multiplicative identity* believing it better captured the reality of what it is like to experience multiple forms of oppression at once. She writes: “multiply each of my parts together, \(1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1\), and you have one indivisible being. If you divide one of these parts from one you still have one” (Wing 1997: 31, emphases in original text). Wing’s contribution to the conceptual history of intersectionality is that she insists identities be thought of as multilayered, indivisible, whole, and multiplicative. Indeed, Crenshaw’s analysis was informed by an entire legacy of African American women formulating theories on oppression while caught between the male-only lens of anti-racist movements and the white-only lens of white feminist movements.

White feminism refers to any movement or perspective on gender that erases the significance of race, primarily, but other identities as well. Thus, it is important we not expect analyses of white feminism to only deal with race and gender. Class has intersected with race and gender to socially construct White womanhood such that whiteness and femininity are inseparable from “middle-classness” (Levine-Raskey 2011). One could also argue that marriage status and sexual orientation are equally significant in that, throughout history, White women’s class status, along with her adherence to cultural norms surrounding whiteness and femininity, are directly related to the sexual politics of heteronormativity and monogamy.

As such, in sticking with Black feminist perspectives on power, an analysis of white feminism requires us to acknowledge how hierarchal systems constantly, and mutually, reinforce one another. Because there has not yet been any empirical attempt to determine whether contemporary feminists have in fact adopted intersectional ideals (it has just been assumed to be true) much of what we know in terms of what is or is not intersectional comes from women of
Color who position themselves outside of orthodox feminism and the theoretical critiques regarding how intersectionality as an analytic tool has been applied in the academy—to be sure, the majority of these critiques also come from women of Color.

Existing research in this area highlights a concern among women of Color scholars regarding the institutionalization of intersectionality. Knapp (2005) believes theories like intersectionality that travel quickly through the academy often gain acceptance at the cost of losing their original intent and critical edge. Alexander-Floyd (2012) discusses how critical perspectives born out of Black feminism are weakened as they become further entrenched in institutionalized spaces. Chandra Mohanty (2013), a transnational feminist scholar, discusses how her work on intersectional feminism has been “misappropriated” in the academy and misrepresented. Bilge (2013) examines how intersectionality has become “depoliticized” and “whitened” and used to do no more than take inventory of peoples’ privileged and oppressed identities. Ness (2010) makes a similar argument, pointing out how feminist researchers often claim they are using intersectionality on girls and women but fail to treat racial and class identities as interconnected products of social hierarchies. These intersectionality scholars are thus making the argument that for something to be truly intersectional there must be a critical analysis of power as a multi-dimensional force that shares a dialectical relationship with the social identities they are tied to. Put simply, intersectionality must go beyond merely recognizing that individuals are both gendered and raced (Arnold 1990).

In her second article, “Mapping the Margins” (1991) Kimberlé Crenshaw attempted to address this very issue. Realizing that her perspective was being used in analyses of identity void of any discussion of power, Crenshaw pushed people who lay claim to intersectionality to recognize that identities are more than mere descriptive categories—they are socially constructed
and politically and culturally negotiated. Time does not seem to have been helpful in changing the way intersectionality has been handled, however. In a 2014 interview, Kimberlé Crenshaw was quoted saying, intersectionality has a “wide reach, but not [a] very deep one: it is both over- and underused; sometimes I can’t even recognize it in the literature anymore” (in Carastathis 2014). Collins (2015) speaks further to the de-politicization of intersectionality she encountered at a women’s festival in South America: “They were surprised by my argument that US Black feminism and intersectionality were interconnected knowledge projects, stating bluntly, ‘We thought intersectionality was for white feminists and that it had nothing to do with us.’” Clearly, there is widespread belief that intersectionality has been adopted by Whites within feminism.

Feminist researchers and writers who claim self-identified feminists have become more interested in emphasizing racial diversity and inclusion and less accepting of the belief that “woman” represents a singular category often neglect to provide a historical analysis of the social construction of white womanhood (see Aune & Holyoake 2018; Dahl Crossley 2017; Henry 2014, 2005; Tong 2013; Springer 2002; Drake 1997; Walker 1995). This is significant given the socio-historical relationship between racial violence and white womanhood, to be discussed later on.

Review of the Literature

Social movement and gender scholars have attempted to understand feminist self-identification by examining several different factors including, the rate at which individuals identify as feminists, what elements of feminism they align with or reject (Aronson 2003), and the significance of identities such as race (Harnois 2005), age (Dahl Crossley 2017) and political generation in the formation of one’s feminist consciousness (Rupp 2001; Whittier 1995). Research indicates that rates of self-identification are much higher than one might think given
suggestions made in the news-media, with anywhere between 30-40% of people identifying as feminists (Dahl Crossley 2017). As stated above, age does seem to be relevant. Schnittker et al. (2003) and Ferree and Hess (1995) found that people who were born between 1933 and 1955 are more likely to identify as feminists than younger individuals, although this is contested by Dahl Crossley’s (2017) more recent study on millennial feminists. She points out that when attempting to understand self-identification with feminism, we must also examine individuals’ attitudes toward progressive policies and legislation. For instance, although self-identification among younger people is lower, attitudes toward traditional (cisgender) gender norms and abortion are “increasingly progressive” (Dahl Crossley 2017: 27). A nationally representative poll conducted in 2013 found 82% of people believe women should be socially, politically, and economically equal while 63% reported that they were neither a feminist nor against feminism (YouGov 2013).

One’s relationship to feminist movement and self-identification also seems to depend on racial identity and sexual orientation. White women, for instance, tend to come to feminism as a result of a “click” moment (Martin & Sullivan 2010). A click moment describes White women’s politicization as a result of learning about gender oppression in higher education, in a club or group, or by encountering it in their place of work (Reger 2012; Harnois 2005). Put simply, it is the moment one realizes that the world is not equal and that women are differently situated in comparison to men.

White women’s sudden click moment is compared to Black women’s politicization, which tends to not be tied to a specific event or experience. Because of how pervasive racism and sexism are in society, Black women report being aware of oppressive forces at an early age (Dahl Crossley 2017; Harnois 2005; Hurtado 1989). So, when Rupp (2001) argued that young
women are less likely to identify as feminists because they do not have the experience with oppression that older women have, it seems likely they overlooked the importance of feminist’s intersecting identities. In terms of sexual orientation, Taylor and Rupp (1991) and Taylor and Whittier (1992) show how lesbians have played an important role in feminist organizing and activism. Recent survey data supports this rather dated finding. Dahl Crossley (2017) found gay, lesbian and queer-identified individuals were more likely to identify as feminists than heterosexual individuals.

Interestingly, Harnois (2005) found that while Black women were more likely to report the salience of feminism in their lives and support feminist ideals to a greater extent than Whites, White women were more likely to self-identify as feminists. This is likely because feminism is often portrayed as something for middle to upper-middle class White women (Cooper 2017; Harnois 2005; hooks 1984, 1981). Indeed, research has found that Black women describe feelings of “divided loyalty” in regard to their being caught between anti-racist movements and feminist movements (Hunter & Sellers 1998).

In 2000, Liss, Hoffner, and Crawford conducted a study titled, “What do Feminists Believe?” They asked, “When a woman says, ‘I am a feminist’ what does she mean?” (2000: 279). By 2000, intersectionality was already theorized to have been accepted by “third wave” feminists. While Liss et al.’s project was not specifically designed to test whether intersectionality was meaningful to self-identified feminists, their findings give us a sense of feminists’ perceptions of intersectional approaches to gender equality early on in the third wave. In short, Liss et al. found that their all-women, majority White sample more closely aligned with what is referred to as liberal feminism (to be discussed in Chapter 2). In short, liberal feminism heavily values merit and individualism, so much so that material and historical differences
between women become insignificant. Importantly, however, self-identified feminists in their sample scored higher on items designed to gauge beliefs about the interconnectivity of racism, poverty, and sexism (intersectionality) than did non-feminists in the sample. Although the authors did not comment on the generalizability of their results, the racial makeup of their sample closely mirrors that of the general population.

Not long after this study was published, however, Lugones (2003) argued that claims of an intersectional take over among feminists outside of the academy are not grounded in reality. She argues that the majority of White women are too frightened of confronting difference and accepting the plurality of experience for an intersectional wave to take place. Ortega (2006) echoes this sentiment, arguing that White women have yet to overcome the “terror and loathing” that is ignited in us when we are forced to recognize ourselves as racial beings. Importantly, however, Ortega sees potential in White feminist’s intentions, arguing that most White feminists are “well-meaning,” if misguided.

Trepagnier (2010) expands on this idea of “well-meaning” whiteness in a study on racism among White women. To her surprise, she found self-identified feminists were no more likely than non-feminists to align with racial justice causes, nor were they more likely to exhibit high race awareness. These findings echo the concerns of Lugones (2003) who argued that race remained too taboo of a subject among Whites for intersectionality to take hold. This finding is supported by more recent literature. In case study findings on three feminist organizations, Daniels (2016) observed that the mere mention of race in predominantly White feminist spaces compromised an individual’s membership and acceptance. Daniels describes encounters of White women confronting other White women about racism within the organization and how such confrontations typically result in the anti-racist woman being excluded, attacked, or
criticized. This type of response is something critical whiteness researcher Robin DiAngelo (2018) refers to as white fragility or, “the state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress...becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (p. 103). These moves include everything from anger, fear, guilt, and comprises behaviors such as “argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (p. 103). DiAngelo argues that Whites knowingly employ white fragility in an attempt to “reinstate white racial equilibrium” (p. 103). Fine (1997) suggests that this discomfort is triggered by a disturbance in White peoples’ presumed racial comfort and lack of racial stamina as a result of segregation. On the other hand, Dahl Crossley (2017)—who provides the most recent descriptions of self-identified feminists and their beliefs—found the White millennials in her sample were quite willing to talk about race, intersecting inequalities, as well as white privilege. Similarly, Case (20212) conducted a qualitative study on a group of anti-racist White women and found them to be highly organized, purposeful, and thoughtful in their quest to divest from whiteness. Importantly, however, the feminist women in her sample report that it was their orientation to feminism that prevented them from understanding the significance of their whiteness.

Significance of the Study

Research on whiteness is quite expansive, as is research that utilizes intersectionality. As I will discuss in the following chapter, whiteness scholars have developed several concepts and theories to add to our understanding of the maintenance of whiteness while feminists of Color (along with anti-racist White women) have provided innumerable critiques on the issues associated with the white feminist approach to ending gender oppression. Yet, research that attempts to bridge these topics is scant.
Ware (1992), for instance, examines the relationship between white womanhood, feminism and racial violence but does not offer empirical insight on how the effects of that relationship manifest in the minds and actions of self-identified feminists. Frankenberg (1993), on the other hand, provides the first in-depth empirical investigation into White feminist’s understanding of race but, unfortunately, the “feminism” part of her investigation effectively fades into the background of her analysis. Empirical investigation from Liss et al. (2000) provide insight on what type of feminism their majority-White women sample identify with, but the significance of their participants’ whiteness is altogether overlooked. More recently, Dahl Crossley (2017) examined the perspectives and behaviors of self-identified feminists who are millennials, pointing to the integral role of intersectionality, but failed to examine the nuances of intersectional theorizing. She sees mere acknowledgment of women’s multiple identities as evidence that intersectionality has been meaningfully integrated into someone’s feminist consciousness. Moreover, her analysis of whiteness did not extend beyond discussions of white privilege.

Conversely, where feminist research lacks an analysis of whiteness, critical whiteness studies have not specifically engaged with feminism. Whiteness scholar Bonilla-Silva (2003) provides insight on White working-class women’s “sense of commonality” with “racial minorities” but whether this finding can be applied to feminists remains unclear (Trepagnier 2010). Trepagnier (2010) does provide an analysis of White women and racism but, again, feminist identification is not explored. Case (2012) does touch on the significance of feminism for the few participants in her sample who identified as feminist but the significance of their orientation to feminism More importantly, none of the aforementioned studies privilege the
standpoints of those who arguably possess the most critical perspective on whiteness and feminism—Black women (Collins 1986).

While it is important to highlight Black women’s experiences with racism in feminism, racism would not exist without Whites. Thus, whiteness must be treated as a relevant subject of inquiry in studies on racism. By limiting our examination of race and racism to the experiences of Black people, researchers perpetuate the idea that race is only relevant in the lives of people of Color. This is not to say that marginalized standpoints cannot, and should not, inform our examination of whiteness. On the contrary, I argue that explorations into whiteness that do not center people of Color compromise the validity and utility of subsequent conclusions. The significance of this study lies in its examination of whiteness among self-identified feminists from the standpoint of Black feminism.
CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

I begin this section by discussing the relevant literature within whiteness studies. I examine how white race theorists have attempted to understand the causes and consequences of racial formation. I then provide an in-depth discussion of the history of feminist theorizing and activism, focusing specifically on their treatment of race. While there are many schools of feminist thought (each with their own factions and offshoots), this discussion will focus specifically on the frameworks most relevant to the present study and to the participants of this study: liberal feminisms, radical feminisms, and Black feminisms.

Critical Whiteness Literature

Whiteness has been examined at length in scholarly literature (Bonilla-Silva 2018; DiAngelo 2018; Daniels 2016; Trepagnier 2010; Hughey 2010; Feagin 2010, 2006, 2003). Critical whiteness scholars see whiteness as a socially constructed manifestation of privilege and power that relies on the definition of in-group and out-group boundaries (Feagin & Elias 2013). These boundaries establish who is who is not White and, thus, who does and does not have access to the material and discursive privileges available via whiteness (Frankenberg 1993; DiAngelo 2018).

Critical race theorist Joe Feagin (2006, 2003) argues that to be White is to possess an institutional status and social identity imparted with legal, economic, social, and political rights—rights others do not have. Feagin joins whiteness scholars such as Bonilla-Silva (2018) and Tehranian (2000) to demonstrate how the very idea of race was created to propagate myths
about racial difference and justify excluding non-White people from the citizenry and all of the privileges that come along with it. Anyone considered White would be granted access to all of the rights and liberties deserved to “Americans” while everyone else would be excluded as racial others, unworthy of similar privileges (Tehranian 2000). Identification with whiteness, even if only perceived, thus grants individuals’ access to an amalgam of resources (material or otherwise) systematically denied to people of Color. Self-worth, positive expectations, feelings of belonging, freedom of movement, a sense of entitlement and individuality, and “the psychological freedom from the tether of race” are perpetually obtainable if you are identified as White (DiAngelo 2018: 25). Importantly, however, to be identified as a member of this in-group is not to be seen as exceptional. Whiteness is not the exception; it is the rule.

Whiteness gains its power from its invisibility and ability to maintain an unmarked status (Rabaka 2007; Frankenberg 1993). W.E.B Du Bois was the first to consider this idea from a sociological perspective in his often-overlooked essay, “The Souls of White Folk” (1910 [Rabaka 2007]). He wrote: “Everything considered, the title to the universe claimed by White folk is faulty” (Rabaka 2007: 2). Long before critical whiteness studies had been established as an area of research, Du Bois called into question the assumed neutrality and universality of whiteness. Indeed, when you are perceived as White, you are more than a privileged citizen—you are the norm, the standard for humanity. Critical whiteness scholars argue as much because social institutions and structures—indeed all of society—are created to operate in favor of those who have been defined as belonging to the “in-group” (Feagin 2006). The invisibility of whiteness allows those of us who exercise it to think of ourselves as “normal” individuals—“just humans”—while people of Color are defined as racial “others” (DiAngelo 2018: 27, Dyer
1997). Anyone who frequents the hair and beauty aisle of a pharmacy store is subtly reminded of the normativity of whiteness as an unmarked category.

For example, people who have hair that is more textured or perhaps braided, locked, or relaxed, can find their products under a sign that reads “Ethnic Hair”. Products for people with fine or straight hair are not differentiated in any marked way because this type of hair is treated as the norm. In the beauty section of Walgreens.com, for instance, products for textured hair are listed under a heading that reads, “Different hair types require different hair care products,” (emphasis added) thus implying that “non-White” hair is different hair (read: “white” hair is normal, “black” hair is not normal). In this context, and many others, to be White is to be human and to be “ethnic” is to be different. It is these subtle reminders that communicate to whites that we are the norm and that we need not concern ourselves with racial issues. Consequently, White people typically think of race as an indicator of otherness and difference (i.e., Black) and, thus, many White people (including feminists) do not think of themselves as having a race or being impacted by race relations (Bonilla-Silva 2018; DiAngelo 2018; Kendall 2012).

Situating whiteness as the norm allows White people to frame their beliefs, perspectives, and hypotheses as universal (DiAngelo 2018). It also obfuscates the existence of whiteness as a racial category. In everyday life, this allows White people to move through social structures “free from the tether of race” (DiAngelo 2018: 25), which in turn permits us to believe that our successes are the result of individual hard work and our unique set of talents, not racial privilege. In academia, it allows White researchers to treat the white experience as generalizable. Erasing the significance of race in the production of knowledge ensures the white standpoint and frame of reference will remain dominant and “mainstream” (Potter 2015; Feagin 2010; Frankenberg 1993).
Whiteness as Standpoint

While the concept of whiteness as a standpoint is attributed to Ruth Frankenberg (1993), the conceptual roots of this perspective are often traced to Blumer (1958). While Blumer was not a race theorist, he did consider the topic of racial prejudice in a number of manuscripts. Unlike others at his time, he did not accept that racial prejudice was an inherent characteristic of some individuals and not others; rather, like Du Bois, he believed race prejudice arose from one’s sense of their group’s position in relation to other groups. Wellman (1977, 1993) builds off this idea, arguing that White people maintain their white privilege by justifying the subordinate position of Black people. Thus, by defending white privilege one necessarily maintains the racial hierarchy as well as their group’s position (Trepagnier 2010).

Frankenberg’s (1993) perspective on whiteness as standpoint arises out of a study on how White women, specifically, construct their identities at the intersection of whiteness and (cisgender) womanhood. While her original intention was to examine White feminists’ replication of racism within movements to end gender oppression, this analysis never came to fruition. Put simply, white feminism’s treatment of race motivated her study but ultimately became a non-issue. Nonetheless, Frankenberg’s study was groundbreaking (DiAngelo 2018) in that it demonstrated how femininity was a relevant variable for analysis within studies of whiteness. Specifically, Frankenberg examined White women’s perception of race and racism—what it looks like, feels like and what can be done to address it. In conceptualizing whiteness as a standpoint, Frankenberg (1993b: 54) posits: “whiteness is a…place from which to look at oneself, others and society.” The place from which we view ourselves and society is informed by the landscape (both social and geographic) and our experience of it. Moreover, our understanding of race and racism are structured by other systems of power such as sexuality and
class. Frankenberg’s research demonstrates that by virtue of living in a society structured by race, all people undergo a “conceptual mapping of race, of self and others… which follows from and feeds the physical context” (1993b: 77). Put simply, the white standpoint will necessarily be impacted by the social and cultural landscape of race and personal experiences of race.

Frankenberg’s conceptualization of whiteness as a standpoint, allows us to make sense of how White people come to (a) view their experience as representative of the human experience and (b) come to expect others to have a similar experience. Because our standpoint exists in somewhat of a feedback loop with our surrounding environment and personal histories, Whites must constantly divest from the white standpoint and its effect on how we perceive of the world. The most enduring effects of the white standpoint, Frankenberg argues, is denial of the significance of race.

Denying the significance of race and racism will necessarily result in a biased perspective on the world, one that allows people to see only what they wish to see or expect to see. Feagin (2010) proposes a concept that is related to Frankenberg’s notion of whiteness as standpoint but still distinct. Unlike Frankenberg, Feagin is interested in explaining the mechanism by which whites come to see the world through a lens that biases their own experiences, even if the face of evidence that might suggest otherwise. This biased frame of reference is what Feagin identifies as the white racial frame. The white racial frame refers to the collection of racist images, practices, and discourse that exist to benefit Whites. It is seen as the key mechanism behind the maintenance of white supremacy in that it allows Whites to “circulate and reinforce racial messages that position whites as superior” (DiAngelo 2018: 34). This frame acts as the vantage point from which all whites makes sense of everyday situations, both at the macro and micro levels.
Encompassed in the white racial frame are racial stereotypes, ideologies, racial interpretations, narratives, racialized images and language, emotions, and the inclination to discriminate. Within the frame exist positive representations of whites and white institutions and negative perceptions, images, and understandings of people of color. For most Whites, even those of us who see themselves as progressive anti-racists, the white racial frame defines our perspective on life and provides us with the language and interpretations that help us make sense of society and normalize, importantly, the racial hierarchy (Feagin 2010). One of the most conspicuous “side-effects” of the white racial frame is that it precludes Whites from being able to empathize with the experiences and perspectives of African Americans (Hunt 2019). Because virtually all Black people living in the United States are forced to navigate racism on a daily basis, it follows that to dismiss the experiences of African Americans is to attempt to erase the significance of racism, thereby justifying one’s group location in the racial hierarchy (Trepagnier 2010).

In a study on well-meaning White women, Trepagnier (2010) predicted the self-identified feminists in her sample would be more likely than non-feminists to identify race as a significant force and show sympathy toward causes devoted to racial justice. Although this prediction was not exactly accurate, it was not an unrealistic expectation considering Bonilla-Silva, in the first edition of his book *Racism Without Racists* (2018), found White women were the group most likely to align with racial justice causes. Importantly, however, Bonilla-Silva was speaking of *working-class* White women and not necessarily feminists. What Trepagnier did observe, however, is that lesbian White women demonstrated far more empathy toward racial justice causes and race awareness. This implies race awareness and empathy from White women is intersectional in nature. Kendall’s (2012) discussion supports this idea.
In “A White Woman Talks to White Women” (2012), Kendall presents stories of women of Color working closely with White women in the academy. The women are mid- to upper-level college administrators, and although Kendall does not explicitly state their demographics, their occupations imply middle-class, if not upper-middle class status. Women of Color who spoke with Kendall identify White women as “their greatest barrier to success” (2012: p. 17). They describe how White women refuse to validate their experiences with microaggressions from other Whites and hearing four types messages about race from White women: “first, you’re putting too much emphasis on race; second my White race is ‘not relevant’ and your race shouldn’t be, either; third, people of Color are ‘problematic’ and not qualified to teach at this school; furthermore, you’re whining, making a big deal out of nothing, and you don’t fit in” (p. 18).

This echoes Benita Roth’s (2004) account of second-wave feminist movement. The second wave of feminism, which started around the mid-1960s and ended in the mid-80s, saw a great deal of political organizing around issues of gender, race, and class inequality. While there were some instances of coalition building between White feminists and feminists of Color, Black and Chicana feminists were more active in organizations with men of their race or in autonomous women’s caucuses (Thompson 2002). Women of Color’s absence from the orthodox feminist spaces is often assumed to be evidence of their disinterest in feminism. On the contrary, these women were highly organized and incredibly active; they were simply not interested in organizing around the issues White women prioritized. Moreover, Roth (2004) demonstrates how Black and Latina women viewed White women as far more oppressive than the men in their race and ethnic groups. For women of Color, White women’s colorblindness was far more difficult to overcome than the sexism they experienced in their communities.
Colorblind racism is a particular expression of white racial superiority cloaked in post-civil rights respectability. Bonilla-Silva (2018) uses the term colorblind ideology to describe the covert ways in which systemic racism is able to operate in our social and economic institutions in spite of anti-discrimination legislation passed in the 1960s. As such, colorblind racism manifests at both the micro- and macro-levels. In interpersonal interactions, colorblind racism can be identified among Whites who argue that affirmative action is discriminatory against Whites and on a systemic level it manifests in legislation that targets communities of Color without overtly mentioning race. For instance, although school segregation was banned by the courts in 1954 following Brown v. Board of Education, giving Black children the opportunity for equal education, the historical legacy of segregated housing and the process by which we fund public schools ensures inequitable outcomes. Data overwhelmingly indicates that children living in predominately White neighborhoods will receive a higher equality of education than children living in predominately Black neighborhoods (Hannah-Jones 2012).

According to findings from Bonilla-Silva (2018), Whites are able to claim colorblindness because we look for a type of racism that is no longer as common as it once was. White people look for blatant, explicit, and intentional evocations of racialized words or actions. When these cues are not observed, or when racism is “well-meaning” (that is, when it is not intentional, overtly incendiary, or purposefully hateful), Whites assume racism is a non-issue. Because most White people believe racism is intentional, interpersonal, hateful, and rare, the far more prevalent form of racism—systemic, colorblind racism—is allowed to persist (Blauner 1994; Trepagnier 2010; DiAngelo 2018). Critical whiteness scholars see Whites’ refusal to acknowledge the significance of race as central to the continued existence of white racial dominance (Rabaka 2007; Feagin 2006; Frankenberg 1993).
Critical whiteness studies and feminist research intersect where the centrality of whiteness in orthodox feminist movements is subject to analysis. Black feminists such as Beal (1970), Rich (1979), Spellman (1988), hooks (1984), Angela Davis (1983), Guy-Sheftall (1995), Collins (2000), Beth Richie (2000, 2012), Bilge (2013), and Brittney Cooper (2017), to name only a few, have long demonstrated the ways in which the assumed neutrality of race enables white racial dominance in feminist movements and theories. Anti-racist White women have also been integral in identifying the problems with white feminist theories and movements. In the section that follows, I will delve into Whites’ treatment of race and gender, examine the more intersectional approaches to gender oppression, and discuss some of the existing research on White feminists and intersectionality.

Feminist Theories

Textbooks and readers on United States feminism are typically organized according to the following schools of thought: liberal feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, post-modern feminism, Marxist/ socialist feminism, and “multiracial”/ intersectional feminism (Tong 2013; Donovan 2006). In some instances, eco feminism and existentialist feminism may be included and “multiracial” may even be divided up to differentiate between Asian American feminism, Indigenous feminism, womanism, Chicana feminism, to name a few. For the purposes of this study however, it is appropriate to focus specifically on liberal, radical, and Black feminist theories. The reason for including Black feminisms should be obvious: intersectionality is a product of Black feminists’ theorizing; this study examines the extent to which intersectionality has been meaningfully adopted by feminists who are White. In a similar vein, it is appropriate to focus on liberal and radical feminism over post-modern, Marxist, cultural, and socialist feminisms because these two traditions are often regarded as the “mainstays” of white
feminist theorizing (Potter 2015). Moreover, participants’ ideas about gender oppression have been greatly influenced by liberal, radical, and Black feminist ideals. The other schools of thought mentioned above did not manifest in participants definitions of feminism or activism.

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism is named as such because it adopted its ideals from enlightenment liberalism popular in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe. Enlightenment thought posits that all people possess the inalienable right to exercise their autonomy and that this right must not be obstructed by “the good” so long as others’ rights are not being impeded (Tong 2013). Liberals advocate for state protection of civil liberties (voting rights, freedom of religion, speech, etc.) but often reject the idea that the state should interfere in the “free market” and individuals’ lives. Once individuals are given the opportunity to succeed, it is up to them to use their talents and hard work to achieve their goals.

A central assumption of liberal feminism is the idea that men and women are equally endowed with the ability to reason, and, as a result, should be granted the right to act autonomously. Thus, early liberal feminists such as Wollstonecraft (1971) and Taylor (see Tong 2013) believed the right to vote, own property, and receive an education comparable to that of men was of the utmost importance in ending gender oppression (Tong 2013). They believe oppression exists as a result of women’s lack of legal protection and civil liberties. Thus, the solution lies in working with the state to reform laws that would otherwise preclude women from exercising their autonomy. This is why liberal feminists advocate for “equal opportunity,” “women’s equality” and “equal rights for women.” They posit that if women are seen as equal to men in the eyes of the law, they will eventually have the means to compete with men and obtain power and status comparable to that of men. When theorizing “women’s rights,” liberal
feminists are not concerned with the differences in circumstance between groups women because they see gender as the only form of oppression.

Liberal feminists seek to be seen as the equals of rich, *White* men. Although the early theorists did not write about race or class in any of their pieces (see Tong 2013, Donovan 2006, and Jaggar 1983), we know they are writing about White women deserving the same treatment as the men in their race and class because Black men, poor White men, immigrant men, and Indigenous men did not enjoy the civil liberties of White, property-owning men. This is why liberal feminists are often criticizes for erasing the significance of race and class identity. Moreton-Robinson (2000 34) argues, “They wrote as though gender could be isolated from other aspects of identity and by doing so made race and class invisible.” In treating race and class as irrelevant, liberal feminists center the experiences of women who are privileged by their race and class. Thus, the liberal feminist goal of “women’s equality” all but codifies White women’s superiority in feminist movement because White women have the most to gain from such an individualistic approach to solving gender oppression.

As liberalists, liberal feminists are necessarily invested in individualism. Thus, a central precept of liberal feminism is that if specific groups of women are under-represented in a society with equal rights, it is because of their merit, or lack thereof. Using this logic, by making women equal to White men in the eyes of the law, if a woman wants something, she need only work hard, and set her mind to it. The liberal feminist slogan, “all women and men are equal” assumes that Black women and other multiply oppressed groups of women can somehow overcome the substantial historical and material differences responsible for their subjugation and begin to “think and act like [White] men” (Tong 2013: 37; Elshtain 1981). For this reason, Moreton-Robinson (2000) describes liberal feminism as “de-historicizing” women. Indeed, the liberal
feminist agenda to reform society does nothing to address the merit-based system that makes some women more competitive than others, and thus, more likely to benefit from civil liberties such as equal education and equal pay (Moreton-Robinson 2000; hooks 1984; Tong 2013). By identifying equality with White men as the goal, liberal feminists indicate that they do not wish to destroy the power structures responsible for systemic oppression—they only wish to come into power themselves and join the ruling class along with their husbands, brothers, and sons (hooks 1984). For this reason, liberal feminist activism is typically focused on carving out space for women in the existing social structures.

Nineteenth century activism centered mainly around earning women the right to vote. Mill and well as Taylor Mill, Wollstonecraft, and Anthony believed women required suffrage to become men’s equals. They saw suffrage as the route to empowerment, arguing that if women were able to vote they could use the ballot to reform the systems and structures responsible for their oppression. Initially, suffragists worked closely alongside abolitionists. Indeed, White suffragists gained their knowledge of political organizing as well as oppression from abolitionist men and women (Davis 1983). This is not to say, however, that the union was mutually beneficial. White women suffragists such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton would eventually advocate and campaign for White women’s suffrage at Black peoples’ expense.¹

¹ The relationship between the movement for White women’s suffrage and the emancipation of Black slaves would reach an end in the years leading up to the ratification of the 15th Amendment—the provision that allowed Black men to vote. Anthony and Cady Stanton were furious that Black men gained the right to vote before they did and eventually appealed to White Southern Democrats for their support in the suffrage movement. Southern Democrats were eventually successful in disenfranchising Black men in the majority of the former-confederacy states (Davis 1991).
According to Tong (2013), after gaining suffrage in the early 20th century, liberal feminists remained rather quiet. Large scale feminist movements among White women did not pick back up again until the 1960s with the birth of the women’s rights movement and the publication of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963). With the minor exception of the hundred-year difference, the messages of Mill, Taylor, and Wollstonecraft barely differ from that of Friedan and her co-founders at the National Organization of Women (NOW).

Although Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton agreed with the other liberal feminists at the time in terms of the importance of suffrage, they did not believe suffrage alone would be enough for women to be liberated. Women needed to experience the full array of civil liberties men benefited from, including economic opportunities and sexual freedom. These were the realizations middle-class White women were coming to terms with forty years after the 19th Amendment was passed.

In her well-known piece *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan suggests that cisgender gender norms for wives and mothers are the root causes of women’s oppression and unhappiness. She refers to the role of the housewife as unfulfilling and unsatisfying and urges women to find meaningful fulltime work in the public sector. Friedan referred to women’s collective status in society as “the problem with no name.” She writes: “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my house.,’” (1963: 380). The “more” Friedan is referring to is a job outside of the home.

Unlike some radical feminists (to be discussed below) Friedan did not believe that women should separate themselves from motherhood or their relationships with men; rather, she suggested that women can have it all. In her view, there is no reason a woman cannot have a full-time career while being a loving wife and mother. She argued that to suggest otherwise is to
“limit [women’s] development as a full person.” According to the *Feminine Mystique*, women’s participation in the workforce would solve “the problem with no name” by allowing them to pursue individual interests and financial independence. In this way, Friedan suggests that all of women’s problems stem from their unemployment.

In “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!”, Claudia Jones uses data from the U.S. Department of Labor, the Women’s Bureau, and the *Handbook of Facts for Women Workers* to compare differences in wages and employment between White women, Black women, and Black men, as well as the differences in wealth accumulation between White families and Black families. She also demonstrates how the overwhelming majority of Black women are employed in private homes tasked with taking care of “children who are not her own” and the expectation that they will “put the care of children and families of others above her own” (1949). Jones’ piece, published almost 15 years earlier, makes clear that women’s problem is not unemployment—Black women and poor White women have always had to work full-time jobs outside of their home, in addition to the full-time job of being a wife and mother. Additionally, Jones’ demonstrates that when economically privileged White women do pursue careers outside of the home, Black women, not White men, take on the domestic labor in middle-class White families. Nonetheless, Friedan’s piece mobilized an entire generation of middle-class White women who would eventually join “women’s rights groups” such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC).

This generation of feminists continued to push legal reform. They campaigned for the Equal Pay Act and for a “sex amendment” in the 1964 Civil Rights Act—a provision that would bar sex discrimination and one that would ultimately fail to come to fruition (Tong 2013). In 1967, Betty Friedan—who was president of NOW—publicized NOW’s 1967 Bill of Rights for
Women. This document was decidedly liberalist, something that angered the more radical members of the organization as well as women of Color and reflected the backgrounds of the privileged, White women responsible for crafting them. Included in the list were demands for contraceptives and abortion, the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, equal employment opportunity for women, and paid maternity leave.

With this Bill of Rights, it became clear that the women’s rights movement was mainly invested in the priorities of women who were most likely to succeed in the system (Tong 2013). The concerns of lesbian women, Black women, poor women, and Latina women were not considered and this angered a significant portion of the group’s membership. Still, Friedan maintained (1963: 6), “the gut issues of this revolution involve employment and education and new social institutions, not sexual fantasy”—referring to lesbian women’s insistence that they be allowed to contribute to NOW’s agenda. NOW, and the liberal feminists who organized with them, were insistent that all women share the same issues and, as women, we must set aside our differences and come together to address the shared source of oppression. However, at the 1970 convention, where Friedan was expected to address these concerns, she avoided the issue and promised to address the concerns of women who believe women and men are equal and seek to work within the system.

By focusing on reform, liberal feminist activists failed to recognize that some women do not want to participate in “the system.” The women who had no interest in participating in patriarchal, capitalist systems joined organizations such as the Redstockings, the Feminists, and the New York Radical Feminists. These were women who became radicalized in the anti-war and civil rights movement, not in boardrooms and congressional commissions (Tong 2013). Revolution, not reform, would be their goal.
Radical Feminism

Radical feminist theories developed in response to some women’s frustration with the liberal perspective. Radicals distinguish themselves from liberal feminists by advocating for revolution and rejecting the idea that women’s condition in society can be improved through legislation. For them, women’s condition cannot be improved through reform because the system is inherently designed to disadvantage women.

Radical feminist theories are predicated on the idea that patriarchal rule exploits and exaggerates existing sex and gender differences between men and women in order to ensure that femininity will be culturally synonymous with weak and subordinate, masculinity with strong, capable, and dominant. This view on sex and gender stands in stark contrast to liberal feminism which views sex and gender as more or less insignificant (i.e., “women and men are equal”). According to radical feminists, liberal feminists were unsuccessful in their attempt to improve women’s condition in society because they preoccupied themselves with eliminating male privilege when they should have been focused on eliminating concepts of sex and gender altogether (Firestone 1970).

Patriarchal rule is central to radical feminist theories and agendas. Radical feminists such as Ti-Grace Atkinson (1969) Shulamith Firestone (1970), and Kate Millett (1970) view patriarchy as the oldest and most significant form of oppression, one that is “transhistorical” in nature. Atkinson (1969: 85) writes:

The first dichotomous division of this mass [mankind] is said to have been on the grounds of sex: male and female… it was because half the human race bears the burden of the reproductive process and because man, the ‘rational’ animal, had the wit to take advantage of that, that the child bearers, or the ‘beasts of burden,’ were corralled into a political class: equivocating the biologically contingent
burden into a political (or necessary) penalty, thereby modifying these individuals’ definition from the human to the functional, or animal. By identifying patriarchy as transhistorical, radical feminists assert that patriarchy serves as the blueprint for all other systems of power.

Millet contributes to this perspective in *Sexual Politics* (1970: 27) where she writes: “Social caste supersedes all other forms of inegalitarianism: racial, political, or socioeconomic, and unless the clinging to male supremacy as a birthright is finally forgone, all systems of oppression will continue to function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation”. According to this framework, Black women are oppressed because they are women and, yes, racism does exist but only because patriarchy has made it so. Radical feminists thus believe all women are sisters and that women must put aside any cultural differences, come together, and work toward eliminating the common enemy—male dominance.

In maintaining that sexism is the primary form of oppression, one that is universally experienced, radical feminist theories ensure that privileged White women’s problems will be given priority because they are the only group that stands to benefit from a movement solely committed to dismantling patriarchal rule. Because of this heavy emphasis on patriarchy and sex differences, most radical feminist thinkers focused on issues surrounding reproduction, heterosexual relationships, motherhood, and the body.

Radical feminists’ ideas about gender, sexuality, patriarchy, and women’s bodies differ between radical-cultural and radical-libertarian feminists. Radical-libertarian feminists urge women to explore their sexuality and, essentially, do whatever they find empowering. Radical-libertarian feminist Gayle Rubin (1984) argues that society needs to be reconditioned to think of
all sex as good, stating that we should not make any judgments about what qualifies as
good/moral and bad/immoral sex. Radical-cultural feminists strongly disagree.

Radical-cultural feminism is largely responsible for the stereotype that feminism is about
man-hating. Radical-cultural feminists associate heterosexuality with male dominance and all
expressions of men’s sexuality as “irresponsible, genitally-oriented, and potentially lethal”
(Echols 1984: 59). They contrast male sexuality with female sexuality which is more “muted,
diffuse, interpersonally-oriented, and benign” (1984: 59). In their view, the only “good sex” is
monogamous lesbianism. Within this tradition, heterosexuality is intricately bound to patriarchy
and is understood as so corrupt a system, it is beyond repair. In order for women to experience
liberation, heterosexuality and patriarchy must be destroyed. To be clear, radical-cultural
feminists also view heterosexuality as an institution that is oppressive and harmful for women;
yet, they believe it is just as wrong to force lesbianism on someone who prefers to have sex with
men.

Radical-libertarians see pregnancy and childbirth as “barbaric” and believe patriarchy has
conditioned women to see labor as a joyful and empowering experience when it is, in fact, more
like “shitting a pumpkin” (Firestone 1970: 12). Firestone also viewed natural reproduction as the
source of other patriarchal evils such as possessiveness, jealousy, and hostility. For Firestone,
“the favoring of one’s child over another on account of the child’s being the product of one’s
own ovum or sperm—is precisely what must be overcome if humans are to put an end to
hierarchies” (Tong 2013: 75). They saw technological developments in reproduction as a way to
overcome the biological requirements for natural reproduction. Conversely, radical-cultural
feminists maintain that childbirth can be enjoyable and empowering. Moreover, they dispute the
idea that women’s liberation can be brought about by advances in technology. Zillah Einstein
(1981) argues that technology is not likely to help women carry out their anti-patriarchal agenda considering technology is controlled by the ruling class.

In identifying patriarchy as the common source of women’s condition in society, radical feminists (both libertarian and cultural) dismiss the significance of race and class differences. The message from radical feminists is, sisterhood is powerful because our similarities as women matter more than our differences as Whites or Blacks. To be a radical feminist then means believing “all men are the enemies of all women” (hooks 1984: 33), a position that quickly alienated women of Color. At the time of women’s liberation (the radical feminist movement) Black and Latina women felt they shared more in common with the men in their lives than they did with White women and, moreover, they viewed White women as their most immediate oppressors (Roth 2004).

Radical feminist theories were also unappealing because they failed to address the oppressed status of Black men and other men of Color. If patriarchy is the sole source of oppression and all men are oppressive, how is liberation achieved for men who experience oppression as a result of racism and classism? Radical feminists’ refusal to acknowledge that men can be both oppressive and oppressed ensures women’s liberation remains a movement for White women only. Hooks speaks to this problem (1984: 68):

Anti-male sentiments have alienated many poor and working-class women, particularly non-white women, from feminist movement. Their life experiences have shown them that they have more in common with men of their race and/or class group than with bourgeois white women. They know the sufferings and hardships women face in their communities; they also know the sufferings and hardships men face, and they have compassion for them…. There is a special tie bonding people together who struggle collectively for liberation. Black women and men have been united by such ties.
For Black women certainly, but for poor White women as well, it goes against their best interests to aid and abet male-female antagonism (hooks 1984). Moreover, it does not really accomplish anything by way of eliminating sex and gender. If anything, the radical feminist agenda relies on the continued existence of sex-gender differences.

Radical feminist activism is often referred to as the women’s liberation movement (Tong 2013). Building off the idea that all women are sisters and share a common experience with oppression, radical feminists popularized the slogan “sisterhood is powerful.” Radical feminists are also responsible for introducing the practice of consciousness-raising to feminist movements. In consciousness raising groups, women exchange stories with one another and eventually identify their shared experience with oppression. These conversations were viewed as the first step in mobilizing support for women’s liberation. It is from these groups the slogan, “the personal is political” became popularized.

Consciousness-raising groups were most common among White women (Thompson 2002). Black, Asian and Latina women who participated in women’s liberation were more involved in grassroots organizing either with mixed-gender groups or autonomous organizations for women of a particular racial identity (Roth 2004). This is likely because “click moments” (discussed earlier) are not as common among women of Color as they are among White women (Dahl-Crossley 2017). Conversely, hooks (1984) argues that Black women did not need consciousness raising groups in the way White women did. White patriarchy, she argues, works to keep White women separate from one another.

The most enduring legacy of the consciousness raising groups, and radical feminism in general, is the resultant organizing around the issue of violence against women, particularly rape. Tong (2013: 48) writes:
Consciousness-raising showed how the trauma of a woman who had been raped or who had to resort to an illegal abortion seemed to be linked to the experiences of the wife whose husband refused to do his share of housework, appeared never to have heard of the female orgasm, or sulked if she went out for the evening; the secretary whose boss insisted that she wear ‘feminine’ clothes, expected her to ‘be nice’ to important clients, or viewed her as the office coffee maker; and the female student whose professors expected her to do less well and refused requests to study female writers or even traded good grades for sexual favors.

As groups of White women began to confide in their “sisters” about their experiences with violent assault, radical feminist writers like Shulamith Firestone, Jean MacKellar, and Susan Brownmiller began theorizing on the root of men’s violence against women. However, to understand the flaws in their approach to the question of sexual assault, it is important to first understand the relationship between rape and whiteness.

Anti-rape theorists of the women’s liberation movement overwhelmingly ignore the important role racism plays in violence against women. Davis (1983: 177) demonstrates how rape is an issue of both sexual and racial violence and how White women’s bodily autonomy is closely related to Black women’s:

While Black women and their sisters of color have been the main targets of these racist-inspired attacks, white women have suffered as well. For once white men were persuaded that they could commit sexual assaults against Black women with impunity, their conduct toward women of their own race could not have remained unmarred. Racism has always served as a provocation to rape, and white women in the United States have necessarily suffered the ricochet fire of these attacks. This is one of the many ways in which racism nourishes sexism, causing white women to be indirectly victimized by the special oppression aimed at their sisters of color.

With their sole focus on gender and the patriarchy, white feminists neglected to address the racialized nature of the history of sexual violence against women and, at times, perpetuated racist myths about rape.

Firestone (1970) provides one of the earliest radical feminist perspectives on rape and race. In her view, Black men rape White women in response to their unfettered desire to have sex
with White women. It is their goal to kill the father and sleep with the mother. In 1974, Susan Brownmiller further contributes propagates the myth of the Black male rapist in the anti-rape movement. In *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Brownmiller argues that rape “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear” (1974: 15, emphasis in original text). She also argues that the historical oppression inflicted on Black men has disenfranchised them to the extent that they are unable to access “legitimate” expressions of male domination and thus seek power in sexual assault:

“Corporate executive dining rooms and climbs up Mount Everest are not usually accessible to those who form the subculture of violence. Access to a female body—through force—is within their ken” (1974: 194).

In *Against Our Will*, Brownmiller “reinterprets” the events which led to the violent murder of a 14-year-old Black boy named Emmett Till. After being accused of whistling at a White woman named Carolyn Brant, Till was brutally beaten, his body found in the Tallahatchie River (Davis 1991). Brownmiller claims Emmett Till’s actions amount to “more than a kid’s brash prank” (p. 247). She writes, “Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by inference, *they* could get a white woman” (p. 247). Brownmiller goes on to equate Till’s alleged whistle to “a deliberate insult just short of physical assault.”

White women’s theories and concerns regarding sexual assault dominated the anti-rape movement during the late 1970s through the 1990s. This is not to say, however, that Black women were not concerned about rape or that they were not organizing to combat sexual assault against women in their own ranks. Their marked absence from anti-rape organizing by orthodox women’s liberation groups should be understood instead as evidence that Whites’ radical
feminist perspective was deeply problematic for women of Color. Angela Davis writes (1983: 173):

If Black women have been conspicuously absent from the contemporary anti-rape movement, it may be due, in part, to that movement’s indifferent posture toward the frame-up rape charge as an incitement to racist aggression. Too many innocents have been offered sacrificially to gas chambers and lifer’s cells for Black women to join those who often seek relief from policemen and judges. Black women have always protested sexual abuse and fought for bodily autonomy both during the women’s liberation movement and in the century leading up to it (Guy-Sheftall 1995; Davis 1983).

Black Feminisms

Black feminism takes many forms, ranging everywhere from 19th century anti-lynching pamphlets to Janelle Monae’s, Dirty Computer. Whereas Whites’ feminist theories can be categorized in many different ways, Black women’s theorizing is usually reduced into one section (usually at the end of a reader) and most likely named “Third Wave Feminism” or “21st Century Feminism” (see: Archer Mann & Patterson 2016; Tong 2013; Donovan 2006). This is because Black women’s theorizing tends to be essentialized and treated as a monolithic body of knowledge when, in fact, it is quite diverse and nuanced (Cooper 2017).

Because of the diversity of Black women’s intellectual and political perspectives, it can be quite difficult to provide a singular definition for a perspective that encompasses centuries’ worth of intellectual theorizing, activism, and praxis. Thus, in an effort to acknowledge the plurality of Black women’s contributions, many scholars find it useful to refer to Black feminisms rather than Black feminism.
While Black feminists’ theorizing does cover a wide variety of ideas (and even mediums), there are commonalities among African American feminist thinkers (Guy-Sheftall 1996). First, all Black feminists maintain the particular form of oppression experienced by Black women—one that is not only sexist but also racist and, at times, classist, heterosexist, ableist, and transphobic, just to name a few. Second, and related, Black feminisms view the oppression of Black women experience is inherently different from, and thus not comparable to, the oppression experienced by White women and Black men (Hull et al. 1982). Historically, movements for gender equality and racial justice have attempted to subsume the problems black women face under the banner of sexism or racism (White 1986). Third, Black feminists treat all oppression as interconnected and feeding into other forms of oppression (Jones 1944; Combahee River Collective 1977 [Guy-Sheftall 1995]; Davis 1983). Contrary to the theories discussed in the preceding sections, Black feminists do not attempt to identify a primary source of oppression. How could they without splitting apart their selves (Wing 1997), they argue. Fourth, and finally Black feminism is liberatory in nature. It emerges from the lived experience of women of Color (Collins 1991) and places a special emphasis on praxis2. While the basic premises of Black feminism are fairly straightforward, as I attempt to provide an outline of Black feminist theorizing and activism over time, it should not be assumed that Black feminism is a homogenous ideology (Guy-Sheftall 1995).

Early Black feminists

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2 Praxis refers to any research or scholastic endeavor that has the explicit goal of empowering marginalized communities by including them in the process of knowledge production. Praxis-based research is often described as a collaborative, mutually beneficial project where political organizing or social justice activism is a primary goal (Bryman et al. 2004).
Black feminists began writing and *formally* organizing as early as the 1800s. Although many historians argue that it was the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century that inspired the first Black women to organize for women’s rights, Guy-Sheftall argues that it was “the horrendous circumstances that enslaved African women endured since 1619, not the abolition movement, that inspired their first yearnings for freedom and a rebellious spirit” (1995:2). Black feminism at this time, then, looked like the Black women refusing to bring children into slavery through the practice of abortion and natural birth control methods (Davis 1983). These narratives which illustrate early and desperate attempts to express bodily autonomy are overwhelmingly left out of feminist history books. Springer (2002) believes this is because their activism challenges the idea that ‘race women’ were not concerned about gender oppression.

When White women were organizing during the “first wave” the majority of Black women in the United States were enslaved (Taylor 1998). There were, however, freed Black women in the North who began to formerly organize in the struggle against racism and sexism (Davis 1983). These women were active in both suffrage and abolition and were responsible for what Angela Davis refers to as “the Black women’s club movement.” These clubs were often holistic—they were devoted not only to political organizing but also to literacy, the arts, family support, religion and spiritual growth, and community empowerment (Davis 1983). Importantly these clubs were created out of necessity because White women barred their membership to their own clubs. While some of these women, such as Ida B. Wells and Sojourner Truth, are rather well-known, there are several others who are not.

Maria W. Stewart is perhaps one of the most under-recognized, yet influential, Black women of the 19th century. Stewart, both an abolitionist and a suffragist, was the first American
woman (of any race) to give a public lecture to a mixed-race, mixed-gender audience (Guy-Sheftall 1995). In 1831, Stewart lectured at the African American Female Intelligence Society, calling on Black women reject cisgender gender norms and to pursue formal education. In one of her essays she writes: “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles” (Guy-Sheftall 1995: 29). Ultimately, Stewart’s lecture circuit was cut short following criticism from religious leaders who were troubled by her beliefs about women, domestic work, and higher education. Certainly, Stewart’s messaging was influenced by liberalist thought on education and cisgender gender norms. However, it must be noted that Stewart was not calling on Black women to reject domestic duties in their own homes, as White liberal feminists were; rather, when Stewart referred to women burying “their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles,” she was speaking of the pots and kettles in the homes of the White women who hired Black women as “the help.” This is some of the earliest intersectional theorizing. Sojourner Truth follows in Stewart’s footsteps on the public lecture trail. In 1851, Truth delivered her famous, although unsubstantiated, speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” and simultaneously condemned the ambivalence of abolitionist men and the race-bias of suffragist White women while advocating for the recognition of the experiences of poor Black women (Guy-Sheftall 1995). Truth was one among many who attempted to appeal to White suffragists.

Black women’s early organizing also involved crusades against lynching. Ida B. Wells is one of the first Black women to apply intersectional theorizing to non-Black women in the United States through her investigative reporting on lynching in the United States. Her analysis highlights the relationship between racial violence, patriarchy, systemic racism, the social construction of white womanhood, and Black male sexuality (Guy-Sheftall 1995). Wells, who
began campaigning for suffrage in Chicago in the early 1900s continued this activism and leadership through Jim Crow segregation. Her work, as well as the work of the other women discussed in this section, lays the groundwork for Black women’s theorizing and organizing through the 20th and into the 21st century (Taylor 1998; Potter 2015).

Black feminisms in the modern era

As White feminists recovered from their first wave into the “second wave” so too did Black women. Their experiences in the civil rights movement and the women’s movement/women’s liberation movement during the 60s and 70s led them to develop a perspective on oppression that was fundamentally distinct from that of these other groups (Taylor 1998). The Combahee River Collective (1977 [Guy-Sheftall 1995: 232]) speak directly to this: “We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time, we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements”. These Black feminists provide a discussion of racial, sexual, and gender politics that is fundamentally intersectional (Guy-Sheftall 1995: 233):

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

While most people point to Crenshaw’s (1998) article as the origin of the term intersectionality, Taylor (2017) believes the Combahee River Collective were actually the first to use the term in their practice and in their theories. Nonetheless, the 1970s onward saw a striking rise in Black
women writers, literary critics, and artists—many of whom began to provide complex theoretical analyses of the nature of oppression (Taylor 1998).

Patricia Hill Collins’ (1990) *Black Feminist Thought* presents a sociological analysis of the condition of Black women in the United States. In this piece, she develops the idea of the matrix of domination. The matrix of domination can be used to understand how one’s social identities combine to determine their location on numerous axes of power, each of which is constantly interacting with, and feeding back upon, every other axis. Collins refers to this concept as one more contribution to the intersectional paradigm and suggests it can be useful in analyzing any group of people. “Not only do intersectional paradigms prove useful in explaining U.S. Black women’s experiences,” she writes, “such paradigms suggest that intersecting oppressions also shape the experiences of other groups as well” (1990: 245). Although Crenshaw’s conceptualization of intersecting oppressions is more frequently called upon, I find Collins’s matrix of domination is more helpful in illustrating the plasticity and complexity of power dynamics. Crenshaw’s illustration of power as a traffic accident at the intersection of two or more streets (hierarchal systems) prompts one to think of power as something that is fixed—quite literally, in concrete—whereas the matrix of domination conjures up images of a multi-layered, dynamic, and variable system whose dimensions are constantly shifting across time and space. Moreover, Crenshaw’s collision metaphor does not allow for resistance whereas Collins’ does:

All contexts of domination incorporate some combination of intersecting oppressions, and considerable variability exists from one matrix of domination to the next as to how oppression and activism will be organized. For example, as Senegalese feminists, Black American feminists, and Black British feminists all point out, social institutions in Senegal, the United States, and the United Kingdom reflect intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Yet social relations within these three nation-states differ: Domination is structured
differently… Thus, regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of a matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities (1990: 246).

For Collins, power is not only contextual from one society to the next, nor is it envisioned as something that can be understood by only analyzing one’s immediate social context. Rather, power, privilege, and resistance are in a constant state of flux depending on both the individual’s situation and their global location. As Black women developed theories on the nature of power, they also provided critiques on the flaws in Whites’ approach to gender oppression. Bell hooks (1981, 1984) analysis is regarded as one of the most comprehensive critiques of whiteness within feminism (Moreton-Robinson 2000).

Hooks conceptualizes feminism as “a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (1984: 24). In her analysis of white feminism, hooks critiques their idea of a universal sisterhood, investment in dominant ideology, limited understanding of power and privilege, condescending attitude toward Black women, and White women’s dismissal of their role in maintaining oppression.

In white feminist movement, sisterhood has been used as a rallying cry to evoke a “spirit of power in unity” (hooks 1984: 44) among women. While sisterhood as a notion of woman-bonding has the potential to be revolutionary, white women’s use of sisterhood, according to bell hooks, is damaging. This version of sisterhood became popular in the 1960s and 1970s when the concept of women’s liberation was informed by the idea that women, regardless of race, class, sexuality, and upbringing can find common ground on their shared source of oppression—
sexism—and bond over shared source of oppression. This is a fundamental problem with white feminism, according to hooks (1984: 5):

A central tenet of feminist thought has been the assertion that “all women are oppressed.” This assertion implies that women share a common lot, that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women. This implies that women are more united by gender than they are divided by things such as race and class, and, further, that white, middle-class women are capable of speaking in the name of all women. Such a monochromatic vision of solidarity will only lead multiply disadvantaged women to abandon not only the idea of sisterhood but feminist movement in general (hooks 1981), making any chance of intersectional feminism impossible. For hooks, white women’s insistence that women share a common oppression implies that oppression is the only force that can bring women together. She sees this as a reflection of sexist ideology.

Bell hooks sees white feminism as investing in capitalist ideology, patriarchal socialization, and white supremacy. She points to the individualism inherent in the liberal feminist approach and the singular focus on sex/gender in the radical approach as evidence of this. And, as stated above, she finds the messaging of both these feminisms playing into patriarchal socialization that encourages women to see themselves as victims and to equate masculinity with violence and femininity with passivity. Moreover, by focusing solely on oppression, there is no requirement for privileged white women to examine their own sexist attitudes toward other women (hooks 1984: 46):

Identifying as victims, they could abdicate responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism, and classism, which they did by insisting that only men were the enemy…[It] was informed by racist and classist assumption about white womanhood, that the white “lady”…should be protected
from all that might upset or discomfort her and shielded from negative realities that might lead to confrontation.

Hooks believes this makes feminism unappealing to women who, for their own survival, cannot afford to identify with victimhood. As Collins (1990) points out, Black women have long thought of themselves as survivors—survivors of a system that attempts to quash their happiness and threaten their existence at every turn. Put simply, this is an image of womanhood that just does not resonate with multiply oppressed individuals (hooks 1981; 1984).

Hooks also points out that the logic of women coming together under the basis of shared victimization is not sustainable for feminism. In the 1970s and 1980s it led many White women to desert feminism as soon as they improved their individual circumstances. This eventually led to a belief that the United States had entered into a “post-feminist” society (Dahl Crossley 2017). Since women who had benefited from the women’s rights movement and women’s liberation movement achieved the opportunities and resources they were fighting for, they no longer identified with the victim and, hence, feminism no longer felt necessary (hooks 1984). Finally, hooks takes issue with the in-group/ out-group mentality that permeated liberal feminist and radical feminist organizations.

In addition to socializing women to see themselves as victims, patriarchy also teaches us to expect other women to be untrustworthy and, consequently, favor relationships with men over woman bonding. Hooks connects this to white feminist’s tendency to create exclusive groups where within-group ties are strengthened by devaluing and distancing those outside of the group. During the 60s and 70s, hooks observed white feminists “trash” any women who did not wholly subscribe to the version of feminism they set forth. We certainly saw this in NOW’s treatment of lesbian women. Friedan, who was president at the time, admonished lesbian women for attempting to infiltrate NOW with their “lesbian agenda,” and reportedly referred to them as “the
lavender menace.” She accused them of trying to make the women’s movement about their “sexual fantasies” by merely requesting representation at their annual conference. Similar to Black women, lesbian White women could not simply separate their gender identity from their sexual orientation. Any feminism that is unwilling (or unable) to think of power as multi-faceted has very little to offer women who occupy a multiply oppressed location on the matrix of domination.

As I have stated, White feminists who treat gender as the only source of oppression ensure their problems are prioritized. Recall liberal feminist’s focus on “equality of the sexes” which suggests that gaining equal footing with wealthy White men can improve the condition of women. Hooks rejects the idea that feminism can be liberatory while rallying under the banner of “equality of the sexes” because sexism is not the only relevant issue for the masses of women who desperately need to see other systems of power deconstructed. Hooks’ framework is thus a critique of many systems of domination at once and provides insight on the various ways in which women are both privileged and oppressed by the status quo. If feminism is not committed to eliminating every aspect of the social hierarchy, it cannot end sexism because, contrary to radical feminist theories, sexism works in consort white supremacy and capitalism. The extent to which people of Color are harmed by a particular social problem, so too are women. Thus, the extent to which self-identified feminists participate in and advocate for problems experienced by the multiply oppressed is a strong indicator of whether feminism has moved beyond single-axis praxis.

Bell hooks takes additional issue with white feminists who perpetuate the false idea that White women invented feminism. She argues that as long as White women can purport to be the
“architects” of feminism, they maintain control over the discourse and agenda. Hooks writes (1984: 10):

Frequently, white feminists act as if black women did not know sexist oppression existed until they voiced feminist sentiment. They believe they are providing black women with the analysis and “the” program for liberation. They do not understand, cannot even imagine, that black women, as well as other groups of women who live daily in oppressive situations, often acquire an awareness of patriarchal politics from their lived experience, just as they develop strategies of resistance (even though they may not resist on a sustained or organized basis).

White feminists who speak about “inviting” black women to “join” the movement imply that feminism is theirs. In doing so they imply that Black women are only able to participate in the movement because Whites have deemed it acceptable (hooks 1984). For hooks, mere inclusion or invitation is not enough, however, because White women have often given Black women space with the expectation that they represent Whites’ ideas of what Black women should be. Hooks asserts (1984: 11):

And though they expected us to provide firsthand accounts of black experience, they felt it was their role to decide if these experiences were authentic. Frequently, college-educated black women (even those from poor and working-class backgrounds) were dismissed as mere imitators. Our presence in the movement activities did not count, as white women were convinced that ‘real’ blackness meant speaking the patios of poor black people, being uneducated, streetwise, and a variety of other stereotypes. If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could only be heard if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse.

This characteristic is related to the second, investment in dominant ideology, in that when white feminists do not divest from their own sexism and racism, it is brought into the movement. Hooks thus calls on White women to engage in critical self-reflection in an attempt to understand the ways in which hegemonic stereotypes about Blackness influence their perceptions of Black women.
Finally, hooks believes feminism cannot be liberatory if privileged women are not willing to identify the ways in which they oppress other women. Radical feminist’s emphasis on a “common source of oppression”, for instance, dismisses the reality that women can be privileged by their race and oppressed by their gender. The argument that racism is significant but, ultimately, only exists as an extension of patriarchal rule does not reflect the lived experience of women of Color who view White women as just as, if not more, oppressive than White men (Kendall 2012; Roth 2004; Thompson 2002). This characteristic of white feminism is also related to the reliance on the single-axis theorizing (hooks 1984). When feminists rely on single-axis theorizing of oppression (and thus, essentialist understandings of womanhood) they are not required to consider the ways in which they themselves are sexist against women—women of color, trans women, poor women, immigrant women, lesbian women, and disabled women.

Although hooks does not use the word “intersectionality” at any point in her analyses, on a fundamental level her work provides a critique of white feminist’s inability to think about power intersectionally in the 1960s and 1970s. And, as I will show, her conceptualization of whiteness within feminism remains rather salient despite the decades between her work and this project.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the various theories and perspectives that have informed this study. I first discussed how existing literature and theories within whiteness studies pertain to my examination of white feminism. I discussed how whiteness scholars conceptualize whiteness (as a status, social position, and manifestation of power). I then examined three traditions of theorizing and activism within feminism: liberal, radical, and Black feminism. I focused on these theories because they were most pertinent to the study, both in terms of my approach to the study
of whiteness and because they were the traditions most relevant to my participants’ beliefs on feminism. Finally, I outlined the relationship between Black feminism and intersectionality and argued that they should be thought of as one in the same.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

The research design of this study was informed by the following assertions: 1) Black women offer one of the most critical perspective on whiteness in feminism (Moreton-Robinson 2000; Collins 1990; hooks 1984), 2) much of the existing research on intersectionality and feminism does not adequately acknowledge Black feminist perspectives (see Collins 2015), 3) as a White person, my perspective on feminism is clouded by my white racial frame (Feagin 2013), and 4) within a study on whiteness, the time and energy required of Black women should be limited. To accommodate and address these points I use survey, interview, and focus group methods in a sequential manner. All names, locations, and other identifying information have been replaced with pseudonyms.

In this chapter I will explain the methodological frameworks that guided my data collection and analysis processes. I will also provide an in-depth discussion of the research methods I used, including the sampling and recruitment procedures, problems I encountered “in the field,” and process of data analysis. Because the results from the survey make up the instrument for the interviews, I discuss the results from the online survey in this chapter. First however, I position myself in the research, as is expected in a feminist-informed project such as mine.

Researcher Positioning

As I will discuss in more detail below, feminist sociologists believe that transparency is essential to credibility. Indeed, there are political motivations and preconceived ideas that
informed this project (as they do in every research endeavor). Because these have the potential to implicate how I analyzed and present the data, I lay them bare here.

To explain the origins of her own study on whiteness and womanhood, Ruth Frankenberg wrote (1993: 2), “the research project had as its inception… my own despair over the confused mess that white feminist women’s response to charges of racism had collectively become by 1983-84.” She goes on to explain that her observations of the ways in which White women responded to criticism regarding racism (anger, dismissal, guilt, and withdrawal) made “sites of productive multiracial feminist dialogue…few and far between” (p. 3). Fast-forward a few decades and I find myself in a shared space with a White woman writing almost 40 years before me.

I open with Frankenberg because I have found that, in spite of the increased acceptance of feminist research methodologies in the academy, there are still those who question whether human emotions (that is, the subjective experience) and research are diametrically opposed foes. Frankenberg—who is regarded as one of the most important researchers of whiteness and womanhood since her book The Social Construction of Whiteness was published in 1993—provides precedence for me to situate the origins of my own study in the subjective experience.

Similar to Frankenberg, this study found its origins in frustration. In college I was taught about intersectional feminism and how it differed from liberal, radical, and even Marxist/socialist feminism, but I was also taught that intersectional feminism had become the norm; that racism was, at the very least, being addressed by the majority of feminists. Quickly, however, I began to notice contradictions in what I was being taught and what was going on around me. I did not observe a willingness to confront issues of racism, cis-centrism, and heteronormativity. When other White women were accused—including myself—of racism, we responded with
anger and defensiveness, sometimes withdrawal. I came to see myself, and my friends, in the criticisms from people like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty when, originally, I read their works assuming they were not speaking to me. I saw myself as a “good” feminist because I was well-intentioned. Unfortunately, intentions have little effect on impact (Frankenberg 1993).

At community organizing events I have had other White women approach me with racist, transphobic, and incendiary comments, expecting me to act in solidarity with them. I have seen White women be violent toward homeless people during marches and protests in my downtown center. I have also been present when my White women colleagues have tried to undercut, take credit for, or condescend Black women I love. In every instance, there is an expectation from my White sisters that I will either do nothing or support them. For these reasons, I have come to have low expectations for White feminists. The reader should keep this in mind when studying my analyses.

At the same time, as a White woman I desperately want other White women to be better. This created a bit of a paradox. As data collection and analysis unfolded, I found myself simultaneously at risk of overlooking the extent of whiteness in feminism (in hopes of concluding that we are doing better) and ignoring areas where White women are doing well (a consequence of my preconceived ideas about white feminism). As this chapter unfolds, the reader will be made aware of how I handled this paradox when I was confronted with it.

Finally, it is important for researchers to be transparent about any personal stakes they have in the research proves. I conduct this study because my civil and human rights depend on radical transformation within feminism. As an intersectional feminist, I believe that I am historically and politically bound to other women; what happens to any woman also happens to
me. As a student of Black feminism, I see how the patriarchal gender norms that inhibit my livelihood also repress trans women and men. Or, how the societal response to rape and sexual assault against White women is bound to the exploitation of Black people. It is clear to me how the survival of women who are different from me is intricately connected to my own. So long as any person’s human rights remain uncertain, so too do mine and, right now, the safety of too many women hang in the balance. Thus, and simply, this project is an attempt to organize and better understand my people, for our own good.

Methodological Approach

While method and methodology tend to be used interchangeably, the two terms should not be conflated. A methodology is a theory on how research should proceed (Harding 1991). A method, on the other hand, is a “technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence” (Harding 1991: 2). Feminist researchers make use of a wide variety of methods and methodologies (Cancian 1992). In this study, for instance, I draw on qualitative interviewing but I also use focus groups and, to a lesser extent, survey methods. Likewise, there are multiple methodological traditions that inform the present study. At its core, this project is informed by feminist approaches to research and studying up literature, each of which I will explain in turn.

Studying Up

Studying up refers to research that attempts to understand those in positions of power. Anthropologist Nader (1974) first discussed the concept in relation to field work and ethnographies. She was concerned about the ethical implications of highly privileged researchers who studied inequality by imposing themselves on those most impacted by unequal power relations. She asks (1974: 5), “What if, in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to
study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?” Rather than ask, “why are people poor?” as most social scientists do, studying up requires us to instead ask, “why are some people so rich?” This line of questioning illustrates the activist component of studying up literature; interrogate the powerful with the purpose of restructuring power relations.

To be sure, studying up literature does not suggest that people in power are more interesting or more valuable in terms of what their perspective can contribute to theoretical development or empirical knowledge; the experiences of marginalized people are important and it is vital that academia not deny the credibility of those experiences. What studying up literature does suggest is that researchers be thoughtful about power relations and not assume to act as a mouthpiece for groups they are only interested in for the sake of research.

In the context of the current study, studying up literature illustrates the importance of analyzing White feminists and whiteness in our attempt to understand intersectionality in feminist movement. Because whiteness would preclude the development of an intersectional feminism in orthodox movements, whiteness deserves our attention. I thus see this project as an exercise in studying up in that I analyze the most privileged women in feminist movement, White women. The tradition of studying up has additionally influenced the process of data collection (discussed below). While I want to center Black women’s standpoint in this study, I do not want to continue to hold Black women responsible for addressing racism in feminism. I do not find it liberatory to ask Black women to set aside the time and energy to have yet another conversation with a White woman about why orthodox feminism is problematic.

It should be noted that researchers have questioned the compatibility of feminist methodology with studying up (Becker & Aiello 2013; Sohl 2018). Becker and Aiello (2013), for
instance, conducted a study on employees of a women’s prison. They found it difficult to
navigate inappropriate comments or jokes from staff members about the women inmates while
also paying deference to feminist values. They worried that if they followed feminist praxis and
pointed out the problematic nature of the inappropriate comments from prison staff, they would
anger the administrators and lose access to their research setting. For obvious reasons, this is not
something I had to worry about in constructing a feminist-informed project that attempts to study
up. I did not need to rely on any particular gatekeepers for access to a specific research site. I did,
however, find myself in the position of not knowing how to respond to participants who shared
blatantly racist or transphobic beliefs. In these instances, I relied on dialogical interviewing
techniques (to be discussed below) and, when that failed, made sure to bring up the issue in the
focus group discussion.

Others who question the compatibility of the two point out the difficulty in adhering to
the feminist ideal of minimizing power differentials among researcher and participant while
studying up. Moreton-Robinson (2000), an indigenous Australian feminist researcher, discussed
the difficult position she was placed in during her interviews with White feminist academics who
were well versed in feminist research methodology. During the course of their interview, one of
Moreton-Robinson’s participants equated Black feminism’s critique of white feminism to
violence and abuse. Moreton-Robinson questioned the participant on this, and the conversation
became “highly emotive”. Once the interviewee was given the opportunity to proof-read the
transcript (a common technique used in feminist research), they refused to allow Moreton-
Robinson to use the bulk of the transcript in her study. In her analysis, Moreton-Robinson argues
that this feminist was able to use her knowledge as a researcher along with her white privilege
against the interests of the study. The feminist practice of allowing participants to read through
interview transcripts “served to reinforce existing relations of domination and subordination” (2000: 81).

At the outset of this project, I dismissed the issue Moreton-Robinson encountered as something I would not have to confront. I thought as much because, first of all, I am White; Moreton-Robinson believed it was her Indigenous status in relation to her participants’ whiteness that made the interviewee feel justified in taking advantage of feminist approaches to data collection. Second, I would not offer copies of the transcripts to participants for them to proof-read. As Kirsch (1999) points out, there is no singular approach to feminist research. It is not a cardinal rule that interview transcripts should be shared with participants and, indeed, Moreton-Robinson’s experience makes it clear that it is not always appropriate to do so.

Feminist Research Tools and Techniques

In this study, I utilize four methodological tools developed by feminist researchers—feminist standpoint theory, strong objectivity, self-reflexivity, and dialogical interviewing. Feminist standpoint theory is used to push back against the historical legacy in academia of treating women’s experiences as “too subjective” and unremarkable (Collins 1997). Standpoint theorists reconstitute the research process by placing women directly at the center (Hartsock 2004). More specifically, however, I utilize a Black feminist standpoint.

White and Black feminists conceptualize standpoint theory differently (Collins 1997). White feminists such as Hekman (1997) see standpoints as situated knowledges and each is regarded as equally valid and valuable. This represents a micro-level approach to standpoint. For Hekman, standpoints are fragmented and signal individual ways of knowing. Contrast this with the Black feminist approach to standpoint theory which focuses on group standpoint. In regard to
Black women’s standpoint, Collins (1997: 381) writes: “standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences. Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that the group realities transcend individual experiences.” Collins is not suggesting that all Black women are the same; she is suggesting that as a group, Black women have similar ways of knowing as a result of their group position. Black women’s historical relationship with White women makes up a part of their group standpoint. Because Black women’s feminism has evolved alongside their criticisms of white feminism, Black women proffer the most critical and comprehensive perspective on whiteness in feminism (Collins 1986; hooks 1984; Davis 1983). As such, I rely on Black women’s standpoint to dictate the direction my conversations will take with White, self-identified feminists.

I also employ the feminist methodological concept of strong objectivity. Strong objectivity is an alternative to pure objectivity or, objectivism (Harding 1991). Objectivism assumes that researchers can (and should) divorce themselves from their subjectivity so as to uncover a “Truth” about the world. In this approach, the researcher is divorced from the project (including the participants) and plays the role of an “invisible hand” (Frankenberg 1993). Harding (1991) argues it is not only impossible to divorce yourself from research, it is irresponsible to try. Because all research is produced within a specific context, it follows that any knowledge gained from the research process will be significantly influenced by the dominant beliefs, values, and assumptions of the larger society. For Harding, researcher bias becomes a problem when the potential for bias is ignored. As such, rather than aspire to pure objectivity, feminist researchers aspire to strong objectivity.

Strong objectivity can be achieved through various techniques. Most of these involve the researcher making themselves aware of how hierarchical relations manifest in, and shape, the
research process by treating their own beliefs and experiences as data (DeVault 1999; Stanley and Wise 1990). Harding, for instance, writes (1991: 9):

The best feminist analysis goes beyond innovations in subject matter in a crucial way: it insists that the inquirer [themselves] be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter… That is, the race, class, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the research must be placed in the frame of the picture that [they] attempt to paint… Thus, the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historic individual with concrete, specific desires and interests.

I attempt strong objectivity in this project by positioning myself in the research project, as was done at the outset of this chapter. The purpose of this statement is to provide information on how my own biases and experiences may come to bear on my findings, analysis, and conclusions so the reader may understand my role in the research process.

Self-reflexivity, the third feminist technique I employ, and strong objectivity are closely related. Indeed, self-reflexivity can be used to achieve strong objectivity. As mentioned above, feminist researchers can engage in self-reflexivity by examining how their social positions impact their perception of the subject under study. As feminists, we should never assume our interpretations are unproblematic (Maynard 1994; Wolf 1996). McCorkel and Myers (2003) illustrate the particular importance of engaging in self-reflexivity in projects where the researchers are differentially privileged, relative to their participants. McCorkel and Myers were both studying communities mostly made up of people of Color. Although they attempted to uplift the voices of their participants, upon examination of their findings years later they realized they had inadvertently imposed dominant narratives about race onto their participants. In trying to empathize with her participants, McCorkel focused on her shared oppression with the participants. This decision led her to disregard the significant role of race and class oppression in the experiences of women prisoners (McCorkel & Myers 2003). They suggest that had they been
more aware of how their racial identity differentially privileged them in relation to their participants, they may have been able to build better rapport with their participants and gain better insight into their experiences.

Finally, I make use of Frankenberg’s dialogical approach to qualitative interviews. Dialogical interviewing requires the researcher to position themselves as “explicitly involved in the questions” (1993: 30). This approach to interviewing contrasts with conventional interviewing techniques in significant ways. First, dialogical interviews unfold more like conversations and involve the interviewer sharing information about themselves in relation to the topics being discussed. In traditional approaches to qualitative interviews, researchers are meant to be “neutral” and “blank-faced,” avoiding questions about their own opinions and life experiences. When participants ask us about ourselves, we are trained to use elusive responses in an effort to redirect the conversation back to the interviewee. This has become standard practice under the assumption that if we share anything about ourselves, we will lead interviewees to respond in socially desirable ways and thus compromise the validity of our data. However, because one’s presentation of self is never neutral, it is naïve to assume that our participants will read our actions as such (Frankenberg 1993).

In dialogical interviewing, participants are treated like partners in a conversation. This approach to interviewing is a direct challenge to the “blank faced interviewer” technique where the interviewer does not share anything about themselves for fear of impacting the interview process. I told participants at the outset that they should feel free to ask me questions or to pose interview prompts back to me. Truthfully, the dialogical approach was difficult at first. It challenged my prior knowledge about what research “should” look like. Moreover, participants
were not eager to reverse the social norms of the interview and only one participant posed a question back to me.

Frankenberg’s (1993) technique also provided insight on how I could open up with participants without negatively impacting the research process. I often relied on her approach when participants seemed reticent or nervous. My interview with Hannah, for instance, was one of the more difficult ones to get “up and running.” She seemed very nervous and was rather quiet even though I invited her to think of the encounter as more of a conversation. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words, so to make her feel more comfortable, I talked about my own experiences. I hoped this would show her that she was welcome to do the same. Here is one exchange:

*So how do you practice feminism?*

H: Umm. I don’t know. [long pause] I guess I would say I don’t really do enough.

*I feel that way too. So do a lot of other people I’ve talked to. I think some of that has to do with the fact that a lot of us do things that other people might not consider “feminist.” Like I work with some organizations on campus that aren’t specifically feminist, like the grad student association and the union, but the things I do within them definitely are.*

H: Well I guess my biggest outlet then is through politics. I’m involved in a lot of things. I work for a candidate right now who […].

Hannah then went on to describe a wide range of activities she does with the local Democratic party to support policies and candidates she believes in and who reflect her feminist values. If I had followed more orthodox approaches to interviewing, I am not sure my interview with Hannah would have ever really developed into a meaningful conversation. While I relied on this technique frequently it was really only necessary in the first half of the interview. Eventually, I developed rapport with all of the participants and had no problem sustaining an engaging and thoughtful conversation with them.
The dialogical approach also enables the researcher to push back on participants if they make statements that are problematic or dangerous. Frankenberg (1993) provides numerous examples of moments when she challenged racist ideas proposed by participants in their one-on-one interviews. While I did not address each and every problematic comment my participants made, I did make sure to differentiate my beliefs from theirs when they wrongly assumed we agreed. For instance, Stella used “we” pronouns when describing why trans women “need their own movement.” She explained, “They don’t grow up experiencing what you and I have experienced. They don’t end up pregnant, we do have pussies, we do bleed.” Stella referred to these as “big issues…the real issues.” I let her finish what she was saying and then explained, “I’m not sure I feel that way just because in a lot of ways the stuff they’re dealing with is much more dire than what I’m dealing with in my life right now.” Frankenberg’s approach provided me with the tools to figure out how to gently dissent without de-railing the interview.

This gets at one of the primary reasons I am so drawn to Frankenberg’s methodology. As much as I want to respect the research process and the power differential between Stella and myself, I do not see why this means I have to concede to the suggestion that trans women are not women. Trans women are murdered because others see their expression of womanhood as deviant and threatening. Thus, it was important to me that Stella understands her beliefs are not shared by all women, especially women she perceives to be cisgender. The dialogical approach shows feminist scholars (scholars who overwhelmingly study issues that have personal significance) how to conduct empirical research without having to aspire to the unattainable “blank faced” interviewer. While it did take a while for me to figure out how to navigate

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3 In addition to assuming that I shared her beliefs on trans womanhood, Stella also assumed I was cisgender. While I shared a lot of information about myself with Stella, I did not tell her my gender identity.
situations like the one I have just described, I eventually was able to find a way to be both a researcher and a person.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The first stage of data collection involved gathering input from Black women via an anonymous, online survey. These responses were analyzed to formulate the questionnaire used in one-on-one interviews with White feminists, which then determined the issues and talking points that would be addressed in the focus group discussions with interview informants. I explain each of these methods in turn.

Surveys

There are a few reasons I felt it was necessary to create an interview guide informed by input from Black women. First, an interview guide created solely by me would elicit information on what I think is important to examine in a study on intersectional feminism. Existing studies on intersectionality and feminism do not often depart from a Black feminist standpoint and, as I discussed in Chapter 2, Black feminism and intersectionality are one in the same. When intersectionality is divorced from its Black feminist roots, it becomes merely a tool for counting identities. I view the surveys as one of many ways to ensure that Black women’s standpoint on intersectionality and feminism remained central.

Because I was only interested in input from Black women, I needed to rely on purposive, non-probability sampling techniques. As such, survey respondents were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Calls for participation were posted on social networking sites such as Collective of Trans Women of Color, Black Lives Matter Southwest Michigan, Guerilla Feminism, and Women of Color Feminists (see Appendix H). I also emailed the call for
participation to the social media directors for the women’s and gender studies, African studies, and intercultural studies programs at two colleges in southwest Michigan and asked if they would share information about the survey on their page. All of these groups agreed to share the survey information on their page, with the exception of the Collective of Trans Women of Color who did not want to ask their group members to participate in a study that did not offer compensation. Admittedly and unfortunately, while I did offer an incentive to focus group participants, I did not consider offering an incentive to online survey respondents. This is an oversight I regret. In addition to publicizing the survey through various online networks I also sent the information to the Black women I know personally.

The survey instrument was created on Qualtrics.com and was short, anonymous, and consisted of a total of five items (see Appendix D). Respondents were required to provide their informed consent (see Appendix C) before continuing on to the survey. The first question asked the respondents to indicate their location (city/town and state). The second question asked respondents if they identified as a feminist. The third and fourth questions were the substantive items. Question three asked respondents what they would say to white feminists if given the opportunity to speak to them anonymously. In the following question I then informed respondents that I would be interviewing Whites about race and feminist movements and inquired if there was anything specific they would like me to ask? This was a partially open-ended responses that gave respondents the option to select yes, no, or don’t know. Those who indicated they did have a specific question to ask were prompted to provide a question (“Yes, please ask the this: ____________ ”). The final question asked participants if they were interested in the results of this study and, if they were, prompted them to share their email address. They could also select, “No, I’m not interested in the results,” or “I don’t know. I will
contact Olivia at Olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu if I am interested.” Once respondents submitted the survey, they were thanked for their time and invited to share the link with other Black women they knew who might be interested in participating.

The survey was open for one month. Because the purpose of this survey was to gather input from Black women, not to necessarily draw conclusions about the overarching significance of their responses, generalizability and statistical power were not a concern in this project. Still, I needed enough data to utilize a grounded theory approach and formulate interview questions based on the survey results. As such, my goal was to gather responses from at least 20 people within that time frame. By the end of the month however, I had gathered 42 responses. I received input from individuals living in 14 different states with 54% of the responses coming from Michigan, Washington, and Illinois. This is not surprising as four of the five Black women I personally asked to consider participating lived in Michigan, Washington, and Illinois. Responses were also collected from North Carolina, Georgia, Utah, Indiana, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Louisiana, California, Maryland, and Tennessee. Of these respondents, 60% identified as a feminist and about 14% did not. Nearly one-quarter (23.8%) of respondents did not answer this question and one responded, “prefer not to say.”

While I was concerned that people who were not Black women would complete the survey, given the content in the responses this did not seem to be an issue. The responses from Black women contained themes discussed in Black feminist literature—even in cases where the respondent did not identify as a feminist, their input mirrored a Black feminist perspective and addressed the interlocking nature of oppression. This reiterates my contention in Chapters 1 and 2 that Black women’s perspective are necessarily intersectional, even when they are not explicitly tied to Black feminist theories. There was only one response that seemed questionable
because it was such an outlier. This person, who did not respond to any of the other items, answered “Is race and racism even a problem?” to the question “If given the opportunity to speak anonymously… what would you want to say?” Because this response differed so much from those of the other 41 respondents—and contradicts all existing literature within Black feminism and whiteness studies—I made the decision to exclude it as a relevant theme and, as such, it is not represented in the interview guide.

Once the survey was closed, I downloaded the responses from Qualtrics and converted the file to a Word document for open-coding analysis. Esterberg (2002) explains open-coding as a method where the researcher works intensively with the data, coding transcripts line-by-line with the purpose of identifying recurring themes and categories. Once the data was exported to a word document file, there were approximately three single-spaced pages of data to analyze, two pages in response to the first substantive question and one for the second. For the first substantive question regarding what Black women would want to say to Whites, I read through the transcripts several times, taking notes in the margins regarding the content discussed and patterns I observed. I compiled a list of topics and emergent themes that appeared more than once and organized them into several overarching categories.

I then went through the same process for the second substantive item regarding specific questions Black women wanted me to ask. Here, I wanted to make sure that the data from the second response reflected the themes I had observed in the first response. My analysis did not reveal any unique themes. I then attempted data reduction by reducing the themes I identified five categories: 1) racism/white supremacy, white privilege, 2) activism/lack of activism, 3) Black women claiming/challenging universality of white feminism, 4) intersectional solidarity, 5) cross-race relationships/lack thereof. These categories were then re-imagined as interview
questions. For instance, in response to the first substantive question, one respondent wrote: “The ways that Black women’s issues continue to go unaddressed by you are inherently racist (category 1)… it has made more Black women reject the notion that they want anything to do with feminism because of how it is applied by white feminists (category 3). Further, when you hurt us, you hurt yourselves4 (category 4).” This was one of several other responses very similar to this one. Thus, to understand if White women are concerned with Black women’s problems, cognizant of racism in feminism, and dedicated tointersectional perspectives on oppression and liberation, I included the following questions in my interview guide: What social issues or problems are important to you and your feminist practice? Do you think race plays an important role in feminism? Are you familiar with the term intersectionality and, if so, what does it mean to you? I did this until I had formulated a question for each theme.

At this point I also determined if any of the questions suggested by survey respondents could be used exactly as they were posed in the interview guide, in an effort to preserve respondents’ unique voices. It would not have been beneficial to use all of the questions posed by Black women exactly as they were written. For instance, one respondent wrote “Why do you only speak out when the rights of stereotypical feminists are impacted?” Another: “do you believe in the rights of all women or White women specifically?” Yet another: “why is your feminist practice based in white supremacy ideology?” While all of these questions are legitimate and deserve answers, it is unlikely they would elicit information that could help me determine if intersectionality was meaningfully adopted by White feminists. In short, they are not likely to generate honest responses from the interview participants. As DiAngelo (2018)

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4 This is a reference to a song by Beyoncé. In this context, I believe it refers to one the fundamental beliefs of intersectional feminism—that all women’s fates are intimately connected.
points out, Whites tend to shut down when asked questions about their beliefs on race and racial
privilege. Combine this with the power differential between myself and the participants that may
result in their feeling uncomfortable or awkward (Cancian 1999), it was clear that if I wanted to
gather honest and authentic responses from White participants, I would require a less direct
question. Thus, the raw and real insights from Black women in the examples above were
transformed into the question, “have you ever heard people say that feminism is a movement for
White women? If so, where do you think that idea comes from? Why does it exist?”

At times, however, it was possible to take Black women’s questions verbatim and include
them in the interview guide. One respondent, for instance, wrote: “Who are your feminist
mentors and influences, when you look at them do they come from diverse backgrounds or are
they in line with your privilege?” For this question I simply used the first half of the response:
“Who are your feminist mentors or role models?” By the end of this process I had generated an
interview guide consisting of twelve questions (see Appendix F).

Interviews

Qualitative interviews were used to gain an in-depth understanding of Whites’ beliefs
about feminism, gender oppression, and intersectionality and to determine whether
intersectionality had been adopted by whites. Sometimes referred to as “depth” (Jones 2004) or
“intensive” (Schutt 2006) interviewing, qualitative interviews aim to “understand how particular
individuals arrive at their cognitions, emotions, and values” (Miller & Crabtree 2004: 4). While
surveys are useful instruments for collecting general information on individuals’ ideas or
attitudes, they are not particularly useful for trying to understand how people make sense of or
rationalize their viewpoints—especially when race and racism are primary topics of interest
(Bonilla-Silva 2018).
Because White feminists were my target population, I recruited “self-identified feminists” for interviews. Because White women are more likely to self-identify as feminists than women of color given feminism’s public image as a “for Whites only” movement, it was my hope that by using the language of “self-identified feminist” in my call for participation I would attract interest of White people. Frankenberg (1993) used this approach as well.

Similar to the first phase of data collection, participants were selected via snowball and convenience sampling. I relied on word of mouth, fliers at local organizations, and social media to gather potential informants (see Appendix I). I disseminated information about my student on a number of Facebooks, including: Women for Women Kalamazoo, Progressive Women of Southwest Michigan, Resist Kalamazoo, Kalamazoo Women Voters, and Queer Women of SW Michigan. Call for participation fliers were posted at one of the local YMCA branches, the YWCA, a campus student center, and one of the college’s gender and women’s studies departments. My plan was to cease interviewing once I had achieved theoretical saturation. To determine whether theoretical saturation has been achieved, Glaser and Strauss (1967: 229) suggest that researchers “go out of their way to look for groups that stretch the diversity of data as far as possible, just to make certain that saturation is based on the widest possible range of data on the category.”

After conducting ten interviews, I realized my sample was quite homogenous in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation and that the Queer Women of SW Michigan advertisement was not resulting in a lot of interest. I began recruiting heavily for cisgender men and queer identified people. To gain access to potential informants who identify as queer, I contacted the local resource center for LGBTQ+ identified people but, unfortunately, did not hear back from them. At this point, I began reaching out to my queer-identified friends and asking them directly
if they knew people who would be interested (I did not interview anyone I was previously
acquainted with). I was subsequently contacted by five queer-identified people who agreed to sit
down for an interview. My effort to increase the number of cisgender men was not as successful.
As the Facebook groups and community organizations were not eliciting responses from
cisgender men, I started asking the several participants I had already interviewed if they knew of
anyone who might be interested. I heard back from two men. Both were interested in an
interview, but I only agreed to meet with one. I did not end up interviewing the other individual.
Although I was very interested in increasing the representation of cisgender men in my sample, I
found this person’s interest in the project disingenuous, at best, and disturbing, at worst. In their
emails to me, they spoke mainly of the ways in which society is sexist toward men, how they
could help me improve my research and find employment, and they offered to put me in contact
with several well-known figures such as the governor of Michigan, Noam Chomsky, and Bernie
Sanders. So, while my sample is not extremely diverse in terms of gender identity, it is diverse in
a number of other areas (to be discussed in the following chapter).

Interviews lasted anywhere from 35 minutes to 2 hours. Most, however, lasted about 90
minutes. Before sitting down for an interview, participants were provided with an informed
consent (see Appendix A) document and asked to sign and return it before scheduling the
interview. In some cases, participants did not have access to a printer and so I obtained verbal
consent over the phone or email and brought them a blank copy to sign. Our conversations were
electronically recorded took place in a location of their choosing. Most of the time they chose a
neutral location such as a bookstore, coffee shop, or location on campus. Other locations
included participant’ place of work, home/ apartment, and church. All participants were located
in southwest Michigan with the exception of Kelsey who lived about 45 minutes north of my location.

The instruments for the in-depth interviews included the interview guide and a demographics questionnaire. The questionnaire (see Appendix E) asked informants to indicate their pronouns, a preferred pseudonym, birth year, highest level of education, if they were currently working and if so in what capacity, sexual orientation, and whether or not they were interested in the focus group discussion. The interview guide consisted of questions sourced from the online survey responses discussed above. Questions were aimed at understanding participants definition of feminism, how they came to feminism, how they practice feminism, their beliefs about gender oppression and how best to combat it, beliefs on racism and anti-racism, their understanding of intersectionality, their vision for an ideal society, and who/what has influenced their feminism. I also asked questions about their social circles, experiences with gender oppression, and beliefs opinions on other feminists.

All interviews began with relatively easy-to-answer questions that would allow time for rapport to develop before I began asking the more “sensitive” questions. In most cases, I asked participants to fill out the questionnaire after the interview but at times I used the questionnaire as a way to provide participants who seemed nervous time to “settle in.” It was surprising to me how many participants felt uneasy about being interviewed. The most common worry among participants was that they were talking too much. I expect this is related to cisgender socialization which teaches women to limit their contributions and censor their opinions. While this was something I could not control, I was able to use Frankenberg’s dialogical interviewing to help personalize our conversation and make participants more comfortable.
The placement of questions in the instrument also helped to ensure a fruitful conversation. All interviews began with the easy-to-answer questions that invited participants to talk about themselves. I began by asking participants if they identified as a feminist. Every respondent was comfortable speaking on this. The majority of the time, this would lead participants to explain what feminism means to them. In those instances when they did not explicitly speak to this, I would follow up with a probe: “So, you do identify as a feminist, what does feminism mean to you?” The next several questions were aimed at encouraging participants to speak to their own interests and passions. About mid-way through the interview I began asking what might be considered more controversial questions: “are there any types of feminism you think are problematic?” “Have you heard people say feminism is a movement for White women?” At the end of the interview I returned to questions that would be accessible and approachable so that our conversations ended on a positive “note”. I asked them, “If you could share one thing about feminism to someone who doesn’t identify as a feminist, what would it be? and “what is something I didn’t ask you that you think would be interesting for me to ask other participants?” It was important to me that the participants walk away from our conversation feeling glad they took the time to sit down with me because I hoped it would encourage them to attend the group discussion.

Interviews were coded by hand without the use of any computer software. While the original plan for data analysis was to use themes acquired from hooks’ (1981; 1984) conceptualization of white feminism as deductive codes, once I began working with the data it became clear that this was not the best course of action. Using *a priori* codes for white feminism as the focus of my analysis did not allow me to provide descriptive information on self-identified feminists’ beliefs and practices. I felt as if I was playing “spot the racist” with my informants and
not taking the time to understand the substance, significance and context of their perspectives and opinions; I was merely looking for key words I had pulled from hooks’ work. Put simply, I was working on a search and find game when I should have been engaging in a theoretical application. Thus, I made the decision to reserve hooks’ perspective on white feminism to be used in the concluding discussion of the data (Chapter 6). To actually *analyze* the data, I returned to the questions that guide my study.

Interview transcripts were analyzed according to the topics addressed in my research questions: definitions of feminism; social problems of concern; social groups of concern; opinions on the significance of race/anti-racism in feminism; beliefs about intersectionality and if/ how it is practiced. A simple color-coding technique was used indicate where and what was said about these topics in the transcripts. For instance, “definition of feminism” was assigned to one color; “talking about race” assigned to another color. After color coding all of the transcripts, I organized the material into five tables, one for each topic. Rows were labeled according to participant pseudonyms and columns were labeled by substantive topic. For example, all 23 definitions of feminism were copy and pasted into one table, opinions on intersectionality into another, understanding of race and privilege into another, and so on and so forth. So that I could accurately represent participants, large chunks of the transcripts were copy and pasted into the tables, providing context for analysis. The longest table, for instance, is “Race and Privilege” and is almost 30 pages in a landscape layout.

I then identified patterns in participant responses and kept track of their frequency. For instance, when attempting to determine what social issues self-identified feminists cared about, I read through the “Social Problems” table and made a list of everything discussed. I then used a tally system to keep track of how many participants discussed a particular social problem. This
method of analysis was also used for identifying what social groups feminists were concerned with and how they defined feminism.

This was an appropriate method of analysis for these three topics because the responses provided were, more or less, nominal. I needed a different approach for the remaining two topics that were more nuanced: beliefs about gender oppression and the significance of race, and opinions on intersectionality and its practice. For instance, while it was not feasible to keep tally of participants’ beliefs about the significance of race in feminism, it was feasible to identify which participants believed racism was a significant part of gender oppression, and which did not. Once I had done this, I then identified patterns in the way they explained their position and categorized participants according to those patterns. For instance, in Chapter 5 I discuss the different ways participants make sense of white privilege; as a tool, a resource, or something that needs to be “checked”. I took the same approach with their beliefs about intersectionality. I first determined who had heard of the idea and who had not. For those who possessed an understanding of intersectionality, I identified patterns in their description and in their explanation of how it impacts their feminist practice.

Focus Groups

The purpose of the focus group was to engage participants in conversation about the findings gathered from the interviews. In Chapters 4 and 5, the reader will become aware of how different variant participants’ beliefs are regarding feminism, race, and intersectionality. I was curious to see how they would respond to people with opposing ideas. I also saw the focus group as a form of praxis. According to Madriz (2000) focus groups are ideal methods for promoting social change and facilitating activist-oriented discussions. I hoped the conversation would lead
to a fruitful discussion regarding whiteness in feminism and how we, as a collective, can go about divesting from white supremacy in feminism.

The discussion took place several months after the interview data was collected. This allowed me sufficient time to transcribe the interviews, analyze the findings and design a discussion guide that would spark meaningful conversation. All 23 interviewees were invited to attend the focus group and were offered a $25 incentive for their time. The funds for incentives were provided by the Kercher Institute for Social Research at Western Michigan University. To decide on a mutually convenient time, I sent out a survey and asked participants to indicate what days and times of day were most convenient for them to meet for the discussion. I also asked them to let me know if there were any out-of-the-ordinary commitments they had so I could try and pick a time that would work best for everyone.

Of the 23 participants interviewed, 20 responded to the survey. Because 20 responded to the survey, I thought it might be necessary to schedule two focus groups. However, I knew based on existing research regarding focus group recruitment that researchers should expect attrition (Bloor et al. 2001). Moreover, I received four messages from people that although they would do their best to make it, their busy schedules made it unlikely. As such, I decided to set a single date and if the number of RSVP’s were low, I would schedule a second one. In total, 14 people RSVP’d for the first date. I expected 10 to attend. Although six to eight participants per focus group is the standard recommendation (Morgan 1988) this was not meant to be a traditional focus group and I thought it would be beneficial to include as many voices as possible, given how varied their ideas were.

Ultimately, however, there was only one person who sent in an RSVP but did not attend the focus group. On top of that, two people who did not RSVP attended. Because I used a
snowball sample, a number of participants knew each other outside of the study. I interviewed both a mother and daughter (separately) and a husband and wife (also separately) who were all friends with one another. The daughter responded to the RSVP, but her mother did not, and this was also the case with the husband and wife. All four showed up together. When I saw them all walk into the room where the focus group was to take place, I thought to myself: this must be the first time in focus group history where there are more attendants than there were RSVPs.

The focus group was held in the library at the race and ethnicity institute on campus. I chose this location because it is easy to find and offers plenty of space for free and accessible parking. The library itself is cozy with a large oval table in the center of a room encircled by books, artwork, and comfortable chairs. As participants filed in, they were asked to read through the informed consent (Appendix B) and create a nametag with their preferred pronouns and either a pseudonym or their real name. They were also instructed on how to complete the incentive paperwork.

To start, I told them a little bit about the purpose of the group and I also informed them of some conventional “ground rules” typically used in focus groups. I requested that they do their best to limit side-conversations and to let one voice speak at a time for transcribing purposes. I also asked them to respect preferred pronouns when they were referring to co-participants and explained that consensus is not the goal of a focus group discussion and we should think of dissent as healthy and welcomed. At the same time, however, I also let them know that if we disagree with one another we should do so respectfully without “getting personal” or insulting others. Finally, I explained that they were welcome to share the information discussed here with people outside of the focus group but if they choose to do so they should leave out all identifying information.
Similar to the interviewing process, I started off by asking questions that would help participants “settle in” (see Appendix G for full list of questions). I wanted this to be an engaging discussion and I wanted participants to feel some rapport among one another, so I tried to create prompts that were active and thought provoking. For instance, the first prompt was: If you could have a beverage with any feminist (self-identified or not) who would it be and what beverage would you share? This was designed to be an “ice breaker” question—something easy and “fun” to discuss in a “think, pair, share” format. “Think, pair, share” is a format used in teaching where individuals are asked to consider a question, discuss their answer with someone else, and then come together as a large group and review the various responses.

After “breaking the ice,” I asked participants to participate in an interactive “rating” activity. Each participant was provided with a stack of five cards and on each card was an individual number written on it ranging from one to five. I then read them a series of statements and asked them to hold up a card indicating if they strongly agree, agree, neither agree/disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement. Because I only planned for 14 participants, one person had to use their fingers to signify their rating. A power point slide containing the Likert-style scale was projected onto a screen to aid participants. The statements include, feminism has improved my individual circumstances, feminism has improved the lives of people I care about, feminism is headed in the right direction. Following each statement, I asked if anyone wanted to share the reasoning behind their rating and discussion unfolded from there. This activity was considered part of the ice breakers. I was more concerned with participants getting to know one another and becoming comfortable with the discussion setting than I was with their responses to these questions. Indeed, I could anticipate participants’ responses to these questions based on our
interview. I thought this was an important step in helping participants build rapport because it gave them the opportunity to speak about feminism in general terms.

I then moved into the substantive questions. These were designed to stimulate discussion about race and racism within feminism while sharing some of my findings with the participants. I had to think carefully about how to craft these prompts. For instance, while I wanted to make them aware of some of my findings, it was important to me that I not come off as the teacher of “How to Not Be a Racist 101.” I am not specially trained in how to lead an anti-racism workshop nor am I an expert on anti-racist activism. In fact, my participants challenged me to re-think some of my previously held beliefs in both of these areas. Thus, it did not feel appropriate to view this discussion as an opportunity to “call out” problematic ways of thinking about gender oppression. Additionally, I had to be cognizant of activating white fragility—something that will often shut down a conversation about race such that they are no longer productive (DiAngelo 2018, 2011).

Further, I knew it was important to think carefully about this portion because I was privy to who would be attending this discussion. When I began planning for the discussion, I envisioned myself throwing a finding out, relying on different-minded participants to challenge one another, and sitting back to observe a discussion unfold from there. But for some reason, most of the “race-aware” participants were not attending the focus group. The conversation was overwhelmingly made up of those who held simplistic ideas about race, whiteness, and gender oppression in feminism. I knew I could not rely on the more intersectionally-minded participants to do the work of engaging their fellow feminists in critical discussion about race because the majority of them were not going to be present. Consequently, I decided to integrate the survey
responses from Black women into the focus group and use them to reinforce my findings and stimulate discussion.

Substantive questions began with everyone receiving a handout which contained anonymized survey responses from Black women. Everyone’s handout included different responses, with the exception of a few that were repeated to accommodate the number of participants in attendance. Before I handed out the survey responses, I explained to participants the entire design of the study. I told them that I was studying whiteness in feminism and had used anonymous input from Black women to build the interview guide I used in our conversations. I then instructed them to read the responses in front of them, pair up, and discuss their reactions. After about five minutes of the “think, pair, share” style discussion, I brought us all back together and posed the following questions:

1. What were our reactions to these? Please read the response you are referring to because we all received different statements. Follow up: where do you think this reaction comes from?
2. How many of us have thought about these issues before or heard people express similar sentiments?
3. Some researchers say that if feminism is going to be inclusive of women of Color, we need to prioritize anti-racism. How do we feel about prioritizing anti-racism in feminism?

I then moved into the following questions. These contained generalized statements about my research findings.

1. I found some of us felt race and feminism are better kept separate while others felt they could not be separated. What do you all think about the diversity of opinions on this?
2. Some of us felt that white privilege could be used for good, but others thought you could not separate white privilege from racism. Is privilege necessarily bad?
3. There was disagreement on the idea of equality and equity in terms of what feminism should aspire to. Some of us thought that equality was not enough and some of us thought that recognizing difference—part of the
equity approach—was problematic. What are our thoughts on these different approaches?

These questions were not as effective because, again, there were many people who fell into one group and only a few who fell into the opposing group. Moreover, many people simply reiterated the ideas expressed in our one-on-one conversations. After these questions, the plan was to move into closing prompts. Regretfully, however, we did not have time for closing questions.

While the participants enjoyed the group conversation the high attendance did pose somewhat of a problem. If anticipating low attendance was my first mistake, not hiring a research assistant was my second. I was almost outnumbered by my participants. Everyone was eager to share their responses to the questions and I often had to interrupt people, insisting we move on. Even so, participants would suggest that, instead, we should remain on the subject and let everyone share their thoughts. At one point, Nicole said, “Well, I think this is important…” and continue on her response. Others would merely force a return to a subject they felt I ended too abruptly by redirecting the conversation (e.g., “going back to what you said earlier…”, “Like you were saying before…”).

After an hour and a half of talking, I explained that we did not have time to go through all of the questions I had planned for and that we needed to move on to the closing questions, but the participants requested we extend the discussion. Because so many of the participants were enjoying the discussion and in agreement that the conversation should continue, I consented but invited people to leave if they needed to. Our conversation lasted two hours and only one person left after the hour and a half had passed. Needless to say, this experience taught me that limiting

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5 I know this because I received several emails in the days following the discussion.
the number of participants per focus group is as much for data collection purposes as it is for ensuring the researcher can remain in control of the process.

The conversation was recorded, transcribed and analyzed in search of findings that did not emerge from the interview data. I hoped this discussion would alert me to how participants navigate whiteness in a group setting, how they respond to dissent, or new information on how intersectional feminism manifests in majority-White feminist spaces. However, the focus group served to triangulate interview data—no new data was acquired. Although there was not much dissent, even when there was, individuals maintained their existing perspective. They also reiterated information shared in the interview. For instance, in Chapter 5 I share a story Bob told me about a time one of their friends alerted them to their racist behavior. Bob shared this same story in the focus group (almost word-for-word) in response to some of the issues raised in the discussion of Black women’s survey responses. Bob was not the only person to do this. Indeed, it turned out to be the rule more than the exception.

I believe the repetition of stories, anecdotes, and opinions may be the result of something I overlooked regarding participants’ perception of the focus group. It has occurred to me that participants may have thought the purpose of the focus group was to “test” them on whether the ideas they shared with me about feminism in a one-on-one setting matched with those they shared in a group setting. While there is no way to know this for sure, I do see it as a possibility. Participants were nervous about the research process. As I explained above, some of them were nervous about providing technically correct definitions. They viewed me as an expert and were concerned with “getting things right.” This leads me to believe that some participants may also have been concerned with appearing consistent across the interviews and the focus groups. If I were to repeat the study, I would let participants of the focus group know that they should not
think of the conversation as a “test.” I would explain that peoples’ feminist beliefs are constantly evolving and changing in response to our environments and experiences and that they should not feel beholden or restrained by what they shared with me in the interview. I would also tell them that the interview data and focus group data would be analyzed separately, that I was not interested in corroborating one with the other.

Self-Reflection

The process of speaking to participants and analyzing the data was only one part of collecting and analyzing data. Following the interviews themselves (and throughout the extent of the study) I journaled and recorded voice memos about my experience and overall impressions of the research process. This is a necessary component of all feminist research because the researcher is conceptualized as a relevant variable. Not all of my interviews were seamless; they were often frustrating and challenged me in ways I did not expect. Journaling allowed me to debrief from my conversations and, more importantly, to make sense of how my own expectations, prejudgments, and beliefs were impacting my understanding of participants’ beliefs. It was during the journaling that I became aware that I was playing “spot the racist” with my participants.

Combined, my journaling from the interview process alone accounts for approximately 20 pages of single-spaced text on a word document. Journaling became less frequent during the data analysis portion but, even so, I wrote a little under 5 pages of single-spaced text. These journal entries are more similar to memos in that they more closely resemble notes than actual reflection pieces. They helped keep track of emergent patterns and the logic behind grouping some themes with others for data reduction. The process of journaling and recording my
thoughts—self-reflexivity—helped me remain cognizant of the ways in which I was impacting the data collection process.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I explained the research methods used in this study. This included a description of the methods of data collection and analysis, as well as a discussion of the methodologies that influence my approach to the research process. I also provided a brief discussion on how my social positions may have impacted the findings and subsequent analyses.

Specifically, I explained how the traditions of studying up and feminist methodology combined to inform the research design. I discussed how studying up encourages researchers to examine power at the source. The tradition asks researchers to turn the analytic lens away from those who are most negatively impacted by differential power relations and onto those who benefit from their oppression. From feminist methodologies I borrowed the concepts of standpoint theory, dialectical interviewing, strong objectivity, and self-reflection.

I also discussed the sequential, mixed-methods design of this study. I explained how I used online surveys and a convenience sample of Black women to establish their standpoint on white feminism. The results were analyzed using open-coding methods and transformed into interview questions. Interviews with White feminists were thus guided by Black women’s standpoint. I suggested that it is essential we depart from the perspective of Black women in order to avoid reinscribing whiteness as the dominant voice in research and feminism. I then described the interview process and how the transcripts were analyzed. Next, I discussed the purpose of the focus groups, including an examination of the issues I ran into during the discussion.
In what follows I discuss the results of the interviews and focus groups. Throughout the findings chapter, I integrate my analysis of the data and how it relates to extant literature. The limitations of this study will be fully examined in the final chapter.
CHAPTER IV

THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR FEMINISM

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the wide range of subjects and topics that combine to make up participants’ understanding of feminism and gender oppression. In doing so, I address the following research questions: How do self-identified feminists define feminism and what do they believe to be the most pressing issues? In discussing their definitions of feminism, I also address who is included in their vision of feminism and who is not and consider how their experiences have shaped their understanding of feminism. First, I provide an overview of the demographics of my sample.

Participant Demographics

Existing research indicates that White women (Harnois 2005; Kane 2000; Liss et al. 2000) and gay and lesbian people (Dahl Crossley 2017) are more inclined to self-identify as feminist than their of Color and straight counterparts. Research also indicates that younger feminists have adopted intersectional feminism (Dahl Crossley 2017; Archer Mann & Patterson 2016; Tong 2013). There is some debate, however, regarding whether young people in general are less likely than older people to take on a feminist identity (Dahl Crossley 2017; Schnittker et al. 2003; Rupp 2001; Ferree & Hess 1995; Whittier 1995). My sample both reflected and challenged these findings.

As was my hope, every feminist I interviewed identified as White or “Caucasian” (sic) and they ranged in age from 21 to 75. About 47% of my participants fall into the “under 30”
category, followed by 31% who were between the ages of 30 and 50 at the time of our interview, and 22% who were over 50 years of age. Despite findings from existing literature which indicate that younger people are more likely to align with feminist ideals while not identifying as feminists (YouGov 2013), I was still surprised to have recruited so many people over the age of thirty. This was primarily because this research took place in what might be referred to as a “college-town.” In addition to the large, public university there is a liberal arts college in town as well as a community college. For this reason, I was worried my sample would consist primarily of people in their twenties and thirties and, had it not been for Cleo, this might have been the case.

Cleo, who was forty-one at the time of our interview, connected me with her mother, Nina, who then shared my information with numerous people in her social circles. Nina belongs to a feminist book club, what she refers to as a “women’s support group,” and a very active community of Catholic social justice activists. As a result, about one-third of my sample also identifies as Catholic. Aune (2011) found only 11% of feminists identified with a major world religion and that the majority of feminists considered themselves either atheist, agnostic, or simply indicated “none” in terms of religious beliefs. Thus, it seems my connection with Cleo put me into contact with a somewhat underrepresented group of feminists. Cleo also put me in touch with the only cisgender man who agreed to sit down for an interview, Harold, a self-identified anti-racist who is known as “the rebel Deacon” at one of the Catholic churches in his city.

Similar to Harnois (2005) and Reger’s (2009) sample, all of the feminists I spoke with had already earned bachelor’s degree or, in some cases, were only a few semesters away from completing their degree. Eight more had gone on to earn graduate degrees in the areas of social
work, education, religious studies/ seminary, public health, music, communications, counseling psychology, and science education. Contrary to existing literature, the vast majority of my sample (60%) identified as straight. Twenty-one percent identified as bisexual. I also spoke with three self-identified feminists who listed “queer” as their sexual orientation, one who identified as lesbian and another described themselves as asexual. The third participant did not expand upon their identification with “queer” as a sexual orientation.

Similar to extant literature (Dahl Crossley 2017; Reger 2012; Harnois 2005; Liss et al. 2000) my sample was also overwhelmingly made up of women; more specifically, cisgender women, although the aforementioned studies do not specify gender identities. Harold (a cisgender man) and Bob (a gender fluid individual whose gender identity shifts between boy and demi-girl) were the only exceptions. Unfortunately, I was not able to find valid data on the distribution of gender identities among self-identified feminists. While there is data on how many “men” and “women” identify as feminists (see above), it is not clear whether these categories reflect a binary view on gender or if they consider the reality of gender diversity and fluidity. Related, when researchers have attempted to estimate the rates of gay/lesbian and transgender feminists, they use the overarching category of LGBTQ to categorize individuals—this combines transgender (a gender identity) individuals into a category with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (sexual orientations/ sexualities) individuals (Dahl Crossley 2017).

While individual feminists may identify as part of the “LGBTQ+ community” this category is not a useful measure for discerning differences in rates of gender identities and sexual orientations/ sexualities among self-identified feminists. In short, while there are similarities between my sample and existing literature—specifically in terms of race and
education—there are patterns within my sample that challenge expectations particularly in regard to religious identity and sexual orientation.

Coming to Feminism

Hurtado (1989) argues that White women are less likely to develop an awareness of gender oppression before we enter college because racism and classism act as insulators and protective devices for White girls. Whereas girls of Color are forced to develop the skills necessary for negotiating hostile systems, agencies, and authority figures early in life, White girls lack experience dealing with oppression. This is because teachers, adults, and social institutions in general, tend to be quite responsive to the needs and feelings of White girls and young women (Lorde 1984). Additionally, White children do not have as many early interactions with the public sphere. Children of Color may be expected to serve as translators for their relatives who do not speak English, they may be forced to cope with state interventions in their home lives, and as they enter into young adulthood they often play an important role in the family’s economic survival. Indeed, Black girls receive racist and sexist messages about who they are and what their place is at an early age (Stevenson 1998).

When White women leave the safety of our homes to participate in the professional sector we are surprised by the pushback we encounter from those in power. While some women respond by internalizing their anger, others respond by developing a political consciousness, what Martin & Sullivan (2010) refer to as a “click moment.” White women’s click moment typically occurs in college or upon entering the work force (Reger 2012; Harnois 2005). Related to this is Bonilla-Silva (2018) observation that poor White women and White lesbian women were far more likely to align with racial justice causes and support legislation for racial equity.
than their middle-/ upper-middle class and straight counterparts. Taken together, extant literature implies a relationship between privilege, support for equity, and politicization.

Nineteen participants describe coming to feminism in young adulthood. Thirteen connect their development of a feminist consciousness directly to attending college and explain a range of experience in college that led them to feminism. During Chelsea’s first year of college she was “mugged pretty violently” off-campus and then blamed for “being out alone at night as a girl” by her family. This motivated her to take a gender studies course where she “learned to see everything differently” (Chelsea). Carrie was also politicized in a gender studies class she took her freshman year. “It totally blew my mind to see the world in this new way,” she says, “and once I saw it I could never un-see it.” While Chelsea’s click moment resulted from a direct experience with violence which eventually led her to women’s studies, Carrie happened upon feminism by chance as a result of a course she was enrolled in. Of the 13 participants who associated their feminist consciousness with college, five felt a gender studies course helped to stimulate or solidify their identity as a feminist.

It is important to point out that while gender studies courses played an important role for some participants, their cultivating an awareness of the importance of feminism and the existence of gender oppression was not necessarily reliant on the formal study of feminism. Ellen developed her feminist consciousness as a result of her father trying to keep her from attending college; Chelsea explores gender courses following victimization; Kelsey and Madeline explain the role of meeting “different” people when they arrived at college and then pursuing gender courses as a result. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that college provides individuals with the material to learn about feminism which then leads them to identify as feminists. Although some
eventually pursue feminist studies, participants were brought to those courses via a wide range of influences.

Ellen also came to feminism as a result of an experience surrounding her attending college. Ellen, a cisgender woman who came into her political consciousness during the 1970s and 1980s explained that she found feminism when her father tried to prevent her from attending higher education:

I really wanted to go to Purdue and be a vet and [my dad] wouldn’t complete the financial aid form that was required because he was convinced I wouldn’t study. […] He said, “you’re not going to study, I’m not going to do that for you.” My brother, who was a year behind me, he did it for him […] but my dad didn’t think I should go to college. He felt that I should be graduating from high school and marrying a nice Polish Catholic boy, having a family. That’s when I was kind of like, woah that’s not who I am.

Although Ellen experienced her click moment prior to college—which she does eventually attend but without financial aid or her father’s support—it occurred as a result of her decision to challenge her father’s patriarchal ideas. His response comes as a shock to Ellen because her whiteness protected her from the burden of needing to navigate systemic inequality up until this point.

The feminists I spoke with describe growing up in homes that were overwhelmingly supportive and encouraging, places where they were surrounded by “strong women.” Even Ellen (whose father attempted to keep her from college) described her home as a matriarchy. Anne, a psychologist in her early 40s, explains how she was “born a feminist” because she “always knew that girls were equal to boys.” She explained

I just knew I was strong. I remember my dad telling me, you can do anything you want to do in life and just always empowering my self-esteem and providing opportunities, so I think my feminism just came from that.
Nicole also felt she had always been a feminist, but she attributes this to her being raised in a matriarchal family. “It just didn’t occur to me that women weren’t in charge until I was like, in the outside world,” she explained. Nicole continued, “Then, as I got older, I was like, why is it like this [laughs]?” referring to the sexism she experienced in “the outside world.” Both Anne and Nicole felt they had always been feminists because they equate a feminist consciousness with their belief that women can be strong and in charge. Importantly, however, Anne explains that she did not come to recognize gender oppression until her first feminist theory course in college.

Seven participants who found feminism in college point to being around “people who were different” as an important factor that led them to feminism. It was common for participants to grow up in segregated spaces, where the people they lived near and went to school with shared their race, class, and religious identities. Emma described growing up in a town and going to a high school that was “super, super White.” Lilly also referred to her hometown as “a very white area.” College was the first time most of my participants had spent a meaningful amount of time away from their hometowns. While none of these participants described identifying as a feminist as a result of a specific friendship or acquaintance, their exposure to “different people” (Ivy) or “new people” (Kelsey) seemed to prime them to eventually take on a feminist identity. This was quite salient in Kelsey’s description of how she came to feminism:

Kelsey: I live in a town full of White people who have only ever heard the perspective of other White people, you know? Like, that’s invalid! […] It took me coming to college and unlearning a lot of behaviors to understand that I was a feminist because back then I was under the impression that feminism was a bad thing and it was because I was uneducated and naïve and so it really took me getting a quality education in a new place to realize these things.

Was it a class you took or something?
Kelsey: Well, first of all I just got really involved with a lot of new people. I just met new people who were unlike the people that were…. [trails off]. They were just thinking in different ways and looking at the world in different ways and helping me realize where I was mistaken and then eventually in my second year of college I did take a gender and society course and *that* is when I *reaaaaally* opened my eyes to feminism and gender matters in general.

For Kelsey, becoming “involved with…new people” (people she later identified as Black and “part of the LGBTQ community”) enabled her to see how her perspective on the world was limited by her privilege. She did not become aware of the ways in which she also experiences discrimination until her gender studies class where her identity as a feminist became solidified.

Madeline had a similar experience. She explained how she was taught to believe that “men and women are equal,” and “you don’t need a man, you can do whatever you like.” It was not until she left her “small town that was very White and very religious” that she “met a lot of people that kind of awakened me a little bit.” She described what it was like to realize the extent of her family’s economic privilege when she moved in with her first roommate in college:

I mean, my grandparents set aside money for me to go to college. I had this immense privilege of not having student debt and I look around and my roommate has $13 to her name and literally could not afford food for the entire semester. I just remember going ‘Woah, wait—people exist like this? It was at this time, Madeline said, she “just started paying more attention and getting more into politics.”

Bob had a similar experience after getting to know a lot of queer people of Color during their first year of college. For these participants, it was other peoples’ experiences with, and perspectives on, inequality that prompted their politicization.

This finding, while still related, offers a partial challenge to Hurtado’s assertion. As stated above, Hurtado (1989) argues that college or the workforce mark the first time White women will have encountered resistance in their lives as a result of their race and class privilege. The resultant shock at experiencing systemic inequality pushes some to feminism, and indeed,
this was true for some of the feminists I spoke with. Importantly, however, participants like Kelsey, Lilly, Madeline, Bob, Danielle, and Sadie, began connecting the “personal to the political” not because of their own encounter with oppression but because their growing awareness of others’.

Social movement scholars theorize the role of sympathy in the politicization process (Klandermans 1984). When individuals feel sympathy for a group’s grievance, they may be motivated to mobilize on behalf of that group (Klandermans & Oegema 1987). However, if a social movement is not able to mobilize a concerned individual into a politicized group member, the energy of the sympathetic individual will erode over time, making them less likely to become activists (Oegema & Klandermans 1994). For Kelsey, erosion did not occur because after learning about oppression and eventually coming to understand her own location in the matrix of domination, she forms a feminist consciousness that integrates an awareness for race, class, and gender oppression:

Coming into college and learning about the things Black people are still facing and then being so involved with the Black Lives Matter movement and seeing how many White people push back against it with the “All Lives Matter” thing… It just shows me how much they don’t understand. So yeah, you have to look at things systematically and institutionally. If you’re just looking at it like, ‘Oh well I struggle too,’ you’re only look at this little tiny picture.

Kelsey’s comment about people who hone in on their own struggles gets at one of the key issues Black feminists take with white feminists—the overwhelming focus on gender oppression as the only form of oppression that should be addressed by feminists. And for participants like Madeline, erosion certainly did occur.

Recall, Madeline became politicized in college as a result of her exposure to people who faced hardships she did not know existed. Her relationship with her roommate who struggled to
pay for food was one particularly salient moment in her politicization but so were the friendships she developed with young women of Color. She explained:

If you haven’t witnessed that yourself or met anyone who had that experience then it’s something you don’t know about, so that was really eye opening—the racial issues. Then you know, you get into looking at all the statistics of it and you learn that there are experiences that my friends were having and that I was having that are being backed up by the statistics.

Yet, once Madeline came to understand her own location in the matrix of domination, the issues that originally led her to feminism began to lose their importance. For instance, although Madeline spoke often about how eye-opening the experiences of her less privileged friends were, ultimately, she dismissed their ideas about how to improve society in ways that would alleviate some of their struggle.

Madeline mentions how her “Black friend Amaya” believes in the importance of reparations but Madeline does not think reparations are a good idea. She explained, “I’m not saying all Black people would spend the money on drugs but there is a drug problem in impoverished communities and most of those communities are Black.” She is also unsupportive of programs for student loan forgiveness despite the fact that her roommate’s inability to pay for food was in-part due to the student loan payments she had to keep up with. When I asked Madeline what kinds of social changes we should focus on instead, she suggested we redirect the money to actions that would “systematically improve things for women.”

This provides insight on not only how Madeline makes sense of the primacy of gender in individuals’ experience with oppression; it also indicates that Madeline does not understand the multiplicity of oppression as Black women experience it. Madeline does not understand how addressing the legacy of slavery in the United States would also mean addressing the oppression of Black women. In Madeline’s case, politicization through sympathy for others helped her gain
a sense of her own oppressed status but over time her concern for their condition waned as she became more focused on her own struggle. While Kelsey became more convinced of the importance of combatting oppression at all of its intersections, Madeline’s concern eroded as she failed to connect her struggles with those of her friends.

**Defining Feminism**

Feminism has long been regarded as a heterogenous movement with a plethora of definitions, political agendas, and understandings about the nature of oppression (Schnittker et al. 2003). This makes it difficult to determine what exactly feminists believe and what makes someone a feminist (Tong 2013). Indeed, participants’ ideas about the definition of feminism varied. Some viewed feminism as a political project aimed at large-scale social change but this was certainly not the case all around. While each participant was able to explain what feminism means to them and to articulate its purpose, no two definitions were exactly the same.

Participants understood feminism as everything from an outlook on life to a political project. Four participants’ answers are particularly illustrative in terms of how wide ranging the responses were. Rita’s definition is heavily influenced by liberal feminist thought and, while brief, hers was by far the most common: “it’s the belief that men and women should be treated equally.” Joanna’s definition is more about personal empowerment: “for me, it’s that I’m not willing to be put under the thumb of males.” Joanna seems to subscribe to a radical-feminist perspective that emphasizes male domination. She then goes on to add, “I would just explain [feminism] as, the way I feel from within.” Different still is Cleo’s perspective which suggests that feminism involves direct action with the purpose of affecting structural change: “It’s just that term for smashing the patriarchy and getting rid of these structures that oppress everyone, not just women.” Contrast this with Danielle’s view that feminism is “the active seeking of, first
and foremost, knowledge about people’s lives other than my own; specifically, people who come from less privileged groups.”

Some participants took issue with the fact that there are so many definitions of feminism. Both Nicole and Rita held very different ideas about what feminism means but both felt strongly that there is only one definition of feminism. Rita, for instance, believes that one is a feminist so long as they agree that women and men are equal:

I guess I just don’t like the type of feminism that—well, I shouldn’t say “the type of feminism” because there is only one type of feminism! It just goes back to that definition, men and women are equal. I just think the group of feminists who want to define what feminists should do…. The idea that you have to be these certain things to be a feminist… [long pause] Creating such a narrow definition of what feminism is, I think, is problematic. But that’s not even feminism! That’s some extreme offshoot of what the feminist movement is and is supposed to be so, I guess…. I don’t know. There are feminists who I think need to put their own spin on what feminism should be but that’s problematic because they are alienating people who would be for the cause.

Rita’s definition reflects Henry (2014) and Reger’s (2009) observations that feminism has become more apolitical in recent years. Rita took issue with feminists who “think you can’t be a feminist if you’re not outspoken about certain political movements.” She not only believed that one need not be political to be a feminist, she expressed that if other feminists expect her to be part of a larger political movement as part of identifying with feminism, they are not doing feminism correctly.

Rita’s perspective on the definition of feminism is interesting because it is simultaneously broad and rigid. She is essentially advocating for the “anything goes” feminism bell hooks (1984) takes issue with, while maintaining such an inflexible perspective there is not a lot of room for other feminists to challenge her. Rita’s definition allows her to dismiss anyone who disagrees with her un-feminist because there is one definition of feminism and it is hers. Hooks
(1984) sees this as an exclusionary practice that allows White, liberal feminists to maintain the dominance of their perspective. By rejecting definitions that are not in line with the liberal perspective, feminism closes itself off from new theories and ideas about the nature of oppression and how to combat it.

Nicole provided a similar perspective on how to define feminism in that she suggests there is a specific definition that must be followed, but she opposes Rita’s suggestion that feminism is essentially anything you want so long as you believe in equality. She refers to Rita’s version of feminism as “choose your own adventure.” Nicole explained,

I think especially today, feminism has become very commodified. It’s seen as this thing you are, not something that you do. I would explain feminism as not just an idea but as a set of political principles. It’s a political movement that involves you taking very specific actions. It’s not something you are, it’s something you have to practice every day. I would compare it with being anti-racist. It’s not enough to not be racist, you know, or not be sexist, you have to actively fight and do things every day that help other people also not be racist and sexist and to me, feminism is very much tied to race and class. You can’t separate them, so if you’re a feminist you’re also an anti-racist. […] There are set things about feminism. It’s not just a choose your own adventure. There are specific principles you have to follow that are non-negotiable.

Nicole echoed Rita’s concern that feminism lacks an overarching definition but rejected the idea that feminism is merely about the belief in women’s equality. Nicole saw feminism as necessitating direct action and maintaining an awareness of intersecting oppressions.

Joanna’s feminism is not as rigidly defined as Rita’s but still maintains a focus on the individual. Recall the quote from above when Joanna said her feminism is about her “not willing to be put under the thumb of males.” Ellen provided yet another version of feminism rooted in the individual: “It’s just the process of finding your voice and being willing to speak your truth and ask for what you want and if you’re not getting it, try and find a way to get it.” Ellen sees feminism as necessitating direct action if one encounters a problem that might preclude them
from accomplishing a goal or fulfilling their individual needs. Direct action is only necessary on a case-by-case basis (“if you’re not getting it, try and find a way to get it”)—there is no indication that she sees feminism as a large-scale movement toward change.

Regardless of variations in definitions, all participants believed feminism to have something to do with addressing unfairness in society. Although fairness was central to these participants’ beliefs on feminism, they were divided on what fairness looks like in practice. Is it equity? Or equality? Participants for whom equality was important (9) stated, in various ways, that feminism is the belief that “there should be equal opportunity between men and women” (Chelsea). Others discussed “equality of the sexes” (Madeline), or simply “equal status in society, pay, recognition…just being equal to men” (Lilly). Anne opened up her definition by stating that feminism is about “equal rights for humans.”

Equality-feminists viewed feminism as a project of personal empowerment. Indeed, they were very much informed by the liberal feminist perspective on gender oppression. They were unsupportive of feminists they believed to be “destructive,” “loud,” and “militant,” or feminists who sought to challenge the status quo. As Ellen Explains:

Ellen: This just goes back to my whole belief system [sighs]. If you piss somebody off, they’re not going to do anything to help you. If you find a way to make them want to help you, build relationships instead of tearing things down…. I’m just all about construction, not destruction.

*When you talk about feminism tearing things down, what are you thinking? Can you talk about that a little more?*

Ellen: I mean, I guess that we need reform without destroying. There is a difference. I mean look at Margaret Thatcher, she got to be prime minister! And Angela Merkle, people who have wielded power in ways that we haven’t seen before, especially here in the United States and they’re not tearing down institutions and they’re not being…vocal about it…. bitchy. I mean they might be bitchy to their spouse and their staff but even that, I mean… yeah. I just think there are other ways to go about this stuff that would be just as effective as the militant stuff if not more effective. I just think tearing everything down would
be…. Why rebuild the wheel, you know? The wheel works good! We just need to oil it or smooth the edges so it’s a more of a smoother ride; get it balanced. There are ways of doing that without pissing people off.

Ellen’s belief that seeing women such as Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkle in positions of power is a sign of positive change is much in line with the individualistic, liberal feminist approach. Her insistence that “the wheel works good!” indicates that she is not interested in dismantling the systems responsible for keeping the wheel spinning—capitalism, meritocracy, individualism. By insisting that women can combat oppression by “building relationships” and not pissing people off, Ellen dismisses the significance of the advantage she is granted because of her middle-class white femininity.

Joanna also took issue with approaches to feminism that were not “respectful” or that were “too blatant” about challenging the status quo. She explained that she was particularly pleased with the Women’s March on Washington because it was not too “in your face.” Joanna described the march as, “just this thing where we came together as a group and just said, ‘this is us. This is who we are. Look at us.” Later in the interview I asked her if there were any types of feminism, she thought were not helpful or problematic and she responded:

Feminism that is pushy or aggressive… I don’t like that at all. It doesn’t help in any situation, feminism or not. I think aggression is just… it’s just too much in your face and the person on the other side is not---well, all they’re thinking about is fight or flight and they’re not thinking about the real reason why you’re there. I’ve never thought that being pushy is the better way for anything.

Joanna believed that women’s liberation can be achieved by working with the existing system, so long as we conform to their expectations of what women should be: quiet, polite, submissive, non-aggressive. She does not consider how women who are not middle-class, cisgender, straight, and White are not able to conform to normative ideas about how women should act.
To assume that all women will be able to improve their condition by being polite is to disregard the privileges of middle-class white femininity. Feminists of Color argue that White women are able to move through society with the expectation that power structures will bend to our will because the white patriarchal structure is more responsive to White women than they are to Black women, Latina women, and poor women (Richie 2012; Collins 1990; Hurtado 1989). Moreover, Ellen’s suggestion that all we need to do is fine tune the “wheel” is a proposition that requires poor women and women of Color to work toward fixing a system that ensures their continued oppression (hooks 1984).

Apolitical equality-feminists were by no means the only feminists I spoke with, however. Similar to Dahl Crossley (2017) I found a number of informants—ten, to be exact—who felt strongly about equity and the importance of structural change. Participants for whom equity was important discussed the value in recognizing differences in power across groups of people: “it’s about ensuring people get what they need for their individual needs” (Ally). In addition to acknowledging differences in power, participants like Joe and Emma made it clear that they were interested in equity by explicitly stating that feminism should be about equity, not equality. Leigh spoke directly about providing marginalized groups “preferential treatment,” a perspective she acquired from her Catholic upbringing. In general, all equity-feminists believed that feminism should be responsive to difference and sensitive of privilege. Moreover, there was a clear focus on dismantling oppressive systems rather than working within them.

Bob believed feminism should revolutionize society such that power structures no longer exist. When they said they believed feminism to be about “making sure all genders receive equal and equitable treatment,” I asked them what they meant by “equitable.” Bob explained:
It’s basically the idea that not every solution is perfect for every person. So, when we say equal, I think people use it as a way to get away with not recognizing their own privilege. Have you ever seen that comic of the baseball field? I think about that picture a lot. It’s a good way to illustrate it because just because this solution works for one group, it doesn’t mean you can say, “okay, we’ve implemented this solution, why are you still upset?” Different solutions work for different people so you can’t just give everyone a box to stand on because some people are shorter than other people. But if you take away the fence and the barriers entirely, everyone is equitable entirely. Everybody has what they need regardless of what their extraneous circumstances are and regardless of where they started.

Bob is getting at the fundamental difference between the equal outcomes and equal opportunity approach. Equality (also known as the equal opportunity approach) refers to the vision of society where fairness is achieved by treating everyone the same. Equity (or the equal outcomes approach), on the other hand, is rooted in the assumption that difference is meaningful. This perspective on social justice posits that because people are different in meaningful ways—ways that differentially position us in systems of power—equal is not always fair.

Those who favored equity rather than equality argued that liberation is not possible given the current hierarchical landscape of society. Sadie, for instance, said our best chance at achieving fairness for everyone may require us to “burn it down.” She said,

I honestly think we should just burn it down. […] Reforming an entire system is genuinely, nearly impossible. I don’t know what it looks like to burn it down and build it back up again, but I just know that… I just can’t see how we can fix this.

Nicole, Ally, Emma, Cleo, and Harold also felt that liberation for women would be impossible without the destruction of other systems, including capitalism, white supremacy, and the criminal justice system.

While every participant was able to provide a definition of feminism, those who spoke about equity and equality were, at times, difficult to understand because they often contradicted their definitions with the examples they provided. Some participants (4) used the word “equality” while discussing the importance of recognizing difference. Both Carrie and Nina spoke about
“equal rights for women” but also about white privilege, the danger of capitalism and the importance of ensuring individual basic needs are met. In cases such as theirs, it would seem that these participants merely lack the technical jargon to differentiate equality from equity. Other participants, however, simply held contradicting ideas.

For example, Stella spoke about equality frequently when describing feminism yet her opinions on feminism and women’s oppression were heavily influenced by a radical feminist perspective which rejects visions of “equality”. Recall, radicals believe women and men are too different to be treated equally. Stella seems to possess a similar belief in that she views gender-based oppression as a product of reproductive roles, patriarchal rule, and cisgender gender norms regarding the division of labor. “To separate childbearing from dependence on men,” she argues, “would change everything!” Understanding that we do not yet have the technology to accomplish this, however, and that “not everyone can just move to Finland,” she explains that universal paid maternity leave is a good place to start. One would think then that with this awareness of sex/gender differences, Stella would identify with equity-based feminism and yet, she rejects the idea that women should be treated different from men:

Do you consider yourself a feminist and what does that mean to you?

S: Well, I’ve never actually thought about that. I mean, yes, I am but... I guess to me it means that women and men should have equal weight, you know? […] Well, equal is kind of a funny word though because there are differences that, for things to be equal, you would have to work around like we’re the ones who bear the children so that’s always going to put us at a disadvantage. It’s always going to put us a step behind so, you know, feminism isn’t like women asking for more or special treatment, we just want to level the playing field. It’s men and women having equal opportunities. People say it’s preferential treatment and it’s not. We just want to level the playing field.

So, to you, feminism is just trying to level the playing field for...
S: It’s men and women having equal opportunities. Equal…. How do I put it? Just opportunities. And, you know… the same…. just that their needs and wants are given equal weight.

Stella struggles to reconcile her belief that women should not receive special treatment with her awareness of the ways in which the biology of childbearing disproportionately affects cisgender women. Her belief that equal opportunity and universal paid maternity leave can solve the problem also contradicts the reality of those biological differences. According to the most recent research, maternity leave (even paid maternity leave) is actually the biggest contributor to the wage gap (Boushey 2016; Goldin 2014). Moreover, providing both men and women with equal opportunity to take advantage of parental leave is not a likely remedy because the majority of the time men elect not to take advantage of paternity leave for fear of how it will affect their careers (Kleven et al. 2018).

Madeline was another participant who was difficult to understand in terms of her ideas on inequality, feminism and its purpose. Madeline defined feminism as “equality of the sexes.” On the other hand, she seemed to push back against the idea that merely providing women with the opportunity to succeed is enough: “They say ‘here, take your seat at the table!’ but it’s like, well there’s no chair at the table for me so I guess I’ll have to go get the coffee.” Later in the interview, I asked her to clarify what she meant earlier when she used the term “equality”. She explained:

M: The need to be on a more equal playing field. Just ground level equality in terms of everything. Every gender, every race, every anything. Every person. The same thing.

So, are you saying everyone should start out with the same things in life?

M: Umm. No, I think that… I mean, that’s just unrealistic and it’s sort of communist-y. So, it’s not that everyone should have the same things but the realization that someone might not have something, and they need to be given the opportunity to get it and should be allowed the same voice.
My conversation with Madeline was one of the more difficult interviews to follow because of how often she contradicted herself, not just here but throughout the interview. While she identified with intersectionality, she also felt that the anti-racist movement and the feminist movement “should be treated like separate things.” She said, “racism is an issue but it’s not a feminist issue.” With Madeline, and other participants, there seemed to be a disconnect between what they believed feminism should be about and what feminism should do to create a more fair and just society.

But why does all of this matter? What is the significance of determining whether self-identified feminists are in favor of equality or equity in their mission to create a fairer and more just society? Simply put, one’s preference for equity or equality is a good indication of how they understand privilege and power, both within feminism and between women. It provides meaningful insight on their goals and, hence, their priorities as feminists. Where white feminism seeks to erase the significance of racial and class identities, intersectionality seeks to draw our attention to them. Recall, the goal of “equal rights for women” is central to the liberal feminist framework discussed in Chapter 2, where differences between people are downplayed on the grounds that “all humans are created equal.” This perspective is rooted in individualism and “freedom of choice” and, consequently, seeks to carve out space for women in a society where merit determines one’s worth. There is no critique of the historical and material differences that make some women more competitive than others (Moreton-Robinson 2000). The “equal rights for women” approach only advances the interests of certain groups of women; specifically, “privileged women who, because of their privilege, think and act like men” (Tong 2013: 37).

As bell hooks (1984) points out, when privileged White women call for “equality with men” they are not referring to Black men, or even poor White men; they are referring to equality
with the men of their race and their class. By identifying “equality with men” as the goal, self-
identified feminists are indicating that it is their hope to share a status with White men and
become part of the ruling class. Intersectional feminism cannot manifest when this is the goal of
feminists. There are two reasons for this. First, since privileged White women are most able to
compete with privileged White men in a racist and classist system, White women are the only
ones who have anything to gain from achieving “equality with men.” Second, because this
approach would require White women’s buy-in to oppressive systems (e.g., individualism and
meritocracy), their gains would only come at the expense of Black women and other multiply
marginalized groups. As such, one cannot realistically be committed to both intersectionality and
equal opportunity. More importantly though, we have no reason to believe change and evolution
are implausible.

Self-identified feminists who spoke about the need for equity-based feminism also
explained how equity was not always their goal. Bob, Ally, and Emma all started off as equality-
feminists who eventually came to modify their beliefs, typically after building relationships with
people whose experiences with gender-based oppression were different from their own. Bob
came to see feminism as a movement for equity when they began making friends with people
who are queer, particularly with queer people of Color. It was then they came to understand that
“not every solution is perfect for every person.” Similarly, Ally began questioning her ideas
about feminism when she made the conscious decision to expand her friend groups to include
people other than cisgender White women. She points out, however, that this is not an easy or
comfortable process:

You really have to be willing to recognize your own ignorance if you’re going to
grow. And so, I think about when I was younger, about the problematic things I
would say or do and I’m like ‘oh my gosh I was the worst feminist! Look at my
Tumblr!” But I think you have to recognize those things and then it’s not so much about “spot the bad feminist” [...] it’s just recognizing your bias and then figuring out what to do about it. My start to feminism was mainly like, “women shouldn’t have to wear bras!” I started with the very stereotypical “women’s rights” things and then I started to mature, get older, have different friend groups and that makes you pay attention to how your presence effects those around you and your privilege. [...] It then becomes my responsibility to start learning about what feminism is, what it really is: what does it involve and what can I do? [...] A lot of it was just trial and error and figuring out where my own flaws are. I try to be self-reflective. It’s a lot of googling and researching. [...] Of course, you know, people think “Yeah feminism is great! Women should be able to wear whatever they want and not have kids!” But it goes so much deeper than that. It’s like, trans women of Color have the highest rate of murder—those are real issues—like, who the [expletive] cares if you’re not wearing a bra?? Address the things that are killing people.

For Ally, the evolution of her feminist beliefs from equality to equity required work on her part and a willingness to be vulnerable. She refers to a process of “trial and error” where she learned to understand how her own beliefs were shaped by her experience as a middle-upper class cisgender White woman. Although she does not say as much, this evolution also required Ally to recognize that her problems (the expectation to have children, social pressures surrounding women’s appearance) are not indicative of all women’s problems, nor are they the most pressing. This was something Emma, Bob, Sadie, Nicole, and Lexi also spoke about in their interviews.

Ultimately, the self-identified feminists I spoke with maintain differing beliefs on feminism. For bell hooks (1984), feminists’ inability to reach a consensus on what feminism is and what we believe threatens our ability to effectively organize. Without group consensus “we lack a sound foundation on which to construct theory or engage in overall meaningful praxis” (1984: 17). Social movement theorists agree, arguing that solidarity and cohesion are necessary elements for a successful movement (Rupp 2011, 1999; Taylor & Whittier 1992; Rupp & Taylor 1987). Importantly, however, these elements cannot exist in the absence of a collective identity,
or “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor & Whittier 1992). Hooks sees this lack of consensus as an indication of a “growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement,” (p. 17) and, indeed, some participants did seem to think of feminism as more of an outlook on life—an “anything goes” type of feminism. On the other hand, participants did not seem disinterested in the issues they believed were facing women. Conversely, every self-identified feminist I spoke with felt very strongly about the immediacy of the various social issues facing women.

Social Issues: What Matters?

To gain insight on the priorities of these self-identified feminists, I asked participants to respond to the following question: “What social issues or problems are important to you and to your feminism practice?” In response, they listed a wide range of subjects. Some of the topics they discussed were concerns shared by other participants, whereas others were only brought up by one person (e.g., gun access restriction, animal rights, mental health care, abolishing electoral college). Only one participant, Lexi, was concerned with women’s oppression on a global scale. She listed the unfair treatment of low wage workers in the global south as one of her main concerns. In general, however, most participants indicated that they were mainly concerned with the issues that impacted their lives. Cleo, for instance, listed universal healthcare as the most pressing social issue and explained that this was so important to her because she recently came to losing her healthcare. In response to the same question, Rita explained, “I’m intending to go into a sphere that is still very male dominated and there is still sexism involved.” She then continued on to talk about problems women face in the workplace. Joanna was similar. When I asked her why she was passionate about workplace discrimination she said, “these are the things that are
most going to affect me most.” Indeed, workplace discrimination was, by far, the most frequently discussed topic.

Women in the Workplace

Of the 23 feminists I interviewed, 13 identified gender discrimination in the workplace as an important social problem facing women. Specifically, participants listed the wage gap, workplace sexual harassment, lack of support for working mothers, and being overlooked for promotions as issues of concern. For Stella—a straight, cisgender mother of two—the fact that “women cannot pursue a career while having a family” is “one of the biggest problems facing women.” Thus, paid maternity leave and work-place childcare are some of her top priorities.

Rita, a straight, cisgender soon-to-be law student, explained how she has been warned about the “underlying sexism at law firms” by attorneys who are women. “Personally, it really freaks me out,” she said. To get a better idea of what she was referring to, I asked her to go into more detail on the matter:

Something I hear a lot is that if a man isn’t in the office everyone assumes he’s in court but if a woman isn’t in the office they assume she’s with her child. So that makes me nervous, being driven out of work because, oh gosh I want a second kid, you know?

Rita explained this is common knowledge among women lawyers.

Lilly also expressed concern about how “women are treated” in the workforce. Lilly is a graduate student in biology, who also identified as a straight, cisgender woman. I asked her to explain what issues, specifically, she is concerned with in terms of how women are treated:

The subtle kind. The things that are going to go unnoticed. […] Like when I started my job at the lab. I was good friends with a girl who worked in a nearby lab and she got her boyfriend to talk to his boss, who was this PhD student, and they helped get me a job there. At that time in my life I was just going through this phase where I was transitioning between relationships and I was sleeping with
a lot of people. It was just one of those times in my life and, you know what, that’s fine. So, he gets me this job and then tells the PhD student, “oh this girl Lilly is starting and she’s a huge slut.” Of course I didn’t know about this until months into it and I was talking to [my boss] and I was like, “you know, you’re never going to start a new job and have people know your sex history because it’s not a topic of conversation for a man but that’s a topic of conversation for a woman.” […] Just the fact that it would even come up… That is how you know there’s a difference in how women are treated in the workplace.

Lilly viewed double standards regarding men’s and women’s sex lives as proof in general of how women are disadvantaged in their professions (“that is how you know there’s a difference…”).

Similarly, Rita and Stella saw their concerns regarding work and motherhood as common problems facing all working women.

The workplace problems Lilly, Stella, and Rita are concerned with are legitimate concerns; they compromise their ability to pursue careers in their respective fields while having a family or enjoying an active sex life. Importantly, however, these are problems that overwhelmingly apply to straight, cisgender women and are not necessarily reflective of the problems all women must deal with in the workplace. According to the 2015 United States Transgender Survey’s (USTS) Executive Report, 77% of transgender people report going out of their way to avoid mistreatment in the workplace by hiding their gender expression, delaying their transition, or quitting their job altogether. Another 30% report being fired, denied promotion, or refused a job, and 15% report being physically attacked, assaulted, or verbally harassed while at work because of their gender identity or expression. While these numbers alone are impactful, it should be noted that the USTS expects these numbers are much higher than the report suggests. Additionally, 2019 saw a significant rise in hate crimes against transgender people (Human Rights Campaign). Unfortunately, however, initiatives to combat gender discrimination in the workplace focus exclusively on the concerns discussed above—the
concerns of White, cisgender, straight women (Johnson & Otto 2019). Meanwhile, the threats to trans women’s and lesbian women’s livelihoods are still up for debate.

As of January 2020, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals are awaiting the Supreme Court to issue their decision on three cases that would determine if the Civil Rights Act of 1964 covers discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (ACLU). Currently, only 21 states that have explicit laws to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (ACLU). In other words, in more than half of the United States (including the state of Michigan) lesbian and transgender women can lose their job and be evicted from their homes as a result of how they “do” womanhood. None of the participants I spoke with (both those who listed workplace discrimination as a problem as those who did not) discussed the specific threats and barriers facing working trans and lesbian women.

While participants did not seem to understand the work-place issues faced by those oppressed at the intersections of gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation, the gender wage gap between White women and women of Color was of concern. Nicole, for instance, believed “you can’t be a feminist and only care about the number White women are making.” Danielle also expressed concern about “white feminists” who “think you can solve the wage gap by only looking at gender,” adding, “what happens to everybody else once ours gets fixed?” Hannah referenced specific statistics about the race-gender wage gap:

I mean, it’s a big thing. You obviously know this, you’re a researcher. White women are paid in the 80-cent range, Black women in the 70-cent, and Latina women in the 50s? So that’s like crazy to me and that should not be happening.

Sadie suggested prioritizing women of Color in this area:

Like, yes, at some point I want to be making what White men are making but I’m first going to use the massive amount of privilege I have to make sure that first Latinx and Black women make what we are making and then, of course, when
they end up making what White men are making we will too. It’s just a matter of both pushing forward and pulling up.

Indeed, the wage gap seemed to be an accessible entry point for some participants to make sense of how individuals can be multiply oppressed.

Women’s Health

After workplace discrimination, issues surrounding women’s health (including reproductive rights) was the most frequently discussed. More specifically, 12 participants spoke about some issue related to healthcare or health in response to the question about issues of concern. Many of these participants were concerned with the degradation of abortion rights and women’s access to birth control. Some identified specific concerns regarding healthcare; Ellen spoke about the importance of making sure women are able to get mammograms and Nina was concerned about how drug companies do not test medications to see how they will affect women. Most participants, however, were concerned with the more general issue of access to healthcare.

Cleo identified lack of access to healthcare as one of the biggest problems facing women in the United States, calling for socialized medicine and single-payer care plans. Chelsea echoed these sentiments:

The Medicare for all, the insurance thing. That’s huge for me. Like my mom is a poor woman. She doesn’t have health insurance and she’s got high blood pressure and obesity. She needs to be going to the doctor and getting checked up and getting medication. She has cataracts and can’t drive at night, but she has to because she works at a bar. So, the healthcare thing is really important to me.

Leigh was also concerned about the relationship between health and poverty and how “people are going bankrupt trying to take care of themselves.” In Leigh’s opinion, affordable healthcare is the responsibility of the entire community. Although these participants’ perspectives on
heathcare demonstrate an awareness of the significance of class, their ideas about women and medical care were bound to binary thinking regarding sex and gender.

Importantly, the 12 participants who spoke about the importance of women’s health were overwhelmingly focused on healthcare as it pertains to cisgender women, with only two exceptions (Emma and Sadie). Madeline, for instance, listed women’s healthcare and sexual education as topics of great importance to her. When I asked her to explain what she meant by women’s healthcare, she discussed abortion, birth control, and maternity leave—subjects that presume cisgender identities:

M: Sexual education is a big one for me.

*In terms of what?*

M: A focus on how a woman’s body works because I think that we do not put enough attention on that. My health teacher in my high school from this small town didn’t talk about the clitoris because he said it wasn’t important. […] I have friends who are like my age and they have never had an orgasm. […] Like what do you mean you don’t know there’s more than one hole down there? If you don’t know this about your own body how do you expect a man to know this? That’s why I make my artwork. I make what I call vagina art. […] So yeah, it’s basically just sketches of women’s anatomy.

Madeline’s views on sexual education assumes a cisgender and heterosexual woman. Heteronormativity and cissexism are closely tied to one another because hegemonic ideas regarding masculinity and femininity reflect the idea that men and women complement one another sexually (Butler 1990). Where men are dominant, women are submissive; while women are nurturing, men are protective. Madeline’s impression that women should understand their sexual organs so that they can have fulfilling sexual relations with men underscores the idea that “cisgender” is an invisible adjective in her understanding of issues related to women’s health. It is also telling that she refers to her “vagina art” as “sketches of women’s anatomy.”
Participants who were concerned for women’s reproductive rights spoke about abortion, “the freedom of choice,” and birth control. These were the only topics that came up in discussions on reproductive rights. As Angela Davis (1983) points out, these issues reflect the concerns of White middle-class cisgender women—women who are seen as ideal mothers and, consequently encouraged to have children. Conversely, reproductive rights for Black cisgender women generally involve restrictions on their ability to give birth and mother their children. During slavery, Black women’s bodies were viewed as a means of production that would increase slave holdings (Roberts 1997). After slavery, eugenics policies resulted in the forced sterilization of Black women, as well as Latina women and Indigenous women (Davis 1983). Even when Black women are able to bear children, however, omnipresent threat of state intervention threatens their right to mother and raise their children (Richie 2012). Roberts (2012), for instance, illustrates how the prison and foster care system work together to punish Black mothers who do not conform to the socially and culturally constructed image of motherhood under the guise that they are protecting Black children.

None of this is to say that White feminists should not be concerned about women’s “freedom of choice” or the ever-quickening roll back of protective legislation surrounding Roe v. Wade. As with the issue of workplace discrimination, these are real issues. It is important, however, for White feminists to keep their race and class privilege in mind when campaigning for issues surrounding reproductive health. For example, White feminists’ demand for access to safe and immediate procedures surrounding reproductive healthcare in the 1970s compromised the efforts of Chicana feminists in California. Chicana women were pushing for legislation that would require a 72-hour grace period between women receiving information about reproductive health procedures and the procedure itself. The institution of a grace period between the request
and the procedure was central to Chicana feminist’s movement to end forced sterilization because doctors were pressuring women to sign a sterilization consent form while they were in labor, under duress and without the presence of a translator.

The 72-hour grace period Chicana women demanded (and White feminists rejected) would ensure that Spanish-speaking women had time to translate the document they were being asked to sign and make an informed decision before having any reproductive health procedure conducted of them. Abortion rights advocates refused Chicana feminist’s request to consider how their demand for instantaneous abortions posed a threat to Mexican American women’s quest to institute a grace period. If White feminists would have worked in solidarity with Chicana feminists, they could have passed legislation to decriminalize abortion *while* legislating for protections against women of Color who were being forcibly sterilized. County hospitals in California continued to forcibly sterilize Spanish-speaking women for almost two years before a grace period was mandated.

In short, the central focus within the feminist movement on abortion and birth control overlooks the significance of racism and classism in cultural ideas surrounding motherhood, bodily autonomy, and reproduction. As Black feminists point out, conversations surrounding reproductive rights must include not only the right not to reproduce, but the right to reproduce (Davis 1983; Roberts 2012).

Racism

Although race is the central focus of Chapter V, it is worth pointing out here that, similar to Dahl Crossley (2017), racism (as a social problem) was a concern for some of the feminists I spoke with. Seven participants spoke about racism as a problem in society, though not all of
them discussed racism in response to the question on the social problems they were most concerned with. When discussing racism as a social problem, participants discussed the prison system, police brutality, impeaching President Trump, immigration, violence against women, and the school to prison pipeline.

The majority of these participants did not connect racism or anti-racism to feminism, specifically. Interestingly, Ally, Sadie, and Chelsea were the only participants who identified racism as a social problem and spoke about how racism impacts women and its relationship to feminism. For these participants, the rate of violence against trans women of Color were of great concern. None of the people who discussed concern for trans women fall within the older age bracket. When I asked Ally what social problems she is most concerned with she replied,

> Some people think feminism is about ‘oh women should be able to wear what they want and not have kids if they want but it goes so much deeper than that. [...] The fact that trans women of Color have the highest rate of murder, those are the issues and, like who the [expletive] cares if you’re not wearing a bra. There are things actually killing people!

Ally differentiates herself from feminists she feels are not focused on the most pressing issues, issues commonly associated with white feminism. Finally, while other participants focused on the effects of racism, Emma was concerned with the source of racism. When explaining racism as a social problem, Emma was mainly focused on whiteness as the source of racism. Her approach to anti-racism focused on de-centering whiteness and deconstructing the normalization of white superiority and white culture. Again, I will discuss this more in the following chapter.

Including, Excluding: Who Matters?

The self-identified feminists I spoke with varied in terms of their beliefs on who could be considered a feminist and who feminist movements should serve. A number of questions were asked to make sense of participants’ beliefs about what makes someone a feminist and what
groups of people feminist movements were trying to help, including: Are there any types of feminism you disagree with or think are problematic? What does feminism mean to you? Do you think race plays an important role in feminism? If you could improve society, what would you do and what outcomes would you hope for? What social issues are important to you and your feminist practice?

While some participants held very rigid ideas about who qualified as a feminist, others merely differentiated themselves from people they disagreed with. Consider the difference in Nicole and Ellen’s response to the question, “are there any types of feminism you disagree with or find problematic?” Nicole explained: “Well, there are set things about feminism. It’s not just a choose your own adventure. There are things that are non-negotiable. […] You can’t be a feminist and not be anti-racist […] you can’t be pro-life.” Nicole does not believe pro-life individuals or feminists who do not align with intersectional feminism can be considered feminists. This is a quite different stance from the one Ellen takes when responding to the same question: “Feminism that is strident. Militant. […] My feminism is all about construction and not destruction and that’s just part of how I identify, for better or worse.” Whereas Nicole explained feminism as a “set of principles” that are “non-negotiable” Ellen merely disassociates from feminists she does not align with; she does not disqualify them from feminism.

When explaining who should be included and involved in feminist activism, participants’ responses were concentrated around the question of whether men could be included and to what extent trans women were included. The third most common response that was discussed the issue of whether feminism should include anti-racism but, again, this is the focus of Chapter V. As such, I will explore participants ideas on men and trans women here and return to the issue of anti-racism in the following chapter.
Feminism and Men

The question of whether or not men could be considered feminists (and, thus, a part of feminism) was the most common topic of discussion among participants. They spoke about how feminism could be beneficial to men and shared stories about trying to convince the men in their lives that feminism was helpful for men, as well as women. When having these conversations, they focused on the ways in which the patriarchy is harmful to both men and women. As Ivy explained, “our patriarchal system does a lot to women, obviously, but I think it also does a lot to stifle men.” Participants’ beliefs about why men should be included in feminism mainly deal with concerns about how social and cultural norms regarding masculinity and emotions are detrimental to men’s mental health. Bob explains:

I’ll be 100% with you. To be a feminist you have to want equal rights for men too because men experience toxic masculinity and men would benefit from having feminism because it would make it okay for them to experience emotions. You’d have a lot less men committing suicide because they could actually cry and it wouldn’t be seen as ‘gay’ [motions air quotes] or whatever.

Danielle expressed similar feelings:

We need support for teenage boys in terms of allowing them to be vulnerable and to learn how to process their emotions and deal with them. My husband, when he was a teenager, was routinely encouraged by his family to essentially be Elsa—“conceal don’t feel.” […] Even now after being in therapy he still can’t express emotions outside of his close group of friends. And, by no means is this the source of all problems but it definitely is a major contributor to violence, racism, sexism, because anger becomes the only acceptable emotion they can have. […] I think feminism has fallen into a disaster where feminism wants to exclude men. Although Danielle, along with several other participants, felt that feminism overwhelmingly excludes men, none of the individuals in my sample felt that men should be excluded from feminism. to be true among any feminists in my sample.
Of the 23 participants interviewed, 22 spoke about the importance of inviting men to feminism. All but one participant (Emma) described “man hating” as detrimental to the feminist movement. Harold, the only male-identified participant, was the only person who did not discuss the importance of including men. While this topic did come up in my conversation with Harold, he did not offer his opinion on it; he only referred to it when explaining why he did not originally identify as a feminist at the same time his wife, Leigh, did. It was not until he understood that most feminists are not interested in separating from men that he began to see himself as a feminist. When this topic came up in my conversation with Emma, she simply stated “I’m really not concerned about women hating men because it doesn’t have the same effect on men as it does on women and men who hate women.” Still, Emma was not willing to say that men could not be included in feminism.

The only participant who came close to saying men cannot be feminists was Madeline. Interestingly, Madeline opened the interview by stating that feminism is not about “putting men down so women can be up here” [gestures with her hands]. She also explained how one of the biggest influences on her feminism is the speech Emma Watson gave to the United Nations as their Goodwill Ambassador when she introduced her campaign “He For She.” According to the organization’s website, its purpose is “to achieve equality by encouraging both genders to partake as agents of change and take action against negative stereotypes and behaviors.” When I asked her what she thought men’s role should be in feminism she provided a rhetorical scenario in which she is in a work meeting about pay equality with a male coworker:

I would appreciate him sitting there and saying, ‘Hey Madison has something to say about this because she’s a woman’ and pushing over the mic to me or turning attention to the right person. I don’t know though. There’s just something meh about some guy preaching about feminism.
Although Madeline was apprehensive about the idea of men “preaching about feminism” I would not say she is against men participating in feminism. Again, she is very much influenced by Watson’s “He For She” campaign and explained it as “something I really relate to in terms of what feminism means to me.”

Most of these participants spoke about “men” as a universal category. Emma, Nicole, Sadie, and Ally were the only participants to integrate a race analysis into their beliefs about men in feminism. These individuals were concerned with how being oppressed by race puts some men at risk in a white supremacist society. The other 18 participants did not consider how race intersects with masculinity in ways that differentially situate men in a patriarchal society. For instance, when Danielle, Nicole, and Madeline explained their belief that women, as well as men, are harmed by the “boys will be boys” idea, they did not consider how the “boys will be boys” narrative is something that is really only available to White boys and men. As Demby (2018) points out, Black boys are denied their childhood and not free to engage in the same roughhousing and “tom foolery” White boys are often encouraged to experience. Moreover, White boys and men maintain the presumption of innocence well beyond boyhood, and even into their adulthood. Brett Kavanaugh—a Supreme Court justice who was appointed in 2018 by President Donald Trump—was repeatedly referred to as a boy by congressmen during his confirmation hearings when he was accused of sexually assaulting Christine Blasey Ford. Conversely, Black boys experience an “aging up.” Goff et al. (2014) found that Black boys are seen as older and less innocent than their White counterparts and that the characteristics of childhood are less likely to be associated with Black boys relative to White boys.

Feminism and Transgender Individuals

123
The question of whether or not transgender people in general, but trans women specifically, should be included in feminism was also a common subject for discussion among participants. Of the 23 participants, 13 discussed trans-inclusivity specifically or provided a definition of feminism that allowed for the possibility of trans-inclusion. People who did not explicitly mention transgender people but allowed for their possible inclusion explained feminism as a movement “for all the genders” (Lexi). This was also the case with Hannah who stated, “I just think all genders should be equal, I guess. Definitely recognizing that there’s more than two genders.” Although Lexi and Hannah do not specifically discuss trans people here, by framing feminism as something for “all the genders” they make it clear that they reject a binary view on gender that could discount the legitimacy of trans identities.

Participants who explicitly discussed transgender inclusion were mainly concerned with acknowledging that transgender individuals are a part of feminism and should not be made to feel unwelcome. These discussions revolved around the issue of TERFs. When I asked Danielle if there were any types of feminism she thought were problematic, she replied, “One is the TERF—I would not even call that feminism. […] They are the people who say trans women aren’t women.” TERF, an acronym for trans exclusionary radical feminist/feminism, is defined by Serano (2018) as someone who is “strongly opposed to transgender identities, experiences, and rights.” The foundations of TERF derive from the theoretical perspectives of radical feminists (see Chapter 2), specifically, lesbian separatists who believe that the only way to liberate women is to remove women from the domain of men (Frye 1983). These feminists view male genitalia as inherently violent and, consequently, they identify anyone who is assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB) as a threat (Earles 2019). Thus, this vein of radical feminism views the gender binary as a biological axiom rather than a social/cultural construction. As Danielle
explained, TERFs fundamentally reject trans women’s claim to womanhood and view them as part of the patriarchal power structure and, thus, a threat to cisgender women (Whittier 1995).

There were also participants who purposefully included trans women in their feminism without excluding TERFs from feminism. Chelsea did this by stating that she disagreed with TERFs explaining, “I think feminism should include all women’s problems and address all women’s problems and advocate for change against those problems and that’s my opinion on that.” Unlike Danielle, Chelsea did not state that TERFs are not feminists. She merely differentiates herself from them and argues that feminists should care about the problems trans women face. Likewise, in response to the question about problematic types of feminism, Ivy stated:

Not super on board with the whole TERF thing. I think that the experience of womanhood that transwomen feel is different than those of us who were like, assigned and stayed that but it’s still an experience of womanhood and I don’t really see why we would exclude them from our community.

While participants like Ivy and Danielle were sure to include trans women in their definitions of feminism, this does not necessarily mean they were concerned with the experience of trans women beyond making sure they were acknowledged as part of feminist movement.

Participants who included trans women in their feminism are categorically distinct from those who sought to center transgender women in feminism (Brighter 2018). Ally, Emma, and Sadie went beyond including trans women in their definition of feminism, explaining that they believed it was important to focus on the particular set of issues trans women encounter.

Consider the difference between Danielle and Emma. Both bemoaned the historical relationship between trans women and orthodox feminism, identifying TERFs as problematic feminists. For Danielle, however, her concern for trans women did not extend beyond acknowledging their
membership. When discussing problems in society, changes she would like to see made, and her priorities within feminism, Danielle mentioned everything from racial diversity and inclusion training to ending fascism and mass shootings, and eliminating the two-party political system, just to name a few.

Absent from her long list of social problems and necessary social change is something that would address the inequity experienced by women who challenge the gender binary. Emma, on the other hand, centered the problems of trans people when discussing her top priorities as a feminist.

Emma: Body autonomy is a huge one for me—women having the ability to do what they want with their bodies and when I say women, I’m thinking of trans women. [...] I just feel like trans folks and nonbinary folks are the ones who have the least autonomy over their bodies and so that really concerns me. Even in cases of sexual assault and abortion, these are things that impact them as well.

*So how do you think we should approach those feminists you mentioned earlier, the TERFS?*

Emma: It’s a matter of leading by example sometimes, I think. [...] I always try to think about the impacts of my feminism. How does the way I do things or say things impact trans folks and nonbinary folks?

“Leading by example” through thoughtful self-reflection is not the only way Emma worked to improve the lives of trans-identified people, although she does not speak of it here. Emma is a librarian and belongs to a group I will refer to as Hidden Stories. Hidden Stories works with members of the community to ensure that the materials offered at the library reflect the voices of those the library is meant to serve. Emma’s most recent focus has been on bringing in books and other forms of media that uplift the voices of trans-identified people and people of Color, in an effort to normalize their experiences. Emma goes beyond including trans people in her definition of feminism by considering how trans individuals are affected by the social problems she
priority. Moreover, she described purposely engaging in activism that can have a positive impact on trans-identified people in the community.

The difference between inclusion and centering is also salient when comparing Ivy and Sadie’s discussion of trans people and feminism. When discussing how important women’s healthcare and the “freedom of choice” is to her, Sadie explained that it was important for feminists to make sure trans women were included in discussions on women’s healthcare and that the focus was on bodily autonomy generally. She explained, “it’s not just about the reproductive issues.” She also thought it was important to make sure our medical providers are educated on trans women’s particular needs. When I asked Sadie how she integrated trans rights into her feminist practice she explained how she is purposeful about seeking out trans women’s perspectives on the subject at hand. She specifically prioritized the voices of Black trans women, speaking about how Laverne Cox and Janet Mock’s writing and podcasts influenced her feminism. This approach is very different from Ivy’s.

While Ivy does not understand why anyone would want to exclude transgender people from feminism, she does not take trans individuals into account when discussing social problems or her vision of a more fair and just society. When I asked Ivy what kinds of social issues or topics she feels passionate about she responded, “I mean, maybe it’s a little selfish but I mostly confront the issues that come up in my own life and take on the things that I relate to.” Ivy explained that the issues most relevant to her are the harmful nature of traditional gender roles, their impact on individual people and their relationships. Ivy was specifically troubled by the idea that women should be nurturing, caring, and constantly available for, in her words, “male consumption.” Her vision for a more just and fair society involves creating a world where “we
wouldn’t need feminism […] because we are collectively trying to get to a place where it’s not about your assigned role in society anymore.”

Because Ivy does not consider the needs of trans people beyond ensuring that they are included in feminism, she does not see how centering transgender people would still allow her to “take on the things” she relates to. Transgender people undoubtedly face some of the most violent consequences for defying conventional ideas about gender. It is ironic that Ivy does not see how she can improve her own condition by thinking more purposefully about the oppression of trans-identified people. Thus, while both groups (those who include and those who center) are certainly affirming of trans people within feminism, the extent to which they integrate trans rights into their feminism is very different.

There was only one participant who questioned whether feminism should include trans women. Although Stella did not explicitly say she believed trans women could not be a part of feminist movement, she was very clear that she felt trans women’s problems should not receive attention in feminist movements. This topic came up when Stella was explaining a conflict that took place on a local Facebook group devoted to feminist organizing:

Stella: Have you heard of this? Of what happened on there?

*Well I did hear about it but why don’t you explain what you know because I’m actually not a member of the group, so I didn’t see what happened.*

Stella: So there were a lot of transgender people who said that they were made to feel like they weren’t welcome because of the pussy hats and how we were talking about women’s issues and these big issues—maternity leave, women not having access to tampons, just things that aren’t their issues. And, um, I am not a… oh god, what’s it called? A TERF? [laughs] Some negative thing. I am not against transgender rights, that is ridiculous! [long pause] But it is a different movement. They don’t grow up experiencing what you and I have experienced. They don’t end up pregnant, we do have pussies, we do bleed. I mean these are real, feminist issues and to not have those issues addressed, it’s… I just…. Those are the real issues and theirs are different! They have very different issues; they almost just need their own movement. (Original emphasis)
Because Stella cannot conceive of someone identifying as a woman outside the rigid boundaries of the sex-gender binary, she does not consider the problems facing trans women as “women’s issues.” All of the problems Stella identified as “the real issues” are problems that assume a female reproductive system. She so strongly adhered to the idea that the “big issues… the real issues” are one’s that require female anatomy, she risks excluding cisgender women who have had hysterectomies. Because Stella only sees feminism as a movement meant to address the concerns of menstruating, childbearing women, she believes trans women simply need their own movement.

It is important to point out that while Stella may be a TERF according to the perspectives of the more trans inclusive participants I have discussed here, she would not qualify as a TERF according to trans women activists. According to Brighter (2018) and Serano (2018) it is crucial we do not broadly apply the term TERF to any feminist who “expresses transphobia and/or attempts to exclude trans women from the category of women” (Serano 2018). This risks alienating potential cisgender allies (Brighter 2018; Serano 2018). According to Serano and Brighter, Stella does not qualify as a TERF because she does not deny the existence of trans women, nor does she appear to believe that trans women are without their own problems. Moreover, she does not believe trans women are men posing as women to gain access to women’s bodies, as radical lesbian separatists did (Millet 1970). By confronting feminists like Stella as if they are “trans-unaware,” rather than trans exclusionary, we leave open the possibility that they can be educated about the plight of trans women and come to see the immediacy of the threats facing them and how cisgender women’s oppression is bound to that of trans women’s.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter I addressed the research questions pertaining to White feminists’ beliefs about feminism. I also provided demographic and background information on the sample. In terms of their beliefs, I described what they believe feminism means, their perception of its purpose, who it involves, and what social problems it should address. I also explored the various experiences that led White feminists to form a feminist consciousness. Through the various responses, it is clear that the self-identified feminists who participated in this project hold very different beliefs and opinions about feminism. They even hold different ideas on what a fair a just society looks like.

The demographics of my sample somewhat reflect what we would expect given existing research on self-identified feminists. The sampling procedures of this study relied on the findings from existing research regarding the racial dynamic of those who self-identify as feminists. By seeking out participants who “self-identified as feminist” I hoped to target Whites specifically, and indeed all 23 participants who agreed to be interviewed are White. The sample was also highly educated with all participants reporting they had attended college and, in some cases, graduate school. Because research is divided on whether younger people are more or less likely to identify as feminists, it seems fitting that my sample consisted of an almost even split between participants who are under the age of 30 (47%) and those 30 and over.

The process by which participants came to feminism was largely similar to my expectations, given existing research (Harnois 2005; Roth 2004; Hurtado 1989). As expected, the self-identified feminists I spoke with describe believing men and women were equal when they were children. Some even described their childhoods as “matriarchal” and surrounded by “powerful women.” They explain having very limited understandings of oppression and
inequality before attending college and described “click moments” when their “eyes were opened” as a result of some encounter or experience.

There were a few distinctions in how they came to feminism, however. While some came to feminism by way of their own experience with oppression (a result of their exposure to discrimination in the workplace or in college), others seemed to happen upon feminism after taking a gender studies course. Others still came to eventually identify with feminism through their exposure to “new people” who encountered problems they did not know existed. For some of these participants, however, their sympathy for the problems of those responsible for their politicization did not carry through to their development of a feminist consciousness. When issues like racism, classism, or discrimination against LBTQ people brought participants to feminism, their priorities as feminists did not necessarily retain a deep concern for these issues.

Once politicized, participants’ beliefs on feminism began to manifest. They came to form ideas about gender oppression and to integrate those ideas into their feminist consciousness. Everyone I spoke with held strong beliefs and were convicted in their definitions of feminism. Participants’ beliefs on feminism are closely tied to their ideas on what fairness looks like. Participants who felt feminism was about individual choice and empowerment largely favored reform and rejected feminisms that sought to deconstruct systems of power such as meritocracy and individualism. For these self-identified feminists, equality was the goal—equality within systems of oppression. Participants who viewed feminism as a political movement spoke of equity were sensitive of difference, and more inclined to speak about dismantling existing social structures in favor of non-hierarchal ones.

The social problems my sample was concerned with were largely reflective of their position in the matrix of domination which places them in a simultaneously privileged and
oppressed location. Cisgender women’s healthcare issues and workplace discrimination revolving around straight, White cis women’s problems were the primary focus of most participants. Even when participants discussed racism, most did not relate it to feminism. In line with the literature, these feminists are concerned about whether or not men feel included in feminism. Scholarship and theorizing on contemporary feminism maintain that feminists today are more concerned with trans rights and the ways in which men are impacted by patriarchy (Aune & Holyeoak 2018; Tong 2013). While men and masculinity were of primary concern to my participants, the same is not true for trans-identified people. Participants expressed their belief that trans women should be included in feminism, but this concern did not translate over into their perspective on social problems and social change.

This chapter thus offers partial answers to some of the questions and input provided by the survey respondents:

*Why do you only speak out when the rights of stereotypical feminists are impacted?*

*Why is [feminism] only centered on the plight of cisgender white women?*

*You can’t embrace something only when it benefits you.*

*Think outside the box, it’s not all about you.*

*When you think about your feminism is it in alignment with your privilege?*

*I don’t relate to you because I don’t get the rights you fight for. They are not inclusive of minority women... Where do we fit in here?*

*If we as feminists are going to win, we can’t throw around the idea of inclusivity without inclusive actions.*

For the survey respondents who wonder why White feminists practice a feminism that is “in alignment with [their] privilege” or a feminism that “only benefits [them]” I can report that, for those in my sample who reflect these concerns, it is likely a product of the individualistic approach to feminism I observed. If one views feminism as a quest for personal empowerment
and individual liberty, it follows that they can justify working to change the problems they will encounter in life. When feminism is a struggle to remove personal barriers, cis White people simply do not ask themselves “where do [they] fit in here?” when thinking about women of Color and other multiply marginalized groups. The mere hope or desire for inclusivity is believed to be enough. Indeed, if feminism does not necessitate a collective struggle to dismantle the systems that oppress all people, there is no reason for cis White women to “think outside of the box.”
CHAPTER V

SELF-IDENTIFIED FEMINISTS TALK RACE AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine participants’ beliefs about race and intersectionality. Specifically, I discuss data relevant to the following research questions: how do White feminists understand race within feminism? Do they view it as important? Are they cognizant of whiteness and privilege? Do they know what intersectional feminism is, and if so, do they identify with it? I start by discussing their beliefs about white privilege. I then move on to discuss whiteness and race more broadly. Next, I consider participants’ understanding of intersectionality.

Before moving on, it is important to point out that participants’ ideas about whiteness and the significance of race within feminism cannot be organized into discrete categories. Too many participants contradicted themselves too often for parsimony to be a realistic expectation. As a matter of fact, I characterize 14 out of 23 participants as self-contradicting. For instance, informants like Nicole, Leigh, Danielle and Lexi used words like “systemic” and “institutional” to describe racism while only discussing interpersonal remedies for white supremacy. Similarly, Cleo and Ivy wanted women of Color to feel included in feminism but viewed racism as subsidiary to, or resultant from, other forms of oppression such as sexism and poverty. Rita and Ellen, on the other hand, claimed race did not matter but also spoke about Black women facing “more problems” than White women.

However, contrary to what we would expect given existing research (Bonilla-Silva 2018; DiAngelo 2018; Daniels 2015), I did not find participants were reluctant to talk about race. With
the exception of a few, participants spoke at length about race and racism, often unprompted by me. There was only one participant (Rita) who became visibly frustrated and agitated by my questions. Still, while these participants were not at all uncomfortable talking about race, because of how difficult it was to follow their ideas, I did not get the sense that they had spent time contemplating the subject of race as it pertains to feminism.

Making Sense of Whiteness

The majority of self-identified feminists could not conceive of the significance of whiteness outside of the concept of white privilege. While whiteness is often regarded as an unmarked category (Tehranian 2000; Frankenberg 1993) or an invisible identity (Dyer 1997), white privilege was quite salient for participants. In this section, however, I demonstrate how an awareness of white privilege is not necessarily indicative of white racial awareness, nor is it indicative of divestment from racialized narratives and racist stereotypes.

White Privilege

White privilege was absolutely central to participants’ understanding of the significance of their own race. Twenty-two participants spoke about privilege and of these individuals, 17 could only make sense of whiteness through privilege. This in and of itself is a significant finding. Contrary to what we would expect given existing research (Bonilla-Silva 2018; DiAngelo 2018, 2011; Feagin & Elias 2013; Unzueta & Lowery 2008; Feagin 2006; Tehranian 2000), the vast majority of individuals I spoke with did not deny that they were necessarily advantaged by virtue of the color of their skin. Joanna was the only participant who did not discuss privilege and, as I will show later on, she also rejected the efficacy of intersectional feminism.
When participants discussed white privilege, they referred to it as something that gave them access to resources (material and immaterial) that gave them an advantage not available to people of Color, as a tool they could use to improve race relations within feminism, or as something that should be “checked” and subsequently rejected. As I explained above, there is overlap between these groups, even among those who believe privilege should be rejected and those who see it as a resource. This overlap is due to the fact that participants who rejected their privilege were not obtuse to the fact that even if they rejected it, they continued to reap the benefits from it. I discuss how participants see privilege as a resource first.

Sixteen participants conceived of white privilege as something that provided them with access to both material and immaterial advantages in society. In terms of material advantages, participants discussed how whiteness provided White people with resources people of Color could not as readily or easily access:

Emma: Very often it seems, because of white privilege, White feminists are more able to get access to the media attention. […] And just in terms of myself, you know, as a privileged White kid who went to a private school that was predominantly White and who had a home and food to eat and all of that kind of thing… [trails off]. I don’t think I recognized those things at the time.

Emma attributed her access to a private school education to White privilege. Others did as well, including Hannah who explained that it was her all-White education that led her to gain an awareness of the significance of race in determining what school you could attend.

Kelsey, Cleo, and Madeline also made sense of their white privilege by conceiving of it as a resource. For these participants, white privilege was closely related to family support:

Kelsey: I have a lot of white privilege. Like, my parents pay for my college. That’s a luxury that not many people have, sometimes regardless of if you’re White or Black but especially if you’re White. In general, White people have more financial support from their family than Black people.
Cleo: You know, I’m White. Sure, I’m a woman and that’s a mark down […] but you know, I’ve been unemployed since March and I’m not worried about paying for my daughter’s daycare because my brother has said that he will help. So yeah, I have a ton of privilege. So, when people try to say, “oh I can’t believe you said you’re privileged—you’re a single mom!” And it’s like, “yeah, I’m a White single mom.”

Madeline: I mean, my white privilege… [trails off]. Like my grandparents set aside money for me to go to college. I had this immense privilege of not having student debt […].

What these participants are referring to, in sociological terms, is the racial wealth gap—the concept used to describe the effects systemic racism has on families’ ability to accumulate wealth (Baradaran 2017). White families are far more likely than Black families to have access to the “financial cushion” which allows them to save large sums of money for their children’s education (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro 2013). While it is not clear whether these participants are explicitly aware of the systemic nature of their family’s ability to help finance college, they seem to possess a general awareness of the relationship between white privilege and financial security.

When discussing privilege in terms of access to resources, participants also discussed more immaterial (less tangible) advantages their whiteness afforded them. Rita and Bob, for instance, spoke about their white privilege in terms of it providing them with the presumption of innocence in interactions with authority. Rita, someone with dual citizenship in Canada and the United States, recalled how her experience at the immigration office was so different from that of the “Hispanic people.” She explained, “they just treated me so much better. They searched their bags, made them get waved down with that wand and they just let me walk right through.” Bob explained how white privilege “got me off the hook” when they were pulled over by police officers: “It’s like yeah, you know, with police officers, literally all my interactions have been
good and I don’t think I’ve ever… Yeah, I’ve never gotten a ticket so, it’s like, there’s something wrong here.”

Ivy’s discussion of privilege as an immaterial resource is interesting in that she simultaneously acknowledged her privilege while also reinforcing racist stereotypes:

I know I get a pass on a lot of things because not only am I a White woman, I’m a very young-looking and very inoffensive looking. I don’t look intimidating or seem intimidating at all and I know for a fact that makes my life easier in a lot of ways. I mean, it also makes it harder because nobody takes me seriously, but in terms of race specifically, I think having that aura of kind of an inability to do any harm often allows me to get away with things that I wouldn’t otherwise.

Ivy refers to herself as “inoffensive looking” and as “having that aura of […] an inability to do harm” within the context of discussing white privilege. Although I did not ask her to explicate on what she meant by “inoffensive looking,” the implication is that to be anything other than White is to look offensive and dangerous. She also seems to suggest that she is both advantaged and disadvantaged as a result of her whiteness when she suggests that her whiteness “makes it harder” for her.

Critical whiteness scholars demonstrate how Whites often describe people of Color, particularly dark-skinned people of Color, as inherently dangerous, unruly, and deviant (DiAngelo & Sensoy 2014). Whiteness and predominantly White spaces on the other hand, are seen as safe, sheltered, and inherently good. Indeed, Nicole, Chelsea, Madeline, Kelsey, and Lexi describe their majority-White hometowns as “sheltered” and “naïve” because they “don’t have a lot of minorities.” Importantly, this perspective fails to consider how safe and sheltered their
hometowns are for people who are not White (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Kelly Fyffe-Marshall, Lolade Siyonbola⁶).

Of the 16 who referred to privilege as a resource, ten saw it as something that allowed them to be more active feminists. They used white privilege to explain their perception that Black women are not as involved in social justice work, specifically, feminist activism. This is where the significance of their race in feminism overlaps with the significance of women of Colors’ race in feminism. As Nina stated, “I think, unfortunately, our white privilege makes it a lot easier for us to speak up and to take a political stance.” Similarly, Emma explained: “There’s a certain way that White women have more privilege to be able to, I feel like, maybe to demand change.” Madeline reiterates this:

*Have you ever heard people say feminism is a movement for White women?*

Madeline: [nods] Mhm.

*Why do you think that is?*

Madeline: Because we have more of a voice.

*Like, we use our voice more?*

Madeline: Yeah. Because we can.

These participants see whiteness as something that allows White women to develop a political consciousness and then act on that consciousness. They do not believe this is something Black women can also do or have done.

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⁶ In 2018, Siyonbola was a graduate student at Harvard who fell asleep in the graduate student common room while working on a paper for her African Studies degree. In response, a White student called the police on her. In a similar series of events, Kelly Fyffe-Marshall (the granddaughter of Bob Marley) was leaving an Airbnb rental in an affluent California neighborhood in 2019 when someone called the police as her and her friends were loading luggage into their car. Both of these women were able to walk away from these encounters to police without any bodily harm. While I am not attempting to equate the murder of Trayvon Martin with what happened to Fyffe-Marshall and Siyonbola, it is worth pointing out that very little stands in the way of these Black women’s encounters with police taking a more deadly turn. Indeed, many more Black women have been killed by police for engaging in similar, everyday activities such as driving, sitting at home while watching TV, and making a wrong turn (African American Policy Forum 2015).
It is ironic for participants to suggest that their whiteness makes them more politically active given that they also understood their whiteness as something that sheltered them, that is until they arrived at college, met “different people” and, as a result, became politicized. Moreover, as I have already discussed, there is reason to believe that whiteness slows down Whites’ development of a feminist consciousness and interest in political organizing. According to hooks (1984), white feminists often suggest that Black women are not involved in feminism. She views this as condescending and sees it as having a secondary effect of justifying the centering of whiteness in feminism. If White women see themselves as “the inventors of feminism” (as one of the survey respondents phrased it), then we can rationalize the dismissal of the significance of race. Indeed, participants’ conception of privilege was easily reconstituted as a way to re-center, rather than challenge, whiteness.

Leigh and Ellen rely on racialized narratives about Black people to describe the relationship between white privilege and feminism. When I asked Leigh if she had heard people say feminism is for White women, she responded:

Leigh: No but it wouldn’t surprise me.

Why is that?

Leigh: White privilege. If women who are talking about equality on the job, you know, professional things, then they must not have to worry about are my kids going to get home from school safely? Are my kids going to be dealing drugs by the time they’re in second grade? Do I even have, you know, a partner in my life to help raise said kids? Is that partner going to live past 25? You know, so all of these things that women of Color are dealing with, are not, from what I see, necessarily feminism.

Leigh suggests that Black women cannot participate in feminism because their children start “dealing drugs by the time they’re in second grade.” Importantly, Leigh did not report having any friends who are Black women, making it unlikely that she is basing this belief on her personal knowledge. It is possible that Leigh was trying to be cognizant of the material and
immaterial advantages that white privilege brings and apply that to her understanding of women’s participation in feminism. Regardless of her intention, however, she capitulates to the racist stereotypes that Black people are engaged in more criminal activity than White people and that all Black men are incarcerated. This is the same narrative used to justify the hyper-criminalization and surveillance of majority-Black neighborhoods (Alexander 2012) despite the fact that Black people and White people engage in drug use at similar rates (Rosenberg et al. 2017).

Ellen similarly demonstrates how an awareness of white privilege is not necessarily indicative of divestment from racist stereotypes.

I’m coming at this from a white privilege point of view. I have the time to be concerned with these issues because I’m not trying to feed my family or keep a roof over my head. I’m not trying to find a job. It makes a difference if you have the time, the effort, the energy. […] Sometimes you just can’t be concerned with the bigger picture.

Although Ellen’s response may seem benign, maybe even race aware in that she acknowledges that with white privilege often comes economic security and psychological freedom from the burden of race, her suggestion that Black women lack concern for “the bigger picture” reflect racialized narratives about “Black culture.”

Participants who suggest that Black women do not participate in feminism because of drug addicted children, lack of concern for long-term, or an inability to “demand change” exhibit investment in the “culture of poverty” thesis (Gustafson 2009). The culture of poverty posits that peoples’ marginalized position in society is a consequence of (among other things) their inability to plan for the future, a lack of motivation to confront their own disadvantaged condition, and their impulsive behavior. These combine to make poor folks more violent, more likely to become addicted to drugs, and have a poor work ethic. This suggests that disadvantaged people are
disadvantaged because of their own deficiencies, a narrative that ultimately justifies their exclusion and oppression.

Participants who view white privilege as a resource that allows White women to be more vocal about gender oppression than Black women do not realize that Black women’s absence from their feminist spaces may be more of an indication of how unappealing their beliefs are and how those beliefs, when imposed on feminism, create a hostile space for Black women. It is condescending to suggest that Black women are not as involved in feminism as White women (hooks 1984) and not helpful to rely on cultural difference as an explanation of disadvantage. Additionally, Black women’s activism has been more constant and more sustained than White women’s (Roth 2004; Davis 1983). This is mainly due to the fact that Black women cannot afford to “go dormant” as White women can between their “waves” (Tong 2013).

Given that 10 of the 23 participants used condescending ideas about Black women—or racist stereotypes about Black people in general—to explain their absence in feminism, it is interesting that the most common way for participants to discuss white privilege was in terms of it being a tool they could use to “help” feminists of Color and improve how White feminists deal with issues of race. Fifteen informants felt that their whiteness could be used to “give voice to” (Kelsey), “uplift” (Cleo), or “speak out for” (Ivy) women of Color. All of these participants explained this as their way of practicing anti-racist activism.

In attempt to challenge participants to give more thought to their understanding of privilege, I asked participants who spoke about privilege in this way to provide “real-life” examples of how they would accomplish this type of anti-racist activism. Madeline described an imagined scenario of “handing off the microphone to a Black woman” so she could talk about
pay inequality. Danielle similarly spoke about a hypothetical scenario where she is at a round-table discussion on anti-racism and uses her white privilege to “step back and be quiet to give space for Black women and women of Color to talk.” Nicole explained a comparable situation:

_So, in talking about anti-racism and white privilege, what are some things that you do?_

Nicole: Just continue talking about—White women need to be using their platform to uplift the voices of Black and Latinx women.

_In what way? How? Like, how would you do that in real life?_

Nicole: [laughs]. It’s so simple. Like, it’s just so simple. Just share things. I share things [online] like if I have an opinion on something I will say, “this person is more of an expert, they’re more articulate than I was” so instead of making my own separate post or writing my own essay I spread essays by women of Color who said it better than me and has a better experience than me. It is like the simplest thing. So I think just making sure when you’re talking about issues or when you’re in a space where you’re working with an organization and you have white privilege and there aren’t a lot of women of Color, make sure you’re uplifting the voices of them in your organization.

This theme of “helping” women of Color speak up arose in both the interviews and the focus group. As Cleo explained in the focus group: “it’s up to us to use our white privilege to help women of Color along and help them find a space in feminism.” Stella and Madeline followed up Cleo’s comment in the discussion by affirming Stella’s suggestion. As I explained above, this implies that feminism was never meant for Black women and that they must be invited into feminism by White women (hooks 1984).

As is observable in the excerpts above, when talking about privilege as a tool to help people, participants used vague or hypothetical language to describe how they mechanize their white privilege. They also used abstract and intangible examples. Consider Ellen’s response to my question, asking her to speak more about how she uses her privilege:
My white privilege is that I can extend a hand. I have two strong hands. I have enough, I don’t need to have more and if I help you, maybe you’ll help the next person because someone extended it. I mean, it’s a ripple effect. You throw that rock in and you don’t know where the ripples are going to go. It’s not up to me to dictate your ripple. Your ripple is your ripple. You never know how your ripple will affect the world.

Ellen’s conception of how she can put her privilege to use is well-meaning but ultimately intangible. It also seems void of purposeful intent (“You don’t know where the ripples are going to go. It’s not up to me…”).

Thompson (2010) describes this type of discourse on privilege as the “sterilization” of white privilege. Privilege talk becomes sterilized when Whites are not required to confront the complexity of power as it relates the unearned and undeserved advantages we gain from systemic racism. The way my participants mechanize discourse on white privilege emphasizes hypothetical, individual actions over tactics that could substantively change the way feminists handle racism. Critical whiteness scholar McGee (2017) argues that focusing on “helping” people of Color allows Whites to maintain a positive image of themselves without needing to seriously engage with the question of how to bring about Black liberation. As a result, privilege remains an abstract concept, untethered to racism and neutralized by passivity. Participants who held more critical perspectives on whiteness were more inclined to speak about white privilege as a tangible resource that needed to be rejected because of its connection to systemic racism.

The participants I have discussed thus far view privilege as a resource or a tool—something that can be used to affect change or harnessed for the greater good. Ally, Harold, and Lilly do not see white privilege in this way. These participants understood privilege as something that unfairly endowed certain individuals with more power than others and, consequently, should be refused. This does not mean they ignored their privilege. On the contrary, they spoke about specific ways they tried to keep their privilege “in check” (Ally).
When I asked Ally how she checks her privilege she began talking about her job teaching at a juvenile detention facility. She described her whiteness as especially salient in this space because the majority of faculty are White while the majority of the students and supportive staff are Black. She explains:

Ally: It’s all about power. It all comes back to power. Feminism is a power struggle. Anti-racist movements are power struggles. Juvey is all about power. Everything has to do with the distribution of power. The kids see their teachers as source of power […] and so recognizing that is important. It’s not just about being an “authority” [air quotes].

So, as a White woman, how do you—

Ally: I keep tallies. A lot of the time we’re in a situation where we’re all asked to participate in something, and I use tallies to watch the amount of space I take up.

Like you literally keep tallies?

Ally: Yeah, I keep a tally of how much I’m talking, either in all-staff situations or with my students too. I know I have a tendency to take up space. Or, I’ll wear rubber bands and each time I talk I’ll move a band over to the other hand and make myself stop at three. I keep frequency data on myself [laughs].

Power was clearly at the forefront of Ally’s conception of privilege. Her awareness of its tangibility motivates her to monitor her behavior. This is one of several practices I adopted from participants.

While Ally was invested in making changes at the individual level, it was her hope that, one day, her job will become obsolete:

If you hold privilege, you have to be willing to give it up if you want to see change. I would be more than willing to change my position if it meant a woman of Color could become a teacher in our school. I am happy to do it and you have to be willing to do it. […] Or, oh my god, how about we [expletive] close the juvenile facilities?! I hope to lose my job to get those facilities closed. Kids should not be incarcerated. […] How do you keep a ten-year-old locked up?! This is a problem. They’re children. So, yeah. I want them closed.
Ally believed that no matter how good her intentions at these facilities, no matter how much she tries to use her position of power for good, the best outcome would be for her to lose her job or, at the very least, be replaced by a woman of Color.

Lilly spoke about her privilege similarly. She saw privilege as something that should not be used but, instead, compromised:

The privileges in my life... Like, I don’t know. I think it’s just some bullshit the patriarchy pushes and women push who want to be more powerful. It helps them protect their status and where they’re at. I mean, I’ll be real, I like the privileges in my life, and it will be hard if they go away but that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t or that I deserve to keep them. They hurt people. We can’t keep things that hurt someone else.

Lilly viewed privilege as inherently bad. For her, power differentials cannot be transformed and used for good because their existence necessitates the disadvantage of others.

Peggy McIntosh (1989) described white privilege as the “invisible knapsack” and encouraged Whites to confront the myriad of ways our unearned and undeserved advantages in society are made invisible to us. Their invisibility, she argues, allows us to take for granted the “normalness” of white racial superiority. She believed that by confronting these privileges we will become more aware of the racial hierarchy and the significance of whiteness. McIntosh (1989) writes: “describing white privilege makes one newly accountable.” While this might be true—participants definitely felt accountable to make use of their privilege upon becoming aware of it—based on my findings, it is not clear that one must necessarily acknowledge “White” as a racial category by virtue of taking stock of their white privilege.

Race, Racism, and Anti-Racism

I found participants conceived of race as either a system or a microlevel process, with little middle ground. Moreover, the words participants used to explain their ideas often
contradicted the ideas they explained. This is where there is potential for feminist methodologies to conflict with “studying up” methodologies. There were a number of participants who self-identified as anti-racist and described their beliefs about racism as “systemic” and “institutional” and yet, I characterized them as lacking a “sociological imagination on race” and challenge their perspective on anti-racism. Some feminist scholars may take issue with this, arguing that women’s voices should be uplifted in research since, for so long, we have been marginalized in academia (see Becker & Aeillo 2013). However, because I am researching whiteness from a feminist perspective, I must be critical of the ways in which participants describe their beliefs about race and anti-racism (Sohl 2018). Moreover, as Goerlick (1991) points out, women’s standpoints must be analyzed within the context of their identities; there are circumstances when privileged women’s perspectives have been used to reinforce systems of oppression. In an effort to acknowledge the conflict between these two approaches to research, I make note of participants’ self-identification as anti-racist while problematizing their beliefs.

Critical whiteness scholars argue that whiteness gains power from its assumed “normalness” (Rabaka 2007; Frankenberg 1993). Among my sample, there were only a handful of informants who possessed an understanding of race as a system. Indeed, most saw race and racism as microsocial processes and understood them playing out on the individual, rather than institutional, level. They lacked what Bonilla-Silva (2018) refers to as a “sociological imagination on race” and, consequently, did not see themselves as part of a larger racial structure. In order to establish what a sociological imagination on race looks like, I begin by examining those who were more critical of whiteness.

Emma, Sadie, Bob, Hannah, Harold, and Ally possessed a critical perspective on whiteness. They went beyond merely acknowledging their white privilege and spoke about the
ways in which race is woven into the fabric of society. They discussed how the social and cultural preference for whiteness impacts the individual and explained anti-racism as needing to focus on systemic solutions. They understood “White” as a race and also made explicit connections to white supremacy and the social construction of race. Emma, for instance, talks about how social norms favor “white culture”:

One of the designs of the anti-racism group I’m apart of is to caucus. So, we’re separating people of Color and White people into groups. We talk about the same question but in the White group we’re talking about internalized racial superiority. That’s the focus. This idea that we’ve been socialized to think that White is better—that we’re better, you know? […] So, one of the things caucusing as kind of intended to do is look at how white supremacy takes place in ourselves and in the work that we’re doing. Either/or thinking is one of those things that, specifically sort of ties us to white culture. This idea of a binary—either/or, yes/no, right/wrong…. I’ve been trying to understand that better in the caucus and I do recognize it so much more than I ever did before. It’s still hard because it can be debilitating. It just feels so deep [original emphasis] and I’m so concerned about doing harm to someone else and not acting in a way that is liberating. It creates anxiety but I constantly try to just work through that. It’s just part of doing the work. Feeling concerned is part of our work.

The group Emma is describing here operates out of the library in her city. Part of what they do is work toward building infrastructure that supports institutional equity. What her group was working on at the time of our interview was a scholarship fund to send students of Color to graduate school for library studies. She also explained a second anti-racism group she belongs to, Hidden Stories.

Hidden Stories was discussed in Chapter 4. It is an organization that operates out of the library and partners with members of the community to bring in material that reflects the voices of the people the library is meant to serve. Emma explained that most libraries stock their shelves with “classics” and materials that reflect dominant interests (i.e., Whites’ interests). Hidden Stories works to increase the number of books written by, about, and for people of Color, trans, and gender nonconforming people, including those who fall within both categories. Hidden
Stories demonstrates how institutions can be forced to displace whiteness from its position at the center by the collective action of individuals. Indeed, these participants were all focused on making changes within institutions that would displace whiteness from its position at the center.

At the time of our interview, Ally was working on introducing creative methods for de-escalating children who are have trouble coping at the juvenile facility she works at. Her facility used to “punish kids” whereas now they focus on recognizing growth and rewarding healthy coping skills.

The past two years we’ve just been working hard on social-emotional learning and it’s been astronomical to see the data. Reflections\(^7\) have gone down, attendance has gone up […]. Next year we’re going to have this sensory room. There’s going to be musical instruments and a reading nook and a punching bag and stuff—things that our kids will actually like. There’s a boxing area, a massage chair and stuff. They can just excuse themselves from class for a maximum of 10 minutes a few times a day just to get away from punishment. That’s the type of change I’m focused on making.

Ally goes on to explain that she finds these are necessary to continue reducing the number of “outbursts” that happen at the facility. Ally sees this as of the utmost importance in her role as a teacher because often when teachers do not take time to build relationships with the students at the facility or emotionally engage with them, when they misbehave events can escalate quickly, increasing the likelihood at that the police officers will become involved. Ally sees this as unacceptable because it “just continues the prison pipeline from our school into incarceration.”

As Ally and Emma demonstrate, participants who possessed a critical perspective on race were aware of how social structures favor whiteness. Emma speaks about the library’s preference for White stories and Ally talks about how her majority-White institution plays a role in

\(^7\) In Ally’s facility, reflections are essentially “time-outs.” Ally explains that reflections are more of a way to punish bad behavior rather than reward good behavior. She believes her facility should not be punishing but, instead, teaching healthy coping skills. Indeed, when Ally says they have been trying to “get away from punishment” she is referring to the current model which has teachers send children out of the room for “reflection time.”
facilitating the continuation of the school-to-prison pipeline. Likewise, Harold recognized how social structures favor whiteness to the extent that Whites have more freedom of mobility and choice:

One of the biggest changes in me happened when I was finally able to admit that I’m a racist simply because I have white privilege. I have it all the time. I have to consciously work against that privilege. […] When you’re White, the system is made for you. You know, way back when we moved here Leigh said, “I don’t care where we live there as long as you find us a place in South Center” because she had done some research and found that it had a national reputation of really good schools and she was concerned about our kids. So, I found us a place there because I could! It’s that simple. I didn’t realize until getting involved with [the anti-racism group] that that’s not everybody’s experience—to go wherever you want to go. Your race controls your behavior. That’s what I’ve learned. My white racial superiority allows me to act in certain ways.

Harold did not attempt to downplay the significance of he and his family living in racially segregated spaces. In our interview he explained his majority-White neighborhood and his children’s majority-White school system as the intentional outcome of white racial superiority. His ability to recognize that participation in a racist society is not an indictment of one’s moral character (“I’m a racist simply because I have white privilege”) also demonstrates a critical perspective on whiteness.

Participants for whom whiteness was salient believed that Whites must abandon the idea that racism, prejudice, and discrimination are necessarily intentional and indicative of one’s moral compass. They believed that all White people participate in racism by virtue of us having white privilege and felt it was unproductive to view feedback about problematic behavior as a personal attack. Sadie, for instance, spoke about the importance of “eating humble pie”. She explained, “If you’re in this work, you have to accept that you’re gonna [expletive] up and you need to be able to hear the word ‘no’.”
To normalize feedback on race matters, participants explained how they reframe “negative” feedback in positive terms. Consider the following excerpts from my conversation with Ally and Bob where they explain feedback as an opportunity:

Ally: Nobody really likes to get called out for something they didn’t know was wrong, but I think that’s the difference between being a feminist and not. How do you respond when someone calls out your bias talk or when you say something that offends someone? Are you willing to accept the criticism and then change and grow from that? Or do you take it personal? Do you get defensive and angry?

Bob: I think it’s nice when my friends call me out for something that is racist because, like, taking the time for that…. [trails off]. One time… So, I used to do that thing they do in Peter Pan [gestures a racialized impression of indigenous people] and [my friend] and her sister looked at me and they were like ‘What did you just do?’ and, you know, I didn’t know that was not an okay thing to do but I needed to know and it’s like, “Wow thanks for letting me know.”

While Ally sees feedback as a way to deepen her commitment to feminism, Bob views it as a way to enrich their relationships with friends of Color. Bob shared this same story at the focus group discussion. Harold expressed a similar sentiment. “If you can think of it as a privilege—that someone is willing to share something that’s important to them with you,” he explained, “it changes how you look at it.” Participants’ ability to view feedback about the ways their whiteness unknowingly impacts their behavior demonstrates a fundamental difference between those with a sociological imagination on race and whiteness and those without.

Participants who understood race in micro-level terms also associated race with something Black people have and experience, not White people. Consider how Kelsey explains white feminism: “It was aimed at fighting for women in general, not understanding that being a Black woman is different.” In Kelsey’s description, White women are the neutral category and women of Color are a separate category of women that cannot be considered part of “women in general.”
The “normalness” of whiteness is quite salient in a story Lilly shared with me a story about her co-worker, Mia. Mia is a Black woman and, according to Lilly, she regularly experiences discrimination at work. I asked her if she and Mia ever talk about it. She explained:

No. I don’t have that kind of relationship with her. Plus, it scares me to talk about race with her because I’m [expletive] White. Like, I don’t know. It feels inappropriate, like it’s not my business.

Although Lilly recognized that her coworkers do not treat Mia fairly, she felt it was “inappropriate” to talk about because she is White. She viewed race as something people of Color possess and, consequently, racism as something people of Color should address. This does not mean that Lilly believes racism and racial discrimination should be ignored. Yet, by saying “I’m […] White. Like […] it’s not my business,” Lilly essentially dismisses herself from the burden of race and the burden of addressing racism (DiAngelo 2018). Indeed, if it is inappropriate for White people to talk about race, it is easier to justify why White people should not “get involved” with anti-racism.

Lilly’s own race is invisible to her as is the fact that racism is more appropriately understood as a White person’s problem, given that we are its creators (Kendi 2016; Tehranian 2000). The fact that most Whites associate “race” with something people of Color have allows White people to think of themselves as normative and neutral, a group that is unimplicated by race relations and racism (DiAngelo 2018). Moreover, this cements the idea that racism is not a system but an event that transpires between individuals.

Other informants identified their prejudicial behavior around Black men as examples of racism. Chelsea explains how she would sometimes “pull my purse closer when I walked by a Black man.” Lexi described an instance when she worked at a bookstore where a customer who was a Black man approached her for help: “he came up to me and started asking me questions
and I realized the fear I had. […] I mean, I don’t think I’d ever say that I’m a racist but… [trails off].” Nicole explained how her disdain for people who play music in public (something she believes is more common among Black people) is an act of racism. Participants who focused on racism as something that takes place between two people also conceived of anti-racism in interpersonal, rather than structural, terms.

For example, Lexi discussed meditation as a form of anti-racism. Carrie and Cleo said they practice anti-racism by reading books by women of Color. Kelsey stated that sharing articles on her twitter is “the most powerful form of anti-racist work” she engages in. Several participants discussed self-reflection as anti-racism and, to be sure, self-reflection and introspection are important steps to take as anti-racist activists (Saad 2020). However, some of the other examples of self-reflection as anti-racism were difficult to understand in terms of how they could help improve the condition of people of Color in society.

Nicole often referred to herself as an anti-racist. In the section above on white privilege, I provided an example of how Nicole suggested other people can engage in anti-racist work (sharing articles). When she was done explaining what other people could do, I asked her what she, specifically, does. Nicole explained:

You know, it’s still something that I’m learning and as a White person who grew up in a racist society […] I have to actively unlearn my own biases that maybe I don’t even realize I have so that’s what I try to do.

Well, how do you do that?

I might be in a space that’s primarily minority people and I catch myself having a thought and it’s not anything malicious and I’m like “um, that was kind of racist for you to think so maybe don’t say that or think that again.” […] Like, I get annoyed by people playing their music out loud without headphones and I notice it is something that happens when I am in predominantly African American neighborhoods and I was really annoyed because I just don’t like listening to other peoples’ music. […] But I have to look inward and realize it’s a cultural thing for them where people like to listen to music together. Especially in African
American circles. Like, I actually looked into it. I looked up “why do I always see Black people listening to music without headphones?” Because like, I knew it couldn’t be that they were just rude! [laughs] So I had to tell myself, okay I can’t judge this too hard because it’s not a part of my culture. […] Like I didn’t know that sharing music was a big part of minority cultures. So now when I see it, I’m like okay just let it go.

I asked Danielle the same question when she indicated that anti-racism was important to her. She explained:

I just try to be really cognizant of things I know contribute to microaggressions. I’ve noticed I’m more likely to cross the street if I see a White man approaching me than I am if a Black man I don’t know is approaching me. I’m terrified of them [White men]. I got lost when I first moved here […] and I had no idea where I was. There were like three different middle-aged White men that I could have approached and asked for help (my phone was dead). Instead, I waited… I was just like, afraid of them. Then I saw a Black man just walking up from getting his mail and I…. [pauses]. He was the one that I felt comfortable approaching. But at that time, I was also worried about him and how he was feeling so I actually parked my car and got out of my car and walked up to him because I knew that me driving up to him in my car—I just knew that could seem aggressive to him or seem sketchy. So, I actually parked my car and went up to him. […] It wasn’t until I was talking about the experience later that I realized I felt safer around this other man.

Danielle seems to point to her desire to be around Black men as opposed to White men as evidence of her orientation toward anti-racism. This is not uncommon. Whites often point to proximity to people of Color as evidence that they are not racist (e.g., “I work with Black people,” “My neighbor is Black”) (DiAngelo 2018). I found this anecdote curious, however, because if Danielle was concerned that her presence might compromise the safety of the Black man in her story, one would think she would feel compelled to simply leave him be.

Similarly, Cleo describes an interaction she had with a White woman on Facebook who commented on a post she made about looking for a henna artist. This person felt that it was cultural appropriation for Cleo to use henna and Cleo felt that it was wrong of this person to presume that they were qualified to talk about race, given their whiteness. She explained:
She went off like “you can’t do this, you shouldn’t do this,” and it’s like A) we’re trying to find an Indian artist and B) the Indian women where I live have never felt offended by it. […] It’s like, you are a White woman [laughs]. You cannot speak for Brown people. I was like, “okay we’re not going to talk about this because you want to fight and I’m not going to have a conversation with someone choosing to speak for—like, maybe that’s your experience so you think you can say what people should and shouldn’t do but if you’re going to come at me…” [trails off]. I’m not going to try and speak for Black and Brown women because their experience isn’t the same as mine. I can be there and add my voice to theirs but I’m not going to try and represent them by engaging in that type of discussion.

Cleo’s perspective on racism is that it is never appropriate for White women to engage one another when issues of racism or cultural appropriation may be relevant.

Although Cleo is well-intentioned, her approach to conflicts where race is salient essentially leaves the work of dealing with White women’s racism to women of Color. Cleo explained in our interview, and the focus group, that most of her friends and coworkers are White. Thus, it is unlikely that she will find herself in a situation where she can add her voice to Black and Brown women’s, essentially abdicating her from the burden of engaging in discussions about race. Consequently, Cleo does not have the opportunity to build racial stamina.

In the excerpt above, Cleo used words like “went off,” “fight” and “came at me” to describe an interaction where someone questioned her behavior. This demonstrates a lack of racial stamina, manifesting as white fragility (DiAngelo 2018). Cleo’s defensiveness and aggressive response to the feedback from the individual on Facebook greatly differs from the participants discussed above who, with more practice, have been able to develop a “thicker skin,” so to say. Similarly, recall the passage above where Lexi insisted “I’m not a racist” when she explained her behavior toward the Black male customer who approached her at work. Lexi’s desire to distance herself from the category of “racist” is also an indication of white fragility. DiAngelo (2018) argues that Whites who refuse to view themselves as active participants in systemic racism are more likely to become defensive amidst accusations of racism. Indeed,
participants who were individually, rather than structurally, oriented believed calling someone racist was an attack on their character. They conceived of racism as the harmful acts of a person who hates another because of the color of their skin.

This view of racism—as something that only bad people are capable of—creates what Trepagnier (2010) refers to as the good/bad binary. Within this binary, all racists are supposed to be hateful, mean, and morally compromised. Thus, if you do not intend to be racist, you are not racist. Bonilla-Silva (2018) argues that this perspective allows Whites to think of themselves in morally superior terms, so long as they do not purposefully hurt a person of Color and so long as they publicly oppose overt racism. Conceiving of racism as something intentional, however, minimizes the myriad of ways Whites unknowingly (and unintentionally) participate in white supremacy. Participants thus sought to defend themselves against those who challenged their words or actions. This desire to disassociate from racism in order to protect a positive sense of self extended to participants’ family members.

Madeline, for instance, shared a story about someone in her family being arrested and convicted for assaulting a 17-year-old boy who is Black after he booed a Donald Trump float at their local Fourth of July Parade. This is how Madeline described the interaction between her two family members and the boy before the assault: “they just got into a little altercation thing where they were yelling the N word at them” (emphasis added). This “little altercation” involved two White adults punching a minor in the face while “yelling the N-word at him” and his family. Similarly, when Lexi explained a situation in which her father used racialized language to say hello to a Black man at the grocery store, she explained, “he’s not racist or anything, he’s just lived in our hometown all of his life and he doesn’t understand.... [trails off]” Nicole was similar. She referred to her grandmother’s beliefs about Black people and Latinx
people as “kinda bad but not racist like Southern racist. […] We just grew up in a very White city where there were only like five Black people” (original emphasis).

These participants relied on racially segregated spaces to justify their family’s anti-Black sentiments. This is what Frankenberg (1993) refers to as the social geography of race. Frankenberg found that physical environment was central to how Whites make sense of racism and race relations. This is why so many participants used their “sheltered” upbringings and the lack of racial diversity in their hometowns to explain their majority-White friend groups. As I discussed in the previous chapter, they also pointed to their segregated upbringings to explain why they had not developed a political consciousness before leaving for college. In using terms like “naïve” (Kelsey) and “sheltered” (Ivy), participants treat racial segregation as not significant, but something benign and accidental.

Consider the difference in how Hannah (someone I characterize as having a sociological imagination on race) and Nicole described the areas where they grew up:

Hannah: I mean I guess I’ve been aware of like, being White, for a long time but definitely not in [elementary school], you know. It was probably around high school when I became more self-aware and could say that, like… I don’t know. I went to a private Catholic school in a predominantly Black city and it was mostly White people at my school. Like, I recognized that we’re up on this hill overlooking a poor, Black city. Literally, positioned up on a hill.

Nicole: I didn’t grow up in a family that was racist—like, Southern racist—but I grew up in a very White city where there were like 5 Black people in my whole school, you know. I just didn’t interact with people who weren’t White as a young kid because I’m from up north.

Why do you think that is?

Nicole: That’s just how it is. It’s very WASPy. There are a lot of older Christian people who live there and there just aren’t many minority people. […] So, I try to

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8 White Anglo-Saxon Protestant
recognize my own bias and then try to project that onto other people and help them recognize it as well.

According to Nicole, the lack of people of Color “up North” is happenstance because she sees racism as something that takes place in the South (“not racist like Southern racist”). Hannah also relied on physical environment to understand race relations but, different from Nicole, she understood the role of racism in shaping the geographic landscape of race in her town. Without an understanding of racism as a structure, she viewed her segregation from people of Color as more of an innocent coincidence than a product of white supremacy.

Nicole, Lexi, Cleo, Madeline and Rita reiterated these ideas in the focus group. In the group discussion, I attempted to push back on their suggestion that they “just so happened” to live in an all-White town. While Rita was involved in this discussion in that she described her town as “super White” but her family as “very open-minded,” I was mainly asking the following question to Nicole, Lexi, and Madeline because they had previously suggested that they saw racism as a system.

"But, you know, like you were saying before about racism as a system, why do you think you grew up in these towns that are so White?"

Nicole: Up north is just White. That’s not anything I have, or that I can control and—

Madeline: Right.

Lexi: And, sorry to interrupt, but I wouldn’t say my upbringing was totally White. I grew up around my best friend and her mother who were Black.

"Do you ever think about why it’s that way?"

Rita: I mean, that’s pretty common here. Didn’t you say you’re from Washington? Michigan just does not have a lot of opportunities for diversity.

Cleo: Well, especially in this city⁹ [original emphasis].

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⁹ For some context, the city this participant is referring to is actually rather racially diverse in comparison to the surrounding area. According to 2018 estimates from the US Census Bureau, the racial makeup of the city in question is about 69% White, 21% Black, 7% Latino, and 6.5% mixed race.
[Everyone laughs]

Nicole: Right, like there’s only so much... [trails off].

I pushed these participants on this issue because I was curious to see if they would eventually connect systemic racism to their all-White upbringings. This did not happen and, in an effort to keep the conversation going, I simply moved on. Admittedly, it was difficult to find a way to effectively straddle the lines of researcher and activist. While I wanted to keep the conversation moving along, I also wanted to avoid making participants feel that I was attacking them. These two goals (which are essential to ensuring I could actually collect data from participants) conflict with my values as a White person attempting to be critical of whiteness. Indeed, it was difficult to understand whether my decisions on how to engage participants were more impacted by my whiteness (a desire to protect other White people by not pushing back on their flawed reasoning) or my role as a researcher.

Feagin’s (2003) concept of the white racial frame is rather useful in trying make sense of participants’ beliefs about race and racism, especially in cases where their beliefs are contradictory. Feagin describes the white racial frame as the collection of racialized images, language, narratives, ideologies, stereotypes, and emotions that exist to benefit Whites. As a result of being socialized in a racist society, we filter our understanding of the world through this frame and, when we do not divest from it, end up circulating and reinforcing racial stereotypes that uphold white racial superiority. As a result, our beliefs about whiteness and race are distorted.

Within the white racial frame also exist positive representations of Whites and white institutions. Participants’ belief that the separation of Whites from Black people is an innocent coincidence signifies a positive representation of the institution of segregation and the various
structures that uphold it such as the education system, criminal justice system, and the economy, to name a few. Additionally, Ellen’s belief (discussed in Chapter 4) that it is better to “fix the wheel” rather than “get rid of the wheel” exhibits a preference for the social structure created and maintained by white supremacy. Ellen, however, never claimed to be an anti-racist. When participants claimed to be anti-racist, their white racial frame seemed more capable of “acting up” as a result of it going unchecked.

Consider this excerpt below from Madeline. Madeline, who identified as an anti-racist, provided an excellent example of how the white racial frame can distort one’s ideas about Black people even while they position themselves as anti-racist. In explaining her position on reparations, Madeline stated the following:

It’s like my mom would say, “If you see a homeless person on the street,”—well, the first thing she would say is “Look away.” But anyways, “If you’re going to give them anything give them food because they’re just going to spend it on drugs,” and, in a way, I think that is sort of what would happen. I don’t mean to imply that all Black people would spend their money on drugs but there is a drug problem in more impoverished communities and a lot of those communities are Black people.[...] And reparations, that’s not a feminist issue, but if we could use that money to systematically open more women’s shelters… like, that’s…That’s feminist.

I observed a similar process in my conversations with Ivy and Nicole—both self-identified anti-racists. Ivy believed that focusing on race in discussions about oppression “ignores a lot of why people make the decisions they do and why their cultures are stuck in certain places.” Of course, this implies that individuals can be blamed for their own oppression. Because Ivy identified as an anti-racist, the fact that she attributes systemic disadvantage to “the decisions” people make is confusing. So are Nicole’s beliefs about wrongful conviction.
When I asked Nicole how she practices feminism, she explained that most of her activism takes place online in the form of “calling out” people on Twitter who share problematic ideas about rape. She explained:

Nicole: There has kind of been a change for me recently though where I’m like, you know I’m not getting paid for this so I’m not going to waste my time. I’m not going to try and educate you on this subject anymore because I know you’re being lazy. [.....] And it’s mostly men who will expect that. Like, [in a deep voice imitating a man online] “what about this person who was accused of rape and was innocent.” Like, I know this is unpopular but honestly, I don’t care. 99% of rapists never see a day in jail so if one man spends 6 months in jail, which is what a lot of rapists get, that’s fine by me [laughs]. That’s super problematic and I probably shouldn’t think like that.

Like what?

Nicole: Think that if an innocent person is in jail it’s okay but I’m just so sick of it. I’m like, you know, if one person is in jail [laughs] and they are innocent, fine. I just get so sick of people not being held accountable and I just don’t care! […] We’re not going to be able to hold rapists and abusers accountable because it’s just not how our system is set up so I’m 100% just like, you know what, ruin their lives. We’re not going to get actual justice from our government. […] We have to take things into our own hands.

What Nicole is advocating for here is essentially exchanging wrongful conviction for what she believes to be justice in cases of sexual assault. Nicole is not concerned with who is on the receiving end of this wrongful conviction. She also is not concerned with the victim’s definition of justice. Her only goal is that someone be punished for sexual assault vis-à-vis incarceration.

This perspective on sexual assault, wrongful conviction, and incarceration is particularly notable given that this project privileges Black feminist perspectives. As I discussed in Chapter 2, white feminists have a history of approaching the issue of sexual assault without regard for the relationship between rape laws and racial violence. While Nicole does not use racialized language to explain her perspective, race is incredibly significant in cases of wrongful conviction where rape is the charge. Seventy percent of known wrongful convictions involve cases where
men of Color are the supposed perpetrators and approximately half of those convictions are cases of rape with a White woman accuser (National Registry of Exonerations 2017).

Case (2012) found white privilege and systemic racism was more salient for those who engaged in anti-racist activism. Importantly, Case was focused on Whites who are involved in anti-racist organizations, not Whites who identified themselves as anti-racist. This is critical because, as participants like Nicole, Madeline, and Ivy demonstrate, one can identify as an anti-racist while perpetuating problematic ideas about race. It is also worth pointing out there that the participants I characterize as having a sociological imagination on race—Emma, Ally, Harold, and Hannah—did not refer to themselves as anti-racists. They did, however, explain that one must constantly aspire toward anti-racism.

Conception of Intersectionality

Thirteen participants reported that they were familiar with intersectionality and believed their feminism reflected the goals and values of an intersectional approach to gender oppression. When the remaining nine indicated they were not familiar with it, I explained the idea and asked them their thoughts. Four rejected it (Rita, Joanna, Ellen Stella), and the remainder simply agreed that it sounded like a legitimate approach to social justice work and did not elaborate further.

Self-Described Intersectional Feminists

The 13 participants who identified with intersectionality all belong to the “under 50” age bracket. The “eldest” participant who self-identified as an intersectional feminist (Cleo) was 42 at the time of our interview. They all explain coming to understand the concept in college through courses they enrolled in, social justice clubs/organizations on campus, or friends who exposed them to the concept. These findings are not at all surprising as the rate at which
intersectionality has managed to travel through academia in the last twenty years has been
called about at length (see Roth 2017; Collins 2015; Alexander-Floyd 2012).

The most common way for participants to apply the term “intersectionality” was in
explaining the variety of identities individuals possess. Nine of the 13 who had heard of
intersectionality used it to explain how people exist in more than one identity group. Bob stated:
“Like I’m not queer or non-binary or a woman or White or poor. I’m all of those things at once,
all the time. So, the way that those interact is incredibly important” (original emphasis). Indeed,
for those who aligned with intersectional feminism, the concept helped them make sense of how
they could be both privileged and oppressed. Sadie explained:

*Earlier you mentioned this idea of intersectionality. What does that mean to you?*

Sadie: I mean, I look at it in multiple ways. There’s the intersectionality of my
privileges. I was talking about being a White woman with two parents, went to
college, no abuse, you know, I mean I’m basically privileged in every way
possible. No disability, I mean, it’s just amazing all the ways in which…. [trails
off]. So, then I also look at it with regard to feminism or any kind of like racial
oppression—any of that—how do all of those things intersect to either give you
that higher position on the rung of the hierarchy and then how do you find the
people whose intersectionality puts them at the bottom while you’re at the top.

Sadie relied on intersectionality to help her understand how, despite her experience with
gender oppression, her “position on the rung of the hierarchy” is mitigated by her privilege. In
this way, Sadie viewed intersectionality as an analytic for recognizing the multiple identities she
holds but also as a means for understanding her position in the matrix of domination. Moreover,
there is an action component to her conception of intersectionality (“How do you pull them
along…”).

Nicole described intersectionality similarly:

Intersectional feminism specifically means centering my feminism and my
scholarship around people who have different experience than me. […] To be an
intersectional feminist you have to look at all aspects of life. You look at race and
class and gender and you know if you’re disabled or able-bodied, your gender identity, sexuality. You look at all of those because they all connect and intersect with each other and those are multiple layers of oppression and/or privilege. You can’t just look at “men and women” you have to look at Black women, White women, Black men. […] If you really want to help people though, you also need to be educating yourself. Educate yourself and ask questions if you don’t understand. (original emphasis).

For Nicole, intersectional feminism is non-negotiable. She explained, “If your feminism isn’t intersectional […] it’s not worth anything. You’re only helping White women.” Earlier in the interview, Nicole explained that one cannot be a “choose your own adventure” feminist—implying that to identify as a feminist, one must follow set of principles. She viewed intersectionality as one of those non-negotiable principles.

About half of the participants who identified with intersectional feminism felt that you could not claim to be feminist if you were not an intersectional feminist. Carrie, Nicole, and Lexi, for instance, explained “white feminism” as oppositional to intersectional feminism. Ally agreed stating, “Feminism has to be intersectional. […] Feminism has to be about affecting all people of all marginalized groups. You can’t just be worried about cis, middle-class White women.” Bob and Danielle explained non-intersectional feminism as white supremacy. Likewise, Sadie questioned the efficacy of a feminism that only focused on gender as an oppressive force:

Speaking generally, there are just too many White women not willing to put themselves out there, not willing to take a back seat to others who maybe have more immediate needs. We don’t push and pull. […] I mean, think about it: if we are just pushing for what we need, White women will win this race, we will “win” [air quotes], and do you honestly think all of us are going to stop and go back and help everyone else push? If we get rid of patriarchy, do you think the majority of White women right now would understand that we need to go push for everyone else? For Black women, for poor women? No, we wouldn’t. […] When you just look at something as a white feminist, you don’t realize how these are things that impact everybody. Even people who don’t want to be part of the movement. And you know what, that’s probably because they see what’s happening, right? They
see what white feminism is like and knowing that… I mean, that’s why we have to include their needs in our movement.

What Sadie describes here is one of the main critiques bell hooks (1984) levels against white feminists—that in failing to see the myriad of ways in which women are implicated by other hierarchal systems, organizers abandon the cause as soon as they feel their individual conditions have improved. They do not “stop and go back.”

Sadie believes White women’s failure to “push and pull” is what makes poor women and Black women not wish to be “part of the movement.” However, because White women are responsible for them not wanting to identify with feminism in the first place, Sadie sees it as our obligation to “include their needs.” This is why hooks (1984) pleads with us to not engage in exclusionary feminism where we are more concerned with who is and who is not a feminist rather than who is suffering and by what means. Indeed, Sadie concluded by arguing that since White feminists are responsible for our poor reputation with Black women and poor women, we cannot abandon them when they do not identify with us.

Not all participants who identified with intersectionality incorporated an analysis of power into their understanding of intersectionality. Consider the difference in how Carrie and Cleo explained the concept:

Carrie: I think the biggest thing it means to me is that while I believe that women are systemically oppressed, I also believe that women are oppressed by capitalism, by racism. It’s not just one big group of women. Gender oppression isn’t the same thing. […] It’s all the identities we hold that make it not just about being a woman. So, feminism has to encompass all of the identity politics. You know, you’re a woman but what about your race? How does that position you? Your health? Sexuality? What kind of work you do? What about where you relate in terms of capitalism? […] If we’re only considering the problems with being a White woman then we’re not feminists. We’re just white feminists.

Cleo: For one thing it’s…. So, the identity politics. Identity politics is… I…. it just doesn’t really make sense because identity is very individual. Again, I’m a White, middle class, single mom, dancer, student. Like, no one else is going to
have my identity so intersectionality is saying at the same time that I’m affected by being a woman, I’m also affected by being a single mom. [...] So, it’s that intersectionality of all the different identities that are imposed on us and that make us unique.

The difference between Carrie and Cleo’s understanding of intersectionality is salient in how they feel about “identity politics.” Carrie seemed to think of identity politics as legitimate while Cleo does not. The term “identity politics” derives from the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective (1977)—a vanguard of intersectional theorizing that predates Crenshaw’s (1989) article. Although identity politics are often invoked as inherently derisive, divisive, and even obsolete, the basic idea is simply that identities (both in terms of one’s sense of self and group definitions) are socially constructed and tethered to systems of power and inequality. As a result, identity politics are necessary to consider in movements for change (Whittier 2017). White feminists’ and Black liberationists’ disregard for identity politics in the 1970s are, in part, what led to the formation of groups like the Combahee River Collective.

When someone ascribes to identity politics, they believe that it is important to organize around the experiences of a collective and continuously grapple with the significance of difference (Whittier 2017). This is Carrie’s understanding of intersectionality, and that of Sadie, Ally, Danielle, Nicole, Bob and Lexi. They conceived of intersectionality as an awareness of how identities are differently situated and a prescription for how to address women’s oppression. While Cleo aligned with the former component of intersectionality, she called into question the value of engaging in identity politics.

It is important to point out that Cleo also managed to avoid talking about race in her explanation of intersectionality. This may be because of her belief about the nature of gender and racial oppression. Cleo ascribed to a radical feminist view on gender in our interview and in the
focus group. She explained that sexism is the source of all oppression and sees the racial hierarchy as stemming from patriarchal rule:

*So, what are your thoughts on the relationship between race and feminism?*

Cleo: Well, they’re both patriarchal structures, sexism and racism. I find there is a strong—even if other people don’t see it—there is a strong intersection between the two goals because, you know, racism stems from slavery and they’re both stemmed from patriarchy. Patriarchal structures created slavery and race-based oppression, so I really do see them as two big systemic issues. They’re very closely related. [emphasis added]

Cleo managed to integrate intersectionality into her existing perspective without compromising her belief that gender is the primary form of oppression—an idea that is antithetical to intersectionality. Black women are not women first, Black second (Bowleg 2008; Wing 1997).

Moreover, research on feminist movements indicates that Black women feel more solidarity with men of their racial group than they do with White women (Springer 2005; Roth 2004). In treating gender as the primary form of oppression, radical feminists offer no path toward liberation for Black men (Tong 2013) and Black women will not abandon Black men for the sake of feminism (Breines 2002; hooks 1984). Ivy, Madeline, and Kelsey also struggled to reconcile their beliefs about gender oppression with their identification with intersectionality.

Similar to Cleo, Ivy aligned with intersectional feminism but sees class inequality as the root of gender and racial oppression:

Regardless of race it just happens to be that we have set up a power structure as a culture which has always oppressed people. I think there’s a lot of issues in economic disparity that we avoid looking at because we want to look at these other issues like race and gender.

While race and gender are certainly organized along socioeconomic lines, a focus on class inequality as the primary form of oppression minimizes the various ways in which White women derive power from race. As such, although the focus is different, the arguments of radical
feminist and class-centered feminists arrive in the same place—White women and Black women experience sexism in the same way, making race insignificant (Moreton-Robinson 2000).

Madeline and Kelsey were quite different from the other participants in this category. They were able to explain intersectionality in scholarly terms and pointed to specific articles and books where intersectional standpoints are featured. Madeline discussed specific components of Crenshaw’s (1989) article and pointed to details about the discrimination lawsuit Crenshaw used in her analysis and, similarly, Kelsey was knowledgeable about the historical relationship between Black women and White women. As such, I had a difficult time making sense of their responses to my question about the relationship between anti-racism and feminism alongside their identification with intersectional feminism:

Kelsey: I think they should be viewed as their own separate thing. Racism is very much its own issue, and feminism is as well. But if you’re like me and you’re an intersectional feminist you recognize that it’s still important.

Madeline: It’s its own thing, for sure. It should be a part of feminism. Because, I mean, I’ve met people before—people of Color—who tell me they aren’t feminist because it doesn’t include people that look like them and that’s a problem. […] You can’t have a toxic environment when you’re talking about a woman’s movement. That’s not okay, that’s not the goal. So, we need to be aware of intersectionality […]. Just knowing it [racism] is a problem is a huge part of if but it’s really its own thing. We need to deal with that, but as a separate issue.

Kelsey and Madeline want to create space to address Black women’s problems. Madeline spoke about the problems of creating a “toxic environment” for people of Color in feminism and Kelsey was one of the most passionate participants I spoke with in terms of her opposition to white feminism. I believe that they believe in intersectional feminism. What is more difficult to reconcile is how feminism can be useful for women of Color if race and racism are “their own separate thing.” This is one of the more salient examples of how difficult it was to make sense of
participants, given how contradictory some of their perspectives were. I return to Kelsey and Madeline later on.

The other way participants described intersectionality was as a model for building solidarity, or forming coalition, with other social justice groups, although this was much less common. Five participants discussed the importance of feminism coalescing with other movements, specifically LGBTQ+ rights groups and anti-racism groups. This is not to say that the other participants did not talk about the relationship between, for instance, feminist movement and anti-racism. However, only five applied intersectionality specifically to make sense of how social justice groups could work together. As Ally explained:

Intersectionality also means supporting lots of different movements. If you want equal rights for women, then you are also saying you want equal rights for trans women. So, you can step back and say, “Okay, how do I now get involved in the LGBTQ+ movement and advocacy because there are women here too.” It also means finding ways to support women of Color. It means you need to educate yourself and learn how women of Color have been historically oppressed and then find ways—I mean, because these all intersect in some ways. Women are everywhere, in everywhere group. […] So, it really means they have to be involved together. These movements simply can’t thrive on their own because they are created in grassroots groups by marginalized people so in order for us to create change, the marginalized groups have to support one another.

Ally does not see a single-dimension approach to gender as sensible because “women are everywhere, in every group.” In her view, by virtue of being a feminist, one must also be an anti-racist and a supporter of LGBTQ+ advocacy because to the extent women are oppressed, so too are trans women. Ivy makes a similar argument stating, “seeing that there are connections between issues, the intersectionality of it, it helps us come at the bad parts of society from multiple directions rather than our own little corners.”

Previously Unaware of Intersectionality
The nine participants who had not heard of intersectionality ranged in age from 23 to 75. About half identified as Christian and with the exception of two, most identified as straight and cisgender. What they share in common is that, with the exception of Anne and Chelsea, most did not study feminism in college. Chelsea (38) would have been entering college around the time intersectionality began “traveling” (Collins 2015) through the academy and Anne (47) would have been entering college just after Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) seminal pieces were published.

Of the participants who had not heard of intersectionality, six stated that they believed it had merit after I explained the concept. Leigh felt her feminism has always been intersectional, even though she did not know to call it this, as a result of her “pro-justice Catholic upbringing.” Leigh explained that social justice work necessitated a “multi-pronged” approach because the nature of oppression is not one-dimensional. She explained

You can’t truly engage with gender or class or race without at least beginning to question what it’s like where it connects with one of the other areas. So, do I use the term intersectionality for this? No. It’s new to me and I’m not as active anymore. I think, again, it just comes from my belief system, my faith system. [...] As a pro-justice Catholic there is the preferential option for the poor.

Chelsea also agreed saying, “I mean, I think that’s what I try and to with my feminism.” The majority of those who believed it had merit, however, did not attempt to consider how their feminism is, or is not, similar to intersectional feminism, like Chelsea and Leigh do. Participants like Harold, Anne, and Nina simply noted that it seemed to make sense to them.

Rita, Ellen, Stella and Joanna rejected the efficacy of intersectionality, although they had not heard of the term before our interview. Joanna and Ellen explained their disagreement with intersectionality by suggesting that difference is divisive. For instance, when I explained intersectionality, Joanna replied:
See… I can’t… [long pause]. It’s really hard for me to think that way. I worked in the blindness community and […] I’ve had a lot of female friends who are blind, and I don’t see them as any different. I don’t think it’s helpful to think of them as different from me. They are fine the way they are.

Based on Joanna’s comment, “They are fine the way they are,” it seems that she is conflating recognizing difference with trying to “change” or “fix” someone. Of course, it would be problematic to suggest that blind women need to be fixed. Similarly, when I described the concept to Ellen, she sighed and replied, “Again, it’s about…. It’s just about women being women.” Both Ellen and Joanna demonstrate what Frankenberg (1993) describes as “color-evasive” feminists. In clinging to the idea that colorblindness is possible, color-evasive feminists downplayed the extent to which women are oppressed by forces other than sexism.

Participants who rejected intersectionality all felt that racism is a problem, however they do not believe race to be relevant in a feminist context. This is quite salient in my interview with Rita. She felt that feminists who tried to look at race, gender, and class were making gender “too miniscule of an issue when it is already specific as it is.” Her perspective on this is reiterated in the way she makes sense the relationship between race and feminism. When I asked Rita if she had ever heard people say that feminism is a movement for White women, she struggled to answer the question and became defensive.

Rita: Okay well I haven’t encountered that perspective yet so I don’t know if I can speak on it. But…. I mean, it’s not supposed to be about race. Feminism is…. It’s not what the definition is. It…. It says nothing about race. I’m just confused. I feel like that’s a misinterpretation of feminism if that’s what people are saying. Where is this coming from? Who is….? [trails off]

I mean, I think it’s something that is typically expressed by women of Color although I did have one interview where someone said they had heard it from a White man [laughs].

Rita: Well, I’m assuming they are saying, “you don’t have it as hard as us?” so we shouldn’t be fighting? I’m not sure… Um. Yeah, I don’t… [trails off]. [Speaks about Black maternal mortality] Feminism and racial equality are separate fights.
There’s the idea that men and women should be treated equally and, of course, I believe all races should be treated equally. But if we’re just talking about definitions here, “What is feminism?” we’re not talking about race in that discussion. When we’re talking about the definitions of them and adding racism into the discussion, we’re using terms that just don’t belong with one another, if that makes sense?

So, by terms that don’t belong together, do you mean including “race words” [air quotes] with “feminist words” [air quotes]? Like “White” and “Black” and “Latina” are words that don’t belong in feminism?

Rita: Right. Right. Exactly! Like we’re just talking about men and women being equal here. That’s all that means and it’s implied that Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, all of those women are the same. It’s implying in and of itself that all races are the same. They both fall under the umbrella term of humanism. To me it’s just all the same. The actual definition is not talking about race. It’s implied, but that’s not what it’s about. I don’t know. I’m just very confused about this question.

Okay, that’s alright. I’m sorry. We can move on.

Rita: Yeah. I just… Um. Yeah.

Rita also engaged in color-evasive discourse to justify her position. Rita believed race can be kept separate from feminism if we treat “all races the same.” Rita can adopt this mindset only because she does not recognize White as a racial category. Whiteness occupies a neutral position in Rita’s mind. Ironically though, in her attempt to keep race out of feminism, Rita favored the neutral—which is to say, the White—experience thereby reifying the salience of race in feminism.

When this topic was brought up in the focus group during the activity that asked participants to read survey responses, Rita maintained her perspective. She received the survey response “Feminism without intersectionality is white supremacy” and she reiterated the perspective above throughout the group discussion. She talked about her research, acknowledged the significance of racism, but maintained that race in feminism does not make sense. When Nicole and Lexi attempted to persuade her otherwise, she became flustered, her face turned red,
and she seemed to totally disengage. I had trouble getting Rita to participate from that point forward.

What is interesting about Rita is she has more experience with the empirical investigation of Black women’s oppression than I do, yet she still struggled to understand how feminist issues intersect with race. The following excerpt is what Rita continued to talk about in the section I passed over above, denoted by the brackets “Speaks about Black maternal mortality”:

I’m just confused. I would never dispute the fact that in a lot of sectors Black women have it the worst. Like, I study maternal mortality—as I was telling you before we started the interview—for my undergraduate thesis and without a doubt nobody can argue with the numbers. Black women have it the worst. They have the worst birth outcomes. There is something to say about being both Black and being a woman that puts you at a double disadvantage, it’s like a double whammy in a way. […] I would just need to talk to someone who thinks this because I don’t understand what they’re getting at. If it’s like about seeking acknowledgment that in a lot of cases non-White women have it the worst then, yeah, there’s data to support that but that doesn’t mean they’re not a part of feminism or that they… I mean… I don’t know. To me it’s two different issues going on. Women are still oppressed as a gender; non-White races are still oppressed as non-White races. Those are two issues that are going on and even though some people belong to groups that are oppressed in both cases, it doesn’t mean they should be treated as the same issue. They are separate.

Although Rita has researched Black maternal mortality, she struggled to understand the significance of Black women’s particular experience such that it would make sense for “race words” to be used alongside “feminist words.” In her attempt to treat all women “the same” (i.e., generalize whiteness), Rita contradicted the findings of her own research which demonstrate that Black women and White women are not the same.

Crenshaw argues that Black women’s unique experience with oppression is overlooked because individuals and institutions do not possess adequate frames with which to understand their multiply marginalized position. This does not seem to be the case with Rita, however. Rita possessed the knowledge (and the language) to describe Black women’s experience with
oppression—the idea of a “double whammy” is not too far off from Beale’s (1970) concept of “double jeopardy.” Thus, this is not merely an issue of not having an appropriate frame. Rita has the pre-existing knowledge and possesses the necessary frame. This is clear when she says, “There is something to say about being both Black and being a woman.” What is more likely is that her unexamined whiteness has overpowered any existing knowledge she has about the difference in experience between Black and White women such that the significance of that difference becomes null and void. It seems that, contrary to Crenshaw’s argument, the frame of intersectionality is not enough. This reiterates the idea that intersectionality cannot truly manifest alongside unexamined whiteness.

Similar to Rita, Stella acknowledged the oppression of Black women: “They unfortunately have bigger barriers when it comes to education and jobs and they’re not wrong, but any time they protest they just get called ‘angry Black women’.” Additionally, she seems to recognize racial privilege: “White privilege is a thing! It’s true! People are like, ‘Oh, I’ve had a super hard life,’ and it’s like, I’ve had a hard life too but none of it was because of my race!” At the same time, she did not understand race as a significant variable in the context of gender oppression.

For instance, when Stella explained her opinion that “domestic life” is “servitude” and the source of women’s oppression, I pushed back a bit and suggested that some women, particularly Black women, would not agree. She responded:

It’s just because they haven’t done it! It’s like “the grass is greener” thing. It’s not a privilege to stay home. You’re dependent on someone else’s money and they can do whatever they want, and you can’t, and I know from that point of view—because that was my point of view! —they don’t want that. They don’t want it. I shouldn’t say that because it’s not my place to say what somebody does and doesn’t want but they just don’t see how trapping it is—it’s a trap. It’s a trap.
Because what do you do when it doesn’t work out? You’re stuck! Whereas if you’re independent—I mean, do they really want to be home and take themselves out of the workforce and be dependent on somebody who can change their mind in a day? I mean, that’s… That’s… I get why they want to be with their kids at least for the first few years but after that, it’s just not a good idea. You will never get it back and you will never get back that potential earning in income, that retirement. People leave and think they can go back to where they started but no. You can never go back and start over again. You’re competing with 18-year olds. So, I’m sure it looks like privilege to them—just like how I admire their independence and that they have stronger support networks with their families than White people in general. Like, I don’t have that. That—those networks—would be so helpful. Just to know that somebody’s got your back… Yeah.

Stella’s suggestion that the division of labor is the source of all women’s oppression disregards how racism is also a system responsible for women’s oppression. This is a result of unexamined whiteness, specifically, and unchecked privilege in general. For instance, if Stella was an undocumented, transgender woman, it is unlikely that her analysis would be limited to the heterosexual, cisgender division of labor. Second, Stella’s belief that Black women’s “stronger support networks with their families” diminishes the significance of sexism in their lives is harmful.

Pointing to Black women’s “stronger support networks” is what Angela Davis (1973) refers to as a cruel misnomer, and it is closely related to the controlling image of the strong Black woman. Black women’s unstable kinship structures are often discussed alongside suggestions that Black families are more matriarchal (Harris-Perry 2011). These discussions minimize the centuries of trauma imposed on Black women who have been forced to cope with attacks on their family structure in the form of coerced separation. Before the Civil War, coerced separation was central to the chattel slave system which exploited and commodified Black bodies—families were split up for the purpose of capitalizing on their labor. Post-Civil War, coerced separation continued but in the context of the prison industrial complex (Richie 2012;
Roberts 2004). Yes, Black kinship structures adapt to this separation, but it is out of necessity in
the face trauma, not because of some inherent difference that makes Black women more
independent than their White counterparts. As such, the focus should not be on Black women’s
ability to adapt but on the ways in which white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism force
adaptation in exchange for survival.

Participants explanations of why race is not relevant within feminism (and thus, why
intersectionality is not plausible) reveal further insight on how they make sense of whiteness.
Stella, Ellen, and Joanna, for instance, imply whiteness as the norm when they explain why
Black women are absent in feminism. Joanna says when she imagines feminists in her mind, “I
just don’t think of Black, Hispanic, and Latina people. I just don’t. I don’t see them in my
head…” In Stella and Ellen’s mind, Black women do not need feminism because of their
strength:

Ellen: They are so strong and self-sustaining. […] It may be because they’ve had
partner issues where the guys were off doing something that might not be
strictly…. Legal? They get themselves in trouble with the law, things like that.
That’s not true of any of my White friends but it is true with my Black friends.

Stella: They are so much more independent than White women. They don’t end
up pregnant because so many Black men are in jail. […] Their issues are
different.”

There are a few things to unpack here. First, many Black women do experience pregnancy.
Second, while there is nothing inherently wrong with viewing women as “strong”, the strong
Black woman narrative is often used to dismiss their suffering (Collins 1990).

A controlling image is a stereotype that normalizes Black women’s oppression, both in
society and within feminism (see Harris-Perry 2011; Windsor et al. 2011). They make the
racism, sexism and oppression experienced by Black women seem normal, inevitable, and
natural (Harris-Perry 2011; Windsor et al. 2011) but the image of the strong Black woman can
certainly be understood in terms of Feagin’s (2003) concept of the white racial frame. Hunt (2019), for instance, found that one of the most primary functions of the white racial frame is that it allows White people to dismiss the suffering of people of Color. Indeed, if White women do not see Black women as suffering under the patriarchy, it becomes easier to justify the centering of whiteness. White women’s experience with sexism is treated as the norm and universalized. Moreover, given how central shared victimization has been in regard to mobilizing White women to feminist activism (hooks 1984), if Black women are portrayed as impervious to suffering, it follows that they do not need feminism. Thus, whiteness is treated as neutral—White women’s oppression becomes “the norm” in the context of sexism.

While I was working on making sense of these participants’ perspectives, I began referring to them as separate but equal feminists. The phrase “separate but equal” refers to legal doctrine derived from the 1896 Supreme Court decision in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson. This ruling reiterated that the Fourteenth Amendment is meant to ensure all races receive equal treatment under the law but further stipulated that it is not necessarily intended to prevent discrimination or social exclusion. This provided individual states the tacit approval they needed in order to roll out Jim Crow segregation policies and exclude Black people from spaces deemed more suitable for Whites. While racial discrimination was not outwardly or “technically” sanctioned, it certainly was not prohibited.

Similarly, these participants agree people of Color should be “treated equally” and do not overtly advocate for the segregation of women of Color from feminism, just as Plessy does not overtly encourage segregation. However, by virtue of maintaining a separation between racial justice and feminism, they effectively ensure women of Color will remain marginalized within feminism and never receive the attention needed to bring about improvements to their condition.
in society. Rita, Stella, Ellen, and Joanna all felt that racial justice—while important—should be separated from feminism. For this reason, I went back and forth on whether Kelsey and Madeline are more appropriately included in this group, despite their identification with intersectional feminism.

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, by advocating for race and racism to be separated from sexism and feminism, self-identified feminists favor whiteness and, consequently, marginalize those oppressed by both racism and sexism. Similarly, I was uncertain if Cleo and Ivy (the two participants who attempted to subsume racial oppression into either gender or class oppression, respectively) should be analyzed as intersectionally-oriented feminists simply because they self-described as such. Ultimately, I do not consider participants like Kelsey, Cleo, Ivy, and Madeline as totally comparable to those who reject the idea of intersectionality because, while intention does not take precedence over impact, it is certainly worth considering in a sociological analysis.

Mariana Ortega (2006) proffers a helpful concept for making sense of White women who subscribe to the theories of feminists of Color without thoughtfully integrating their ideas into their feminist consciousness. She describes them as lovingly, knowingly ignorant. The notion of loving ignorance derives from Marilyn Frye’s (1983) concept of the “arrogant eye” and the “loving eye”. The arrogant eye allows its perceiver to organize the world according to their needs and interests. For instance, when heterosexual men judge the measure of their wives based on their ability to fulfill misogynistic expectations (cooking, cleaning, etc.) these men are viewing their wives through the arrogant eye. Frye, a White woman feminist philosopher, suggests that the arrogant eye is possessed by women as well as men. For White women and men, the arrogant eye is implicated by our “whiteness”. It causes us to view people of Color in whatever way is
necessary for us to make use of them. She contrasts this with the loving eye—“the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination” (Frye 1983: 75). The arrogant eye consumes for the personal gain whereas the loving eye listens, questions, and checks their own perception.

To understand Ortega’s concept of loving, knowing ignorance, she argues we must first understand the irony of the concept: “Loving, knowing ignorance is not loving at all; it is not a way of practicing loving perception” (2006: 61, original emphasis). Loving, knowing ignorance describes a situation in which the perceiver dictates the production of knowledge on women of Color (by reading their work, citing their work, or writing about them) while simultaneously manipulating their ideas to meet the perceiver’s ends. While the perceiver may claim their actions have loving intentions, “this loving, knowing ignorance has nothing to do with love” (Ortega 2006: 61). We can understand participants like Madeline, Kelsey, Ivy, and Cleo as engaging in loving, knowing ignorance in that they see it as important to cite and understand and celebrate women of Color without feeling compelled to grapple with the ideas they discuss.

These feminists identified with intersectionality, believed in the value of “including” women of Color in feminism, and bemoaned the historical relationship between white feminists and feminists of Color. Yet, rather than transform their beliefs about gender oppression to reflect the ideas of the women they seek to include, they manipulate intersectionality to meet their own ends. The loving, knowing ignorance allows us White women to pretend that we are not the very people feminists of Color are addressing in their work.

Loving, knowing ignorance is further self-serving in that it allows White women to present themselves as intersectional around other feminists. In the focus group discussion, for instance, Cleo reiterated her idea (discussed above) that racism is a patriarchal structure. She did
this when trying to explain the importance of intersectional feminism to Harold, an attendee who mentioned that he had never heard of the term before our interview. To help Harold understand, Cleo stated: “there’s just no way we can win this fight without addressing everything along with gender. Racism is patriarchal, women’s oppression is patriarchal. We have to come at it from all sides.” By simply integrating words and ideas derived from intersectionality into a radical feminist perspective, Cleo was able to portray herself as an intersectional feminist while maintaining whiteness as the center.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I attempted to make sense of White feminists various and, at times, contradicting ideas about race. I explored their understanding of white privilege and their thoughts on how it should be used. I also examined some of their ideas about Black women’s position in feminism and their beliefs on the efficacy of intersectional ways of thinking about oppression. The fact that well over half of my participants can be considered self-contradicting is an important finding in and of itself. Foster (2013) argues that Whites’ self-contradictory discourse on race serves to maintain White racial superiority. By presenting ideas that are difficult for other people to make sense of, knowingly or unknowingly, White people maintain control of the discourse on race.

Participants’ understandings of race were largely bound to white privilege. In fact, white privilege was the most common topic discussed by the self-identified feminists I interviewed. They made sense of privilege to explain White women’s participation in feminism but filtered their ideas through the white racial frame. They associated Black people with drug addiction and saw Black women as lacking a voice, not concerned with the “bigger picture”, and less politically engaged. They did not acknowledge the many and varied ways Black women have
been integral to improving the condition of women. Thus, while they possess the language to speak about racial privilege, they engaged in discussions about privilege that reified white dominance. In failing to see how insulting their ideas about Black people are, participants attribute the high visibility of Whites in feminism to White women being more politically aware, involved, or better positioned to address inequality.

Other participants made sense of their privilege as a tool that could be used to help women of Color. However, they provided abstract, hypothetical, or intangible examples of how they would mechanize their privilege to the benefit of these women. They sterilized the idea of privilege to the extent that it was no longer connected to power. A few participants, however, saw their privilege as inherently connected to power differentials and, as a result, sought to reject it or, at the very least, keep it in check. Thus, in response to the 13 survey respondents who inquired as to whether white feminists acknowledge their white privilege, I can report that these feminists do acknowledge their privilege. However, as I have attempted to illustrate in this chapter, it is possible to acknowledge privilege while maintaining an individualistic perspective on race and perpetuating racialized stereotypes, a finding that challenges existing research in critical whiteness studies (Case 2012; Unzueta & Lowery 2008).

Participants’ views on white privilege were rather indicative of their views on race in general. Participants who understood race and racism as a system were generally aware of White as a race and focused on the ways in which whiteness is advantaged in social structures and institutions. These participants were interested in engaging with anti-racism at the institutional level and felt that Whites in general, and feminists in particular, need to reject the idea that racism and racial prejudice can be understood in binary terms.
Those who filtered their understanding of privilege through the white racial frame or engaged in the sterilization of privilege tended to possess an individualistic understanding of racism as a system. I show how these participants viewed racism as a character flaw and something that takes place between individuals. Ultimately, this led them to think about anti-racist activism as something that takes place within an individual (e.g., journaling, meditating, educating). Additionally, I found that participants who lacked an understanding of racism as a system failed to see themselves as racial beings. In viewing racism as something that takes place between individuals and race as something only people of Color have, they treated whiteness as the norm within feminism. They also saw racism as a character flaw and, as a result, attempted to downplay their own racial prejudices and those of their family members even when prejudice led to violence.

In terms of participants’ understanding of intersectionality, 13 self-identified as intersectional feminists but the extent to which they integrated intersectional ways of thinking about gender oppression varied. Some understood intersectionality as an analytic tool that could be used to help make sense of how someone could be simultaneously privileged and oppressed but it was not always the case that these participants viewed identity as related to systems of power and inequality. Moreover, some claimed intersectionality while attributing oppression to only one social hierarchy or while maintaining a separation between race and gender. In short, they treated intersectional feminism—in Nicole’s words (Chapter 4)—as a “choose your own adventure” exercise where they could take the elements of the perspective that benefitted them and disregard those that did not.

I also observed that those who had never heard of intersectionality were not all opposed to the concept. Participants like Chelsea and Leigh demonstrated that individuals need not
identify as intersectional feminists to possess an intersectional view on oppression. Of course, I did find a few participants were not keen on the idea. They were concerned that intersectionality was too focused on difference and because they viewed difference as inherently divisive, they quickly rejected its legitimacy. These participants relied on color-evasive language to describe their belief that race is not relevant in the context of gender. Moreover, they invoked the controlling image of the strong Black woman to reify the centrality of whiteness in feminism.

The data discussed in this chapter demonstrates that there are no clear-cut answers to the research questions I posed regarding race and intersectionality. While participants are aware of white privilege, their awareness of it is not indicative of a divestment form whiteness. Moreover, I found that feminists can acknowledge white privilege while also dismissing the significance of race within feminism and among women. Thus, while many are cognizant of white privilege, many are not cognizant of whiteness beyond privilege, nor is the subject of race within feminism salient for them. On the other hand, some participants demonstrate what I characterize as complex and sociologically nuanced understandings of racism and anti-racism. Still, not all of these people identified with, or even understood, intersectionality.

Much of what I found among my participants echoes the existing literature on whiteness and intersectionality as it has manifested throughout the history of feminism. Just as there have always been Black feminists working and writing about the relationship between gender, race, and class oppression, there have been a handful of White women who have worked in consort with them (Thompson 2002; Davis 1983). In general, the majority of feminists I interviewed are white feminists in that they claim to be invested in the condition of women of Color, and seemingly believe themselves to be “woke” while continuing to center whiteness and prioritize their own needs and desires. It does not seem to be the case, however, that most self-identified
feminists are totally oblivious to race, even if their ideas are dangerous and misguided. Perhaps this indicates the path forward for those of us who seek to unmask whiteness from its neutral position.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In my final discussion, I provide a brief synopsis of the findings from this study and offer a concluding analysis on white feminism and intersectionality based on my data. I will begin by reviewing each of my research questions and summarizing how the data address the original inquiry. I then situate my project within the existing literature, discuss the implications of this study and identify how the results and design of this project contribute to the discipline of sociology. Finally, I outline the various limitations of this study and offer suggestion for future research.

Synopsis of Findings

The purpose of this study was three-fold. First, it was to explore the beliefs and priorities of self-identified feminists who are White. Second, I sought to understand how White feminists view the subject of race; both its relevance in feminism and as it pertains to gender oppression. The third and final purpose of this study was to determine whether self-identified feminists had adopted intersectionality. To make sense of the extent to which intersectionality had been adopted by self-identified feminists, I argued that we must examine how self-identified feminists navigate whiteness, specifically, from a Black feminist perspective.

With Black feminist theory and critical whiteness studies serving as the theoretical and conceptual foundation, I designed a project that utilized a sequential, mixed-methods approach. It began with an anonymous survey of Black women. I wanted Black women’s standpoint to guide this project because existing research tends to disassociate intersectionality from the tradition of Black feminism (Collins 2015; Potter 2015; Bilge 2013; Alexander-Floyd 2012). The results of
the survey were used to build the interview guided I utilized in my one-on-one conversations with White feminists. The third and final method utilized was the focus group—this method was not intended to be used as a way of triangulating interview data but because no new data was collected (for various reasons), focus group data merely reinforced findings gathered from the interviews.

Research Question 1: How Do Self-Identified Feminists Define Feminism?

The self-identified feminists I interviewed were a heterogeneous group in terms of how they defined feminism. This was to be expected. Researchers of feminist movements and activism have long pointed out the diversity of opinions on what is and is not feminism (Dahl Crossley 2017; Tong 2013; Harnois 2005; Schnittker, Freese, & Powell 2003). In general, however, participants’ understanding of feminism were closely tied to their beliefs about what a fair and just society looks like. Those who felt feminism was about personal empowerment and exercising individual freedom described feminism as a movement to obtain “equality” for men and women. More specifically, these participants were seeking equality with cisgender White men. They understood fairness as women having the ability to achieve shared status with men. In this way, many were very similar to the liberal feminist thinkers and activists associated with the suffrage movement and women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. Like liberal feminists, these participants were largely interested in reform and, at times, explicitly opposed the idea of total revolution.

Others within the “equality” category I describe as “apolitical” because, while they sought equality with men, they disassociated feminism from activism and politics. They found overtly political feminists to be destructive, unhelpful, and divisive. In their descriptions of these feminists, they relied on cisgender norms of femininity established under patriarchy to form opinions about how feminists should or should not act in their quest to improve the condition of
women. They believed in the power of “politeness” and “kindness” in affecting social change. Importantly, their understanding of social change emphasized individual circumstances. Thus, feminism to them was about improving their own condition.

Other participants, however, were insistent that equity, not equality, was the goal. They were focused on structural change and concerned with power differentials across social groups. These informants believed that feminism should be responsive to difference and rejected the idea that feminism should treat all women the same. Their goal was largely revolution. They believed a just and fair society could not be achieved in our existing social structure because of how reliant it is on systems of hierarchies. Unlike the equality feminists, they wanted to dismantle oppressive systems, not work within them.

Research Question 2: What Do Self-Identified Feminists Believe are the Most Pressing Issues?

Most of the self-identified feminists were mainly concerned with problems affecting cisgender, White women. For instance, issues surrounding the workplace and women’s health (including reproductive rights) were discussed by more than half of the sample. Of the 13 self-identified feminists who spoke about the workplace, four viewed workplace discrimination through a gender and racial lens. These informants spoke exclusively about the differences in the average salaries of White women versus Black and Latina women. Outside of this, their concerns in this area mirrored hardships they were most likely to face as straight, cisgender White women. They spoke about maternity leave and workplace sexual harassment without an understanding of how doubly or triply marginalized women are differentially impacted by these issues, or how their position of privilege affords them protections not granted to LGBTQ+ people. Ironically, research indicates that as straight, cisgender, middle-class White women, they already benefit most from workplace anti-discrimination initiatives (Johnson & Otto 2019) while more
marginalized women still struggle to gain legal protections (American Civil Liberties Union 2019).

The findings are similar regarding those concerned with women’s healthcare. Of the 12 who discussed problems related to these topics, only two were concerned with trans healthcare and bodily autonomy. The remainder treated “women” as a universal category to refer to issues specific to cisgender, straight, middle-class White women. Abortion rights, sexual education, and access to contraceptives were their main concerns. The central focus on preventing childbirth in discussions on women’s healthcare reflects a white feminist perspective on the issue of reproductive rights as economically privileged, cis-straight White women are viewed as the ideal mothers (Kornbluh & Mink 2018). This group of women are largely encouraged to give birth whereas Black women and poor women, by comparison, are largely discouraged from childbearing and rearing, if not outright prevented from raising children (Ritchie 2017; Roberts 2012). A feminism that is intersectional would ensure that people are able to make their own decisions about having children, both as it pertains to having and not having them.

The third most common response dealt with issues of racism. Dahl Crossley (2017) also found this to be true of her sample of millennial feminists. Seven feminists discussed racism as a social problem and pointed to policy brutality, the criminal justice system, and violence against trans women of Color. Interestingly though, less than half listed racism as a problem of concern in response to the specific question I asked about social issues. Moreover, when they referred to racism as a social problem, most did not connect racism to feminism. When discussing issues like police brutality and the school to prison pipeline, there was not any special attention paid to gender.

Research Question 3: Who Are Self-Identified Feminists Concerned With?
Existing literature suggests that feminists today are more concerned with including women of Color, trans women and cisgender men (Aune & Holyoake 2018; Tong 2013). I found the vast majority of participants were concerned with masculinity and including men in feminism, particularly White men, but only a few who centered trans rights in their feminism. While a little over half spoke about trans people in the context of their feminism, most were only concerned with acknowledging them as part of the movement. They wanted them to feel “welcomed” and “included”. Three participants went beyond inclusion and actually centered their feminism on trans women, particularly Black trans women. Similarly, I observed that many integrated women of Color into their feminism but to a superficial extent such that they indicated a desire to include them but did not transform their priorities and goals in a way that would benefit them.

Research Question 4: How do White Feminists Understand Race Within Feminism? Are They Cognizant of Whiteness and Privilege?

Most of the individuals I spoke with are cognizant of whiteness but only in the context of privilege. The majority of participants conceived of race and racism in individual terms and lacked an understanding of race as a system. As a result, they disassociated white privilege from the subject of racism and filtered their understanding of the benefits they reap from privilege through a white racial frame. They used privilege to explain their participation in feminism and spoke about Black women as not having a voice and not being able to mobilize because they lacked white privilege. Moreover, they worked to downplay or dismiss their own racism or that of their families. In seeing racism as something intentional that takes place between individuals, they were compelled to defend their character.

Participants who were focused on race/racism as it manifests at the individual level mainly associated “race” with people of Color. They referred to White women as “women in
general” and their problems as “specifically feminist problems.” White became an invisible
category and was assumed to be normal within feminism. Whiteness was also normalized
through suggestions that Black women do not need feminism. Their strength, “strong family
networks” and independence were upheld as evidence that Black women did not experience
sexism to the same extent White women did. Importantly, these claims were made while also
acknowledging Black women’s oppression. Their oppression, however, was understood as
“racial oppression” and not relevant or appropriate within the context of feminism.

While the majority of participants did not possess a “sociological imagination on race”
(Bonilla-Silva 2018), some absolutely did. They referred to race as a system of power and
pointed to ways in which a preference for whiteness is embedded in our social institutions and
culture. They were concerned with transforming systems and institutions whereas the
participants I discussed above were concerned with transforming their personal ways of thinking.
Contrary to what I expected given the exiting literature (Bonilla-Silva 2018; DiAngelo 2018;
Daniels 2016; Trepagnier 2010; Frankenberg 1993), I did not find the majority of Whites in my
sample to shy away from the topic of race. Most self-identified feminists introduced the subject
of race or racism into the conversation without me prompting it and only three could be
considered color-evasive (Frankenberg 1993).

Research Question 5: Do They Know What Intersectional Feminism is? Do They Identify With
It?

About half of the self-identified feminists I spoke with had heard of intersectionality, but
there were some who had not. Awareness of intersectionality (and identification with
intersectional feminism) was concentrated among participants under 50 but not all participants in
this age bracket had heard of it. Those who had not heard of intersectionality were straight and
cisgender.
Of those who had heard of intersectionality, all identified as intersectional feminists but the extent to which they meaningfully integrated the concept into their existing views on oppression varied. About half felt that intersectional feminism was non-negotiable. Which is to say, they thought you could not be a true feminist if you were not an intersectional feminist. I found that most used intersectionality as a tool to help them understand how identities interacted with one another, particularly their own. This is not surprising because, as I stated above, participants were grappling with the concept of white privilege. Intersectionality helped them make sense of how they could suffer as a result of their gender but be privileged because of their race. Fewer possessed an understanding of how identities were related to power, however.

Limitations and Future Research

All research has limitations. Researchers are upfront about these limitations so that others might a) learn from them, b) understand their effects on the data, and c) know how to replicate the study. The first limitation of my study is that I did not offer an incentive to survey respondents. As I discussed in Chapter 3, I would have been able to recruit from the Collective of Trans Women of Color had I been more thoughtful about the importance of providing compensation for Black women who gave their time to this project. Increased participation from Black trans women would have resulted in different interview questions. While there is no way to know how this would have affected the research process, it is certainly worth considering in the future.

A second limitation is the selection of interview participants. I did not ask why the self-identified feminists who agreed to sit down with me, agreed to do so. This applies to the focus group as well. They could have been motivated by a number of reasons that ultimately impacted our conversation. Moreover, although I worked diligently to recruit participants for this study,
my sample only consists of 23 individuals. These individuals all lived in (relatively) the same geographic location but were otherwise unconnected to one another (with the exception of those recruited via snowball sample). Future research should examine whether self-identified feminists’ beliefs about gender oppression and intersectionality differ across location. For instance, I anticipate that the social problems participants identify might change depending on the community where the research takes place.

Additionally, I have wondered how my findings would be impacted if I decided to focus on a particular group or organization rather than individual, self-identified feminists. Dahl Crossley (2017) also found that most of the feminist millennials in her sample engaged in their activism online and, indeed, many of the participants were recruited online, via social media. Although I attempted to recruit from community organizations by posting fliers and contacting the organization leaders, this was ultimately unsuccessful. As far as I know, all participants heard about this project via social media, a friend or family member, or a flier posted on campus. By virtue of recruiting the majority of my participants online, was I bound to attract those more likely to do, and think, about feminism at the individual level?

While social media is certainly a quick and easy way to garner interest and attention around your project, future research on self-identified feminists should work to ensure there is at least an even distribution of online recruits and organization recruits. I argue as much because it is still unclear whether or not online activism translates into offline mobilizing. Social media researchers have determined that we tend to organize online in much the same way we organize offline—with people who share our interests, desires, and political perspectives (Gillani et al. 2018; Colleoni et al. 2014). If this is the case, it is likely that the “online” activism many of my participants spoke about (sharing articles, calling people out, tweeting) is not having much of an
impact because the majority of people who they are sharing information with already share their political perspective. Even when social media is able to cut across the echo chambers created online, Conover et al. (2011) found that this dialogue is “much more about shouting than listening,” making it unlikely that they are bringing people over to “their side.” In line with this, it could be the case, as I allude to above, that by gathering the majority of my sample online that I was more likely to find feminists focused on the individual rather than the structural, simply because they choose to practice their feminism by engaging individuals via social media.

My project was also limited by the various problems I ran into around the focus group design. Indeed, the focus group can be described as a series of unfortunate events, many of which are the result of poor foresight. In my desire to maximize the diversity of perspectives participants were exposed to, I exchanged quantity for quality and scheduled 14 participants, thinking 10 would attend. Because I did not plan for a co-facilitator, I was more or less outnumbered by my participants. But even if I had planned for less people in each group, I still had participants who did not indicate any interest in attending that showed up at the last minute. Additionally, I did not encounter the problems with attrition one would expect in a focus groups study. All of these combined to make for a group discussion that was over-saturated with voices.

Finally, while I cannot know this for sure, I believe the lack of new findings from the focus group were impacted by the poor instructions I provided at the start. Although I followed suggestions from previous researchers about “setting ground rules” I did not consider how my ground rules might need to be different given the sequential-method design of this study. Because of how similar participant-input was in the group discussion and the interview, I expect some participants were concerned with appearing consistent in the one-on-one conversation and focus group. Although the questionnaires were different across the two methods, participants
shared nearly identical anecdotes, examples, and responses. Future studies should take care when designing mixed-method studies where each method relies on the completion of the previous one and where the same participants are recruited multiple times.

There are directions for future explorations into whiteness and feminism unrelated to my study’s limitations. Future research could examine a larger geographic region. I wanted to focus on a relatively small area for the sake of convenience and because of a limitation on resources, but additionally because I wanted to study a community I belong to. However, as this is in no way a requirement of feminist research, future explorations into this topic could expand the research setting. For instance, do White feminists living in majority-Black areas have more of a “sociological imagination” on race? Is immigration or global migration a more central issue for White women living in Southern-border states? What about feminists living in coastal cities where there are higher populations of “out” gay, lesbian, and transgender people (UCLA Williams Institute 2017)? Are they more invested in activism that centers on multiply marginalized women?

Contribution to the Discipline

This study contributes to the discipline of sociology in several ways. First, the design of this study indicates that studying up can be accomplished without reifying privileged standpoints. While studying up does shift the empirical gaze onto those responsible for creating systems if inequality, there is always the risk that in doing so, we further marginalize oppressed voices while uplifting privileged ones. I have demonstrated that we can privilege marginalized standpoints in the research process while analyzing privileged voices. Moreover, I have shown that this can be done without asking marginalized people to donate large amounts of time and
energy to the research process. While the survey results were in no way generalizable, they did ensure that the insights of Black women remained central throughout the research process.

I have also shown that acknowledgment or awareness of white privilege is not necessarily indicative of a conscious divestment from whiteness. Whiteness can, and has, adapted to race discourse so that racist stereotypes are affirmed and perpetuated through speech masked as anti-racist. Ultimately, the language my participants use to describe their perspectives on race is quite different from the language used by Frankenberg’s (1993) participants forty years ago. Still, the effects of their language remain the same—whiteness, at least for the majority of feminists I spoke with—remains in the center in an unmarked position. Similarly, just as racism can be affirmed by those who identify with antiracism, intersectionality can be claimed in the absence of intersectional ways of thinking about oppression. In this way, my findings indicate that sociologists who research feminism should not view identification with intersectionality as the sole indicator of a dedication to intersectionality.

If participants’ adherence to intersectionality as they understand it is the measure of whether or not intersectionality has been adopted, we would conclude that, yes, the majority of self-identified feminists I spoke with are intersectional. They believe intersectionality is about being aware of the multiple identities a person can possess. Thus, since most of them are cognizant of how someone can be privileged in many ways, oppressed in many ways, and/or simultaneously privileged and oppressed, they have adopted intersectionality. However, as I have attempted to show throughout this dissertation, intersectional feminism is about more than recognizing the multiplicity of identities.

Power is an important component of intersectional feminism and most of the participants who identified with intersectionality lack an understanding of how identities are related to power.
Conversely, some understood the importance of an analysis of power, but they applied it such that their existing ideas about oppression and inequality could remain unchanged. Consequently, these participants’ priorities remained central. Thus, this study also demonstrates that when researching the adoption of marginalized theories in “mainstream” social movements, the standpoints of those who created the theory must be centered. If they are not centered, our findings are not valid or, in feminist terms, they lack “truth value” (Lincoln & Gupta 1985). Put simply, these findings demonstrate that when examining the presence or absence of intersectionality (one of the most impactful theoretical perspectives of the last few decades [Collins 2015]) Black feminism must remain centered. If it is not, we are measuring the ways in which dominance has co-opted intersectionality.
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Appendix A

Statement of Informed Consent—Interview
Interview Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Department of Sociology

Principal Investigator: Angela Moe
Student Investigator: Olivia McLaughlin
Title of the Study: Politically and Historically Bound: Engaging Self-Identified Feminists in Conversation About the Significance of Our Identities

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to engage self-identified feminists in conversation about how their identities impact feminist movement and will serve as Olivia McLaughlin’s dissertation project for the requirements of the doctoral degree. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to sit down for an in-depth interview about your beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding feminism. You will also be invited to participate in a focus group discussion with other interview participants where you will be given the opportunity to respond to and reflect on the findings from the interview portion of this study. You may choose to participate in the interview portion and not the focus group discussion. Your time in this portion of the study will take approximately 30 – 90 minutes. Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be possible discomfort from answering sensitive questions and time set aside to complete the interview. Potential benefits of taking part may be developing a deeper understanding of your feminist beliefs. You are not required to take part in this study.

You are invited to participate in this research project titled “Politically and Historically Bound: Engaging Self-Identified Feminists in Conversation About the Significance of Our Identities” and the following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
The purpose of this study is to find out more about how feminist’s identities impact their beliefs and attitudes about feminism. This study aims to better understand whether the theories suggested by feminist scholars in the academy are reflective of the ideas and beliefs of feminists in Southwest Michigan.
Who can participate in this study?
Any person, 18 years or older, who self-identifies as a feminist and resides in Southwest Michigan is eligible to participate in this study. Participants must be willing to have their interview recorded to be considered for the study.

Where will this study take place?
Interviews for this study will take place in a quiet and safe location of the participant’s choosing and at a time and day of each participant’s choice. Participants should choose a place where they feel relaxed and comfortable speaking freely; this could be a coffee shop, home, office, etc. If participants do not have access to a location that fulfills these needs, the student investigator will provide options such as a reserved meeting room at Western Michigan University.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Participants of this study will complete an open-ended interview that will last from 30-90 minutes long. At the end of each interview participants will be asked if they are willing to agree to shorter, follow-up questions later on in the data collection phase to generate or clarify information. Follow-up interviews may be conducted over the phone or via email depending on the participant’s preference. Participants can decline to be contacted for follow-up interviews without penalty.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
Those who agree to participate will complete an open-ended interview about their beliefs on and experience with feminism. Participants will be asked a series of questions about their feminist beliefs, how they came to feminism, how their experience in life and other identities impact their ideas on sexism and gender oppression, and their opinions on contemporary feminist activism and priorities. Participants will be asked to allow the student investigator to audio record the interview and will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym if they wish. Participants may also be asked to answer a few short follow up questions, but this is not required. Participants will also be given a short questionnaire to complete and return to the study investigator at the end of the interview. This survey will include questions about personal demographics and other background information. It will also include a question that asks the participant if they would be interested in participating in a focus group discussion with the other self-identified feminists who agreed to be interviewed for this project. This is not required. The participant is able to take part in the interview and decline to participate in the focus group discussion. If the participant is interested in taking part in the group discussion, they will be asked to provide information on their availability so the student investigator can schedule a time that works best for everyone interested in the group discussion.
What information is being measured during the study?
This is a qualitative study that aims to understand how feminist's identities impact their ideas and beliefs about feminism, opinions on how feminism can improve or where it has gone wrong, and whether those ideas are reflected in the theorizing of feminist scholars. In-depth interviews will allow participants to speak freely about their ideas and beliefs and will help the student investigator better understand how peoples’ experience in life impacts their feminist activism and beliefs.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
The potential risks to participants in this portion of the study are very minimal. It is possible that participants might experience distress when speaking about their experiences that led them to feminism or negative experiences as a result of participating in feminist movement. If any participant exhibits distress during the interview, or say they are unable to continue the interview for any reason, the interview will be ended.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
Some participants may benefit from being able to discuss their experience with feminism and their ideas about gender oppression. Those who participate in this study will be providing information that may lead to a better understanding of how one’s identities impact their experience with gender oppression and feminist movement which may help others work on building more inclusive spaces within feminism.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
Only the student investigator will have access to the information collected during the study. The student investigator will share aspects of data collection during the study with the principal investigator but no one else will know the passwords for any of the password protected security measures. This study is being conducted as a dissertation as thus will be published and available at Western Michigan University Waldo Library. Results from the study will also likely be presented at professional academic conferences. The information collected about participants for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research.
What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. At any time during the data collection phase of the study, you may ask to revoke portions, or the entirety of your interview.

The student investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Olivia McLaughlin by phone call or text at (810) 373-9098 or by email at Olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant’s signature Date
Appendix B

Statement of Informed Consent—Focus Group
Focus Group Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Department of Sociology

Principal Investigator: Angela Moe
Student Investigator: Olivia McLaughlin
Title of the Study: Politically and Historically Bound: Engaging Self-Identified Feminists in Conversation About the Significance of Our Identities

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to engage self-identified feminists in conversation about how their identities impact feminist movement and will serve as Olivia McLaughlin’s dissertation project for the requirements of the doctoral degree. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to sit down for an in-depth interview about your beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding feminism. You will also be invited to participate in a focus group discussion with other interview participants where you will be given the opportunity to respond to and reflect on the findings from the interview portion of this study. You may choose to participate in the interview portion and not the focus group discussion. Your time in this portion of the study will take approximately 30 – 90 minutes. Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be possible discomfort from answering sensitive questions and time set aside to complete the interview. Potential benefits of taking part may be developing a deeper understanding of your feminist beliefs. You are not required to take part in this study.

You are invited to participate in this research project titled “Politically and Historically Bound: Engaging Self-Identified Feminists in Conversation About the Significance of Our Identities” and the following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
The purpose of this portion of the study is to find out more about how feminist’s identities impact their beliefs and attitudes about feminism. This study aims to better understand whether the theories suggested by feminist scholars in the academy are reflective of the ideas and beliefs of feminists in Southwest Michigan.
Who can participate in this study?
Any person, 18 years or older, who self-identifies as a feminist and resides in Southwest Michigan is eligible to participate in this study. Participants must be willing to have their interview recorded to be considered for the study.

Where will this study take place?
The focus group discussion will take place in quiet, communal setting that will be predetermined and agreed upon by all participants.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Participants of this portion of the study will be asked to set aside approximately 60 minutes of their time to complete the focus group.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
If you choose to participate in the focus group, you are asked to discuss a number of topics with other participants. In the focus group, participants will be presented with the researcher’s analysis of interview data and asked to discuss their reactions to, and opinions of, the preliminary findings from the present study. Any interview data shared during the focus group will be presented using the pseudonyms assigned or chosen by interviewees. It will take approximately 60 minutes to complete the focus group. You will be able to complete it today. This focus group session will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The data will be summarized to document participants’ feedback on how the researcher analyzed the interview data and their reaction to the conclusions reached by the researcher. The information collected about participants for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research.

What information is being measured during the study?
This is a qualitative study that aims to understand how feminist’s identities impact their ideas and beliefs about feminism, opinions on how feminism can improve or where it has gone wrong, and whether those ideas are reflected in the theorizing of feminist scholars. The focus group conversation will allow participants to speak freely about their impression of the findings discussed from the interview portion of the study and their feedback will be incorporated into the final analysis of the data.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
The potential risks to participants in this portion of the study are very minimal. It is possible that participants might experience distress when learning about how the student investigator analyzed the information shared during the interview portion of the study. If any participant exhibits distress during the focus group, or say they are unable to continue the interview for any reason, they will be invited to exit the focus group discussion.
What are the benefits of participating in this study?
Some participants may benefit from being able to discuss their experience with feminism and their ideas about gender oppression. Those who participate in this study will be providing information that may lead to a better understanding of how one’s identities impact their experience with gender oppression and feminist movement which may help others work on building more inclusive spaces within feminism.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
Those who participate in the focus group portion of the study will be compensated $25 for their time. They will receive their compensation as they arrive at the meeting and once they provide the student investigator with the signed informed consent document.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
Only the student investigator will have access to the information collected during the study. The student investigator will share aspects of data collection during the study with the principal investigator but no one else will know the passwords for any of the password protected security measures. This study is being conducted as a dissertation as thus will be published and available at Western Michigan University Waldo Library. Results from the study will also likely be presented at professional academic conferences. The information collected about participants for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. At any time during the data collection phase of the study, you may ask to revoke portions, or the entirety of your interview.

The student investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Olivia McLaughlin by phone call or text at (810) 373-9098 or by email at Olivia.M.Mclaughlin@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.
Appendix C

Online Survey Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Department of Sociology

Principal Investigator: Angela Moe
Student Investigator: Olivia McLaughlin
Title of Study: Historically and Politically Bound: Engaging Self-Identified Feminists in Conversation about the Significance of Our Identities

Please read this entire document carefully and feel free to contact the principal investigator if you need more clarification or have any questions, comments or concerns. This consent form will discuss the purpose of this study and will explain the necessary time commitment, the procedures employed in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research.

You are invited to participate in a research project designed to engage white feminists in a conversation about racism and the significance of their whiteness. To participate in this survey you must be over the age of 18 and identify as a Black woman. The results of this project may help the whites who participate it in to better understand the significance of their racial identity and how it contributes to racism in feminist movement. This research is being conducted as part of the dissertation requirements for Olivia McLaughlin.

This survey consists of 4 questions and should take no more than 5 minutes of your time. Your replies will be completely anonymous and the data used to analyze responses for future reports will not include any identifying information that could trace your responses back to you. When you begin the survey, you are consenting to participate in the study. If you do not agree to participate in this research project simply exit now. If, after beginning the survey, you decide that you do not wish to continue, you may stop at any time. You may choose not to answer any question for any reason.

If you have any questions prior to or during the study, you may contact the primary investigator, Olivia McLaughlin, by phone call or text at (810) 373-9098 or email at olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 if any questions or problems arise during the course of the study. If you are interested in learning the results of this study, please contact Olivia McLaughlin at the contact information listed above.

This study was approved by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

If you agree with these statements, please click the button below to begin the survey.
Appendix D

Online Survey Instrument
Where do you currently live? (Please indicate both the town/city and the state.)
_____________________________

Do you identify as a feminist?
  o Yes
  o No
  o Don’t know
  o Prefer not to say
  o Other (please specify): ________________________________

If given the opportunity to speak anonymously to white feminists, what would you want to say to them?
I am going to interview white feminists about racism and the impact of racial identity in feminist movement. Is there a specific question you would like me to ask the people I interview?
  o Yes, please ask them this: ________________________________
  o No
  o Don’t know

Would you like me to share the results of this study with you?
  o Yes, please email the results to __________________________.
  o No, I’m not interested in the results.
  o I don’t know. I will contact Olivia at Olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu if I decide I am interested.

Thank you for taking this survey! If you are able, please share this link with other black women who may be interested in participating in the study.
Appendix E

Demographic Survey Instrument
What pronouns would you like me to use when referring to you?
- She/her/hers
- They/them/ theirs
- He/him/his
- Other (please specify): _______________________________

What pseudonym would you like me to use in the write up?

_____________________________

In what town/ city do you currently live? _______________________________

Please circle your highest level of education.
- Less than high school
- High school/GED
- Some college
- Associate’s Degree
- Bachelor’s Degree
- Graduate Degree
- Other (please specify): _______________________________

Do you currently work? Yes  No

If you work, what is your job? _______________________________

What year were you born? _______________________________

What is your gender identity? _______________________________

Please indicate your sexual orientation.
- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Gay/Lesbian
- Straight
- Queer
- Questioning
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify): _______________________________

Are you willing to participate in a focus group discussion that will take place sometime in the fall?
- Yes, Olivia can contact me with more information.
- Not sure right now, I will contact Olivia for more information.
- No, I am not interested in participating in a group discussion.

Do you know of someone who might also be interested in participating in this study?
- Yes, their contact information is: _______________________________
- No, I don’t know anyone else who might be interested.
Appendix F:
Interview Guide
1. Are you a feminist? What does that mean to you?
2. How did you come to feminism?
3. What social issues or problems are important to you as a feminist?
4. How do you practice feminism?
5. Are there any authors, role models, or feminist figures that have been particularly influential to you and your feminism?
6. Are there any types of feminism that you think are problematic?
7. Do you think race plays an important role in feminism? What about antiracism?
8. How would you describe your closest friends?
   a. Do you and your friends come from similar backgrounds?
   b. Do you and your friends share a lot of the same identities? (Prompt: race, class, gender identity?)
9. Have you ever heard people say that feminism is a movement for White women?
   a. Where do you think that idea comes from?
10. Are you familiar with the idea of intersectionality?
    a. If so, what do you think about it? What does it mean to you?
11. If you could change society for the better what would you do and what outcomes would you want to see?
12. Is there anything we didn’t talk about that you think I should bring up with other people?
Appendix G

Focus Group Discussion Guide
**Ice Breakers**

Think, pair, share: If you could have a beverage with a feminist (self-identified or otherwise), who would it be and what would you two drink?

Rating Game: Using the stack of numbered cards in front of you, rate the following statement according to the scale on the board. If you hold up a one, it means you strongly disagree; two, disagree; three, neither agree/disagree; four, agree; five strongly agree.

- *Feminism has improved my individual circumstances.*
- *Feminism has improved the lives of the people I care about.*
- *Feminism is headed in the right direction.*

**Substantive Discussion Questions**

Each of you have been given a handout with a collection of survey responses. Everyone’s handout is different. Read through the survey responses and share your immediate impressions with your Think, Pair, Share partner.

(Bring back to larger group)

- What were our immediate reactions to these? Please read the response you are referring to since we all received different statements. (Follow up: Where do you think this reaction comes from?)
- How many of us have thought about these issues before or heard people express similar sentiments?
- Some researchers say that if feminism is going to be inclusive of women of Color, we need to prioritize antiracism in feminism. How do we feel about prioritizing antiracism in feminism?

**Prompts for Discussing Interview Findings**

I found some of us felt race and feminism are better kept separate while others felt they could not be separated. What do you all think about the diversity of opinions on this?

Some of us felt that white privilege could be used for good but others thought you couldn’t separate privilege from racism. Is privilege necessarily bad?

There was disagreement on the idea of equality and equity in terms of what feminism should aspire to. Some of us thought that equality was not enough and some of us thought that recognizing difference—part of the equity approach—was problematic. What are our thoughts on these different approaches? Does it matter?

*Note: closing questions were prepared but, for reasons discussed in Chapter 3, there was not time to pose them to the focus group and so they are not included here.*
Appendix H

Survey Recruitment Flyer
SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH

Do you identify as a black woman?
Do you have opinions on white feminism you would like to share?

My name is Olivia McLaughlin and I am a sociology graduate student at Western Michigan University. I am doing my dissertation research on whiteness in feminism and am seeking input from black women (both transgender and cisgender!) in the form of a short, anonymous survey that should take no more than 5 minutes of your time.

All black women over the age of 18 are eligible to participate.

Your participation is valued regardless of whether or not you identify as a feminist.

What will you be asked to do?
Respond to an online survey consisting of 5 questions aimed at gathering black women’s input on whites and feminism.

The input will be used to create an interview guide that will guide my conversations with whites about feminism. Anonymous responses will also be shared in a focus group discussion aimed at encouraging whites to think about gender oppression intersectionally.

Interested in participating or know someone who might be?
The survey is available at:
https://wmichcas.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1yTm6ZKgCPyttVH

You may also email the student investigator (Olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu) and she will send you a link to the survey.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time.

Questions? Contact Olivia McLaughlin at (810) 373-9098 or Olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu

IRB Approval Number: 19-06-05
Appendix I

Interview Recruitment Flyer
SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH!

*Are you a self-identified feminist?*
*Do you live in Southwest Michigan?*
*Are you interested in talking about feminism with other feminists?*

My name is Olivia McLaughlin and I am a sociology graduate student at Western Michigan University. I am doing my dissertation research on feminism and am seeking out self-identified feminists to participate in my study in the months of June, July and August 2019.

*All self-identified feminists over the age of 18 are eligible for this study. Your participation is valued regardless of your gender identity!*

**What will you be asked to do?**
Sit down for a one-on-one, audio recorded interview about your experience as a feminist and your beliefs regarding gender oppression. Interviews will last approximately 30 to 90 minutes, but you need only set aside as much time as you are able. Interviews will take place in a location of your choosing; however, locations can be provided if necessary! You will also be asked to fill out a brief demographics survey and will be invited to participate in a “consciousness raising” focus group discussion with other study participants.

You will receive **$25** if you decide to attend the focus group.

Not interested in the group discussion? No problem. There is no obligation to take part in the focus group discussion and you may change your mind at any time.

**Interested in participating or know someone who might be?**
Call or text Olivia McLaughlin at (810) 373-9098 or email Olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu

*Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time.*

**Questions?** Contact Olivia McLaughlin at (810) 373-9098 or Olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu

IRB Approval Number: 19-06-05
Appendix J

HSIRB Approval Letter
Date: June 14, 2019

To: Angela Moe, Principal Investigator
   Olivia McLaughlin, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 19-06-05

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Politically and Historically Bound: Discerning the Salience of Intersectionality Among Self-Identified Feminists in Southwest Michigan” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) June 13, 2020 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at https://wmich.edu/research/forms.

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.