MCGILL UNIVERSITY

WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY
AND
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract

A most deafening silence is the effect created by the omission of Whiteness from racial discourses. Those within the social work profession, who seek to eradicate racism have for the most part, restricted their analyses to dissecting and defining the racial "Other". This has perhaps unwittingly implied an acceptance of "Whiteness" as an all-powerful, unnamed normality, exempted from the requirement of definition. This examination of White racial identity is an attempt to engage in a discussion of a different sort - exploring racism at its source. Those actively involved in the practice and/or study of Social Work in Montreal (Quebec) were asked to contemplate the meaning of "Whiteness" in society and in their own lives. Their interpretations were aligned with social and cultural interpretations, as well as my own interpretations. This study illustrates that, in spite of its elusive nature, Whiteness does indeed have very powerful meanings for those who have access to this racial category, those excluded, and the society in which we live.

Resumé

Il existe un silence étonnant en ce qui concerne l'identité de la race Blanche comme subjectivité dans les discours théoriques. Certes, dans la pratique sociale, l'analyse de l'identité, leurs cadres théoriques interculturels et les approches anti-racistes se limitent souvent à l'interrogation de "l'Autre". Par conséquent, cela crée l'effet d'une acceptation sans borne de l'identité "Blanche" ou de la race Blanche comme étant la norme qui demeure hors de toute analyse critique.

Cette étude a pour but d'entreprendre une discussion exceptionnelle; l'exploration de l'identité et/ou race Blanche comme subjetivité et de sa relation avec le racisme. À cette fin, plusieurs intervenants ont été invités à partager sur l'identité et la race Blanche dans la société, ainsi que dans leur propre vie. Cette étude entend démontrer l'absence remarquée de l'identité de "race Blanche" des discours théoriques. Finalement, cette thèse propose de démasquer ce vide théorique en déconstruisant l'identité de la race Blanche, et à exposer les enjeux d'appartenance et d'exclusion à cette identité toute puissante.

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to "Junior",
who always takes care of his "little sis".

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CHAPTER 1 - LOCATING WHITENESS

1.1   Introduction

"To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naive and simplistic...Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must examine themselves constantly."
                                        - Paulo Friere, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The goal of this thesis is to examine White subjectivity and its relationship to racial attitudes of White social workers. It seeks to answer the question, "What is Whiteness?" This study of White racial identity grew out of my original desire to study the psychological impacts of racism on Black people. After spending several hours perusing through books, journal articles, and dissertations, it became evident that not only had this topic already been competently examined, but that there was an abundance of literature available. I became frustrated by the plethora of literature examining racism, dissecting the psyches of Blacks and People of Color, all under shifting titles including anti-racism, anti-oppression, cross-cultural, etceteras. I sought a different way of challenging racism. This exploration of White racial identity was the result of my personal desire and professional requirement to engage in a discussion of a different sort - exploring racism at it source.

1.2   Racism and the Social Work Profession

The Social Work Profession is an arena where the struggle against racism continues to be waged. Anti-racist, cross-cultural and anti-oppression approaches are among the many means through which racism is being challenged (Dumbrill & Maiter, 1996; Kropf & Issac, 1996; Guiterrez, et al, 1996). Eradicating racism is not about a few people changing their attitudes and remaining in isolation. Changes must exceed the realm of the personal and go to where the real power resides. In "Sister/Outsider" Audre Lorde (1984) addresses criticisms from the White

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Lesbian community that Black Lesbians' emphasis on racism only hinders their (White lesbians') "ability to get past their guilt" (p. 131). Guilt is kin to pity. Pity will not dismantle racism, nor will it even begin to challenge it. As Social Workers practicing in multiracial, hierarchical social and political systems, not only must the individual "flaws" that produce racist acts be acknowledged, but racism must be challenged on institutional, social, and individual levels (Katz, 1978; Akwani, 1995; Giroux, 1997; Dominelli, 1998; Ferber, 1998; Frankenberg, 2001).

Omitted information and unchallenged assumptions inevitably perpetuate racial imbalances (Tatum, 1997; Essed, 1991). Those within the Social Work profession who seek to eradicate racism have for the most part, relied upon examining the impacts of racist actions and attitudes on the "Other", with only a peripheral view of Whiteness. In other words, they have implied that "White people act, while non-White people are acted upon" (Jordan & Weedon, 1995, p. 95). This singular focus on the "Other" has perhaps unwittingly implied an acceptance of "Whiteness" as all-powerful and exempted from the requirement of interrogation. The White social worker has been asked to understand how "Others" are hurt by his/her powerful Whiteness, with little analysis of what Whiteness means - especially in relation to his/her own person. A "race cognizance on the part of white people could only correlate with a move toward greater anti-racist consciousness." (Frankenberg, 2001, p. 91). Social workers must always be aware of their own White subjectivity and what that means. This suggests that understanding, internalizing, and practicing "anti-racist", "anti oppressive", "culturally and racially sensitive" Social Work is dependent on a White social worker's ability to understand his/her own subjectivity. Before we can *ever* unite under the emblem of "sameness", we must first acknowledge and resolve the problems that are the results of "difference" (Williams, 1998). To do so, an examination of the role of Whiteness in racial discourse is necessary.

1.3   White racial identity and Social Work Practice

This thesis seeks to answer the question, "What is Whiteness?" Linked to this, other questions such as "How is Whiteness constructed and defined? Who has access to this group and what does their membership mean?" will also be addressed. Those actively involved in the practice and/or study of Social Work in Montreal will be asked to contemplate the meaning of "Whiteness" and their own membership to this racial category.

I am conscious of the need to resist essentialism and to recognize that racial categories are not fixed, but have fluid boundaries (Fredrickson, 1997; Miles, 1997; Bonnett, 2000) But, I am also cognizant that although gender, class, and other hierarchical classifications suggest that they do not benefit equally, all Whites do benefit from racism due to their membership in this powerful racial category (Newitz & Wray, 1997; Chambers, 1997). Throughout this text I will frequently employ the terms Black/Blackness, White/Whiteness, People(s) of Color, and Otherness (the many identities juxtaposed with *Whiteness*). While recognizing that these are not fixed categories, they will be employed to punctuate the hierarchical nature of racialized discourses.

This chapter "Locating Whiteness" will conclude with an overview of the Emergence of Critical White Studies. It will outline some of the key components of this expanding multi-disciplinary field. Reviewing history "helps us to become conscious of certain facts that, for the most part, have often escaped analysis" (Smeadley, 1993, p.16). Thus, Chapter 2 will highlight some of the socio-scientific events that have contributed to the evolution of Whiteness. Included in this is a suggestion that capitalism, religion, and science conspired to justify the power that this *manufactured* racial group wields. Chapter 3 will offer some indications of the Social Significance of Whiteness. Its absence from racial discourses and its status as a relational concept will briefly be highlighted. Chapter 4 offers an insight into The Psychology of Whiteness. It will

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illustrate the effect of Whiteness as a psychological "burden" and will suggest various models and typologies that explore the White psyche. Chapter 5 will describe the methodological components of the current study. In particular, it will identify some of the theoretical approaches, philosophical questions, and personal choices that affected the research process. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 (respectively), will describe participants' interpretations, my interpretations, and social and cultural interpretations of Whiteness. Participant interpretations (chapter 6) and my interpretations (chapter 7) will include commentaries reacting to the research process. Finally, chapter 9 "Fixing our gaze upon Whiteness and White racial identity" will discuss and summarize some of the key arguments made throughout this paper. It will begin with a synopsis of answers to "What is Whiteness?" generated from the focus group. It will also comment on "Limitations of the study", discuss possible implications on Social Work and suggest areas for future research.

This project seeks to promote change. It is an attempt to challenge racism in a way that is different. As this thesis seeks to answer "What is Whiteness?" it will engage in a discussion of a different sort - exploring racism at it source.

1.4 The emergence of Critical White Studies

Blacks and People of Color who endure the weight of Whiteness in every aspect of their lives, as well as those Whites who are allies in the struggle towards a just society, are naturally taken aback by the prospect of diverting attention towards Whiteness (hooks, 1995). Cumo and Hall (1999) pose the question: "Don't we already know enough - too much - about white folks and their business?" (p. 3). But, within our hierarchal and racialized society Whiteness is typically excluded from racialization (Carter, 1995). The emergence of Critical White Studies sought to fix the gaze upon Whiteness. Its origin is linked to the work done during the 1970s by Critical Legal Studies and its offspring Critical Race Studies (Delgado and Stefanic, 1997).

Before the emergence of White studies, the only references to Whiteness was in relation to racism and prejudice, which were widely accepted as aberrations in society, emanating from individual folly (Jones & Carter, 1995; Lipsitz, 1998; Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Cumo & Hall, 1999). Writers such as Blalock (1967) and Kinloch (1974), argued for a rejection of *theoretical particularism* (the focus on one single factor of racial phenomena) and challenged the assumption that White behaviors and attitudes are normative "and therefore not subjects for study in their own right" (Bowser & Hunt, 1996, p. xviii).

White Studies should not be construed as a response against American Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies and other disciplines that seek to challenge various oppressions. It should not be confused with White supremacy. White supremacist discourse sees Whiteness as being threatened (Ferber 1998) and invokes racial rhetoric in its defense. Cumo & Hall (1999) caution that Critical White Studies should not be interpreted as *racial* attack or hatred against Whites, in the form of what is deemed "reverse racism". Miki (1994) adds that the charge of "reverse discrimination" is a predictable response when attention is placed on Whiteness. This charge is invoked to displace the legitimate claims against the power that Whiteness wields (Miki, 1994).

Critical White Studies is a multi-disciplinary examination which calls upon meta-narratives and emancipatory theories (such as feminism(s) and Marxism), with the goal of scrutinizing the global supremacy of Whiteness and exposing its theoretical, cultural, historical, and legal foundations (Frankenberg, 1993; Cumo & Hall, 1999; Winant, 2001; Frankenberg, 2001). Critical White Studies seeks to challenge White supremacy by interrogating the very notion of non racialized White identities (Keating, 1995). It examines the historical development of Whiteness, its role in contemporary politics, its performance by *its subjects*, and critiques the role Whites play in movements towards social change (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 3).

Critical White Studies goes beyond racializing "Otherness" and challenge those who perpetuate and are the beneficiaries of racism (Ferber, 1998; Morrison, 1992; Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, and Wray, 2001).

Critical White Studies builds upon the examination of Whites within racial discourses that was started by theorists such as De Bois (1920), Rich (1979), Lorde (1984), Fanon (1968 and 1970), Friere (1994). Simpson and Yinger (1965) were among the first to examine the costs and benefits of racism for Whites. *Wellman's Portraits of White Racism* (1977) explored White identity and its intricate connection to racism. Terry's (1970), *For Whites Only* is perhaps the first to directly attach meaning to Whiteness (Bowser & Hunt, 1996). The 1970s and 1980s saw a particular emphasis on Whiteness as it exists within legal and educational disciplines (Nakayama & Martin, 1999). In the 1990s there was a proliferation of texts from every imaginable discipline. These included socio-historical analyses of Whiteness (Gutman, 1976; Berlin, 1987; Allen, 1994; Roediger, 1991, 1997; Ware, 1991; Omi & Winant, 1994; Saxton, 1990).

Much of the work that I encountered on Whiteness was found in the form of anthologies. In particular, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas (1995) and Delgado & Stephanic (1997) compiled comprehensive overviews of White Studies in their anthologies. Both texts take a multi-disciplinary approach to their exploration, as they have amassed the most seminal texts within this emerging field. Anthologies have focussed on historical and pseudoscientific explorations of Whiteness. Banton (1988), Gates (1997a, 1997b) Roediger (1991, 1997); Allen (1994); Saxton (1997) are some of the most cited and prolific writers in their historical investigations. Bulmer and Solomos (1999) strive to present international perspectives of race and citizenship (including Canada), in their multi-disciplinary collection of essays. Kaplan (1997) explains the importance of White Studies as furthering work that has already been done

by women and Blacks. She proposes that Critical White Studies offers White males the opportunity to *undo* themselves. It challenges them to examine their power by confronting constructions of Whiteness, while at the same time engaging in a "real recognition of black subjectivity" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 326). It is ironic that although she proposes a movement away from the binary, Kaplan's (1997) description of the process returns to the Black-White racial binary. Winant's (2001) analysis of the White racial project describes: neo-conservatism (belief in color-blindness, "reverse racism" and general denial of racial hierarchy), liberalism ("it is an effort to frame racial egalitarianism incrementally enough that large numbers of whites will sign on to the effort to get "beyond race"); and new abolitionism (in the socialist inspired quest for racial equality, emphasizes White privilege as oppressive, and seeks to become "race traitors" by actively relinquishing White privileges) (pp. 102-106).

Much of Critical White Studies scholarship relies on the use of narratives to illustrate theory. Authors from the disciplines of Education and Law have generated a substantial body of literature that explores White identity. Some notable texts in Education include Tatum's (1997) *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria: And other conversations about race"*; Howard's (1999) *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, McIntyre's (1997) *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring the Racial Identity of White Teachers engage individuals in a personal journey towards racialization*, and McCarthy & Crichlow's (1993) *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*.

Race theorists from legal studies examine the role of law in the "construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination" (Crenshaw, et al, 1995, p. xi). Scholars explore Whiteness as an entity that has privileged rights codified in laws and entrenched social practices (Banton, 1988; Bell, 1987; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Harris, 1993; Crenshaw, 1995; Lopez, 1996; Smeadley 1999). Authors have challenged legal studies to broaden its critical gaze

to include more penetrating analyses of race and power (Matsuda, 1995; Dalton, 1995; Cook, 1995).

It is significant that even texts generated from Legal Studies frequently employ personal narratives to vividly set the stage for discussions and decipher complex concepts. The use of the narrative enables a departure from the safety of technical scholarly jargon and offers a vivid illustration of everyday, lived-in experiences that are accessible across boundaries (Ferber, 1998; Tatum, 1997). Employing a post structuralist approach in their use of narratives, scholars seek to highlight the "the role of the social in producing reality" (Cumo & Hall, 1998, p. 7). It is also remarkable that, while seeking to interrogate Whiteness, their gaze still seems fixed upon "Otherness", particularly Blackness. For example, Hill's (1997) compilation of essays seems to be packed with articles that dissect some of the most recognizable historical and recent representations of discourses about Blackness. These include black face and minstrel shows, Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas inquiry, the Rodney King scandal, the OJ Simpson trial, just to name a few. It leaves one wondering: Can Whiteness be examined by removing the gaze from Otherness? In other words, is it conceivable to "Mak[e] whiteness rather than white racism the focus of study...[as] an important pedagogical strategy"? (Giroux, 1997, p. 309). Critical White Studies is packed with examples illustrating that, while racism is an essential component of White privilege and power, its analysis needs to go beyond just examining how it manifests itself on the bodies and minds of Otherness.

Over the past several years, there has been a proliferation of printed literature, including material employing new mediums. Scholars engaged in Critical White Studies demonstrate in their works that Whiteness does indeed have meaning within the real world. It is not a static entity, but evolves and changes (Frankenberg, 2001). In particular, the internet has expanded the boundaries of Critical White Studies exponentially, as more people can access this information,

stimulating more dialogue and production of knowledge. For example, the book *Race Traitor* (Ignatiev & Gary, 2002) has been adopted into a web site and a magazine, each bearing its name. It advocates "New Abolitionism", where Whites become "race traitors" by relinquishing their active dominance over Otherness and striving to attack institutional racism. *The Center for the Study of White American Culture* also hosts a web site, which possesses a plethora of information, ranging from newsletters, papers, dissertations, references to books, and much more. Jay's (2002) site *Whiteness Studies* similarly offers access to a myriad of texts that critically examine Whiteness. These are a few of the many resources that are rapidly emerging across the world wide web. What is particularly useful about them, is their links to other web sites and detailed descriptions of information that will assist in accessing other sources of information.

"Whiteness" is the result of racial discourses that have evolved and placed it at the top of the racial hierarchy. Any examination of it must acknowledge its roots in history. The proceeding chapter will detail the historical evolution of racial discourses.

CHAPTER 2 - THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE WHITE RACIAL CATEGORY

2.1 Introduction

As this text explores "Whiteness", it will become evident that, rather than being a "denotation" and description of a fixed entity existing in nature, Whiteness is a "connotation", used to describe a *vertically and horizontally connected* social construction. *Vertical connectedness* refers to one's linkage to time and history. It is "based on a pre-conscious recognition of traditionally held patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving" (Arce, 1982, cited in Pinderhughes, 1989, p.137). *Horizontal connectedness* describes present linkage to others who share the same ways of thinking and same feelings of belonging in the world. It constitutes a bridge to all that is external (Acre, 1982). Via these vertical and horizontal linkages, cultural identity guards against "emotional cutoff from the past and psychological abandonment in the present" (Pinderhughes, 1989, p.10). Simply put, White racial identities are based on their (vertical) link to past historical events and (horizontal) connections to other individuals in society.

While Whiteness is often used as a connotation describing "Europeaness", it is not a racial category that is inherently European. Examples of its use in describing non European groups of people can be found in Chinese, Middle Eastern, and African histories (Bonnett, 2000; Segal,1991). Europeans eventually claimed this identity and cast themselves in the role of Whiteness, which they determined to be the most desirable among all racialized identities. Goldberg (1993) posits that, racialized discourses were creations of modernity and historically emanated from the creation of what is now "The West". Carr (1997) emphasizes the significant role of race in colonialism, focusing on the English expansion of its empire into North America. The English dominance of world history, particularly their brand of race based oppression, enabled them to establish a strangle-hold on much of the globe. Due to their strong influence on

North American and other "New World" populations, this section will explore the meaning of Whiteness as it relates particularly to English history. Similar to its colonial founder, its history of violence, domination, slavery, and oppression, qualifies the United States as a "major locus" in the evolution of racial discourses across the globe (Muir, 1997; Carter & Jones, 1996; Cohen, 1997). Therefore, race in the United States must also be examined. While this will not be an exhaustive historical analysis, it will highlight some of the factors that have cemented Whiteness to the top of the racial hierarchy.

2.2   Whiteness and Capitalism

> Social structures and material conditions mean that discourses and language give expression to particular power relations, and lock people into various forms of subjectivity...Certain discourses dominate...
>
> (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 165)

Race, gender, class and other social designations often work in concert with each other to maintain power hierarchies and oppression within society (Washington, 1979; Gutman & Berlin, 1987; Frankenberg, 1993; Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Fredrickson, 1997; Lipsitz, 1998; Thandeka, 1999). The thread that links historical descriptions of race together is the notion of power and domination. In order to justify the oppression of "Others", their categorization as inferior was necessary. For example, race as a classification of "Otherness" was used by the English and then the Americans to justify the subjugation of indigenous peoples, based on perceivable differences (i.e. skin color, dress) (Smeadley 1999; Banton 1988; Wander, Martin, Nakayama,1999; Pinderhughes, 1989). With the arrival of Africans to the North American continent, racial categorization became more extensive (Carter, 1995). The apparition of race and racism into history was largely the result of White skinned European conquest and colonization of people who were typically darker in complexion (Smeadley, 1999; Carter, 1995; Cohen, 1997; Jacobson, 1998). This began in the 15th century. By the nineteenth century, as the intricacies

of racism flourished, the White skinned Europeans had gained economic and military domination over a significant portion of the world (Gates, 1997b; Banton, 1988; Conley, 2001).

When discussing the notion of "race", Carr (1997) differentiates between race and nation. "Nation" confers rights, including self-determination upon a people (ie. Native nations, rather than Indian "race"). Classifying "Others" as members of racialized groups (ie. African Americans with all Blacks across the globe) trivialized their rights and removed the need for their political recognition. Whiteness was created and continues to function as a means of describing those who have preferential access to economic advancement and social and political control over society (Lipsitz, 1998; Winant, 2001; Weis, et al, 1997; Crawford, 1998). As the proceeding inquiry will reveal, the paradox of race is that "Race is irrelevant, but all is race" (Goldberg, 1993, p. 6). The evolution of the racial discourse is based upon historical economic power dynamics entrenched in social institutions (Gallagher, 1996; Carr, 1997; Alcoff, 1999). Religious, scientific, and other social institutions served as the scripts from which these relationships of domination were performed (Smeadley 1999, Banton 1988; Yee, et al, 1996; Duster, 2001).

2.2.1 Religion and race in the 16th century

The social hierarchy of early English societies was based on religion, nationality (*Englishness*), and economic status. The term "race" can be traced back to the sixteenth century as it denoted genealogical and class identity (Gates, 1997b; Banton, 1998). The poet William Dunbar is credited with its first apparition in 1508, as he used *racis*, in reference to categories of people, rather than its usual use in reference to livestock (Muir, 1997; Goldberg, 1993). This term departed from its original use as an artistic description of individuals. It was systematically re-designed to signify an injurious meaning in the classification of human beings.

Through its explanations for how the natural world was ordered, religion was complicit in solidifying racist categories in colonial societies. (Smeadley, 1999; Bonnett, 2000). Stories within

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the Bible were identified as indicators of the inferiority of certain races, particularly Blacks. For example, the notion of universal descent of all humans from Adam and Eve was widely accepted. However, splits from this genealogical tree were also identified, particularly in reference to Africans. Africans were deemed the descendants of Ham and cursed by God (Banton, 1988). According to this belief, Blacks wore their curse upon their darkened skins. Therefore, It was God who determined that they indeed warranted an inferior status (Banton, 1988; Jacobson, 1998). Carr (1997) and Jordan (1969) refute this Biblical interpretation, and assert that, while Ham was cursed for looking upon his father's nakedness and was destined to remain a servant for the rest of his days, there was no mention of him being blackened. The description of dark skin mentioned in the Jewish Talmud was adopted by Christians as a justification of slavery and the abominable treatment of Blacks (Carr, 1997). It is important to note that early European colonizers identified and differentiated themselves from Otherness through their Christianity or their national origin, rather than due to their racial grouping (as Whites) (Barnett, 2000). As the proceeding section will demonstrate, it was the industry of slavery that produced their change in racial identification.

2.2.2 Race and 17th century

Early on in seventeenth century North America, Blacks occupied an inferior status not due to the colour of their skins but, rather, as a result of their non Christian status (Finkelman, 1997). Black slaves were initially treated in the same manner as European indentured servants, rather than as mere chattel (Saxton, 1997). Until then, religion was the means by which the natural world was explored and explained. But an emphasis on the *provable* knowledge, found in science emerged. Therefore, it can be argued that scientific explanations for oppression of inferior populations were manufactured to alter the way that race was determined. It permanently altered the fate of Blacks.

Banton (1988) asserts that Eurocentric socio-scientific racial projects defined the boundaries of social inclusion or exclusion. The results of these projects was the "universalization" of Whiteness, or the demarcation of Whiteness as representing what it meant to be human (Montag, 1997). The principle of graduation (higher beings were worth more than lower ones) employed in the classification, furthered the process of racial differentiation and supremacy of the white race in demarcating the boundaries of humanity (Goldberg, 1993; Alcoff, 1999). In 1684 French physician François Bernier was credited with using race as a classification of human beings according to physical characteristics. Based upon their geographical locations across the globe, he created the categories: Europeans, Far Easterners, Negroes, and Lapps (Muir, 1997, Cohen, 2001).

The changing status of the African illustrates the intimate connection between capitalistic pursuits of wealth and the need for racial categories. The first Africans to arrive in the English colonies had the status of indentured servants, thus had the right to work towards buying their own freedom (although high mortality rates meant that most lived out their lives as servants). Their humanity was unquestioned (Finkelman, 1997). The Portuguese were the first to largely rely on the labour of enslaved Africans (since the 1400s) (Smeadley, 1999). By the1600s, indigenous populations in countries colonized by Europeans were succumbing to the brutal conditions of slavery and began to perish. Attempts to fully exploit the slave labour of indigenous peoples had failed, thus creating a desire for the labour of what was perceived to be the sturdier African (Muir 1997; Smeadley 1999). Hence, justifications were manufactured in order to maintain control over the economically attractive, forced labour of Africans (Saxton, 1997). Wright (1997) describes the *reasonable* conclusion that sealed the fates of all Africans:

> By linking slavery to race, slave escapes became much more difficult, particularly once all blacks were presumed to be slaves...racial classification became of critical importance in American society - it could be the difference between freedom and slavery and later, the difference between privilege and disenfranchisement. (p.165)

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Chattel slavery was the institution from which many of our modern racist concepts have evolved (Segrest, 2001). The racialization of slavery was not only beneficial to the planter class (plantation owners) who could avail themselves of free labour for indefinite periods of time (because there was no longer the menace of a slave earning freedom), but non slave owning Whites (including indentured servants) also stood to benefit (Segal, 1991; Thandeka, 1999). Roediger (1991) provides a most stirring analysis as he asserts that:

> [t]he economic and political interests defending Black slavery were far more powerful
> than those defending indentured servitude.
>   (quoted in Harris, 1995, p. 278).

This means that it became more socially and economically beneficial to encourage and protect the institution of slavery than it was to maintain the status of Africans as servants, who could enjoy the same rights as non Africans. Slavery was seen as the *natural relation*, the marker or *natural condition* between the races as it "underwrote an ideology of united, consanguine whiteness" (Jacobson, 1998, pp. 37-199). Some "racialized Whites" (ie. non-English, European immigrants) who also occupied the ranks of the oppressed class were freed from the threat of competing with emancipated Black slaves for paid labour (Smeadley 1999, Nakayama & Martin, 1999; Cohen, 1997). Thandeka (1999) asserts that Blacks and servant class Whites (i.e. indentured servants, paid laborers) shared common grievances against the White ruling class. The ruling planter class (plantation owners) actively sought to protect its own social and economic interests by disabling any threat that a Black-White servant class alliance may have had on their abusive strangle hold of social and economic power. Legal decrees and limited social reforms affixed higher status to servant class Whites, which eventually had the effect of erasing their collective memory of commonalities with Blacks (Thandeka, 1999). The broader inclusion of groups into the White racial category effectively appealed to the servant class of Whites. It afforded them limited rights

(although class issues still persisted) and they could conceivably (although this seldomly occurred) gain entry into the higher social echelon (Harris, 1995; Thandeka, 1999; Smeadley, 1999). In spite of their continued oppression at the hands of the ruling class, they were nonetheless elevated above Blacks, whose singular social status was that of the slave. Linking "Blackness" to slavery thus created a bottom rung on the hierarchy, within which they could never be classified (Smeadley, 1999; Gutman & Berlin, 1987).

2.2.3 The increased racial classification of the18th & 19th centuries

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were eras when many of the earlier explanations about race became more sophisticated. The "Enlightenment Period" (18th century) signified a period when even more emphasis was placed on scientific reasoning. Systems of classification and the reliance on measuring nature were hallmarks of this period. In turn, science continued to be used to classify and rank "differences" between individuals and create racial categories based on these perceived differences. One pioneering text was Carolus Linnaeus' (a naturalist) *Natural System* (1735) which introduced racial taxonomy, where all living things, including humans were categorized (Watts, 1997; Muir, 1997; Duster, 2001). During this era, physical differences continued to denote the racial category within which individuals would be classified. For example, physician Samuel Morton collected thousands of skulls and created racial classifications according to skull size (Muir, 1997). These physical differences were complemented with descriptions of intellectual and moral traits viewed as inherent to each racial category. His findings were later (in 1981) found to be fraudulent by Stephen Jay Gould (Carr, 1997, p. 41). Georges Louis Leclerc, the Compte de Buffon's *Natural History* (1749) contributed the notion of infertility as evidence of mankind being comprised of the same species (Smeadley, 1999). If beings could reproduce an offspring that was fertile, this signified their membership to the same species. The Black and White racial groups were recognized as

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belonging to the same species, as a fertile offspring could be produced (Banton, 1988). Buffon also believed that the skin colour "white" represented normal human pigmentation and that the skins of Black individuals were temporarily darkened by the intense rays of the sun (on their continent of origin, Africa) (Ferber 1998; Bonnett, 2000). The classification of race became increasingly sophisticated with Johnann Freidrich Blumenbach's, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1775). Each category of race was ranked according to its proximity to the "civilized" and superior "Caucasians" (Ferber, 1998). Not only was classification based upon physical traits (such as skin tone) but, each race was ranked according to subjective values and interpretations, such as perceived "beauty". (The term "Caucasian" was coined as a result of Blumenbach's belief that "Caucasus" (in Russia) "produced the world's most beautiful women") (Ferber, 1998, p. 29).

2.2.4 Darwinism and the 19th century

Darwin's *Theory of Natural Selection*, referred to differences in beings as indicators of their ability to adapt to their environments. Darwin's theories, for the most part, resolved the *poly genesis* versus *mono genesis* debates regarding whether humans were all descended from the same ancestors or not (Smeadley, 1999). Evidence that humans share common ancestry was quite convincing, hence, polygenesists shifted their emphasis away from origin, towards evolution. There was growing attachment to the belief that Whites gained their superior status due to their more advanced evolution (Banton, 1988). They were viewed as further along on the evolutionary scale. Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) were adopted to racist ideologies. These ideologies not only acknowledged racial classifications (including the "skull experiment"), but they justified the inferior status of Blacks as being located between the Caucasian (Whites) and *the gorilla* (Banton & Harwood, 1975; Gould, 1981; Goldberg, 1993). Thus, science continued to differentiate between White and non-White, espousing what Jacobson

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(1998) deemed "the politics and practices of white supremacism" (p. 37).

2.3   The 20th century and beyond

The literature suggests that twentieth century science has firmly rejected the notion of racial categories as having any scientific foundation (Gould, 1981; Banton, 1988; Goldberg, 1993; Saxton, 1997; Smeadley, 1993 & 1999; Bonnett, 2000). Although having no foundation in science, the notion of race continues to be relevant due to the social significance that has been accorded to it. For example, racial topography and stereotypes are employed to maintain the institution of racism. Even after the emancipation of Black slaves in America (in 1865), both science and religion conspired to continue to justify their inferior status and to prevent them from gaining social, economic, and political power (Banton 1988, Ferber 1998, Smeadley 1999). Some of the theories about race developed in previous eras, ranging from biblical to biological explanations, have remained embedded in social and (pseudo) scientific debates about race throughout the twentieth century. Wills (1997) talks about melanin and its function beyond the naked eye:

> ...because its effect is so visible in our skin, it has been made to be an utterly undeserved burden of sociology and political significance. There are far more genetic differences among people who make up these arbitrary constructs we call races than there are differences between races.
>
> (Wills, 1997, p. 15)

Lipsitz (1998) argues that individuals are encouraged by public policies and private acts to invest in Whiteness, by actively participating in its perpetuation. These investments yield strong returns in the form of access to financial and social resources. Even this most powerful social identity is itself "fluid" and "continuously being constructed and reconstructed" (Bowser & Hunt, 1996). Whiteness is a property that can be acquired (Harris, 1995; Carr, 1997; Lipsitz, 1998). Ruling class membership seems to influence classification into the White racial category

(Lipsitz, 1998). The migration to the 'New World' of immigrants from across Europe influenced the expansion of the White racial category (Jacobson, 1998) from its original colonial meanings. An increased understanding of how groups of people gained access to this ruling race is necessary. While communities such as Eastern Europeans and some Jewish people eventually gained access to the White racial category, the following section will briefly examine the Irish promotion to this dominant group.

2.4 How the Irish became White & Blacks became slaves

> Whiteness and property have a common quality or premise, namely, the right to exclude.
>
> (Delgado & Stefanic, 1996, p. 46).

The notion of "ruling class membership" as criterion for membership into the White racial category has already been mentioned. For example, for centuries, the Irish who endured brutal treatment under English domination were viewed as savages and of a different race than their colonial dominators (Roediger, 1991). The treatment that they endured paralleled, in certain ways, the exclusion that Blacks endured in the New World, as their inferior status was also codified into law (ie. couldn't vote, receive skilled training, own land, etc.) (Smeadley 1999). The Irish served as forced labour within Europe and were also exported to the New World as indentured servants (Smeadley 1999). Blacks and Irish also shared the role of strike breakers (Cohen, 1997). Why then did the Irish gain superior status and eventual acceptance into the White racial category? The Irish situation is an excellent illustration of "racial oppression without reference to alleged skin color or, as the jargon goes, "phenotype" (Allen, 1994, p. 22). Being accepted as White meant that the Irish were given the opportunity to enjoy some of the privileges that this rise in social status offered. This included owning property. For Africans, it meant that they became property (Carr, 1997). The following is a summary of some of the

explanations presented by Smeadley, (1999, pp. 100-111) for the "Whitening" of the Irish and the permanent enslavement of Africans. It is important to note that many of these same arguments are made by other authors such as Allen (1994), Carr (1997), and Cohen (1997). Notions to consider in the process of Irish *Whitening* are as follows:

> 1) African slaves were regarded as even more docile and "civilized" than the Irish, who were known to engage in "drunken brawls" and attack their masters. The Irish were viewed as "having a dangerous nature" that was distinct from Black slaves.

> 2) The Irish historically aligned themselves with enemies of their English dominators in armed conflicts. Hence, they had allies within the Americas and in Europe who contested their forced labour. In particular, the Spanish and French who also relied on the slave labour of Africans were undisturbed by their life-long forced servitude, but they were disapproving of their Irish ally being treated in the same manner.

> 3) When the Irish rebelled and escaped, their white skins made it easier for them to blend into the community. Retrieving them was a difficult (and costly) task that some eventually abandoned.

> 4) As the Irish were products of European values and societies, they were more aware of the rights that they possessed and the laws under which they could be protected. Smeadley emphasizes that this knowledge may in part explain their frequent rebellions.

Eventually, ranking the Irish alongside the African became less attractive and increasingly unnecessary. The sheer "complications" that using Irish labour posed made African labour the "natural" choice upon which to solidify a slave based economy. Furthermore, the permanence of African slavery meant that, as long as they produced offspring, it would be possible to maintain an endless supply of free labour (Smeadley, 1999). The classification of Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy initiated the process of the Irish vertical climb towards Whiteness. As mentioned in the preceding section outlining the historical evolution of race, it is important to emphasize the advantageous situation it created for the ruling planter class. Creating a permanent schism between their unpaid/enslaved and poorly compensated/oppressed workforce prevented

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any unified challenges to their economic and social power (Bowser & Hunt, 1999). Several authors referred to this as "White unity" which was a means of perpetuating the economic and social benefits of racism, by maintain the polarity between the free slave labour of Blacks, and the low wage labour of Whites (Helms, 1990; Essed, 1991; Muir, 1991; McIntosh, 1995; Bowser & Hunt, 1999; to name a few). Relabeling the Irish removed them from their non-White status alongside Black slave labour. It aligned them with other "White" laborers who opposed the progression of Black free labour (Roediger, 1991, quoted in Bowser & Hunt, 1999). The increase of immigrants with more visible traits that signify difference, assisted the Irish climb exponentially.

We have been examining how racial categories were constructed and maintained historically. But, what does White racial identity mean for individuals who have been granted membership into the White racial category? The following chapter will explore answers to issues related to "The social significance of Whiteness".

CHAPTER 3 - THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF WHITENESS

3.1   Introduction

> Over time, race has acquired a social meaning in which these biological differences, via the mechanism of stereotyping, have become markers for status assignment within the social system. [It has] evolved into complex social structures that promote a power differential between Whites and various people-of-color.
>
> (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 71)

Although having no foundation in science, the notion of race continues to be relevant due to the social significance that has been accorded to it. The categorization of individuals according to race hurled some to the bottom of the hierarchy, while Whites were propelled to the top. While racial categories fluctuate (i.e. Irish now White), there is a constant placement of Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (although closely preceded by Native Americans) (Williams, 1998). The following sections will continue to examine "The social significance of Whiteness", as it briefly explores its absence from racial discourses.

3.2   The absence of the Whiteness from racial discourses

Language serves as an indicator of values and perceptions of society.   Not surprisingly, the language used to describe Whiteness is sparse. Whites have been examining and affixing labels to "Others", but the same attention and vigor has not been applied to their own identification. hooks (1990), McIntosh (1992) and Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, and Bradford (1999) highlight a dilemma that I experienced in trying to define Whiteness: definitions are often tautological in nature (ie. Whiteness = Whiteness), indicating a lack of substance and meaning affixed to this identity. Martin, Krizek, et al (1999) identify the ideographic functioning of Whiteness, as it takes on the same powerful significance as concepts such as "freedom", which our society proclaims to be unquestionable notions (p. 44).

3.3   Whiteness *does* have meaning

Whiteness does have meaning. Frankenberg (2001) reminds us that it is a relational concept evolving from colonialism, which distinguishes between the colonized and colonizer (in modern context an example is "Canadian" = White); it is perched on top of the racial hierarchy; and throughout history (and today) it has meant "I am not that Other" (p. 75). Investigations into the meaning behind "Whiteness" revealed an almost unanimous description of its ability to be invisible and unnamed (Wildman & Davis, 1996; Montag, 1997; Hill, 1997; Williams, 1998; Frankenberg, 2001). Frankenberg (2001) challenges this idea of its elusiveness, as she clarifies that it remains "unmarked" only for those who benefit from its privileges. The effects of Whiteness on racial "Others" are inevitable and impossible to ignore. Brookhiser (1996) refers to its association to success, civic-mindedness, industry, conscience, anti sensuality (as opposed to exoticism and sexuality of Otherness).

Whiteness is regarded as *unquestionable;* it is the normality, against which all "Otherness" is measured and categorized (Allen 1993; Carter, 1995; Carr, 1997; Frankenberg 1997; Hardiman 1994; McIntosh 1994; Nakayama & Krizek 1995; Ramussen, et al, 2001). As Montag (1997) describes in detail, Whiteness is the universal descriptor of humanity. It is implied to be the generic representation of normality. When one talks about "a person" they are usually assumed to be White, unless Otherness is specified. Whiteness is an individual and collective marker of power and privilege, which inevitably shapes one's world view (Giroux, 1997). For example, a University of Saskatchewan sociology professor distributed a questionnaire to students entitled "Who is White?". It listed various nationalities and asked students to classify each according to their racial grouping. The responses revealed interesting differences in how students perceived race. The author concluded that:

Melanin content - strict biological skin colour has little to do with the verdict on

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the great mass of light brown, in-between people...[T]o be labeled as a white
nation it is at least as important to be a member of NATO or another pro Western
alliance, politically stable, wealthy and industrialized. Anti West, poor,
politically unstable (especially revolutionary) and non industrialized countries
tend to be excluded from the white race...political economy of race classification
suggests...whiteness or master race membership has been virtual synonymous
with ruling class membership

<div align="center">(Daniels, 1997, pp. 53-54)</div>

The preceding description of "How the Irish Became White and Blacks Became Slaves" illustrates

that Whiteness is not assumed, but is granted. White status implies social, economic, political,

and psychological privileges (Roediger, 1991). McIntosh (1988) describes the "knapsack of

invisible privileges" automatically assigned to all those considered White. She highlights benefits

of being White that are practical (i.e. "I can chose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that

more or less matches my skin"), social ("I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my

skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability"), and psychological ("If my

day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it

has racial overtones") : As stated before, Whiteness is assumed to represent 'goodness' and

morality. The results of this is that it is provided the "moral justification" for its "privileged"

status (Weis et al., 1997, p.212).

Thus far, there have been descriptions of the material and social benefits of Whiteness,

historically and in today's society. The next chapter will go beyond that which is visible, as it

explores The Psychology of Whiteness.

CHAPTER 4 - THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WHITENESS

4.1   The psychological burden of Whiteness

As discussed in previous chapters, Whiteness is given meaning through socio-political and historical developments. But, in the same way as it acts as a possession that attracts privileges, so too does it *possess* those draped with its powerful label (Lipsitz, 1998). Discourses involving race are often infused with deep emotional conflicts. Whites are routinely excluded from racial identification outside of accusations of racism. Thus, acknowledging White racial identity or being identified as White, frequently evokes shame, anger, and fear (Gallagher, 1997; Martin, et al; Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1992). Even <u>talking</u> about Whiteness evokes powerful emotions that one would attribute to the the discussion of a taboo subject, a vile illness, or the violation of a sacred agreement (Thandeka, 1999; hooks, 1995; Pinderhughes, 1989; Helms, 1989, 1990; Thompson & Carter 1997; O'Donnell & Clark, 1999). There is reluctance by some individuals to be associated with this race. For, while conferring upon them privileges, it also denotes the oppression of Others (Hill, 1997; Frankenberg, 2001; McIntosh, 1992). Therefore, Whiteness can sometimes become "a weight rather than a privilege" (Roediger, 1997, p. 44). At the same time that it is something to be claimed (even subconsciously), it is also something to be (actively) avoided (Hill, 1997, p. 3).

4.2   White Racial Identity in Practice Settings

In spite of its powerful impact on people's lives, Whiteness is often ignored within therapeutic settings (Helms, 1984, 1990; Yee, et al, 1993; Carter, 1995). It is usually not even considered in White client/White worker relationships. When mentioned by visible minorities, it is often viewed as holding very little significance or is characterized as the use of defensive strategies to avoid tackling *real* issues (Carter, 1995). Calling upon "humanistic existential" (focus on client and his experiences) theorists such as Carl Rogers, Viktor Frankl, and Frits Perls,

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Carter (1995) identifies race as an important element in the therapeutic relationship (p. 20). This is a belief that is echoed by Yee, Fairchild, Weizmann, and Wyatt (1993).

4.3   Theories exploring White racial identity

The labels that are affixed to our persons describe the roles that we are challenged to play in society.   Conceptualizing identity involves unifying one's subjectivity with socially constructed categories (Davis, 2000). Racial identity starts to be developed right from childhood through metacommunications and is reinforced through social interactions (Thompson & Carter, 1997). We receive cues, directions, and ad-lib based on overt and subconscious exchanges with individuals and structures within a racialized society and our own perception of identity influences how we see the rest of the world (Thompson & Carter 1997).

The process of 'racial self-actualization' implies that an individual has become aware and has come to terms with his racial identity, thus becoming an integrated "whole" who is more capable of dealing with racial dilemmas (Thompson & Carter 1997; Helms, 1990). Developing White racial awareness involves admitting that racism exists; acknowledging its benefits to all Whites (across ethnicities and class); and recognizing its continued reinforcement in institutional and social structures (O'Donnell & Clark, 1999). Models and typologies describing White racial identity have emanated mainly from psychology and sociology (Gorski, 1998).

Helms (1990) has extensively examined various models and typologies which seek to map White identity (See Appendix I). She identified two main categories as ones that employ topoologies to classify stages of identity development and ones that view racial identity as a process (Gorski, 1998; Thompson & Carter 1997).   Kovel, 1970; Gaertner, 1976; Jones, 1972 presented anti-racist typologies, focused on the process of recognizing the impact of racism on its victims (Helms, 1990). Some theorists such as Kovel (1970) employ a Freudian analysis of racial discourse, including notions of repression (Frankenberg, 1997). The second category

highlights the negative impacts of racism on the development of positive racial identity for Whites (Terry, 1977; Ganter, 1977; Hardiman, 1979; Carney & Kahn, 1984; Helms, 1984, 1990; Ponterotto,1988). This second category of theories adheres to Lawrence and Bunche's (1996) assertions regarding the need for White individuals to not only recognize their own racial identity and the racist privileges they enjoy, but to work towards affecting social change, by challenging institutional racism (as cited in Gorski, 1998). Helms' stages (1984) or statuses (1990) of White racial identity are overwhelmingly the most cited when White identity is explored (Carter, 1990; Thompson & Carter, 1990; Delgado & Stefanic, 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; Gorski, 1998; Rasmussen et al, 2001). The later version of White Racial Identity Stages (WRIAS) emphasized the non-linear status of identity. It rejected the notion of identity consisting of fixed, mutually exclusive categories. The statuses represent traits that we exhibit in response to different situations that we may encounter (Helms, 1990). It recognizes that we are not always at one "status", but our classification against the model will vary. Thompson & Carter (1990) emphasize that this is a spiraling process, rather than one that is linear and is a life-long process.

The consensus is that comfort with identity, emotional security, professional competence, and the freedom to confront racial dilemmas are some of the positive outcomes that Whites can enjoy, once they resolve issues related to their own racial identity (Erikson, 1968; Gehrie, 1979; Winnicott, 1971; Pinderhughes, 1989; Helms, 1989, 1990; Thompson & Carter 1997; O'Donnell & Clark, 1999).

CHAPTER 5 - THE CURRENT PROCESS OF EXAMINING WHITENESS

5.1   Rationale for research methodology: Qualitative versus Quantitative

This project of examining White racial identity was very much a phenomenological endeavor, where the very act of engaging in research did not only illicit information, generate concepts, and deconstruct old notions, but it also gave rise to the form or approaches employed (Coenen ,1996). The methodological form that this project took on, followed very much an organic and evolutionary process.

One of the first decisions that had to be made about the methodological approach was whether it should be a qualitative or a quantitative inquiry. The initial stages of the research process (even before structuring the research design) involved delving into the literature on White racial identity. In this initial review of literature, over sixty books and articles (including previous studies) had been examined. Early examinations of the literature revealed that many of the studies exploring White racial identity have been quantitative in nature. Frequently employing Helms' (1984,1990) White Racial Identity Statuses (WRIAS), they categorized and quantified varying degrees of racial identity. In keeping with this trend, a quantitative examination of White racial identity was considered.

I appreciated that quantitative research is outcome oriented, reliable (replaceable data), "generalizable" to the larger population, and "assumes a stable reality" (Oakley, 1999, p. 156). I also assumed that quantitative approaches offer a greater potential to achieve objectivity (Riessman, 1994). Helms' (1990) White racial identity status had a tool that could be used to measure the level of racial awareness of prospective participants. Thus, the goal was to employ Helms' (1990) White Racial Identity Scale (the tool which identifies placement on list of statuses) to quantitatively describe the level of racial awareness that social workers in Montreal have achieved.

The political views, social location, and all that impacts on the individual perspective of the researcher strongly influence the choice of research methodology (Fook, 1996; Sadique, 1996). I am a Black, middle-class female, whose interest in exploring White racial identity goes beyond intellectual curiosity and towards personal necessity. Due to the seemingly abundant amount of research that dissects the personas and the lives of Blacks and People of Color, I sought to examine the 'un-named' race - Whiteness. My personal experiences and initial examination of literature suggested that 'everyday Whiteness', Whiteness as it affects individuals in their daily lives, is seldom addressed. I recognized that quantitative research reduces the complexity of the human experience to numbers and theoretical categories (Hall, 1988). Approaches such as surveys and closed ended questionnaires force participants to make certain choices, with little possibility of expressing individual nuances; they falsely portray the individual as static (never changing, always fitting into categories); and they oversimplify images of reality (Hall, 1988). Again, I considered the relatively large amount of quantitative data available. While I believed that quantitative methodologies would possibly be perceived as 'more credible', objective, and more readily accepted, I believed that it was important to engage participants in a dialogue about Whiteness. In particular, I thought that it was important to engage social workers within the Montreal area in a discussion that I believed had tremendous potential to do more than fulfill my requirements for a Masters' thesis. I hoped the discussion would produce changes within them as White individuals and White Social Workers. Thus, I decided to decline the use of positivist methods of inquiry in order to explore the notion of Whiteness. As the research process evolved, the resemblance of this endeavor to participatory action research became more evident.

5.2   Participatory Action Research

> ...that hoary old aphorism of Marshall McLuhan, 'the medium is the message',
> might be rephrased 'The doing is the message.' Or in more conventional terms,
> the attempt to do research may often be understood as an analogue of the very
> activities being investigated and thus reveals much about the subject of the
> research.
>
> <div align="right">(Healy, 1996, p. 71)</div>

Drawing from the phenomenological approach, my goal was to explore the participants'
understanding of Whiteness, from their own perspectives and through their experiences
(Riessman, 1994; Oakley, 1999). A qualitative inquiry would allow for a discussion that
seldomly occurs. As Fook (1996) suggests, a qualitative methodology avoided the imposition of
a structured framework and sought to generate observations. I decided that the discussion would
be framed within the context of a focus group. Although I believed that a qualitative inquiry
would give rise to a unique dialogue about Whiteness, I still hesitated, as I considered how I
would approach to focus group.

My academic past ingrained in me the belief that the form in which ideas are presented is
almost as important as the content. I believed that academic work had to be framed within an
'objective' package that was presented as 'neutral'. Thus, due to my desire to present a *truly*
academic text, I initially attempted to maintain an 'objective' and 'professional' distance by
eliminating my own subjectivity from the research process. While I recognized that it was
impossible to totally 'disappear' from the process, attempts were made to camouflage or
minimize my visibility. Early correspondences with my thesis supervisor Peter Leonard and the
Chair of the Masters' Committee (at the time) Julia Krane, expressed my ambivalence regarding
how my own subjectivity and how my "Blackness" would impact the research process. Some
of my concerns are outlined in the following correspondence:

I had intended on introducing myself to participants and describing my involvement (of

<div align="center">*30*</div>

course informing them that this is my project) when I recruited them for the study; and then re-introducing myself before I observed the focus group. The reason why I was ambivalent about actually conducting the group is because of my recognition that probing and discussing racial identity can be very difficult. (I myself have used Helms' Black Racial Development Theory to explore my own identity and was quite surprised by the intense feelings that it evoked). I thought that (especially for individuals who are less sophisticated) exploring issues related to White racial identity with a Black woman would be awkward and uncomfortable. People may end up saying things that they think I may want to hear or engage in "confession" as they may feel judged by me. As you have done, Peter also stressed the importance of locating myself in the research and explicitly stating implications of my own racial identity on the research process. I agree with your comments about "truth" being "a relative term" and the importance of locating myself in the research process. Upon reflection, I realize that by trying to disengage myself from data collection, I was implying that researchers can only effectively conduct research within their own racial grouping...

(Krane, J., personal communication, April 12, 2002)

While I actually considered "observing" the research (rather than actively participating in it), I eventually recognized the powerful opportunity for promoting social change that this process offered. Not only would I acquire new language and skills for discussing and identifying White racial identity, but the very act of exposing and analyzing Whiteness would inevitably have the effect of producing a change in participants. I hoped that their levels of awareness and perhaps even their internalization of White racial identity might be increased. Thus, this research process became an opportunity to initiate social change through participatory action research.

Although I did not set out to engage in participatory action research, social change was a motivating factor in broaching the notion of White racial identity. My vision of social change recognizes that individuals everywhere are engaged in a process of deconstructing and challenging the existing status quo. While sometimes initiated by dynamic actions or formidable events, for the most part, positive social change is the sum of the seemingly insignificant efforts made by individuals to promote a just society. Focused on promoting social change and social analysis, an action research framework must involve research, action, and participation (Greenwood &

Levin, 1998). Social action is seen as the means through which analysis occurs, knowledge is generated, and change promoted. By asking social workers to think about and talk about Whiteness, I recognized that changes within their person would be inevitable. Even if they refused to label themselves as White, the very attempt to acknowledge and discuss this invisible subject was a powerful act. I also hoped that this would have a rippling effect, as their racialization affected how they see the world and how they interact with others (White individuals and *Otherness*).

Action researchers embrace a more collaborative process of gathering information. The goal of the researcher is to forge a dialogical relationship with the participants. The researcher must urge participants to not remain the *objects of research* (Friere, 1988). The 'Friereian' dialogical approach was important in this particular process, due to the invisibility of Whiteness, and the lack of frequency in which situations are created to expose and discuss it. Therefore, I emphasized to the participants on several occasions that I am not 'The Expert', but that we all bring our own subjective interpretations to the discussion. The knowledge, revelations, analysis, and critical awareness that the discussions evoked, were to be employed by the participants in the examination of their own identity, in their interactions with friends and colleagues, and in their roles as social workers. I argue that, just by engaging in the focus group, participants are putting into action the fruits of the research process - identifying Whiteness and considering their own membership to this racial category. While I hoped that they would actively use their experience in their personal and professional lives, the very act of engaging in the focus group was a decisive step in the promotion of positive change.

5.3 The Focus group

Focus group was favored due to the opportunity it offered for interaction and discussion among participants (Morgan, 1996). The literature review revealed that for the most part, not

only is White racial identity seldomly discussed but, for many, it may not even be identifiable. With this in mind, I prepared an Interview Guide with a detailed list of open-ended questions. It was used to elicit information, encourage participants to share their narratives and opinions, and engage in a collective examination of Whiteness (see Appendix II). While many of the questions reflect information found in the literature, a study conducted by Alfonso Associates also proved quite helpful in the structuring of the focus group and formulating questions.

5.3.1 *The Setting*

The location of the focus group was at Thompson House, in the McGill Graduate Student Society building. This large Victorian building houses a pub on the main floor, and several lounges and meeting rooms on upper floors. We occupied a meeting room. This location was chosen to ensure a neutral, 'professional', yet comfortable environment. The discussion took place in a medium sized room with a large conference table in the middle. Participants sat on both sides of the table and I sat at the head of the table. At the other end of the room (opposite me), a video camera was mounted. It was controlled by Robert (Professional Social Worker) who was listed on the Research & Ethics Board application form as a researcher. It is also important to note that the discussion took place on one of the first days of a heat wave. Two open windows (shaded by large trees outside of them) and pitchers of ice water provided some relief from the heat. Snacks were also provided. The extreme heat and my concern for participants' comfort, motivated me to exercise a strict adherence to the group established time limit for the discussion.

5.3.2 *Recruitment of participants*

Social work teachers, senior students, and individuals working in clinical and community settings, who I identified as White (due to their Caucasian appearance, in particular white pigmentation) and who espouse an anti-racist approach to their practice were sought. While I

recognized the difficulty that accompanies any focus on Whiteness, I believed that they would be most capable of engaging in and reflecting upon Whiteness and its meanings in society and within themselves.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. This involved word-of-mouth contacts and written requests for participants (Appendix III). Letters were sent to some professors' e-mail addresses (at McGill University) describing the nature of the research and requesting their participation and the participation of their students. Verbal and written contact was made with students and other individuals known to express anti-racist beliefs. Once six (6) individuals had been recruited, a follow-up letter describing the date, time, and location of the research was sent to all participants.

5.3.3 Description of participants

Although a notable amount of interest was generated among prospective participants, only six (N=6) were required. On the day of the focus group, two participants withdrew their participation. "Eve" is a social worker with over ten years of experience working with adults and youth from disadvantaged communities, within paragovernmental and community organizations. Eve withdrew her participation due to health difficulties that she experienced on the day of the focus group. Although "Marcel", (a senior student) confirmed his presence a couple of days before the discussion, he failed to show up to the focus group. Therefore, of the six confirmed participants, only four (N=4) actually participated in the focus group. They are as follows:

Patrick has been working in community organizing for over 25 years. Born in the United States, he possesses a rich background in community development and has participated in the initiation and development of projects aimed at benefiting racial and cultural minorities in Canada and in the U.S. He currently works as a community organizer and sessional lecturer at a Montreal university.

Anthony is of Italian descent and grew up in the City of Montreal. He possesses over fifteen years of Social Work practice in various organizations and institutions. In particular, he has

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worked with youth and is currently employed as a Social Worker at a paragovernmental organization located in what is one of Canada's most multiethnic, multi-racial neighbourhoods.

Mark is currently working with students, assisting them in issues related to their academic endeavors at a university in Montreal. He is also pursuing a Masters Degree in Social Work. A major focus of his work and academic experience involves working with youth within community based agencies. He has been actively involved with programs that deal with issues (ie. racism, homophobia, etc.) that may compromise the well-being of youth and adults alike.

Sophia is a Graduate student in the final stage of completing her Masters Degree in Social Work. Argentinean born, she moved to Montreal in the early 1990s, where she studied Social Work and worked in a number of social assistance agencies, some of which serve multiethnic and multi-racial communities. Her research and practice interests focus on work with women.

5.3.4 Data collection process

All participants were required to sign a consent form (see Appendix IV). Early on in the process, I recognized that some participants may fear being perceived as a "racist" or being revealed as less-than-knowledgeable about concepts related to the discussion of race and racial identity. Although I was aware of their anti-racist beliefs, I also understood that they may never before have participated in such a challenging discussion about race and identity. I assured all participants that their identities would be concealed. Every effort was made to diffuse discussions may develop into labeling, categorizing, and ostracizing anyone. Participants' right to withdraw at any time, without penalty or negative repercussions was conveyed in the Consent form and verbally. Participants also received an "Agenda" and description outlining how the evening would proceed (see Appendix V). I also prepared an introduction to start the discussion (Appendix VI).

The focus group was videotaped. Videotaping facilitated the verbatim transcription of the process. Each participant who spoke could be easily identified and it enabled a visual examination of physical and emotional responses throughout the dialogue. The video was viewed again in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. Once the transcript had been completed,

a summary of each participant's responses and comments was prepared. Participants then received copies and were asked to "comment on my comments". I initially suggested that the group would reassemble in order to view the videotape again and to engage in another discussion. While this meeting may eventually occur outside of the scope of this research project, it was deemed not to be feasible at this time. Although individual commitments clashed with the scheduling of the viewing of the videotape, the most pressing obstacle to meeting as a group was the need for individual discussion. The summary that was produced spawned intense emotional and intellectual conflicts, that were best addressed individually. This also offered the opportunity for participants to speak with more freedom than would have been possible within a group. Thus, individual follow-up was favored over another group discussion.

5.4   Analysis: Exploring White racial identity within theoretical frameworks

Friere (1988) refers to the transcribing or committing to paper of discussions as an important part of the research process, as it offers the opportunity to "understand the multiple implications that are discovered in collective discussions" (p. 273). Once the narratives had been committed to paper, I found it vitally important to approach their analyses from theoretical perspectives. My initial attempts to summarize the focus group interactions revealed that, without an articulated theoretical framework from which to work, my own beliefs and interpretations became blurred with those of the participants, those found within the literature, and social and cultural interpretations. While I had embraced notions of reflexive/reflective research, which included post-modernist deconstruction of fixed categories and beliefs, this had not clearly been articulated and systematically applied to the data analysis. Thus, it became evident that a theoretical framework had to be stated.

Reflective/reflexive research, hermeneutics, and postmodernism/post structuralism are all

approaches that I borrowed from, but had not identified. Each of these possessed components that I believed to be appropriate for the analysis of the focus group. The attributes that are favorable to analyzing the research data are described in the proceeding paragraphs.

5.4.1 Reflective/reflexive approach

Reflective/reflexive research recognizes that all data must be subjected to scrutiny and "are the *results of interpretation*" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 5). It asserts the belief that no one theory or framework is relevant in all situations. Therefore context, perspectives, and varying interpretations should be considered, rather than assuming one unified 'reality' (Fook, 1996). Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) suggest that the participants, researcher, community, society, intellectual and cultural traditions, and language must all be taken into account within a research context. Data collected must be regarded as the *interpretation of interpretations* and analysis must constantly consider whose interpretation it is and the various dimensions of reality at work (Healy, 1996). Reflective/reflexive analysis is also aware of the political and ideological context within which research occurs and their influence on what is explored, how it is examined, who participates, and how reality is represented and interpreted (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). A reflective/reflexive researcher examines actions, reasons, rationales and justifications ("a priori, ad hoc and post hoc") in order to identify practices, theories, and assumptions that underlie the "intuitive actions" of the research participant (Fook, 1996, p. 5).

5.4.2 Hermeneutics

My analysis of data takes into consideration the objectivist school of hermeneutical interpretation. The objectivist approach suggests that a distinction must be made between the original meaning (for participant) and the significance (for us). Meaning is unstable and changes according to context. Thus, researcher's interpretations should be placed alongside various

interpretations (e.g. historical, cultural, subject's previous statements, etc.) and a decision must be made about which interpretation should be ascribed greater "weight" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Madison (1988) refers to this as an approach that focuses on process, judgment, practical (rather than theoretical) reason and argumentation, with the goal of establishing an "inter subjectivity", rather than an absolute conception of reality (quoted in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 59).

5.4.3 Postmodernism/post structuralism

Discussing Whiteness as an identity is an ambitious endeavor, especially for those who have never had to consider this as part of their own identity. Thus, borrowing from the postmodernist/post structuralist approach, an attempt will be made to 'de-centre' and recognize identity as a process. As postmodernists call into question the idea of fixed identity, I will "shift [my] emphasis" towards language, (conscious and unconscious) thoughts, introspection, emotions, and discursive contexts, to explore how participant subjectivity is influenced by social factors (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 162). The identity that they present within the group will be an example of their narrative about themselves. Postmodernist explorations acknowledge various voices, perspectives, interpretations and narratives regarding a phenomena. Not only must the researcher decide on what is to be included or excluded and why this choice has been made, but this approach also "upholds the authority of the researcher in relation to other voices" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 185, 187).

5.4.4 Reflection/reflexion, Postmodernism, and Hermeneutics United

While I did not limit my inquiry to the use of a single approach, components of each one were considered in the analysis of data. In effect, there were overlapping elements that were useful in the process of analysis. These approaches are unified in their rejection of scientific,

positivist conceptions of reality. They favor more emancipatory and participatory approaches to research (Fook, 1996). The inherent supremacy of perspectives is challenged, recognizing the artificiality, and changing interpretations of reality. Focus on authority and what is deemed reality unites these approaches. This means that both the researcher's interpretation and the participant's assertion of authority or assumed representation of reality are equally questioned (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). The external meanings and influences (such as that which is revealed in the literature) will also be explored. Neutrality, whether researcher, participant, or theoretical is rejected.

The approaches will also be united in their favoring of a dialogical approach, where meanings will not only be recognized as produced, but will be negotiated by interactions between researcher and participants (Maso & Webster, 1996; Smaling, 1996). I, as the researcher am a story-teller who cooperates with participants to produce various narratives which are reconstructed, transcribed, and form a new narrative (Smaling, 1996). Maso & Webster (1996) acknowledge that the answers that a respondent gives during an interview are somewhat influenced by the interviewer's own bias, which is expressed in the questions asked and the responses anticipated. They further assert that, while an interviewee can give any response (even ones contrary to her belief), the goal of the researcher is to transmit the idea that there will be no 'negative consequences' to the opinions that they express. Each observation made "implies a bias of what was observed" (Maso & Webster, 1996, p. 10). Palmer's (1969) hermeneutical approach refers to being aware of the interviewee's verbal and non-verbal behaviour and how it can be interpreted and re-interpreted, both as a part of the whole process, and as a separate entity (as cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). This may also include a process of "self clarification". Thus, not only will what is said (by participants, texts, researcher) be important, but elements that are left unnamed are also essential to our

understanding of White racial identity.

As stated in preceding paragraphs, narratives are essential components of these approaches. I will remain conscious that, rather than solely being a depiction of "reality", information and narratives revealed in the research will inevitably be a reflection of the questions asked, the interactions and interpretations occurring, and an illustration of inter subjectivity. Again combining approaches, I will take a definite position. But in doing so I will differentiate whose perspective is being illustrated.

5.5 Differentiating perspectives

I wondered: "What am I to make of their interpretations, as well as my own interpretations?" While having a theoretical base (as described in preceding paragraphs), a form in which the analysis of data could be tackled still had to be considered. There are many voices that could be acknowledged in the data analysis. I recognized that the choice of which perspectives to illustrate was indeed a political act (referring to the postmodernist and hermeneutical approaches). They represent the reality within which I choose to confine the scope of the research. The narratives that will be considered in the analysis of this research process are participant narratives and interpretations; my own perspective, as researcher, participant, and as a Black woman; and the social and cultural meanings that can be ascribed, as illustrated in the literature about White racial identity. I will avoid using psychological interpretations as they not only essentialize subjectivities, but could have a pathologizing effect.

5.5.1 Format employed in the reporting of findings

The format in which the findings were reported is a response to participants' initial reaction to the post discussion summary provided (in which I requested that they "comment on my comments"). There was a very understandable reaction to what seemed to be criticism and

even the interpretation of some of their narratives as expressing racism. The intent was not to personally indict participants as racists, but to illustrate how their subjectivity may offer an insight into our understanding of Whiteness. Therefore, certain adjustments to reporting the findings had to be made to satisfy my research goal of gaining insight into White racial identity, and respecting my ethical and personal duty to minimize any emotional or other negative impact upon participants. Thus, I omitted the names of participants from the statements they made. This enabled me to focus on the interpretation, rather than the individual making the statement. I believed that it would limit the chance of forming opinions about the individual speaking. While this approach was adopted, it must be noted that, individual biographical information was commented on or referred to, when deemed necessary. While portions will be incorporated into this thesis, the summary of the focus group is also excluded from the final document submitted, in order to limit participant identification. Also, all participants will be referred to in the masculine, in order to avoid distinguishing the sole woman who participated in the focus group.

The chapters representing the interpretations of the participants, my interpretations, and the cultural/social interpretations will illustrate various themes and concepts that emerged. As much as possible, I tried to suspend my own interpretation and present (and summarize) participants narratives and interpretations as close as possible to the way in which they were presented during the focus group .

5.5.2 A note on my own role as participant, researcher, and Black woman

This dissertation is a narrative that is being produced as a result of my role as participant, researcher, and Black woman. While becoming a separate narrative brought into existence by the compilation of many different narratives, its form is determined by my subjective and political choices and omissions. In this study, I am not an objective, detached collector of data and observer, but I am a participant. I recognize my role as participant in the very personal and political choice of even broaching the topic of White racial identity. The data generated are results of my role as participant in eliciting information from the literature, other participants, and myself. As a researcher, I recognize my responsibility in moderating between my own thoughts, beliefs and emotions, and the research process. As stated in earlier sections of this chapter, commitment to this responsibility has caused me to even consider withdrawing myself from the direct collection of data, in order to minimize participant reactivity. As this study is about White racial identity, it is important to acknowledge and use my own racial identity in generating knowledge. I am a Black woman who due to my own experiences with racism have inevitably gained a life-long *awareness* of Whiteness. My on-going multi-disciplinary examination of racism, furnishes me with an authority about racial identity that I believe that the participants may lack due to their own social and racial locations. In keeping with the action research intent of this project (which considers postmodernist and hermeneutic approaches), I will at times take a position. There will be moments where I will noticeably favor my own interpretation, attributing to it supremacy. My responsibility as researcher will compel me to support my beliefs with clear explanations or information generated from the literature (particularly the most controversial or contested of my interpretations). In spite of this occasional acceptance of the supremacy of my interpretations, I will not lose sight of the "instability of truth" and will enforce the alignment of narratives and interpretations side-by-side.

CHAPTER 6 - PARTICIPANT INTERPRETATIONS OF WHITENESS

6.1 Introduction

In its addressing of Whiteness, the focus group challenged participants to talk about an identity seldomly acknowledged, and spoken of even less frequently. It challenged them to reflect on their society, as well as on their past and present conceptions of self. The following represents a summary of the major themes that emerged from the discussion. These themes are summarized under the headings: Ethnicity, geographical location and the names we call ourselves; What it means to be White; and Becoming White. These broad themes will be subdivided into sections that capture issues explored within the narratives.

6.2 Ethnicity, geographical location and the names we call ourselves

6.2.1 Ethnicity

Participants described their identification as "ethnic" beings, rather than as members of the White racial category. One participant described to the group his own journey towards embracing his ethnic identity. Inspired by the Black Civil Rights Movement's reclaiming of Black identity (illustrated in the assertion that *"Black is beautiful"*), he was provided with an approach from which he would eventually reclaim his own Irish identity:

> ...there were other aspects of identity. But...when I grew up there was a
> definition of what it meant to be Irish that was the society's definition...And
> then later on, partially because of the Black Civil Rights Movement and these
> asking of questions, I started looking at identity, I started identifying Irish.

Ethnicity is a means of identifying self that was taught and reinforced within the family unit:

> I suppose we weren't brought up that way [to identify their Whiteness]. We
> were brought up to identify with ethnic group, you know... I come from an
> Italian background. So, it's very much centered on that, "there's Italian and
> then the rest of the world!"

Participants talked about the fear of reprisals (i.e. being labeled a racist) which is associated with claiming White identity. Ethnic group serves as a positive collective that one can turn to in order to gain a sense of well-being, belonging, and pride. In response to being asked to consider whether ethnicity is being used as a shield against the label of "White", a participant asserted:

> I just want to...speak to what you said about it being a protective thing or finding some other minority group to be proud about. For me, I don't look at it as being a protective cloak, as much as it's: "I want something I can be proud of!" I feel bad because I'm a man and men have historically oppressed and patriarchy and that stuff... And now I don't feel so hot about being White, cause all the crap that my forefathers, and all that stuff, have done. So, I *need* to feel proud. We all need to feel proud about something...I think my great great grandfather apparently came from Dublin. So, ah, I grab on to that!

Another participant referred to ethnicity as a means for not having to claim Whiteness:

> Maybe it's excusing it. But it's also true that if you don't do it, then you're...more likely you're going to identify maybe as White.

While ethnic identity can serve as a source of pride, a participant cautioned that one must not assume one's ethnic group is exempt from historical attachments racism. He also described his use of ethnic pride to reduce the racism expressed by members of his Irish community:

> ...And looking back and saying, "Well, there is something called racism. And what role did the people, whom I'm proud of being proud of, play in that?" Because, I mean, I even helped start the Irish Arts Centre. My personal motivation was to get Irish people to not be racist. It was infuriating, and ignorant, and dumb! Why? What could explain this ignorance? I tried to explain it by a lack of culture. A lack of knowing who one was and having means to express oneself. And so therefore, you don't need to climb up on somebody else...

When discussing identity, not only did membership to an ethnic group seem to be important for participants, but geographic location also serves as an important reference point in their articulation of racial identity. The proceeding section will explore the notion of geographical location.

6.2.2   Geographical location

Geography seemed to play a role in how participants described their "racial" identities. In particular, city and nation were highlighted as having significance. Some participants saw the city where they dwell as being integral to how they identified themselves. One individual commented that: "I never had that identity as White. I had an identity as a New Yorker..." Another acknowledged his Whiteness as becoming evident whenever he was in a situation where he felt like a racial minority. This situation seemed to contrast with what he is used to experiencing as a resident of Montreal. He stated:

> And also, being a Montrealer, a White Montrealer, you don't [encounter] a lot of these things. You don't think of it...until I traveled to Atlanta and I walked into somewhere I was the only White person...And that struck me!

When participants were asked whether they believe that race affects them, references were made to their nationality influencing how they were racially affected:

> Does race affect me? It certainly affects me in this sense: there's a kind of a wall in terms of people of a different race and "Otherness". It's a small wall, as compared to the wall [in the U.S.] - which is a big one. In the United States the wall is such that...I remember (says the name of a Black acquaintance) when she went to Atlanta and she came back, came to pay a visit. I asked how she liked it. One thing she remarked is that all the Black people lived here and all the White people lived here (he gestures to indicate different location). But that's not so much the case, it's some of it. There's racism, but it's not that enormous...that peculiar institution. So, um...it affects me in the sense that there's a little...a smaller wall and, uh...I don't know...I don't think it affects me too much.

The enormity of racism in the United States was compared to experience of living in Canada. Geographical separation according to race is highlighted as an example of "that peculiar institution" that makes racial experience different than here in Canada. Canada is viewed as having "a smaller wall" that diminishes the negative effects of racism. The United States was not the only country identified as experiencing racism in a more pronounced way than the one found in Canada. A participant stated: "People who were very concerned about the races

and being White would be people like South Africa, like this was occurring in South Africa..."

Participants were frequently challenged to go beyond the geographical limitations of their perceptions of race and to attempt to answer the question, "What is Whiteness?" Their reflections are summarized in the following next section.

6.3   What it means to be White

The question "What is Whiteness?" was asked several times. Participants illustrated biological, social, political, and very personal meanings of Whiteness. Their interpretations of what it means to be White are summarized under the headings: Attempting to define "Whiteness"; Does Whiteness equal racism?; Whiteness and its umbilical connection to Blackness; Emotional responses to Whiteness; and the Inherited Privileges of Whiteness.

6.3.1   Attempting to define "Whiteness"

While biological features such as skin color are perhaps the most *recognizable* markers of Whiteness, participants also seemed to have a clear understanding of the significance of Whiteness beyond the visible. One person referred back to his youthful understanding of race as being determined only by physical attributes. He commented:

> I would love to say that it's just a lack of pigmentation...And when I was
> younger, simplistically that's what it was! I used to marvel at "How do people
> have so much hate for someone who just has more pigment?" This is how my
> mother explained it. So they have "less melanin" in their skin...

Participants were asked whether there was a White community (like a Black community). One participant commented on his individuality. The notion of White community seemed to act in opposition to how he viewed himself: "I really think of myself as a person on so many other different levels." Another response was:

> So...we're...we're terribly, *not united*, White people! I mean, what is the
> common White experience? Maybe if you're American you can relate to well,

"Whites are the ones who owned slaves and slaves were Black." So we kind of have that. But what is your common [experience]? If you're White?

Whiteness is described as an entity that does not come into existence independently of Blackness. A participant asserts:

> I think it basically means "not to be Black". And even that - if you look at the all scales of Blackness goes pretty far. But to my mind, it has to do with especially the institution of slavery in the United States; the position of Blacks, being slaves, being degraded, and so on. And then later on, on top of that, the magnificent movements, courage, spirit and then sort of saying that's it, that's it, that's all. And we're left inside there somewhere, in terms of what Black is.

The next section builds upon this idea of White being "there somewhere". A participant's narrative helps to paint White identity as not being one unified category, but existing on a continuum.

6.3.2 The continuum of Whiteness and Otherness

One of the difficulties experienced in defining or explaining what "What is Whiteness?" is the notion that it does not exist in one form or fit into a single definition. A participant described what I have summarized as "The continuum between Whiteness and Otherness". He described feelings of longing to be White, that he experienced as a youth growing up in a particularly Anglo-Saxon community. He exclaimed: " ...I wanted really to be, um... (pause) what I would consider to be White." He went on to describe to the group his sense of alienation from what he understood as Whiteness, because he did not physically fit into the what was considered "White" in his community. It is important to note that although the participant was excluded from the local definitions of Whiteness, he did not interpret the alienation that he felt as representing racism:

> But I think that they weren't...like I don't consider them racist moments in my life. It felt like it was most definitely about that I was different, you know...that I was different in their eyes. My name was always made fun of. I was easy to

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make fun of. I had a nose that, you know was not tiny and buttony. I was like (jokingly banging his hands on the table): "Damn! I want a button nose!"

He went on to describe his feeling of acceptability when he moved to a community where there were more ethnic groups:

> It was just...It just felt like I belonged somewhere, you know. It felt really good! For the first time it sort of felt like "Wow! Someone could say my last name without sort of saying, you know..."

The preceding statement implies that the participant felt some degree of acceptance when he moved to a milieu where there was more ethnic and racial diversity. This participant's narrative illustrated the possibility of Whiteness existing on a continuum.

Narratives also referred to Blackness as a reference point in understanding "What is Whiteness?" The idea of Whiteness having an umbilical relationship with Blackness is referred to throughout the focus group. This notion is explored in the proceeding section.

6.3.3 Whiteness and its umbilical connection to Blackness

Participants were asked whether they believed that race affects them during their daily routine. One participant commented on the identification of Whiteness in society:

> The only people, if you're walking on the street who would notice that you were White would be Black. And the, the White people, the only color they would ever notice as a color would be Black, you know...

He seemed to be saying that Whiteness is only identifiable whenever Blackness is present. Another focus group member described a situation where, whenever Blackness is absent, then one's identification as being White is no longer an issue. He declared:

> ...I grew up never seeing Black people... Seriously! And ah...and I think Black people were a little bit exotic because anything that's not familiar is a little bit exotic. And, ah...so you don't really think of yourself as White.

The contrast of Blackness with Whiteness is explored, as a participant compares White

discomfort with what he perceives to be Black comfort when placed in a minority situation:

> And then it makes you wonder, if a Black person walks into a place, [like a] restaurant where they're [in a minority position]...[do] Black people do that? [Do they feel uncomfortable?] And the Black people I know, don't. How come they're so comfortable with that? I mean..and when I get put in that situation, I'm not. Because maybe I'm not used to it, and I'm not!

In his attempt to provide a response to "What is Whiteness?", a participant illustrated his own understanding of White identity and its intimate connection to Blackness. He explained:

> About the defining thing. I think the defining thing is slavery. It's maybe one thing that's localized with [the U.S.]. Had there been no slavery, there still would have been problems; in a sense there's a majority/minority. So when you are visible...If you're a White society, if you're Black you're Other. The reverse would be true. But when there was slavery that was a race to White. Saying, "You are not human"; "You are like the quality of certain animals"; "You are not free"; "We will degrade you, in any way we can"; and "We will try to keep you from the benefit of Western civilization...

The notion of slavery as initiating a distinction between Whiteness and Blackness is described. While the participant agrees that in any majority/minority situation "problems" occur, he specifies that the dichotomy of Black and White meant that Blacks lost claim to their humanity and Whites were given license to "degrade" them and limit their enjoyment of "benefits of Western civilization".

The word "nigger" was used on a few occasions during the focus group. Participants used this word to illustrate moments in their past where they have become aware of race, including their own Whiteness. A participant recalled:

> I think before I ever met a Black person I heard the word "nigger". Um...and I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it was bad. I think that I was six years old, in grade one. There was a girl (I think that she was as white as that piece of paper) who because she had done something to me, she had wronged me in some way, I called her nigger. I got my mouth washed out (this was 1975)...I got my mouth washed out with soap and...um, you know... I think I got spanked. My parents couldn't figure it out, you know... Why? Number one: why would I say this? Number two: why would I say this to this girl who was obviously

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White? But for me it...it was a...it was a b-a-a-d word. It was a derogatory word term.

Other concepts related to racial distinction and oppression based on race emerged throughout the focus group. A few examples will be explored in the following section entitled, "Whiteness equals racism".

6.3.4 *"Whiteness equals racism"*

Whiteness identified, equals racism. This summarizes some of the opinions shared throughout the focus group, as participants explored the possibility of attaching Whiteness to their identities. References were made to the racist intents of individuals who have chosen to identify themselves as White. For example, the historical use of Whiteness in racist or White supremacist rhetoric was described:

> And then also, in the sixties when people started talking about White and Black, um...people...anyone who brought up being White or talking about Whiteness, you didn't want to identify with them because they brought it up in a kind of a horrible way. [When they] give you a speech, talk to you or you would read something about Whiteness - it was negative! It was horrible! I mean it was racist! Really!

When asked about the role that racism plays in his life, a participant focused on his anti-racist beliefs, stating:

> One, I don't know if I play any great role, except as someone who doesn't believe in racism and as someone who started working with the Black community [he names groups that he was active in establishing]...But, I don't play any particular role outside of being the best person I could be. Not to be racialist. I don't see myself as racialist.

Also, rather than "looking for racist activity" or arguing about "who's more racist", a participant advocates the importance of recognizing one's individuality and one's role as a citizen. The idea of individuality (as opposed to collective identity) is briefly explored in following the section

"Inherited privileges of Whiteness".

6.3.5 Inherited privileges of Whiteness

Internalized racism and the belief in the racial inferiority of Blacks are legacies of slavery that have survived within many Black individuals. Participants were asked to reflect on whether any of the legacies of slavery have survived within Whites. The following question was posed:

> If Blacks are suffering from the legacy of slavery and People of Color from historical legacies of oppression, on the other hand, are Whites benefitting psychologically from the benefits of oppression as well?...If you take a deep look into yourself, do you ever think of yourself (without thinking about it) as superior? And is that what it means to be White? Because for me maybe Blackness might mean that I understand that I'm viewed as inferior...

The idea of not having to think about their race and to not have to anticipate it having any negative repercussions on their daily lives is revealed to be a privilege that Whites enjoy. For example, one participant stated:

> I think that's the reason that I can get up in the morning and I don't think about things like: "I wonder what kind of day I'm going to have because of the color of my skin?"

Not only were they free from the constant anticipation of racist acts being committed against them, but participants described not even having to think about their Whiteness. This privilege perhaps made it possible to deny the existence of racism. This is exemplified by the following statement: "I mean, there really was this ingrained thing of not thinking in terms of...White people as being White...And really a great sense of denying racism." When a participant talked about his experiences with People of Color, he broached the topic of poverty. He identified the poverty that he had seen in families he worked with, as being different than the poverty that he as a White individual would ever have to experience. I encouraged him to further reflect on whether his statement implied that poverty was a condition that was particular to Peoples of

Color:

> Well I think that the experience that I have with...at least with People of Color that I've known in the context of Social Work...has been poverty... There has been poverty! But I don't necessarily...I think I had a bit of, you know, a shield (motions mimicking a shield) in front of my eyes also because my parents were really politically active, and all that. But we didn't talk about...we talked ... racism was like this, we didn't sit down talk about it like this. We talked about it around politics, and this is why African countries are poor, and Capitalism etceteras.

He seemed to be linking capitalism with the material and social conditions of poverty that Peoples of Color experience. A participant summarized his general understanding of the privileges that his Whiteness affords him. He said:

> You don't go around thinking you're White. Till somebody says, "You know, you're White. You're part of the system because you have more privileges that I do."

He seemed to be saying that Whiteness is never considered, until identified by Others. That's part of the privilege of being "part of the system".

The following section will examine various situations where participants have become reluctantly conscious of their membership to the White racial group. Their narratives will illustrate situations and experiences related to "Becoming White".

6.4   Becoming White

It must also be noted that the nature of the discussion about White racial identity elicited very intense responses from participants. The section "Emotional responses to Whiteness" will briefly explore how participants described their own emotional reactions. We will then examine "Becoming White in Social Work practice", and then inquire about "The possibility of positive White identity". This section will conclude with a description of "Participants' reactions to the research process."

6.4.1 Emotional responses to Whiteness

While their intonations, facial expressions, and gestures provided visual indications of what they felt, participants' emotions were punctuated by their verbal communication of emotions. They were asked to describe their emotional reactions at various points during the focus group. At the opening of the discussion, they described their reaction to my request for them to participate in the focus group. An individual shared his nervousness:

> And so when I got your phone call, in truth I went: "Oh my God!" (there is chuckling in the room). "No way! I don't know. Can I do this? Can I not do this? What are we going to be talking about exactly?" And ah...yeah, for sure, I was really nervous.

In an attempt to display my own understanding of their hesitation to talk about Whiteness, I shared with participants my "nervous" preoccupation with the possibility that *someone* may be listening to conversations about Whiteness that I had in public spaces. One participant concurred, also sharing with us feelings of fear:

> You know how you said, sometimes before talking... using the word "White" you get nervous? I identified with that! You know, if someone says "You're White...", then I'll say: "No, no! Not that kind of White!" (He speaks in an excited and joking voice. The researcher laughs and [another participant] asserts his agreement). "No, not what you think is White!" So, it was always like a very negative connotation!

When I asked whether they have ever experienced shame and guilt in reference to White identity, there were significant responses confirming these intense emotions. One participant shared with us the following:

> Yes. I have. I felt ashamed and mortified, horrified and disgusted. It was my first...probably the first time that I have <u>witnessed</u> overt racism. I mean, what I thought was my mold and what I envisioned it to look like...

He went on to describe an incident where he witnessed his sister-in-law (who is Black) face racism. He responded with intense anger, swearing and verbally expressing his outrage. When

his sister-in-law expressed disagreement with how he responded to the situation, he felt shame:

> I thought, "I'm sorry! That was about me, you know. It was about me and not you."
> ...When we talked about it she said to me, "This happens, like everyday!" I just
> couldn't...I didn't want to think about that! ...*I was so White*. And I was so tired of
> that...then the whole idea of Other.

His reaction was judged to be inappropriate (by his sister-in-law). His exclamation "I was *so*
white" seems to imply that this situation provoked a realization about himself. Witnessing
racism seems to have evoked feelings of shame of being White.

Continuing to build upon the effects of "Becoming White", the next section will highlight
narratives that refer to incidents of "Becoming White in Social Work practice".

6.4.2   Becoming White in Social Work practice

Participants were asked to describe situations where they became aware of their own
Whiteness within a Social Work setting. One person talked about doubt created in the minds of
White workers when clients complained of racist obstacles. These events forced them to
reluctantly recognize their own Whiteness, but at the same time they distanced themselves from
any association with racism:

> It happens in our work, you know: Someone will talk about how they have a
> client and this is going badly...because of their race...He [the worker] denies that
> racism exists so much...You obviously don't want to think of being White. You
> deny it. But there's a part of you that says "Maybe they're right. Maybe it's
> happening". And so you want to struggle, you want to put it closer to the
> people that are bad people. There's good White people and bad White people.
> We really go through all this gymnastics.

Another recalled the feelings of becoming a "White" worker:

> Participant: When I worked at a community centre...the neighbourhood was
> predominantly West Indian, Jamaican, so and so forth...I felt it kind of right
> away, cause I was suddenly in a situation where I was "The White worker".
> Um...the kids, I didn't get that feeling from, at all. The parents, I had an inkling
> that...you know...

Researcher: What did you do with that feeling? Did you work through it or deal with it?

Participant: I did and there were moments in which I did feel guilt and stuff...I tried to over-compensate. I tried to be "The Good White", you know? "Here I am to help!" "I want to empower these kids!" I almost over-stated things...at first. "Gotta try harder!" and "Everyone's my brother"; and...and...and..."There is no differences! We're all one!" And then, I... I wised up and realized that, yeah...there are differences - there are big differences! And, we can all learn from each other. I don't have to go out of my way to be the "Good White Guy" in the neighbourhood, and stuff.

Another participant described the difficulties that he experienced in "understanding", Black clients from various cultural communities:

...eventually somebody said, "You just don't understand, cause you're White!" "What are you talking about?" Well...But it was... they were different races. They were also different cultures.

He recalled being "educated" by colleagues and by other members of these cultural groups. He expressed uncertainty about whether difficulties he encountered were limited to cultural misunderstandings, or whether race impacted on his effectiveness to work with these clients. He was encouraged to expand on his reflection. He said:

Well it had something to do...it had something to do with race because here's this White male, pushing around these, like... single, Black, Jamaican mothers... And...you know, the symbolism of that is quite rich! You know - just saying that! And I was a little bit blind to it.

When prompted to explain the "symbolism" to which he referred, he stated:

Well, I mean now saying those words and terms, you know, you can just see a whole picture...I didn't see their experiences - like racism in a White society, and so on. So right away they have this reaction to this guy who comes knocking on their door, right, and interpreting it as "Well they're crazy!"

He seems to be acknowledging the power that his gender and his race hold. Another participant referred to his past attempts to talk about Whiteness and the power imbalances. He declared:

I was thinking about the whole notion of...when we say if we're White or not. I think that one of the things that I started to do, especially when I started Social Work, is that I did name myself as White...I wanted to talk about the fact that there was a power difference, in the...in the session, or in the room - whatever! ...I wanted there to be a recognition that there was maybe different experiences, and so on...Like we would talk about it, in theory, right, that we would do this. I was pretty nervous about doing that. But I did anyway.

He described to the group the difficulties that he encountered:

The problem was that I was wondering the whole time, "Was I benefitting from this conversation?" Or "is the person that I was working with - the client, benefitting at all from this conversation? Is this what they really want to talk about with me?" I was starting to feel, "Like wow! Now I talked about being a White, you know, Social Worker, etceteras...whatever!" I started to feel like the response was...strange...

Not only did he question whether he was the main beneficiary of his assertions, but he also thought that clients may have been confused about the motives for his declarations. His ambivalence about how to approach the issue of declaring Whiteness in a practice setting eventually resulted in him suspending his efforts:

...I didn't know where to go with the conversation, you know? I think that, like...I wanted to use White...I wanted to make sure that Whiteness was recognized in a way that would empower... But I couldn't do anything...I didn't know what else to do with it, you know? And then I thought, "I need to think about that more." ... I wanted to say that now, "I-am-a White-single-..."

Other participants considered possible resolutions to the dilemma of acknowledging Whiteness within a practice setting. A participant suggested that social workers must do more than be aware of "the experience of race", but must strive not to negate or minimize it. He suggested that when "somebody's part of a minority group...it would be just as normal as asking them any other question" to inquire about whether they feel "victimized" by racism. He suggested that it is important in Social Work practice to consider the whole person and all that affects him - even racism. Another suggested that the very nature of a social worker/client relationship, where the client solicits services, implies that there is necessarily a power imbalance. Making declarations

acknowledging Whiteness does not remove these imbalances.

With our gaze is fixed upon the future, the question, "Is a positive White identity possible?" was posed. Some responses to this question are explored in the next section.

6.4.3   Exploring the possibility of positive White identity

In light of all the negative connotations affixed to Whiteness, participants were asked to consider the possibility of Whiteness being claimed as a positive descriptor of one's identity. Respondents were very clear and decisive in their responses. This question elicited the most arousing responses from participants. Exclamations such as: "There are so many reasons to be apologetic, not proud!" were made. The historical role of Whiteness in justifying the oppression of Blacks and those designated "Other" was vividly illustrated. One participant declared:

> I feel today that, you know...with all that's happened historically, plus there's
> this group that calls itself the Aryan people trying to protect the White race -
> things like that... Now if you go outside and say, "I'm White!", you know,
> that's so loaded!

Another asserted that:

> ...if you're going to be proud to be White, it's in relationship to that. And
> there's not a pride in relationship to that. Because it's of slavey. Oppression of
> people...

The need to recognize "Other" narratives related to even *proud* defining moments in European history was highlighted. A participant talked about the 1992 celebrations that were supposed to mark 500 years since Columbus' voyage to the "New World". Initially, this was to be a proud occasion to be lavishly celebrated (i.e. World's Fair):

> ...And there was a lot of trouble for this because a lot of people wanted to see
> this as the Europeans coming over, massacring all these other people, taking over
> continents, you know, populating them. That's how Others saw it! And
> Europeans or White people who generally were the ones who really thought this
> was a remarkable event to be celebrated[...] And after a while [...] people felt like,
> a little shamed. What was the big celebration in 1992 to mark 500 years of the

discovery of <u>America</u>? (He speaks expressively with his hands flailing). None! Almost none! ... It got canceled because Black people said, "You think,...you're going to celebrate 500 years of White oppression?" It's in the culture! [...]There isn't a lot to celebrate about being White. Because we're still digesting some of the negative things in history that were done. And I think maybe as we digest that, okay, maybe we can find a perspective - a way of looking at that, where there might be something to celebrate. I don't think we're there yet!

The idea of perception was a key factor in questioning the possibility of White pride. One participant asserted: "No...I guess I would be afraid to do that - how I would be perceived?" Reference was made to White *Canadian* oppression of Otherness, as a participant reminded us that: "We're still dealing with the after-effects of so much, including the Residential Schools."

Participants unequivocally rejected the possibility of adopting a positive White identity, because on a personal level, this racial category lacks meaning. One person emotively emphasized the following: "And what's the quality that goes with Whiteness that one is to be proud of? Ah... They didn't...Didn't do anything!" Fellow participants added that Whites were "stronger" and "more conniving". The following explanation was also offered:

Well, people who were of the White race or Caucasian, oppressed people who are of the Black or Negroid persuasion or race. And that's when it- it became something. And again, it doesn't have any meaning. I don't refer to myself as White. If somebody says. "Are you White?" "Well, yeah, I'm not Black!" And then you sort of say, "Are you blind?" But...and the other thing is that White is captured. To the degree that White has negative meaning - it's not positive! It's anti Black is what it is. That's the identity of Whiteness...

The following declaration summarizes the general emotional and intellectual responses offered by participants. In particular, it highlights the fear attached to even considering "White pride":

...I can't ever envision, you know, any kind of pride to be White...[If] they had a "White Pride Day" I'd probably just put blinders on my windows and just hide! You know, what does that mean? What has it meant? And what does it still mean? [...]

One participant provided conditions that needed to be present for him to even consider White pride:

And I think that when that situation of racism and discrimination no longer exists, then you can say "White". But then it will go back to being, not White anymore. And the Black people can go back to being "Afro American" or "Kenyan" or something like that.

6.5 Participants' reactions to the research process

After the focus group, participants unanimously expressed an appreciation for having gone through the process of examining Whiteness. If they had never considered their racial identity before, I believe that the focus group stimulated in all participants, some thought about the role that this powerful racial category plays within themselves and society. In regards to having gone through this process, a participant shared the following:

> [...] What's come out of here is like trying to not get depressed about it. Start thinking about "What is being White or Whiteness mean?" Trying and think about it in a positive way and really having a really hard time. You know? Pretty depressing! And I don't want to...I don't want to! There's two ways of dealing with it: try to find something a little positive about Whiteness or to completely denying it as a concept. Saying, you know, "We don't...it's not talked a lot about because it's just not important." But then again, you know that's not true, because it comes and hits you in the face from time to time. So it's quite a dilemma. I'm walking out of here with still that dilemma.

One response to this "dilemma" is as follows:

> ...I think somehow, whatever solution there is, doesn't have to do with guilt. It has to do with recognition. I don't think that Black people benefit in any way by us being guilty. It might have to do with us recognizing certain..certain realities...

Another commented on the sheer emotional impact of the discussion:

> ... it's something that hasn't been talked about a lot - as you say. I haven't thought about it a lot, unless I was really confronted. Like the examples I give. Like really HIT OVER THE HEAD with it. Like in my face... I guess it is an issue for - some. You know? But then I realize it is an issue for you.[referring to the fact that I am Black] It doesn't allow you to escape it.

The need to continue this discussion outside of the focus group was also conveyed:

I also appreciated this talk. And it was done in a way that I could talk about it...I think that talking about it makes...you just get angry about it. [...] I think I have a lot of things to think about and take home with me and talk with other people. I think that's really important!

After reviewing my comments and interpretations of the focus group summary, reactions varied from being surprised, angered, hurt, and accepting. Some participants seemed to be surprised by the vigor of my summary. A participant contrasted the summary with the focus group. He described the group as "awfully neutral", referring to the almost insignificance of my race. My Blackness was not an issue for participants, as I was viewed mainly as moderator, reserving analysis and "probing" for more complete responses. I was perceived as "trying to keep [them] on track." But anger was expressed due to the perception that I was imposing judgments (i.e. labeling as "racist"). One participant prepared an impressive, detailed, and itemized list of responses to my interpretations. This included rebuttals to my assertions and clarifications describing what he intended to say. I listened to his concerns closely, I accepted his clarifications, and after a mutually beneficial discussion about our different perspectives, his concerns seemed to be allayed.

One participant asserted that, "Whiteness is not a hook upon which I hang my identity...not that I make-believe I'm not White." He emphasized the lack of meaning that this label has on how he perceives his identity. Other responses to the summary referred to its effect in stimulating reflection. A participant talked about discussions among family members and associates that resulted from the dominant issues of the focus group. Not only did it leave him with a desire to continue to shed *light* upon Whiteness, but this is an issue that his family members have already dedicated time to discussing and exploring. (In fact, one of the members of his family has already sought literature that will help to forge a better understanding of Whiteness.)

Reflecting upon frequent references (during the focus group) to ethnic identity, a participant highlighted the lack of meaning that these groups have in the current globalized world. He recalled the former status of ethnicity in Montreal, stating: "I remember when French Canadians didn't eat spaghetti...You knew that if you were Italian that meant that you ate spaghetti, pizza...Even saying Muslim. Some people may have a clear idea [about their beliefs], but I can't assume anything ..." He then described the *métissage* in Montreal, where we are no longer "living life with people who are the same". But there is a "fusion" of cultures. "Everyone brings something [to this *métissage*]." If ethnic identities do not have unified, constant meaning, then perhaps Whiteness may be considered? Hence, he wondered: "What are you bringing? You can't avoid looking at it!" [race].

6.6   Conclusion

The participants of the focus group did a formidable job in vividly expressing how they perceived and have experienced Whiteness. Their narratives provided ample examples of themes and ideas that are vital to gaining a better understanding of Whiteness. The next chapter will build upon some of their reflections and some of the themes that emerged throughout the discussion. It will highlight my interpretations of the issues discussed in the focus group, as well as illustrate other reflections that were aroused.

CHAPTER 7 - MY INTERPRETATIONS OF WHITENESS

7.1 Introduction

> I thank you all for this opportunity. This has been a magnificent discussion!
> [...]I've come a long way from starting...from sitting on the bus with books that
> had the word "White" in it and trying to hide the cover....(The room erupts in
> laughter). I thought people would interpret me as being racist, because I was
> researching Whiteness. And, I wasn't sure how this group would go. I was
> afraid that people might be defensive about even identifying as White and
> wanting not to talk about it; by different ways to not talk about it - whether it's
> through attacking each other or attacking me or just always keeping the topic off
> directly looking at ourselves. And so, it didn't happen that way. It was a
> wonderful discussion! It was...um...a lot more came out than I'm sure that you
> realize, right now. But it...it was wonderful!

This statement, made at the end of the focus group, describes my feelings and experiences

researching Whiteness. It describes the dominant issues that emerged throughout the research

process, in my interactions with participants and in my own exploration of White racial identity.

This research process was both a "wonderful" experience and one that caused me to experience

fear, doubt, and hesitation. With the goal of establishing an "inter subjectivity", rather than an

absolute conception of reality (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000) my interpretations of Whiteness

will add to some of the dominant themes that emerged in the "Participant interpretations"

chapter. This chapter will examine interpretations of Whiteness provided a priori (prior to the

focus group), ad hoc (during the focus group) and post hoc (following the group, including the

summary of the focus group). The goal will be to add another interpretation to assist in better

understanding White racial identity.

7.2 What it means to be White

7.2.1 Attempting to define "Whiteness"

> Whiteness is elusive...I did not expect participants to provide tidy definitions or
> even clear understandings of their own membership to this social/racial category.

I expected vague answers and perhaps even avoidance of the subject matter all together. Therefore, the choice of words, the stories recounted, what was said, and what remains unsaid will be vital components in understanding the construction of Whiteness, especially as it relates to individuals engaged in Social Work practice.

The preceding paragraph describes my introductory comments to the portion of the summary which itemized the narratives of participants. While, to a certain extent, I anticipated difficulties in defining Whiteness, I was surprised by the almost unanimous description of it as "not Black". Maso & Webster (1996) assert that the answers that a respondent gives during an interview are somewhat influenced by the interviewer's own bias. Bias is expressed in what is asked and the response anticipated. Perhaps I posed the question "What is Whiteness" several times, in anticipation of *another* response? I believed that participants seemed to emphasize what it *is not*, rather than seeking answers from their own experiences (as Whites) to define what it *is*. Rather than by directly posing the question "What is Whiteness?", responses were found in discursive ways. Not only did participants talk about the privileges that they enjoy (due to their fit into the White racial category), but as the proceeding sections will illustrate, they vividly described their own understanding of Whiteness.

7.3   Ethnicity, geographical location and the names we call ourselves

7.3.1   Geographical location and Ethnicity

The locations of city and nation seemed to influence how participants interpreted their own identities and racial experiences. There is perhaps an interconnectedness between these locations. Cities each have their own individual characteristics, the sum of which embody the national identity. Participants talked about not having to become aware of their Whiteness, as well as there being less racism in Montreal, than in other cities and countries where racism was perceived to be more problematic (ie. the U.S. and South Africa). Although the multicultural

characteristic of Montreal was acknowledged, it seemed to be unusual for them to feel the discomfort of being in a racial minority situation. The national character of identity was also quite clear. Some directly made comparisons between Canada and the United States. The United States was perceived as fostering clear distinctions, or having a larger "wall", between "Blackness" and "Whiteness". In the summary that I presented to participants, I commented on frequent references to the United States :

> Throughout the discussion he referred to the slavery that existed in "that place"
> (the United States). He did not sufficiently acknowledge that slavery was a
> global institution which relegated Blacks across the globe to an underclass, the
> effects of which are still being felt.

Frequent references to the United States in describing identity implied, in my opinion, that participants were very "Canadian" in their analyses. I believed that they were "Canadian", most importantly, in defining their identity using references to the United States. Furthermore, I believed that they engaged in what I viewed as a *typically* White Canadian failure to acknowledge historical and present institutional racism (including slavery) (Akwani, 1995). When it is acknowledged, then it is downplayed - especially when "that peculiar institution of slavery" in the United States is brought in as a comparison. Canada's multicultural society was also called upon to describe the significance of ethnicity, rather than racial grouping in defining identity. In the summary of the focus group, I made the following comment:

> [The participant] expressed fear about how he "would be perceived". Calling
> upon Canada's "multicultural society" he added that, "It's like among Whites,
> you're different!" Thus, it would be difficult to identify a shared White identity.
> [He] seemed to be using his...[ethnic identity] to distance himself from
> "Whiteness". This was an approach...also employed by all other participants
> which served as a "disclaimer" for their Whiteness and their link to its negative
> connotations.

Upon reading this comment, the participant in question expressed disagreement with my interpretation. Not only did I construe him as using this as a "disclaimer", but I "anticipated"

that this technique would be employed by participants. I hypothesized that if they claimed ethnicity, then they didn't have to acknowledge their White racial identity. The participant stressed that he did not *claim* his ethnicity, but he was a *member* of that ethnic group. While he did indeed inherit his membership to his ethnic group, I believed its use to replace racial identity illustrated a phenomena related to how ethnicity is used within society. Whenever exposed, there is an urge to retreat into ethnicity to "disclaim" attachment to "negative connotations". My *a priori* anticipation of the use of "disclaimers" was due, in part to the suggestion of the literature that association with Whiteness is often avoided, by claiming other aspects of identity (Thompson & Carter 1997; Tatum, 1997; Delgado and Stefanic, 1997; Hill, 1997; Williams, 1998; Lipsitz, 1998; Thandeka, 1999; Frankenberg, 2001).

7.4   Whiteness and its umbilical connection to Blackness

On three occasions, the word "nigger" was used by participants to describe various incidents in their pasts. Even before a participant had ever met a Black person, he used this word. The word was used to emotionally injure another classmate who was unmistakably White. As the word is most often used to injure Blacks, this reveals that even at the most naive stages, whether one is fully cognizant of their meaning, racial vocabulary (and insults) often refer to Otherness (i.e. Blacks). This occurs even when there is not a Black person present at all. It implies that there is an understanding that to label with a term usually reserved for Blacks, is to inflict a sizable wound. Ironic in this situation is what perhaps can also be interpreted as a purely accidental de-racialization of the emotionally charged word "nigger", as it is applied to describe/wound a White individual. This de-racialization is not quite the same as its use in a modern context among some Blacks and Whites in various subcultures (i.e. rap music). It is used by Blacks to signify a reclaiming of this injurious word, by diminishing its power to inflict emotional damage. Some Whites claim its use to illustrate camaraderie and solidarity with Blacks.

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By de-racialization here, I am referring to my belief that the word is <u>not</u> a connotation for Blackness. I am wary of any interpretation that implies that by using this word, you are in essence calling a White person Black. Rather, it is the use of a vile insult and indignity that has historically been an accomplice in the beatings, murders, rapes, and other loathsome crimes against Blacks.

7.4.1 *"Whiteness equals racism"*

The claiming of White identity was associated with racist expressions. Participants were quite reluctant to make claims to Whiteness due to the historical and modern-day negative implications of asserting White identity. This includes White supremacist claims of defending the White race and the historical use of Whiteness to oppress those viewed as racial "Others". I asked participants to reflect on their own role in racism as it exists today. An individual responded that he did not "play a great role", was not "racialist" and strove to be the "best person" that he can be. His statements (also cited in the chapter describing "Participant Interpretations") seem to suggest that Blackness is equated with racial awareness, while Whiteness is given an exemption from being racialized. The assertion that he does not identify race seemed to imply that identifying Whiteness was wrong. His term "racialist" seemed to be used in the same way as the term "racist", thus suggesting that he did not oppose identifying "Other" races (because he frequently refers to Blacks), but it is identifying Whiteness that moves him away from his goal of "being the best person [he] can be".

In the focus group summary, I commented that, while acknowledging the existence of racism, participants seem to employ mental "gymnastics" in order to distance themselves from the "bad White people". Racism is viewed as being practiced by "bad people", rather than being recognized as connected to every institution within our society. The vertical connection of all members of society to racism (through our common history) and its horizontal link (through our

interactions with others) also eluded examination.

A participant described a past experience, which I in turn, interpreted as being an example of racism. His disagreement was categorical. He talked about playing the role of "a White Step-and-Fetch-It" as he "shuffled and played the kind of happy ignorant" White. This was in response to being in a situation where he worked within a predominantly Black community. He recalled a conversation where a Black colleague stated that he did not view him as being "insulting", but viewed him as "a clown". My interpretation was that:

> In response to his denial of Whiteness, he adopted a persona which would perhaps rid him of the stigma of being White, by mimicking what he saw as Blackness....[H]e was trying to reject his Whiteness by making everyone comfortable with his new un-White persona. Based on his descriptions, his Black colleagues may have seen his "antics" as resembling "black face" as it presented a clown image, mocking Blackness.

The participant corrected my interpretation that his "antics" were viewed as negative by his colleagues. He stated that "Blacks had a vision of Whites" but he did not fall into this category, as they recognized that he was "another type of White person" (anti-racist). He also added that they were more worried about their own antics, and whether he would interpret them as representing Blacks.

Nonetheless, while not claiming supremacy I believe that my interpretations have some relevance to our understanding of Whiteness and racism as it serves as another interpretation of this situation (of course not necessarily the correct one in this particular situation). In addition to what has already been stated it highlights the possibility that while Whites (or even their Black colleagues) may not interpret racism in particular acts or assumptions, in a broader social context they exemplify racism. In other words, you don't have to be conscious of racism to be guilty of it. What is clear in this situation is the anxiety that both the participant and his friends experienced, in regards to how the their racial identities, (demonstrated by their actions) would be

interpreted.

The possibility of denying the existence of racism is a privilege that those who have access to the status of Whiteness enjoy. The proceeding section will explore my interpretations of "The Inherited Privileges of Whiteness".

7.5   Inherited privileges of Whiteness

Attempts were made to prompt participants to examine the benefits of their own "Whiteness". The notion of White community seemed to act in opposition to how a participant viewed himself: "I really think of myself as a person on so many other different levels..." He saw himself as an individual. This is classified as a privilege, as the idea of individualism (rather than White community), assists in removing the label of White and racial identity from the construction of self. The idea of individualism, rather than the collective identities affixed to "Otherness", is a privilege of Whiteness (McIntosh, 1988).

Although some of participants rejected Whiteness as a descriptor of their identity, their recognition that "you don't have to deal with who you are racially" is perhaps one of the most important characteristic of Whiteness. It is understandable that no one wants to own this identity which, when exposed, "makes you want to cringe" (as a participant stated). Freedom from being racialized (outside of exceptional situations) is another essential privilege of being White. Although I asked participants to reflect on whether White superiority was a legacy of slavery, this notion is not thought about, because Whiteness is never considered.

Consideration of the impact of Whiteness on participants will continue to be explored. The following section will delve into my interpretations of participants' reactions to "Becoming White".

7.6   Becoming White

7.6.1   *Emotional responses to Whiteness*

References were made to the lack of understanding that most Whites have, about the realities that "Others" face (i.e. racism), unless they are placed into a situation where recognition is inevitable. As the participants' narratives illustrate, these situations are often temporary and lacking any lasting effect on how they perceive themselves as racialized individuals. These temporary situations evoked feelings of fear and uncertainty within the participants. Fear was experienced when they were placed in minority positions, including working in an environment where their Whiteness was blatantly visible. I also experienced the same anxieties, about how I would be perceived by Whites who saw me reading books with provocative titles about Whiteness. This common fear illustrates the protected nature of Whiteness, where both the members of this dominant racial group and excluded "Others" are equally threatened if we dare to fix our gaze upon it. We had a common understanding that, to identify Whiteness held the possibility of being branded as a "racist".

Anger, in the face of racism being directed at a family member was also expressed. A participant talked about his anger towards these White displays of contempt. He became nakedly aware that, not only did he share membership to the White racial group, but that his membership implied a lack of understanding about how to respond to and live with the burden of constant racist attacks. His anger turned to shame.

Participants also talked about their experiences of "Becoming White in Social Work practice". This will be the subject of our next inquiry.

7.6.2   Becoming White in Social Work practice

When participants were faced with conflicts related to race, their reaction was confusion. They seemed undecided about how to deal with the dilemmas of racism and their own attachment to the White racial category. A remedy for their racial predicaments included seeking the counsel of *racialized* colleagues. Acknowledging racism and the power implications of their own Whiteness also emerged as a solution. But, it was the proposal of, what I term "coming out" to clients as White, that challenged us the most. While I believe that it is important for workers to be unequivocally aware of the socio-political and historical repercussions of racism on the lives of *racialized* clients, I too join in the questioning of who will benefit most from an overt acknowledgment of Whiteness. This conjures up images of "guilt" and "confession". Perhaps the issue of context is important. There are moments where it would be appropriate to verbally acknowledge one's understanding of the "invisible" barriers that clients face. For this to be mutually beneficial for the client and worker (rather than just being a symbolic gesture), it is essential that the worker engages in a process of *racial self actualization* where he educates himself about issues related to race and racism (Helms, 1990). An understanding of his racial identity and participation in racism must be part of this process. Comfortable with his Whiteness, he will more securely engage in formal and informal actions against oppression, which may go beyond *mentioning* his Whiteness (Helms, 1990).

7.6.3   The continuum of Whiteness and Otherness

A participant talked about feelings of alienation that he experienced due to *not feeling "White" enough*. Moving from a predominantly Anglo-Saxon community to a multicultural environment eased his discomfort. I termed his experience "The continuum of Whiteness and Otherness". This means that within a context where there was a greater quantity of "Others", against which he could juxtapose his racial identity, his feelings of acceptance into the White

racial category was restored. This illustrates the ability of the boundaries of Whiteness to expand and contract, depending on the presence of Otherness.

7.6.4 *Exploring the possibility of positive White identity*

During the focus group, we explored the possibility of choosing to accept Whiteness as a positive descriptor of identity. Participants unanimously rejected this as being an impossibility in the immediate future. But, a participant took steps to instill a sense of pride in his fellow Irishmen, by assisting them in gaining an appreciation of Irish culture, history, and language. It was by being proud of their ethnic origins that he believed they would be able to resist the urge to put others down in order to elevate themselves. Is this approach adaptable to the process of reclaiming Whiteness? Perhaps it would be possible to resist the negative connotations associated with Whiteness (i.e. racism) by embracing a notion of Whiteness that rests on the acknowledgment of the one's connection to the historical legacy and current systems of institutional racism. This would also involve the commitment to not be a passive recipient of racial privilege, but to actively challenge institutional and personal racism (Ignatiev & Gary, 2002).

7.7   My reaction to the research process

When individuals who, by all accounts have not only internalized, but live their anti-racist beliefs are labeled as belonging to and even exhibiting signs if White racism, then the responses can be very charged. A frustrated participant asked the following question: "Why do you want me to embrace Whiteness? Or do you want me to embrace guilt? I'd rather embrace justice!" What could have potentially been a very emotionally damaging process was diffused, in part due to the reflective/reflexive approach of this project. A reflective researcher views frustrations and any problems encountered, as opportunities to "gain insight and understanding into institutional

responses to the practice under investigation" and use these events as learning opportunities (Healy, 1996, p. 80). My response as a researcher was to delay reaction, and to acknowledge participant interpretations as being valid. When needed, I clarified the facts that may have led to emotional reactions. Reflecting on how my own interpretations are influenced by my own political and personal views, I accepted that in several instances I also misinterpreted. This truly was a dialogical process, as participants and I shared our knowledge with the common goal of arriving at a clear understanding of Whiteness.

7.8   Conclusion

I certainly have come a long way in forging a greater understanding of Whiteness. The preceding chapter illustrates that, inspired by the participant narratives, I have become more capable of articulating what I believe are some of the major concepts that comprise White racial identity. The following chapter will provide insights into "Social and Cultural Interpretations of Whiteness."

CHAPTER 8 - SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF WHITENESS

8.1   Introduction

In their exploration of identity, Berger & Luckman (1967) refer to the dialectic between the individual and the social reality. Derived from the Marxist understanding of history as a dialectical process, this interpretation of reality is useful in our examination of social and cultural perspectives of the issues revealed during the research process. It recognizes that there is a tension between the individual's perception of their identity and the social meanings attached.

Most of the narratives described in preceding sections have provided convincing descriptions of the social and cultural interpretations of Whiteness (i.e. review of literature, participant and researcher interpretations). Thus, this section will revisit the main topics and themes that emerged from the focus group, building upon the information already revealed. It will particularly emphasize how participants' subjectivity (and my own) are influenced by, and illustrate social and cultural interpretations of Whiteness (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

8.2   Ethnicity, geographical location and the names we call ourselves

Throughout the research process, participants seemed to de-emphasize their connection to the White racial group, by emphasizing other aspects of their identity. Ethnic identity was employed to position themselves away from Whiteness, yet out of the periphery of "Otherness". This is a typical manoeuvre of Whites, who *selectively* awaken "immigrant tales" and ethnic origin (including general *Europeanness)*, whenever their Whiteness is challenged or in moments of discomfort with being associated with this privileged racial group (Gallagher, 1997, p. 8).

A participant's post hoc reflection on the *métissage* of cultures in Montreal and Canada, provides another perspective from which we can examine Whiteness. *Métissage* refers to "the process of creating a new ethnicity based on the coming together of two ethnicities" (Canadatree,

2002). Originally meaning "mixed blood" or "half-breed", it referred to the mixing of French Canadian and Native Canadian cultures, to create the Métis people. It has been re-appropriated to signify a "blurring" of cultures and identities (Canadatree, 2002; Musée de la civilisation, Québec; 2000) . Ethnicities have become blurred and are no longer the clear descriptors of identity that was once assumed. Ethnic group membership does not exclude Whiteness. Rather, ethnicities are linked by the privileges enjoyed by those able to access Whiteness. Whiteness then, can be seen as a *métissage* of ethnic identities.

Participants expressed that they felt their racial interactions as residents of Montreal and as residents of Canada, influenced them in ways that were different than would be experienced in other geographical locations. One's perceptions of race can be adapted according to local conditions, including neighbourhood (Cohen, 2001). It must be emphasized that the racial interactions that they interpret as Canadians (and Montrealers) are not the ideal images that are commonly imagined (Akwani, 1995). Our national tendency is to attribute to Canada a racial image that is perceived as somehow better than in other places (especially the United States). This was illustrated when (after reading the focus group summary) a participant rigorously defended of his belief that experiences of racism in Canada were less problematic than those in the U.S. His defense was subdued only when I furnished him with specific examples of my own experiences as a Black woman in Canada and in Montreal. Akwani (1995) asserts that the Canadian racial experience is derived "from the American outcome" (p. 98). While we certainly do not experience the same violent and politically charged racial strife that exists in some other nations, modern day policies and laws that discriminate against important groups such as First Nations People(s) are very telling (Crawford, 1998). Foster (1996), Rambally (1995), Kelly (1998), Wint (2001) vividly describe Canada as a place where racism is cloaked under a thin veil of *acceptance*. Crawford (1998) asserts that, in spite of denials of racism in Canada, there is an

"underlying assumption to most Euro-Canadians...that Canada is still white". White privilege is maintained by juxtaposing the image of 'normal' Canadian, with stereotypes of Otherness (Crawford, 1998).

Jones & Carter (1996) echo the beliefs of many of the authors surveyed in the review of literature, as they emphasize the importance of gaining a racial understanding of Whiteness, rather than solely viewing those belonging to this racial category in cultural or ethnic terms. This will be explored in the proceeding sections.

8.3 What it means to be White

8.3.1 Attempting to define "Whiteness"

Fanon referred to the *collective unconsciousness* of society, that does not allow for the recognition of Whiteness (cited in Hill, 1997). Participants' responses to the question "What is Whiteness?" typically focused on what it is not. Within society, Whiteness for the most part is described in terms of 'what it is not', emphasizing the historical nature of Whiteness as that which "does not speak its own name" (Montag, 1997, p. 291).

8.3.2 The continuum of Whiteness and Otherness

A participant's experiences in a predominantly Anglo-Saxon community resulted in his feelings of not quite fitting into the what he perceived to be Whiteness. His narrative illustrates that within society, race is lived and experienced in a multitude of ways, all of which vary according to cultural and discursive locations of the individual (Alcoff, 1999, p. 33). When he moved to Montreal, he did not experience the weight of Otherness, due to the multicultural composition of the city. In addition to what has already been said about ethnicity and geographical location, this narrative illustrates the terrific influence that perception of one's place in the existing social order has on racial identity (Willer, 1971).

8.3.3   Whiteness and its umbilical connection to Blackness

Participants were correct in identifying a link between White consciousness and Black Civil Rights. Authors such as Frankenberg (2001) and Winant (2001) have referred to the social and political lessons that emanated from this movement. The literature review is filled with examples to substantiate this link between Blackness and Whiteness. But, linking Whiteness to Otherness also illustrates that, rather than declare their membership to the White racial category, Euro-Canadians routinely define themselves as NOT being Black or NOT a Person of Color (Crawford, 1998). Participants seemed to have little difficulty and were actually quite articulate in defining "Otherness" and their reality, with an imperialist eye (Roediger, 1997). This "white look" or imperialist gaze to which Roediger (1997) refers, is about inclusion and exclusion. It is rooted in historical "patterns of seeing" the racial Other. It refers to the distinct power of racism and privilege that enables Whites to stand from a "commanding position of surveying from above" (Roediger, 1997, pp. 37-38). This imperialist gaze is the opposite of looking at Whiteness. Rather, it places itself in the powerful position of defining and dissecting Otherness.

8.3.4   "Whiteness equals racism"

There is a whole mythology around racism where "Otherness" is problematized (Segrest, 2001). As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, when the gaze becomes fixed on "Otherness", then Whiteness remains unquestioned. Aside from decisively listing the many privileges accorded to those who are White, McIntosh (1992) admits that she was "taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes" (p. 36). Racism and other prejudices were individualized, because Whites have the privilege of remaining "un-raced" and being viewed as individuals, rather than belonging to a racialized group (Williams, 1998). Wright (1997) also asserts that racial group membership determines the quality of life one enjoys. The institutional nature of racism means that, simply by being White, individuals benefit from

the oppression of Blacks and People of Color (through preferential hiring practices, social

encounters, etc.) (Ross, 1996). Tatum (1997) visualizes the:

> ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway in an airport. Active racist
> behaviour is equivalent to walking fast on a conveyor belt. The person engaged
> in active racist behaviour has identified with the ideology of White
> supremacy...Passive racist behaviour is equivalent to standing still on the
> walkway. No overt effort is being made...
>
> <div align="right">(p.11)</div>

The historical evolution of racial discourses has implied that racism is more of a "process,

rather than thing" (Gilroy, 1987). It is the result of individual, cultural, and institutional practices

(Jones & Carter, 1996), steeped in historical traditions, that categorize groups of people

according to phenotypic and other (real or imagined) differences. Banton (1988) refers to it as a

byproduct of capitalist exploitation. With the White racial category planted at the top of the

racial hierarchy, "Others" are ranked according to subjective interpretations of morality,

intelligence, group behaviour and other traits (Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work,

1991).

8.3.5   Inherited privileges of Whiteness

McIntosh (1988) defines White privilege as the weightless "invisible package of

unearned assets" that are cashed in daily, without one even being aware that they are there (p. 1).

One of the advantages of being White is the life-long access to the rules of success within the

existing social order (Bowser & Hunt,1996; Wildman & Davis, 1996; Daniels, 1997; Crawford,

1998). Another privilege is color-blindness. Color-blindness is an example of a fearful response

to the "threat" of racial confrontations that many are taught as children (Tatum, 1997). When

confronted with the discomfort arising from having to grapple with *racialized* interactions with

clients, well-meaning social workers and social agencies frequently adopt a "color-blind" erasure

of difference.   An example of this was illustrated by a participant's description of his attempts

<div align="center">*77*</div>

to fit into a mainly immigrant and visible minority work setting. He initially sought to relieve his discomfort by adopting a neutral, "There is no differences! We're all one!" approach. In its erasure of difference, this *neutrality* of "color-blindness" results in the perpetuation of the racist status quo (Gallagher, 1996; Williams, 1998). The status quo is one which supports the supremacy of Whiteness (Pinderhughes, 1989). Becoming *blind* to racial identities frees individuals from having to acknowledge the power imbalances and resulting oppressions that lay at the foundations of our societies. It also frees them of the need to own up to their personal benefits from *institution of whiteness* (Powell, 1996; Frankenberg, 2001). In effect, color-blindness normalizes the privileges of Whiteness (Wildman & Davis, 1996; Clever, 1997).

While some individuals, especially ones who espouse anti-racist beliefs, recognize the systemic nature of racism, this analysis is seldomly directed inwards to themselves, but is externalized. Similarly, participants' narratives for the most part, located racist activity in others or depicted it as an unfortunate consequence of living in society. For example, while the capitalist role in Africa was mentioned and while there was some mention of poor Black neighborhoods, there was little consideration by participants, of their role in reference to the idea of economic privilege. (This is of course, aside from a participant's comment that he would never have to experience the same poverty as his Black clients.)

8.4   Becoming White

Those who are allies in the struggle towards a just society are naturally taken aback by the prospect of being associated with this dominant racial group. As Whites are routinely excluded from racial categorization outside of accusations of racism, acknowledging White racial identity or being identified as White, frequently evokes shame, anger, and fear (Pinderhughes, 1989; Helms, 1989, 1990; Thompson & Carter 1997; O'Donnell & Clark, 1999; Thandeka, 1999). Asking Whites to acknowledge race creates a double threat: it places them in the position of

having to identify that which by definition demands invisibility, and it simultaneously calls for the recognition of inequality of those "outside the circle of whiteness" (Mahoney , 1997, p. 331). In "the logic of White privilege", being forced to acknowledge their own privilege and participation in the maintenance of racism is interpreted as "racism" directed towards them (Mahoney, 1997, p. 331; Terry, 1970, cited in Barnett, 1998). This was exemplified in the fear that participants and I had in common that, White individuals may interpret any focus on Whiteness as a racist act. Also, a participant's attempt to not be "racialist" by identifying Whiteness (because he clearly referred to Blackness throughout the discussion), can also be interpreted as adhering to this "logic". For Whites, thinking of oneself only as an individual is an example of White privilege (McIntosh, 1988). Thus, moving from individual to "racial group member" may be a difficult transition (Tatum, 1997, pp. 102, 103). Referring to Albert Murray, James Baldwin, David Roediger and Alexander Saxton, Pfeil (1997) asserts that becoming White "means trading in..ethnic culture" (p. 24). Comfort with identity, emotional security, as well as professional competence, and the freedom to confront racial dilemmas are linked to the requirement of Whites (especially social workers) to resolve issues related to their own racial identity (Erikson, 1968; Winnicott, 1971; Gehrie, 1979; Pinderhughes, 1989; Helms, 1989, 1990; Thompson & Carter 1997; O'Donnell & Clark, 1999).

8.5   Conclusion

Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) suggest that the participants, the researcher, community, society, intellectual and cultural traditions, and language must all be taken into account within a research context. Language, thoughts, introspection, emotions, and discursive contexts sometimes engage in a dialectical relationship with the social reality. As this chapter has illustrated, the narratives produced during the research process were both challenged and clarified

by social and cultural interpretations.

The following chapter will provide a composite image of White racial identity, drawing from my interpretations, participant interpretations, and social/cultural interpretations.

CHAPTER 9 - FIXING OUR GAZE UPON WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY AND WHITENESS

9.1   Summary of Key findings

The researcher is a story-teller who cooperates with participants to produce a new narrative (Smaling, 1996). This new narrative becomes a whole new entity that is separate and different from its creator. As Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) suggest, it is an interpretation of the participants' and researcher's narratives, as well as social, cultural, and intellectual traditions. An answer to "What is Whiteness?" is not to found in any single description or explanation. The process of interpreting interpretations that this project has pursued, illustrates that, while physical markers such as skin color (or *melanin content*) help to identify racial grouping, its description goes beyond characteristics that are visible. Whiteness is a powerful identity, that actively seeks to protect its invisibility behind a curtain of normality. The following four points concisely provide a composite image of this elusive identity:

1.   *Whiteness is given an exemption from being racialized. Thus, the idea of
        collective White identity is rejected.*

No one wants to own this identity which, when exposed, "makes you want to cringe". Whiteness grants what McIntosh (1983) describes as "knapsacks of privileges" from which it maintains its non racialized status. The privilege of individualism assists in removing the labels referring to racialized identity (such as "White") from the construction of self. Although some of the participants rejected Whiteness as a descriptor of their identity, they recognized that not having "to deal with who you are racially" is an important characteristic of Whiteness.

2.   *Whiteness is a socially created, historically grounded "normality", against
        which all Otherness is measured. It is defined by* what it is not *and becomes visible
        whenever it is juxtaposed with Otherness.*

Rather than being a biological fact, Whiteness is a historically created, socially sustained identity,

linked with Otherness. In particular, Whiteness has an umbilical connection to Blackness. The industry and institution of slavery created this inextricable bond. Whiteness maintains an *imperialist gaze* upon Otherness. The *imperialist gaze* is the opposite of looking at Whiteness, as it places itself in the powerful position of deflecting attention away from itself and fixing it onto Otherness. Also grounded in history is the nature of Whiteness to not "speak its own name". Fanon referred to this as the *collective unconsciousness* of society, that does not allow for the recognition of Whiteness, but typically focuses on *what it is not* (Montag, 1997, p. 291). Descriptions of Otherness (again Blacks in particular) most frequently substitute for descriptions of Whiteness. Therefore, to be White means to *not be Other*.

3.   *Whiteness identified, equals racism. Denial of racism is a response to being associated with Whiteness. It represents a rejection of Whiteness, by refusing to acknowledge its oppressive nature.*

In "the logic of White privilege", being forced to acknowledge privilege and participation in the maintenance of racism is interpreted as "reverse racism" (Mahoney, 1997, p. 331; Terry, 1970, cited in Barnett, 1998). The powerful emotions that were evoked during the research process (i.e. shame, fear, ambivalence, anger) were linked to the idea of racism. Participants' descriptions of shame associated with claiming Whiteness; the fear we shared when faced with the prospects of fixing our gaze upon Whiteness; the ambivalence about how to identify one's Whiteness in a practice setting; the anger and surprise that participants expressed towards my initial interpretations of the focus group - all had in common their link to racism. Our common emotional reactions such as fear, illustrate the protected nature and invisible power of Whiteness. Both the members of this dominant racial group and excluded "Others" are equally threatened if we dare to fix our gaze upon it (*'like breaking a sacred oath'*). Using the word "racism" is analogous to shining a bright light in the eyes of a shadowy beast that lurks in the dark, beyond

detection. While the light may reveal what is hiding in the darkness, the beast almost invariably reacts with anger, and we feel fearful. The research process also revealed that, when racism is acknowledged, it is identified as representing individual folly. Racism is viewed as something that emerges from outside of the boundaries of *normal* society, rather than ingrained within society's institutions. Thus, the normality of its power remains concealed in the mundaneness of ordinary people's lives.

The status quo is one which supports the supremacy of Whiteness (Pinderhughes, 1989). When confronted with the discomfort arising from having to grapple with *racialized* interactions, a "color-blind" erasure of difference is adopted. This *neutrality* of "color-blindness" results in the perpetuation of the racist status quo (Gallagher, 1996; Williams, 1998).

4.   *Whiteness then, is a métissage of ethnic, local, and national identities.*

Ethnic identity is taught within the family unit and reinforced in society. It can be a source of pride for individuals to defend against negative connotations associated with Whiteness (i.e. racism). Pride in one's ethnic identity can also diminish racist assumptions about Otherness. As all Whites actively and passively benefit from the institutionalized racial hierarchy (McIntosh), so too must they accept their personal and collective link to historical and current oppressions perpetrated to maintain this racial power.

Race is experienced in a multitude of ways, all of which vary according to cultural and other discursive locations of the individual. There is a continuum between Whiteness and Otherness. Sometimes ethnic identity overrides White racial group membership, in the minds and experiences of individuals. Due to historical processes, geographical origin, local circumstances, and other socio-political factors (such as class), ethnic identities may locate individuals further away from Whiteness on the racial continuum. In turn, while still enjoying the privileges of Whiteness, they may occupy the position and internalize the feelings of "Other". But, as the

quantity and variety of Otherness increases, they are pushed back within the confines of *absolute* (unquestionable) Whiteness.

In this globalized world, and particularly in Montreal's and Canada's multicultural societies, there is a *métissage* of ethnicities. Lines distinguishing ethnic categories have become blurred and they are no longer the clear descriptors of identity that was once assumed. While individuals may attempt to relinquish Whiteness, they still enjoy its privileges. It is like a moving sidewalk, that doesn't have to be claimed, but can either actively or passively be enjoyed (McIntosh). Therefore, ethnic group membership is not an alternative to, nor does not exclude their Whiteness. Rather, ethnicities are linked by the privileges enjoyed by those able to access Whiteness. Whiteness then, can be seen as a *métissage* of ethnic identities.

5.   *To claim White identity means that the legacy of Whiteness is also claimed.*

Participants seemed to emphasize that socio-historical events preclude a positive White social identity. Still, the possibility of claiming Whiteness was explored. Participants talked about the possibility of claiming Whiteness within practice settings. Comfort with identity, emotional security, as well as professional competence, and the freedom to confront racial dilemmas are linked to the requirement of Whites (especially social workers) to resolve issues related to their own racial identity. Claiming White racial identity calls for a recognition of the social, economic, and political inequality of those "outside the circle of whiteness." (Mahoney , 1997, p. 331).

9.2   Limitations of the study

The small sample size (N=4) limited the scope of inquiry that was possible. With only one woman participating in the focus group, a gender analysis was not conducted. Therefore, factors such as gender based differences in narratives and participation style in the focus group,

were not commented on.

While my own racial identity provided insights from a perspective *outside* of Whiteness, it may have also limited the freedom in which participants expressed themselves. In light of their assertions to the contrary, perhaps having several groups or conducting parallel groups with a White and a Black facilitator may confirm or disprove my suspicion.

While the participants represented three generations of social workers, this was not explored. This decision was due to my effort to maintain maximum anonymity of participants. As the Anglophone community in Montreal is relatively small, I attempted to provide only cursory descriptions of biographical information (outside of information revealed in narratives). I feared that reference to age may have increased the possibility of participant identification. It would have been interesting to explore whether there were any generation gaps in how they perceived themselves and Whiteness as a racial identity. A larger sample size may reduce the risk of participant recognition.

Also, as this exploratory study sought to present a general overview of White racial identity, the breadth of inquiry made it impossible to explore any single issue in great detail.

9.3   Implications for Social Work

One of the biggest contributions that this study offers is its Canadian origin. It is ground breaking in its broad scope and general overview of White racial identity from the perspectives of social workers in Montreal, Québec. Its relevance for anti-racist/anti-oppression/cross-cultural social work practice is evident, as it will be useful in stimulating discussion about race and racism which emphasizes Whiteness as a racial category. It is also an important document, as it discusses race and racism as historically evolving and socially maintained institutions.

This is action research. The production of a document that will sit on a shelf and collect

dust was not my motivation for engaging in this study. The participatory action research intent of this project implies that the research process did not end when the focus group was conducted. It will not end once a final document has been submitted. Rather, I will continue to use this document and the ideas expressed within to challenge the invisibility of Whiteness in society. Also, participants will be invited to comment on this document that they were integral in producing (See Appendix VII). I eagerly anticipate that they will have interpretations, which may generate more interpretations, which will stimulate debates, which will continue the process of identifying and "naming" this privileged identity.

9.4   Implications for further research

Gaining a better understanding of White racial identity was a goal of this paper. But after going through the research process, I am left with even more questions:

- Is there a generational difference in how Whiteness is perceived?
- How do clients perceive Whiteness?
- How does one bring awareness of Whiteness into a practice setting?

This exploratory study sought to present a general overview of White racial identity, with a wide scope of inquiry. Thus, future studies may choose build upon any of the themes discussed in the preceding chapters. Furthermore, it would be most interesting to use many of the valuable lessons learned from this research process (i.e. in methodology) to engage in a similar discussion with a larger group of participants. Referring to the notion of gender analysis mentioned in the previous section, future research may also consider having all male, all female groups, and mixed groups to explore gender differences in White racial identity.

The American focus of much of the literature provides a convincing argument for producing more data that may illustrate White racial identity from a "Canadian" perspective. The issue of Canadian interpretation versus American interpretation of White racial identity can

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be further explored. Connected to this is the question: Are there distinctions in how White racial identity is perceived within the Canadian borders (i.e. Quebec versus Canada)? A most exciting area for future research is the exploration of White racial identity among individuals who have resolved issues and claimed Whiteness in their self identification. These are individuals who enjoy comfort with identity, emotional security, professional competence, and the freedom to confront racial dilemmas (Erikson, 1968; Gehrie, 1979; Winnicott, 1971; Pinderhughes, 1989; Helms, 1989, 1990; Thompson & Carter 1997; O'Donnell & Clark, 1999). Particularly within the Canadian social work discipline, the issue of White racial identity needs to be a subject discussed and researched more enthusiastically. Whiteness needs to be made more visible within Social Work practice and theory.

I can think of a plethora of areas of research that would assist in responding to my growing list of questions. The more I reflect upon the possibilities for future research, is the more I recognize that the exploration of White racial identity that I embarked upon is far from complete.

9.5   Conclusion

The participants of this project were not passive subjects of research, but they actively engaged in a dialogical process. Together we embarked on a quest to interrogate the Whiteness which oppresses those outside of its powerful circle and imposes an emotional weight on those who bear its name. The very process of acknowledging and discussing this invisible power was an act of courage and defiance. We dared to go outside of the mundane confines of racialized discourse (which often focuses on Otherness), to challenge the 'normality', that *secretly* is White.

The act of talking about Whiteness as a racial identity is analogous to the very activities being investigated. 'The doing is the message' (Healy, 1996, p. 71). Even before I began to

summarize the outcome of the focus group, change had already begun. I argue that, just by engaging in the focus group, participants had already put into action the fruits of the research process - identifying Whiteness and considering their own membership to this racial category. Engaging in a discussion about White racial identity means that we have engaged in *naming* this power that, by definition remains unnamed. This study is one *seemingly* insignificant act, that will combine with other *seemingly* insignificant acts; the sum of which will promote a more just society. Whiteness may someday become invisible, not because of its elusive, all-powerful unquestionable nature but, because it will be rendered "equal", as racialized hierarchies are systematically dismantled. For this to happen, it must constantly be interrogated, investigated, and challenged by individuals who stand both inside and outside of the 'circle of Whiteness'. Until then, those "who authentically commit themselves to the people must examine themselves constantly" (Friere, 1994).

Appendix I - Summary of White Racial Identity Models
(Helms, 1990, pp. 51-52)

Author	Model Type	Components Name	Description
Carney & Kahn (1984)	Stage	1. Stage 1 2. Stage 2 3. Stage 3 4. Stage 4 5. Stage 5	1. Knowledge of ethnically dissimilar people is based on stereotypes. 2. recognizes own cultural embededness, but deals with other groups in detached scholarly manner. 3. Either denies the importance of race or expresses anger toward his/her own cultural group. 4. begins blending aspects of his/her cultural reference group with those of other groups to form a new self-identity. 5. Attempts to act to promote social equality and cultural pluralism.
Ganter (1977)	Stage	1. Phase 1 2. Phase 2 3. Phase 3	1. Protest and denial that Whites are patrons and pawns of racism. 2. Guilt and despair as racism is acknowledged. 3. Integrates awareness of Whites' collective loss of human integrity and attempts to free oneself from racism.
Hardiman (1979)	Stage	1. Acceptance 2. Resistance 3. Redefinition 4. Internalization	1. Active of passive acceptance of White superiority. 2. Person becomes aware of own racial identity for the first time. 3. Attempts to redefine Whiteness from a non racist perspective. 4. Internalizes non racist White identity.

Helms (1984)	Stage	1.	Contact	1. Obliviousness to own racial identity.
		2.	Disintegration	2. First acknowledgment of White identity.
		3.	Reintegration	3. Idealizes Whites/denigrates Blacks.
		4.	Pseudo-Independence	4. Intellectualized acceptance ow own and others' race.
		5.	Immersion/ Emersion	5. Honest appraisal of racism and significance of Whiteness.
		6.	Autonomy	6. Internalizes a multicultural identity with non racist Whiteness as its core.
Kovel (1970) Gaertner (1976) Jones (1972)	Type	1.	Dominative racist	1. Openly seeks to keep Black people in inferior positions and will use force to do so.
		2.	Aversive Dominative Racist	2. Believes in White superiority, but tries to ignore the presence of Black people to avoid intrapsychic conflict.
		3.	Aversive Liberal racist	3. Despite aversion to Blacks, uses impersonal social reforms to improve Blacks' conditions.
		4.	Ambivalent	4. Expresses exaggeratedly positive or negative responses toward Blacks depending on the consequences to the White person.
		5.	Non racist	5. Does not reveal any racist tendencies.

Terry (1977)	Type	1.	Color-blind	1. Attempts to ignore race; feels one can exonerate self from being White by asserting one's humanness; equates acknowledgment of color with racism.
		2.	White Blacks	2. Abandons Whiteness in favor of over identifying with Blacks; denies own Whiteness; tries to gain personal recognition from Blacks for being "almost Black".
		3.	New Whites	3. Holds a pluralistic racial view of the world; recognizes that racism is a White problem and attempts to eliminate it.

Note: Gaerther (1976) and J.M. Jones (1972) elaborated the typology originally proposed by Kovel (1970).

Appendix II

Interview Guide

<u>Directions (read aloud)</u>: This is meant to be a brief (2 hours) discussion about identity formation and particularly White identity. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you do not have to answer it. Please describe your experiences in as much detail as possible and feel free to add anything you think is important. Whenever possible, I would like to hear specific examples/stories, rather than short answers to our inquiries. Remember, there is NO CORRECT ANSWER - I want YOUR story! Also be assured that your name and other identifying information will be kept in the strictest of confidence.

1. What was your impression when you were asked to participate on this discussion on White identity? Do you remember any thoughts & feelings?

   • Do you feel race affects you? If so, how? If not, why not?
   • Do you feel it affects - or will affect - your children? If so, why and in what ways? If not, why not?
   • How do you feel about being white? What feels good? What feels painful?

2. When were you first aware of your race? When did it first matter to you or others? Can you describe any experiences that made you aware of this?

3. Do you remember what it was like for you before you were initially aware of your ethnicity or before it meant anything to you or others? Please explain.

4. Are you involved in your racial/ethnic community? How do you define this community? Do you search out the history of your race(s)/ethnicity(ies)?

4. Are the members of your peer group predominately of your race? How had this changed over time?

5. In your mind, what constitutes "experiencing racism"?

6. Have you ever experienced racism, be it covert, overt, institutional or personal? What were your first experiences with it? How did you deal with this?

8. Have you ever experienced and feelings such as guilt, anger or shame towards your own race or others'?

9. How has the way you felt about your race changed over time? How has the way you felt about other ethnic groups changed?

10. Are you aware of (definition of institutional racism)? If so, how did you first become aware of it? In your estimation, how has this affected your life?

Additional Questions:

- How do white people feel about race relations?
- What type of contact do you have with people of color? What issues does it raise?
- What types of information do you feel you need?
- Does managing relationships between people of different races require special skills and knowledge?
- How do you respond to feelings and attitudes other people have about racial difference?
- In 2050 whites will be a minority in this country. What do you feel about that? Do you see your children as dealing with that? How, how not?

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Montreal, June 2002.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IN A GROUND-BREAKING STUDY IS REQUESTED!!

I am conducting research pertaining to the social, cultural, and family influences on the construction of the racial identities of individuals involved in the social work profession. Focusing on individuals classified in the racial category of "White", this study will explore how senior social work students (Masters and Ph.D.), social work professors and/or individuals working as social workers within the Montreal community view themselves as racial entities. In particular, individuals working in multi-ethnic environments or those who view themselves as "anti-racist" are being sought.

I am hoping that you will be interested in participating in a small focus group that will take place at the end of June (date to e confirmed). Your responses will help me to explore issues related to subjectivity and identity within social work practice.

Should your participation in the focus group not be possible, your assistance in referring other individuals would be most appreciated. Participation in this study will take approximately one and a half hours (1.5 hrs).

If you are interested in participating in this study or you have any questions, you may contact Debbie Ferguson, at the e-mail address and phone number listed below (supervised by Professor Peter Leonard, McGill School of Social Work).

Thank you for any assistance that you may offer!

Debbie Ferguson, B.A., B.S.W.
M.S.W candidate at the
McGill School of Social Work

CONSENT FORM

As a study participant, I agree and understand the following conditions:

1. I am 18 years of age or older.

2. I am a senior Social Work student (M.S.W. or PhD), and/or a Social Work professor, and/or a Social Worker.

3. I am volunteering to participate in this study by participating in a focus group and providing feedback following this group.

4. The purpose of this study has been explained to me.

5. I will not write my name anywhere on the questionnaire except for my signature on this Informed Consent Form.

6. I understand that my identity will be kept anonymous and confidential by separating this form from the rest of the survey packet and by editing and concealing (as much as possible) identifying information that may reveal who I am.

7. I also understand that the researcher would appreciate my answering each question completely and honestly, as the researcher is primarily interested in my genuine opinions and beliefs.

8. I understand that, for any reason, I may withdraw my participation at any time, without penalty.

_____   _____
(Participants name was printed)   Today's Date

Appendix V

Agenda & guidelines

1. Review agenda & description of evening's activities.

2. Description of research.

3. Discussion of issues related to race.

4. Wrap up and next steps.

Guidelines for tonight's discussion on White racial identity

1. Before we begin the discussion, all participants must sign the consent form.
2. All discussion is confidential.
3. The session will be videotaped.
4. Throughout the discussion I will be taking notes.
5. Participants should not make assumptions about what people said. They should not try to label each other.
6. Participants should make "I" statements, such as "I think...," "I feel...," and "I believe...." Consistent with these statements, participants should try to speak from their own experiences and understanding.
7. Any participant may withdraw from focus group at any time, without penalty.
8. I have asked for 2 hours of your time, but we may find ourselves having to decide whether to continue the discussion longer.
9. As soon as possible (within 10 days to 2 weeks), a summary and analysis of the discussion will be written. Each participant will have the opportunity to read it and comment on my comments. Your perspectives will be incorporated into the final version of the thesis.
10. If anyone has need of a restroom, they can leave the group as necessary.

Appendix VI

Introduction for discussion:

Description of research

The social work profession is arena where the struggle against racism continues to be waged. There is a wealth of literature on racism and its intimate connection to the practice of social work. Under the titles "cultural/racial sensitivity", "anti-racism", and "anti-oppression" scholars, activists and others have suggested strategies, designed programs, and initiated efforts to promote a profession that is racially responsive. But the discourse of race and racism has focused on the "Other", perhaps unwittingly accepting "Whiteness" as all-powerful and beyond the boundaries of definition. Those who sought to eradicate racism within the social work profession have for the most part heavily relied upon examining the impacts of racist actions and attitudes on the "Other", with only a peripheral view of the White racial identity. The White social worker has been asked to understand how Others are hurt by his/her powerful Whiteness, with little analysis of what Whiteness means. Rather than engaging in a "political "debate about race and racism, my thesis seeks to understand the social category of "Whiteness" and more importantly, to reveal how White social workers themselves perceive their own race.

Each of you has been asked to participate in this discussion, because first and foremost, whether you accept the label or not (we will surely discuss this issue tonight) you are perceived as a belonging to the White racial category. Also important, it my belief that each of you possesses an advanced level of racial analysis, obtained through your personal, academic, or professional confrontations with issues related to race (ie. working with multiracial clientele). This may be a valuable asset in drawing out descriptions racialized interactions. I would like to stress that more than hearing sophisticated jargon about race and racism, I am interested in hearing personal narratives. "I" statements and specific references to personal and practice experiences are most desirable. There has been few spaces created where White identity can be discussed openly and from a personal perspective. Tonight I hope to be part of a discussion that I believe will greatly assist in furthering each of our racial awareness and will certainly contribute to the advancement of racialized discourses within the social work profession in Quebec and Canada.

[This letter will be sent electronically to focus group participants.]

Dear [name of participant],

Once again, I would like to thank you for your participation in my research on White racial identity. Not only did you unselfishly donate your time, but you courageously shared some of your experiences, insights, and emotions. For this, I am most appreciative.

I have forwarded you a copy of the dissertation. (If you prefer, a hard copy will also be available for consultation). Please note that I made an attempt to illustrate your interpretations, my interpretations, and social interpretations in a manner that I believe will assist in gaining a better understanding of the complexities of White racial identity. Please note that, I am acutely conscious of the fact that, as multi-dimensional beings, the concepts and opinions that you expressed do not define you as individuals. Rather, the summaries of your narratives included in this document are important examples of some of the notions that I believe may shed light on Whiteness.

I am hoping that this process of examining Whiteness will be useful to you, in your practice settings and within other areas of your life.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or if I may be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at the coordinates listed below.

Respectfully yours,

Debbie Ferguson.

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